

> THE LARGEST CARIBBEAN ISLAND, APPROXIMATELY 110 MILES SOUTH OF THE FLORIDA PENINSULA, ALREADY ENJOYS AN INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION FOR ITS MUSIC AND DANCE. IT HAS A FASCINATING HISTORY – IMPRESSIVE COLONIAL BUILDINGS STILL STAND TODAY. CUBA'S REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD ALSO INVOKES INTEREST; THE CHARISMATIC FIDEL CASTRO RETAINED POWER FOR OVER 50 YEARS DESPITE U.S. ATTEMPTS TO UNSEAT HIM. HIS BROTHER RAÚL HAS SUCCEEDED HIM.



# CUBA

The reputation of Cuba's natural environment is also growing – it has stunning beaches, imposing mountains, bat inhabited caves and lively forests full of endemic and unusual birds, deer, minute frogs and other fauna. But what of Cuba's underwater environment? Does this match the topside attractions?

One of the first places I dived in Cuba was Maria la Gorda, right out on the western tip. At first sight it was stereotypical – a beautiful unspoilt beach backed by forest and fringed by a turquoise sea, with a small and welcoming hotel. Entering the water I discovered that beauty was also evident in the seas. I explored small swimthroughs coloured with encrusting sponges and trailing whip corals leading to a bright blue backdrop. Ascending the wall, the life increased as I drew closer to the top. Schools of blue chromis, black durgons and various types of grunts were among the predominant species. Then I got my wish – a green turtle swam right past me. Later, in a spot just like this during a second visit here I saw my first whale shark! Acuario or Aquarium was another memorable dive. Trainee divers are often

taken here as the depth is around eight metres, but it's also good for the more experienced due to the large numbers of fish. Small coral-covered mounts are inhabited by many other smaller invertebrates including worms, seastars, snapper, groupers, trigger and parrotfish, plus a few angelfish.

The bright colours underwater typify diving at Maria la Gorda. The yellows, greens, purples, oranges, blues, pinks and reds of the sponges and corals lend a fairytale quality. Such colour also extends to the underwater caves. El Salon de Maria, named after the Venezuelan lady who, when abandoned by pirates, gave Maria la Gorda its name, provides a bright home to a few groupers and many other smaller species. Internal coral pillars, covered with feather stars give this cave a more cosy and homely feel.

Diving Maria la Gorda was an excellent introduction to Cuba's undersea world, but there was a lot more in store. It was recommended that I visit the Isle of Youth – Cuba's largest island off the south coast. It also had a good wall so I decided to go. Flying in from Havana on a Soviet plane,

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Underwater images courtesy of Avalon Dive Centre

Main: Caribbean reef shark - Los Jardines de la Reina

Top left to right: Cathedral Square - Old Havana; Old American cars are a fun way to travel around Havana; A typical beach scene.



"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, ENTERING MY TERRITORY?"



*Clockwise from bottom left: Tall and imposing mountains of pillar coral in Cuba's waters make lovely photo subjects; Huge goliath groupers (jewfish) can be seen in Los Jardines de la Reina's waters; A hawksbill turtle moves gracefully over Cuba's lush marine environment; Smiling sharks - Los Jardines de la Reina; A banded shrimp rests on a colourful sponge; Spotted drum - during your dives in Cuba you are likely to come across these attractive and delicate looking fish.*

on touchdown it seemed a calm and sleepy place. On the bus to my hotel we passed large numbers of fruit trees and my guide explained the students here pick the fruit in the afternoon after their lessons. I later learnt that the Isle of Youth was given its name due to the large numbers of foreign students sent there to study, particularly in the 60s and 70s. Fidel Castro was even imprisoned here from 1953 to 1955 after initiating the failed attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago. We reached an avenue lined with concrete marine creatures on the approach to the Hotel Colony, built in the 1950s, but now with some lovely modernised bungalows.

Cueva Azul was most impressive. Ascending to around 18 metres on top of the wall, I noticed a number of fissures or large cracks; we descended into one of them. Wow! I passed by large glittering tarpon with a snooty air about them, which suggested they were thinking 'Who do you think you are, entering my territory?' As I moved deeper I was surrounded by sparkling silver-sided fish. I was now at 42 metres and able to exit out onto the wall. This too yielded a great deal of life, lush with deep-water gorgonians and colourful sponges. As I drew closer to the top I encountered barracuda, snappers and even some Atlantic spade-fish.

The Isle of Youth has 56 sites, as well as some close to an outer wall – Pared de Los Indios. I'd heard that this was a good area to encounter southern stingrays. I wasn't disappointed – lying in the sand were three large and graceful beauties. Umberto, an Italian photographer, was overjoyed, and began shooting furiously. I was happy just to watch. Our excitement almost boiled over when these creatures lifted off gracefully and glided effortlessly through the water. More good images were shot on two wrecks close by – the *Jibacoa* (once a cargo ship) and the *Sparta* (a military ship). Both were originally used for target practice by the Cuban military and were intentionally sunk in the 1970s to add to the diving attractions at the island. As well as being important fish breeding grounds, these



wrecks are now covered with colourful encrusting sponges, coral, delicate worms and fine hydroids. Being in only eight metres means the wrecks receive a lot of light so consequently the colourful life is accentuated. But disaster struck – my camera flooded! Luckily Umberto was with me.

I'd heard a lot from my Cuban friends about an area called Los Jardines de la Reina – a 100-mile archipelago off Cuba's southeast mainland. 'Tiburónes' (sharks) was a word I kept hearing in conjunction with Los Jardines. I had to see this place! From the uninspiring port of Jucaro I travelled out to sea for about four and a half hours to the *Tortuga*, a converted barge with spacious liveboard accommodation anchored amid the islands. As an alternative are three liveboards, all of which are run by the Avalon Dive Centre. On arrival I was given an exceptionally tasty lunch and a little later we dived. Those who'd told me about this area were right! As soon as we entered the

water we were greeted by five silky tiburónes clearly looking forward to the fish snacks brought down by the dive guides. Then I met the jewfish. A particularly huge one was looking at me intensely, his wide lips (some would say ugly) agape. Perhaps he thought I had some food for him?

During subsequent dives I saw bull, reef, nurse sharks and a lemon shark. It was a shame I wasn't visiting in October/November – there's a good chance of seeing whale sharks then as well. It wasn't just the sharks and groupers that made this place so good; the reefs and wall were teeming with life. Bright corals, gorgonians and sponges provided cover and homes for other invertebrates such as flamingo tongue snails, seastars, arrow crabs and shrimps. Then there were the abundant morays and tarpon, as well as eagle rays and turtles, and schools of tropicals and jacks.

Clearly, Los Jardines' marine park status is serving it well – commercial fishing is banned here – though this 2,400 square mile area is also frequented by fly fishers attempting to catch the extremely quick bone-fish and tarpon. Though judging from the fishy tales I heard whilst eating delicious pizza regularly served up as an entrée after a day's diving, they didn't pose much of a threat – the bone-fish often got away!



I've just 'touched the surface' of the diving in Cuba on these pages. I haven't included the bull sharks at Santa Lucia, the fascinating historic wreck of the *Christobal Colon* warship near Santiago (sunk in 1898), or the colourful small wrecks at Faro de Luna and the larger ones at Varadero. Though there's still so much more to tell, I think I've made my point. Cuba's undersea world is easily a good match for what's found on land. It's been 17 years, and I'm still diving there.

