

one of the 15th century Spanish forts in Portobello. There were emergency oxygen and first aid kit on the boat. The next day, we dove in the Pacific at El Tico and La Chama. These were great sites that offered Pacific diving with currents, surf, surge and a plethora of animals.

PUERTO RICO

The south coast of Puerto Rico has several dive operations, with some walls, good reefs and decent fish life. Puerto Rico is easy to reach from many American cities and sports an interesting Spanish culture, with tour, with small restaurants and hotels along the south coast, as well as national parks inland. Old Town in San Juan is worth a visit. Winters can be cool. The US military has abandoned the island of Vieques, where there is modest diving and still-low real estate prices.

Aquatica U/W Adventures, September 2005, Luis Jimenez (ljimenez295@aol.com), Tampa FL. Experience: 30 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 feet. Water: 87 to 88 F, calm and flat. The owner Jose, and his wife are friendly, experienced and dedicated too. He knows the area, “the Natural” beach, so pretty and calm. We used a DUP and was cool and fun.

La Cueva Submarina Inc., Oceans Unlimited, January 2004, Jolene Eichorn, Little Canada, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 10 to 15 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, surge. Went to a site called Crash Boat (there isn't much of a boat to see). I was the only diver so

Charles Aponte from La Cueva took me along with a friend of his. It was a shore dive. I got zero help, although the DMs friend helped the DM out. By the time I got suited up I was tired. Charles took off like we were in a race. The visibility was poor and I struggled to keep up. We went under a dock where people were fishing and my leg got tangled in fishing line. I had to stop and untangle it. After I got the line off and started going again the DM came back to get me and evidently I wasn't going fast enough for him because he grabbed my arm and pulled me along. We saw what was left of a boat, fed the fish some bread, he took my picture and then it was a race back to shore. I was so exhausted I was afraid I wasn't going to make it, meanwhile the DM is already on shore and his friend is helping him take off his equipment. Then I had to try to take off my fins with waves knocking me over — like I said I got zero help. The whole dive lasted 21 minutes, but he tried to tell me we were out there for an hour. Before going on the second dive I told him he needed to slow down. The next dive was to some caverns . I told them I didn't want to be in any tightly enclosed areas, they told me these were big caverns — no problem. I got zero assistance with my equipment and this time we had to carry it all down a long flight of steps to the beach. We went to the caverns and the DM wanted me to follow him through a tight tunnel. I didn't want to go, but it was like a maze in there and I didn't know my way out. I signaled I did not want to go, but he was not going to come back for me, so I had to follow. It was tight and my hands got stung by something. There

were only a couple of small fish, so unless you enjoy being in caverns it is a waste of time. Total dive time 23 minutes. Afterward I had to carry all my equipment back up the flight of stairs with a bad knee and I was having a difficult time. Finally the DMs friend came back for me and asked if I needed help. However, there was a girl at our hotel that went with the same dive shop, but a different DM and she had a great time at the caverns. The next days I went to Desecheo with Oceans Unlimited in Rincon. My dive buddy was a diving instructor from Raleigh, NC. We were perfectly paired, went at the same pace and were out of air at the same time. Had a really good time at Desecheo, lots of fish, and then on the way back a pod of Spinner Dolphins chased the boat so the captain let us snorkel with the dolphins, they stayed around for about 40 minutes and the captain didn't rush us, he let us enjoy ourselves. He even went out of his way to see if there was a whale shark under the flock of gulls, but it was just fish.

Oceans Unlimited, Taino Divers, and Parguera Divers, June 2004, Edward Clapp, Corte Madera, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F., calm, no currents. Puerto Rico's diving is good but not first class and \$70 - \$90 for a two-tank boat dive. The island has remarkable beauty making it worthwhile to visit; diving can be a part of it. Here are some of the things you should see in Puerto Rico: Phosphorescent Bay, an explosive night underwater light display (no diving, but be sure the boat you go on allows you to swim); you get to see fish swimming as dancing lines of

light. Rio Camuy, a cave system formed by the 3rd largest known underground river. El Yunque, a tropical rain forest, with lovely hiking. Old San Juan, a beautiful city with fascinating architecture, enclosed in a fortress system. Don't leave valuables visible in your car anywhere on the island. They are likely to disappear. You almost certainly will need a car. We rented one from LandM (www.lmcarrental.net, 787.791.1160). They have a bus that picked us up on the way in and dropped us off on the way out. They check the car carefully for dents both times. Lots of toll highways. Island has been heavily fished and coral near it is generally in poor shape. Best diving on islands off east and west coasts. We chose to dive off the west coast. Locals dive mostly in summer, when water's warmer. Dive operations all had useful web sites, were helpful with arrangements, and were competent and pleasant. They worked the same way, too. The boat leaves 8:00-ish, you dive, eat lunch that they provide, dive again, and return 3:00-ish. Briefings are adequate but there are no warnings about keeping hands off things or harassing the animals. You are required to dive with the group lead by a divemaster; profiles are sensible but require either computers or faith in the divemaster. OU and Taino primarily dive off Desecheo Island, and at the end of the dive with them it's OK to use remaining air at shallow depth near the boat. Snorkeling is possible for those who don't dive. PD dives off a wall and they anchor the boat too deep for this: you come up with the divemaster. Warning: it's not exactly calm out there and people were seasick on all three

boats. Differences: Oceans Unlimited (www.oceans-unlimited.com) OU has a large boat with a good-sized cabin with a head. It's got tables and indoor seating for a dozen or so people. With fewer people, or if most are on deck, there's space to stretch out for a nap. They also provide the best lunches. Given their size, they can spread out stuff for you to build your own sandwiches. But their boat is located a ways from their dive destinations and about a 45 minute ride. OU also arranges trips to Mona Island, some 50 miles out, which people who've been there say is magnificent, though a recent Undercurrent review disagreed. On one dive, OU permitted a diver to hunt for lobsters with a pole with a metal loop at the end. Their policy permits this, with the expectation divers will be "taking only what they will eat, considering the size of the animal and of course releasing the animal if it is harboring eggs." Taino Divers' (www.tainodivers.com) boat isn't large, they have shade but no real cabin, and their lunches are pre-made with no suggestion that you could make specific requests, which they do accept. If you have food preferences, you'd best let them know in advance (though you might want to bring backup food: on one of our trips a vegetarian's request was forgotten). The boat is driven onto the beach and everyone forms a human chain to load it and then climbs aboard. The process is reversed at the end of the trip. The divemasters were good at spotting fish. They were also good at "encouraging" them to leave where they were so divers can better appreciate them. On one dive, a nurse shark and an octopus were accorded this treat-

ment. They weren't so good at customer's needs. My dive buddy has ear problems, which we repeatedly reminded divemasters about. On our last TD dive of the 2nd day, the divemaster decided on a dive called "The Caves", which featured swimthroughs at shallow and varying depths. As described, the dive was to start with a few swimthroughs and then move to deeper water without the up-and-down that can be hard on ears. Once in the water, she seemed to have forgotten about the latter part. After a few swimthroughs, we gave up and stayed outside, but she didn't get the hint and never did the second part of the dive. This contributed to my dive buddy missing out on a day with Parguera Divers. TD does an occasional Mona Island dive. Parguera Divers (www.pargueradivers.com). Their boat isn't large and it too has some shade but doesn't have a real cabin. But then, the trip out is only 25-30 minutes and they generally get back 12:30-1:00. As with TD, their lunches are pre-made and again you're not asked about preferences. They do wall diving, so as mentioned before, you can't get a lot of bottom time in and there's no point getting on the boat if you intend to snorkel. Parguera apparently dives if weather permits, regardless of the number of customers but TD needs to have enough to commit to a dive. All the operations were clear about when dives were happening and we had no difficulty with cancellations. Comments about food: try tostones and amarillos, two separate ways of cooking plantains, as a replacement for French fries. Local dishes tend to be light on vegetables, but it is interesting. Drove from San

Juan to Parador Perichi's (787-435-7197) in Cabo Rojo. \$64/night. Near the beach, pool and restaurant on the premises. Rooms OK — air-conditioning worked, quiet, but sink in bathroom leaked and there was a bit of hassle getting wash cloths. Place is popular with locals; a wedding was breaking up when we got in. Breakfast by the pool and dinner in air-conditioned restaurant. Rincon. Famous for surfing. Stayed at Dos Angeles del Mar (www.dosangelesdelmar.com, 787.431.6057). Owner an American who came to surf, married a local woman, had children, and decided to settle there. \$89/night. Small, pool being built, no food on premises, small (maybe 4 rooms) but nice place. Breakfast at nearby bakery; dinners at the Lazy Parrot Inn and El Flamboyán. Both open air and worked for vegetarians; Lazy Parrot's the better of the two. La Parguera; stayed at Villa Parguera (www.villaparguera.com, 787.899.7777). Popular with islanders. Pool, indoor, dining — food was fine. \$96.30/night. Parguera is a town, if a small one, so you can walk around it and there are a number of places to eat at. Parador Posada Palomar (787.899.4015) has an arrangement with Parguera Divers, but they had a minimum number of nights. San Juan: Previously stayed at Jardineria Iberia Hosteria del Mar (787.727.3302 netdial.caribe.net/~hosteria/). Lovely, right on the beach. This time: Jardineria Iberia (787.723.0200). Nothing special, cheap and centrally located. \$0.50 for a pleasant air-conditioned bus ride to Old San Juan — avoids the hassles of parking.

Oceans Unlimited, August 2004,
Craig Pino, Chesapeake, VA. Experi-

ence: 101-250 dives. Vis: to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. I have been out with Oceans Unlimited often, and Jim and Lisa some of the friendliest people ever. Their 47-ft boat is great for offshore, has a spacious deck with lots of seats, space for gear and a cooler. It also has a place to lie on top of the big enclosed cabin to get some sun. The cabin has seats and tables, with plenty of room for lunch. (They serve the best lunches.) They offer instruction, including Nitrox. The diving in western Puerto Rico is fabulous. This is the best visibility I have been in, with excellent coral. Sharks, eels, sting and eagle rays, plenty of turtles, and even the occasional manta ray have been seen and photographed on their trips. They even showed pictures of their humpback encounters earlier in the year! Their website has a lot of information about the area and accommodations. Parguera Divers is a good operation, but the dives and visibility aren't as good as the west coast, and the boat is smaller. Taino Divers boat is small and crowded, and some of their "divemasters" are just certified divers that go along as guides. (www.oceans-unlimited.com)

Parguera Divers, Copamarina, March 2005, Bill Parks (bparks@coin.org), Columbia, MO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: choppy. To stay at a pretty nice property, we had decided to book the Copamarina, despite Chapbook reviews that the dive operation was problematic. The dive operation at the Copamarina was a disappointment. Just days before, they said everything was fine. Once we arrived, the story was, "The Coast Guard lost our license application so we can't go

out.” The much better dive operation according to the reviews in the Chapbook was Parguera Divers. The Copa dive shop offered to book us with them, so we drove about 25 minutes west each morning to dive with Parguera Divers. We were extremely pleased with the entire experience with Angel and his crew. The Copamarina was nicely landscaped with nice pools, nice rooms, pretty good patio bar/restaurant. But they over booked badly which bumped our friends and many others to the Ponce Hilton for a few days.

Sea Ventures Dive Copamarina, March 2005, Bruce Wallace (laos61@excite.com), Indianapolis, IN. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Copamarina Resort dive package is excellent value. Rooms were clean with daily maid service. Rooms have rear door walkout to beach, dive shop and pier (very handy for wet stuff). Food quality is good, but a little pricey for full meals. We ate lunch/dinner at locals just a few Km from the resort. Sea Ventures dive operation has excellent staff, attentive, outstanding safety and site briefs using colored maps. Dive profiles are open once the DMs have dove once with you. The DMs take you to all the critter sites for UWP. Bill, Tony and Shawna are all well versed on the Wall, Fallen Rock, Aquarium, Pozas, etc. Every UW geography available in the Caribbean. Coral gardens are in excellent condition with wide variety of color. Black coral prolific at 60’ and down the wall to rec limits. Wall construction varies from 45 degree slopes with ledges at 90 to 120 feet, to 90 degree slope with no ledges. Fish life on reef dives

includes most of the Book on Reef Fish. Most fish do not seem too skittish. Water was never under 80 degrees and at 130 feet the temp was still at 80 degrees. Special thrill was humpback whales presence one day — heard songs throughout both dives and observed 22 separate breaching whales off port side of dive boat during surface interval. Rental cameras available, no film developing on site, computer available for download and disc burn, rinse bucket for cameras on board, Captain has good suggestions for UWP locations.

Sea Ventures Dive, Copamarina Resort, April 2005, Bruce Wallace (laos61@excite.com), Indianapolis, IN. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F., calm. Hesitant about PR, but read in UC about southwest coast walls — made package with Copamarina Resort — great price — better accommodations. This is a first class — 5 star resort. All activities — lively bar and close to town with great restaurants and clubs. Sea Ventures is run by contract divers with own boat that meets US Coast Guard requirements. Super clean gear and shop. No touch equipment rules in effect (picked up at room and delivered clean after last dive). The diving centered mainly off coast slightly west of resort (10 minute ride). Bam-Bam is a riot as DM and Bill is a great host and DM. Dives are down to max depth (130’). Most first dives are wall dives with edge at 55’ and black coral formations. We were amazed at how pristine the reef was for PR. Second day/first dive we heard loud “rumblings” under the water — back on board we all watched a huge

pod of humpback whales breaching for over 30 minutes 300m off the port side. Looked like an ad for a well known insurance company. We dove the second dive and stayed under for over an hour listening to the whales' songs. Diving every first dive on sheer walls dropping over 1,000 feet is exciting, especially when the swim throughs (tunnels) are added which are entered at 60' and exited on the wall at 115' to 130'. It's a diver's dream along with the reef fish and turtles. No sharks, but lots of morays and barracuda. No more than 6 divers on boat each day for 6 days. Excellent care on boat for camera equipment — shore facilities in PR include all developing (1 hr available).

Sea Ventures, Guanica, September 2005, Dennis LeTendre (plan2dive@aol.com), Longmont, CO.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, choppy. First dive is usually off wall that starts at 50-60 feet, goes down to 150 feet, then angles at 180-200 feet to spill off again to 1000 feet. Reefs off wall look in pretty good shape — some bleaching. Whip-wire and black coral on wall as shallow as 60 feet. Some decent brain corals on rim of wall. Good sized elephant ears and other sponges on wall, as well as fair sized pillar corals in shallower areas. Second dives were usually reef/ ledge at 40-50 feet. mid level reefs were in good shape, not much algae, some bleaching. Reefs did not look beaten up by divers. Due to apparent over fishing, I did not see any large grouper, snapper or large fish. Plenty of smaller fish. Dive operation carried your gear to and from the nice sized boat, helped with set up and walked you to back of boat. Easy-in-out

ladder. Had oxygen, first aid kit and all emergency gear was pointed out and described. Captain "Bill" Winnie did a good job managing and positioning the boat, and covering safety issues. Had a tag line out, and a tank with two regulators hung at 50ft for low air "emergencies." DM "Tony" Rosario did a good job finding macro subjects, including large crabs and a little arrow crab. Dive site descriptions were too brief. Handed out towels after dive. Provided fruit and iced water/ sodas. Air in tanks was clean and dry, dive shop small but appeared well-managed. No Nitrox. Tanks were aluminum 80s. Had decent inventory of rental gear. Copamarina Resort is on the south coast, which has better weather and cleaner water than north coast of PR. It is in the middle of the Guanico DryForest reserve — good hiking and unusual birds, some petroglyphs. Nice, clean resort, but more for couples etc. two good pools- two hot tubs. Restaurant had slow service, food was pretty good. I went to towns of Guanica and Yauco for lunch/ dinner and found reasonable food/ bars (10 minute drive). Plan on 2-3 hour drive from San Juan, depending on traffic. Sea Ventures has operation in Fajardo, near San Juan, which is poor diving and mainly for beginners. Make sure you book for Guanica. Sea Ventures, Phone: 787-315-1813, www.divecopamarina.com. Copamarina Resort, 787-821-0505, www.copamarina.com.

The Dive Shop, September 2005, Luis Jimenez (ljimenez295@aol.com), Tampa, FL. Experience: 30 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 feet. Water: 85 to 87 F, calm and flat. The dive shop in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, was good. The owner, Papo, was

professional, experienced and friendly. He has a good divemaster, Ismael, great team.

Vieques

Nan Sea Charters, Wyndham Martineau Bay, April 2004, Bill Schlegel, Jefferson City MO. Experience: 600 + dives. Vis: 70 feet. Water: 83 to 85 F. Vieques is 10 miles off the southeastern coast of Puerto Rico. The Atlantic Ocean is on its north coast and Caribbean off the south coast. Get there by flying to San Juan, PR, and flying over with Vieques Air Link. They only allow 25# of baggage and charge \$.70 for each additional pound. Can also get there by ferry from Fajardo on the mainland. A car is a must, preferably a four-wheel drive. Several private car rental companies but no big rental chains. Stayed at the Wyndham, Martineau Bay resort. Food is poor and overpriced, the service is mediocre and cost is high. But, the place is beautiful, snorkeling is O.K. and the pool with swim-up bar is great. Next time, I would stay at one of the beautiful bed and breakfasts: the Blue Horizon, the Tamarindo, Casa La Lancita (all great ocean views) and the Hix House, and Crows nest (off the coast). The Amapola is a bar on the waterfront in Esperanza that rents cheap rooms also and the food is not bad. Vieques is the last undeveloped island in the Caribbean because the U.S. Navy used it for a bombing range since the Spanish-American war. There is just one small, inhabited area in the center of the island. Most of the island was transferred from the Navy to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service about a year ago. 80% will never be "developed"

except for what the FWS considers development. The reefs are amazing and diving pressure' is light. There were large stands of growing staghorn and elkhorn corals. Encrusting corals are healthy and there were healthier sea fans and soft corals than I've seen in a long time. Fish life was abundant. I saw a large school of Horse Eyed Jacks. Had a 4-foot Nurse Shark approach within arms length. The divemaster said it was probably curious because most likely it never seen a diver before. The island is analogous to Catalina in size, population (Avalon ' Isabela Segundo), mountains, amount of coastline, distance from the mainland etc. The differences are that the water is 85 degrees and the island is tropical rainforest and tropical dry forest instead of the Catalina grasslands. The diving is on shallow "skip reefs" that extend for 4 to 5 miles north and south and are 20 to 100 feet deep. There are walls off the western end of the island. There are manatees in the eel-grass beds off the north coast, but I didn't see any this trip. There is only one dive operator: Chipper Leslie of Nan-Sea Charters. E-mail: nleslie@hotmail.com / phone 787-761-3224. Chipper's a nice guy with a boat, which takes up to six tourists out for dives. Call him about lodging. He's knowledgeable and professional. Oxygen on boat. Nearest chamber on mainland Puerto Rico. No Nitrox. The above water opportunities for sight seeing and other adventures are enough to keep you busy for at least two weeks. There are multiple secluded beaches. The white sand (very fine) and crystal clear water is amazing and most of the beaches are protected. Many

beaches were empty or just a half dozen people per quarter mile of beach at most. Great snorkeling everywhere. The Bioluminescent Bay is listed as the best in the world by marine biologists. The intensity of the light and the density of the dinoflagelates that produce the light is so great that everyone glows with a ghostly light and fish glow in the dark while leaving trails behind them as they swim. There are wild horses on the island that wandering out in front of your car. Horseback riding available. Dining, with some fine examples of the culinary arts, often in a laid-back atmosphere. History, with the old Spanish fort and museum.

Nan Sea Charters, Wyndham Martin-eau Bay Resort and Spa, November 2004, Ben Blair (bfbclair@comcast.net), Cherry Hill, NJ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 Feet. Water: 82 F, choppy, no currents. It had been six and a half years since my wife and I had been to Vieques. Back then, the accommodations were pretty limited, and there was only one dive shop on the island (Blue Caribe Divers). The diving was so-so then, but we decided that it was time for a return trip after the new Wyndham resort on the north shore finally opened in February 2004 (it was under construction by others when we were there in 1998). There's one less dive shop now — Blue Caribe is operated as a kayaking center specializing in night trips to the bioluminescent bay. But the last owner of the dive shop still lives on the island, and he runs two tank dives departing from the pier in Esperanza, the only town on the south shore, and the primary social center on the island for tourists. Only managed

to get in one day of diving. But Chipper ran a nice operation, the visibility was excellent, the dives were leisurely, and the tropicals were plentiful. On our first dive, a hawksbill turtle greeted us as we dropped down to the bottom at about 75 feet, and seemed to be in no hurry to leave the area. Chipper's limit is six divers, but there were only three customers plus Chipper diving the day I was out, along with Chipper's assistant, Dave, a newly certified instructor and a professional photographer. It wasn't rough, but the other two divers were seasick and didn't make the second dive, so Chipper and I had the entire ocean to ourselves. It isn't great diving, but it's certainly good enough to make a brief trip to Vieques appealing. They leave promptly at 8:30 in the morning, the dive sites are only a few minutes away, and you're back in Esperanza in plenty of time for lunch at one of the many restaurants along the waterfront. Since the Navy left, and the Wyndham opened, tourism is gradually on the rise, and there are plenty of good restaurants and watering holes on both sides of the island. Vieques is about a 15 minute flight from San Juan, so it's easy to get there from the States (you can take a high speed ferry from Fajardo, too, which takes about 30 minutes). The Wyndham was a great place to stay, with plenty of uncrowded beaches (most guests seemed to prefer the pool), and there are lots of good boutique hotels on the island as well.

SABA

Saba is one of the more adventurous Caribbean destinations, both