

built into the jungle, no running water (showers are from an ambient air temp gravity drop tank next to the cabana) and the electricity is as we said in Iraq, “Hadji Podgy” wiring — a somewhat scary combination of solar/generator DC system. You come to realize you won’t actually die without AC (there is always a nice breeze coming off the water only yards away) and placing your poopy toilet paper in a small plastic bag by the toilet is not that big a deal (to avoid clogging the rudimentary septic drainfield the resort employs.) You settle into a more relaxed, natural approach to the day. The diving was mediocre at best; nurse sharks are pretty much a certainty. There were plenty of the usual small reef fish to make diving/snorkeling interesting enough; believe all the larger fish have long ago been eaten by the locals. The diving is easy, inexpensive only \$15 to go on whatever boat dive you chose to do. Also a relaxed, non-structured dive operation; you make the 10-minute walk over to the dive shop side of the island to see if where they are going that morning interests you, and if not, walk back over about noon to see if the afternoon dive looks good. The dive shop takes an impromptu poll of who’s diving and pretty much goes by majority vote. All dives were less than 80 feet, although the recently arrived/new divemasters were exploring different and deeper dive sites. Went fishing every day with the resort fishing boat, an 18-foot open-air panga. They were down to a couple crusty rods/reels and guided by a newly arrived American lad who was still trying to figure things out. His enthusiasm made the trips quite enjoyable even though the fishing was not spectacular. At \$60 (if you doubled up with someone else at the resort it was only \$30), it was a heck of deal;

we always caught a few fish. Mostly barracuda, one day a couple of nice African pompano. Pretty much the daily stringer of barracuda was the evening dinners every day, except one evening the resort bought some locally butchered pork — that was a meal everyone went “hog wild” over after fish every day. Dinners are a “family style” gathering in the main lodge — you will get to know everyone else at the resort and engage in pleasant conversation. The simple social event of evening dinner was the highlight of the day’s entertainment in the “technology free zone” of Casa Iguana. They do have an internet cafe that spools up for a couple hours in the morning/midday for those who cannot let go completely. By the end of the week, the “real world” seemed like it was a million miles away — relaxing. Stayed in Managua on the way in/out, the Camino Real, nice and reasonable prices for the room, and meals at the first class restaurant in the hotel. Did a day trip, private car/guide tour of the local villages outside Managua — the stop at the small, handmade pottery shop was interesting for high quality trip souvenirs. Nicaragua is not touristy, prices were quite reasonable for everything we did, the local air services are easy to get around the country on, and the local people we met were genuinely hospitable to us wherever we went.

PANAMA

Scuba Coiba, April 2006, Susan De-Canio, Fernandina, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 70 to 80 F, currents. Sea life and variety was amazing! Dive sites were far and boat quite uncomfortable — not even cushions on seats. Could be

challenging diving for beginners as many thermoclines and current and lo-visibility in some locales. Safety not a main goal with dive operator. No radio, no O2, etc., onboard.

Scuba Coiba, Sol Y Mar, December 2006, David Shem-Tov, London, NA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 12 to 50 Feet. Water: 26 to 28 C, calm, currents. If you go to Coiba expecting Cocos and Galapagos on a budget, you are bound to be disappointed. Although the ocean topography is similar and, for the most part, shares the coral barrenness of these locations (aside from a few struggling fans), the fish life is less than I expected. But perhaps my expectations were raised by the Undercurrent and [UK] Diver magazine article [both of which are on Scuba Coiba's website]. Visibility was poor on most dives, but it did rain on preceding days. We did go on the three-day Coiba trip, and indeed, the two dives undertaken on the second day were better than the others. Austrian ex-pat Herbie is a relaxed and good-natured fellow running a very modest operation. He made a special effort to accommodate my temperamental and difficult companions. Scuba Coiba operates one boat and charters a fisherman's boat if the need arises. This fisherman's boat lacked a reliable engine, skilled operators, radio or oxygen. Both boats lacked a ladder, making re-entries challenging and inelegant. While Canadian guide Glen was friendly, he was outshined by his colleague, Rachel. This very enthusiastic and warm Englishwoman made a major effort to please guests and find critters (seahorse and frog fish.) If you do go, try to get her. Luis at Sol y Mar did not want to bother with breakfast, which was a problem given that the local restaurant struggled to open before the dive boats left. If I had a car, I would stay at the

very attractive Italian-run Oasis Surf Camp on the stunning El Estero beach, a few miles down the road. This is also a great place to dump non-diving partners and to spend time after the dives. If air conditioning and hot water are indispensable, I would consider the American-run Buena Vista lodge, located closer to Herbie's shop. It got good reports. The local restaurant visited by Undercurrent's correspondent has been upgraded and refurbished, losing any charm it may have possessed to make up for the barely edible food and mind-numbingly slow service. Alaskan-run Vianka's is only good for beers, but the local bar next to Sol y Mar looks more fun. Dine at the superb and very reasonably priced Argentinian Parilla (grill), Pide. Or go to the Roman Pizzeria, close to Vianka's, for some of the best pizzas in the country.

Scuba Coiba, Sol y Mar, January 2007, Janice R Melara (rescuediverjan@yahoo.com), Austin, TX. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy, currents. Diving was mediocre. The long (hour to hour-and-a-half) boat rides to the dive sites were uncomfortable because the captain drove excessively fast and there were no cushions on the metal bench seats. We found the amount of fish to be average or below average. We specified before making our reservations that we did not want to dive in strong currents or do any difficult dives because my husband is a novice diver. Ernie, the owner of Scuba Coiba, assured us that he could accommodate our needs. Currents were so strong that divers had to be pulled on a rope by the captain from the point of entry to the anchor line for descent. While descending on the anchor line, it took all my strength to hang on and not be swept off the line. On the first day of diving, the divemas-

ter sat on my husband's mask and broke it. She promised to have it repaired, but never did so. On our second day of diving, the crew forgot to load our wetsuits and we had to wait on a beach for an hour and a half while they went back to get them. Before we started the trip, we made it clear to the divemaster (a different one that day) that we did not want to struggle against heavy currents. Since we were the only people on the boat, it seemed likely our request would be honored, but instead we were taken to a rocky point with currents so strong that we were flying straight out like flags in a strong wind as we descended on the anchor line. My husband had to abort the dive after about 20 minutes because he was exhausted trying to struggle against the current. The divemaster didn't even notice that my husband was in distress until I signaled repeatedly with my noise maker. By that time, we were already about halfway to the surface. We canceled the rest of our dives. Accommodations at Sol y Mar were primitive at best, and yet, the rates were quite high for Panama. The only hot water was in the shower — none for the sink — and it was supplied by a small heater at the showerhead with exposed electrical wiring running along the water pipe from the wall to the showerhead. The lights in the room dimmed whenever we used the shower. The breakfasts provided by the owner's wife in the owner's home were delicious and really the best part of the dive trip.

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 and interesting Spanish culture, with tours, 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.

Casa del Buzo, July 2007, Andrea Di Fabio (andrea.difabio@citi.com), Buenos Aires, Cap. Fed. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 90 Feet. Water: 25 to 28 C, calm. Desecheo Island is on the west coast of Puerto Rico, a 2- to 3-hour drive from San Juan and 1.5- to 2-hour boat ride. The island is protected, so no spearfishing or fishing is allowed. The divers at Casa del Buzo in San Juan led the dive. They are competent, friendly and safety conscious. The previous day a diver from another company was lost and so far has not been found. The place is known to have strong currents since it's on the Mona passage, between Dominican Republic and PR. There were one dive instructor (Miky Sanchez) and two Divemasters (Ramon Laborde and Wilson x), all of them responsible and friendly people trying to ensure that we all had a good time. It's no place for big animals, though we did find a giant crab and a giant "pregnant" lobster 6 to 8 pounds. I wanted to go to Parguera for the wall, but it was long weekend and it was all full. Miky and the other guys called all their friends to get me a place in the boats. Last but not least, the "boricua" hospitality was exceptional. I got lost several times driving through the island and got lots of uninterested help from the villagers. Take the kayak tour to the BioLuminescence bay in Fajardo; it's awesome and unique!

Nan-Sea Charters, Inn on the Blue