

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

Horizon, February 2007, Harold and Jan Bedoukian, Montreal, QC. Experience: 400 dives. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm and flat. Nan-Sea Charters is a small operation and Dave tries to accommodate everyone. The rooms at the Inn on the Blue Horizon were quite nice, the staff accommodating, but the food was mediocre at best. Our first day the breakfast, included in the room rate, was good with fruit, yogurt, a variety of breads and coffee. By the end of the week, we were lucky to have toast and coffee. When checking out, a \$16-per-day fee for the use of electricity was charged to our room. (This had never been mentioned anywhere.) There were signs in the rooms asking guests to please conserve electricity, which, being ecology-minded, we did. This extra charge left a bitter taste in our mouths. I would recommend going to Vieques, if only for the quality of food served everywhere. The only exception would be where we stayed. We rented a car and drove to numerous secluded beaches and restaurants. An evening tour of the bioluminescent bay is a must.

Nan-Sea Charters, Blackbeard's Sports, Hix Island House, April 2007, David Vickery and Suzanne Leeson (twodivers@att.net), Hoboken, NJ. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 110 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Hix Island House promotes itself as being an eco-lodge, and is in a 13-acre natural refuge of native trees, tall grasses, birds and butterflies, and tranquility (no phones, television, or typical room and turn-down service). The outdoors becomes indoors. Their self-contained all-concrete lofts highlight views of the Caribbean and palm-lined beaches minutes away; the open-air private terraces include outdoor showers where you can bathe in the trade winds. This is because the "fourth wall" where

the balcony doors would normally be doesn't exist; the entire room is open to the elements. If it rains, it can blow into your room. So do the insects. The comfortable beds reside under mosquito netting, and even in the dry month of April, you'll need it. Don't get us wrong, we'd go back. Mornings and evenings are brilliant. Meeting John Hix at his weekly cocktail party when he is in residence was also a highlight (wait'll you see the view from his house). But if it was rainy or humid, all you've got is a hurricane shutter and an overhead fan. Solar panels augment the electricity and hot water. Water is collected and your shower and basins flow to the landscaped foliage. The pool features an electrostatic filtration system, so it's like swimming in fresh water. The dive operations left a great deal to be desired. We spoke with Nan-Sea Charters before we left and booked (we thought) 6 days of diving. We arrived after their office had closed for the day, called them first thing in the A.M. and there was no answer. Finally, at 10:00 they answered the phone and were already on the boat. OK, we'll dive the next five days. But they only had us down for one day, not six, and were full for the next three days. The boat only holds six, and it's real cozy at that. So bright and early the next day, we trucked into Isabel II, the main town, and booked a couple of shore dives with Blackbeard's Sports. They have no boat. Got the tanks and followed them into the bush to Bahia Corcho, geared up, met the four newbies who would be in the group, and entered via a small rocky beach. The DM said he was going to go real slow due to the new folks, so we swam out over the eel grass to a small patch reef and descended to, well, 27 feet. Yes, 27 feet, and the leader took off like a shot with never a backward

glance, not that there was much to see, except us wondering where he was off to in such an all-fired hurry. After a second dive to 25 feet (really packing in the N2, you know?) along the shoreline where there was a small reef with some sergeant majors, an arrowhead crab, some chubs, and other small tropicals, we gave up on the diving until Nan-Sea could take us out on Thursday. Thursday we schlepped our gear down to the small pier in Esperanza, kind of a funky beach town with bars and restaurants opposite the quay. The Nan-Sea boat is a 28-footer and it's necessary to set up the 3000 psi aluminum 80s on the dock. The DM sits on the stern of the boat with your gear, and you sit on his knee to shrug into your rig. A backward roll and you descend to a patch reef with some mahogany snappers, the sergeant majors, a few parrot fish and the other usual suspects. This is a square profile. After a 20 minute SIT, we were back in the water on another, nearly identical reef. When we got down to 700 psi, we noticed our computers were in deco. We hung for the required time, reboarded via the small ladder, announced we had been in deco, and were told that as long as we did the hang, it was OK. Showed up Friday morning with the same group, set up our tanks on the dock ... and the boat wouldn't start. The DM offered to take us on a shore dive after lunch to the former Navy Pier on the other side of the island. So we called at 11, noon and 1:00. Finally got a call back from the owner at 3:00, who said he knew nothing of the planned dive. Folks, other than a few free-lance guides you may run into in one of Esperanza's imbibational emporiums, these are the only two operations on the island. There are some nice beaches, but skip Green Beach because the sand fleas are brutal.

Ocean Sports, San Juan Marriott Resort, August 2007, David Rapp, Fort Worth, TX. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 84 F, calm. We dived one day with Ocean Sports out of Fajardo. We would have dived more days, but the port closed for weather — Ocean Sports gave full refund. Our dive boat, the "Day Off," was a Newton 46' Dive Special, which was spacious for our family of four. All equipment was in good condition, including soft weights. The captain and crew (all three named Carlos) were friendly and professional. We also got great service from Leslie, who kept us constantly informed as threatening weather approached. With healthy reefs and good population of marine life, the diving was good in general, but was made special when two dolphins came up to check us out. The San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino is a great place to stay. Relax around the pool and on the beach. Beyond the good dining on site, it is walking distance to many other good restaurants, and cab fare is reasonable to anywhere else. Marriott service is consistently top quality.

Parguera Divers, November 2006, Mort Rolleston (mortmandu@rcn.com), Washington, DC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: 83 F, choppy. Drove an hour-and-a-half to the southwestern side of the island to explore Parguera Wall for a day. We dove two sites: Steps and Mojarra — both of which averaged about 60-70 feet in depth. The Steps site was disappointing. First, the dive shop (which was perfectly fine otherwise) had the rule that all divers had to follow a guide — no exceptions. Given we had about a dozen divers, this was, frankly, a pain as we had to dive to the proverbial lowest common denominator. Indeed, we had to wait at the start for ten minutes

under the boat for a couple of divers who had trouble descending. In addition, what few fish there are were scared away by the large group. Second, our tanks were only filled to 2800 psi. Third, the wall itself was not particularly awe-inspiring (compared, in my experience anyway, to walls off New Providence and the Great Barrier Reef or even the ledges off Catalina Island). The small canyon in the coral that paralleled the edge of the wall was fun to explore and the soft coral (similar to Bahamas or Key Largo) seemed quite healthy. And the visibility was exquisite. The fish highlight was a interestingly colored hogfish who was definitely not camera-shy and hung out with me for quite a while. Mojarra was a much better dive. In part, it was because we hung out way behind the big armada of guided divers chugging away at full steam and took some time to explore. It also had more fish (but still pretty underwhelming), including small black triggerfish and blue chromis above the reefs, a pair of angelfish, goatfish, grunts, small wrasses, and butterflyfish. We did see a couple of nurse sharks under the ledges. Indeed, the whole site was basically several large rock/coral formations with wide sandy channels in between and many crevasses beneath. The coral, mostly soft, also seemed quite healthy and featured some bright green/yellow barrel sponges.

SeaVentures, Copamarina, August 2006, Joe LeRoy (joseph.leroy@hotmail.com), Random Lake, WI.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy. The dive shop is nicely equipped and the rental gear is good and reasonably new. The instructor/DM, Tony, is safety conscious and pleasant. As an instructor myself, it was interesting watching him evaluate divers' abilities and experience.

There was a couple who had a number of dives under their belts, but hadn't been diving for several years. Tony was right there with them without making them feel self-conscious. Getting back on the boat was tricky because the wind had picked up. Both Tony and the captain of the boat, Captain Bill, were right there making sure everyone got back on without incident. Another nice touch was the safety bottle hung over the side of the boat. The boat was newer and spotless. The captain explained life preservers, extinguishers, and oxygen before we left the dock.

Taino Divers, November 2006, Mort Rolleston (mortmandu@rcn.com), Washington, DC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: 83 F, choppy. Desecheo Island is 14 miles off the coast. We did two dives at sites called Mars and Aquarium. Mars was pretty disappointing. While the visibility was excellent and the rock formations with their swim-throughs were not bad, the fish life was pretty sparse despite the uninhabited and protected nature of the island. And it was far more rocks than coral. We did see probably the largest lobster I've ever seen! Most of the dive was 30-40 feet, allowing a long bottom-time. Aquarium had better coral and fish life than Mars (mostly the usual suspects of small reef fish, parrotfish, chub, yellowfin snapper, tangs, halibut/sole, goatfish, and spadefish). Quite a few small black triggerfish and small blue fish hovering over the reefs. We also got a visit from a passing swarm of medium-sized blue wrasse. No large pelagics. The bottom is also pretty rocky, with some bright orange/red hard coral on top (if you lit it up with a bright light or a strobe). There is little soft coral. Most of the dive was at 50-60 feet. Taino Divers seemed like a fine operation. We had Ted (a profes-

sor type) and his alter-ego Tim — both quite good and helpful. The boat was small, but handled the waves well. They beached the boat near the shop to load up everyone. They let us dive our profiles without limitations. We did have to follow guides, especially at Mars, who seemed to be more interested in rushing through the circuit rather than letting us explore at our own slower pace. We had four divers and nine snorkelers on the boat (maximum number). The water was mostly too deep to see much from the surface and the shallows had few fish. Rincon is a casual, lush, and fairly well-developed beach area without being urban that is just far enough off the beaten track to avoid masses of American tourists. It also boasts world class surfing, though we didn't do that. It also has a small, exclusive private resort that made the famous "1000 Places to Visit Before You Die" book (Horned Dorset Primavera). Overall, diving in western Puerto Rico is perfectly fine in the sense that any diving in clear tropical water with a few fish and some reefs is never a bad thing. However, I don't think I'd recommend going only or primarily to dive.

Taino Divers, June 2007, Ian Kennedy (kenn123@mac.com), Davis, CA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. The southern part of the island looked a lot like a typical Caribbean island, with lots of stray dogs running around, chickens, little road-side shacks and so on. The interior mountains were nice. We encountered nice beaches on the west side of the island, from Boqueron up to Rincon. We spent most of our time at Rincon, which is a mecca for board riders in winter when the swells get up. We stayed in one of the Punta Villas condos that was nice except for the lack of hot water —the cold water was at least

tepid. I went diving with Taino Divers in Rincon I had met the co-owner, Carson, on a live-aboard on the GBR; we stayed in touch. We went to Desecheo Island each day for a two-tank trip. It is about 40 minutes in their small twin outboard boat from Rincon. The boat holds up to about 12 divers. Customers and crew help lift tanks and gear off a truck and shuttle it along a human chain over to the boat that is beached alongside. The reverse procedure applies when you get back home. The boat does not have a head and does not offer a lot of shade. Pick the starboard side for the ride home to avoid a thorough salt spray soaking. Each dive is led by a dive master. Photographers would be advised to ask to dive as a separate pair so that they could have more time to observe and shoot. The visibility was great — at least 100 feet on each dive. Conditions are great for all levels of divers. We encountered significant current on only one dive that made an ascent up the anchor line advisable. Depths ranged from about 25 feet to about 70 feet. All the dives take place close to the island. There are many swim-throughs and small caverns that make for interesting underwater topology. There are some corals but they are not abundant. We came across several unexploded bombs that were left over from the US military use of the island. They add an element of interest to dropping the anchor. The fish life was good in some areas, lacking in some other sites. I saw one turtle, one barracuda, but no sharks at all over my 3 days. The rest of the fish included the usual characters — parrot fish, etc. The fish life was as abundant or varied as other dive locations that I have seen (Fiji and Cozumel spring to mind). The dives were well organized, customers were treated well, the dive masters were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and courteous.