

undercurrent

The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers

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Cuba's Isla de Juventud

the thrill of diving forbidden water

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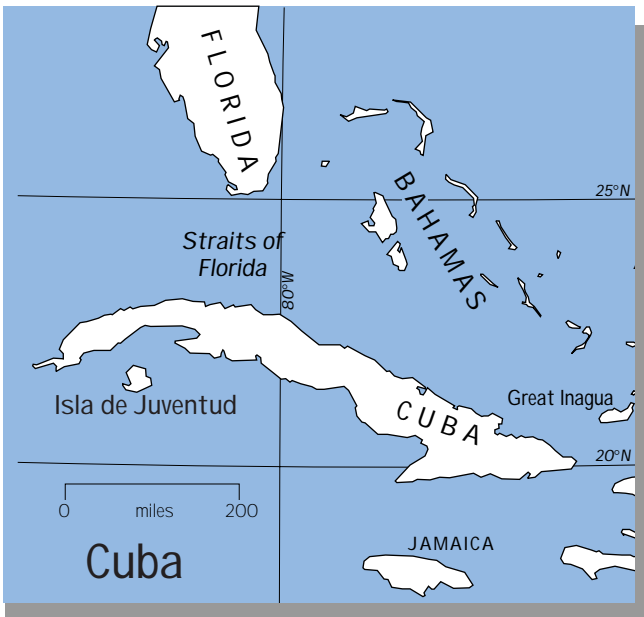
Standing in the immigration line at Cuba's sparkling new Jose Marti International Airport, I felt apprehensive about sneaking into Cuba. Having just arrived from Cancun, Mexico, I carried a Cuban tourist card along with a Spanish language letter of introduction requesting that the Cuban authorities stamp my tourist card but not my U.S. passport. Scubacan, my Canadian travel agent, had provided the documents so that Cancun would appear as my final destination in my passport. Presumably, U.S. immigration would be none the wiser when I returned home.

I presented my papers to the immigration official. He carefully looked at the letter, then at me, and smiled conspiratorially. "I help you, you help me," he muttered in halting English. I asked him to repeat, reluctant to flash cash at him, but that was his drift and I got it. I forked over a fiver and was on my way with my passport unstamped.

Scubacan representatives met my partner, me, and another couple, then transported us in a minivan to the Copacabana, an over-the-hill Mafia-era waterfront hotel in New Havana's Vedado district. The next morning we gathered in the lobby along with a woman from New York, then were driven to Jose Marti for a short flight to the Isle of Youth and the Hotel Colony.

Lying south of Havana in the Caribbean, Isla de Juventud, originally the Isle of Pines, may have been the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. At 1900 square miles, it offers plenty of coastline, and the diving is reported to be Cuba's best.

The rambling 77-room Hotel Colony was built as a casino just before Castro took power forty years ago. It still has a quaint Lucy-and-Desi appeal, right down to the twin beds



in the colorfully-painted rooms. Today, the Colony is almost exclusively a dive resort, since there's little else to do in this remote location 45 minutes from the island's major city, Nueva Gerona.

Upon arrival, I quaffed my welcome Mojito (a rum-and-mint concoction that inspired some of Hemingway's taller stories) and had a hearty, if bland, lunch. They then hustled us off on a short bus ride to one of their five dive boats, which ranged from sleek cabin cruisers to rusty old trawlers (two new 42-footers were due any day, but any day could also mean "manana").

The larger boats take 8-14 divers each, but they assigned the four of us to the runt of the fleet, a 25-foot inboard runabout with a nylon awning, no radio, no running lights, and no

fire extinguisher. It didn't even have a windshield, so waves breaking over the bow splashed unimpeded into the cockpit. During the 80-minute ride to the dive sites at Punta Frances (that's the average time to all sites), the spray became a downright pain in the butt.

Our first two dives were billed as checkouts. Divemaster Martin, a truculent, potbellied fellow in his 50s who sported a monokini, gave no briefing. He merely told us two old salts and the two inexperienced divers to follow him. (I speculated that it's Marxist to treat everyone equally, but then they do that at many Cayman operations, as well, regardless of experience. Oh, well.)

After back-flopping into the 80° F. water, tuxedoed Black Durgon maître'd's escorted me to the 45-foot bottom. It was studded with typical Caribbean finger reefs, straight rows of hard coral with a profusion of soft coral, which were separated by sandy channels. Once Martin was satisfied with everyone's buoyancy control, he led us on a circular tour, pointing out a large green moray inside our 60-foot range of visibility. Since the area is a preserve, the sea life was bold, even audacious. Yellowtail snappers swam in front of my face like pilot fish. An 18-inch lobster stood his ground halfway out of his hole, allowing me to touch his feelers. Martin led us back to the buoy line with 1,000 psi in our 80 cubic foot stubby steel tanks. He climbed on the boat while I played tag with queen angels. After 45 minutes and a safety stop, the boat driver hauled in my tank, BC, and weight belt. I clambered up a rickety swim step and pulled myself over the transom.

At Reino de Sahara (Martin referred to the sites by number, and it took me days to find a key that listed the names), I encountered a few tarpons loitering around an arch at 60 feet. A live conch and even a Triton's trumpet, which were probably alive only because there are few tourists to buy shells, dragged themselves along the sand. Surfacing near dusk, I didn't look forward to the wet 80-minute trip back, especially with no refreshments or food on board. Nor was I amused when the engine failed to start. After all, we were the only boat on the water, and with no communications or running lights, it was a daunting prospect. But Martin and the driver (who spoke no English) eventually got her going. After a drenching trip, we pulled in at 7 p.m. under the watchful eyes of troops manning a guard station at the mouth of the harbor.

Bedraggled, I showered, dressed, and scurried to the Galéon Restaurant. The buffet featured pot roast or chunks of chicken or pork in mild sauces, accompanied by fresh carrots, cucumber slices, and rice with canned peas and corn. In a country where food is rationed and the average family eats meat only a few times a year, this was a lavish spread. However, the dishes, made with poor-quality raw materials, were overcooked and hard to distinguish from one another. And the plentiful selections varied only slightly each night: fuel indeed, but not feast. After dinner, staff and local talent offered a homespun and spirited floor show of songs, dances, and blackout skits.

My ground-floor room looked out on private patios and a palm-studded lawn that swept down to the beach. With no screens on the louvered windows, the mosquitoes swarmed so fiercely after sundown that I was forced to close the louvers and run the air conditioning all night. My partner and I slathered ourselves with insect repellent: it was pretty effective, but hardly romantic.

The Colony draws mainly from Europe and South America. The groups cluster in the restaurant and open-air Pirate Bar next door, which features rum, rum, and more rum (such as 7-year-old Havana Club, which sips like cognac, at \$2.50 a pop). If you want other hard liquor, BYOB. Cuban beers were excellent, particularly Crystal and Maybe (\$1.50). At the end of the pier in front, about 100 yards out, the al fresco Mojito Bar is a great place to watch sunsets and later gaze at the incredibly starry skies. Generally, the hotel staff was very helpful. Ernesto, the 28-year-old general manager of the Colony, made a specialty of taking Scubacan guests under his wing as a combination concierge, tour guide, floor show MC, and all-around problem-solver.

I met only two other Americans, including an *Undercurrent* reader named Bill from Chicago who was on his sixth visit. He gave me good advice: tip Martin on a daily basis. I did so and suddenly he was much more communicative. He even let on that cold drinking water had been on the boat all along.

Over the next few days we visited several sites. At Queen's Garden, midnight parrots worked over an Einstein-sized brain coral 60 feet down; at Pirate's Anchor, an 18th-century relic shared a reef with well-entrenched stone crabs. Tarpon Arch, which rises 3 yards above the 45-foot bottom and opens onto a natural amphitheater, had (what else?) tarpon. Visibility ran to 90-100' on the deeper morning dives. After two dives, we would motor 10-15 minutes for an unremarkable lunch at a beach-side restaurant, then out for an afternoon dive, by which time there was always lower visibility. I passed on the one night dive, which would have delayed dinner until our return to the Colony, close to 10 p.m.

The real thrills came on the deep dives. Pared de Coral was a wall with black coral gently wafting in blue water 125 feet down. The bushy golden brown stands, undistinguished at depth, had to compete for our attention with a myriad of sea rods, plumes, whips, and fans plus massive leaf, plate, and sheet corals. Christmas tree and feather duster worms peeked out between tube, barrel, and loggerhead sponges and a grab bag of encrusting tunicates. On top of the wall I watched a barracuda spook a ball of blue tangs into a flashy display of group reflexes.

Isla de Juventud, Cuba

Diving (experienced)	★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★★★
Snorkeling	★★
Accommodations	★★★
Service & Attitude	★★★★
Ambiance	★★★★
Food	★★
Money's worth	★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)

At Cuevo Azul, Martin led us to a vertical cave at 65 feet. Like Santa slipping down a chimney, I dropped feet first as a tarpon family circled restlessly in a chamber ten fathoms below me. Slowly a posse of small tarpons spiraled up to check me out, all steely eyes and undershot jaws. At 125 feet we exited the cave, then veered down the wall to enter a second vertical tube at 146 feet. There we ascended through another school of tarpon and the balls of tiny glass fish they feed on. Wow!

Since we had a small group, we could explore these extraordinary caves as leisurely as our computers would allow. Once, while we were completing our safety stop, another boat dropped 15 divers over our heads. The group, of mixed experience, drifted all over the surface and struggled to adjust their gear underwater. I hated to think what the trip through those narrow caves would be like among that flailing throng.

The diving operator, PuertoSol, is a CMAS dive operation, so PADI rules, such as 130-foot depth limits, don't apply. Some divers told me of descents to 175 feet or more. A small shop at the marina rents fins, shorty wetsuits, and Spanish-made BCs, all in seemingly good condition. No computers or camera gear were available. They consistently filled steel tanks to 2600 psi. The marina also boasted outdoor showers and a fenced-off pen for rinsing and drying gear. A prize-winning local photographer offers lessons and slide or film-developing services.

Because three tanks take up the entire day, I had no opportunity to sample other activities. The free-form pool, with its graceful angelfish sculptures, was hardly used except for certification classes. An activities shack was stocked with rental catamarans, kayaks, mopeds, and bikes (all with flat tires). Water skiing and sightseeing were available for additional fees. The gift shop featured some bargains (sunglasses were \$4 and tee-shirts \$7). The art gallery was closed until our last day. Snorkelers could see lots of fish (including barracuda) over the grassy sand bottom off the Mojito Bar at the end of a long pier but had to contend with Portuguese Men O' War and other jellies.

Is Cuba's diving worth the hassle and potential risk? I thought so. (See the sidebar for details.) They promised virgin reefs, and while I saw no signs of human damage or litter, storms had kicked a lot of silt onto the corals. Hurricane Mitch had just passed, and I noticed plenty of natural destruction, including a 6-foot stand of pillar coral lying in the sand while swarms of damselfish and blueheads pecked at the remains. But in five days, I had two dives I would rate as 10s, the rest above-average Caribbean fare, on a par with better sites in Belize or Tortola, for instance. With its usual water clarity and abundance of tame, multicolored fish, Punta Frances is a photographer's Shangri-La. As for big animal encounters, all I saw were an indifferent nurse shark, a 6-foot moray, and the ubiquitous tarpon. Trips farther along Los Indios wall and a couple of shallow water wrecks were canceled due to poor visibility.

Spending the last two nights in Old Havana made the trip especially worthwhile. Imagine New Orleans' French Quarter, except twice as big, twice as old,

Sherwood Cries Foul

Is there a problem with the Sherwood SRB5300 Magnum regulator?

The German diving magazine *Tauchen* reported in its test of the SRB5300 Magnum that the unit's dry air bleed system could malfunction, causing insufficient air to reach the user. It concluded that the regulator was dangerous and was the probable cause of two diving deaths. Sherwood called the magazine's comments "reckless and unfounded."

Sherwood claims to have duplicated *Tauchen's* test. After disabling the dry air bleed system, Sherwood noted a "lesser but adequate amount of air for breathing."

Sherwood said it has produced "hundreds of thousands of scuba regulators with the dry air bleed system," which had "proven reliable worldwide in millions of dives in everything from sport to extreme conditions."

and twice as exotic. This lively historic district, founded in the 16th century, is a blend of stately colonial buildings, friendly plazas, mysterious side streets, warm, vibrant people out and about at all hours, and music pouring from every doorway. And there's plenty of security, with armed troops at every intersection.

I stayed at the Santa Isabel, Old Havana's only 5-star hotel. The building, converted from an 18th-century palace, is a four-story wedding cake of a structure on the Plaza de Armas, which serves as a town square of sorts for the district. For \$150 a night I got spacious and beautiful quarters with comfortable double beds, honor bar, in-room safes, appliances that actually worked (including TVs that pulled in ESPN and CNN from Miami), and breakfast. On our spacious balcony, I smoked Cuban cigars and watched the passing parade below. The staff speaks fluent English and was extremely accommodating.

Diving in Cuba's Forbidden Waters

Boat and beach diving are possible at a number of other sites along Cuba's shores. Here's a quick summation of the key spots, moving clockwise from Havana. Information about services and accommodations can be obtained from the travel services and websites listed in the Diver's Compass.

- **Varadero** -Primarily a training base on the Atlantic with lots of beach resorts. Some beach diving and inland cave dives. Less than 100 miles east of Havana.
- **Cayo Coco/Guardalavaca/Santa Lucia** -Shallow sites among cayes off the northeast coast. Pelagics, sharks, turtles. Remains of Spanish-American War shipwrecks and forts.
- **Cabo Cruz/Guantánamo** -Southeast tip of main island, with sites ranging from Atlantic to Caribbean. Virgin black coral, historic wrecks.
- **Santiago de Cuba** -Cuba's most Caribbean city is the gateway to four diving zones. Tunnels, caves, walls, hammerheads.
- **Trinidad/Jardines de la Reina** -Cave diving on the south-central coast, deep drop-offs, black coral, giant sea turtles, remains of Spanish galleons. Check out the floating hotel, or cruise on a couple of live-aboards.
- **Cienfuegos** -Known as the Pearl of the South. Wrecks and the occasional whale shark. Just west is the infamous Bay of Pigs, which can actually be dived from the beach.
- **Cayo Largo** -Largest island in the Archipelago de los Canarreos off the southeast coast. Historic wreck sites, walls, shallow coral gardens.
- **Maria la Gorda** -Fidel's favorite, on the western point of Cuba. One diver who has covered a lot of Cuba told me: "The walls blow away the Caymans and I had a chance to play — I mean PLAY — with a couple of 30-35 lb. groupers. There are caverns that start at the edge of the reef and spill you at 120 feet on the wall. The reef was the most alive I've ever seen."

Is it illegal for Americans to visit Cuba? Technically, no, but the catch is that we are prohibited by the American government from spending any money there. That's why, when a celebrity's visits get publicized—e.g., Jack Nicholson's a few months back—they make it a point to say they're guests of the country. People like you and me get there by signing up with a foreign-based travel firm and paying money in advance so it doesn't go directly to the dreaded Red Menace just 90 miles below Florida.

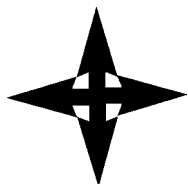
Official Treasury Department regulations require that persons subject to U.S. jurisdiction have a license to engage in any transactions related to travel to, from, and within Cuba. Transactions related to tourist and business travel are not licensable. This restriction includes tourist or business travel from or through a third country such as Mexico or Canada. Treasury will consider specific licenses for journalists, humanitarian missions, telecommunications activities, or for professional research. Without one, you pay your money, and you take your chance. That includes possible fines up to \$250,000 and confiscation of property, although enforcement of the laws is currently fuzzy. So hundreds, if not thousands, of Americans enter Cuba weekly from foreign cities on foreign planes.

La Habana Vieja houses a dozen or more museums, plus outdoor arts-and-crafts displays and bookstalls. You can follow Hemingway's footsteps by visiting the room at the Ambos Mundos Hotel where he wrote several novels, then having a Mojito at La Bodeguita del Medio and a daiquiri at La Floridita. The people were friendly and delighted to meet Americans. Nearly everyone I met has a relative in the States and longs for an end to the embargo so people and goods can cross the borders freely. They have great respect for Castro and the revolutionary struggle but are not afraid to discuss such problems as shortages of goods and job opportunities. I saw little street hustling or begging.

Cuba is a patched-together paradise, a land of do-it-yourselfers who've learned to make the most of their meager resources. Given all they've made of the scant amount they've had to work with, it seems unfair to complain about minor problems. On the other hand, visitors need to prepare for a genuine third-world experience. Bathrooms may overflow, bugs and geckos may infest your room, the hotel may run out of toilet paper, and your TV may pull in only one German-language station (thankfully, not very well). But the sincere and friendly people, most of them clean, well-dressed, and proud, genuinely tried to make our stay as comfortable as possible.

There is another, intangible reward here for travelers: the tingle one gets when wandering into forbidden territory. As we approach the year 2000, there aren't many opportunities like this left for divers.

- D.L.



Diver's Compass: Scubacan, the Toronto group operator, has been advertising fully-hosted, completely legal dive adventures in American dive magazines. I flew to Havana from Cancun in an Aero Caribe 727 (missing the thrill of Cubana Airline's Aeroflot jet). High season rates of US\$1538/person include round-trip airfare to Havana from Toronto, Cancun, Nassau, or Panama, the round-trip from Havana to the Colony, a double room for 5 nights, all meals and non-alcoholic beverages, 11 dives minimum, two nights in New

Havana with a city tour, and escorted airport transfers. A few other goodies, such as a lobster beach party, are provided for groups of eight or more. The Scubacan folks were extremely helpful throughout the trip. . . .Scubacan has a package of 3 dives per day for its groups, a schedule that requires their clients to arrive and depart together. . . .If you book independently, rates at the Colony are lower, but you have to make your own flight and transfer arrangements. A la carte diving during high season is \$56 for two dives. Snorkelers pay \$8 to join boats. They claim the best diving at Isle of Youth is in May or August (low season), but watch out for hurricanes. . . . Since most goods are in short supply, bring everything you need, including an insect bomb for your room, personal repellent, toilet paper (people dispense it for tips in airports and other public places), a hair dryer and a wash cloth. . . .Bring plenty of cash, because you can't use credit cards or traveler's checks issued by U.S. banks. The dollar is eagerly accepted. Most hotels have safes for valuables. Typical high-season rates in Old Havana were under US\$100/night for two; dinners ran US\$10-15. Shopping is limited, but inexpensive (original watercolors under \$20, for instance). You won't need adapters for electrical appliances, but be ready for power outages. . . .Additional resources for planning your trip: Cuba Tourist Board, 555 Queen St. E., Suite 705, Toronto, Ontario, M5C 1R6 Phone: 416-362-0700, Fax: 416-362-6799; Cubanacan International Canada, 372 Bay St., Suite 1902, Toronto, Ontario M5H 2W9. For booking trips to Maria la Gorda, Trinidad, Cayo Largo and other locations besides the Isle of Youth, try Carlos Dellacqua, Cuba Travel, 630 San Vicente Blvd., Apt. H, Santa Monica, CA

90402, phone: (213) 975-1692, e-mail scuba@cubatravel.com.mx. . . .For cyberdives, information on specific sites and nearby hotels and dive operations can be found on www.cybercuba.com/scubacuba.htm; www.cubatravel.com; www.fun@suntravel.net; www.3routes.com/scuba/ca/cuba; www.cubanacan.cu/index1. Scubacan's website is www.scubacan.com/information/cubadiving.

What's Left After Mitch?

reports on Honduras, Belize, Cayman, and Cozumel

As everyone now knows, Hurricane Mitch, a category 5 storm that ranked among the strongest hurricanes on record, wreaked havoc in Honduras and left its mark elsewhere in the Caribbean. The storm left an estimated 7,000 dead and 11,000 missing in Honduras, and the Bay Islands took the first and hardest hit. Mitch sat atop Guanaja and battered the island with 180 mph winds, but most of the island's residents survived by fleeing to a protected canyon that spans the island. Their homes fared less well, with some initial estimates reporting 75 percent of the structures destroyed. Bonacco Town, built entirely on stilts over the water, is nearly gone. Little is open currently on Guanaja, but, while docks and on-water buildings were devastated, damage to resorts was less severe than might have been expected.

Other Bay Islands were less severely impacted, and most live-aboards in the area are up and running. Resorts on Utila reported beach erosion and damage to docks, and Cayos Cochinos had moderate damage. Roatán's damage was minimal, and most resorts there are operational. We've heard that the shallow water dives suffered most and that there was some coral breakage, although visibility seems to have bounced back to around 80'. A few resorts on the north side are claiming 150' visibility and bigger fish than they were seeing prior to the storm. While I don't have first-hand knowledge of Roatán's post-hurricane reef condition, I did drop in on Cozumel just two days after Gilbert scoured the island in 1988, and, oddly enough, I found that there were more big fish on the reef than before the storm.

Mitch trapped a lot of divers on Roatán who were unable to evacuate. According to Terry Evans of Roatán Charter, despite pleasant weather preceding the storm, the Honduran

Small Reserve — Big Fish

Attention dive resorts: no matter how small a marine reserve you establish, the protection seems to help fish populations — and your business.

At Anse Chastenet Resort in St. Lucia, the hotel and dive operation put up a ring of buoys to keep fishing boats at bay. While scientists had little information about whether such a small preserve would have any effect at all, they were pleased to note that the number of commercially important species (parrot fish, snappers) was more than double that in nearby non-reserve areas. Predatory and herbivorous fishes were also greater in number in the reserve than outside. And the fish aren't there because of feeding (it's prohibited) or artificial structures (there are none).

Fish inside the reserve were also substantially larger than those in fishing grounds, and surprisingly, the reserve contained large individuals of species whose scope for movement might have been expected to take them into fishing grounds where they could be caught. Snappers and grunts, scarce along the heavily fished coast, were evident in the reserve.

While such a small reserve cannot benefit all species, it is significant protection for some species — and a real draw to divers.

[Reported in the Journal of the International Society for Coral Reef Studies]