

undercurrent

The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers

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Diving With Parguera Divers in Puerto Rico

if it's so good why isn't it a major dive destination?

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It happens every time: on a dive trip somewhere in the Caribbean, on Tuesday or Wednesday night, après dive, I'm having beers with new friends and they ask, "so where else do you dive?" "I love to dive in Puerto Rico," I say. Then I see that look on their faces. They're thinking Sharks and Jets and "I love to be in America," and they can't fathom my love for Puerto Rico.

"So why's Puerto Rico so good?" they ask. The answer, for me, is Parguera, a small fishing village turned resort village in southwestern Puerto Rico. There are plenty of good things about Parquera: nice people; cheap prices; a great dive operation; great food; good hotel; nice weather; and over 20 miles of walls to dive. I love walls. I love good, uncrowded diving, and that's Parquera.

Parguera Divers is owned and operated by Efra Figueroa, who is ably assisted by Angel Rovina. Efra has been diving Parguera for well over a decade. He discovered all the sites and is one of the "founding fathers" of Puerto Rican diving. No one loves to laugh and joke more than Efra, but this isn't apparent on day one, because his face is polite and captain-stern. "Show me your "C" card. When did you dive last and how many dives do you have under your weight belt?"

I followed Efra's routine, which was to rig your tank while the boat was at the dock. The staff was watching me, but I'm glad I didn't let that put me off, because I soon discovered that this crew is capable of watching and running dives without over-supervising, making them a pleasure to dive with. In fact, the staff truly loves to dive: Efra is thrilled to be in the water while for Angel it's serious play. They participated and guided, but, once I'd rolled my bones with them, if I informed them of my profile and dove well, I discovered that there weren't a lot



of rules: off the boat; dive your profile; stay with the guides or not; back to the hang line; and then up on the boat with 500 psi. A safety stop is required. I followed these guidelines, and all went smoothly. Screw up, however, and I've seen Efra banish people from his boat. My log shows a lot of 120-something foot dives. With these beautiful walls and the 100-foot visibility, dives like that are typical.

It's a small operation; expect only 6 to 8 people on the boat. If there are a lot more (say, over 12), it gets beyond cozy. If the group gets much larger than that, there's a second, 28-foot boat to back up the partially-covered 36-footer. Although the boat's spacious enough, with ample gear storage, there really aren't any comfort-

able seats. The shop keeps some rental equipment (Sherwood), and they can fix broken stuff, but it's best to show up with your own gear. Photographers will be at home here, though: Efra is also a photographer (I'm not) and has a freshwater rinse tank on the boat just for cameras. There's also a shower contraption for humans. A weighted line with a spare tank and regulator hung beneath the boat on every dive, and a 30 or 40-foot Jesus line trailed behind. But compared to other multi-Newton, fleets of 42s type operations, Efra's is modest. The hour run to dive the walls wasn't luxurious, but once I'd gotten to the sites, I found walls that challenged anything I'd seen. Efra's Wall, Two for You, and Canyons were all excellent. I'm a certified Wall Freak, and on my Wall-O-Meter the best walls at Parquera were heart-pounders on a par with walls in Cozumel, Little Cayman, and some of the outer cays of Belize. When the boat dropped anchor next to the wall and I headed down to a 40 - 60 foot sand bottom, then flew out over the wall, it was magic.

For me, the real magic and best wall dive ever was Black Wall. The wall is monstrous: it starts at 50' and goes down to forever. At the west end, it horse-shoes, then straightens out. Though it's called Black Wall because of a stand of black coral, the wall itself is brilliant, and on a sunny day it shimmers with color. Vivid reds, yellows, and greens deck the almost vertical wall, along with huge basket and tube sponges. I slid down the wall, swam to the horseshoe, and was buzzed by durgeons, angels, and on down the list of typical tropical colorfuls. Swimming around the horseshoe, which is half the size of a football field from one end to the other, I peered down into the water turning from light blue to black as it neared a few little shelves at 150 and 200 feet. The magnificent scale was literally awesome. Black Wall was my favorite dive, period.

Several other dives stood out: Fallen Rock was another beautiful, sheer wall that started at 60' and went down to infinity. A huge, school bus-sized boulder has broken off the wall and landed on a ledge, and in the spaces behind it I discovered a bevy of mega-lobsters and crabs. Old Buoy, starting at 40 to 50 feet, teamed with fish. There were huge schools of the Puerto Rican piranhas, black durgeons, and they were especially fierce if I threw a chunk of my sandwich over the side of the boat. I also kept company with a few barracuda, and my last time there I saw a honker southern ray. Parquera's fleet of French angels boasts size and curiosity, and there are deep trenches to swim through. I tried hitting the trenches and swam out and over an impressive vertical drop into the deep blue.

My shallow dives were also excellent, including Chimney, a fish-filled, 40-foot flat with a great chimney coral formation. I swam into a comfortable-size horizontal opening and found myself in a sun-filled amphitheater filled with fish. I felt as if a Gary Larson-type deity had put together the perfect aquarium for leisurely viewing. I couldn't get over the huge variety of soft coral, sponges, and smaller fish. I played with a good-sized octopus, then swam up and out through the top. Though I'm not a shallow/la-la diver, my log shows 75 minutes at Chimney: something must have been interesting. Other dives turned up a 100-member spade fish team and a fleet of over 50 barracuda that hung overhead like a silver cloud, along with the usual suspects, Caribbean fish augmented by the occasional ray or nurse and black tip shark.

If it's so good, why aren't divers flocking in droves to PR? Why isn't Parguera Little Cayman? There are several reasons. Let me explain.

My wife and I go to Parguera every February. The weather is clear, beautiful, and warm (low to mid 80s) then. The water temp is always 78 to 81. For me, that's tee-shirt diving; for most others not on my special high-fat diet, it's up to 3 mills. The vis averages around 100'. I've also been there in May when the air gets into the 90s and the water to low 80s. PR is definitely in the hurricane belt, but except for hurricanes and the really hot summers, I haven't heard of a bad time to go.

One option is to fly into San Juan and drive over the mountains to Parguera, which takes about 3 to 4 hours. The roads are superhighways, but Puerto Rican driving takes some getting used to. Most cars stay in the left lane (which is usually in better shape) and pass on the right. On my first trip, I did the long drive thing, and of course I expected to see friendly villages with tropical folks waving from charming roadside restaurants. Forget it: it's highways, though there are some nice views going through the mountains. For those less enthused about driving, do what I did on this trip: take American Eagle from San Juan to either Ponce or Mayagüez, both of which are about 45 minutes from Parguera. Having a car for the week is helpful.

Parguera is a little town where Puerto Ricans go for the weekend or for a holiday. It's the Jersey shore, and it's honky-tonk. Over the past few years, there's been more building and more gentrification, but Parguera is essentially a few grocery stores, lots of bars, a few restaurants, and Puerto Ricans having their seashore weekends. Everybody is friendly, everybody is happy, and few locals are divers -- Reason No. 1 why this isn't Little Cayman: it's not a dive destination. That, for me, feels different from my trips to the Brac or Cozumel or Provo.

But the town was great. I stayed at Parador Villa La Parguera (70 rooms with a/c and phones). It's one of a few paradors (inns that must meet government standards) in town. For under \$650 a week, I got a nice room with a view of the water, a pool, and a restaurant. It was by no means a luxury resort, and at times there were

Scuba Figures

More interesting than the scuba figure a beer gut cuts in a Lycra wetsuit, the National Sporting Goods

Association figures show that 2.3 million Americans scuba dived in 1997, averaging nearly eleven dives each. And that a record 715,000 women participated in 1997. PADI's research shows that in 1984 first-time certification of female participants was 26.3% of the total; by 1996 that number had increased to 34.6%.

The top three regions for diving in the U.S. are: South Atlantic (25.7%), Pacific (17.1%) and West South Central (13.4%). Not surprisingly, diving attracts an affluent demographic: 43.6% of divers have a household income of over \$75,000 and 35.7% are in the \$35,000 - \$74,999 household income bracket.

The study also indicated that divers must like to brag about their adventures as the number one communications impetus fueling new diver participation is word-of-mouth from existing divers.

too many little kids screeching by the pool for my W.C. Fields-like tastes. It was clean and functional as opposed to big and luxurious, but still comfortable enough that my wife was completely satisfied. Parguera Divers has an affiliation with Posada Por La Mar, another parador a block away, where the boat is docked. It's supposed to be comparable, but I was so content at the Villa that, other than waving at the owner and getting on the boat there, I didn't check it out.

Life on my dive trip consisted of two morning dives and then lunch, and I usually followed this with an island adventure. There are lots of places to go and adventures to have within an hour's drive from Parguera, and I filled my dance card in a variety of different ways. There was the drive to the beach. (Ah! Reason No. 2 why this isn't Little Cayman or Bonaire: there's no beach in

Nikon SB-103 Strobe Slow Repairs and Stolen Units

In last year's October issue, we told readers about Nikon's September recall of its Nikonos Speedlight Model SB-103 electronic flashes. The recall was initiated when Nikon determined that gas buildup could cause the front lens and flash tube unit to be projected from the speedlight. Nikon was offering to replace the units, which were manufactured between 1984 and 1994, with its newer SB-105 model. According to *Undercurrent* reader John Krupka, Nikon initially shipped out replacements in short order. Krupka wrote to tell us that his "subscription to *Undercurrent* has paid off big (again). I spotted your notice on the SB-103 recall in my e-

mail on Sept. 21. Figuring that Nikon would shortly be overwhelmed by the program ... I shipped my strobe to Nikon the same day. When I returned on Oct. 4, my new SB-105 had already been delivered."

But Krupka's prediction that Nikon would soon be bogged down appears to be on the money. Reader Richard Scalzo sent his unit to Nikon in September and didn't receive his new replacement till about six weeks later. Paul Broussend of Nikon's service department recently told *Undercurrent* that "units that were received in late October are now being replaced. This was a worldwide recall amounting to 80,000 units, of which 20,000 were sold in the U.S. So production of the SB-105, which is replacing the 103, has to be increased, not only to meet replacement needs but also the 105 market. This takes time." He went on to tell us that "we are replacing units in the order that we received them, so soon we will be working on those returned in November."

While Nikon obviously has some catching up to do, they are still accepting returned units. Owners who have not yet taken advantage of the recall offer can ship their SB-103, sans cables, brackets, and batteries and insured for a minimum of \$100, to Nikon Inc., 19601 Hamilton Avenue, Torrance, California 90502-1309, Attention: Nikonos SB-103 Return. Be sure to include your name, address, telephone number, and the address to which you would like the replacement body shipped.

When he spoke with *Undercurrent*, Broussend also reported another, more unusual problem with the recall: some of the SB-103s seem to have found their way back to Nikon more than once. Broussend says that, because the 103s are made of very thick metal, they were unable to crush and destroy recalled units prior to disposing of them. Instead, Nikon elected to drill a hole through the center of each unit where the number 103 appears. A couple units with a patched hole in the center have been sent in with requests for replacement.

Those units appear to be only the tip of the iceberg. In January there was reportedly a posting on Ebay for a Nikon SB-103 strobe for sale. Though a couple of e-mail addresses veiled the identity of the seller, hundreds of units were reportedly offered for sale, all of them with patched holes. When a handy type with a machine shop was allegedly able to repair the hole and the unit pressure tested to 200', he apparently decided to buy and repair the whole batch, and it seems he's selling them at bargain basement prices. Though Nikon says they have no idea how many discarded units may have disappeared or how they found their way into customers' hands, they do say they have begun to warn customers against buying any Nikon flash units that have a patched hole in the center, and they add that they are not replacing any SB-103s that have a patched hole. But an alert reader who'd heard about the problem posited an interesting question: "Who will be responsible if a similar incident should occur with the 'repaired' strobes: Nikon for not destroying them in the first place, the guy who sold them on Ebay, the guy who plugged the hole, or the consumer who bought the repaired strobe, knowing their history?" Time will tell.

— John Q. Trigger

Parguera. There's a bay with mangrove all over the place. I tried renting a rowboat and outboard (there are also kayaks) and cruising the "canals" that ran through the mangroves, and it was very nice.) There was the trip to Boquerón, which seems to be the place where old hippies and burnt-out surfers go to retire and die. And the beach was great: it took me 45 minutes to get there, I had a fantastic, cheap lunch by the water, and I spent a great day. At night, I tried the party boats to Phosphorescent Bay. There was good food at several places in town (the restaurant at Villa La Parguera, the great new restaurant at Posada Por La Mar, and the restaurant at the marina were all winners; for

bigger bucks and minimal dress up, drive 45 minutes to Copamarina, an upscale resort, for dinner.) Food in town was reasonably priced, and I could go out for a nice dinner of fresh fish and a few beers (Medallia, the PR beer, is very good) for \$20-\$25. I think I've become addicted to skirt steak with beans and rice. And those who travel the Caribbean eating peas and rice/rice and beans should add PR, where it's pinto beans swimming in a wonderful red sauce, to their list.

Wait! Only two morning dives? That's it? Yes, that's Reason No. 3 why this isn't the most popular dive destination in the world: constant seas of three to five feet (sometimes a little less, sometimes a little more). Parguera Divers' 36-foot boat rocks and rolls. With the walls about hour's run from the dock, two a day for a week was enough for me, but Efra will do afternoon and night dives upon request. With groups, depending on their wishes, stamina, and the seas, he'll do afternoon and night dives up to a total of four a day.

The seas are definitely an issue for the seasick-prone. If you're going to barf anywhere, you will here. It was easy enough to backroll off the boat, but, given the prevailing rough waters, getting to the bobbing ladder to get on again without getting ladder-shined was sometimes a real challenge. In really rough seas I had to shed my weights at the dive platform in back, hang my BC and tank on the Jesus line, swim to the platform, and time my jump with a maneuver I could only call an "ass-flip" onto the rising platform. But no matter what was roiling on the surface, once I got below 10 or 15 feet, there was no evidence of what was going on above and little surge. Imagine a rough day on the ride from Provo to West Caicos, and you'll have a good idea of what the ride was like. The vast majority of the divers on the boat were experienced and self-confident; our motley crew included a brother and sister from Argentina, a gaggle of American divers from all over, and a few Puerto Ricans. (When my wife and I were on St. Croix, the dive shop owner asked where else we'd dived. We said, "La Parguera." He said, "Oh, then you can dive anywhere.")

Efra has both the capacity and willingness to coach newer divers, but this is certainly not the place for bad or stupid divers. It was a fun boat, and there was a lot of laughing, but once I set up my tanks and 8:00 came (the boat didn't wait), things settled down quickly. Once the boat left the dock and slipped out of the bay into open water, no one walked around much. Everyone grabbed a seat and hung on. But once we arrived at the site, the crew got into gear. When I came up from the first dive, they changed my aluminum 80 and presented me with a hunk of "authentic Puerto Rican sandwich." There were also soda, water, and snacks on board. Someone asked if there was a head on the boat, and Efra just shook his

Parguera Divers, Villa Parguera

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

★ = poor

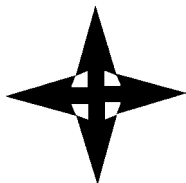
★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)

head and walked away. More importantly, however, the boat had O₂, radio, first aid, and well-maintained dive equipment.

I found Parguera because I was looking for "another" place, somewhere easy to get to and a reasonable addition to the Caribbean circuit. Its reef and fish life is interesting, and the dive sites rival the top-ranked Caribbean Wall Heavies. If Parguera becomes more popular and the demand for Efra's services increases, he'll have to strengthen the operation, which means newer and bigger boat(s), more personnel, and perhaps a glitzier dive shop. I like it the way it is, a bit funky but uncrowded, a relatively unknown getaway with plenty of walls and plenty of fun.

— K. B.



Diver's Compass: À la carte diving with Parguera Divers is \$360 for 6 x 2...There were no nitrox, photo processing, or camera or video camera rentals available...Their website is netdial.caribe.net/~divepr; the site has lots of info about the dive operation and the dive sites...Parguera Divers' packages are all with Posada Por La Mar, where the boat is docked. It's more dive-oriented than Villa Parguera, where I stayed. According to their website, Posada Por La Mar's packages run from \$732 (8 days/7 nights/6 days X 2 tanks) to \$878 per person...Book packages through Into the Blue at 1-800-6-GetWet (643-8938) or e-mail at divepr@caribe.net...Boat scuttlebutt was to spend the extra money on 4th-floor "deluxe ocean view" rooms...Villa Parguera is \$636.50 for 7 nights; for reservations call 787-899-3975; fax 787-899-6040 or see their website at www.elshop.com. There is no "package arrangement" between Parguera Divers and Villa Parguera. If you go to Villa Parguera, ask for a room in the section of the hotel that's on the left (as you're facing the water), where rooms have better views and are more open...For burgers and night life, try The Blues Café (easy walk from either hotel). There was live music sometimes and a nice deck for sitting out...La Jamaca, which looks like a converted house in the middle of a residential neighborhood, serves Puerto Rican/Continental food at an average of about \$15 per entree. It's cozy, and the owners trip over themselves to be of service.

Diving Western Australia's *True North*

it's more than just skurfing, whale sharks and waterfalls

It was a crazy Aussie who talked me into trying to stand on a surfboard while he got in a tinnie and towed me at warp speed across a lagoon in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Had I been able to stand up, it would have been great for my ego. But the pictures taken by all my dive mates -- well, they tell the truth.

As it turned out, I wasn't much of a "skurfer," as they call it. But I had ventured to Western Australia to dive, and let me tell you ... it's got it all over skurfing.

From Sydney, Australia's west coast is a five-hour cross-country flight. It's the quintessential Wild West, wide open and barely disturbed by humans. Cross the city limits of any town, and you'll find no power poles, no billboards, no traffic, no litter. Emus and kangaroos are the biggest travel hazards. But phones, doctors, and decent supermarkets are there for your pleasure. And so is good diving ... if you know where to look. Go too far north, and you'll swim with oceangoing crocodiles; too