

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Adding It Up in Venezuela's Caribbean

Aboard the Antares Dancer

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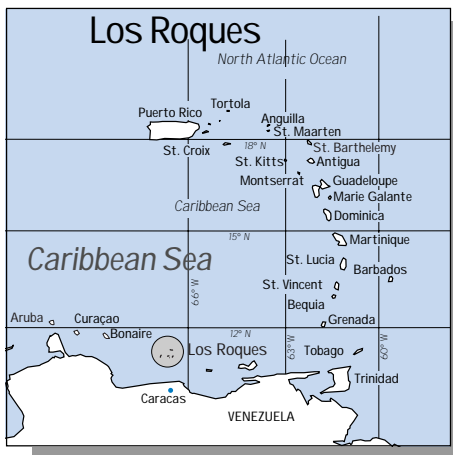
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Dear Fellow Diver:

For several thousand years philosophers and mathematicians -- including Aristotle, practitioners of Gestalt, ancient Indian Sammatiya priests, and modern holistic advocates -- have discussed the notion of "the whole being greater than the sum of its parts." My recent trip on Peter Hughes' *Antares Dancer* proved, at least to me, that such a seemingly impossible equation can be true. The week's experience, like my wife's Brunswick stew, was much better than a simple summation of the various ingredients would suggest.

Diving in Venezuela's starkly beautiful Caribbean archipelago of Los Roques did not produce any adrenaline-charged moments with whale sharks, manta rays, or reef sharks. The *Dancer*, much like an aging hooker covered with cosmetic paint, proved serviceable. Chef Rafael's meals rated not much higher than "pretty good." Nevertheless, by adding a cheerful and enthusiastic crew, diving on pristine reefs overflowing with reef fish and corals, beautiful weather, and a compatible group of fellow divers, I logged a memorable and high quality trip -- a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The *Dancer* usually offers five dives a day, and one dive found me at 125 feet off a Cayo Sal sloping wall, marveling at a small squadron of eagle rays flying under my fins. In excellent visibility the fans and whips of the wall provided a rich backdrop for thousands of reef fish engaging in their mating and eating rituals. Easing up the slope, I mentally added more species to the "Reef Fish Survey" worksheet that they had assigned me. Peter Hughes is involved in the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF), and we added to the fund of knowledge of fish



species in the southern Caribbean. Recalling it now, the list seemed endless, but angelfish, schooling chub, ubiquitous barracuda, lurking groupers, patrolling jacks and mackerels, and a profusion of parrotfish were evident. On the reef top were scorpion fish, jawfish, and toothy lizardfish. The green moray population was hale and healthy. Many of us raved about the number of juvenile spotted drums dancing under coral. The hogfish population thrived. I saw spotted anemones on every dive, and arrow crabs and Pederson shrimp were busy cleaning up their world. The number of trunkfish was notable; I was fascinated by two who engaged in the marine equivalent of fisticuffs to win the attention of a waiting female.

Near week's end we had an interesting dive led by the normally reclusive Captain Raoul. As dusk neared, he led us through a labyrinth of coral heads searching for, and finding, several nurse sharks resting peacefully (at least until we arrived) in mini-caverns under the reef. Night dives were fun, though usually held to the requested thirty minutes. Lobster and crab were evident, and sleeping parrotfish, some of them dressed in magnificent self-spun cocoons, added color. As I swept my light across the reef, red-eyed shrimp blazed tiny lights, then disappeared when I approached. An encounter with a resting turtle bigger than the old-fashioned Saturday night wash tub was a thrill. In these waters an observant diver would see most of the Caribbean underwater life featured in Paul Humann's excellent series of books.

Los Roques was designated a marine park in 1972, and I understand that only line fishing is allowed. The reefs' richness and life shows the effects of conservation efforts. True, there were no big creatures like those that draw divers to Cocos, but for beautiful, unspoiled reefs with prolific fish and corals, this is one great location. As in most marine parks, the forces of good and evil compete. Before my trip, the Venezuelan Coast Guard rolled up a large sea cucumber harvesting operation allegedly bankrolled by Japanese yakuza. They had expected an enormous profit from selling thousands of dried trepang in Asia.

Appearance-wise the *Antares Dancer* is not the queen of the Hughes' fleet. Built in 1972, she shows her origins as a steel-hull fishing trawler. After extensive refurbishing in 1999, she is surprisingly spacious for her 85-foot length and 22-foot beam. The secret to the roominess is keeping the guests to twelve and using a new 35-foot dive tender. Since dive gear is kept in the tenders for the week, the tiny size of the aft deck is not a problem. Photographers have a three-level table for storage as well as a large rinse tank, although it's still not as spacious as most serious shooters would like. But with the two tables in the salon and additional tables on the top deck, there is room aplenty. The top deck, aft of the wheelhouse, has a large shaded area with tables and chairs for reading, conversation, and relaxing. For those who ignore warnings about sun and skin cancer, the deck has open space with lounge chairs. An ice maker and a cooler loaded with soft drinks and beer is behind the large bar.

The salon/dining room is roomy enough as well, though it's not air-conditioned. Still, although temperatures on my August trip hovered in the 80s, cross breezes from the louvered windows kept it comfortable. Two tables seat twelve guests comfortably, though two at each table have to play musical chairs if they want to leave early. To the rear is an entertainment center with television, VCR (VHS and 8mm), and CD/tape player as well as a banquette for six people. Forward

is a sidebar with ever-present cookies and peanuts, filled ice bucket, tea, coffee, and soft drinks. While there is a good supply of booze, this boat, like all Hughes' vessels, rigorously enforces the "your first drink ends your diving for the day" rule.

The cabins are more spacious than I usually find on live-aboards, especially considering the relatively small size of the *Dancer*. Two forward on the main deck rate as "master staterooms" and sport a television and VCR. They're similar in size to the "deluxe staterooms" on the bottom deck. The air-conditioning units, with separate controls for each cabin, could chill a side of beef. All cabins have separate bathrooms with toilet and shower and warm water, adequate for showering but not hot enough for a good shave. Five of the six have two beds side-by-side; cabin six has bunk beds and is more susceptible to noise and odors from the bilge and engine room. Each has small closets and under-bunk drawers. A night stand separates the beds, which have good reading lights. David, the steward, kept the rooms clean and changed towels and linens regularly. The marine toilets worked well, probably because we were instructed to put used toilet paper into a nearby wastebasket, which they removed daily. Although the more fastidious might wrinkle their nose at this arrangement, the week of problem-free toilet operation made it acceptable to me.

Except for his cheerful and happy nature, Chef Rafael could be a shorter, more rotund version of the Seinfeld Soup Nazi character. He is indeed a master of soup, from pumpkin to broccoli to cheese to yucca, which he served at every meal except breakfast (that included fresh fruit like pineapple or mango, eggs to order, and occasionally French toast or pancakes). After the first morning dive, he offered a tasty cake or quasi-brownie and provided afternoon hors d'oeuvres. Varied and filling lunches (beginning with soup) included a Cheeseburger in Paradise Day, a staple of the Hughes menu. A special Venezuelan shredded beef with a thick version of a tortilla was quite good, as was a Tex-Mex spread of chicken and beef with tacos, frijoles, salsa, and guacamole. The four-course dinner started with the soup du jour and a fresh salad, then perhaps a fried breaded fish with mashed potatoes and carrots, baked chicken with rice and cole slaw, or grilled steak with rice and vegetables. Desserts ranged from a type of flan to Jell-O and cake. Wine was served at the evening meal, and the fancy tablecloths and napkins added Peter's usual touch of class. Yet, despite Chef Rafael's prowess with soups, his evening main courses rarely rated better than "pretty good," though still better than some live-aboard food I've had. Venezuelan cuisine can be superb, especially the fresh seafood that's available all over the coast -- why no fresh fish on this boat, I must ask? Señor Hughes needs to step up the quality of the evening meal. Nonetheless, the three offerings a day, plus snacks, made the whole, once again, greater than the sum of the parts.

On a live-aboard trip, however, the cabins, the salon, and the meals are all secondary to the dive operation, and here the elements of the equation

Antares Dancer, Los Roques

Diving (experienced)	★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Ambiance	★★★★ 1/2
Service & Attitude	★★★★★
Food	★★ 1/2
Money's worth	★★★★★ 1/2
★ = poor	★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)

No More Sea Lice; No More Jellyfish Stings

After ten years of research, Israeli scientists have come up with a lotion that protects against the stings of most jellyfish, anemones, and corals. Clinical dermatologists in a hospital approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration illustrated the effectiveness of the product — named SafeSea — against pain and rash.

Each volunteer touched the jellyfish with an unprotected hand and a hand protected by SafeSea. None felt pain or skin irritation in the SafeSea hand, while the unprotected hand developed the expected pain and rash.

Jellyfish, sea lice, sea nettles, coral, and anemones are equipped with stinging cells that consist of a capsule — the nematocyst — containing a tubule filled with potent toxins. When it comes into contact with human tissue, the tubule is fired from the capsule at speeds comparable to those of a bullet being fired from a gun. The discharge is driven by the buildup of internal hydrostatic pressure reaching levels as high as 200 atmospheres, equivalent to the pressure in an aluminum 80.

The active ingredient in SafeSea interferes with stinging cells' biochemistry, reducing their pressure and interrupting their sensing mechanism. It was derived from the protective mucus secreted by clownfish, who live unharmed among the tentacles of anemones.

The manufacturer, Nidaria, has not tested whether SafeSea is effective against the box jellyfish, which kills as many as 65 people a year in Australia, most within less than three minutes of being stung. However, since the compound interferes with the stinging mechanism common to jellyfish, anemones, and corals, it is expected to be universally effective.

The cream will be marketed in the U.S. under the Skin Guard and SafeSea brands, and negotiations are underway with Coppertone and Hawaiian Tropic to produce a dual-purpose cream combining SafeSea and sunscreen.

again yielded a whole greater than its parts. Divemaster Juan Carlos, a handsome and charming Venezuelan of Italian ancestry, ran a top-notch operation. The first evening he explained the diving and the procedures clearly and concisely. He addressed us as "my friends," a nice touch I preferred to the "you guys" I often hear. The dive day started with a white-board briefing. He presented the dive plan, the marine life expected, and advice for photographers, then welcomed questions. For our trip a young university student named Vanessa, who was studying the Los Roques lobster population for her senior thesis in marine biology, served as assistant divemaster. Her English was excellent, as might be expected from a dual citizenship lovely who attended grade school in the states. After the briefing, we donned skins and suits and were helped into the tender. Tanks pumped to 3000 psi were already set up with BCs and placed snugly into molded holes in the built-in benches. Masks, fins, weight belts, and snorkels were stowed under the seats.

During the 5-10 minute run to

the sites, I geared up and prepared for the backroll over the high gunwales. Juan Carlos and Che, the tender driver, handed down cameras and otherwise helped. Divers were free to do as they wished and, as you might expect, serious shooters dived solo. When the dive was finished, usually at the requested sixty minutes, Che drove to floating divers, who handed up weight belts, fins, and tanks, and climbed a sturdy metal ladder onto the tender. If you left your tank on, a crew member would tank-walk you back to your seat -- "safety first" is not a bad way to go on a rolling boat. The bench seating can be restrictive -- shoot for the seats fourth back from the front. The sturdy overhead canvas awning was a welcome sunshield.

Back at the *Dancer*, crew members helped with the transfer from tender to boat, took skins and suits for rinsing, and draped a warm towel over my shoulders. There is a freshwater shower, but the area is crowded. After the night dive, they offer hot chocolate with brandy at the aft deck. An aside -- because of Juan Carlos' courteous nature and the "relaxed pace" of some divers, the dive day can slip away and the last dive can be canceled or the surface intervals shortened. I've seen this on other trips, and never know what to do about it. Nobody wants to be on a vacation with a boot camp drill instructor screaming

about schedules, yet it's impolite for my fellow divers to dawdle when the dive bell rings. I guess the best I can do is offer gentle hints, then grin and bear it.

Another element in my semi-mathematical evaluation of a dive trip is the congeniality of fellow guests. This was a week of good fellowship, good stories, and good memories. With a French couple and an Italian duo, we were an international crowd. The Italian lady, who spoke English with an Oxford accent, translated Dutch novels into Italian. A couple from Pennsylvania seemed to have logged more dives than Jacques Cousteau, and we exchanged tales of dive scows we had known and memories of great dives around the world. An OB/GYN had fascinating tales to tell of the future world of cloning. Never missing a dive, she was a scuba fanatic as well as a virtual dive store of computers, masks, fins, still and video cameras, lenses, housings, video lights, and strobes. A duo from Northern California contributed tales of trans-Pacific sailing. A retired Naval architect spun tales of submarine construction and disaster, golfing adventures, and the intricacies of wine making -- good folk all, and good times at sea.

There were other diversions. We visited a turtle farm on Dos Mosquises where turtles are studied, eggs hatched, and babies released. We had several interesting slide shows on local marine life which emphasized the REEF survey program. A video of the week's activities (available for purchase) was shown to general laughter. Friday we had several hours to walk around the tiny and charming fishing village of Gran Roque. The pastel homes and small inns, the sand streets, the dominating peak topped by an ancient lighthouse, and the harbor with an assortment of day boats and sailing vessels all provide a very laid-back scene for hundreds of Venezuelans and Europeans to vacation. Venezuela is a friendly country with remarkable ecotourism -- consider a side trip with Lost World Adventures in Marietta, Georgia (800-999-0558).

To sum, as it were: The *Antares Dancer* can provide an excellent week of relaxed diving among zillions of reef fish and healthy corals. Although the dives are

The Survivor Whose Torch Still Flickers

For a few minutes after we boarded the *Antares Dancer*, I had the feeling that my torch would be extinguished and I would be voted off the island. What happened was this:

When I booked I was told there were ten guests. Four of the six cabins had been assigned to couples. A single female was booked into the only cabin with bunk beds, and I was booked into the remaining cabin (cabin five), which was more expensive but had twin beds. I booked close to sailing day and was told there was a good chance I would have the cabin to myself. And because Peter Hughes has a policy of "no involuntary assignment of male - female guests to the same cabin," I figured my odds were even better.

When I boarded I noted there were twelve passengers. Cruise Director Juan Carlos took the four couples to their cabins. There were now four of us for the two remaining cabins. I was told that I would be sharing cabin five with Jean Luc, a Frenchman. The two women, Peggy and Francois, were to go to cabin six with the bunk beds. As Juan Carlos showed me my cabin, he started a halting discussion of how nice it would be if Jean Luc and his wife, Francois, could be in the same cabin, how it would be wonderful if I would share the bunk-bed cabin with the other female guest, and how, by the way, Francois wasn't able to sleep well in a bunk bed. I pointed out that I had booked a cabin with twin beds and also was not keen on sharing a cabin with a female guest. Nor was I happy about the prospect of crawling up and down from the top bunk all week, which is why I had paid for a more expensive cabin with a bed on the floor.

I was feeling pressure to be a nice guy and expected the vote to throw me off the island to be held immediately. I could see my torch starting to flicker. I asked Jean Luc if he had previously known that he and his wife were going to be separated. "Oui," he answered. They had booked quite close to the sailing date, and he understood that the remaining beds were in separate cabins. At that point, I felt that the pressure was off. If they had gone into this trip knowing the room assignments, there was no need for me to volunteer to move in with a female roomie. The assignments went as planned, and I found Jean Luc most considerate and polite. His wife, on the other hand, did not speak to me for three days. But at least I kept my torch and stayed on the island.

described as drift dives, my experience was one of gentle suggestions of current, good visibility, and calm waters. Despite some visual signs of aging, the *Dancer* is a good boat and offers good food, an excellent crew, and comfortable cabins. Put it all together, and the total experience is somehow greater than the sum of its parts.

- E.E.



Diver's Compass: Peter Hughes' *Antares Dancer*: 800-932-6237 or 305-669-9391; website: www.peterhughes.com; e-mail: dancer@peterhughes.com...master staterooms \$1695, deluxe staterooms \$1595, twin staterooms also available...Price before discounts includes flight from Caracas to Los Roques...add \$65 for port charges...book cabin six if it is the only cabin left...if you have the slightest concern about seasickness, come prepared...E-6 processing; camera and video gear for rent...no Nitrox...water can dip into

the 70s; in August I recorded 79° F.; bring rubber...also bring Dive Alert, dive sausage, BCD strobe light, and C Card...oxygen on board...chamber in Caracas or air evac to the United States via Caracas...it's expensive to overnight in Caracas (hotels are at least half an hour from the airport), so consider flying out early from Miami after spending the night...if you don't speak some Spanish, bring a paperback Spanish phrase book. It may come in handy at the airport...if you have a lengthy wait for your domestic flight, pass through security and eat at the "American Cafe," which is a cut above the sandwich shops in the main concourse...save \$21 for departure tax from Caracas....

New Destinations on Land and at Sea

and one airline not to fly

Looking for a not-so-widely known destination for your next trip? How about live-aboards in Cuba or Panama? The romantic island of Bequia? Or Cayman's East End? All are good trip choices, but not the islands of Bonaire, Aruba, and Curaçao — not if you must fly ALM.

An Aggressor in Cuba?

Now plying Cuban waters is the *Belize Aggressor*, rechristened *Ocean Diver*. Owned by those who own the *Cayman Aggressor*, the *Ocean Diver* is not marketed by the Aggressor Fleet, but by Scubacan, the Toronto firm that seems to have a virtual monopoly on scuba travel to Cuba. Here is a report by an *Undercurrent* correspondent, on board in May.

"I flew to Havana via Cancun, with no problems getting in or out of Cuba. We landed at Havana's new international terminal (a joint venture between Canada and Cuba), which rivals any U.S. airport. Scubacan's local rep escorted me through customs and made sure they stamped my visa, not my passport. Next stop, the run-down domestic terminal, where Scubacan charts a DC3 for the short flight to Cayo Largo, where the boat is docked.

"The *Ocean Diver* is a typical *Aggressor*, well-equipped with outstanding photo facilities, E-6 processing, a photo pro, underwater scooters, Nitrox, emergency equipment, a working Jacuzzi, a fax machine, and even e-mail access. Unlike the newer *Aggres-*

sors, the cabins were damp, dark little holes below decks with a washbasin (no heads, but there are three on the boat) and basically no storage space. The crew was helpful, hard-working, and friendly, but the meals were pretty bad. Beer, wine, soda, and no-name booze were available gratis.

"The diving compares to the Cayman's. No big stuff — a single shark and an occasional turtle — but the reefs were 100% pristine, as if I were diving where no person had gone before. Beautiful untouched coral and sponges made for good wide-angle shots. While macro subjects were few, fish were curious and did not mind our presence. The full moon brought schooling snappers