
Grown-Up Diving with Aldora Divers of Cozumel

Dear Fellow Diver,

Babe Ruth held his bat out with one hand and pointed with it to the right-field stands, signaling to his fans that he was going to hit a home run to that part of the ballpark. Forty years later a young Muhammed Ali used poetry to predict victory over sullen Sonny Liston in their upcoming fight. A few years after that, Joe Namath guaranteed that his Jets would beat the Baltimore Colts in the Super Bowl.

And last week in Cozumel, a happy Dave Dillehay turned to our group of divers on his boat, the *Aldora II*, and guaranteed sharks.

All the predictions came true. A homer, a TKO, a new football champion -- and a big blacktip shark cruising the wall 40 feet from us at the south end of Punta Sur Reef.

McDiving with the McMasses

Too many dive operations have settled into what I'd call "mass market diving," adopting a lowest-common-denominator mentality and insisting on conservative dive profiles ("Yes, you can dive with your computer, but don't go any deeper than 80 feet, and be back at the surface in 30 minutes"). The close and easy become the dive sites of choice, with fewer trips to the more exciting locations. Under these conditions, divers can visit places like Cozumel for a week and never know what made it a dive destination in the first place.

It has been possible on Cozumel to find small operators who will show you the real diving, but usually at the expense of service and safety ("Is that my dive guide down at 250 feet on the second dive of the day trying to scare up sharks? Who's in the boat?"). Now, however, things are changing. A new breed of operators offer high-quality service and diving as an antidote for the cattleboat operations.

Our Pick of the Litter

Aldora Divers has no shop on Cozumel and isn't listed in the phone book -- no walk-ins, please. It took me three phone calls and 15 minutes to talk the owner, Dave Dillehay, into letting me dive with his operation. It was worth the effort, though. Aldora Divers is setting the

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Before flying out on the seaplane, I spent the night at the Vista del Mar on Cozumel. I headed for Carlos & Charlie's to party down; my buddy decided to turn in early, but forgot to lock the door of his third-floor room. He was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of someone in his bathroom. Half asleep, he watched the door open. Out stepped a young blonde woman, naked to the waist. Thinking he could be dreaming, he asked if she was all right. "Jim Morrison is God," she explained.

As she climbed into his bed, she asked if she could spend the night. Not sure of the situation, he lay there beside her until she said, "My husband is going to kill me."

He wasn't dreaming. She had gotten up in the middle of the night and wandered groggily out of her room, accidentally locking the door behind her. She had been unable to wake her even groggier husband by pounding on the door.

Now fully awake, my buddy, perfect gentleman that he was, gave her a T-shirt so she could go to the front desk and get another key. He never saw her or his shirt again.

J. Q.

***Free T-Shirt
with Every
Visit***

Second Choice (and Others) in Cozumel

Wild Cat divers is a small operation on the north side of the town square, run by Victor Cassanova, a.k.a. El Gato ("the cat," because of his blue-green eyes). El Gato didn't offer fast boats, but would, I was told, take me to some of the better dive sites.

At 9:30 I met the boat at the pier in front of La Ceiba Hotel for the morning two-tank dive. Besides me, the 29-foot *Copy Cat* boarded a group of six other divers. Our first dive was at Palancar Caves. Victor was attentive, though not restrictive; I could dive my computer and come up with a reasonable amount of air. So 85 feet for an hour at this place with its magnificent caves, though little fish life at the time, was a step in the right direction.

After a surface interval we proceeded to Columbia Shallows, one of the better shallow dive spots on Cozumel but infrequently dived because it is so far south. Here three of us enjoyed an 80-minute dive, cruising over a low-profile reef interlaced with tunnels and small caves and loaded with schools of grey snappers, French Caesars, grunts of various persuasions, several yellow stingrays, some lobsters, and many varieties of corals and sponges. All this, and we were the only divers on the reef.

We got back to the dock around 3:00, so this is not a way to max out on diving in Cozumel. I signed up for a night dive the next night. Victor decided it would be better if I took a cab from my hotel, so he deducted the cab fare from the cost. This dive was more standard Cozumel fare: dive Paradise Reef with 50 zillion other groups, and try to return to the right boat — a bit of a disappointment after the previous day's diving.

Overall, I liked the operation. Victor is easy to deal with and offers dive opportunities that are not readily available from many other operators. With such a small operator (he has one other boat, a 25-footer), a small group should be able to do the kind of diving they want. However, faster boats would be a definite plus here.

Victor charges \$45 for the two-tank morning dive and \$30 for the night dive. His shop is on 5th Avenue between 2nd and 4th Streets; phone 52-987-21028. WD-40

Here's how some of our readers describe other Cozumel operations:

Advanced Divers (no phone listed) — "Advanced Divers great about finding sites away from crowds. Divemasters allow experienced divers to dive computer limits." — Anonymous

Aquatic Sports (no phone listed) — "Underwater, allowed to do our own thing and dive our computer profiles." — Gary Nagel

Blue Bubble Divers (011-52-987-2-18-65) — "Flexible, helpful, and lived up to motto: 'Blue Bubble . . . no trouble.' Sensitivity toward inexperienced divers." — Brad and Maren Heinze

Deportes Aquaticos (011-52-987-2-06-40) — "Led each dive with a safety-first attitude without restricting each diver's profile in this experienced group." — Jim Juneau

Martin Aguilar (P.O. Box 134, Cozumel) — "He is careful not to mix resort-course divers with experienced divers." — Ron Watson J. Q.

standard for divers who want the best: diving the better sites, diving for longer times, and diving away from the crowd hangouts or when other operators are away from them.

Aldora picks up its guests at hotel piers early in the morning in its two custom-built 28-footers. The boats are equipped with radio, oxygen, and GPS, and their twin Yamaha 150s quickly blast you to the prime dive sites long before the other boats get there.

These open craft can hold six divers, but I shared my rides with only two to five divers. Dave also owns a 56-foot racing sloop. An engineer by training, he's a gadget freak, and his boats have well-thought-out fittings for gear and tanks. If I had a quibble with the boats, it was about getting back into them. There's no ladder; you have to surge upward and flop onto a small section of the starboard hull that swings down to make a platform at the waterline. The arrangement also results in a lot of water sloshing around the bottom of the boat.

The tanks epitomize Dave's operation. They are steel 120s with 3,500-pound air fills. Dave will supply a DIN adapter if your reg needs it. Part of his service includes regulators and computers (he requires dive computers but will lend you one if you don't have your own). His gear is good: Zeagle Ranger BCs, for example. The heavy tank let me drop two pounds of lead, and its capacity and

fill gave me twice as much air as the aluminum 80s that most operators provide; you get a lot more bottom time. But the amount of bottom time is not as important as its quality, and

ideally I want a lot of both. I got it.

Down the Devil's Throat

Diving one of Cozumel's famous sites, Devil's Throat on Punta Sur Reef, I dropped through 90 feet of surprisingly murky water before I hit the top of the reef. Visibility improved dramatically as I got deeper. I inverted and entered the tunnels that give this dive its name. Exiting

on the face of the wall at 135 feet, I circled and went back into the tunnel system. In one chamber, the Cathedral, there's a large sponge in the shape of a cross, imparting a different sort of serenity (I've seen this cross, and I'm not quite convinced it's a natural occurrence). Back outside, I worked my way up to 100 feet, then swam across a sandy patch to Columbia Reef. A big stingray below was escorted by a scavenging pufferfish, a bit of piscine behavior I'd not seen before. The topography was the highlight here, not fish life.

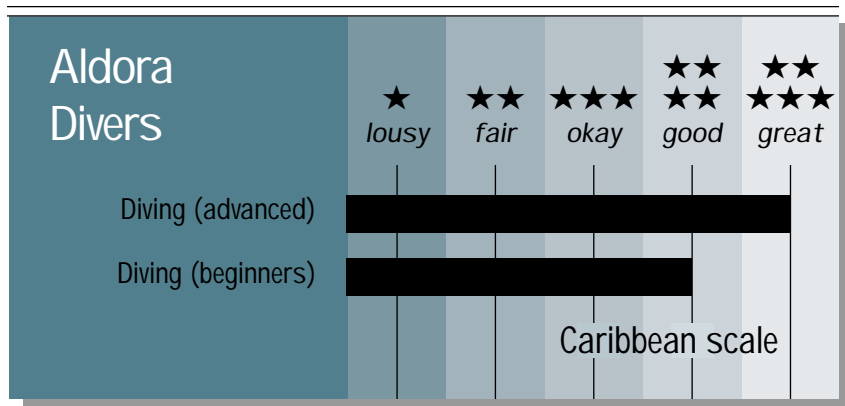
Many dive operators won't do Punta Sur: too far, too deep, too much gas, too little bottom time. A year ago I had done the same dive with Dive with Martin, a fine operation, but my logbook reminded me that I did 125 feet for 30 minutes. This trip, with Aldora's steel 120s, I did 130 feet for 54 minutes (and spent some late-dive time offgassing).

Dave delivered. Punta Sur means Devil's Throat to divers, but to Dave it also means the entire reef structure, and off we went to Punta Sur South. The two-hour surface interval not only makes it possible to do another deep dive, it happens when all the other boats are headed back in the other direction to do the shallow reefs (Aldora still has you back to the dock by one in the afternoon).

Punta Sur South might be redundantly named, but it's pristine and a hell of a dive: great coral heads, swim-through after swim-through, great topography, and a lot of fish. And the big blacktip shark on patrol.

I'm making my own prediction: Someone will get the idea from Aldora Divers to try a similar operation on Grand Cayman. But what I won't predict is whether this entrepreneur will be able to fly it past the Cayman government and the Cayman Diving Association.

I. C. & WD-40



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With no shop on the island and little or no advertising, I think that Aldora is getting the bulk of its business from internet postings by satisfied customers. Another interesting aspect of Aldora Divers is that even though I'm touting them as the best operation for advanced divers, they are working both ends of the stick by offering beginning instructions. Several reports have been from neophyte divers who were impressed by Aldora's professionalism. Aldora charges \$65 for a two-tank dive. They are insistent that customers make diving arrangements through their U.S. office prior to arriving in Cozumel; be prepared for some interrogation. The U.S. phone is 713-334-3003; in Cozumel, 24048 or 22067. Aldora is also reachable by e-mail on compuserve at 102142,3237 or on the net at 102142.3237@compuserve.com.

Ditty Bag