

free plentiful pico de gallo on request, \$5 guacamole well worth it. Service amiably chaotic but accommodating; they want you to have a good time. Open water diving (overall, inferior to Cozumel) from open high-gunwale 20' boat that leaves from shore 200 yards up the beach. Seats 6 easily, 8 tight. Entry simultaneous backrolls. Exit: hand up weights, shed BCD/tank, climb up aluminum ladder. Dives drift (fast current), boat chases bubbles, divers in a loose swarm (no strict Follow-The-Leader). Terrain long ridges and rills with sand chutes, few swim-throughs, could go hunting in chutes. Coral plentiful but often broken or sand-covered. Fish sparse. Fills 3200+, first dive typically 80-90' for 40, second 40-50' for 55. Water 79-80° (3mm full-body OK, less invites cold), viz limited (40-80' depending on chop and sunshine). Seas often too rough for boat to go out. Cavern diving (within 200' of light/ air) from cenotes are the reason to come. Load into van, drive 10-15 min then off road into jungle, park, suit up and go. Groups of 4 escorted by a very safety conscious guide. No tight spaces. Diving through living underground caverns and rivers – stalactites/ stalagmites galore, marvelous glowing blue light at entrance. Viz pristine (150+') as if the water were not there. Virtually no life (tiny fish). Water 77° (cold). Descending, you encounter the halocline, where lighter colder fresh water lies on top of warmer sea water: immiscible liquids, when kicked through, they swirl and smear, spectacular effect. Day-long excursions possible to Coba (large Mayan

city embedded in the jungle), Tulum (smatter site with a few well preserved ruins in a lovely seaside setting), with side jaunts to cenote Calaveras (10' jump-in snorkeling) and Playa Akumal (lagoon snorkeling, poor viz (silt, halocline) but fun nooks and crannies to explore and lots of fish (3 midnight blue parrot, 1 enormous rainbow parrot). Great place to find out if cavern/cave diving is your thing – don't go for open-water except as a break from the caverns. (**Aquatech/ Villas DeRosa: 52-987-59020, website www.cenotes.com**)

PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rico has always been a waypoint to other dive destinations in the Caribbean, but as dive tourism infrastructure develops, more divers are stopping to sample the reefs. While night life is abundant, crime is somewhat of a problem . . .

Aquatica Tour, Captain Elik "Finci" Hernandez, 2000, Luis Munoz, Chicago, IL. I saw in the July 2000 issue comments by Darryl and Trish Boyer (Lincoln, DE) about Mona and Monito Islands on the west coast of Puerto Rico. I bumped into them while diving with Parguera Divers run by Efra Figueroa. It just so happened that I and my dive buddy had dived Mona and Monito a week earlier. I went to Jose' Rafols from Aquatica in Aguadilla (787-890-6071, whom I've been diving with since 1993, and he referred me to Tour Marine Captain Elik "Finci" Hernandez (787-851-

9259 or 375-2625). It's a wonderful adventure to two remote uninhabited islands. We met Finci at 5 am at the dock in Joyuda. If you don't speak Spanish, don't worry, Finci knows enough English to get by. The boat was in fine shape, plenty of room with a crew of 3. One helper for the tanks that I rented from Aquatica, and your equipment (no English) and a DNR person who served as a cook (Finci used to work with the DNR that helps with the permits to the islands). The boat ride was 2 1/2 hours; on the way out we saw 4 humpback whales. Jose' had given me half a dozen dive sites and the order to dive with them which I relayed to Finci; Finci says let's see what the currents are; it was obvious that he wanted to see what kind of divers we were. Jose' had suggested diving Monito first. Upon arriving Finci informed us that the currents were too strong to go to Monito. So we went to our second option not far from the camping site. 2 more humpback whales; we did our first dive that was a wall dive similar to Little Cayman. The reef was in good condition along with the usual reef fish, lobsters, crabs and one large hawksbill turtle; all 3 dives were drift dives. We come up and Finci checked our computers and he now declared that Monito was now good to dive. So we rode to Monito which is basically a huge boulder 4 miles from Mona. If you're a bird watcher bring the specks. There are hundreds of nesting birds on this island. You cannot go on this island. A mother humpback with its calf surfaces less than one hundred feet from the boat. Of course, now

we're in the water in 2 seconds; we get situated and we begin to go in the direction of the whales. Those plans changed when the first blacktip showed up. After we watch the blacktip for a couple of minutes, we see southern sting rays, groupers (which are rare in PR), the usual reef fishes. Then a large hawksbill turtle and 2nd black tip shows up. We had to turn back because we could feel some strong currents just ahead so we decided to play it safe and not risk going to the Dominican Republic. Now we're not even looking for the reef fishes, too many big ones to watch. At our safety stop we observed a school of fish 100-200, which appeared to be tuna-like in shape but we could never ID them. Needless to say when we surfaced we were high fiving each other over the terrific dive we just completed. You would have thought we had just won the superbowl. The crew now took us to the beach where the Mona camping is allowed. The crew then cooked us a meal that was out of this world while we explored the island. Just like the Boyers mentioned they have been hunting for goats and pigs. The hunting season is from December-March, Monday-Thurs. The weekends are for the non-hunters. The hunting parties were real nice even pointing out to us the Mona Iguanas. I believe the fee is \$4/day to camp. We sat on the beach catching some rays and watching a lone humpback whale slapping its fluke and pectoral fins at the surface several hundred yards away. After we ate, we did our final drift dive that was really relaxing. We

saw the usuals but nothing like the first 2 dives. My dive buddy and I were the only 2 divers in the water. Can't get any better than this. The crew was marvelous, great weather, and superb diving. The best diving I have done in Puerto Rico in 7 years. If I had one beef it would be that the land is a wildlife refuge but the government does not protect the reefs. What's wrong with this picture? This is truly a jewel. Divers have the option with Tour Marine to stay 2-3 days on the island or on the boat. Remember these are 2 uninhabited islands 50 miles to the nearest land. No 7-elevens. The best time to see the humpbacks are from January-middle of March. Don't be surprised if you make arrangements and they're canceled. The Mona passage is rough at times. This was my 4th attempt to get there.

Palomino Divers, El Conquistador Resort, October 1999, Roman Pibl (roman@dialstar.com), Salisbury, NC. Vis: 15-35 ft. Water: 80-83 degrees. Sunny, windy. Water: choppy. Dive Restrictions: You had to dive with a dive guide, however, I never asked to go on my own. First person in your group low on air at least made the group head up to the shallows and then you could hang out as long as you wanted. Hurricane Jose was stirring up the visibility. The Dive operation was very friendly and relaxed. The diving was OK. Some nice profiles including 30-40 foot walls that made for some nice relief. We encountered a school of dolphins. For experienced divers, I wouldn't say the diving is exciting but nice. The

dive guides and staff were very nice and accommodating, the dive boat was large and reasonably fast (especially compared with NC dive boats), we never had more than eight divers on the boat, though the boat could accommodate a lot more. Check to see if snorkelers are going because the snorkeling sites do not make for good dive sites. **(787-863-1000, ext. 2829, 787 863-7588; Fax 787 863-6363)**

Paradise Scuba, La Parguera September 2000, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), San Juan, PR. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 degrees F, choppy. Dive your own profile. Restrictions: None other than suggestion as to recommended depth and time. None for those diving with computers. Good, clean, well equipped and staffed facility. The boat is on the small, slow side but the dives were excellent, as were the divemasters/guides. **(787-899-7611; Fax 787-899-7611)**

Parguera Divers, Parador Por La Mar, February 2000, Bob Cottle (mongoose7@earthlink.net), Lisle, IL. Vis: 70 to 90 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy no currents. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: none, except for newer divers who had to stay close to dive guide (either Efra or Angel). You fall out of your bed at the Parador, crawl 30 feet and you are at the boat. Going to the sites was a 30-45 minute ordeal (sea was a bit choppy and we were heading into the waves) once there, Efra (the owner of Parguera) or Angel (his faithful assistant of many years) would go

down with the newer divers. We who had been down a few times were allowed to do our own thing. Coming back up, if you're a bit short of air you can do your safety stop using their reg that hangs from a 45-ft hose connected to a full tank on the boat. After coming back to the pier, you rinse your regs, bc, suit and then you hang them to dry outside Parguera's shack and forget about them. Angel will hang them inside their shack to dry and next morning they (your equipment) will be sitting on top of a fresh full tank. The coral was the best I've seen in the Caribbean. Very little fish life, nothing large and few small critters (might be great for macro photog). Only one 2 ft. barracuda. The level of service provided by Efra is very high. (Ph: 800-234-7682, 809-899-4171, Fax: 809-899-4171)

Parguera Divers, Hotel Parguera Porlamar Posada, May 2000, Stewart Kaslow, Maplewood, N.J. Vis: 50 to 70 ft. Water: 80 to 82 degrees, choppy. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: air 500 lbs; 3 min. safety 1 hour. Captain Efra and Angel run a great operation directed toward experienced divers. It is not a hand-holding tour. Boat leaves between 8-8:30 am for 2 tank dive trip to some of the nicest walls in the Caribbean; most divers had computers and safety stops of 3-5 minutes are mandatory. Extra air hose overside at 30 ft. if needed. Trail line always out and all get instruction on how to get back into the boat safely without getting hurt by waves pushing you

against boat or ladder. Serves lunch between 1st and 2nd dives. Although you can fly into Ponce, better fly into San Juan and drive to the Parguera.

Sea Ventures, June 2000, Stewart Kaslow, Maplewood, N.J. Vis: 40 to 60 ft. Water: 80 to 82 degrees choppy. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: controlled by site; time 50 min. Dove 2 days with Sea Ventures in Fajardo. 1st day mostly resort course divers; went to a shallow site, poor vis. few fish. Next day much better—all certified divers; went to better site with lots of fish and better vis. Did a drift dive. Best day to dive with this operation is Sunday when they take advanced divers to their best sites. Great boat, attentive staff, good lunch between dives. (800-739-3483; Fax 787-782-7330)

West Coast Charters, Desecheo Dive Shop, 2000, Darryl and Trish Boyer, (SurfaceInterval@ce.net) Lincoln, DE. Vis: 80 to 100 feet, Water: 76 to 78 degrees, choppy, some strong currents. Dive your own profile: Yes. Dive restrictions: none. A group of 4 experienced wreck divers went to Puerto Rico primarily to dive Mona and Monita, uninhabited islands at 50 miles out of Rincon for (need to get permit well in advance) which you need special permits from DNR. We saw turtles on every dive, many nurse sharks, and all the usual tropicals. Not as many pelagics as anticipated, but worth the trip to be the only divers in the vast area and able to dive our own profiles. They conducted all dives as drift dives due to frequently swift currents. We were picked up by Capt.

Joe Swider on his 31 ft. "Vessel Melitza" which is comfortable for diving. Normally you camp on the island by permit, but the days we wanted were taken by boar and goat hunters so we stayed on the boat and dived 5 tanks. Dives are limited by # of tanks the dive boat can carry. Excellent for the adventurous willing to forgo luxuries and rough it a bit. (787-823-4114)

SABA

South of St. Maarten, Saba is one of the more adventurous and exciting Caribbean destinations, both on land and in the sea. . . . Pinnacle diving begins at 70 feet, with good fish life and occasionally sharks and bigger fish. . . . All accommodations are in quaint villages at 1000 feet and above. . . . Although there are no beaches or night life, Saba has delightful people, a few good restaurants, and a cool, pleasant climate at altitude. It's also in the hurricane belt. . . . Some divers claim that, after several days of diving, they get muscle pains if they climb 3000-ft. Mt. Scenery. . . . Be sure to close your eyes when your plane lands. . . .

Saba Deep, El Momo, October 1999, Bob Hill (rhill43010@aol.com), Apopka, FL. Vis: 50-90 ft. Water: 83-84 degrees. Sunny. Water: calm. Restrictions: Recreational limits (130 ft), 500 # air at completion. Boat did not have a fresh—water rinse tank, however, returned to dock after every

dive (only 10 minutes at most) with good rinse facilities at dock. Staff handled photo gear carefully when helping diver in/out of water. Saba Deep is a first-class operation. Extremely impressed with their attention to detail, their knowledgeable and helpful staff and their desire to share the beauty of diving Saba. At end of dives with Saba Deep they present you with a packet of useful information about the island, their operation, a map showing all the dive sites they use, etc. as well as a complete list of the dives you dove with them to include the date, site name, depth, dive duration and name of divemaster. They have their main dive shop in town and a separate shop at the dock at Fort Bay. Their shop has complete and well-maintained dive gear and appeared well organized. We dove with them two days. They assembled your gear and made all tank changes. At the end of the day they brought all gear to the shop, rinsed it all in fresh water and hung up. The second day we arrived at the boat with all gear on the boat and tanks set up ready to go, another nice touch. The dive shop has a restaurant in conjunction with descent food. We made three dives per day — 9 and 11 am and 1 pm. The boat returns to dock between each dive. Between the first and second dive we placed our lunch order at the restaurant and it was ready within minutes of our return from the second dive. Great chocolate milk shakes! The diving on Saba is excellent. Basically, the entire waters surrounding Saba are a marine park, therefore, the area is pretty pristine.