

Divers Dream, Hotel Aquarium, November 2001, Lloyd Baker/ Colegio Jorge, Cartagena, Colombia. Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 75-80 F. Dives logged: 600+. San Andres Island (Colombia) is a small (11 km by 3 km) island in the Caribbean, 200 km east of Nicaragua. The diving consists of deep vertical walls on the eastern coast and sloping drop-offs on the west coast with a few shallow patch reefs on the northern end. We dove on two beautiful walls --"Palacio de Cerna" which starts at 12 m and is vertical to the abyss. While the second dive -- "Blue Wall/Hole" is a canyon at 20 m and a tunnel at 30 m meets up with a circular area with huge boulders covered in hard and soft corals. The "Pyramid" is two minutes from the dock and is a 9 m sand basin with a triangular coral mount raising to the surface. The huge schools of grunts and blue tangs are not shy about approaching divers for hand outs, as this is also a popular snorkeling spot for tourists. Coral and fish life was healthy and abundant with a few sightings of sting rays. Diving was from an open launch and the maximum number was five divers. After the briefing the dive guide asks you what profile/time and depth limits you want. The dive operation is laid back but well run and personnel are professional and friendly. They change over tanks after dives and rinse/store your equipment overnight, and have it ready the next day. The dive operation is in the Hotel Aquarium (where we stayed), it is an all-inclusive resort in a beautiful property on the water a few blocks from the main town or Centro.

Diving: two-tank dive without equipment \$45 USD, two tank dive with equipment \$65 USD. I did a 3-day package of two tank dives without equipment \$124 USD. Hotel Aquarium: all-inclusive (accommodation, all meals/beverages/snacks etc.) approximately \$70 USD per person per night. We obtained a hotel/flight package from Cartagena for four nights for \$335 USD per person. (Ph: +57-8-512-6923; e-mail informes@diversdream.com; website www.diversdream.com/english)

CUBA

To visit Cuba legally, American citizens must be licensed by the Treasury Department, and ordinary tourists don't get licensed. Big fines await those who are nabbed when passing through one of the gateway airports in Mexico and Canada. The U.S. government has been cracking down since mid-2001. . . . Street signs in Cancun and Playa del Carmen offer four-day trips to Cuba for as little as \$300 US and Scubacan in Canada also runs trips. . . . Dive operations are generally well-run, and the reefs are pristine.

Brisa Sierra Mar, April 2002, Atkinson Family (yakpack@sympatico.ca) Toronto, Ontario. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 30 Meters. Water: 28 F, calm no currents. The hotel staff made this quite a delightful holiday despite the diving. Everyone from the gardener to the wine waiter was

extroverted and friendly without being annoying. Daily excursions out of the resort for non-divers. Nice pool with swim-up bar, stage show every night. 90% of the 200 guests are non-divers. Beach is sandy and clean with shade trees and palapas. Food was good. All-inclusive including local drinks made it an economical trip. This place wants your business and there were many repeaters there. Despite an extremely enthusiastic dive shop staff, cautious and helpful divemasters, congenial personalities all around, the mediocre visibility and lack of fish made the diving dull after the first day. All dives 15 minute boat ride away, never more than six divers. Corals in good shape, there are interesting walls, swim-thrus and channels but local line and spear fishermen have taken their toll. No sightings of anything larger than a pair of barracudas and two queen angel fish. Most fish hand sized or smaller, not that many small fish either. One hour bus trip to shore dive a 100-year-old wreck, the Christopher Columbus, Spanish warship, was best dive of the week. Bugs annoying but not overwhelming, take your own insect repellent. If you have to take small kids, your grandparents, or a non-diving spouse and are content to do three or four acceptable dives during the week, this is the place to go.

Maria La Gorda, January 2002,
Russell Person (promove@SYV.com),
Solvang, CA. Vis: 60-100 ft. excellent, Water: 78-80 F. Dives logged: more than 500. Cuba has great diving

almost everywhere. Dive operations were well run and easy going. The dive leader actually could speak Russian to my Russian speaking fiancé. I would bring only wet suit, booties and mask. I brought all gear and paid an extra \$120 at airport. (Over weight fee)

Maria La Gorda, February 2002,
Ken Wilson, Detroit MI. Experience: 200 Caribbean dives. Vis: 70-90 ft. Water: 80 F, mostly calm. Diving at Maria la Gorda on the Western tip of Cuba (a scenic 4.5 hr drive from Havana) is uncrowded and is comparable to the best Caribbean locations. Get there before the Miami lobby finally loses to common sense and decency; this (and other Cuban locations) will then be packed. Mornings are wall dives, with lots of tunnels and chimneys. The coral is healthy, including varied black corals. The 2nd and 3rd dives are on top of wall at 50' or on the back reef. Some sites listed in the Lonely Planet's Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Cuba (especially Jimayá) are great, but all the sites we visited were good. Gorgonian Gardens, Cuevas (caves) de Pipo, and Aquario, for example, had lots of big schools (creole wrasse with bogas, blue striped grunts, ocean tangs, white margates, etc.) and added a couple new entries to my life list. We also saw "smoking"(clouds of gametes) tube sponges. There are some big black and tiger groupers, cubera snapper, barracuda and black jacks, as there is no fishing allowed. Our British dive pals had a close encounter with a scalloped hammerhead; no pelagics for us. All sites are

close, with a return to the resort dock between dives. About half drift dives, half anchored. Guides are competent but not great creature scouts. No premium service here: you set up tanks and rinse your own gear. With mostly European divers, they were doing two dives a day. We requested three per day, and they immediately accommodated. We did one night dive: not a great site but a good dive, and over 60 minutes. We have dived the Isle of Youth in Cuba that attracts more divers, but we prefer Maria la Gorda. The all-inclusive 35 room resort/hotel is right on the beach; nice but plain. The buffet-style meals are plentiful but "basic Cuban." Birding nearby is great with the best guide/naturalist we've had the pleasure to walk with. \$104 per day for a double room facing the ocean including all meals for two. Dives priced separately (e.g., 15 dives \$340). Beer \$1. We showed up after faxing from Havana. Bok in advance (about 15% more expensive) from the USA through Scuba Cuba (www.cuba.tc/CubaScuba_MariaLaGorda.html). Taxi rides from Havana and back are easy, but we rented a car to tour Western Cuba a few days. Spending money in Cuba presently violates US law. But you can join the estimated 70,000 lawbreaking gringos per year who travel there via Mexico, Canada or the Bahamas. You will meet wonderful people and just may help change that unjust law.

Scubacan International, October 2001, Irene Gillman
(101E52@aol.com) Great Neck, NY.

I was supposed to go diving in Cuba October 2001, booked through Scubacan International in Canada. Paid them \$2850 in August and they never came through with the visa — no trip at all. They have not refunded my money though I gave them money for supposed trip insurance. Keith Bollander refuses to return my calls. He originally sent me back a \$650 check for the airplane that bounced. I called the Canadian Travel Minister and found out they are not a registered travel agency so there is nothing they can do for me. (**website www.scubacan.com**)

Scubacan, Colony Hotel, December 2001, Mimi Greensburg
(ltlmi@aol.com) Los Angeles, CA.
Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 5 to 30 Feet. Water: 70 F, calm. Scubacan packaged this trip and charged twice the retail price for the hotels, dive package, meals and transportation. Colony Hotel is rundown and infested with mosquitoes and no-seeums. Almost no housekeeping in guest rooms. Lots of fried, greasy food. Good fresh fruit served at all meals. Local agents for Scubacan cheated Americans by refusing to provide prepaid services, forcing us to pay again or go without. Three spectacular dives; five ordinary dives. Prepaid but never received night dive. All dive sites are 45-60 minute boat ride from marina. Totally turned off by the Scubacan dive experience.

CURACAO

A short hop from Bonaire, Curacao's colorful, historic,