

mate, provided some of the most exciting of shore based day trip diving I have experienced. The area is full of interesting possibilities with wild life unique to the area such as the Pacific giant octopus, the “cloud sponge” formations, and dolphins and killer whales. We did not see killer whales on my trip but there was a profusion of animals at all levels and sizes. There are the artificial reefs of the war ships *MacKenzie* and *GB Church*.

VanCleemput is knowledgeable of the area and on a first name basis with the giant octopuses as he used to study them. It is cold water diving (I was there at the end of Feb) and it is hard to imagine doing it comfortably without a dry suit though some do. VanCleemput is supportive and ran the trips with only one diver, me! He serves an excellent hearty hot soup and bread for lunch which is perfect for the coldness. I learned a great deal about cold water diving despite my experience in the North Atlantic. The boat runs out of Sidney, B.C., and the prices were reasonable. Budgeting enough time for the Vancouver Island area. (250-479-4276)

COLOMBIA

Buzos de Caribe, Dive Bandara, Decameron Marazul, December 2002, Ken Robertson, Calgary, Alberta.

Dives: 300+. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water 81 to 83 F. A very popular charter destination for Canada’s eastern cities of Montreal and Toronto, and for Europeans. We stayed at Decameron Marazul from Dec. 19 to 27. At the San Andres airport, we were met promptly by a World of Vacations

agent and sent to the hotel in a prepaid taxi. We were ushered into the hotel’s main hall, given a welcome cocktail, our keys, a quick briefing, and it was off to the rooms. We ended up with a room right under the main air conditioning unit for our building, no vibrator bed required — the whole room seemed to vibrate. So it was off to the front desk to request help with a room change. The next day we were moved to a nice room overlooking the lush grounds. Our hotel had an office for Buzos de Caribe (“Caribbean Divers”), staffed by a very nice young lady named Miriam. I missed the group and the first dive of the day, but as I was doing the required sign-up paperwork. Miriam kindly (and quickly) got on the telephone and made arrangements for me to meet the boat on the other side of the island at Cove Bay when they dropped extra tanks off, so that I could get one dive in that day. There I met five Canadians who had been diving together for the past week and had really gotten to know the area. After the customary environmental group dive with three Colombians from Bogota to get the feel of things, I joined the five Canadians for most of the week. Buzos de Caribe’s pick-up truck picks the divers up and takes them to the downtown shop location where the boats were. The divers ride on bench seats. Our DM was a NAUI Instructor named Jaime Andres Vinasco. He came to the hotel each morning to get the group together and handle any problems before leaving the hotel. He is a great chap to dive with — very attentive to detail in assisting people and getting the people around

the dive shop going here and there. He speaks very good English and is happy to help those of us who are working on their Spanish. At the dive shop, the divers rig their gear and put it on board one of the shop's two boats. Divers would take their gear back to their hotels each night. The boats are typical fishing boats which can accommodate about 10 divers comfortably — after that it gets a little crowded. Water entry is back-roll, reentry is with a small ladder or by pulling oneself over the side. In between dives there was often a quick pit stop back at Cove Bay for fresh tanks. The small restaurant there had provisions for the hungry and thirsty, although the boat always had water and usually some food. On the third day Buzos did not have enough experienced divers for a two-tank dive, although they did offer to have me join them for some student open water dives. Consequently, I asked them if they could recommend another shop for me to dive with that day — Jaime got on the telephone right away and lined up Dive Bandara. I had a couple of nice easy dives with them. I was glad I could speak some Spanish though, as I was the only non-Colombian of the three divers and none spoke more than a few words of English. Underwater the signs and signals are the same, but they were all happy to help me practice my Spanish. I got in nine good dives at San Andres. It would have been 11, but they did not dive on Christmas Day. Experienced divers seem to have a lot of leeway with the Buzos de Caribe operation, and the boat drivers know where the currents will be taking the divers.

Lesser experienced divers are requested to stay in a group, but Jaime always had lots to show them. On two days I tagged along on the periphery of the group dive and then joined them near the end so that Jaime could lead the less-experienced through their safety stop while those with sufficient air could continue to tour with me. Jaime is a pretty easy going guy, but I liked the way he kept an eye on everyone and revamped his buddy teams as he observed and evaluated their skills, above and below the water. The reefs look in good shape, and it was pleasure to dive there. The diving reminded me a lot of Cruce. The visibility was great all week and the currents mild. There are lots of fish, but larger ones seemed scarce, after all this is a fishing nation. I saw nice sponges and corals, Christmas tree and feather worms, two small nurse sharks, a large marlin, grunts, snappers, barjacks, trumpetfish, golden eels, green morays, groupers, parrotfish, trunkfish, one tiny pipehorse, porkfish, grey angels, masked hamlets, lobster, octopus, large blue ocean triggerfish, and some nice lettuce nudibranchs. The dive shops at San Andres are interested in protecting their reefs, and this is encouraging. The Decameron Marazul is one of five all-inclusive hotels that the chain has on the island. It was not downtown, had a nice beach and outdoor sitting areas at the beach and pool. The grounds are nicely maintained, but the constant piped-in music did not add to the existing ambiance and became tiresome quickly. The hotel did have a disco, but it wasn't overly active. The party crowd, it seems, went to other

Decameron Hotels. There were beach activities that really got hopping when a planeload of Italians landed. We gave the Marazul a strong 3.5 stars (out of 5). The food selection is good, varied, and plentiful — you will not go hungry! Service in the dinning room is fast and helpful. The beer is delicious. The mixed drinks varied, as every bartender seemed to mix them differently. We had to ask them to turn the volume down at the beach bar on more than one occasion so we could talk, but generally it was a nice place to sit and watch the sea after a leisurely dinner. They also pass out free cigarettes — no thank you. The (second) room we had was large, bright, and cheery. It was well maintained. There are TVs in the rooms. We were told that wealthy Colombians like to send their kids to the Decameron Aquarium just before Christmas as a graduation or end-of-the-school year present. Sure enough the place was full of older teenagers. (I wonder if some of the mothers knew that their daughters were topless and wearing thongs?)
(www.buzosdelcaribe.com)

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is famous among experienced divers for uninhabited Cocos Island, three hundred miles offshore. Here are challenging, high-tension, big-animal dives among hammerheads, mantas, occasional whale sharks, and other awe-inspiring creatures of the Pacific deep. Cocos is one of the more reliable places on earth to find them, but it's not for the

faint-of-heart, coral lovers, or those out-of-tune with their skills. ... Follow the weather pattern when planning trips as the number of sharks is negatively affected during El Nino years. ... Visibility and water conditions, however, are unpredictable, with both visibility and wind down in the rainy season (roughly May through November). ...

Northwestern Costa Rica's land-based diving is a smaller-scale version of Cocos Island. There are sharks (although no massing hammerheads) and a big-ocean feeling with rigorous conditions and an awesome amount of fish life (including good odds of seeing a whale shark) and often poor visibility. ... Bat Island offshore is the place to go, so insist on it before booking. ... Beaches vary from not-so-great to decent, but nature side trips are definitely a double "yes." ... Though Spanish is the national language, English-only speakers can get by.

Agua Rica, Cala Luna, November 2002, Martin Raffauf (mraffauf@us.ibm.com), San Carlos, CA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, choppy, surge, currents. Agua Rica is located in Tamarindo on Pacific coast. Dives only at Santa Catalina Islands (which is good). The marine life there is prolific — lots of sharks, rays, eels, tons of fish, large schools, wahoo, tuna, etc. Occasional whale sharks, although November is not the time (usually in spring). The Santa Catalinas are one of