

100 feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, choppy, no currents. The service was quite extraordinary — in terms of dining, bar, room comfort and cleanliness, the dive operation, extras like fishing, and their contact with the local airlines to confirm flights. Not once was tipping mentioned or even subtly displayed (e.g., like a “Tip Jar”). I actually had to ask management on the last day — one of the few places to let you put tips on your credit card. Honor bar and honor shopping (if no one was in the shop). Food was absolutely delicious and plentiful, with meat and vegetarian choices all the time. The large beach is dotted with bungalows — all with lounge chairs. Hammocks and picnic tables here and there in the shade. The salt water pool is next to the bar and dining area — so you can eat wherever you want — alone or with the group. Fun stuff like Friday night BBQ on the dock — the locals also gather. We booked a three-tank per day package and so got in all the dives we wanted. However, if you don’t get this package, you’ll need four people for the boat to go out, or pay a fuel surcharge. We added some guided fishing — bone-fishing on the flats from a skiff — fairly inexpensive for four hours. Deep sea fishing is also available. For digital photographers, everything is great, rinse tank on the boat. No film processing available. Digital still photo rental available with transfer to CD for a reasonable price.

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. ... Street signs in Cancun and Playa del Carmen offer four-day trips to Cuba for as little as \$300US. ... Dive operations are generally well-run, and the reefs are pristine.

Barracuda, Barlovento, October 2002, James Atkinson (yakpack@sympatico.ca), Toronto, Ont.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 10 to 30 feet. Water: 80 F, choppy. Traveling to Varadero was a last minute surprise, originally booked in to the El Colony on Isla de la Juventud; the hurricanes that week required a last minute detour. We did miss both hurricanes that hit the El Colony in a one week period, but we were on hand for the hurricane that hit Varadero halfway through our stay. As a result, we dove off Varadero three days, and the other two days were surprise dive days. The Barracuda dive shop has a bus that tours all the hotels on the peninsula to pick you up. On the first bad day when we were expecting to be stood up, they drove up to our hotel and informed us we were driving the entire width of Cuba to the south coast to go diving at Playa Giron on the Bay of Pigs. We drove out of the storm and then through quite astonishing small villages and thousands of acres of cooperative farms. The visibility at the Bay of Pigs was excellent and the two wall dives we did there were

brehtaking as far as the topography. The second dive ended up on a no-name metal wreck — perhaps from the invasion — that was pretty smashed up but quite alive with marine life with some excellent swim-thrus amongst the wreckage. Playa Giron also has Cuevas de las Peches, a cave dive opportunity we did not take advantage of. Our second day of bad weather we arranged a trip to the Saturno caves a half hour from Varadero. This was my first time in a cave. You walk down a set of stone stairs to the grotto, jump into chilly water — my 3 mm was not enough — and have the choice of touring the main grotto without ever losing sight of the surface or, if you are foolhardy enough, follow the guide into the connecting caves. They go in with regular gear and crossed fingers and will take you a half hour into the caves and back again. I was told there were lines but I was content to stay in the main grotto. Even with the surface above me, the overhanging grotto ceiling gives you the impression you are completely inside a cave. The three better weather days in Varadero were spent on the local marine park with quite a variety of wrecks, natural and man made. The visibility due to the nearby hurricanes was poor, but the Neptuno, an older site, had a colony of green morays that have obviously enjoyed the company of generous divers. I saw my dive buddy face to face with a fully emerged green moray as tall as he was and so enthralled that he didn't realize there was another one behind him sandwiching him. The Patrullero is a massive sunken ex-Russian patrol boat that is just beginning to grow a reef; it

is quite the playground, and I want to see it again in a few years. There are other intentional wrecks in the park that we didn't get the chance to see, including a plane. This is definitely on my list of places to return to for the diving. The hotel, Barlovento, is an older hotel with an attentive and polished resort staff. The food is typically Cuban, wholesome but a bit plain; the service, excellent. This was a Havantur tour, and there were a couple of glitches around the airport transfer and flight connections. We got better service with the Cubanacan tour last year, but Havantur was quite acceptable.

María La Gorda, April 2003, Gabriel, P.R. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm. María La Gorda (Fat Mary) is a dedicated dive resort located in the southwestern tip of Cuba, off Cabo Corrientes and in Guanacahabibes Bay. It is a five-hour scenic drive from Havana, the first three along the Russian-financed freeway that traverses most of Cuba east and west from Havana. The freeway ends in Pinar del Río, the capital of the eastern province of that name. This is the largest tobacco-producing area of the country. From Pinar del Río the road turns into a two-lane, winding blacktop through several villages with names such as Sandino, San Juan y Martínez, to mention two. The resort at María La Gorda is first class by anyone's standards. The reception area is built to resemble a peasant abode, complete with high thatched roof and log columns. In it are the front desk, bar, a small dining room for those not on the all-inclusive plan, a sundry

store, and a dispensary staffed by a registered nurse with a physician on 24-hour call. The nearest chamber is in Havana, and there is helicopter transportation available as required. The rooms are located in three two-story buildings, each spotlessly clean. Two rooms face the street, and four face the beach and ocean. The air conditioning is enough to freeze you, if it is not judiciously controlled. Following the lodgings is the dive shop and next to it the common dining room where three meals are served daily. One has the choice of dining in air conditioned comfort or out on the terrace looking at the bay and, in the evenings, the gorgeous sunsets. The food is varied, tasty, and abundant. It is served on steam tables cafeteria-style, and one can repeat as often as desired. There is always a cook at a grill who, at breakfast, prepares eggs any way you please and, at lunch or dinner, fish caught that same day. There is always a choice of beef, pork, chicken, or fish, along with the staples of rice and beans, black or white. The food is tasty, and one can put on some girth if not careful. There are two 41-foot boats with covered area and plenty of deck space. The divemasters and guides are extremely knowledgeable and accommodating, once they assure themselves of your competence. Less experienced divers will find these fellows to be patient and always ready to assist even the most clumsy. Divers are separated five to a guide, with the groups composed according to the divemasters' evaluation of the experience level. They are unobtrusive and will allow you to go on your own, once they have observed your above and

underwater performance. Their language skills are abundant. I heard one or the other speaking English, German, French, Italian, and, naturally, Spanish. All dive sites are 10 or 15 minutes away from the dock, except for Yemayá, which is not to be missed. This one requires a 25-minute ride. The water was calm with no chop at all and temperature at a constant 82 degrees. Visibility was normally 150 to 200 feet. The reefs are vibrant and full of every kind of fish imaginable. However, do not expect to see the big fellows. Cuba is not noted for large pelagics. There are some southern sting rays and turtles, but that is as large as it gets. If there is even a minimal current flowing, the dive will be planned as a drift dive, making it even more effortless. Practically all dives contain a wall at some point. You may start at 60 feet along a chute and at its end find yourself plunging over a wall. There are also chimneys, which lead you vertically down and then horizontally out to the wall face. In short, the diving is spectacular. The boat returns to the dock after every dive. There are normally two daily dives, one at 9 a.m. and the other at 2:30 p.m. However, and in the spirit of accommodating the diver, if one wishes to make a two-tank morning dive, an exception will be made, and after the first dive they will drop you off at a dive site, take the rest of the divers back to the dock and return for you at a predetermined spot. If you miss the buoy, not to worry, just surface and the boat will pick you up. Night dives can be arranged at any time for a charge of \$40. The cost of a five-night, eight-dive package is \$260, all inclu-

sive, except beverages of any kind, including bottled water. I forgot to mention mojitos and beer are available on the boat at the end of the last dive. (www.cuba.tc/CubaScuba_MariaLaGorda.html)

CURACAO

A short hop from Bonaire, Curacao's colorful, historic, cosmopolitan Dutch city of Willemstad offers plenty for the nondiver — good diving, international shopping for high-rollers, night life, hiking, an orchid-filled forest, beautiful rural villages and country homes, windsurfing, half-naked Europeans, and horseback riding. Excellent Indonesian restaurants offer all-you-can-eat rijstafels (rice tables). ... Marine Park, southeast of the public aquarium ("Seaquarium"), offers rough boat rides in exchange for the best wall dives on the island. There's outstanding beach diving from protected coves on the northwestern side of the island, which is usually calmest and is easily accessible by car. The windward side is almost always too rough to dive, but the diving's good if the wind shifts from its prevailing pattern.

Caribbean Sea Sports, Marriott Beach Resort, May 2003, David Haupt (dbhaupt@yahoo.com), Louisville, KY. Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 81 F, choppy, surge. Marriott Beach Resort is five to 10 minutes west of downtown. It is very nice property with all the ameni-

ties. There is an on-site deli, three restaurants, exercise room, spa (massages, facials, etc.), pool w/ bar, and a nice beach. While I was diving, my wife took full advantage of the exercise room and had a couple of massages. Hotel staff was helpful & friendly. The dining on the island was a pleasant surprise. The places we tried ranged from very good to excellent. The on-site dive-op is Caribbean Sea Sports. The DMs are very personable. There were anywhere from five to 12 divers on the boat each day. Everyone jumps in, hangs on a line on the surface, then submerges as a group. The DM leads along the reef until someone reaches 1,500 psi. The group then turns and heads back. Once they saw me dive, I was afforded certain freedoms. I was always the first one in and the last one out! My shortest dive was 52 min. with a max. depth of 105 fsw. Their boat is a Pro 42 powered by twin 300 hp Jetstreams. With a max. capacity of 20 divers, it never felt crowded. The boat does not have a rinse tank, but a hose is available for rinsing. The dive shop has two large rinse tanks. Decent house reef. No E-6 processing. Room had 110 for charging batteries. (www.caribseasports.com)

Easy Divers, October 2002, Anne Warburton, Yorba Linda, CA. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F. Dives accrued: 150-160. Dive restrictions enforced: boat at 500 psi. Two other couples in place for a week, and the next three days many came in. Dive operation was good. We could dive our own computers all the time. Shore dive off the Habitat was the best of any — tons of eels, drums, (blue) parrots, and