

Providencia Island, Caribbean

by Wolfgang Schreibmayer

I first became aware of Providencia Island as a diving destination, when I asked in Scubaboard for a Caribbean diving location that still offers intact reefs and sealife and is not overrun by tourism (my Caribbean diving experience was, so far, limited to a stay in the early 90s at Grand Cayman and two stays on the Florida Key Islands around 2000).

Instigated by a very positive recommendation, Lisi, myself and two friends (Franz and Gerdi) headed towards Providencia Island in March 2024...

The tiny island belongs politically to Columbia, but is located in the western Caribbean approx. 150 km off the coast, at the geographical height of Nicaragua. It is located close to another, bigger, island, San Andres and belongs to the San Andres archipelago.

Before I start to report about this remarkable diving and UW-photography journey, it is important to state that this is certainly NOT a diving destination for everybody.

Do not attempt to undertake this trip, unless you are prepared to deal with the toils listed below, otherwise

the trip may become a nightmare:

Arrival and departure to and from Providencia is very tedious: For us Austrians this means a flight from Vienna to Paris, followed by a long flight from Paris to Bogota, the capital of Columbia. After arriving at Bogota in the late evening and spending the night in a hotel near the airport, we took a flight from Bogota to San Andres.

After spending another night in San Andres, we headed finally to our destination, Providencia.

Satena, a small domestic airline, operates the route from San Andres to Providencia with small turboprop aircrafts that remind me of bumblebees - especially landing and taking off on the small landing strip on Providencia is an adventure in itself.

Here is a facette of the typical reefscape at the outer reef. While I was trying to adjust flashes and camera to make a photo of the reefscape and the three langusts, a juvenile reef shark swam into the frame and destroyed my composition .

*Sony A7R5, Nauticam housing, Canon 8-15mm @15mm, 140mm domeport, 1/160s, f/9, ISO 250, 2*Z330.*



© Wolfgang Schreibmayer



*The highlight for UW-photographers on Providencia island is certainly the Caribbean reef shark (*Carcharhinus perezii*). They live (still) in high numbers around the island. This species appears to be the Caribbean counterpart of the grey reefshark, that lives in the Indopacific (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchus*). They are “just” reefsharks, but some specimen can grow to quite formidable size (I estimate the individuals that we encountered to measure between 1 m and 2.5 m). The photo shows Gerdi taking a photo of a Caribbean reef shark at the outer reef: Sony A7R5, Nauticam housing, Sony 28-60mm @28mm, WACP-C, 1/200s, f/9, ISO 250, 2*Z330.*

The check-in luggage is restricted to 15 kg (!), but more luggage is allowed upon extra payment, so no problem.

The real problem was that three suitcases got lost on the flight from Paris to Bogota and these delayed suitcases are not automatically transported to the final destination.

It took us three days, a lot of effort and nerves, numerous phonecalls and the dedicated help of Nelson, an employee of a concurrent domestic airline at San Andres, until we had our complete photographic equipment on site - we were three UW-photographers.



These sharks are anything but shy and approach the divers as soon as they come close to the drop off at the outer reef (they are not fed or baited by the diving base). From few up to a dozen of these animals would encircle the divers during the entire dive and make outstanding motifs for UW photographers.

*Reef shark against the reef: Sony A7R5, Nauticam housing, Sony 20-70mm @20mm, 170mm domeport, 1/160s, f/9, ISO 400, 2*Z330.*

Departure from Providencia was the same, but in reverse order, and this time there were no problems with luggage. Just allow three days for each direction...

Tourism on Providencia island is simple. There is a small, single hotel with enclosed PADI diving base on the island, called “Sirius”. The complex had been completely destroyed by Hurrican Iota in 2020. Since then, only very simple accomodation is available

in private “Posadas” on bed and breakfast basis.

There is no “cold” or “hot” water, it comes just at the temperature as it is available at the container on top of the building. Some apartments have a gas stove for preparing food. In SW-Bay (the biggest beach in Providencia) there was a a single and small restaurant (“Divino Nino”) that offered delicious food for little money. For the spoiled ones amongst us, the choice



*Grouper at “El Planchon”: Sony A7R5, Nauticam housing, Sony 28-60mm @60mm, WACP-C, 1/200s, f/11, ISO 200, 2*Z330.*

between fish, shrimps or lobster may be a little bit repetitive...

The inhabitants of Providencia are very relaxed and exceptionally friendly to foreigners. Spanish is the official language, but they speak Creole amongst them and many know English.

A few tourists from Colombia come to spend simple, nature bound, holidays. In addition to the general tourists, there are a few divers, mostly from Colombia, but also others from all over the world (Providencia is not a complete insider tip any more).

In the two weeks we stayed

at Providencia, we met divers from Colombia, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany and USA. Daniel, the busy and helpful owner of “Sirius Diving” has established a new replacement diving base, located close to the original one and there are plans to re-establish the hotel and original diving base, but the opening day is uncertain.

This small island is located in the Caribbean high seas and is surrounded by a massive reef. The diving spots, both on the outside as well as inside the reef, are reached by small boats.



*Mixed school of bluestriped grunts (*Hemulon scirius*) and French grunts (*Hemulon flavilineatum*) at Tete’s place: Sony A7R5, Nauticam housing, Sony 28-60mm @28mm, WACP-C, 1/160s, f/11, ISO 160, 2*Z330.*

Visibility in “Caribbean blue” waters is good, I estimate 20m to 25m. The reefs are typical for the Caribbean, with a few stone corals, but plenty of horn and fan corals and impressive sponges. They looked completely intact to me, I could not see signs of bleaching or pollution (some hard corals were broken, presumably from the hurricane).

The Caribbean reefsharks at Providencia island are curious and investigative. Seldom but sometimes, they would come extremely close, almost touching the domeport, in

order to check you out. At a few cm distance they would haul off and continue to encircle the divers at greater distance. Only once during the entire period of two weeks was a shark exerting threatening behaviour against me, i.e. lowering his head and starting jittering with his pectoral fins just in front of me at arms length (I believe that this shark was feeling restricted, as I was positioning myself directly in his swimming direction to get a frontal photo, and Lisi, who was beside me, also taking photos, and the close coral wall dropoff - all



*West Atlantic trumpetfish (Aulostomus maculatus), well camouflaged in a gorgonian octocoral: Sony A7R5, Nauticam housing, Sony 20-70mm @70mm, 170mm domeport, 1/160s, f/11, ISO 100, 2*Z330.*

contributed to the restriction).

After Lisi and I swiftly backed off (better listen, when such an animal wants to tell you something), the shark continued to swim speedily back and forth along the reef edge, repeatedly and fast opening and closing its mouth.

At this point I should say that *Carcharhinus perezi* is considered harmless to humans, but



*Flamingo tongue snail (Cyphoma gibbosus), feeding on gorgonia, taken with the fisheye lens: Sony A7R5, Nauticam housing, Canon 8-15mm @15mm, 140mm domeport, 1/160s, f/16, ISO 100, 2*Z330.*

attacks on humans after neglecting such threatening behaviour have been reported.

A wreck, "El Planchon", is located at the bottom of the coral reefs surrounding Providencia island. Our guide, Carol, told us, that it had been a Colombian ship supporting German submarines with replenishment of all kind during WWII. When the end of the war was close, captain and crew

decided that it is time to go home and sunk the ship putting their thoughts into action (happy people!). Today the wreck is home to triggerfish, groupers and impressive reefsharks as guardians.

The diving at Sirius diving base is typically done with the first dive in the morning on the outer reef and, after a sufficient surface interval, the second dive in shallow and sheltered areas within the reef. These areas provide shelter for impressive schools of snappers, grunts and sweetlips, juvenile fish of all kind, puffer fish, nurse sharks and other kind of marine life (we even encountered a group of friendly purpoises, but they were too far away to take reasonable photos in good quality).

I must admit that I was so impressed by the variety of WA (and fishportrait) subjects (first of all the charismatic *Charcharhinus perezi*, that were abundant at Providencia and whom I, personally, met for the first time in my life), that I did not use my macro setup for even a single dive.

Instead I was using WACP-C/Sony 28-60m, Canon 8-15mm and Sony 20-70mm for all dives (in this order). The period of two week diving was too short and it would have been better to stay for another, additional, week to exploit the beautiful macro subjects, including snails and shrimps, that we encountered.

Our trip to Providencia island was an exceptional experience for all four of us, with fond memories that will endure...

Wolfgang Schreibmayer