

Cuba Diving - The West Side

By Felix Rodriguez

In these days, there are a few places less controversial than the socialist republic of Cuba. Constitutionally defined as a “socialist state guided by the principles of José Martí, and the political ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin”, this island, and archipelago comprising the mainland, the “Isla de la Juventud” (Island of Youth) and other smaller islands and keys, had kept their reefs barely touched by the hand of man and the progress itself, maybe due to the fact that only a few bunch of cubans have the privilege to use (not even own) a boat (let’s remember everything here belongs to the government), the almost inexistent local divers as diving industry is for tourists mostly, or the protection of the government and fishing regulations, the Cuban reefs, are ones of the most preserved over time in the Caribbean.

The east side of the island is famous for the archipelago “Jardines de la Reina” (Queen’s Gardens) on the south and the shark diving over “Santa Lucia” (Saint Lucy) on the north, but this time we decided to pay a visit to the west side.

Once we arrive to the island capital “La Habana”, we start to realize that diving there wasn’t going to be as easy as we thought, since most dive operator was shutted down by government decision and find information over the internet was pretty much difficult. Gladly our hotel had a tourism bureau, and they point us to the only dive operator



active in La Habana over the “Marina Hemingway”, where dive certification was less important than the Passport, due to the fact that the boat must go for a passenger count made by the National Coast Guard, when going out and when returning from diving as well. Another impressive thing is that they check the fuel level on the boat, witch it need to be almost the exact meassure to go out, dive and came back, no less, no more.

Diving La Habana reef was pretty much a nice dive with Caribbean warm waters, great reef scenics, full of color and marine life, and you can

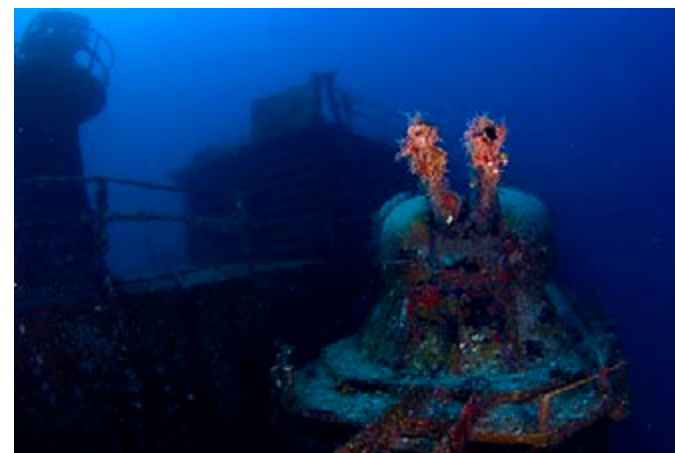


(Top left) Image of Ernesto “Ché” Guevara on the Interior Ministry Building, Nikon D50, Sigma 17-70mm @ 40mm, 1/160, f/6.3, ISO 200.

(Left) American Car: American Cars on Old Havana near “Malecón”, Nikon D50, Sigma 17-70mm @ 17, 1/10, f/2.8, ISO 200.

(Above) School of grunts over “Cayo Piedra”, Nikon D50 on Ikelite, 2x DS-125 at _power, 1/500, f/6.3, Tokina 10-17mm @ 17 under 8” dome, ISO 200.

(Below) Gun: Port gun of the Russian Destroyer, Nikon D50 on Ikelite, 2x DS-125 at full power, 1/160, f/6.3, Tokina 10-17mm @ 10mm under 8” dome, ISO 200.





Soft Corals: Soft sponges over Havana reef, Nikon D50 on Ikelite, 2x DS-125 at _power, 1/125, f/7.1, Sigma 17-70mm @ 17 under 8" dome, ISO 200.

see here the conservation of coral due to the size they growth, the abundance of species and the lack of broken and death corals around. This is the typical Caribbean wall with schools of grunts, surgeons and damselfish, an occasional basslet wrasse hiding here and there, some medium size groupers on cleaning stations or a trumpet fish trying to hide behind something. I actually got impressed when I



Stairs: Starboard stairs of the Russian Destroyer, Nikon D50 on Ikelite, 2x DS-125 at _power, 1/160, f/6.3, Tokina 10-17mm @ 10 under 8" dome, ISO 200.

downloaded my photos on the laptop and realize how many colors were popped up by the light of my strobes. Those walls provide a great opportunity for WA, CFWA and macro work.

Once we go back, we found a fresh water tank to rinse the camera and a couple of showers. Dive here was close to 90\$, on a two dives package basis.

Next thing we did was take



Bow Gun of the Russian Destroyer, Nikon D50 on Ikelite, 2x DS-125 at full power, 1/125, f/6.3, Tokina 10-17mm @ 10 under 8" dome, ISO 200.

an interstate bus for a 3 hours ride (actually they were really nice, and so much better than we expect, including Air Conditioning and new buses) with price was close to 12\$ p/pax, to arrive the peninsula of "Varadero", the most turistical place over the west side of the island after Havana.

Varadero is a resort town in the province of Matanzas, with waters of the clearest shades of blue and full of night life. Once there, we approach one of the bigger dive operators in Cuba, called "Barracuda Diving Center" to reserve our dives for the rest of the week.

Diving Varadero have a main attractive that no one can miss, a "Russian Destroyer" with 100m long and 14m wide, called "The Patrol Boat", same class of the one sunked by the government of Cayman Island in Cayman Brac the "Russian Destroyer 356", purchased to the Cuban

Government. The main difference between both is that the Cuban one presents no mayor deterioration on the structure, almost anything was intact, even the weapons and ammunitions. This ship was strategically positioned on Cuba during the Cold War among another ships, and left in abandon after.

This wreck is so big and covered with so many corals, that photography get really benefit with a fisheye lens like Tokina 10-17mm, Nikkor 10.5mm, or a 15mm / 16mm on a FF camera.

Other nice dives around Varadero, take place over "Cayo Piedra" (Stone Key), where you can spot lots of stingrays resting on the sand, waiting for some naive prey to pass by, some schools of grunts, large seafans covered with flamingo tongues and some occasional barracuda and pelagic fauna passing



Group of street Cubans musicians on “El Patio” Old Havana, Nikon D50, Sigma 17-70mm @ 29 + Kenko 2X TC, 1/160, /6.3, ISO 200.

Once in La Habana, one must visit “La Vieja Habana” (Old Havana) where you can zip some “mojitos” (pronounced moh-heee-toh) which is the National Cuban cocktail made from rum, lemon, sugar, club soda and mint leaves, eat some Cuban style pork with rice and black beans, visit some tobacco factories and some historical places rich in color and music. As for Varadero, just pick one of the many “all-inclusive” resorts, enjoy the more than 20kms. of beautiful sandy beaches, and relax!

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by.

The Diving in Varadero was 100\$ every two dives. The Dive operator is well equipped, nitrox available and the boat was a common dive boat for 20 people or so. Neither Havana nor Varadero do night dives. Some days on the week, the dive operator goes to “Bahía de Cochinos” (Pig’s Bay) and “Playa Girón”, basically a couples of dives with a two hours ride from there, provided by them. If you have the time, include on your trip some days on “María La Gorda” (Fat Mary), one of the most isolated and great places on the West Side for diving.

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