

The Medas Islands

An underwater refuge

by Francesco Ricciardi

“Do they really become THAT big? I can’t believe it!”

Usually, this is the first question you ask your guide after your first dive at the Medas Islands. A Marine Protected Area since 1983, this group of small islands (the biggest, “Meda Gran” is only 1.8 km²) hosts incredible marine diversity, and the complete protection from every fishing activity permits the “inhabitants” like the famous Medas groupers to reach probably the upper limits of their body size. If you’re lucky enough to dive during a day with good visibility (and it is not so uncommon, especially during summer months) you can really enjoy probably one of the best dive-spots in the whole Mediterranean Sea.

L’Estartit is a small fishing town located in the northern part of Catalunya, North-East Spain, where only a few diving centres have the rights to approach the Islands. The boat trip is very short – maximum 10 minutes – and every diving centre has a schedule in order to avoid too many people diving at the same site making some areas more crowded than the Ramblas in Barcelona. A big shared compressor located directly on the harbour provides tanks for almost every diving center in L’Estartit. Nitrox tanks are always available: I definitely suggest using it, as you don’t need to go deeper than 30 m to enjoy the best of the Medas Islands.

The number of people that can dive in the Medas water is strictly controlled – and some



*A friendly Dusky Grouper (Epinephelus marginatus)
(Nikon D80 in Sealux Housing, Sea&Sea Strobes.
Nikon 18 mm, 1/125 f/9.5 ISO 200*

spots of the Islands are completely forbidden – this precautionary policy is showing advantages. Fish don’t feel threatened and it’s relatively easy to approach big dusky groupers (Epinephelus marginatus) without feeding them, as was quite rare until few years ago. Don’t be surprised if they stay close to you for quite a long time as they are quite





*A bicolor variation of the gorgonian **Paramuricea clavata** (Nikon D80 in Sealux Housing, Sea&Sea Strobes. Tokina 11-17 mm, 1/125 f/9.5 ISO 200*

curious.

Large schools of plankton-feeders (anchovies, red anthias, brown damselfish) take advantage of the huge quantity of nutrients – coming mainly from the mouth of the river Ter - which is the basis of the Medas food chain. And, obviously, large pelagic predators like breams, dentex, and barracudas often join the party! It is really a paradise for wide-angle lovers.

Are you in macro mood? Don't worry, you'll have fun too. Have you ever seen red anthias feeding

in the current? Why don't you try to take home a good shot of one of these wonderful little fish with its mouth open? If you get it, stay away from me, please. More than 2 years trying without success, for the moment!

The particular position of this group of islands – something like an arrow heading southwest – with the bigger Island at the bottom and the “Cavall Bernat” at the top, allows diving activities in almost every sea condition. However, the area is characterized by a wind predominantly coming from north



Nudibranch diversity in Medas Island is amazing! (Nikon D80 in Sealux Housing, Sea&Sea Strobes. Nikkor 105 mm micro, 1/200 f/22 ISO 100

(here called “Tramuntana”). When this wind is particularly strong, all the northern part of the Meda Grande is virtually off-limits. And this is a shame, because this zone offers two incredible walls (La “Pota del Llop” and “La Pedra de Deu” – literally “Wolf's Leg” and “God's Stone”) with a maximum depth of almost 50 meters with huge benthonic life,



*A Ringneck Blenny (**Parablennius pilicornis**) (Nikon D80 in Sealux Housing, Sea&Sea Strobes. Nikkor 105 mm micro, 1/200 f/25 ISO 100*

gorgonians, colourful sponges and an amazing view. The canyon located at around 30 m depth in the Pedra de Deu, hosts on both sides red and yellow gorgonians with a diameter up to 150 cm, the biggest size I've seen in the Mediterranean. Directly in front of the Pedra de Deu, a small rock called “Medallot” offers another very interesting dive spot. The southern



A wide cave in Cala Viuda. (Nikon D80 in Sealux Housing, Sea&Sea Strobes. Tokina 11-17 mm, 1/60 f/2.8 ISO 200)



A big school of two-banded breams (Diplodus vulgaris). It is a very common view in Medas Islands waters (Nikon D80 in Sealux Housing, Sea&Sea Strobes. Nikon 18 mm, 1/90 f/11 ISO 200)

part of this “cylindrical” wall is a true “Anemone city”, with thousands of small purple-tip anemones, many of them with their symbiotic crabs.

The Medas Islands are also famous for their caves. Probably the most well-known is called “Cova de la Vaca” – literally, “Cow’s Cave” (name due to the ancient presence in this cave of monk seals, or “sea cows”) - a series of wide tunnels that, especially during afternoon dives, when the sun is lower on the horizon- offers an incredible panorama for backlight

shots! The internal wall of these caves is incredibly rich in benthic life: the Mediterranean red coral, which forms small colonies mainly in shaded areas, is particularly rich and its white polyps often show their beauty feeding on the current. But take care, because not every cave present in the Island is safe for recreational divers – always follow the indications of your guide! Anyway, if you like caves don’t miss the “Dofi”, as well, located on the Meda Xica (“Small Meda”) which offers some extraordinary and

easy-accessible tunnels.

The south-west part of this small archipelago offers other unbelievable experiences. The “Cavall Bernat”, the “Tascó” and “Ferranelles” are the sites where the huge diversity of fish schools reaches the maximum. Take care of the currents, which some days can be very strong, but at the same time permit the coexistence of sea eagles, barracudas, giant dusky groupers and other big predators. Where there are currents, there are

gorgonians and plankton-feeders as well: the gorgonian wall in Ferranelles is really colourful and comparable with those present on the other side of the archipelago.

Moreover, many other diving sites are present all along the northern coast, so there is no need to repeat the same dive, unless you intentionally want to!

It is really easy to arrive in L’Estartit and to dive around the Medas Island. The closest airport



The Medas Islands: this is the northern part with the Medallot and the Meda Gran which is only 18 km² in area. They have been a Marine Protected Area since 1983.

good temperature, and hopefully good visibility. Water temperature on the sea surface ranges from 11 °C during the winter to about 23-24 °C during summer months.

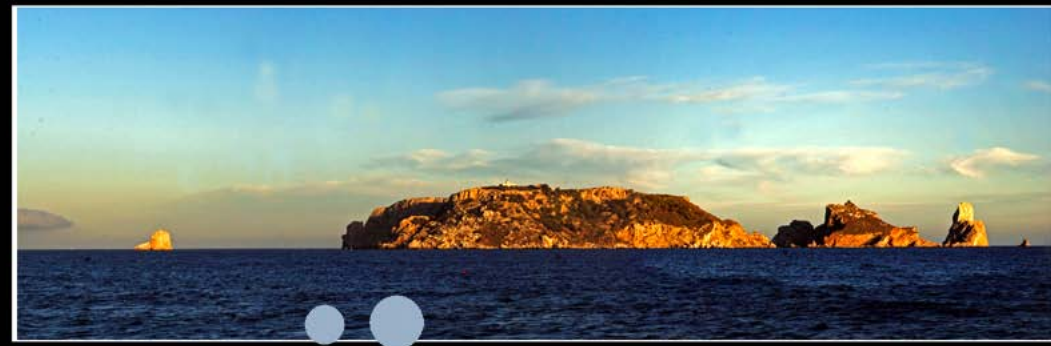
Also if many diving centres have very big boats – allowed to carry up to 30 divers- I would suggest a choice of smaller diving centres where you can enjoy a more relaxed and tolerant atmosphere towards slow and demanding underwater photographers.

is in Girona (about 40 km), an airport used by many cut price flight companies from all around Europe. Barcelona is also not so far away. A taxi trip from Girona to L'Estartit, or just 45 min car driving will take you to this small town on the coast. Choice of accommodation is quite abundant – from hotels (some of them especially adapted for divers) to large apartments.

From a photographer point of view, the best period to visit the Medas Islands is in June and from the end of August to the middle of October: less people in the water,

www.uwpmag.com

Francesco Ricciardi
<http://myuwimages.wordpress.com>



AQUÀTICA
 Submarinisme
 L'ESTARTIT -ILLES MEDES

A RELAXED AND PLEASANT ATMOSPHERE
 ENJOY OUR PROFESSIONAL SERVICE
 SMALL GROUPS AND CUSTOMIZED GUIDES FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

AQUÀTICA ILLES MEDES DIVING CENTER
 CRTA. TORROELLA S/N
 L'ESTARTIT 17258 GIRONA - SPAIN
 WWW.AQUATICA.CAT - INFO@AQUATICA-SUB.COM
 TEL/FAX (+ 34) 972 750656

