

Gardens of the Queen, Cuba

by Joanna Lentini

It's late in the evening and my eyelids have had all they can take for the day. I'm struggling to keep them open but they're leadened down from a mix of jet lag and dive exhaustion.

I finally give in to the pressure and shut my eyes. As I do so images of sharks flash through the darkness of my mind. And as I fade deeper the images linger longer, the lighting softens and their brown skin begins to glitter from the afternoon sun. The water is a brilliant shade of blue and as I start to float away in it I hear the wind howling outside and awaken. My eyes open widely and dart around the room before collapsing closed again. This whole process repeats itself several times until I eventually fade away into the ocean of my mind.

The next morning I wake up to the regular 7am knock at the door with an offering of coffee and juice. Now that's service! I take a quick stretch, and hop in the shower. As I stand there with the water raining over me it happens again. I can't close my eyes without seeing images of sharks. I find it amusing and quietly laugh to myself. Since I first landed in Havana my senses have been overloaded. From the unfamiliar sights, sounds

and tastes I encountered in the city to the schools of Silkies and Caribbean Reef Sharks I met on my first dives this adventure has started off on a whole new level for me. And I still have seven days to go!

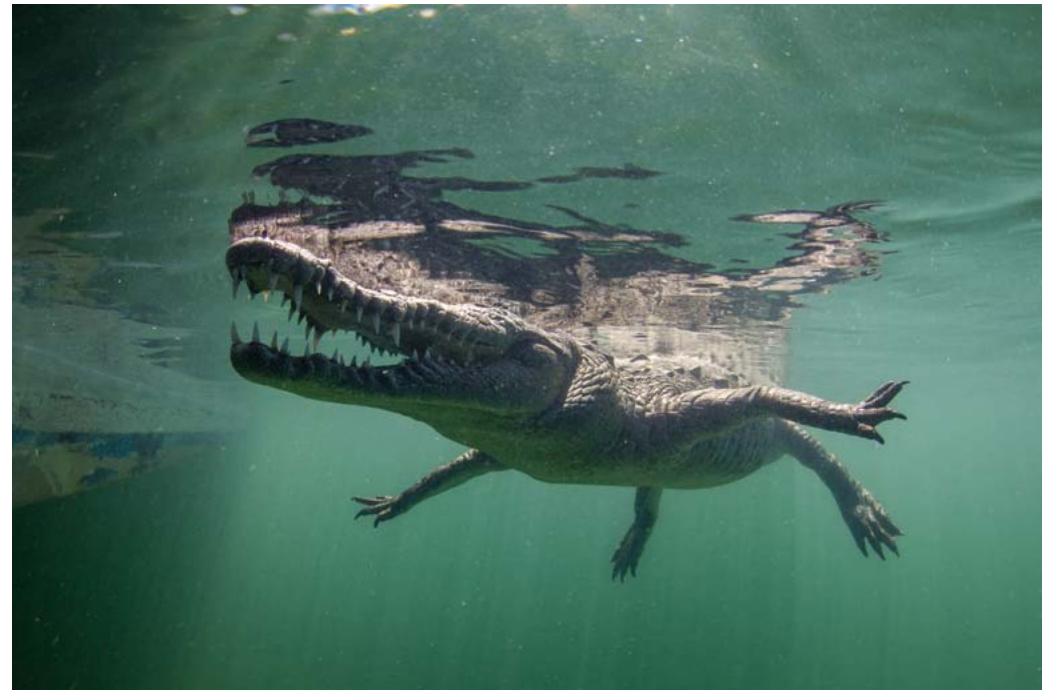
Having had an interesting night of dreams and restless sleep, I decide to stick with the 10-17mm fisheye lens as the prior day. I'm half asleep still and don't want to take any chances with changing ports. And besides, the 16-35mm isn't really necessary. The wildlife here is not at all camera-shy. I open my bedroom door and head down the steps with a slight bellyache. I'm not sure if it's anxiety, hunger or both. But I do know saltwater

(Top) American Saltwater Crocodile posing for the camera.

Canon 60D in Nauticam Housing. F11, 1/125, ISO 125, Tokina 10-17mm @11mm. Available light

(Right) Just one of the hundreds of beautiful sea fans that were scattered across the ocean floor at La Puntica dive site.

Canon 60D in Nauticam Housing. F13, 1/250, ISO 250. Tokina 10-17mm @10mm. One Inon Z240 strobe.



crocodiles are on the agenda for the day and well to be honest, I've got some mild apprehensions. It's one thing to talk about it and it's quite another story to quietly slip into the murky, green water to then sneak attack it with your camera. But hey, that's the plan.

Last night, while enjoying some mojitos on the deck, I was introduced to Franco, the resident 5-meter long American saltwater crocodile. Unfortunately, from what I was told, Franco is too shy to let photographers near him. Somehow this formidable giant is actually afraid of us! Still knowing he was out there with others of his kind was a sobering thought as I prepared myself for some mangrove exploration.

As is usually the case in the Gardens of the Queen, the weather today is mild, the sea is calm and the sun is out. The water is slightly warmer (27 C) for this time of year (February) and as a result the group has brought with them everything from 2.5mm wetsuits to full drysuits. Each diver seems to have very different experience levels but what's interesting is it doesn't really matter here. There really are no currents and the ones you do encounter are mild enough for beginners.

As we gear up I hear, "Niñoooooooooo! . . . Niiiiiñooooooooo" . . . This is the call our guide Noel

used throughout the week to attract a number of more juvenile Crocs who were affectionately referred to as "Niño" (Spanish for child). Amazingly, almost always, after some brief calling and clapping, one or all of about three juveniles would come swimming over to our boat like trained puppy dogs. From there we would calmly enter the water one by one and get up close and personal with these seemingly docile and curious creatures. My experiences photographing these amazing animals completely dismissed any prejudice and apprehensions I may have had. As the last person returns to the boat, the engine starts and the boat slowly drifts away; I think to myself just how grateful I am to be in this place. With only 350 divers allowed in this marine reserve per year I feel quite privileged to be one of them.

Jardines de la Reina, or Gardens of the Queen, is still a little-known piece of heaven positioned between Cuba and the Cayman Islands in the Caribbean Sea. Christopher Columbus gave this beautiful archipelago its name to honour the Queen of Spain. Having realized its beauty and need for protection the government of Cuba established it as a National Park back in 1996. This of course equates to a limited number of visitors, pristine conditions and abundant marine life. Some might say



Saltwater Crocodile scurrying away through the sea grass as a larger saltwater croc decided to make an appearance.

Canon 60D in Nauticam Housing . F10, 1/200, ISO 200. Tokina 10-17mm @10mm. Inon Z240 strobe.

it serves as a time capsule for what coral reefs of the world looked like 50 years ago, or more importantly, what we wished they all still looked like today. The sites are bright, healthy, and teeming with marine wild life. BIG wildlife! However, with close to 840 sq. miles of cays and islands to protect, protection is a daunting task.

There is just one dive operator in the park called Avalon and due to unfortunate political concerns around government boat travel, aside from the

Avalon staff, Cubans are not permitted to visit the marine park. And for the foreigners who do get to visit getting there is a bit of an adventure. From Havana you have six hours of land travel followed by another 3-6 hours by speedboat or ferry. But don't let that stop you. The trip is well worth it!

We were picked up from our accommodations (Hotel Parque Central) in Old Havana at 4am. Without a doubt, this is the area

where you want to get a room booked. The main attractions of the city will be at your doorstep. The luxury bus ride was smooth and made a few stops throughout the rugged countryside.

Six hours after you set out, you'll arrive in the tiny port town of Jucaro on the southern coast. Once you get clearance from the coast guard you'll hop on the boat and be on your way to Jardines in no time. I've heard the sea can be bumpy at times but I only experienced a little bit of that (on the way back). For the most part, my three hour speedboat crossing was smooth sailing. I was even able to catch up on some much-needed sleep after some long Havana nights.

Upon arrival, we are welcomed on board the Tortuga by friendly and casual staff who quickly get us organized and fed. No diving for today. The mission is to rest up for an intense eight days of diving to follow. There are a couple of options regarding accommodations, but of course these decisions need to be made well in advance.

Avalon offers several live-aboard options, however, our photographic expedition was booked onto the Tortuga. This retired houseboat is the hub of Avalon's very own water world and the majority of your diving is at most fifteen minutes away by small powerboat. It has been permanently fixed in place and strategically positioned in a channel surrounded by mangroves for added protection. This floating hotel never moves and is likely the best option for any one who has issues with seasickness. We make our way up the steps to our rooms, which are clean, spacious, air-conditioned and internet accessible via free WiFi (a true treat in this remote location given how expensive and difficult this was to find in Havana).

Strangely, in what has to be considered one of



the world's true diving meccas, most visitors come here to fish rather than dive. No worries, it is all catch and release. From what I was told, Avalon actually makes more money per fisherman than diver! The "big three" goals for sports fishermen are bonefish, tarpon, and permit. For now, we're in the minority here, and care far more to see the marine life beneath the waves. This only adds to the allure as our group are the only divers in the entire archipelago. Exclusivity at its finest!

As for dive service, our guides were true consummate professionals. Our group was divided into two and I was placed with Noel Lopez Fernandez. He has been working in Jardines for seventeen years and prior to that he was a cameraman for Cuban television. He's an incredible and ingenious underwater photographer who has learned to make do with what equipment is available in this remote location. Shooting with a Canon 60D inside a Nikon housing which he retrofitted himself is testament to that. The other group's guide, Andres, is actually a marine biologist, and although I didn't get to dive with him, I was able to pick his brain over dinner and hear



This school of Silky sharks seemed to enjoy cuddling up to each other. There were times throughout these dives when I thought another diver was accidentally hitting me with their fins. It took me a while to realize the fins that were "hitting" me weren't made of rubber.

Canon 60D in Nauticam Housing . F11, 1/250, ISO320. Inon Z240 strobe. Tokina 10-17mm @10mm



After an hour with a dozen plus Caribbean Reef sharks, some were kind enough to escort us back to our boat. They just didn't seem ready to say goodbye! Canon 60D in Nauticam Housing. F7.1, 1/160, ISO 200 Tokina 10-17mm @14mm Inon Z240 strobe.



One afternoon we found ourselves snorkeling into this tight waterway where we were surrounded by the mangrove on all sides, including from above. Canon 60D in Nauticam Housing. F7.1, 1/125, ISO 250. Tokina 10-17mm @10mm. No Strobe

some interesting dive stories.

Both men were professional, knowledgeable, and passionate about marine life and they seemed to truly enjoy being in the company of fellow divers for a change. I was surprised to find out that my guide, Noel, still logs every dive and during one of our dives he hit his eight-thousandth! At that stage you would think he had seen every nook and cranny of Jardines, however, it turns out they have only scratched the surface of this huge

archipelago. In fact, Noel confirmed quite enthusiastically that he still sees something new and interesting almost every day. With fifty dive sites already, it was exciting to learn that new sites and species are being discovered all of the time.

The marine life these guys introduced us to seemed like something out of an underwater fairy tale and the photographic opportunities were endless. On our first day of diving at Cueva del

Pulpo, we were greeted by a school of Caribbean reef sharks before we even entered the water. At first I'll admit I was a little uneasy doing a backward roll with so many circling the boat. But I quickly learned they were not a threat at all.

In photographing these specific sharks we were always guided down to the ocean floor between twenty and thirty meters. Apparently they can be a bit frisky at the surface with a bait box around. Aside from the

occasional shark sneaking up on me (and one crazy Nurse shark) I felt completely at ease around them. I tried shooting with my new 16-35mm lens but it didn't work too well for me. I had considered as much but this was my first time diving with such large, confident sharks.

On our second dive, the 16-35mm seemed to work better with the Goliath Grouper. While getting close enough wasn't the issue, I wasn't particularly keen on getting too cozy

with him so quickly. That territorial chomp they make really got my attention and I've heard they can do some real damage. But of course my 10-17mm fisheye would have been the best bet if I had had the interest in getting closer.

Later on in the trip as I grew more comfortable with him I was able to get some nice shots with the fisheye. I learned that it isn't the goliath grouper as much as it is his smaller friends, the Black Groupers, that you need to pay particular attention to. They were probably the most aggressive creatures we met on the trip, coming after me a few times.

After lunch I decided to switch to the 10-17mm for the Silkies as I was told they would be coming in even closer than the Caribbean Reef's. Although known for some displays of aggression in other parts of the world here this variety are referred to as "brown sweetsies" for their non-threatening almost affectionate disposition. And I'd have to say these guys lived up to their nickname and quickly became the highlight of my time in Jardines. Their friendly curiosity was incredible and I cherished every minute photographing and documenting their behavior at the Pipin dive site.

With schooling sharks, curious crocs, and goliath groupers abound, for me wide angle was the way to go



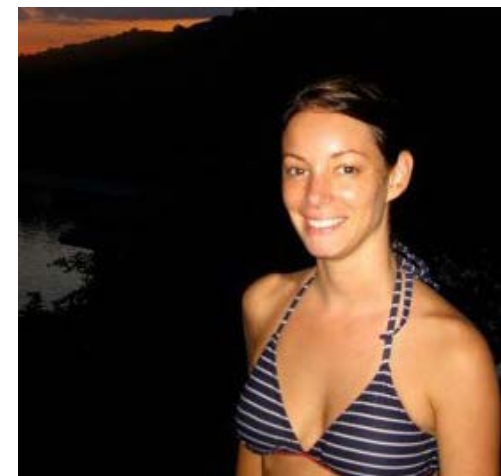
in Jardines, and my Tokina 10-17mm fisheye was undoubtedly my "go to" lens given all of the close encounters with such large marine life. However, if smaller critters are more your thing, don't be discouraged, as Jardines has it all. I simply had my mind (and lens) focused on the wide-angle images and found it difficult to deviate.

On one the last dives of the trip at La Puntica, I came across a large assortment of brightly colored, reef fish swaying in the shallow fields of dancing sea fans and hiding around the giant coral formations. With the sun low in the sky the beams of light



seemed to braid their way through the water, reflecting off the most pristine reef I've ever laid eyes on. Despite the tranquil scene, my heartbeat began to pick up as it occurred to me why the fish were hiding. It was late in the day and each minute that passed added new shadows to the wild landscape, filling my mind with false glimpses of the one creature that eluded us the entire week: the Great Hammerhead. Maybe it's my wild imagination playing tricks on me but I could feel his presence that afternoon lingering just past the rim of visibility, tempting me to return to Jardines one day . . .

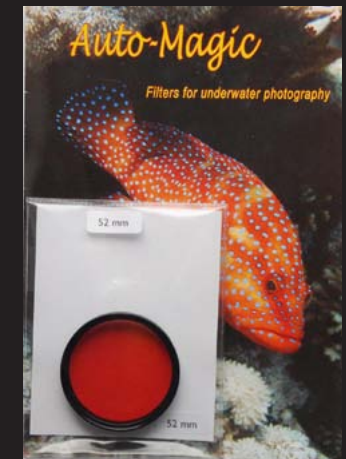
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