

The Many Glories of Cuba

By Erin O'Neill

Cuba has always been just an arms reach away for Americans, lying a mere 90 miles off our shores, less than an hour's flight from Miami. However, it has been one most delicious forbidden fruit for over a half-century. Now finally, finally, we can, with some effort and expense, visit! Ironically, this isolation from its closest neighbor may have inadvertently aided Cubans in keeping the country unspoiled with an environment to be envied by other developed western islands. I hope they recognize this and even with the temptations to modernize and expand tourist opportunities, we all fervently wish them to safeguard and value their island as a world largely still unrevoked and unpolluted. Go soon to ensure you'll have the same experience.

A couple of years ago the television news journal 60 Minutes announced the news that Cuba was finally accessible, under strict guidelines, to a few divers! We had known of the beauty of this part of the Caribbean and were impatient to dive in. We watched films of sharks, groupers, and corals that had become rare in the rest of the Caribbean Sea.

The international honor society and charitable organization Women Divers Hall of Fame took advantage of recently-relaxed visitation possibilities to see for ourselves what the fuss is all about. The group traveled with the ocean conservation organization Ocean Doctor and founder David Guggenheim. He led our trip, made all the legal preparation and introduced us to the noted scientists, conservationists, photographers, teachers and divers making the difference in Cuba today. We are all travel-savvy, all having dived the world's oceans; everyone felt it was a praise-worthy trip, one for the books! Everyone wants to return!

Bluestriped Grunts - healthy, vibrant fish life abounds. Nikon D7000 in Nauticam housing, 10-24 mm lens at 24 mm, Sea & Sea YS-110a dual strobes, f/11, 1/60 sec, ISO 200, manual mode.

Dueling photographers and a hawksbill turtle, WDHO member Robin Parish. Nikon D7000 in Nauticam housing, 10-24 mm lens at 24 mm, Sea & Sea YS-110a dual strobes, f/7.1, 1/80 sec, ISO 200, manual mode.





My big photographic draw, the Black-tip Shark, 8+feet long. Nikon D7000 in Nauticam housing, 10-24 mm lens at 24 mm, Sea & Sea YS-110a dual strobes, f/8, 1/80 sec, ISO 200, manual mode.

It's a miracle that Cuba has survived at all considering the world's most powerful country had condemned her. She is a marvel with her green landscapes, beautiful beaches, mountains and farmlands, marvelous music and rum, a rich culture and the most amazing, resilient people. How does this poor, rather isolated country provide such magic for seasoned travelers? They turn difficulties into assets. I believe the most wonderful and unique aspect of Cuba is the Cubanos themselves. They exude a joy for life and imbue

a love of fun and a can-do approach to everything. There seems to be a fun-loving aspect to every fragment of their lives. The atmosphere is saturated with music and rhythm, with smiles and hope. Our countries had just become officially friendlier and everyone seemed very happy for that significant shift. Generally well-educated, the Cubans are all very aware of the easing of poverty that tourism brings. "No problem" is often the refrain we heard whatever we may encounter.

Landing on New Year's Eve and



Red Hind Grouper/Sea Bass family. Nikon D7000 in Nauticam housing, 10-24 mm lens at 24 mm, Sea & Sea YS-110a dual strobes, f/7.1, 1/80 sec, ISO 200, manual mode.

the anniversary of the Revolution, we spent 3 marvelous days and 4 nights in Havana and environs, walking the streets of Habana Vieja (old Havana), marveling at the lovely, old architecture from the 16th and 17th centuries (some well-preserved, much crumbling, some in the restoration process, all beautiful.) Privatization is creeping in aided by money from those who fled Cuba fifty years ago. These ingenious people conduct businesses on the streets and in the old, magnificent homes, the paladors (family-owned restaurants) and the

casas particulares (family-run inns). The other restaurants and hotels are government-owned. The food is delicious, the famous rum drinks, too, and live music is everywhere. In the market square we picked up an old National Geographic magazine from the late 1950s which featured Jacques Cousteau's visit to Cuba and his encounter with Fidel Castro. This meeting was fortuitous for the country's conservation efforts; it led Castro from his life as an ardent sportsman to one of a dedicated conservationist. The Gardens of the



A Silky shark takes a speared lionfish. Nikon D7000 in Nauticam housing, 10-24 mm lens at 10 mm, Sea & Sea YS-110a dual strobes, f/7.1, 1/100 sec, ISO 200, manual mode.

Queen is the Caribbean's largest game preserve and a full one-quarter of Cuba's waters are protected.

After visits to a successful, enchanting eco-village with a zip-line and an art gallery, and the old Ernest Hemingway's estate seemingly ready for him to walk in again, it's time to dive! We traveled much of the day via bus to the South-central port of Júcaro to board a fast boat transporting us to the remote archipelago of Los Jardines de la Reina - The Gardens of the Queen, perhaps the largest, most successful of any Caribbean preserve.

At this intersection of the Gulf of Mexico with the Caribbean Sea, one must live aboard either a houseboat or a dive-boat for there are no inhabited islands in the archipelago. The dive sites are all moored and the area is vast, over 800 square miles. We had sixteen dives, returning to the mother ship after each dive for sustenance; we could have requested night dives but each dive of 3 daily dives was often over an hour of bottom time plus surface intervals full of snorkeling in now-rare Elkhorn corals, in the mangroves, island visits with local



Popular street artist in Old Havana. Nikon Coolpix AW110, 5 mm, 1/80 sec at f/3.9, ISO 125.

wildlife encounters (jutias, iguanas, hermit crabs, American crocodiles) and beach-combing for trash and treasures. They were long, glorious days, beginning with breakfast feasts, ending with dinner, drinks and dancing every night. Keep in mind that it takes a day of travel each way by boat and bus to and from Havana to The Gardens of the Queen.

We dived a rich seascape with walls, canyons, finger reefs, bommies and undersea prairies full of healthy,

vibrant life, packed with soft and hard corals and other invertebrates. Because of the weight limitations on the charter flights to and from Havana and Miami, I packed as lightly as I could, choosing to leave all the macro lenses and ports at home. After all, what I really wanted to photograph was the sharks, the black-tips and silkies, the big groupers, the Goliaths and the Nassaus, and the crocodiles!

We requested no chumming at all – we wanted to experience nature



American crocodile in the mangrove waters, photo by David Guggenheim. With 3 in the murky water displaying major territorial behavior, I chickened out of getting in the water with them. Canon EOS 60D, 18-200 mm lens at 190 mm, 1/500 sec, f/8, ISO 200.

naturally if we could, but nevertheless we were greeted on many of the dives with sharks in the water, one hammerhead showed but all the rest were either silkies or black-tips – that was thrilling. And sometimes a wee bit intimidating when the sharks got very excited – one young one kept nosing me, I think attracted by my focusing light but perhaps a bit hungry or curious? Hard to know, but that's the great thing about a big camera rig – comes in handy when

it's a barrier between you and a fish with lots of big teeth. She kept circling me as I whirled with her - we kept it up until she finally gave up and followed the rest of the pack. Whew. One dive the dive-master had speared several lionfish and there was a continual circling of him by about 20 eager sharks creating what looked like the spin cycle in a very large washing machine! There was also usually a grouper of one kind or another hanging around the mooring



line when we attached. The dive-masters are spearing and feeding the invasive lionfish to the sharks and groupers with varying degrees of success. Lionfish do not appear to have yet become natural prey to either species; there were a couple of feeding frenzies after the spearing but the sharks most often had to be lured in. I don't think the behavior has been adopted by the predators yet.

I logged about 20 dives, many of them deep and somewhat dark, and my bottom times sometimes required decompression stops by my computer. It wasn't necessary to dive deep, the moorings were always in shallower water – the visibility was never glorious as it was reputed to be in January, but there were storms at sea resulting in unusual silt in the water. The dive-masters expected the conditions to improve every day in the open water. It was crystal clear in the protected lees, so our snorkeling was fabulous, we constantly surprised

turtles, eels, rays, and conch are plentiful (bring the camera, good ops in the mangroves, especially for macro), and we had good ocean conditions with sunny days. The trips between the houseboat Tortuga and the dive sites were fun – fast speed boats well laid out for diving with good ladders, but dry boats they were not, so bring a dry bag if possible, a wind-breaker and a dry camera for sunsets, islands, wildlife, birds, scenics and fellow travelers. There is no Nitrox available on the Tortuga, by the way, although it reportedly is on the Avalon dive boats. Wear socks or booties so the sharks don't mistake your feet for edibles while climbing the ladder, ha!

The dive masters are excellent, never hovering but always keeping one in sight which is reassuring for a photographer who is often otherwise alone. We had at least 3, sometime 4 dive-masters in the water for each dive with our 13 divers. We were fortunate to dive with famous Cuban photographer Noel López who regaled us with diving stories and slide shows. One of the main perks of traveling with Ocean Doctor is the opportunity to meet with, learn and share with the Cubans themselves and David Guggenheim is in very good standing with the Cuban diving community. Remember, only 1000 divers are allowed annually. Avalon Diving



The wonderful dive crew on the Tortuga, leader and top dive exec Andreas surrounded by the peerless Avalon dive crew. Nikon Coolpix AW110, 8.4 mm, 1/1000 sec at f/4.1, ISO 125.

Services runs a good ship.

Things to know: Language is Spanish, English widely spoken; money system is interesting with two currencies, tourists use CUC\$, exchange rates vary, we were told \$1+1CUC but our exchange rate was not that good in January. It's OK to bring U.S. dollars or Euros, not sure about English pounds. Bring cash, Cuba is still largely on a cash basis, the use of credit cards is not

a sure thing. Public restrooms may or may not have toilet paper, there is often an attendant who expects a tip for giving you a bit, so carry small change and tip. in your pocket. Cell phones are problematic, too – don't count on using it, ditto for internet access though we did have it on the Tortuga and in our hotel (Hotel Parque Central in Old Havana). The local beer and rum is very good. When to go? That's always the question. High

season is November through March and again in July and August but the latter is also in hurricane season. Prices are higher in high season, of course. Weather is very nice in the November through March time frame, being cooler as well as drier. Guide book I recommend: Lonely Planet Cuba Travel Guide.

The main idea I'd like to leave you with is that you will have wonderful fun and abundant photo opportunities in both the city, countryside and underwater; take wide angle lenses for all. Would I go again? In a heartbeat. Would I have wished for more time in the water?

Always. Am I happy with my photos? If not completely, it wasn't from a lack of opportunity!

Erin O'Neill



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Each year, the Women Divers Hall of Fame™ offers scholarships and training grants in diverse fields such as marine conservation, underwater archaeology, technical diving, hyperbaric medicine, disabled diving, and more. WDHOF scholarships are available to women as well as men of all ages who wish to pursue higher education and training, further their career goals, and seek out opportunities in the aquatic and diving-related industries. Information on all scholarships and training grants administered by the Women Divers Hall of Fame is available on the WDHOF website: www.WDHOF.org.

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