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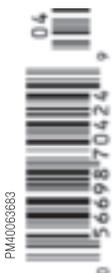
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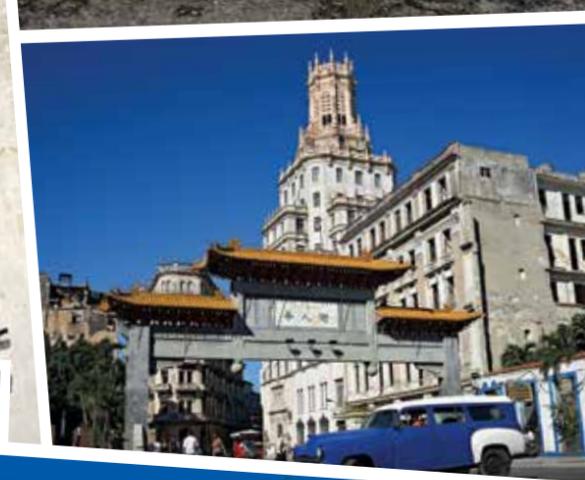


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DIVING CUBA'S FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

Like today's old world Havana streetscapes, Cuba's Gardens of the Queen recall Caribbean diving of a time past when reefs were bountiful and pristine

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY
SCOTT AND LAUREN JOHNSON





miles (80km) northwest of Haiti, the main island is the largest island in the Caribbean and the 17th biggest island in the world. The brief 45-minute flight from Miami to Havana covers a mere 235 miles (378km), but warps time to an age long past. Havana and its inhabitants appear to live in a bygone era as if an old black and white movie is magically being rendered in color and then brought to life before your eyes. From a city oozing with nostalgia to the Caribbean's largest and most successful no-take marine park, Cuba is a compelling place to explore that reveals undeveloped islands and pristine reefs dating back to a period before overfishing, pollution, commercial development and global warming began tainting the seas.

Gardens of the Queen

Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus discovered Cuba in 1492 and then returned in 1494 while sailing from Hispaniola to Jamaica. He was so impressed with the coral gardens off the southern coast that he proclaimed them the Gardens of the Queen in honor of Queen Isabella of Spain. These same coral gardens now offer some of the best diving on the planet. The Gardens of the Queen (also called Jardines de la Reina) archipelago comprises more than 250 uninhabited coral and mangrove islands. An 837 square mile (2,168 square kilometer) center cut of this tropical expanse was declared a no-take national marine park in 1996 and the first marine protected area (MPA) in Cuba's National System of Protected Areas. Situated in the Caribbean Sea, 50 miles (80km) south of the small fishing village of Jucaro and across the Gulf of Ana Maria, this remote park is sheltered from coastal runoff and vigilantly patrolled to enforce the government's 'look and enjoy, but don't take' mandate.

Sometimes even a dictatorship can have a silver lining. In this case, Fidel Castro, an avid fisherman and scuba diver who ruled Cuba with an iron fist from 1959 to 2006, supported the formation and enforcement of the MPA. Local fishermen were transitioned to state ecotourism jobs, such as boat crew, guides and park patrol. It is one thing to merely tell a fisherman he or she can no longer fish, it is all together different when you come in the name of the king to train them



Looking into the eyes of a wild American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) from three feet (0.9m) away is a much different perspective than using binoculars from a safe distance. Everything about

this seven-foot (2.1m) croc looks bigger with only an underwater camera housing and a drink of water between us. Noel Lopez, our guide for this butt-clinching endeavor, yells, "No worries, I'll watch your back." Next thing I know, a GoPro attached to a long polecam sneaks past my right shoulder as if to document the impending carnage.

The croc is hanging just beneath the surface and doesn't directly stare back at me. I'm pretty well in its face yet it stares straight ahead, seemingly indifferent to my presence. The golden orbs of this heavily armored reptile may not convey the calculating intellect behind them, but its big, white and wickedly sharp teeth demand my full attention and respect.

Stretched along this prehistoric

animal's right flank, I fire a couple of test frames. The croc responds by slowly rising to lift its eyes out the water, which only seems to magnify the size of its teeth. A second burst of shots and the croc dives 15 feet (5m) to the lagoon floor. I reluctantly decide not to follow when another smaller croc rushes in from the surrounding mangroves and bites Noel's polecam. A bubble-laced laugh escapes my lips when I see Noel's eyes appear to have tripled in size and also because I am quite sure he just soiled himself. Shaking his head and smiling, Noel says, "Time to go... need to get ready for the next dive."

Cuba is the only place I know where I can sandwich dives with Caribbean and silky sharks and Atlantic goliath grouper (*Epinephelus itajara*), with a chance to dance with feisty crocodiles while off gassing. Call me crazy, but my dance card is full for the next week.

The Republic of Cuba, an archipelago of more than 4,100 islands, islets and keys, is tantalizing forbidden fruit for neighboring United States' citizens and an underwater Garden of Eden for scuba divers around the globe. Located just 94 miles (151km) south of the Florida Keys and 50

Silky sharks in abundance and healthy reefs await visiting divers. Opening pages: Cuba is known for its American crocodiles, cigars, classic cars and the streetscape charm of Havana

THE GARDENS OF THE QUEEN NATIONAL PARK CAN BE, SHOULD BE, A MODEL FOR THE REST OF THE CARIBBEAN





GOING – AT A GLANCE

- **Location:** 94 miles (151 km) south of the tip of the Florida Keys, 87 miles (140 km) south of the Bahamas, 50 miles (80km) northwest of Haiti, 90 miles (145 km) north of Jamaica and 130 miles (209 km) northeast east of Mexico across the Yucatan Channel.
- **Size:** Total area is 42,426 square miles (109,884 sq km).
- **Population:** 11,400,000.
- **Capitol:** Havana.
- **Getting There:** José Martí International Airport in Havana is Cuba's main international airport.
- **Visa/Departure Tax:** A Tourist Card or Visa costs 20 CUC upon arrival. There is also a Departure Tax of 25 CUC.
- **Currency:** One Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC), called a kook, is equal to 1.09 Canadian dollars (CAD). Canadian dollars are accepted, but Euros are preferred. Canadian and European-backed credit cards are widely accepted. American dollars and American-backed credit cards should be avoided due to the ongoing American embargo.
- **Electricity:** 220 volts with European style outlets in the hotels and 110 volts with Canadian style plugs on the boats.
- **Language:** Spanish.
- **Time:** Cuba Daylight Time, which is equivalent to EST in the summer and CST in the winter.
- **Hyperbaric Chamber:** Located at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station on the main island.
- **Climate and Dress:** Climate is subtropical humid, with a dry, winter season from November to April and a rainy, summer season from May to October. The average annual air temperature is 77°F (25°C). Hurricane season runs from July to October. Hats, sunglasses and tanning lotion are essentials.



for a new career. Other fishermen who originally complained about their lost fishing privileges within the new park, now camp just outside its boundaries because of the spillover effect of burgeoning fish populations literally spilling outside the MPA. 35 percent increases in fish stocks within the Gardens of the Queen National Park have also yielded 20 percent hikes in the adjacent waters.

Coral reefs, mangrove forests and sea grass beds are vital habitats that contribute to the rich biodiversity and healthy ecosystem of the MPA. The mangroves function as nurseries that shelter offspring; they also limit erosion and filter toxins from the water that might harm the nearby reefs. The seagrass beds oxygenate the water, trap sediment and offer tasty snacks for marine herbivores. Nutrient rich currents circulating through the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico continuously bath the reefs directly or indirectly. These currents distribute plankton and larvae throughout the Caribbean, which means the robust productivity within the Gardens of the Queen National Park is likely seeding reefs throughout the range.

The Research Center for Coastal

In almost 30 years of diving, I have not observed comparable reefs within the Caribbean

French angelfish help animate reefs and the crocs are in big demand with avid underwater shooters

Ecosystems in Ciego de Avila, the Fisheries Control Department and Avalon Diving, a joint Italian-Cuban dive operation, support the ongoing management and protection of the area.

Avalon Diving is also the only game in town when it comes to diving and even they are limited to 500 catch-and-release fishermen and 1,000 divers per year. The five-hour crossing from Jucaro is via a luxury dive yacht and then guests either stay aboard or transfer to a 110-foot (33.5m) double deck houseboat called the *Tortuga*. All dives and land excursions are made from sturdy skiffs. Underwater visibility is tidal dependent, which means incoming tides carry clear open ocean water into the archipelago and outgoing tides can leave divers swimming in sediment-laced soup with the clarity of a sand storm. So, I simply go with the flow by focusing on macro subjects when a dive guide tells me the tide is heading out. The water

temps range from a respectable 77°F (25°C) in the winter to a balmy 86°F (30°C) in the summer – that translates to a 5 ml and 3 ml wetsuit, respectively, for me.

From Pranksters to Priceless

The uniformly exquisite reefs in the MPA apparently reside in Cuba's version of the Fountain of Youth. In almost 30 years of diving, I have not observed comparable reefs within the Caribbean. For example, elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*) that's almost extinct elsewhere in the Caribbean thrives here. The robust hard corals, gorgonians and sponges are as impressive as the plentiful fish and other reef inhabitants. And yet, what continually grabs my attention and leaves me yearning for the next dive is the abundance of big marine animals, including numerous species of sharks, groupers and rays, as well as tarpon and the American crocodiles. Best of all, these robust inhabitants are generally approachable and curious.

Cruising along the reef at Finca de Pepe I'm jolted from behind and literally stopped in my tracks. I look over my left shoulder to see

the strobe cord attached (at least, I hope it is still attached) to one of my Sea&Sea YS-250 strobes dangling from the puckered maw of a 300-pound (137kg) Atlantic goliath grouper. The massive fish had sucked the strobe into its now bloated mouth and as the scaly joker looked brazenly into my eyes he spits his ill-gotten booty back at me with a resounding pop! Keith Strange, owner of Paradise Adventures and currently my overly excited dive buddy, swims over to signal if I'm okay and is then so focused on examining the not-so-palatable strobe that he fails to notice when the enormous goliath decides to make him victim number two. When I point behind him and he turns to see humongous fleshy lips only three inches (10cm) from his mask, he almost rockets to the surface. I laugh so hard I drain half the remaining air out of my tank and swear I can hear the grouper laughing, too. These big animal encounters are a good source of comic relief as much as excitement.

Longline fishing has devastated silky shark (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) populations worldwide over the past 15 years. Preferring

CUBA

Gardens of the Queen

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to roam in the shallows of the open ocean, this species used to be ever-present in large numbers at such renowned dive destinations as Cocos Island, Costa Rica and Ecuador's Galapagos Islands. Now divers are fortunate to catch a fleeting glimpse of a lone specimen during a week of diving. I am thrilled to spend an hour with 30 or more of these sleek sharks near the surface at Farallon. They swirl around me as if trying to figure out what kind of unusual creature is invading their space. The electrical discharges emitted from my flashing strobes entice some of the silkies to gently bump me as they pass. There is no fear, only elation at seeing so many of these special sharks living free and in good health within the park. The rest of my group spends most of the dive exploring the submerged coral pinnacle and its tunnels at 90 feet (27m). They join me for an extended safety stop to observe these endangered animals and prolong another aquatic stroll

through the gardens. Noel, my trusted croc shield and a renowned dive master and underwater photographer, has been diving in Jardines de la Reina for the past 20 years. He tells me, "We were fortunate to see three or four silkies here before the park was established. Now, we have to make sure we don't jump on one at the start of a dive." He says, "The ongoing protection and education have been the keys." Giuseppe 'Pepe' Omegna, Avalon Diving's Italian owner, originally carried his ideal for a marine reserve to Dr. Julio A. Baisre in the Ministry of Fisheries, and the seeds for the park were planted. Omegna smiles when I tell him how impressed I am by the silkies and the MPA, as a whole. "Things keep getting better and better," he replies, but cautions, "I'm worried for the future. As Cuba expands its tourism industry, we must make sure that we focus on sustainable eco-tourism and not simply chase the money. The Gardens of the Queen National Park

The Gardens of the Queen National Park boasts plenty of hearty crocs that can be studied from a skiff or in the water

Cuban reefs are populated with lots of characters that include Goliath groupers, left, Roughtail stingrays and Sailfin blennies

can be, should be, a model for the rest of the Caribbean." Snorkeling between dives at La Boca de Piedra Chiquita gives me the opportunity to return to the American crocodiles throughout my stay. The crocs, another endangered species, float at the surface, peer from the mangroves and hide in the seagrass. Crocs, alligators and other marine reptiles have somewhat replaced sharks as the apex predators for the diving community to demystify. Now, dive travel companies market marine reptile only trips in much the same way as the first shark trips originated. The Gardens of the Queen National Park boasts plenty of hearty crocs that can be studied from a skiff or in the water. For these encounters, guests

WHAT LEAVES ME YEARNING FOR THE NEXT DIVE IS THE ABUNDANCE OF BIG MARINE ANIMALS: SHARKS, GROUPERS, RAYS, TARPON AND AMERICAN CROCODILES



A skilled dive guide puts a silky shark into tonic immobility, a natural state of paralysis also called animal hypnosis. Not recommended for the inexperienced!



should cover any exposed skin by wearing a wetsuit, hood and gloves, and carefully listen to their guide's instructions.

Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

A stroll through Old Havana reveals crumbling Spanish colonial facades (Gothic and Baroque styles) that must have been truly magnificent around the time I was born. Scaffolding envelopes some of these structures but the goal appears to be a state of stasis rather than repair for I rarely see even a single worker. While the infrastructure is obviously in distress, the Cubans radiate life, determination and hope. Their famous Yank tanks or máquinas are bold, ever-present examples of their MacGyver-like resiliency. I am far from a car buff, but I cannot resist sitting on a street corner to watch the menagerie of vehicles flow past. A conga line consisting of a Ford Model T, Studebaker, 1950 Chevy and sporty donkey cart are common. When Castro outlawed the purchase of post-revolution automobiles and the U.S. embargo made spare parts scarce, the

Cubans somehow figured out how to keep their wheels on the road. They are defined more by their ingenuity and determination than their meager \$20 month paychecks.

If you can imagine a world free of mobile phones, texting, iPads, computers and social networking sites, like Facebook, you can grasp the social interactions at play in Cuba. People actually sit for hours simply talking, playing board games and reading non-digital books. Children play with one another by kicking cans or balls along the side streets, and on baseball fields scattered throughout the country. Live music streams from balconies and out open doors and windows. Dancing, smoking cigars and sipping rum are national pastimes.

Renewing Hope

Cuba's Fountain of Youth is topped with peace, quiet, gentle breezes and dramatic sunrises and sunsets. There is little to do in the park between dives other than napping, sunbathing, snorkeling and working on gear. Skiff drivers gladly take guests to one of the lonely, white sand beaches and then scatter a few

A diver-size barrel sponge and Yellowhead jawfish... with a mouthful of offspring!

pieces of fruit to encourage the resident Desmarest's hutias (large tree rodents, *Capromys pilorides*), Cuban iguanas (*Cyclura nubila*) and hermit crabs to properly greet them. The whiskers of hungry hutias tickle my lens as they perch on their hind legs and stretch for another morsel. I know Havana will offer plenty of diversions to sample on my way home. In the meantime, the Gardens of the Queen National Park will continue to allow me to get lost in time, far, far away from the hustle and bustle of the 21st century life awaiting me at home. And, the brazen and bodacious marine natives will continue to rejuvenate my burgeoning spirit of adventure and even more, my hope for the future of our oceans. []

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CUBA



Learn about Cuba's unique marine environment during an Oceans for Youth Foundation People-to-People educational program. Guests will fly into Havana where they will spend a full day meeting with scientists about Cuba's marine parks. After two nights in Havana, transportation is provided to the southern town of Jucaro, where the *Jardines Aggressor* live-aboard docks. Travelers will depart for six days of scuba diving in the Gardens of the Queen (Jardines de la Reina) National Park, located 60 miles off the southern coast. Biologists will host discussions and presentations covering many topics including: proper mooring procedures and installations, fish tagging, commercial fishing and other local environmental issues.

The *Jardines Aggressor* liveaboard is a floating resort with deluxe accommodations, onboard chef, professional crew and state-of-the-art diving amenities.

Join an Oceans for Youth Foundation People-to-People educational tour and learn about the many treasures in this Caribbean paradise, Cuba!



Oceans For Youth Cuba Travel Program Includes:

- Nine-nights, Thursday to Saturday
- Two hotel nights in Havana
- Transportation to Jucaro
- Seven nights aboard the *Jardines Aggressor*
- Program with scientists in Havana and Gardens of the Queen Marine Park

CHARTER RATE:

Jardines Aggressor
 Apr. 28, 2016 - Dec. 31, 2016
 Deluxe Stateroom \$3,999
 Master Stateroom \$4,299
 Additional Fees: Mandatory
 Subscription Fee: \$110

Land Package with Hotel Parque Central, Havana
 Apr. 28, 2016 - Dec. 31, 2016
 Double p.p. \$895
 Single \$985

The Cuba Travel Program does not include airfare, visa requirements or insurance.



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