



From La Habana to Jardines de la Reina – Cuba

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In a Hispanic atmosphere where Che Guevara and Fidel Castro are omnipresent, the Cuban capital is an amazing city where, even after the torments of time have taken a toll, the glories of half a century ago can still be imagined. During a walk in Old Havana or a ride on the Plaza de la Revolución with its impressive monuments, you will discover a city of contrasts and meet charming faces of locals who like to tell you about their country. A UNESCO world heritage city, La Habana is absolutely a city to be visited.

It is only a few kilometers from the city to the countryside, but what a gap. You are at an extraordinary coast with the so brilliant blue color of the Caribbean Sea. The coast and the sea invite you to discover the beaches and the marine wealth. Cuba offers a thousand facets,

and still protected spaces offer themselves to nature lovers and scuba divers.

Lying 80 km (50 miles) off the south Cuban coast and paralleling it for 150 km (90 miles) is a paradise on earth, a place that only a few privileged divers and fishermen can access: the Jardines de la Reina (Gardens of the Queen). Discovered by Christopher Columbus more than 600 years ago and named after Queen Isabella of Spain, the archipelago of the Gardens are preserved and protected. They were established as a national park in 1996 by Fidel Castro, and they cover an area of 2170 square km (840 sq mi) with more than 600 cays and islands.

Against all odds, I had the opportunity to go there for one week and to be, with my partner,

LEFT PAGE, SILKY SHARKS PATROLING UNDER OUR BOAT. ABOVE: HAVANA. OLD CARS ARE LOVINGLY KEPT ALIVE.





the only divers present in this archipelago, the only other tourists being fly fishermen.

The journey to reach this paradise was long and tiring: a 10 hours flight from Brussels to Havana via Madrid, then a pick up at 4 AM for a six-hour bus ride, and finally a three-hour speedboat cruise. But the sight of the barge in the middle of the mangroves that would be our nesting place for six days erased the tiredness and discomfort of the long and harassing trip.

Rapidly settled in our cabin, we were curious to meet the people who would be diving with us, and to our greatest surprise, there was only one, our dive guide Tony. He explained that this week was dedicated for fishermen, but as there was one unused cabin left, they had accepted our request—giving us, by the way, a good discount. Tony explained the different dive sites and was very attuned to my desires and expectations as an underwater photographer.

As soon as I jumped into the turquoise water, I

realised that I would be doing here the most beautiful dives of my life. The undamaged and undisturbed coral reef was flourishing, hosting a large variety of fish. Our first encounter was with a very curious goliath grouper, who looked me right in the eye and accompanied me as a guide. During the next dives, we always had some of them around. But the most fascinating of all were the Caribbean reef sharks. They were circling the boat even before we went into the water. While underwater, they kept coming close, keeping an eye on us as self-appointed guardians of this Garden of Eden. We also met many silky sharks gliding by gracefully and some nurse sharks, who were a bit more shy and quickly left the area where we were diving. In the canyons, decorated with undisturbed black coral, shoals of silvery tarpons barely moved as we swam through.

We also went by boat to visit above water sites of this protected natural area. It is rich in mangroves and palm trees and stretches of virgin white sandy beaches inhabited by iguanas and fearless Cuban hutias, large tree-living rodents endemic to the island.

One of the most impressive moments for me was snorkeling with a juvenile American crocodile. Tony stayed on board the boat, and he told my girlfriend to stay on the boat to take pictures from the surface. As I was getting into the water, he warned me to keep my fingers behind the holding bars of my camera housing. It was a thrilling experience, but I was glad to get back on the boat safe and sound and with all my fingers.

It was a wonderful trip, and the park has some of the most beautiful, most pristine diving you will find anywhere. I just hope Cuba will be able to continue to protect it from the pressures of increased tourism as unrestricted travel to Cuba from the U.S. reopens and grows. There are few of these last great places left.

LEFT PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: HERMIT CRAB ON THE BEACH, AMERICAN CROCODILE FROM ABOVE, A GROUPER LEADS THE WAY OVER AN UNSPOILED REEF. ABOVE: HAVANA STREETScape.