

YUCATAN ROAD TRIP



Massed eagle rays in big currents, stony-faced crowds and an annoyingly compliant turtle – that’s just the first stop on **NIGEL**

WADE’s week-long Mexican jaunt

THE CURRENT WAS STRONG, really strong. My regulator and mask rattled as the fast-moving water ripped around my head.

Exhaled bubbles formed an almost horizontal stream as they were whipped away from my exhaust ports.

My big camera housing felt as if it weighed a ton, making my arm muscles burn just with the effort of holding it in front of me. The line on my current hook was as taut as a guitar string. It held me in position, however, the hook firmly wedged into the upper superstructure of the wreck.

Why was I suffering this onslaught? Why wasn’t I nestled in the relative calm of slack water in the hold, with the more sensible divers in the group?

Eagle rays. As many as 25 big specimens were effortlessly holding their position off the starboard bow. Their white underbellies were visible as they hovered in the water above the sandy seabed.

They stayed just out of camera range, and I knew the only hope for a decent shot was to get below them on the sand away from the wreck.

I signalled for my buddy John to join me, but he decided to stay in position and video my antics instead.

It was a crazy moment, unhooking and descending to the seabed to let the current take me. My theory was that I could swing in an arc from my position on the bow, arriving at the stern in slack water when the job was done.

All went well, except for the final shots as the rays just tipped their wings and drifted further out. Doh!

I arrived safely at the stern to reunite with John. Most of the rest of the group were surrounded by a large shoal of silver snapper, tightly packed and moving in synchronised harmony in the cargo hold.

We were on the wreck of the former Mexican mine detector *C-58 Anaya*. It lay in 25m, broken in two by Hurricane Ivan in 2004 just a few miles from the coast of Cancun on Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula.

I had joined John Spencer-Ades of tour operator The Scuba Place as he led a party of divers on a “discovery road trip” around the popular Mexican

Pictured: Eagle rays in the strong current off the starboard side of the wreck.



"spring break" resorts of Cancun, Cozumel and Playa del Carmen. It had started well. At Gatwick we had our own dedicated check-in at the Virgin Atlantic desk and an over-generous hold baggage allowance of 46kg plus carry-ons. So we had no worries about dive and camera kit, and could even take some clothes, a rarity these days.

CANCUN

Our first stop was Cancun's Moon Palace resort, a huge luxury complex a few miles from what is said to be the planet's largest dive centre, Aqua World. Manager Juan Cardona and Gabriela (Gabby) Chavez had been assigned to guide us around selected Yucatan sites.

After the adrenaline rush on the wreck it was a relief to dive somewhere

a little more sedate. We were greeted by a sea of faces staring unmoving into the blue water as we descended.

Concrete statues depicted people huddled together in groups. Cars had been cast in life-size detail and miniature houses and artistic sculptures dotted the seabed.

Shoals of grunt weaved their way through the artworks; Caribbean angelfish and wrasse picked away at algal growth on the man-made surfaces; seastars and urchins clung to the chests of road-sweepers and mothers with their children.

We were at the Museo Subacuatico de

Arte (MUSA), an underwater museum created by British expatriate Jason deCaires Taylor. Rated in Forbes as one of the top 10 places to visit, the installation consist of 495 statues and Jason continues to add more.

In an average depth of 8m we could relax and enjoy his wonderful creations on this "dive with a difference".

The offshore reefs were our next underwater destination, at sites with varying topography, depth and diversity.

The Cancun reefs I would describe as typically Caribbean; a flattish seabed with rock and hard-coral bommies and

sandy areas stretching like fingers through the ridges and gullies.

Sponges grew everywhere in differing forms and hues, from tubes and barrels to carpets that covered most of the small coral outcrops. Muted brown, red, pink, purple, yellow and orange sponge growth interspersed with blue finger sponges provided a Technicolor backdrop for diver portraits.

Small purple gorgonians swayed in the swell. Groups of yellow- and blue-striped snapper sheltered from predators and the current in small hollows and gorges.

The elegant Lucy Agace posed for me above a huge shoal of striped French grunts while the other divers joined a huge hawksbill turtle that was happy to swim and pose with the divers.

"Did you see those turtles, Nige?" asked Ian Greenfield later. "There were at least three," said Rob Taylor. "Do you want to see my photos?" added Andy Alfred.

"No I didn't", "no there weren't" and "no, I don't" were my replies as I effected not to care, yet kept pondering the lost opportunity.

Our road-trip party continued to Cozumel that evening, and as a minibus carried us to the ferry-port at Playa del Carmen spirits were high, even though we were all jaded by jet-lag and some



Above, from left: A banker buries his head in the sand, and an urchin tags on to a roadsweeper, exhibits at Jason deCaires Taylor's sculpture park.

Left: Dive-guide Gabby over a vibrant Cozumel reef.

Below right: French grunts gather in the hold of the *C-58 Anaya* wreck.



intense diving over the first few days.

The bus stopped a quarter of a mile away from the port, unable to get closer because of construction work. We would have to carry our bags to the check-in.

Suddenly that huge baggage allowance didn't seem such a good idea. However, working as a team we humped, bumped and dragged our kit across the building works to make the ferry on time.

COZUMEL

Another Palace resort hotel, situated on the island of Cozumel off the Yucatan coast, was our base for the next three nights, complete with private beach and jetty. I reflected on our previous days' diving as I soaked my aching muscles in my suite's Jacuzzi.

I joined Dick Cullen and Richard Ward on the next dive. Richard is a

former British soldier who lost both legs after an IED exploded under his vehicle in Afghanistan. The severe injuries ended his career, but not his diving.

Dick is an instructor specialising in teaching less abled divers and leads the Depththerapy programme that gives injured troops the chance to get under water despite their injuries.

The Cozumel reefs differed from those we had visited in Cancun. A deep drop-off fringes the island, creating walls and spectacular topography.

Nutrient-rich currents wash over the reefs, providing the building-blocks for prolific coral and sponge growth along with high concentrations of fish and invertebrates.

Our first dive was at an offshore site near the drop-off. Richard removed his hi-tech carbon fibre and titanium prosthetics and lifted himself into the water from the boat's dive deck.

I was amazed at his dexterity as he used his hands to provide propulsion, his smile and bright eyes conveying the enjoyment that scuba diving can bring.

We followed our guide Gabby down the side of a wall full of life. The reef seemed more vibrant than those we had seen so far, pulsing with the activity of fish of different species, hues and sizes. Vivid orange sponge growth resembling hot liquid lava covered most of the reef.

A large shoal of blue surgeonfish joined us, swarming to gorge on whatever algae they could find on the rocky outcrops, then moving on to satisfy their appetites elsewhere.

Brave little damselfish appeared from beneath them in a show of territorial defiance, trying in vain to protect their homes from the brief but persistent onslaught.

Moving over a large patch of sand we discovered a small guitar shark blending perfectly with its environment and waiting patiently for a potential meal to swim close enough to capture.

Eagle rays drifted by in the distance,





flooded inland cave systems instead.

The famous *cenotes* of the Yucatan mainland are a seemingly infinite system of porous limestone caves and tunnels. Formed by rainwater erosion millions of years ago, the whole land-mass then dropped below sea-level, leaving the caves and tunnels under water.

Some of the roofs collapsed, leaving sink-holes. These were revered as sacred places by the Mayan people and provided their only freshwater source.

The stalactites and stalagmites that formed over the millennia provide spectacular topography, and in some places have joined up to form pillars.

Cave- and cavern-diving isn't for the unqualified, but there are parts of the systems that have been identified as suitable for recreational divers.

These sites have been thoroughly explored, mapped and the routes laid with guidelines.

One of the most popular and spectacular is Dos Ojos (Two Eyes). The surveyed extent of this *cenote* is around 51 miles but we would cover a mere 400m, following the guideline in an arc that would return us to the entrance. Maximum depth would be 10m.

Steps carved out of the bedrock lead to a wooden deck and more steps into the water. Juan led the dive for Ryby, Lucy, John and I, while Gabby led the rest of the road-trip team. Further guides from our *cenote* hosts Squalo



dipping to the seabed to forage for crustaceans in the sand. This was lunchtime on the Cozumel reefs.

We continued our reef exploration for the rest of the day. The sight of the dive-boat in the distance as the sun neared the horizon signalled the end of the underwater activities, but the excited buzz on board indicated that everyone had enjoyed their day.

Above: Ex-soldier Richard ponders his next dive.

Right: Ian moves in on a guitar shark.

Below: Colourful backdrop for a diver portrait.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

We had planned to dive with the bull sharks normally found at this time of year off the coast of Playa del Carmen. Divers were reported to have encountered them earlier in the week, though only in ones and twos instead of the usual dozen or so. None had been seen in recent days.

It seemed that sports and commercial fishermen had been engaging the bull sharks on rod and line, and the large predators had either been removed and killed or had simply moved on to a safer location.

There is growing concern for the welfare of these amazing animals in Mexico's Riviera Maya, with marine conservation groups campaigning for a total ban on shark fishing. We can only hope that their voices are heard.

Meanwhile the diving itinerary was hastily changed, and we agreed that the road trip should take in the peninsula's



Divers brought up the rear, and for our safety they were all equipped with bail-out, in the form of side-mounted tanks and spare regulators on long hoses.

The fresh water filtered through the limestone offers almost unlimited visibility. Saltwater fills the caves from the bottom as the systems are linked to the sea, and the transition produces a halocline.

Swimming through this is a strange affair, with the water seeming to shimmer like a mirage; the seawater is also warmer by about 6°C, making the whole experience strangely surreal.

Small freshwater cichlids joined us in the light-filled entrance as we followed the guideline into a dark tunnel.

Large caverns opened up in front of us, the stalactites and stalagmites resembling top and bottom sets of teeth – I felt as if I was swimming into a huge open crocodile's mouth.

Juan and I had been discussing my irrational fear of saltwater crocs over a few margaritas the night before. Even so, I was surprised to find a small plastic salty mauling a Barbie doll at our turnaround point. Juan had placed it there as a joke just before we arrived, and it certainly put a smile on my face.

Our final port of call was the Palace Resort and Spa at Playa del Carmen, situated on a white-sand beach just 100m from the ferry terminal.

Then it was back to Cancun to revisit the wreck and La MUSA.

Four fabulous dives later, the setting sun was this time signifying an end to the week's activities.

It was a chance to enjoy the warmth from the beach as we off-gassed and reflected on what had been a hectic but thoroughly enjoyable Mexican road trip.



Above: Stalactites and stalagmites join forces to form pillars in Dos Ojos.

Below: Sunset over the dive-boat indicates margarita time



FACT FILE

GETTING THERE >>

Virgin Atlantic from Gatwick to Cancun, www.virgin-atlantic.com

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION >>

Wrecks and reefs: Aqua World Dive Centre Cancun, www.aquaworld.com.mx. Cenotes: Squalo Divers, www.squalodivers.com. 5* ultra-all-inclusive Palace Resorts at Cancun, Cozumel and Playa del Carmen (pictured), www.palaceresorts.com.



WHEN TO GO >>

Year round, though late August to early November is hurricane season and mid-to-late March brings crowds of US students partying through spring break. Bull sharks can be present from November through to March and whale sharks from May to July. The climate is tropical, with warm winds and high humidity. In summer, air temperatures can rise to 40°C. Water temperature averages 28°C year-round, so a 3mm wetsuit is suitable, or a 5mm in the cooler cenotes. Visibility is usually around 18-30m and far more in the cenotes.

CASH >> Mexican pesos and US dollars. Be careful, because the \$ sign is used for both currencies.

HEALTH >> There are hyperbaric chambers in Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Cozumel and Tulum. Take mosquito repellent and high-factor sunscreen, www.sssnetwork.com

PRICES >> The Scuba Place offers the same trip that Nigel Wade undertook for £1760 including flights, accommodation and two dives a day. It can also provide bespoke itineraries and specialises in group bookings, www.thescubaplace.co.uk, 020 7644 8252

FURTHER INFORMATION >>

www.visitmexico.com

