

GARDENING LEAVE



You may have heard that Cuba's exclusive Jardines de la Reina is good, but as **STUART PHILPOTT** realised as he rolled into the water to join a saltwater croc, for adrenalin junkies there is simply nowhere in the Caribbean to match it!

RON MAIDEN'S *Bring Your Daughter to the Slaughter* was booming around our floating hotel, *La Tortuga*, as we prepared to dive. The choice of mood music seemed pretty apt, considering our itinerary.

We were just about to jump into the water with 20 or more silky sharks, followed by snorkelling with saltwater crocs and then an afternoon dive with a 100kg Goliath grouper.

I had teamed up with a Brazilian film crew that had heard so many crazy stories about Jardines de la Reina (Gardens of the Queen) that they had come to see what all the fuss was about.

Jardines de la Reina is no ordinary Caribbean diving destination. It's a group of around 250 small islands located in the mangroves some 50 miles south of the Cuban mainland. This protected marine reserve is bursting with predators of all shapes and sizes.

Somehow, Italian-owned company Avalon has negotiated the sole rights to all the diving activities, and its exclusion zone stretches about 30 miles from east to west. Avalon actively polices the whole area, and any commercial fishing boat or dive

centre caught without clearance will have its boat impounded and the crew metaphorically fed to the crocodiles.

Without the threat of any human exploitation, the walls and reefs are exploding with life. Jardines has to be one of only a few truly untouched areas in the Caribbean in which divers can see the entire spectrum of marine creatures, from reef sharks to nudibranchs, all going about their daily business.

AVALON'S SALES MANAGER, Luisa Sacerdote, was certainly confident that we would see the big stuff. "I guarantee that you will see sharks on every dive, or I will pay for your diving," she said. "Divers usually say they are bored with sharks by the end of the week."

This was a bold statement to make. As it happened, on our first-afternoon warm-up dive at Cuevo de Pulpo (Octopus Cave) we saw no sharks at all.

When we returned to *La Tortuga*, Luisa was speechless. In her defence, on all 14 dives after the first one we had extremely close encounters with sharks, and on some occasions I even had to push them away.

La Tortuga is a shallow-draft

liveaboard that is semi-permanently moored up alongside the Mangroves.

The low-lying vegetation provides plenty of protection against prevailing winds, so even the queasiest diver won't feel any noticeable rocking motion.

The 28m boat has been in operation since 1994, and provides a pretty slick service. There are seven guest rooms on the upper deck level, and all have *en suite* with air-con. The bottom deck is basically kitchen, dining-room, bar area and dive platform.

Most of the staff sleep on a separate floating barge, and the dive centre, complete with diving equipment and noisy compressors, is located on the other side of the inlet.

Lunch and dinner consists mainly of fresh fish, crab and lobster caught during the day, with local fruits such as pineapple and mango for dessert. This really is a remote location, with no off-boat access. It's an eat/sleep/dive existence, with room for one or two

Pictured: Sharks were seen close-up on all but the first of Stuart's 15 dives – this is a Caribbean reef shark...

Above right: ...and this one of the many silkies at Jardines de la Reina.

beers in the evening.

The dives are conducted from small speedboats with twin 60hp Yamaha outboards. They carry a maximum of six divers each plus guide.

Journeys to and from the dive sites usually take no more than 20-30 minutes. It's an exhilarating experience skimming across the shallow mangroves at 20-plus knots, and on one occasion we actually grounded (no damage, other than slight loss of face).

Three daily dives are on offer. The speedboats usually depart at 8.30 for

a two-tank dive and then return to *La Tortuga* for lunch around 1.30. After a brief siesta we would go out again at 3pm and get back just in time for our pre-dinner combo – Mojitos and freshly made pizza.

Avalon has three mobile liveboards operating in the area, including the recently refurbished flagship *Avalon 1*, which can carry up to 14 divers.

Fifty-two dive sites are said to be available from the liveboards, and 32 from *La Tortuga*. Dive durations are normally 45 minutes to an hour, although the Brazilian crew pushed the limits with 90-minute dives (I hope they tipped the guide well!)

When we turned up at El Farallon, otherwise known as "the silky-shark dive", three or four fins were already breaking the surface. Had they heard the approaching boat?

Noel Lopez, our dive guide, seemed to have an uncanny way with the local marine life. I felt sure that it actually

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recognised him.

We began our dive on the reef about 25m below. There were some canyons and caves to explore, and I caught sight of a monster 200kg Goliath grouper moving away from me. Noel pointed at an eagle ray, but these shy creatures are very difficult to get near, especially with noisy scuba bubbles.

I managed to photograph Noel next to a giant green moray eel, and then it was time for us to ascend the mooring line back towards the surface.

By this time around 20 silky sharks, varying in size from 1m to big 2.5m females, had congregated beneath the boat. I also spotted a number of black grouper swimming among the pack. This was no "oh, I've just seen a shark in the distance" moment.

The inquisitive silkies passed within touching distance (no contact is allowed), completely breaching my comfort zone. The Brazilian film crew were encouraging the sharks by slapping the surface and waving their arms to get even closer camera-nudging shots. It was quite an intense experience.

A small 1m silky with a deep gash by its dorsal fin started biting my flashgun. I guessed that it had sensed the electrical

discharge. I tried to push the shark away, but it just kept coming back at me. Even a few well-aimed fin-kicks didn't stop its advances, so I eventually got out of the water. Why do the runts always have an attitude?

We stopped off at the long white sandy beach by Boca De Piedra for a breather. Noel had brought along some mangos and bread to feed the waiting iguanas, hermit crabs and jutias. The latter, a cross between a rat and a guinea pig, provided non-stop entertainment. They would stand on their hind legs nibbling our offerings, or would sneak up behind and nip my ankles.

NOEL HAD TOLD US about a "pet" 3.5m saltwater crocodile named El Niño (little boy). For months he had been coaxing it closer to the dive-boat with lumps of chicken (I thought saltwater crocs ate mainly fish).

The Brazilians were producing a short film for prime-time viewing that had to be punchy and exciting to hit the spot in a ratings war. Close encounters with deadly crocodiles would make a great storyline.

We sped off into the crocodile-infested mangroves in search of El Niño. I couldn't believe it when Noel

cut the engines and started shouting "Niñoooooo!" through his cupped hands.

After several minutes of constant "Niñoooooo-ing", we saw a ripple appear close to a tree root. Sure enough, there was a crocodile moving towards us.

I took some surface shots with its snout centimetres from my dome port. There was no explosive attack – in fact, El Niño was extremely well-behaved.

Thanks to Steve Irwin, I was acutely aware of the crocodile's fearsome reputation, and kept a close eye on its 60 or more very sharp pointy teeth, poised to crush my housing or my arm in a single bite. And when Noel said we could get in the water, I thought at first that he was joking.

I was expecting a full-on death-roll attack, but again El Niño was unphased. I even managed to manoeuvre the crocodile over to a mangrove tree for an above/below water shot!

It really was an unbelievable experience. There can't be many places in the world where divers can actually get in the water with a saltwater crocodile and live to tell the tale.

WE FINISHED THE DAY at Cuevo del Pulpo (Octopus Cave), home of the "resident" Goliath grouper. It was already making its way up the reef wall to greet us as we rolled back into the water.

As far as Goliath groupers go, this was only a baby, weighing in at 100kg-plus and just 2m long. Noel had brought along a dead fish to lure it closer, and this had also attracted four or five Caribbean reef sharks to the scene.

The giant-sized grouper made its stand right next to the barrel sponge with the dead fish inside. I managed to get some really close-up shots, in between the grouper chasing away the reef sharks from its next meal.

Noel reminisced about a 200kg Goliath grouper named Pastorita that liked eating cameras and regulators. He

Above: Stuart Philpott expected a "full-on death-roll attack" when he dropped into the water, but this saltwater croc was in a kindly mood.

Above left: Photographing a giant moray eel.

Above central: The "houseboat" *La Tortuga*

Below left: One of the smaller Goliath groupers.

said that a Czech diver had been taking a picture when Pastorita lunged forward and swallowed his camera whole.

Normally the grouper would spit out such an unedible lump straight away, but this time it didn't. Noel said they found the camera on the reef about a week later – still in working order.

There are so many big animal encounters at Jardines de la Reina that I didn't get much of a chance to look around for macro subjects.

At a shallow site called La Cana there were plenty of morays, lobsters, angelfish, grouper and even nudibranchs to photograph, and I didn't have to hunt around for subjects. To be honest, it made a nice change from our adrenalin-fuelled shark dives.

Even then, there were some reef sharks, barracuda, tarpon and the odd nurse shark passing by in the blue, but the whole scene was far less intense.

Avalon Dive Centre has an extremely good set-up. A long list of plus points includes an absence of equipment problems, boats and engines in good order, always leaving on time and

limiting divers per dive site to six. The groups are split depending on experience levels (realistically CMAS 2 star/PADI Advanced with 50 logged dives is a minimum) and whether they are photographers or not, to avoid any unnecessary niggles. We could even choose our dive sites.

I'M A GREAT BELIEVER in the saying "you get what you pay for". Compared to the rest of Cuba, Jardines de la Reina is not cheap, as might be expected when numbers are limited to 700 divers per year. The flora and fauna are in pristine condition, and there are guaranteed predator encounters on every dive.

Using dead fish to lure sharks even closer is a debatable subject, but it seems to be the divers and photographers who are making these demands.

As the last rays of sunshine dipped below the horizon, there seemed to be an air of total contentment aboard *La Tortuga*. We sipped our Mojitos and talked over the day's exciting events. Even the Brazilian film crew looked happy. *Salud*, Jardines de la Reina! 



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Fly with Virgin or Cubana direct to Havana. It takes 9-10 hours. A five-hour coach transfer to Jucaro is followed by a 2-3-hour boat crossing that can be quite lumpy.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ *La Tortuga* is part of the Avalon fleet, cubandivingcenters.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ November-May is best for diving. February offers best vis, which ranges from 10-50m depending on whether currents are moving in or out of the mangroves. It's wettest in September/October, in hurricane season.

MONEY ▶ Take sterling and change it for Cuban convertible pesos (CUC) at the airport or hotel. There are few ATMs in Havana. Capital One and American Express is not accepted.

HEALTH ▶ Divers must sign a medical statement/release waiver. Take mosquito repellent, especially for early evenings. There are at least 11 hyperbaric chambers around Cuba, but no on-site chamber at Jardines de la Reina.

PRICES ▶ The Scuba Place can provide a package with flights, three nights B&B in a 5* hotel in Havana, six nights (seven days/15 dives) in Jardines de la Reina and two further nights in Havana, transfers and taxes from £2499 per head. www.thescubaplace.co.uk, 020 7644 8252.

FURTHER INFORMATION ▶ www.travel2cuba.co.uk

