

# CIRCLING CUBA



The Caribbean's biggest island is like a number of dive destinations rolled into one, so an island tour is one way to sample the best of it. As any good diver would, **STUART PHILPOTT** tries to resist all those free mojitos

**S**HARKS, WRECKS AND vertiginous walls by day – mojitos, salsa and wild *chicaritas* by night. Cuba is a crazy combo bursting with energy above and below the waterline. How could I fail to have a fun time in a country famed for its Bacardi rum, torpedo-sized cigars, 1950s-style *Happy Days* Cadillacs and infectious Latino hospitality? Even us stuffy Brits are guaranteed to return home with a smile.

Cuba is currently flavour of the moment, with some great-priced deals on offer. John Spencer-Ades, Manager of The Scuba Place in London, specialises in diving holidays to Cuba and had mapped out a “seat of our pants” itinerary for the two of us, starting at Playa Santa Lucia, the bull-shark venue, before moving on to Guardalavaca for moray and grouper encounters, followed by a short flight to the Isle of Youth for some wall-diving.

The dive tour would end at popular tourist spot Varadero, where some serious wrecks were promised.

From Holguin Airport to the east of the island we jumped into a taxi and sped off towards Santa Lucia. For me, one of Cuba's main attractions is its rawness and unpredictability. After a quick pit-stop for ice-cold Cristal beers, we spent the next three hours dodging bomb-crater-sized pot-holes, pedestrians, bicycles and even the odd spotted cow wandering in the road.

Tossed about on the rear seat, I even managed to head-butt the window once or twice. I reckoned slight concussion wouldn't kill me, though full-on impact with a cow just might.

**THE OASIS BRISAS IS A 4\***, 400-room all-inclusive hotel on the north-east coast. My room was spacious and air-conditioned, though the spongy mattress had me wallowing around. The dive centre, Shark's Friends, is part of the complex.

I had been allowed a whopping 40kg baggage allowance, so had no problems bringing my own dive kit, though the

dive centre's hire gear looked to be good-quality Mares and Scubapro.

Instructor-guide Macau had organised a shore dive to Nuevitas Bay that would make for an intense start to my Cuba experience. The eight divers, including staff, kitted up at the dive centre and hopped on the shuttle bus.

We stopped at a small fishing town along the way to pick up some shark bait – the remains of dozens of reef fish that had already had their tasty, fleshy bits removed. It was an eye-opener to see how the locals lived. They may have been smiling, but conditions were basic to say the least.

The bull sharks disappear at the end of February and return around July. It's possible that they go off to breed.

**I FOLLOWED MACAU ALONG** the wreck of *La Mortera*, down to about 27m. The 19th century freighter proved a great dive in itself, with plenty of fish and brightly coloured soft corals to see.

We all knelt with our backs to the wreck so that the sharks could approach only from the front. “For safety we take only four divers per guide,” said Macau, who has been “conditioning” the sharks for a number of years.

According to him there have been only five accidents, all involving minor cuts and abrasions to feeders.

The sharks approached singly in a figure-of-eight pattern. They seemed extremely relaxed and non-aggressive.

Macau said that they were mainly big females, averaging 3.5m long and weighing over 350kg. He fed them by hand as I sat to his right, trying to get pictures as they came in to take the bait.

At first the sharks were very cautious, but eventually they came in closer. I had expected a much faster, full-on attack strategy but not once did I feel threatened, even when a big female's underbelly brushed the top of my head.

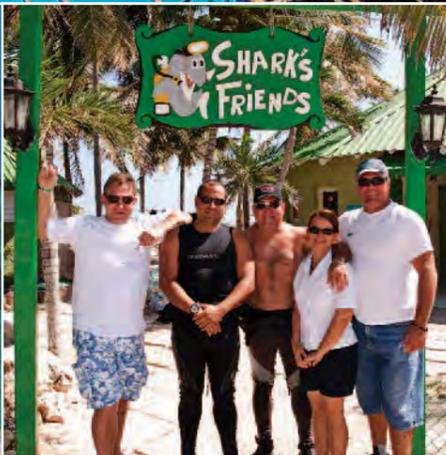
The sandy bottom really got stirred up when the sharks lunged at the bait, at times reducing visibility to around 5m (not good for photography). When the fish scraps ran out, the sharks



Pictured: Diver Alfredo explores Las Cuevitas.

Above: Snack for a bull shark on the wreck-based feed at Santa Lucia.

Above right: The Shark's Friends crew at Santa Lucia – “minor abrasions only”.



quickly dispersed back into the deep. A distinctive black-eyed female was always the last to leave, I was told, including on this occasion.

Most of the hotels I stayed at offered an all-inclusive package, and this means food and drink on tap 24-7. Some had theme restaurants specialising in Italian, Japanese and Cuban cuisine, at no extra cost. There was always some entertainment in the form of singers or dancers to keep the punters amused.

Victor and Frederico, the Oasis Brisas hotel managers, invited me into town for what they called a “cultural” experience. Let's just say that Cuba is a single man's paradise.

On my second bull-shark dive, I was better prepared for the action. I had watched the animals' behaviour and felt confident of getting the close-ups I needed. But the season was just about over, and I was on borrowed time.

“One day they are here, the next they're gone,” Macau had said.

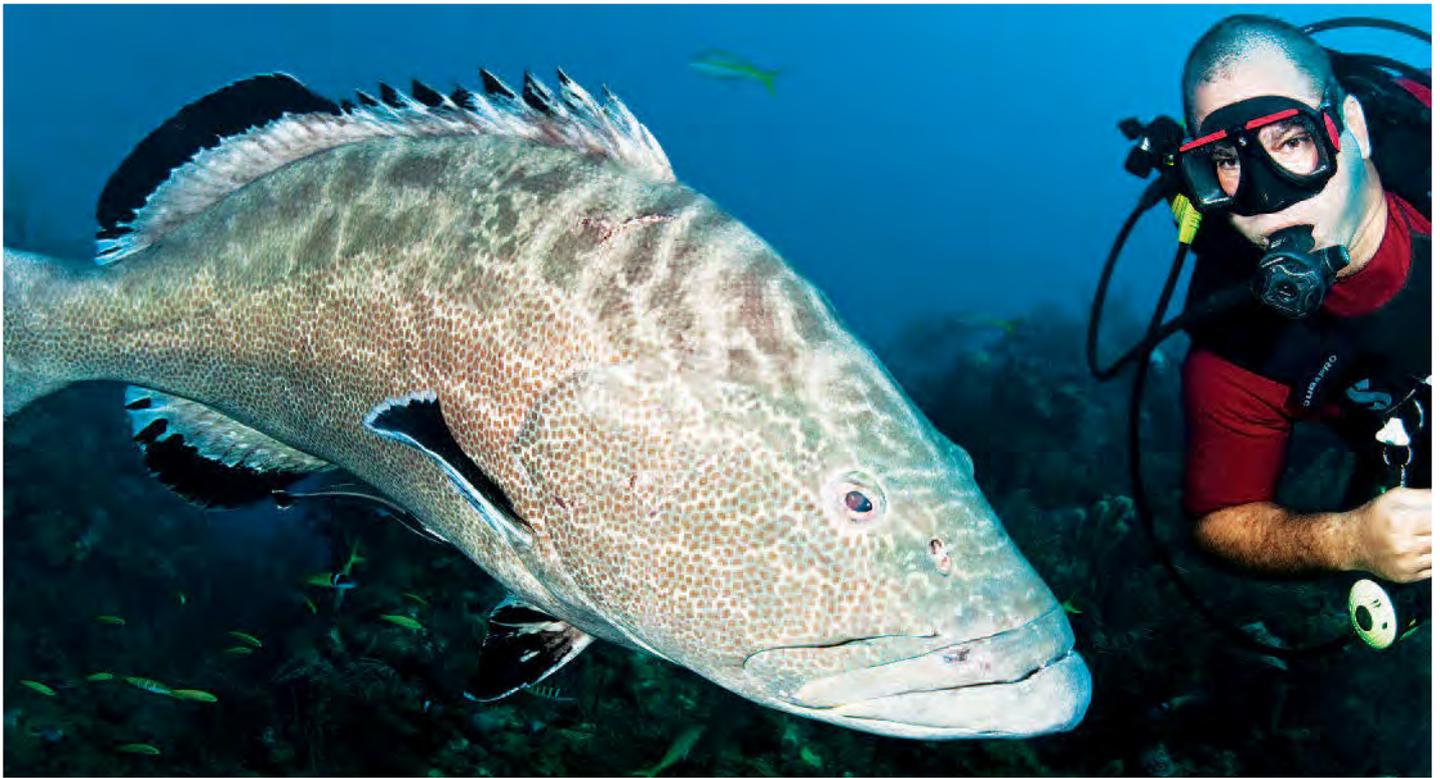
I was relieved to make out at least three sharks as we descended along the wreck. By the time we had settled on the bottom, eight had congregated for the free feed. Macau had brought along some extra fish bits to encourage the sharks to stay around, but their mood had changed. Today they wouldn't come close to the bait at all.

With time and air supplies running low, Macau tossed away the remaining fish. I lingered a little longer, hoping to get a few pictures.

The sharks were all crowding around me, fighting over the scraps. It felt like a “Dr Erich Ritter moment”, but fortunately without the final chomp!

I also had time to sample a more conventional wall dive, starting at around 30m and ending by a wreck in 15m. The old tugboat was standing upright on the bottom and looked really interesting, with plenty of access hatches and doorways to explore, but unfortunately John was having ear problems, so I couldn't spend much time at the site. Shark's Friends offers four scheduled dives each day, and has





more than 38 dive sites on offer, all within 30 minutes' boat journey.

After two action-packed days and nights at Santa Lucia, we made tracks for Guardalavaca. Ominous black rainclouds were drawing closer as we reached another 4\* Oasis Brisas hotel.

Guardalavaca boasts some 26 dive sites, most within 10-15 minutes' boat-ride. George, the guide at Eagle Ray Dive Centre, had arranged a grouper dive at a site called Las Colinas.

There was also supposed to be a "friendly" free-swimming moray eel, happy to pose for pictures.

**Above:** Guide George poses with a grouper at Guardalavaca.

**Below, from top:** Dive-boat on the Isle of Youth during the photo festival, where journalists outnumbered competitors; horse-drawn transport competes with the Caddy in Havana.

George took us through a small swim-through onto the wall, and we were instantly being hounded by a 2m-long grouper. It followed us along the wall and back to the safety stop. I was so engrossed with it that I forgot to ask about the moray.

By the time we got back to the dive centre, the rain clouds were upon us and the wind had whipped up.

After a brief discussion with the skipper, George cancelled the afternoon dives. I felt disappointed, as we had planned to dive two more wrecks, but it was the right decision.

**PLAN B QUICKLY CAME** into operation. This would give me a chance to sample some of Cuba's other delights. John had booked us on a "heart of Cuba" tour that included horse-riding, speedboats, a farm tour and a nose around a cigar factory. I was expecting a visit to Monte Cristo or Cohiba's works but it turned out to be an unknown brand, and there was no sign of virgins rolling tobacco leaves on their thighs.

The horse-riding and speedboats were great fun, and turned a disastrous diving day into a memorable experience.

Most of the tourists I met in Cuba were Canadian. Relations with neighbouring USA are still touchy, so Cuba remains a largely American-free zone, and that includes having no McDonald's (except at Guantanamo).

Other casualties include PADI, so at present the Canadian ACUC, CMAS and BSAC centres have *carta bianca*.

Our next stop was the Isle of Youth

(Isla de la Juventud) on the south-west coast, to look in on the annual Photosub competition. With more than 37 journalists covering the event, there were more *paparazzi* than competitors!

We managed to sidestep most of the red tape, and just went diving, but for some reason we were taken to the Punta Francis Beach National Park almost every day. This involved a two-hour boat ride each way, which severely reduced our dive quota.

But on the bright side, the wall-diving was spectacular, marked by beautiful orange and purple sponges everywhere. We even bumped into a turtle on our very first dive. Highlights were the sting rays at Las Coronas, and a shallow site where two shipwrecks lay side by side.

We stayed at 3\* El Colony Club, which had been Cuba's first international dive resort. My garden bungalow was clean, tidy and spacious, the only downside being that the place was so secluded. Perfect for a group, but I would end up an alcoholic if I stayed there on my own. The dive centre was about three minutes away by bus, and had 57 varieties of dive site on offer.

**AFTER FIVE DAYS AND SIX DIVES** on the Isle of Youth, we took a 25-minute Cubana Airways flight to Varadero on the north-west mainland coast. John said that most of the 160 people he sends to Cuba each week stay at Varadero, with twin-centre holidays at its Club Amigo and at the Comodoro Bungalows in Havana the most popular choice.

Varadero is the largest resort in 





Cuba, with more than 50 hotels and a central “town” area with plenty of shops and restaurants. We stayed at the 4\* Breezes Bella Costa, yet another all-inclusive hotel fronted by a long strip of powder-white sandy beach.

The heavens unleashed another torrential downpour as we turned up at the Barracuda Dive Centre. Alfredo, the guide, was hum-ing and hah-ing over choice of dive sites, but we eventually persuaded him to take us to see the Russian destroyer *P383* in the Cayo Piedra Underwater Park, about 15 minutes’ boat-ride out.

This vessel was sunk in 1998 as an artificial reef project. A remnant of the Cold War, it is 97m long and sits at a maximum 28m. We had ample time to explore the deck area from bow to stern.

The gun turrets and the rocket-launchers were very impressive, and perfect for photographs. There wasn’t much evidence of coral growth but there were plenty of fish. It was a treat to see

a fully intact warship that still looked like a ship and hadn’t yet been ravaged by the sea, or by divers with crowbars.

My favourite wreck was the *Sletrea*, lying at 30m. Alfredo said that this oil tanker was also sunk as an artificial reef. From what I could see, only half of the ship was actually there, the stern section and the bridge and cabin area.

Active marine life included big barracuda, moray eels, lionfish and a shoal of spadefish.

I managed to get within a metre of one barracuda for some reasonable pictures. Then I backed away pretty sharpish when the fish, clearly agitated by my presence, opened its mouth wide, exposing a wicked set of sharp teeth.

Altogether there are some 40 dive sites at Varadero including wrecks and reefs but bear in mind that on the north coast the wind can hinder diving operations.

**I SPENT MY LAST NIGHT** in Havana, at the Copacabana Hotel. It was undergoing refurbishment but again the room was of a good standard, with hot showers and clean towels.

Havana is a must for visitors, and a step back in time. Hemingway’s preferred hotel and bar were big tourist attractions but the old Cadillacs were a hit with me. You can even go for a ride.

In the sleepy suburbs behind unassuming walls lies an underground network of restaurants known as *paladars*. Ernesto Blanco, Manager of The Scuba Place’s operations in Cuba, took me to one of his favourites, and the food, service and surroundings were top-notch, with a live band playing in the background.

Cuba offers good value for money – it

**Above:** Alfredo on the *P383* wreck off Varadero.

**Above right:** An old, bold barracuda on the *Sletrea*.

**Below left:** John with a turtle on the Isle of Youth.

can even compete with Egypt’s package holiday prices. I was pleasantly surprised by the standard of accommodation and food. Apart from the weather I had no major complaints – I guess that for many visitors, on-tap *mojitos* as part of an all-inclusive package will head off most criticism!

The best dive sites are not for inexperienced divers, including the sharks at Santa Lucia and some of the wrecks. But all the staff at the dive centres I visited were eager to please, left on time and knew their sites well.

Whether this was standard practice or out of deference to The Scuba Place I don’t know, but the travel company’s professional locally employed staff do seem to understand how Cuba operates, and the buttons to press to get results. █

## FACTFILE

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Flights with Virgin Atlantic to Havana or Cubana to Havana or Holguin take 9/10 hours. Get a tourist visa from the London consulate.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Santa Lucia – Oasis Brisas/Shark’s Friends. Guardalavaca – Oasis Brisas/Eagle Ray. Isle of Youth – El Colony Club. Varadero – Breezes Bella Costa/Barracuda. Marlin is the official department that runs Cuba’s 26 dive centres, [www.nauticamarlin.com](http://www.nauticamarlin.com)

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Year-round, but summer is very hot and humid and spring is the wettest season.

**LANGUAGE** ▶ Spanish, but English widely spoken.

**MONEY** ▶ The Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) is bought only in Cuba. Take sterling, then exchange for local currency.

**HEALTH** ▶ Hepatitis A and typhoid inoculations needed. There are said to be eleven 24-hour hyperbaric chambers, so that divers are never more than 45 minutes away from one.

**PRICES** ▶ The Scuba Place offers a wide range of single and combo holidays in Cuba, such as its 13-night “Wrecks, Reefs and Bull Sharks” tour, staying at a 3\* hotel in Holguin, a 4\* all-inclusive at Santa Lucia (nine nights) and a 4\* in Havana, for £999 (two sharing), with a 35kg baggage allowance! Ten dives cost from £199. Ask about customised trips, [www.thescubaplace.co.uk](http://www.thescubaplace.co.uk)

**TOURIST INFORMATION** ▶ [www.gocuba.ca](http://www.gocuba.ca), 020 7240 6655

