

The Costa Brava, which translates as Wild Coast, is situated in North-East Spain and was our destination for an amazing, although far too short, trip that combined scuba diving, gastronomy and a wine tour.

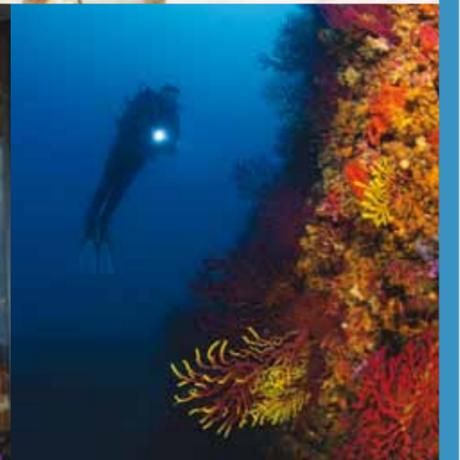
WORDS BY FROGFISH PHOTOGRAPHY

DIVE INTO COSTA *Brava*

We had been invited to take part in the annual underwater photography competition MIMA-MEDES (www.mima-medes.org) and so would be based in the small and picturesque town of L'Estartit, about an hours drive from Girona airport.

Travel from the UK to this region is really easy and inexpensive, with the budget airlines offering value flights to Girona from a host of airports. Once there, it is worth hiring a car to maximize the amount of this wonderful region that you can explore. We headed straight to the coastline, to L'Estartit (www.visitestartit.com), as we would be competing the very next day and needed to make sure we had set-up our scuba and underwater photography equipment. Both of us were excited to be doing our first ever dives at the Medes Islands, as we had heard great things about the marine life and quality of diving to be found here.

The Medes Islands are a series of rocks rearing up out of the sea. The islands and the sea that surrounds them have been a marine reserve for over 30 years and the protected area immediately around the island excludes all fishing and hunting activities as well as throwing anchor. A much larger area, which is increasing in size all the time, has a series of further protections, to prevent any harmful fishing activities and prohibiting all but the handful of local line fishing boats from coming into this area.



This protection, which has been granted to this area over a long period of time, has made these islands a serious attraction for divers and snorkelers from all over Europe. Showing images of the reef and creatures to an underwater photography club back home, and asking them to guess where it is, elicited answers from the Caribbean, Indonesia and the Red Sea— it is truly amazing diving. These small islands, which, in reality, are relatively small rocks poking out of the sea, have been worn down by the action of the waves and have created a series of caves and tunnels pleading to be explored. The rock formations, when you descend to around 20m are covered in amazing gorgonian corals. Red, orange, yellow and pink corals cover the walls, anemones fight for space, so that all your dives are packed with colour. The fish life is incredible, and in our not insignificant experience, is the best you will find in the whole of the Mediterranean Sea. We encountered large octopus and grouper on all our dives. Numerous schools of smaller fish patrol the shallows, barracuda form into large balls and circle in the sunlight whilst blennies hide in every small crevice that can

be found. On one dive, we also saw the biggest scorpionfish you are ever likely to see.

On competition day, we headed to the marina, and boarded the dive boat ready for the underwater paradise that awaited us. As it happened, our first dive was to be along the main coastline, just a short boat ride from the harbour. Once the crew had moored the boat, we gazed over the side and marvelled at the clear water. We could easily make-out the seagrass bed on the bottom beneath the boat. We got ready and dropped down to find a series of overhangs, tunnels and caves to explore. Barracuda glinted in the sunlight near the surface and we were treated with an octopus poking out of a rock crevice on our slow descent. Closer inspection of the reef revealed both huge and tiny nudibranchs (sea slugs that come in all colours), camouflaged scorpionfish and blennies hiding in every hole in the coral. It was a great dive, topped off by seeing a Mola mola, or sunfish, at the surface from the boat while we warmed up in the glorious sunshine. After a bite to eat, we were back on a boat and heading for our first dive of the Medes Islands. Les Farranelles is one of



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the smallest islands in the Medes Islands. The dive ranges in depth from around 8 to 40m. As you go deeper, you find more and more rock formation covered in amazing corals. Moray Eels hide between the rocks, with their cleaner shrimp companions and large grouper hang motionless in the water and even come up to divers to check-out what they are up to.

The next day we dived El Salpatxot, where a vital marine ecosystem of sea grass shelters the juvenile fish. This dive site is on the largest of the islands and so can provide some shelter for divers in windy conditions. However, for us it was another perfect day, with visibility of about 15m, flat seas and the water temperature which suited our 5mm wetsuits well (around 21 degrees). Our final dive was to be one of the most famous dive sites in the area: Dolfi Sud (or Dolphin South). The site is named after a small statue of a dolphin that can be found at the entrance of one of the many caves that make up this dive site, one of which

cuts right through the island from one side to the other. Grouper patrol the caverns which, at certain times of day, are flooded with sunlight. Conger eels lie tucked away in the caves too. It is a great site for those that like to explore.

Once our diving was over, for this trip, we picked up our hire car and planned a route with the tourist board team (www.costabrava.org | www.pirineugirona.org) that would allow us to visit some of the best vineyards in the area and to be able to sample some of the fabulous local produce. This part of Spain is famous for olive oil and wine, as well as great food. We took our car up into the Emporda region to sample some of what was on offer. Much of the area on land, like the sea, is a nature reserve too. So the growers of olives and grapes follow a more traditional way of production, using organic methods and shunning heavy machinery. This region is steeped in wine-making history and viniculture here dates back to Roman times. Our first stop was



to a local co-operative, Empordalia, who work with local farmers to bring to market, the wines, olive oil and other local produce to sell in their shop and café. The wine, especially the sweet, red wine, and olive oil were wonderful and so we decided to bring some home with us (regardless of our tight weight limit on the plane!) We then headed further towards the coast to visit a vineyard that was run by the granddaughter of the founder. It is a business that is, throughout Europe, becoming more and more dominated by women and improving all the time because of this. She whisked us into her 4x4 and said I have something to show you. We were swept down to the coast, along smaller and smaller roads, until we were driving through the terraced national park along her vines. All this so that she could show us her sea view vines that get their cooling straight from the sea breezes. "You are divers" she said, "so am I – I thought you would like this!" We did. We also liked the Coll de Roses tour, which was an audio-visual presentation of how their wine was made in the past and how it is made now. Up on the terrace, we got a chance to sample the wines and then to our delight, she gave us 3 bottles to bring home and try in our own time (packing really was go-

ing to be a problem!) Our final stop was for lunch at a gourmet restaurant, called Terranova, which is set in beautiful grounds with their own kitchen garden. This was to be no ordinary lunch, but a tasting menu, where food seemed to be never-ending, each small course being accompanied by a local wine (for Nick – who was not driving). The chef even managed to adapt his dishes for Caroline, who is a vegetarian. We sat on the terrace, in dappled sunshine with Terry the cat waiting for any morsel that may come his way, and loved every minute of it. Our tour was a perfect length for a day trip from L'Estartit. The tourist board have created wine tours for all those that fancy a go at this and provide maps and recommendations to help you along.

This eye-opening trip was over all too quickly and so we have already started planning our return trip for next year, this time we will be staying for longer to give us more time to explore this amazing region both above and below the sea. ■

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