



Divers are surrounded by sharks under the boat

EXTRAORDINARY CUBA

NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN head to the Caribbean island of Cuba and are overwhelmed by the quality of big animal encounters

Photographs by **NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN/FROGFISH PHOTOGRAPHY**

For many years, we have desperately wanted to travel to Cuba, and this urge has only got greater as the fear of this island changing forever gets ever more real. So when the opportunity to fulfil this dream arrived, we leapt at our first chance to travel to this unique and fabulous country during the run-up to Christmas. The Scuba Place organised a liveaboard trip to Jardines de la Reina, famed for its shark encounters, and invited us to put a small group of photographers together to head out there to photograph the silky and Caribbean reef sharks.

Fewer than 800 divers per year are allowed to make the journey to dive the marine park at Jardines de la Reina. With this restriction, the US embargo, and the 12 hours of travelling (just from Havana), we knew we would be diving Caribbean sites that would be at their very best. We started our journey by flying from Manchester to Havana via Paris. Alas, on the outward leg of the journey, the flight was delayed so we only had a few hours to sleep in the five-star hotel in Havana, before moving on again. A coach picked us up at 4.30am to continue by road along the

long and narrow island, situated just 240 miles south of Key West in the Caribbean Sea. The roads are slow going, with the traffic consisting of horse and carts and vintage American and Russian cars, but our six-hour ride through Cuba gave us an insight into the country. Our destination was a remote archipelago, 100 miles offshore to the south. We transferred onto the boat that was to be home for the next seven days, MY Georgiana, and struck out on a six-hour boat ride to reach Jardines de la Reina (Gardens of the Queen). With the sun shining and the sea calm, it was difficult to imagine the cold and tired skies we had left behind, just the day before. On our arrival at the floating resort, we started to prepare our dive gear, which would be kept on a small skiff used for the diving day. Then it was time to eat, take a quick tour of the mangroves, assemble our camera rigs and start to get excited about the diving the following day.

Our liveaboard was moored among the mangrove islands, the dive sites just a short, exhilarating boat ride away. Our first dive was to be a check dive on a shallow reef, to make sure everyone's kit was working and we were all happy with our weighting and the diving conditions. We

were delighted at both the pristine condition of the reef, the abundance of life on it and the amazing 30-metre visibility that greeted us. But this dive was just the warm-up for the main event. After a surface interval on our mother boat, we were back in the skiff with our tanks refilled, and heading out for our first shark dive. Gustavo, our lead dive guide, told us he would take us on a tour of the reef, and then at the end of the dive, we would encounter a shiver of silky sharks around the boat. The boat crew attract the silkies by putting a fish head (left over from dinner) in a metal box and hanging it over the stern of the boat. The smell drifts out into the sea and attracts the sharks. By the time we rolled backwards into the warm, clear water, a handful of silky sharks had already gathered to greet us. Once in the water, the idea of leaving these elegant creatures to go on a reef dive just seemed absurd, and so we stayed at 5m, watching more and more sharks gather and waited for them to get closer to our cameras. It was wonderful to see these sleek and graceful sharks up so close. As there were only ten divers in the water, including our guide, there was plenty of room to find your own space and watch the show - and with no time limits on the dive. Many of us spent more 70 minutes being enthralled as the sharks became more familiar with us, edging ever closer. Eventually, the thought of lunch made us all climb back onto the boat. After a post-food snooze we were back on the skiff and getting ready for another reef dive. Here, even without any bait in the water, plenty of Caribbean reef sharks cruised the reef, and hung with us on our tour. It was clear from our first day of diving that this was going to be a special trip.

The staff on the boat were excellent all round. Having had a hot shower and starting to download the day's images, there is nothing quite like being offered a complimentary cocktail and a hot slice of pizza. The package also includes free soft drinks, beer and a bottle of rum to share among the group each day! As the sun went down, we reviewed our images, picked out our favourite shark shots from the day and talked about how we could do better the following day...

The plan for our second day of diving was similar to the first. We started with a silky shark dive, which provided another thrilling experience. During our short surface interval back on the main boat, a crocodile swam over. It was close enough for a few of us to dangle our cameras over the edge and get a few shots! On the following dive we took the bait box down with us to attract reef sharks. Gustavo carried the box and found a suitable spot at about 18m to place it. Attractive corals and sponges covered the reef, with sharks soon cruising around our small group of divers. Reef sharks are not shy and will get very close, but are not at all threatening. The time whizzed by, and soon it was time to head up for our safety stop. As Gustavo picked up the bait box and headed for shallower water, the sharks followed suit, and so we got a special treat: loads of time to off-gas and to photograph the reef sharks in shallow blue water.

On day three, in between our first and second shark dives, we decided it was time to go searching for Niño (which means Child) among the mangroves. A few of us went out in the skiff and Gustavo called out for the saltwater crocodile. Niño has been fed chicken by the boat staff since he was very young, but even so, we were amazed that, on hearing his name, out he swam, a three-metre crocodile, just at the edge of the mangroves. The area is very shallow and silty, so those of us who decided to get in the water had to be careful on a number of fronts. Although Niño gets fed chicken, he is still a wild animal. We moved slowly and carefully, so as not to spook him or disturb too much silt. We managed to get in close for a few shots, and then he decided he'd had enough and slithered back into the impenetrable mangrove root system. It was an amazing experience. The rest of the day's diving was also pretty amazing, with plenty more shark encounters. The images from the trip were really starting to fill up disk space!

Days four and five offered yet more chances to get up close to a wild



Happy divers pre-dive



The sharks come in close - perfect for photographers...



...as this shot demonstrates

"By the time we rolled backwards into the warm, clear water, a handful of silky sharks had already gathered to greet us"

The business end of a saltwater croc



El Nino is an impressive sight



"We were amazed that, on hearing his name, out he swam, a three-metre crocodile, just at the edge of the mangroves"

crocodile, and there were plenty more sharks and pristine reefs. On several of the dives there was a giant grouper keen to retrieve what was in the box, and on the final reef dive we encountered a Goliath grouper that left those who had chosen to use their macro lenses looking pretty sick!

All too soon it was time to rinse down, dry out and pack away all the kit. We have been privileged to have dived numerous dive sites all around the world and still we both agree that these five days of diving were the best we have ever experienced. We love diving with big animals, especially sharks, and this trip had given us three dives a day to do what we love best - and we had multiple shark encounters on every single dive. The water was clear and warm (not a luxury we have had recently), and the food, drinks and topside experience, with a lovely group of underwater photographers, topped off the trip perfectly.

Back in Havana, sitting down in our hotel bar for a well-deserved mojito, we spotted Diego Maradona (and a heavy entourage). We decided to stay up for a few more cocktails to see if we could gain revenge for the 'Hand of God' by annoying him with our cameras. With two nights to experience the city, we took a chauffeured tour in a 1952, pink Chevy convertible and got the chance to see Revolution Square. We wandered the crumbling streets, ate in vibrant restaurants filled with Cuban music, explored the markets on bike taxis, and photographed the amazing American jelly-mould cars that cruise about. Having bought cigars, rum and some local art, it was time to head home - exhausted but very happy.

The day after we returned to the UK, Barak Obama announced that the US would 'normalise' its ties with Cuba. For better or for worse, this is going to mean huge changes for this wonderful country and its people. We are delighted we made it just in time to see Cuba as it was, but we are also looking forward to going back to see what it might become. Fingers crossed we will still find a pristine marine environment with a wide-angle lens-full of sharks, and a slightly bigger crocodile! ■

Sunset over the liveaboard



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

CUBA



FreeVectorMaps.com

HOW TO GET THERE

We flew Air France, via Paris, to Havana. It was then a lengthy coach journey to reach our liveaboard departure point. It was another five hours by sea to reach Jardine de la Reina, where we moored for the week.

WHEN TO VISIT

The Gardens of the Queen are accessible all year round, with the best conditions from November to April. Avoid peak hurricane season in August and September.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

You need to get a tourist card before you travel. You also need to have at least six months left on your passport. There is a departure tax of 25CUCs.

CURRENCY

Cuban Convertible Peso (£1 = 1.5 CUC). You cannot get these until you are in Cuba, where you can use an ATM in Havana or change money at the airport or at your hotel. Take cash with you.

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The food on our boat was varied and excellent. In Havana, get out to visit local bars for a mojito, listen to live music and do some salsa dancing.

VERDICT

A destination like no other, and soon to change, so go soon to see it before the huge changes that are surely coming. This is a five-star trip.