



Snap!



NICK & CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN would doubtless have come up with great results had they ever attached macro lenses in marine-life-rich south-eastern Cuba – but why would they, with so much spectacular big stuff around?

I T HAD NEVER REALLY occurred to either of us that one day we would, willingly, get into the water with a large crocodile. To be perfectly honest, why should it occur to us? There are very few opportunities to be able to do this anywhere in the world, and most people would think a diver completely bonkers to even consider it.

And yet, here we found ourselves slipping out of a rather small boat into knee-deep silt, just a couple of feet from a 3m American crocodile. Reassuringly, our guide was standing on the bow of this “rather small boat” holding a mop, just in case anything were to go wrong.

“What could possibly go wrong?” we asked each other as we got our cameras ready and slid, gingerly, towards this smiling reptile, edging ever closer to try to get a shot of the croc’s toothy grin. Snap!

Jardines de la Reina was allegedly Fidel Castro’s favourite dive location, and when you dive there you can see why. On every dive the water is crystal-clear and a perfect Caribbean, azure blue. Every one of the numerous reefs is pristine, with huge sponges, beautiful seafans and colourful soft and hard coral

bursting from every surface.

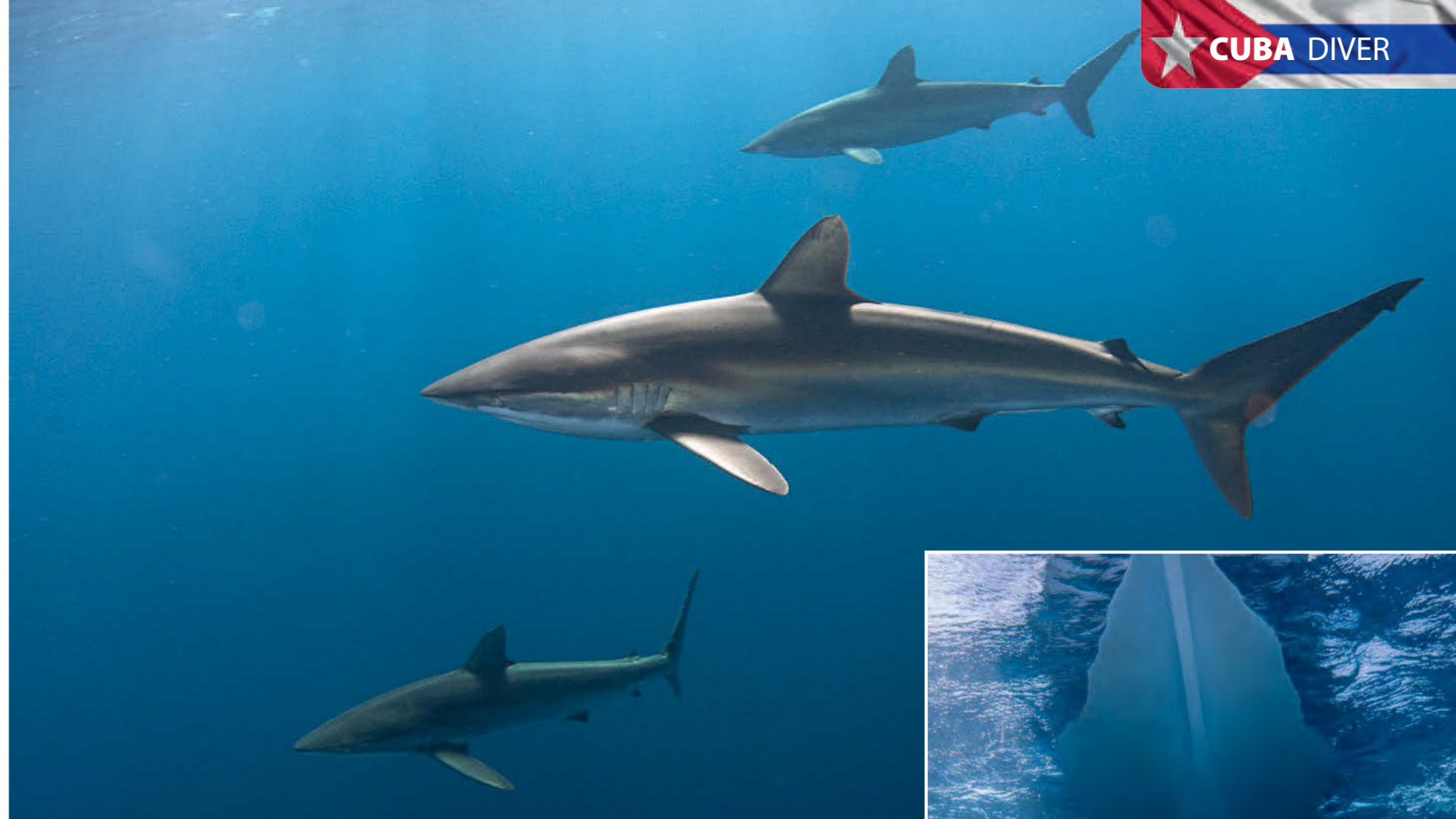
The name translates, from the Spanish, as Garden of the Queens, and the whole area has been a private marine park since 2002, with a limited number of divers allowed to visit each year.

The archipelago comprises a set of islands, mangrove-covered keys, sea-grass and reefs, and to get there requires you to undergo a hair-raising road transfer from Havana that takes six or seven hours, and is probably the only place in the world where you will see

Above: Getting close to an American crocodile is a memorable experience.

Below: Image review over a Cuban rum at the end of the diving day.





Above: A trio of silky sharks at the surface.

back to the mainland.

On our first dive we were briefed that we would be taking a tour of the reef system, and then on our return that we would find silky sharks around the boat to enjoy during an extended safety stop.

The crew put a fish-head into a bait-box and hung it from the back of the dive-boat to attract in from the surrounding waters these elegant sharks, probably the most beautiful.

As we rolled off the side, however, the silkies had already arrived and, inevitably, we abandoned our reef-dive

and spent 90 minutes in shallow blue water photographing them as they circled ever closer to us. It was amazing, and an experience that on its own was worth the distance travelled.

However, Jardines de la Reina has a lot more to offer than silkies and crocodiles. Huge Goliath grouper patrol the reefs, sometimes resting on the bottom and allowing divers to get very close.

The reefs are teeming with fish, and barracuda lurk in the shadows waiting for unsuspecting prey.

On some dives, the guides would bring



Above: Last Chance – a diver waits until his air is all but gone to get a final glimpse of the sharks.

Left: There are some big grouper on the reefs here.

a bait-box down onto the reef, attracting a good number of Caribbean reef sharks and the odd nurse shark, along with several species of grouper.

This made for some of the best Caribbean diving we have encountered, with the warm, clear blue water making this a spectacular place to shark dive.

horse-drawn carts on the motorway.

It then takes a similar time on the liveboard as you cross the shallow channel to the bay that will be your home for the duration of your visit.

We were diving with Avalon and staying on the boat that took us to the site, *Georgiana*. We were very lucky, because the trip consisted of a few photo pros (including us), and a handful of keen students.

So our dives would be uncrowded, and there would be plenty of room for all our camera gear on the smaller dive-boat that we used on a daily basis.

Above: A duo of reef sharks cruise over the reef.

The upper deck of *Georgiana* was given over to a spacious dining/social area and proved a great location for sitting, relaxing, editing some images and chatting about the day's diving, as the sub-tropical sun fell rapidly towards the horizon.

THE STAFF WERE EXCELLENT, with treats awaiting us after each dive, and a cocktail and warm pizza slice as you returned to the mothership following the last dive of the day.

Only one issue stood out really, and that was the lack of wi-fi. OK, we

understand! What do you expect in the middle of nowhere on a small liveboard dive boat?

We had, however, been told that there would be wi-fi, and a couple of us actually needed it for unavoidable work commitments, but to have any hope at all of a signal we had to hang over the railings at the bow of the boat – at 4am.

Amazingly, every time we went to try this there was always somebody else doing the same! The bottom line here is this: do not expect to be uploading the amazing images you can obtain here to social media – not, at least, until you get



The reefs on this archipelago are among the best we have seen throughout the Caribbean, so there is plenty for those who like to change the pace with macro photography, with small crabs and shrimps hiding among the sponges, and flamingo tongue sea-snails on the purple and pink sea-fans.

There is plenty of fish-life too, with eels inhabiting every possible crevice and minuscule secretary blennies poking their heads out of hard coral structures.

There is, however, a small issue when you are trying to capture images of the smaller stuff, and this is that you are constantly being photo-bombed by the Caribbean reef sharks, the nurse sharks and occasionally the grouper, all wanting to be a part of your photographic collection.

You will see numerous schooling reef fish of all colours, along with brightly coloured parrotfish constantly patrolling the reef. However, during our whole time diving these waters we did not put our macro lenses on the cameras.

The wide-angle marine-life potential with the sharks, grouper and crocs was just too tempting for us, and we always felt that, if we went macro, we would surely miss something special.

OUR FAVOURITE DIVING ACTIVITY

was still the one we had enjoyed on our first day, the shallow-water encounters with the silky sharks. Fortunately, our group was of a similar mind and so, whenever we could, we would spend much of our dive hovering at 5-8m, waiting for these spectacular sharks to come in close.

Between these dives, we might head back to the mothership, or hang out near a mangrove to see if we could spot an obliging crocodile. The guides here know each individual, and there are a handful with which they are happy for you to get into the water. They have been habituated

Right: Pristine reefs provide a welcome photographic backdrop for the sharks.



Above: Classic-car ride in Havana.

experience the city at all. So we asked for another two nights to be included at the end of the trip.

Havana is a vibrant, if somewhat crumbling, city and one not to be missed.

to divers, and seem completely unconcerned by our presence.

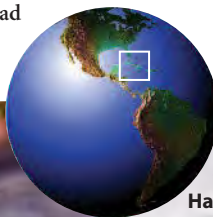
So when the opportunity arose, it was impossible to turn down. For both of us, it was the highlight of the trip; getting face to face with such an unusual, prehistoric and large predator. We would do it again in a flash.

We had already had an overnight stop in Havana at the beginning of our trip, but as we arrived late at night, and we were on the coach very early in the morning, had not had the opportunity to

In the daytime, we made sure to do the touristy thing of taking a ride around the city in one of the classic soft-top 1950s cars, and in the evenings we headed out for cocktails, live music, dancing and home-cooked food (eaten in someone's living room).

The people are warm and friendly, and this is a city packed with history.

Times are changing for Cuba, and it might not stay like this for very long. So apart from the stupendous diving, this is an amazing time to be heading there before it is transformed forever. ❑



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶▶ Nick and Caroline flew from Manchester to Havana, via Paris, with Air France, airfrance.co.uk

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶▶ Avalon *Georgiana* liveboard, cubandivingcenters.com, 4* Iberostar in central Havana, hoteliberostarparquecentral.com-cuba.com

WHEN TO GO ▶▶ Diving in Jardines de la Reina is available all year round, but dry season is from November to April. The trip described took place in December and the authors described the conditions as "perfect"

MONEY ▶▶ Cuban Convertible peso (CUC). Use the ATM at the airport, or change at your hotel.

PRICES ▶▶ The Scuba Place organised the trip – with flights, transfers, three nights in Havana, seven nights on *Avalon Georgiana* plus diving, meals, drinks and a bottle of rum each night to share came to £3600pp, thesubadivingplace.co.uk

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶▶ travel2cuba.co.uk

