Diving With Turtles (and Scientists) in Cuba

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The U.S. government grants special travel licenses for what it calls People-to-People trips, on which American tourists mingle with Cubans. Most such trips revolve around art or education, but the Miami-based Ocean Foundation's Cuba Marine Research and Conservation Program trips focus on science. One itinerary includes scuba diving and observing sea turtles on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula. This national park and UNESCO Biosphere Preserve on the western end of the island contains some of the Caribbean's healthiest coral reefs and a three-mile long beach where 897 sea turtle nests were laid this summer.

The trips are led by sea turtle specialist Julia Azanza and coral biologist Patricia Gonzales, both of the University of Havana's Center for Marine Research. Azanza joined our group on an afternoon tour of the nesting beach, where during nesting season, students spend two-week shifts in a rustic camp, monitoring and collecting data. At night, the group watches as tiny heads pop out of the white sand, followed by front flippers churning to pull the rest of the palm-sized bodies onto the beach. A handful of hatchlings will suddenly burst out at once, clambering over each other and up the side of the nest, illustrating why scientists say a hatching nest is "boiling."

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The next day, it's time to follow the turtles into the water. A three minute ride on the dive boat takes us to El Almirante, a coral reef starting at 30 feet deep where the variety and number of fish surpass that of most any dive site in the Northern Hemisphere. Cuba's reefs look much as they did more than 50 years ago thanks to remoteness, decades with little tourism development, largely chemical-free agricultural practices, and the nation's small population. Cuba also made an intentional commitment to protecting its environment.

The trip includes four days at the nearby resort, Maria la Gorda, time enough to enjoy the twice-daily dive outings as well as the beach peep show, seeing the park's limestone caves, hiking to spot endemic birds like the bee hummingbird and brightly colored Cuban Tody, and swimming in a seaside sinkhole.