
Shark Diving in Cuba's Gardens of the Queen

18/07/2014



The Adventure Begins at Home

I don't pack light. Ever. So when reps from the travel specialists who arranged our Treasury Department-approved flight to Cuba confirmed that all luggage — carry-on, cameras, gear, everything — could not exceed 44 pounds, I had to take a deep breath.

Diving is easy. Travel is hard.

I'm thinking that again one morning as I stare miserably at the tap in my Havana hotel room through which no water is flowing. It comes to me again as we bounce along a narrow, patchy highway on a white-knuckle, predawn bus ride to Cuba's southern coast, six hours away.

Do tourist buses have ultimate right-of-way in Cuba? Our driver seems to think so. (On our return trip, two drivers would execute a shift change and swap places at the wheel without ever slowing down. The entire bus broke into wild applause.)

Thank God western Cuba is mostly flat.

Welcome to Gardens of the Queen

"Bet there's a 9-footer right behind you." I resist the urge to whip my head around and check. We're splashing about off the back of *Georgiana* in 6 feet of water so clear, you could read a novel placed on the sea grass below. From the first moment eight of us boarded the 100-foot [Avalon Cuban Diving Centers](#) live-aboard in tiny Jucaro five hours ago, talk turned to [sharks](#).

Gardens of the Queen, a pristine 90-mile arc of mangroves and keys that snuggles up to Cuba's southeastern

coast, is quickly gaining a reputation as the sharkiest spot in the Caribbean. The area encompasses an 850-square-mile [no-take marine reserve](#) where a young Fidel Castro once loved to spearfish.

Five of us had come legally to Cuba with [Ocean Doctor](#), a Washington, D.C.-based conservation nonprofit with long experience in Cuba. A few other divers not with our group sneaked in illegally, risking thousands of dollars in fines on return if discovered. Experienced shark divers all, each had come to find out: What would it be like to swim with dozens of sharks in a truly wild setting?

We don't wait long to find out. On our second dive, at a site called Los Mogotes, we descend right on top of several Caribbean reef sharks milling around a coral head so large, it had its own mini wall. As we fin over coral fields that would only get bigger as our dives progress, admiring the locals from gray angelfish to Nassau and black grouper, barracuda, triggerfish, blennies, jawfish and more, I glance at what I think is my buddy, half an arm's length away.

In his place is a muscular 6-foot reef shark, swimming companionably in our midst. Immediately you notice at Gardens of the Queen that nothing runs from you: Here, animals from sharks to tarpon to barracuda and rays swim *toward* you, but only in curiosity.

To see a sleek, healthy predator up close in the wild, in harmony with its environment, is awe-inspiring. And, strangely, I feel no fear — just a sense that all is right with this animal's world.

By the end of day one, exuberance all around. "That was fantastic!" says Mike McGowan, from Breckenridge, Colorado. "This has totally exceeded my expectations!"

And that was only the start. For days, we would all look at each other, pinch ourselves and say, "We're in Cuba!" And then dissolve into little-girl giggles.

Sharks and Classic Cars are *Everywhere*

"Cubans love Americans for two reasons," says Antonio Luis ("Tony") Cardenas, 38, a marine biologist who is manager of Avalon's fleet of sport-fishing and diving vessels, the only operator in Gardens of the Queen by contract with the Cuban government. He holds up a finger.

"One, the cars." He smiles. "And two: everything else."

While sharks are the draw at Gardens of the Queen, the classic American cars plying the streets of Havana exert a magical pull all their own, on Cubans and Americans alike.

"I grew up in the '50s," says my dive buddy Charlie Brandenburg, 69, from Fort Worth, Texas. "It's like going back in time for me."

Tom Greenway, 53, an auto dealer from Morris, Illinois, was as excited about the cars as he was about the diving. "The sharks and the classic cars are in the same quantity — *everywhere*."

Cuban ingenuity keeps these cars on the road — the most common thing you hear out of Cubans, regarding any obstacle, is, "We'll find a way." Maintaining these vehicles is a source of pride, but also a necessity: Under government price controls, a new car can cost the equivalent of \$250,000. Most Cubans just laugh. And find another way.

Georgiana wasn't built as a dive boat, but Cubans make that work too, diving from modern tenders serviced and stored at an amphibious dive center tucked in the mangroves near Avalon's tethered "floating hotel," *Tortuga*.

Their adaptability sustains these resilient, resourceful people who haven't lost their hope for the future. That willingness to look ahead is why Gardens of the Queen, first described by 15th-century explorers, today comprises the largest no-take marine park in the Caribbean.

We meet Dr. Julio A. Baisre, vice director of the [National Aquarium](#), for dinner one evening in one of Havana's burgeoning *paladares*, private restaurants encouraged by the government that are causing a small sensation in the Caribbean dining scene. In the mid-1990s, Baisre was a director of Cuba's fisheries management. Giuseppe

"Pepe" Omega, Avalon's Italy-born owner, brought the idea for a reserve open to divers to Baisre. "It seemed like a nice idea," Baisre says with a laugh. A few weeks later, the first marine protected area in Cuba was formally established.

The first problem was fishermen. Virtually every day, Omega and Baisre were on the phone, dealing with violations. But they found a way, and the Cuban government stood firm — no fishing except for lobster — and supported scientific research that gave legitimacy to the idea. Eventually locals accepted the reserve because "they saw changes positive for themselves," Baisre says. Today about 1,000 divers and 500 catch-and-release fishermen are permitted annually in the reserve, officially established in 1996.

Avalon's underwater shooter and videographer Noel Lopez Fernandez started working in Gardens of the Queen about the time the reserve took effect.

"Seventeen years ago, you saw only one or two sharks, and they were far away; they didn't come close. Every year, it's better," says Lopez, 48.

Not all of the Gardens is protected, or even explored. Avalon has identified about 50 sites, 25 of which are regularly dived.

"Right now we know maybe 45 percent of the Gardens of the Queen underwater," Lopez says. "The rest we don't know yet. We have a lot to explore, a lot of new things to discover."

"Americans can go anywhere," Cardenas says, a little wistfully — the right to travel is universally desired in Cuba. "But this place was discovered by Christopher Columbus. I want them to see that."

To Bait, or Not to Bait?

Before our first "official" shark dive in the Gardens of the Queen — where every dive is a shark dive — a debate breaks out:

To bait or not to bait?

Avalon always asks divers if they want to use the bait box — Cardenas says that 95 percent of the time, the answer is yes. Our party is divided, torn between maximum shark and respecting Mother Nature.

We decide to try it both ways. Turns out, you don't really need the box.

Before we are even out of the boat, at a site called El Farallon, silky sharks are circling en masse. Nervous laughter ensues.

Back-rolling on top of a dozen curious sharks seems totally loco. But the weird thing underwater is: no menace. Just indescribable beauty, and a Zen-like serenity induced by morning rays dappling the silkies' smooth skin as they move in and out of the natural spotlights.

Moving away from the boat and the silkies, we drop to 90 feet through deep coral canyons festooned with tube and vase sponges, and enter a crack in the world with formations like jagged teeth — it looks impassable, but we soon discover it is not, shooting out of the swim-through, and flying over more hills of coral and a small mushroom bommie or two.

On our next dive, at La Cueva del Pulpo, sharks are waiting again, along with a toothy goliath grouper. A big spotted eagle ray flaps in and seems in no hurry to depart, circling back for another look.

Finally it dawns on me what's so weird about diving here. On so many dives, I'm forever peering into the blue, straining to see a shark, ray, turtle — anything. But in Gardens of the Queen, the thing you're looking for is swimming alongside you, sometimes for more or less the entire dive. The next day at a site called Black Coral II, we use the box.

The perforated white metal container about the size of a ladies' boot box does seem to attract a few more sharks, and they are more active, but by this time, we are seeing so many sharks on every dive that they seem a part of the landscape, not a circus attraction. Still, they're mesmerizing enough to keep us all at 80-plus feet until deco comes knocking.

NEED TO KNOW

When to go: Gardens of the Queen is a year-round destination. Cuba is in the Caribbean hurricane belt; storm season is roughly June through October, with more storms occurring in August and September.

Dive Conditions: Although the diving requires no advanced training, divers visiting Gardens of the Queen should be comfortable with the possibility of sharks in close proximity on every dive. Visibility can change quickly — particularly with afternoon tides — from 100-plus feet down to 30 to 60 feet; good navigation skills are a plus. Water temps vary from 77 to 80 degrees F November to April to 82 to 86 degrees F May to October. Avalon offers no night diving because of government restrictions.

Operators: Ocean Doctor (oceandocor.org/gardens) partners with Avalon Cuban Diving

Centers (cubandivingcenters.com), the only dive operator in Gardens of the Queen. Ocean Doctor guests are housed in four of Avalon's half-dozen live-aboards, which vary in size. Diving is all from tenders.

Price tag: All-inclusive 11-day, 10-night trips are \$7,240 to \$8,830, including airfare from Miami. (Includes a \$250 fee that supports Ocean Doctor's conservation activities in Cuba.)

WHAT IT TAKES:

[Ocean Doctor](#) is licensed by the U.S. Treasury Department to lead educational programs to Cuba. (under the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba, tourism is prohibited for U.S. citizens; licensed "people-to-people" educational visits such as those led by Ocean Doctor are permitted.) If you are a diver who only wants to be underwater and has no interest in cultural exchanges — a requirement of Treasury Department permits — such as meeting Cuban marine scientists at the University of Havana's Center for Marine Research, or visiting topside nature reserves like Las Terrazas, a UNESCO biosphere reserve 45 miles west of Havana, Ocean Doctor's trips may not be for you. If you are not flexible about last-minute schedule changes or working through small bureaucratic hassles, Cuba may not be for you.
