

## Bragg April 2018 Trip to Cuba

We went to Cuba on a dive trip with the Aggressor Fleet to dive the *Jardines de la Reina* or *Gardens of the Queen National Park*. As part of this “people to people” program, we spent 2 nights in Havana before heading to the dive boat for a week aboard the Jardines Aggressor II. Below are some miscellaneous notes about the trip, in no specific order ...

### 1950's Cars

- The first thing we noticed upon exiting the Havana airport was the overwhelming presence of 1950's US automobiles in a rainbow of colors; it felt like we were stepping back in time
- These restored beauties are an important part of the tourist economy; tourist can rent them for a hour cruise/tour (rate is quoted at \$70 but can bargain down to \$40); they are everywhere in central Havana – lined up along the streets (some with hoods up to display engines)
- In addition to US brands, there are also lots of older Ladas, a boxy Russian made car
- Outside of Havana, we also saw lots of 1950s cars though often these did not sport the gleaming chrome, fancy paint, and detailed upholstery jobs of the ones in Havana
- We learned that the cost of a restored 1950's car can easily be \$50,000 ... we asked “who can afford such cars” and the answer we received was “gangsters and government guys.”



1950's cars in Havana's Central Park

### Havana

- Called “La Habana” by the Cubans
- We stayed at the *Parque Central Hotel* which is operated by the Spanish hotel group Iberostar (they have several other properties in Cuba and across the Caribbean)
  - The Cuban government maintains a majority ownership in ALL Cuban enterprises so all foreign capital funded joint venture projects/properties must adhere to this requirement
  - The hotel is considered 5 star and had a very elegant open ground floor with live music and a lively bar area
  - We did have wifi access at the hotel though it was spotty – we found the mezzanine level bar to have great reception; once we left the hotel we did not have any wifi access for the remainder of the trip (it was nice to totally unplug)
- Beautiful Colonial architecture ...
  - The old historic district has been renovated as a tourist destination as part of the Office of City Historian's revamp of Havana. We visited several of the area's plazas, including the Plaza de Armas, Plaza de la Cathedral, and Plaza de San Francisco. In front of Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (Palace of the Captain Generals located on the Plaza de Armas), the street was made of *wooden* cobblestones. The legend is that the bedrooms of a long ago Governor of Havana and his wife were located just above the street and, so as not to offend

their ears with the sound of horses' hooves and cart wheels, they ordered the installation of wooden cobblestones to dampen the sound.



*Plaza de la Cathedral, Havana*

- Sometimes the facade of a building has been maintained; peek around its corner and you'll see much disrepair
  - Once outside the tourist area, unfortunately, many of the elegant homes & buildings are crumbling
  - The area where the wealthy once owned large homes and properties is now the home to many foreign embassies and consulates ... properties here are well maintained
  - The capital building of Cuba is a very similar design to that of the US Capital building but is not an exact replica; it has recently undergone a major renovation and is now looking quite handsome
  - Signage/advertising is minimal to say the least; this certainly contributes to the historic feel of central Havana ... the complete absence of any US/European franchises was also most welcome
- There is a tunnel built in the late 1950's that connects the 2 sides of the Havana harbor ... we used it to travel to the east side of the harbor to visit the historic fort area which includes the *Castillo del Morro* (Morro Castle) the *Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña* (Fort of San Carlos). Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the Spanish built a series of forts to repel raiders of all



*Steve exploring Morro Castle*



*Looking back towards skyline of Havana from Morro Castle*

sorts including the French and the English.

- Havana's *Malecón* (officially Avenida de Maceo) is a broad esplanade, roadway and seawall which stretches 5 miles along the coast.
  - The Malecón is a popular spot for fishing, walking and more

- Damage from last year's Hurricane Maria is evident as the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of many of the buildings along the esplanade were flooded; some buildings had so much damage that they basically collapsed
- The US Embassy is located along the Malecón
- We found that Cuba's revolution, which ended in 1959 by the ousting of Cuban President Fulgencio Batista, is front and center in Havana ...
  - Images of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro (leaders of the revolution) are common sights; we graciously declined numerous opportunities to purchase various souvenir items with their images on them (Che is an especially popular image)
  - Although we didn't tour the Museum of the Revolution, we did walk by the adjacent "Granma Memorial" and marveled at the outdoor display of tanks, airplanes, artillery and more – all nicely lit up and guarded by military personnel. The centerpiece of the "Granma Memorial" a glass enclosed facility which houses the *Granma*: the yacht that was used in 1956 to transport 82 fighters of the Cuban Revolution (including Fidel and Raul Castro and Che Guevara) from Mexico to Cuba
  - We did visit *Plaza de la Revolución*, "Revolution Square," a large expanse of concrete where many political rallies have been held. The square is dominated by the José Martí Memorial, which features a 358 ft tall tower and 59 ft statue. The National Library, many government ministries, and other buildings are located in and around the Plaza. Located behind the memorial is the Palace of the Revolution, the seat of the Cuban government and Communist Party. Opposite the memorial are the offices of the Ministries of the Interior and Communications, whose facades feature matching steel memorials of the two most important deceased heroes of the Cuban Revolution: Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos.
- All our dining in Havana was done at "private" restaurants. The Cuban communist government has slowly rolled out licenses for private enterprises, including some restaurants.
  - If we hadn't been with our guides, we would have had a difficult time finding these places as many of them have no signage on them; others have very minimal signage (they look like every other house/building along their street)
  - All of our restaurant meals were quite good though usually the only "choice" we had was a choice of a main course with all other courses pre-selected for us



*Che Guevara Memorial at Revolution Square*

### Miscellaneous

- Cuba has two official currencies: the Cuban Peso (CUP) and the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). Tourists use the CUC which has a one-to-one currency exchange with the US dollar (minus a 10% "penalty fee" plus a 3% conversion fee); if you travel to Cuba take Euros or some other accepted currency to avoid the US dollar conversion penalty!

- The average monthly wage for Cubans is approximately \$30 (this was as of June 2017); health and education are universal and free in Cuba, and citizens receive some basic food from the state through a “ration book” -- as you might expect, those in the tourist industry are very keen on tips
- We were talking with one of our tour guides and the subject of TV came up – he noted that he liked to watch major league baseball and basketball games and that “Gray’s Anatomy” was a favorite of his. Turns out that once a week someone comes to his door from whom he purchases “the packet” -- a set of DVDs that contain various US shows/programs – all of which have been scraped from the satellite download at one of the major tourist hotels (a black market situation, not a government-approved business)

### **Beyond Havana**

- We traveled about 6 ½ hours by bus (Chinese made) from Havana to the port city of Jucaro to meet up with the dive boat, the Jardines Aggressor II
- Our route took us down the “National Highway” which runs down the middle of the island; it is a 6 lane highway for much of its duration – we saw very little traffic on the road despite its significant capacity
- Public buses run along the National Highway; we assume they would be like the ones we saw in Havana: very crowded and with no air conditioning
- At every major exit/overpass along the National Highway we saw ...
  - Large groups of locals awaiting bus transportation – many of them held up fanned Cuban currency in hopes of convincing someone to pick them up and provide them with a ride (i.e., hitchhikers willing to pay some money if picked up)
  - Horses hitched to open area buggies; these served as a local taxi service to bring/take locals to/from their villages to the National Highway
- The Cuban countryside we saw was mainly agricultural in nature, we spotted ...
  - Orchards
  - Sugarcane fields
  - A field being tilled by oxen and a walking plow
  - Several very *old* tractors
- The housing we saw outside of Havana were mostly either standalone concrete homes which seemed to all be built following a standard plan (think basic rectangular with small front porch) or sad looking 3-story concrete apartment blocks with louvered windows and small balconies, usually festooned with drying laundry
- We had two rest stops on our journey to the boat. At both, the restrooms were overseen by an attendant who handed you toilet paper when you handed her some money; the toilets were all without actual toilet seats (we found the same situation in the Havana airport)

### **Our Group**

- In addition to Steve and myself, our group totaled 14:
  - Kay & Mark from Virginia
  - Mary & Bud from Virginia
  - Jean & Kevin from Texas
  - Paula & Sue from Montana



- Kent from Colorado
- Rob from Wisconsin
- Edwina from Australia – she had come to Cuba several years ago for a study abroad program and ended up marrying a Cuban fellow; they now live in Australia but were back visiting – as a Cuban, he was NOT allowed to be a guest on the boat – allowing Cubans on the boat presented a possible flight risk
- With the exception of Edwina (who came with just 10 dives), it was a very experienced dive group
- Most of us had previously been on live aboard dive boats before; those who hadn't, quickly



*Our intrepid group, including our dive masters and some friendly local iguanas*

became fans

### **Jardines Aggressor II**

- Operated as part of the Aggressor fleet (in conjunction with the “Youth for Oceans Foundation”)
  - As part of the marine conservation program of our “people-to-people” trip we had 3 lectures on Cuba’s marine conservation efforts and ecosystems of the area (one lecture in Havana, and 2 on board the boat)
  - We also provided fish count information based on visual counts of specific species following each dive (I was responsible for counting Tarpon)
- For our week aboard, there were 14 crew so we were well looked after ...
  - Our chef-prepared meals were both delicious and plentiful
  - Upon our return to the boat after each dive we were greeted by the sights and sounds of the “Three Y’s” (Yosie, Yola, and Yennie) dancing in synch and singing along with energetic

Cuban music; they were often joined by other crew members who also knew the dance moves ... together the group made a noisy and fun production of providing a “hot towel” (straight from the dryer) to each guest after we removed our wet suits and showered on the boat’s back deck

- All diving was done from 2 tenders which took us from the ship to the actual dive sights which were usually just a short ride away – I ended up doing 18 dives and Steve did 21 at the following dive sites: Patricia, Finca de Pepe, Pius Reef, Farallon, Peruano, La Cana, Dark Reef, Pipin, Boca de Piedra, Mariflores, Luisa Reef, Black Coral 2, Los Mogotes, La Trampa, Las Cruces, Black Coral 1, Five Seas, Cabezo de la Cubera, Los Mogotes, Los Indios and Intermedio



*Listening to a dive briefing aboard the Jardines Aggressor II*

### **Jardines de la Reina/Gardens of the Queen**

- The archipelago parallels the Cuban coast for 93 mi and is formed by more than 600 cays and islands. This coral reef and mangrove complex lies about 60 miles off Cuba’s coast
- It was named by Christopher Columbus to honor the Queen of Spain
- It was named a National Park in 2002
- No more than 1000 divers are allowed to dive here each year; we were fortunate to be among that small number
- The water temperature was 81-82 degrees so both Steve and I were in multiple layers (he wore 2, I wore 3) as were most of our fellow divers and dive masters though fellow diver Kevin wore only swim trunks and a t-shirt
- Water clarity was often limited to 40-60ft with a fair amount of particulates in the water



### **What We Saw**

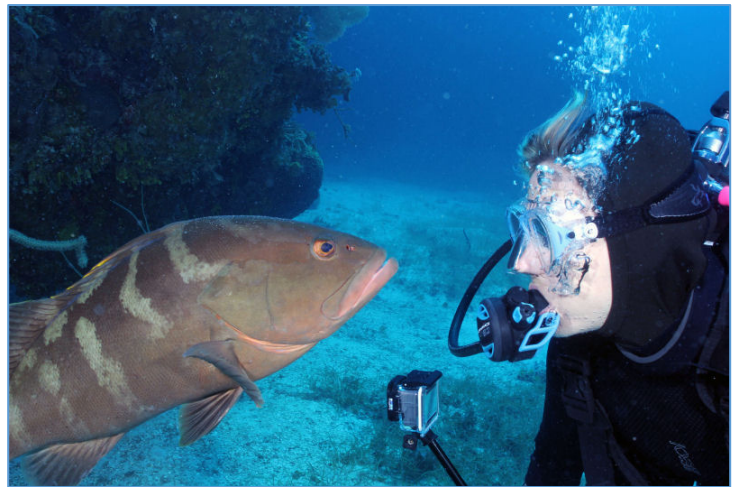
- Overall we’d say the diving was some of the best in the Caribbean though the visibility was often only 40-60ft ... the coral reefs were healthy and contained the usual assortment of reef fish species (parrotfish, angelfish, butterfly fish, wrasses, eels, etc.) and critters (crabs, lobsters, etc.)
- Spotted eagle rays, stingrays, turtles, tarpons, and barracuda were also our diving companions
- We spotted the rare Golden Fairy Basslet well back under a large overhang -- this little fellow (about 3”) was quite shy



*Golden Fairy Basslet*



- The area is known for its groupers – Black, Nassau, and Goliath – they were mostly VERY friendly and curious -- many like having their bellies scratched by those who ignored the “do not touch the wildlife” rule. We watched a couple of not so friendly groupers fighting – they circled around and around one another with occasional strikes (reminded us of a couple of sumo wrestlers) – they kicked up so much silt/sand from the bottom they quickly disappeared into the muck
- We also saw lots of sharks -- mainly Caribbean Reef sharks, several Silky sharks, and only a few Nurse sharks ... one dive we basically spent the entire time hanging with a couple of dozen sharks at the bottom on the buoy line just watching them -- they greeted us when we arrived, descended with us and then ascended with us at the end of the dive
- One morning before a dive we had a brief visit to a nearby island where we met up with some



*Getting up close and personal with a grouper*



*Between us and our tender ...*



*A hutia drinking from a water bottle*

of the local residents – Hutias and Iguanas – to share some fresh pineapple with them. The Desmarest's hutia (jutia in Spanish), also called the Cuban hutia, is a species of rodent endemic to Cuba. They are awfully cute!

- Salt water crocodiles live in mangrove areas; we were able to spot a couple of them – a few brave

souls in our group got into the water with them ... Steve and I both stayed in the tender but it was fun watching and hearing the tender crew call the croc by name, “Nino,” and trying to entice it closer by tempting it with raw chicken. Unlike the hutia, the crocs are not cute.



*Saltwater crocodile*

- Back to the cute creatures ... we did see lots of juvenile spotted drum fish throughout week (the underwater signal for them is using your thumbs as if they're moving drum sticks). They are one of my favorites and we saw some extremely young ones. At one point we spotted three of varying sizes all in the same area swimming around in small, repetitive circles as is their habit -- the smallest had a body (not counting its fins) of about 1/4 inch.



*Juvenile spotted drum fish*

Final thoughts on Cuba: We are glad to have had the opportunity to see some of the island and dive the rich *Jardines de la Reina*. Every Cuban we talked to said living in Cuba "is hard" and we certainly got a glimpse of why. The things that made visiting Cuba unique are also the things that made life difficult for its people. We hope the new Cuban president (the election occurred while we were there) will be able to improve the lives of a people we found very warm and welcoming.