

REPUBLICAN PARTY



They know how to celebrate a good day's diving in the Dominican Republic – and **LISA COLLINS** finds plenty to celebrate

SEX, DRUGS & ALCOHOL! It was one of the first impressions I received on my first dive trip to the Dominican Republic.

We were about to dive the *Astron* wreck 10 minutes' boat-ride from Pro Dive International's new dive centre at the Occidental Resort in Punta Cana. Our charismatic Azorean dive guide, instructor and assistant dive-centre manager Ivo da Silva, told us how the 130m Russian cargo vessel had come to founder on the reef.

Rumours abound that its captain was drunk or drugged, but many believe he was having sex when the ship hit the reef in a night-time storm. If so, at the optimal moment the Earth must have moved for the captain and his lady friend as the ship tore through the reef, slicing a large gash into its side and sinking in 12m of water!

Waiting for its new big boat to be delivered, Pro Dive was using a small glass-fibre speedboat, the type seen skimming the waters all around the coast, as a temporary dive tender.

Scheduled to arrive in December before the holiday rush, the big boat's delivery had been delayed to mid-January, a normal occurrence in a country with a slightly *laissez-faire* attitude.

With great skill the skiff's captain negotiated the waves and swells in the lagoon before exiting to the outer side of the barrier reef. Here the wreck could be seen protruding from the surface at both stern and bow.

As we tied up at the mooring buoy, I was happy to learn from Ivo that practically all dive-sites in the Dominican Republic have fixed moorings.

We had brought only our Lavacore long-sleeved tops, and were pleasantly surprised at how warm and clear the water was in the coolest month of the year. A balmy 27-28° showed on my computer as we descended to the sandy bottom and gently finned in the slight surge towards the stern of the wreck.

Along the whole outside of the fringing reef on the Atlantic side of the island, where some 14 dive-sites can be visited within 5-25 minutes of the dive centre, the bottom is at a fairly constant 12-14m, descending deeper only some way out.

Looming out of the blue, the size of the solid brass propeller impressed me. Imprisoned by the debris torn from the ship, many attempts had been made to steal it but, luckily, none had succeeded.

The wreck had remained largely intact for almost 40 years until

Pictured: Dive-boat at Isla Catalina.

Hurricane Sandy broke the mid-section in 2012, scattering large pieces of hull over the wreck and reef.

Finning under the stern, we spotted a large school of snapper seeking protection. The ship now lies at 45°, the deck sloping up towards the surface.

Reaching the mid-section, we swam across the battered deck, peering into the holes and crevices created by the storm, through to the cargo holds.

On the other side we were able to penetrate an open hole in the hull, squeeze through struts and exit back onto the seabed. We had hoped to see the eagle rays said to congregate at the bow or mid-section, but there was no sign today.

HEADING BACK to the mooring-line through the Dominican Republic's usual topography of large coral boulders covered in soft corals and sea-fans, we felt again the pull of the surge – normal at this site so close to the shallow reef. It's never too bad, however, and the dive suits all levels. In fact a family with a 10-year-old Junior Open Water Diver son joined us on this dive.

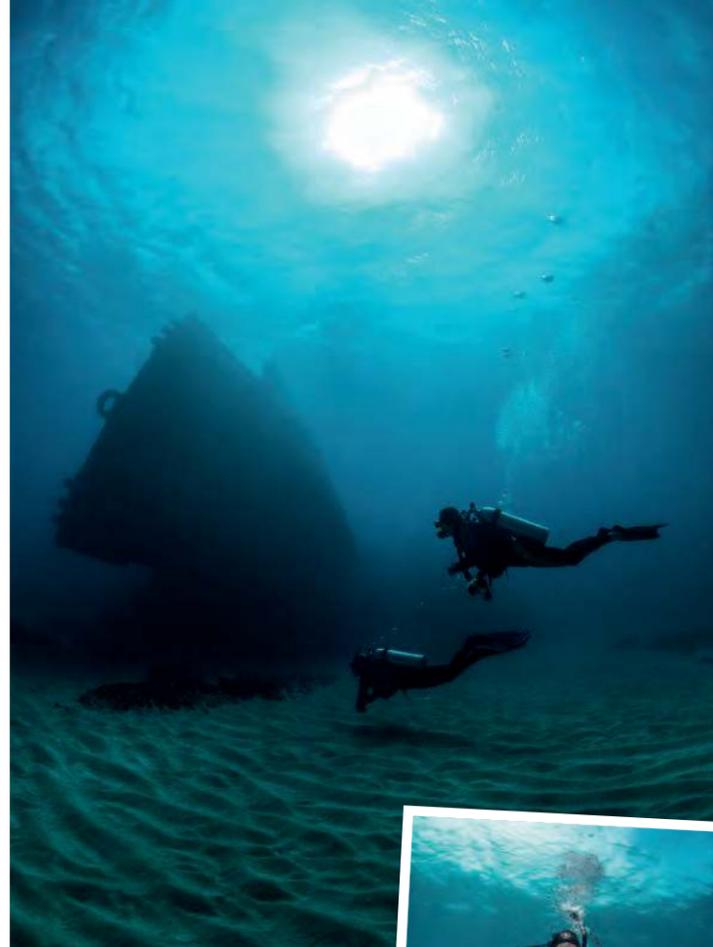
On surfacing in the slight swells, the captain instructed us one at a time to take off our equipment in the water, lifting it out and storing it neatly. I was impressed by this efficiency, having had several bits of expensive equipment broken on small-boat trips in other countries when equipment is simply chucked in a heap.

At the Occidental, Pro Dive staff were

This page, clockwise from right: The *Astron* wreck; its bronze propeller blade; coral encrusted cannon at the Viva Shallows underwater museum; Ivo sets up the tanks; orange sponge at Aquarium.

Opposite page, centre: Diver inspecting the anchor chain at Viva Shallows.

Far right, clockwise from top: Trumpetfish; flamingo tongue on a purple seafan; tiny boxfish; fireworm on seafan; cleaner shrimps in a sponge; electric ray; sailor's eyeball (bubble algae); green moray eel; seahorse.



waiting to help us out of the boat and carry our equipment back up the beach to be rinsed and hung up.

The centre, Pro Dive's first outside of Mexico, opened last October. The staff are clearly trained to the same high standards as those in the 10 Mexican dive centres.

Ivo and dive-centre manager Romain Gelez explained the trials of operating in the DR, having to keep on top of local staff and providers to ensure that the centre is run perfectly. They already seemed to have made an impact by championing conservation projects and educating locals, staff and fishermen.

Unfortunately sharks are a rare sight in the DR because fishermen have been seen as heroes for catching them. They are not caught for fins as in Asia, but for food.

The government and press applaud fishermen on their catch, but the Pro Dive staff are trying to change this attitude and



say they have already had some success with the press. Many of the staff volunteer for conservation projects on their days off.

A day-trip to the Caribbean side of the island was planned for the next day. We would be diving off the marine sanctuary around Isla Catalina.

The air-conditioned bus took us on a 75-minute trip to La Romana, where we

boarded a catamaran in a natural marina in an estuary. Weirdly, the government has decreed that boat-passengers must wear life-jackets on the river but can take them off once in open ocean. It also allows huge cruise ships to dock in the marine reserve around Isla Catalina!

Pro Dive offers trips to Isla Catalina, Bayahibe and Isla Saona, and at present uses a provider that sells places to all the dive-centres, so there can be a mix of divers and snorkellers on board.

This works well if only a couple of people from any one centre want to go, and keeps the price down. There's plenty of room on the spacious boats and a nice friendly mix of people.

It's also good for non-divers to be able to join a trip with diving family-members, and snorkel or relax on the beach.

The boat moored in about 4m on the edge of the reef and the divers made giant strides off the back of the boat. We swam to the edge of the reef and descended on



the wall. Visibility was 30-40m throughout the dive. There was only a very slight current, so Ivo, Mateusz and I headed in the opposite direction to the other divers.

We planned to use almost half our air on the wall, and then ascend and spend the rest of the time exploring in the shallows on our way back to the boat. The wall was covered in soft corals and large purple sea-fans. We saw snapper galore, parrotfish and several large black margate.

In the blue there was a sense of big things lurking. From mid-January to March whales can frequently be heard on dives, so close to the famed Silver Banks, and whale-watching day trips can be arranged during the season.

As we ascended over the lip of the wall an electric ray skittered past us. White-mouth moray bodies could be glimpsed in holes in the reef, but their heads would be buried deep until they fed at dusk.

We had a short surface interval as the boat manoeuvred to a shallow reef called

Aquarium. It was true to its name, with pretty topography, sponges in rainbow colours, black, brain, soft and fan corals, all home to the usual Caribbean suspects.

Rock lobsters basked on the white sand in front of their hides; large crabs hid in crevices. A healthy adolescent drum was nice to see.

As I hovered over the reef to take a scenic photo, a viper moray eel's sudden appearance made me jump. With glistening needle-sharp teeth and a gaping mouth, it lived up to its name.

Not once was I aware of divers from the other dive-boats around – this reef had plenty of space for everyone.

WE HEADED FOR a white-sand beach, and a tender ferried us ashore. A barbecue grill, tables and hundreds of sun-loungers had been set up. A tasty lunch was served with copious amounts of water, soft drinks, Presidente beer and rum punch.

Back on the big boat the staff tried to ply us with more drinks while salsa-ing and mambo-ing to party music. I've never had such fun on the way back from diving. A party to celebrate a great day out, fantastic!

Wanting to shoot some macro subjects, we opted for an afternoon at Pro Dive's local site Las Cuevitas. But as soon as we back-rolled into the almost flat-calm sea, and were confronted by 40-50m visibility, I knew I had the wrong lens on!

It was incredible to be able to see so far. In few places had I seen such amazing visibility before – Turks & Caicos and Cozumel in Mexico came to mind.

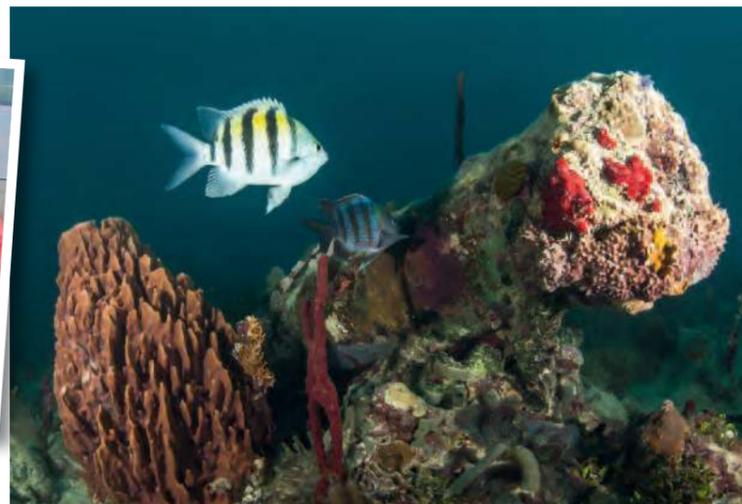
Fantastic topography with lots of swim-throughs and sandy spits interspersing large coral fingers covered in life made for a brilliant dive, all the more so because the maximum depth was only 11m. Flamingo tongues dwelt on almost every sea-fan, and many large hermit crabs were picking their way through the reef to find tasty morsels.

A squeak from Ivo sent us finning wildly to keep up with a couple of small eagle rays that zoomed past and out into the blue. Groups of yellowtail and striped snapper sought the protection of large sea-fans. A big scorpionfish sat proudly on the reef.

The 60-minute dive flashed by, and all too soon we had to ascend for our safety stop. A large barracuda that had been stalking me disappeared as soon as I turned. Just below the surface a huge school of needlefish swam in formation. I would remember this dive for a long time.

THE ISLA SAONA/BAYAHIBE area was an hour's minibus journey away but we took our hire car as only three of us were going, allowing more time to visit a restaurant in Bayahibe that Ivo had recommended for its lionfish specialties.

Sugarcane fields stretched into the distance, interspersed with cattle ranches,



and distant mountains made a picturesque backdrop. Ivo told us that Pro Dive hoped to open another dive-centre in Bayahibe to allow easy access to Isla Saona/Bayahibe sites and also to Isla Catalina, La Romana marina being only 12 miles further on.

Bayahibe is a pretty village with lots of small shops and *super-colmadons* – grocery stores by day that turn into bars and nightclubs by night. Ivo told us of the locals who would attend church every Sunday, followed by an afternoon and evening shopping, then getting very drunk and down and dirty on the dance floor!

We were happy to learn that we would be the only people on the boat – Scuba Fun’s clients had cancelled because the weather was rainy and overcast. That didn’t bother us – the sea was flat-calm, and we would be getting wet in any event!

The Scuba Fun team loaded our gear onto their 4x4 and trailer and drove it to a large shallow-bottomed catamaran, moored in the shallows of a small bay in the middle of town.

Ivo explained that he would have loved one of these boats on the Atlantic side where Pro Dive was located, but they were designed for the sort of calm seas usually found on the Caribbean side.

A five-minute ride brought us to one of the two large wrecks regularly dived in the area, the *St George*. The other is the retired *Atlantic Princess* ferry, which disappeared while being prepared for sinking, and was then found sunk in the shallow water near Bayahibe.

We decided to do a deep shorter dive on the *St George* followed by a longer shallow reef-dive at one of the other 15 local sites, to get a good overview of the area.

The *St George* is protected by the Parque Nacional and fishing is not permitted. Reserved for advanced divers, this cargo ship is one of the most famous and popular wrecks in the Dominican Republic.

SHE WAS BUILT in 1962 in Scotland and transported grain between Europe and the Americas. After 20 years the owners ran out of money for repairs and she was abandoned in Santo Domingo port.

In 1998 Hurricane George ravaged the ship even more, and she was renamed *St George* after the storm. A year later she was sunk in 45m, and sits mostly intact but at a slight angle.

We followed the mooring line down in 20m visibility. Out of the darkness, we could see the chimney marking the shallowest part of the wreck at 23m. Keeping to 15m, we swam to the bow and descended to take some photographs.

Pro Dive imposes a 30m depth limit on divers at the moment. There is a chamber in Santa Domingo, but it plays it safe.

After a few minutes at the bow, we followed the sponge- and coral-encrusted deck to the wheel-house, impressed by the size and austerity of the wreck.

It’s easy in decent vis to forget how deep you are. We soon had to ascend slightly to avoid setting off computer warnings.

Investigating the lifting-gear and wheel on deck, we ascended to the chimney,



Clockwise from opposite page: Looking into the *St George*'s chimney-stack; sponges on deck; over the bow; coral- and sponge-covered wheel.

passing a purple-sponge-covered porthole on our way. The wreck was full of fish. It can be penetrated if you have the air and time, which we didn't.

A cloud of creole wrasse wafted around

as we finished our dive above the stern. We had to surface after a 35-minute dive but this wreck left a lasting impression.

Delicious homemade cakes were served during the surface interval. The rain had abated, so we enjoyed our short journey over to Viva Shallow. Ivo told us that the National Cultural Ministry had sunk some genuine artefacts there to form an

underwater museum to attract divers.

The water was clear, and we could almost make out the shape of cannon and a huge anchor from above the surface. From below we could see quite a few coral- and sponge-encrusted cannon scattered around, just as if a ship had sunk but the ocean had claimed everything apart from these and a huge anchor.

The reef was fairly flat and surrounded by white sand at 9m that fingered its way into the reef here and there. Coral growth was much better than I had expected in this protected shallow area, very colourful and with many varieties of both soft and hard corals.

Sponges were everywhere, from giant barrels to azure vases and yellow and pink fingers. Huge purple sea-fans, which I now recognised as a staple of DR reefs, swayed prettily in the current, with resident schools of snapper using them as protection.

We saw several electric rays sleeping in the sandy fingers in the reef, and several moray species hiding in burrows. Painted and reef lobsters seemed to be under every overhang, and I spotted many cleaner shrimp hiding inside sponges, and an arrow crab making its home in a small azure vase sponge.

Trumpetfish tried to camouflage themselves in the reef by swimming vertically. A tiny boxfish hovered cutely about near an indentation in the reef.

Nearby, I found several fireworms on sea-fans. Ivo had been stung by one a few weeks earlier, while he was descending and it was free-swimming in the blue.

We wondered how it would have got there – this was very unusual behaviour. It had probably been mistaken for a tasty morsel by a fish that had plucked it from the reef, only to spit it out when it realised its mistake!

A squeak from Ivo told us he had found what he had promised, a long-snout seahorse, but he hadn't found just the one, but three! All were hooked onto algae fronds and swaying in the current.

Each one would turn its back on me as I tried to take photos, and I soon gave up and watched them from a distance.

After an 80-minute dive we returned to the boat, looking forward to lunch in Cafe Saona, but it turned out still to be waiting for a local fisherman to deliver the lionfish.

It had received none for several weeks, and the high price of the dishes made us think that perhaps parts of the Caribbean were at last winning the fight against the lionfish invasion.

Enjoying a tasty burger instead, we could only wish our dive trip could be extended, but were sure we would be returning to sample more of the surprisingly excellent diving the Dominican Republic has to offer.



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶▶ The diving area of the Dominican Republic is normally served by either Punta Cana or Santa Domingo airports. There are flights via Madrid or major US gateway cities and direct flights to Punta Cana twice a week with BA. Roads are good, car hire inexpensive, fuel cheap.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶▶ Pro Dive International (www.prodiveinternational.com) at the Occidental Resort Punta Cana (www.occidentalhotels.com).

WHEN TO GO ▶▶ Year round. Water temperatures range from 27°C in January to 32° in August. There is slightly more rain in August/ September in hurricane season, which may affect the visibility.

CURRENCY ▶▶ Dominican peso.

PRICES ▶▶ Flights from £460 return. A 10-night all-inclusive accommodation and diving package at the Occidental Resort costs from US \$1035pp.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶▶ www.godominicanrepublic.com

