

# Mexican Waves



In May **LISA COLLINS** conducted us through the amazing bull-shark experiences of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula – now, for our Caribbean special, she reports on the many other underwater diversions to be found on the coast



**TWO MINUTES' WALK** along the sparkling white-sand beach from our room at the Allegro in Playacar brought us to Pro Dive International's 5\* PADI dive-centre, located at the Royal Hideaway Hotel next door. We had set aside eight days to experience the best of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula dive-sites.

We were 50 minutes' drive from Cancun, and opposite the island of Cozumel. I was looking forward to the week, as I had dived Isla Mujeres and Cozumel but never here.

We analysed our nitrox tanks, supplied free to qualified divers, before they were loaded onto the dive-boat moored in the shallows. Most of the local sites are no

more than 10 minutes away, so after being briefed by Gustavo, our instructor for the week, we kitted up on shore. There was a slight swell as we carried our gear to the boat and climbed the ladder. The boat sped south, hugging the shoreline.

Most local dives are on the Great Maya or Mesoamerican barrier reef, which is only around 500m off shore and spans the 600-mile length of the peninsula all the way to Belize, Guatemala and the Bay of Honduras. Tortugas promised to be a gentle intro. I hoped to see a turtle as I back-rolled into the clear Caribbean.

The white-sandy seabed at 20m was scattered with coral, and we swam over reef full of giant and azure vase sponges,

and seafans swarming with fish.

A slight current carried us at just the right speed to view the marine life darting about. It was easy enough to stop from time to time to take a photo, by turning and finning gently into the current.

Gustavo spotted a turtle almost at the surface, heading up to take a breath.

At almost the same moment I was carried into the path of a giant barracuda, scarily motionless in the current above the reef with its mouthful of sharp teeth. After taking a few photos, I let the current take me further along the reef.

Unusually for this area we spotted two nudibranchs close to each other, which excited Gustavo.

Feeling serene, absorbed and enjoying the 28°C clear water and gentle current, I was startled when he shook me and pointed into the distance. There, on the edge of the wall, swam a large bull shark.

Pregnant bulls patrol the edge of the wall from December through to March, but are normally sighted a little further north. We had been lucky at Tortugas.

At Barracuda Reef, a series of five finger-like outcroppings separated by white sand also proved full of life.

A medium current carried us along the top of the fingers at around 7m, where pairs of French and grey angelfish swam. We dropped over the edge of the reef, hiding out of the current to explore the

**Left:** Blue tang on a healthy reef at Tortugas.

**Above, from left:** Friendly reef cuttlefish; three queen angelfish swimming comically upside-down; green turtle at Tortugas.

sides of the outcroppings down to 12m.

Another giant barracuda, mouth agape as it chased a snapper, was spotted a short distance away. It hightailed it as soon as I tried to approach.

**IN THE MIDDLE OUTCROPPING** was a small overhang with a swim-through. Three queen angelfish were comically swimming upside-down along the roof, feeding. Glassy sweepers and a shoal of porkfish held formation in the entrance.

Off across the seagrass-covered sandy bottom away from the reef, I spotted a large conch moving slowly. Swimming over, I found that it was a hermit crab.

And as we ascended to the top of the

reef, we spotted a golden-tailed moray eel making its home in a cut in the reef.

The Mesoamerican Barrier Reef has more than 500 recorded species of fish, 350 of molluscs and 65 of corals. Many areas are protected, but the invasion of lionfish after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 caused severe damage, because they ate nearly every reef-tending species, destroying large areas rapidly.

Aggressive culling of these lionfish has helped the reef to regenerate recently, and I noticed the difference from when I had previously dived the Yucatan Peninsula over the past five years.

We had hoped to do a sailfish trip run by Pro Dive in an area off Isla Mujeres, 



where the fish congregate from January to March. Unfortunately for us, the weather had been a little overcast and windy, which makes it difficult to spot the aggregations in the open ocean.

Rather than spend a fruitless day at sea in choppy waters, we decided to postpone the trip and do the bull-shark dive on offer instead. Our exciting encounters with the bull sharks I described last month, as they were exceptional enough to deserve their own stage. These dives are a hard-to-resist option between December and March.

Bull-shark dives normally happen in the morning, followed by a shallower reef dive before the boat heads back.

We did one of these second dives at a site called Jardine, where the 10m sand bottom appeared storm-damaged. That's

**Above, clockwise from left:** Painted lobster at Barracuda Reef; electric ray; arrow crab at Moc-Che Shallow; baby filefish hiding in hard corals; Pederson shrimp in a corkscrew anemone at Moc-Che.

**Below:** Gustavo reaches for a sunbeam at Chakmol.



fairly normal on shallower dives in the Caribbean, where reefs feel the force of hurricane season throughout our autumn.

Feeding among the brown soft corals and algae at Jardine, however, were throngs of snapper, tang, wrasse and grouper. Two large pufferfish approached, one inspecting my dome-port and posing for a few minutes. Later a large cuttlefish did the same. I get a privileged feeling when marine-life interacts in this way.

**A**NOTHER OF THOSE post-bull-shark dives occurred later in the week at Moc-Che Shallow, which Gustavo had said was a great site for smaller critters. I put on a macro lens.

At 10m the bottom rose more like a shallow rise in the sand than a reef, covered in seafans, soft corals and colourful sponges. A gentle dive with little current ensued, giving us plenty of time to search the nooks.

A Pederson shrimp danced about in a corkscrew anemone, looking as if it had springs for arms. Gustavo found a tiny baby boxfish cutely pouting. We also spotted an extremely well-camouflaged baby filefish hiding in a hard coral. After nearly 70 minutes, which seemed to pass in seconds, we returned to the surface.

The weather was getting slightly worse; sailfish were still off the agenda. It seemed a shame, because the sun was shining and only the odd cloud marred the blue sky, but the wind was whipping up the sea's surface, making it next to impossible to spot a sardine ball in open ocean.

So early the next morning a taxi took us the short distance to the ferry terminal, where we met Gustavo. The 45-minute crossing gave us time for a leisurely if breezy breakfast on the top deck.

We transferred to Pro Dive's Cozumel dive-boat for two morning drift-dives, the first at Santa Rosa Wall. There was a current, quite strong and visible from the surface. Cozumel is famed for incredible visibility and currents, as well as beautiful walls and abundant marine life.

Santa Rosa did not disappoint. We dived into 40m-plus visibility on a wall with a vertical drop-off, and as we were

swept along the wall we saw beautiful healthy soft and hard coral formations interspersed with crevices and overhangs where huge lobsters hid.

A large pack of horse-eyed jack hunted in the blue. Butterfly and angelfish darted all over the reef wall, pecking at the coral. The wall was a riot of colour, but as the current picked up I forgot about taking photos and let it carry me along.

Near the end of our dive, we ascended over the edge of the wall to a sandy bed where a southern sting ray was feeding.

The second dive, at Tormentos Reef, was only about 10 minutes away. The current felt milder than at Santa Rosa as we descended to a pile of old conch-shells at 15m. It carried us gently across a reef dotted with cleaning stations.

Large schools of grunt and snapper swam over the reef in formation. Ducking slightly out of the current to peer under an overhang, I spotted a giant green moray swaying gently while a cleaner shrimp risked its life cleaning the eel's teeth.

In a large crevice a big red crab guarded its hide, rising to snap a claw at us as we approached. We swam over a sandy patch in the reef, where a yellowish flutter of wings gave away an electric ray hovering above the sand. Hiding in plain view, a huge reef octopus eyed us warily.

Climbing back onto the boat, we wore big smiles. Cozumel had lived up to its reputation, and appeared as healthy and vibrant as when I had last dived it.

**R**EEFS (AND BULL-SHARKS) apart, Mexico is famous for the limestone sinkholes that have eroded over millennia to form freshwater-filled caverns. They are discovered in the dense brush and jungle covering most of the Yucatan Peninsula, and particularly around Tulum.

Many caverns have tunnels that reach the sea, causing a mix of fresh and salt water called a halocline – a bit like looking through a Vaseline-smear mask.

On the day we were due to dive the caverns we awoke to rain and thick cloud. This didn't bode well for obtaining the images I had seen taken by other photographers, of sun-rays streaking

into these *cenotes* from the surface.

Gustavo picked us up, bringing our kit from the dive-centre. The journey from Playacar to Tulum would take half an hour, plus 10 minutes to pick up snacks and drinks.

We were to dive two adjacent and photogenic *cenotes*, Kulkankan and Chakmol. We had dived them before, penetrating fairly deep into the system, but it was light-beams in the clear waters near the entrance that we wanted now.

As we took our time kitting up, the rain stopped and the cloud layer seemed to thin. We descended the stone steps to the entrance, and spots of blue peeked out from the clouds.

The *cenotes* are all on private land, and their facilities differ depending on the owner. Kulkankan and Chakmol are very popular and have good facilities, including toilets, showers and changing area. The paths are well-maintained and hand-railed steps into the water make access easy.

The water was a reasonable 25°, a little warmer than I had expected. I had grown very cold on my previous visit.

We descended to around 8m, swimming through a cut in the rocks to enter a very large cavern with several accesses to the surface. Finally, the sun came out and streaked brightly down

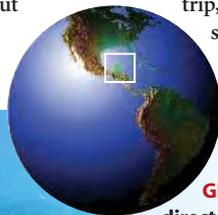
through the water. A magical feeling overcame us as we played in the sunlight. We had no wish to go deeper into the system, and spent the whole dive soaking up the beauty of the sunlit cave.

We entered Chakmol through a more easily accessible *cenote* called Little Brother. Again, we swam through a fissure in the rocks just below the surface for a few metres in temporary darkness before entering a beautiful large cave with an oval access to the surface as well as smaller side-openings.

The surface was half-filled with algae and debris from a recent storm, but we could still see sun beaming in. It was more concentrated in the smaller openings, and I signalled for Gustavo to try to catch a ray in his hand.

**WITH SAILFISH STILL** off the agenda we decided to visit another *cenote*. I requested beautiful, pond-like Carwash. Sadly, after two weeks of torrential rain, the water had turned orange because of leaching from the red mangroves.

I remembered a fairyland of tiny fish darting between long-stemmed underwater lilies. We had progressed a fair way through the system on the previous trip, but this time I asked if we could stay in the shallow 5m pond.



## FACTFILE

**GETTING THERE** ▶ BA offers direct flights to Cancun, or you can fly via major US gateway cities with several airlines.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Pro Dive has nine dive-shops operating on the Yucatan Peninsula. Lisa stayed at the Allegro Playacar, and used the centre at the Royal Hideaway Hotel next door, both at [barcelo.com](http://barcelo.com). Pro Dive offers dive-packages with accommodation at both hotels and others in the area, [prodivemex.com](http://prodivemex.com)

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Year round – hurricane season is between June and November, but the chances of being affected are low. Sailfish season is January-March, but relies on calm surface conditions. Bull-shark season is December-March. Air and sea temperatures range from 27-32°C, cenotes water from 23-26°.

**CURRENCY** ▶ Mexican peso.

**PRICES** ▶ BA has a flight/all-inclusive hotel package from £1150pp. A Yucatan Explorer Dive Package through Pro Dive, including four local dives, two cenotes and two Cozumel dives, costs US \$512.

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ [visitmexico.com](http://visitmexico.com)



**Above:** Pink lily stems rise almost to the surface at Carwash, reaching for the sun.

**Below left:** Looking up at the boats in notably clear waters.

**Below:** Snapper in an overhang at Barracuda Reef.

The day dawned cloudy again, but I hoped the sun would emerge, or at least a little blue sky. We could see the pink of the lilies around the pond's perimeter, right down to the bottom. It looked so different to how I remembered it.

Following the built-in steps into the pond, we saw two technical divers getting ready to penetrate the vast cave-system.

Keeping clear of them and gently finning around the edge of the pond at 4m to avoid kicking up the silt, we spent a very relaxing time weaving in and out of the pink and green lilies and watching the tiny freshwater fish dancing.

After 40 minutes Gustavo signalled to us to ascend, slowly and calmly, to the edge of the pool. There, motionless, was a 1.5m crocodile! We watched for several minutes, taking a few discreet photos without disturbing it. It was the icing on the cake of a great week's diving.

On our last day we relaxed and enjoyed another pleasure for which Mexico is famous – tequila! The sailfish would have to be our excuse for another visit. ◻

