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03



AT THE WILD SOUTH COAST KUBAS

TEXT // KARIN WENGER PHOTOS // ALEXANDER KIERMAYER

FOR ONE AND A HALF MONTHS THE SCHWEIZER KARIN WENGER AND HER FRIEND ALEXANDER KIERMAYER SAILED THE SOUTH COAST OF CUBA ON THEIR SHIP "MABUL".

View of the sleepy fishing village of Cabo Cruz on the south coast of Cuba.

**IN CUBA YOU CAN
DIVING ALL YEAR ROUND,
THERE IS ALMOST NO CURRENT
AND THE TEMPERATURE IS
AROUND 29 DEGREES CELSIUS.**

As we approach Cuba one early morning in May after three days and three nights on the open sea, we immediately realize that everything is different here. In the bay off Santiago de Cuba, in south-eastern Cuba, men are drifting across the water on truck tires, a paddle in one hand and a fishing line in the other. "For us Cubans, there has been no fuel for weeks, so the fishermen can't go out, the roads are empty and we barely have any gas for cooking," says Norbert, the harbour master of the state-run Marlin Marina, after we have moored our sailing boat Mabul to the badly damaged pier. Cuba is in the worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. We were aware of these circumstances and prepared ourselves accordingly, loading our sailing boat Mabul with medicines, food, footballs, clothes and fishing gear, things that we are gradually giving away or swapping.



Above The authors Karin Wenger and Alexander Kiermayer with dinghy captain at Cayo Cinco Balas

Bottom grouper "Nassau grouper".



Above "Mabul" at anchor at Cayo Guano del Este with the famous lighthouse.

Below Karin Wenger and Alexander Kiermayer are delighted with the filled bottles.

wind generator, our desalination plant, Starlink Internet and our Bauer submersible compressor.

Our destination is the Queen's Gardens or Jardines de la Reina as Christopher Columbus called them in honor of the Spanish queen. The archipelago extends over

2,000 square kilometers and has been a huge marine reserve since 1996. Reef sharks, sea sharks and nurse sharks, red snappers, groupers, giant jacks, whales and much more can be spotted here. The reefs have deep valleys and diverse corals and were one of Fidel Castro's favorite fishing and diving spots. You can dive here all year round, current

there are almost none and the temperature is around 29 degrees Celsius. As the area is a marine reserve, the number of diving tourists is limited. As we have a PE100 diving compressor on board thanks to the generous sponsorship of Bauer Compressors, we can also dive in the most remote areas.





IN THE MEANTIME, THE TWO 4,000 NAUTICAL MILES IN THE CARIBBEAN AND THANKS TO YOUR PE100 DIVING COMPRESSOR COUNTLESS DIVES ON SECLUDED REEFS WITH BAUER COMPRESSORS.

However, we are traveling slowly with the sailboat, no faster than with a bike, and so it took us a week to get from Santiago de Cuba to the first small islands of the Jardines de la Reina - a week in which we didn't meet a single soul and had to ride a bike each time, anchoring off deserted islands in the evening. However, our first attempt at diving at Cayo Anclitas ends with an unpleasant encounter. I jump into the water with a snorkel and mask to look for the best entry point to the reef. Suddenly I feel something pulling on my foot. As I look underwater, I see a huge sea turtle diving down. I immediately swim back to the boat and we inspect the damage: The turtle's beak is marked as a bloody Bite wound on both sides of my ankle, diving is out of the question for the time being. Instead of diving down, we sail a few islands further and drop anchor in the calm waters between a reef and a small



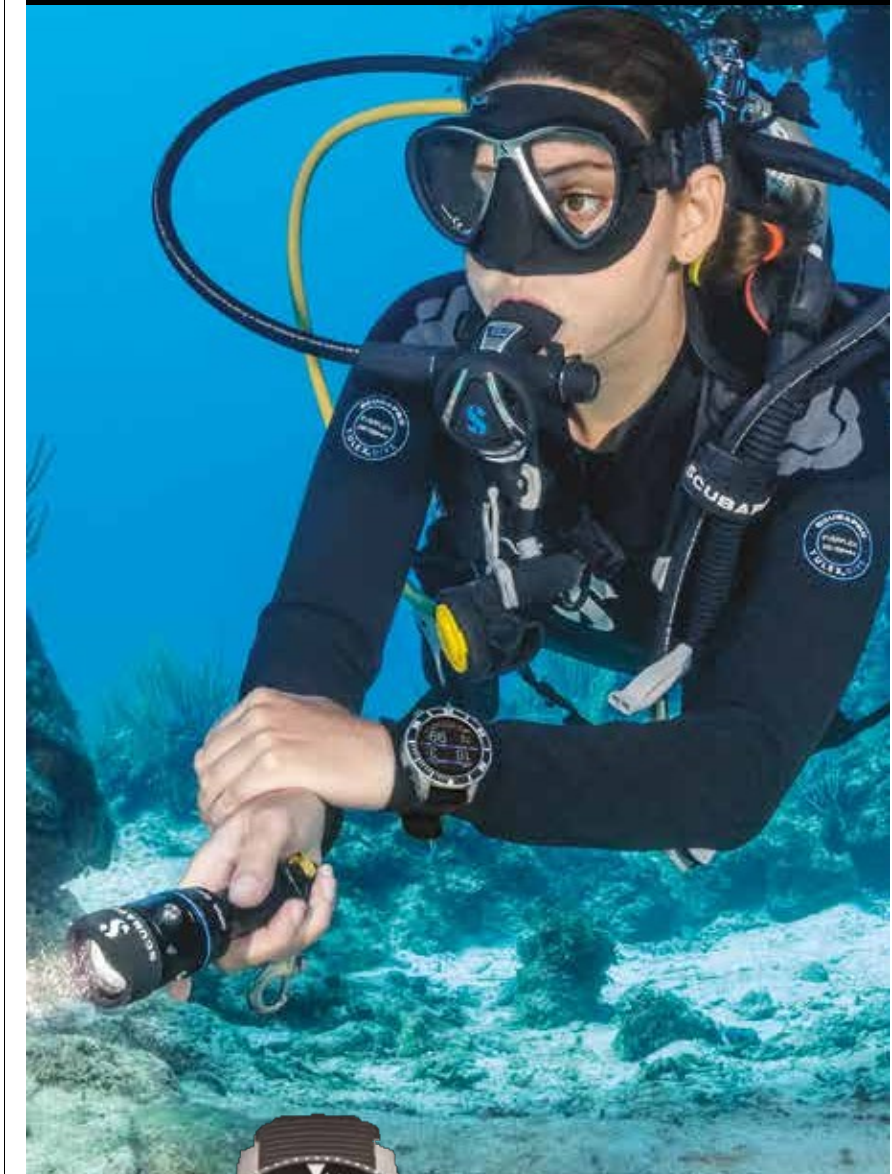
island. Here, the next day, we take our small dinghy and use our Navionics nautical charts to sail close to the island reef edge to dive there. Since Santiago de Cuba, we have had a diver friend on board so that someone can always stay on board to collect the two other divers after the dive and drive them back to Mabul.

The marine area lives up to its name beneath the surface of the water, because once submerged, we find ourselves in endless and untouched royal gardens of soft corals, sponges and sea fans, which are swarmed by colorful reef fish and whose sandy bottom is used by nurse sharks as a place to rest. On one dive we are accompanied by a Shipkeeper fish for a whole hour, as if just waiting for the right moment to suck us in. The diversity is so impressive that we stay at anchor for a week, refill our tanks with the Bauer compressor after every dive and then dive off again. Here you can clearly see how healthy a reef is and how incredibly rich in fish a wee-



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Below A shoal of mackerel turning circles

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The area can be a natural reserve if it is not destroyed by unbridled mass tourism and industrial fishing.

After a week in which we have thoroughly explored the long-drawn reef, we travel on to Cienfuegos, from where we moor the "Mabul" in a marina to make a short detour ashore to Havana before sailing to Cayo Largo in a multi-day trip. This long island stretches over 25 kilometers and is part of the Canarreos archipelago. With its powdered sugar beaches, turquoise, crystal-clear sea and a multitude of excellent diving spots, the island is actually a popular vacation destination, but has hardly been visited by tourists since the pandemic.

First, we visit the island's sea turtle center and are greeted by "El Russo", an employee who has been looking after the turtles for 30 years. In one part of the center, hundreds of turtle eggs are precisely marked and buried under sand. Every year, they would dig up 10 to 12,000 eggs from their nests on the beach and lay them here in the sandy soil.

of the center wieder buried. This is because the beaches are eroding more and more, so that the water regularly washes the eggs into the sea before the turtles have hatched, explains El Russo. At the turtle center, however, they are protected and after the finger-sized turtles hatch, they are brought to the beach after a few days to begin their journey into the sea. Thanks to the small center, loggerhead and hawksbill turtles as well as green sea turtles are given a chance at life.

Cayo Largo is also a paradise for divers. As all the buoys have been destroyed in recent years, we can't moor at any dive site to dive on our own. We therefore dive with the local dive operator and are led into a world of countless reef and nurse sharks. During one dive, we also encounter a clingy grouper that approaches curiously but has a deep wound on its back. Although we are in a marine reserve here, where fishing is prohibited, boats occasionally arrive whose crews hunt the local fish with harpoons,



Above Mangrove island Cayo Granada in the Jardines de la Reina.

Below A four-eye Butterflyfish does the honors



THIS LONG ISLAND STRETCHES OVER 25 KILOMETERS AND BELONGS TO THE CANARREOS ARCHIPELAGO.

explains our dive guide. After a month and a half along Cuba's wild south coast, it's time for us to sail on to Mexico. Another diving area awaits us there: the cenotes of Yucatán and the healthy, fish-rich reefs off Cozumel.

The two have now covered 4,000 sea miles in the Caribbean and, thanks to their PE100 diving compressor from Bauer Kompressoren, they have made countless dives on common reefs. What they experience on their journey and the challenges they face can be heard in their podcast "BoatCast Mabul".