

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

May 2007

Vol. 22, No. 5

Scuba Coiba, Panama, Pacific Coast

from penal colony to protected marine site

IN THIS ISSUE:

Scuba Coiba, Panama.....	1
DAN Debunks Antioxidants Before Diving.....	3
Must-Read Fish ID Books...	5
Get Published in the 2008 Chapbook.....	6
Travel Report Form.....	7
How Many Divers Are There?.....	9
The Deal with Dive Shop Travel.....	9
Tank Blackout	11
Using Dive Computers to Lower Your Risk for DCS.....	12
Dive Computer Recall.....	13
Diving and Hearing Loss...	14
Join Undercurrent Online..	15
Flotsam and Jetsam.....	15

www.undercurrent.org

Editorial Office:

Ben Davison
Publisher and Editor
Undercurrent
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102
Sausalito, CA 94965
BenDavison@undercurrent.org

Dear Reader:

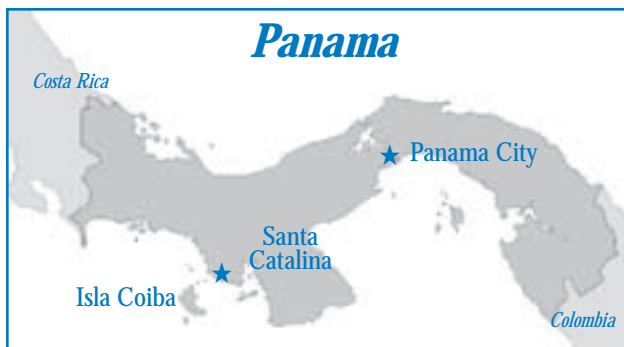
Forty minutes into a dive on the Cholos sea mount, I peeked over a ledge to find an intense boil of white-tipped sharks. Several two-foot bluefin trevally jacks were in the action, along with scissortail chromis, Pacific creolefish and other small creatures at the edges of this mysterious fish blender. I, my two friends and our divemaster Glenn Messingham had front row seats at a display of pure energy, punctuated with strikes by one fish at another.

It was but one of the dramatic scenes I saw underwater during my January stay at Isla Coiba, a 20-mile-long island that lies 25 miles from the fishing town of Santa Catalina on Panama's Pacific coast. The visibility and currents can be problematic, but the fish life is of Jurassic proportions. Glenn, who had promised me that he would find giant frogfish, made good on that same dive by finding three huge yellow ones. Cholos, like many dive sites around Isla Coiba, is like Cozumel, but with rocks. Huge pinnacles, cracks and ledges top out at 45 feet. The currents have mood swings, either coming from one direction or another or just lying still.

Undercurrent wrote about Scuba Coiba last year and its mainland dives near Santa Catalina, but the prime diving is found on its three-day trips to Isla Coiba. Until recently, Isla Coiba was a penal colony, but thankfully it is now part of Coiba National Park and UNESCO World Heritage Site, about 1,000 square miles.



Isla Coiba's only accommodations



There are no condos, casinos or commercial fishing on the island. Accommodations are dorm-style, but roughing it on the food and lodging is worth waking up in your own private paradise to bird songs, doing three interesting dives per day, and spending intervals on beautiful uninhabited isles watching the sand crabs or looking for crocodile tracks. Panama itself is easy to get to from any U.S. airport, offering as much lush beauty and rainforest wonder as its next-door neighbor

Costa Rica but with fewer people and at a lower cost. Forget about the days of Noriega - this is a friendly, gringo-easy country with good roads, cheap gas, clean tap water, and English is widely understood.

I rented a car at the Panama City airport for a pleasant 4.5 hour drive to Santa Catalina, most of it on the four-lane Pan American Highway. The rain forest soon gave way to cane fields, then pastures. I entered Santa Catalina, where I stopped at the first sign I saw, Sol y Mar. After a steep stair climb, I settled into a surprisingly modern room. I then visited Scuba Coiba's headquarters, at the foot of the town's main street to the beach, and made plans to start my three-day trip the next morning.

The 75-minute boat ride from Santa Catalina to the Coiba archipelago was fortunately smooth. After unloading bags and food at the base camp, we went out for dives in the shop's 25-foot dive panga with a Bimini top and 80-horsepower Yamaha motor. Even with just three divers, Scuba Coiba used a three-person crew for all dives - Glenn, dive assistant Luis Terrero and boat captain Orlando. The boat had no rinse tank, but was equipped with tank racks, ladder, DAN O2 kit and a radio. For a multiple-day trip like mine, they brought a fourth staffer, a cook named Manny who also refilled tanks from the dive shop's compressor on the island. Air fills for the 80-cu-ft. tanks were consistently 3,000 psi.

Glenn, a Canadian expat who had been working at Scuba Coiba for the past year, took us to a site he hadn't dived at before, Dos Tetas (yeah, you got it) on the western side of the island. There are no buoyed sites; boats anchor only to set a descent line that is then hauled in for drift diving. Luis found Dos Tetas straight away and joined us on that dive. It turned out to be my favorite, with 50- to 100-foot visibility, big craggy formations, and incredible schools. At one point, swarms of big-eye trevally, blue-and-gold snapper and spottail grunts were in view all at once, with gafftopsail pompano overhead. I did an occasional 360 just to marvel at the numbers, size and variety. Beneath me, a shark cruised through a car wash of small de-lousing fish, and I eased into a school of king angels. Since Glenn, divemaster at the only dive operation within 100 miles, was here for the first time, it's a good bet that few of these fish had seen a diver before. I could make out a loose school of blackfin barracuda cruising overhead, and my buddy pointed off in the blue to a couple of reef cornetfish. As we made our way to the top of the two tetas at 30-foot depths, I played hide-and-seek with various tube blennies, including the Panamic barnacle blenny with its bright red eyes.

There were a few restrictions: No deco diving, and signal at 700 psi to start ascent. Glenn said he didn't plan any dives deeper than 85 feet but we could go where we wanted, as long as we stayed within sight. I never wanted to go deeper, as the fish action and better visibility were a little above. Next was a site near the mouth of the Santa Cruz River. Near the bottom at 75 feet, we were in murky water with 15-foot visibility, but when I moved up to 60 feet, visibility increased to 50 feet. Cool down-currents breezed through. The rocky

slopes held more variety of hard corals than other sites. This was an aquarium dive, with loads of giant damsels, amarillo snappers, razor surgeonfish, guinea fowl puffers and a few starry morays. Glenn pointed to a scorpion fish that I never would have seen because it has better camouflage than its Caribbean cousins. My buddy showed me a Panamic green moray as fat as a telephone pole but with a normal-size head, giving it the look of a bizarre mutant.

Our base camp was at Coiba Park's ranger station. Pretty spartan, the only luxury being hammocks strung up in shady spots. Its cabañas - the only accommodations on the island - were clean but modest. We three shared a room with six twin beds and a bathroom with shower. The room was air-conditioned, but it was cool enough for us to kill the AC and enjoy the night breeze and sounds. The park could have bunked others in our room, but it was far from crowded while we were there. Another cabaña had a group of North Americans from a sport fishing boat, and some students set up tents on the beach.

Between dives, we ate lunch on picnic tables. Panama homecooking, such as chicken soup with potatoes and various Caribbean root vegetables, was basic but most welcome. Crimson-backed tanagers and tropical kingbirds flitted by while some park workers played dominoes at another table. Dinner was fish stew. We dodged the Kool-Aid-like beverage offered by bringing our own beer (at \$3 per six-pack, who can resist?). The tap water is potable here.

One morning, after a shot of coffee at 6:30 am, I took a short stroll on the nature trail to find birds and agouti. Coiba is just about the last stand in Panama for the gorgeous scarlet macaw, and there are 36 types of mammals here, including mantled howler and white-faced monkeys, but seeing them involved a boat trip to a longer trail far from the park HQ. Tempting, but not appealing enough for me to skip a couple of dives.

We had good visibility, water temperatures in the low 80s and manageable currents on most dives. However, the upwellings and convergent currents that make it a fish mecca can also make diving more difficult. Scuba Coiba's Austrian expat owner Herbie Sunk told me that divers often encounter some

DAN Debunks Antioxidants Before Diving

You may have seen the study making the rounds in publications and on the Internet earlier this year about how antioxidants can reduce hazards to divers' cardiovascular systems while underwater. The doctors at Divers Alert Network say it's much ado about nothing.

In a study published in the *Journal of Physiology*, researchers at the University of Split School of Medicine in Croatia said vitamins C and E can particularly lower divers' risk for acute endothelial dysfunction, which is the inability of arteries to dilate fully and release nitric oxide, something that can lead to heart attacks and strokes. They gave standard oral doses of vitamins C (two grams) and E (265 milligrams) to divers two hours before a 30-minute dive to 100 feet. Doing cardiovascular tests before and after the dive with ultrasound, they found divers' pulmonary artery and heart functions were unaffected, and that the vitamins had a positive effect on the vascular endothelium, a layer of cells that regulates and stimulates blood

flow throughout the body. Their conclusion: Popping a multivitamin before going underwater can prevent some of diving's negative effects on your cardiovascular system.

Not so, says Jake Freiburger, M.D., DAN's associate medical director. The measurement of arteries' ability to dilate fully and coagulate is purely a research tool, and endothelial dysfunction is a non-specific term. "Chronic endothelial dysfunction is probably bad, but this study did not show that," he says. Even though the study showed a relationship between endothelial dysfunction and diving, it did not prove that diving was the cause. "I would categorize this as something that happens alongside of something else. The bottom line here is that this is not very meaningful."

Freiburger recommends that divers not load up on antioxidants anyway, in light of recent reports showing that big doses may not be so beneficial. Results of a study of 232,000 people published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* suggest that too much beta carotene, vitamin A, and vitamin E can increase one's mortality risk, but the effect of vitamin C is still unclear.

dives with 20-foot visibility. Late February through April typically marks the time for upwellings of cold water below thermoclines, along with some pelagics.

Scuba Coiba often can't dive Mali Mali (one of many sites named by local fishermen) due to currents, but it was quite mellow for us. I found a peacock razorfish with a tower of a dorsal fin and an argus moray, the sixth moray species I saw on this trip, swimming freely. A green was out in the open, enjoying a cleaning, while large tarpon swam above.

I saw several white-tipped sharks (but no other sharks) on every Coiba dive. Oddly, they are rarely found on dives at the mainland near Santa Catalina. During my trip I positively ID'd 75 fish, as I broke in Paul Humann's new Baja to Panama book.

Just three of those are found in the Caribbean: eagle rays, tarpon, and balloonfish. Many others are genus-mates, as the isthmus closed only 2.5 million years ago. You Caribbean divers will readily recognize the Panamic porkfish, Mexican goatfish, flagtail tilefish and dozens more since you're already on good terms with their siblings. My dive partner, an invertebrate nut, was busy finding new, strange urchins and starfish, very different from those I've seen in the Sea of Cortez. After my trip, I wrote to Humann begging for an Eastern Pacific invertebrate book (but he's occupied for the next year compiling one for the Indo-Pacific).

Three days worked well for great diving and kicking back in a hammock with David McCullough's book, The Path Between the Seas, a history of the Panama Canal. A three-day, nine-dive trip to Isla Coiba is a little pricey, but reasonable considering that they took four staff for our group of three. Essentially we had a private charter trip, but the "private" part may not last. Scuba Coiba has eked out an existence for four years, but since Undercurrent "discovered" it a year ago, I was told, business has doubled and now includes serious divers.

Back in Santa Catalina, we landed at the beach and waded to shore. The crew lugged, washed and secured our gear. Granted, three days does not a full trip make, so I headed for my room back at Sol Y Mar, stopping en route to stock the mini-fridge. I spent a couple of more days in Santa Catalina, doing two dives per day to nearby sites (20 minutes per trip), with plenty of time to kick back. This is the kind of place where pickup trucks share the main street with kids playing ball and folks on horseback. After a couple of days, I felt like I recognized half the people in town. (For a more detailed report on Santa Catalina, see Undercurrent's March 2006 issue.)

The diving off the coast is similar to Isla Coiba but with fewer big schools and less variety in the sites. We dived Snapper Point twice (Herbie Sunk called it the best near-shore site) on different sides of the seamount, with very different fish life and terrain. The first dive was very fishy, with lots of razor surgeons, king angels, jacks, the odd-shaped bumphead parrot, and hundreds of Pacific creolefish seeming to follow us around. On our return trip, I sampled a stiff surface current. After I backrolled, Luis dropped a hand line

Scuba Coiba, Panama

Diving (*experienced*) ★★★★★

(*under good conditions*)

Diving (*beginners*) ★★

Snorkeling (*Isla Coiba*) ★★

Service and Attitude ★★★★★

Accommodation (*Isla Coiba*) ★

Food (*Coiba*) ★★

Accommodation (*Santa Catalina*) ★★★★★

Food (*Santa Catalina*) ★★★★★

Money's Worth ★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide Scale

Know Your Fish: Must-Read Books for Divers

If you're a serious diver, you want to know what you see in the deep. The only way is to take a good book with you to identify the fish and study their behavior. But don't rely on your dive resort or liveaboard to have it on hand—most stock a few dog-eared copies, but they may not be current or complete, or else another guest may have taken the book you need to his room.

Here are the best Caribbean and Pacific Coast ID books to add to your reference library. I'm never without these books when I travel to those sites, and I refer to them when I write. You can find longer descriptions on our website at www.undercurrent.org.

Buy these from *Undercurrent* by going to the book page on www.undercurrent.org. You'll get them for the price currently listed on Amazon.com, although they are subject to change. All the profits from book sales go directly to programs that are saving coral reefs.

The Caribbean

The Reef Set: Reef Fish, Reef Creatures and Reef Coral, by Paul Humann and Ned Deloach. This three-volume set is the unparalleled source for information on Caribbean sea life and identification. Because so many species of fish continually confuse divers with their variable colors and markings, the *Reef Fish Identification's* third edition (512 pages) covers them all. The *Reef Creatures* book (488 pages) covers sponges, nudibranchs, octopus, crustaceans, Christmas tree worms and more. The *Reef Coral* book (252 pages) helps you identify all the hard and soft corals, spawning, and even the growth on top of corals, as well as algae and other plant life. Each book retails for \$40, but the boxed set is discounted by 37 percent. Hardcover with shelf case, 7 x 10 inches, \$75. Paperback with weather-resistant canvas bag, 7 x 10 inches, \$85.

A Guide to the Coral Reefs of the Caribbean, by Mark D. Spalding. This book doubles as a guide to the natural history of coral reefs and a diver's travel guide. It covers

35 dive destinations with key information on reefs, marine parks and remote places, and a photographic field guide of the marine flora and fauna. Spalding, a coral reef scientist, delves into eco-problems with a focus on what each person can do to protect the reefs. Paperback, 7 x 10 inches, \$24.95.

Pacific Coast of Mexico and Central America

Fishes of the Tropical Eastern Pacific, by Gerald R. Allen and D. Ross Robertson. The ultimate ID book for the Baja, Costa Rica, the Galapagos and the Sea of Cortez. Photo-packed pages cover 680 species of sharks and sailfish, wrasses and razorfish, pipefish and pearlfish. Sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute, Drs. Gerald Allen and Ross Robertson's definitive volume describes and comments on these critters' remarkable behaviors. Hardbound, 8.8 x 11.5 inches, 332 pages, \$85.

Sea of Cortez Marine Animals, by Daniel W. Gotshall. The book you'll need in order to identify critters anywhere along Mexico's Pacific Coast, all the way to Panama. Gotshall, a marine biologist with 34 years' research experience, has more than 250 photos of fish, corals, nudibranchs, lobsters, sea stars, and other critters endemic to these waters. There are tips on how to identify each animal and where to spot it. Paperback, 7 x 9 inches, 112 pages, \$21.95.

Reef Fish Identification: Baja to Panama, by Paul Humann and Ned Deloach. The latest edition in Humann's series of marine life books, and the most comprehensive field guide for identifying reef fishes from the Gulf of California to the Pacific coast of Panama, including offshore islands. More than 500 photographs of 400 species in their natural habitat. Each species' portrait includes the fish's common, scientific and family names, size range, description, visually distinctive features, preferred habitat, typical behavior, depth range, and geographical distribution. Paperback, 6.5 x 9 inches, 364 pages, \$39.95.

to pull me to the anchor line. As I made my way down, the divers above looked like socks on a clothesline in a stiff wind. Then the current diminished to a slight breeze near the bottom. This side offered fewer fish but did boast a slope covered in sea fans, some housing long-nosed hawkfish. My friend took pictures of some weird-looking urchins with electric blue spots, white spines and a central cap. Other dives off Santa Catalina are on similar rocky formations with scant coral, but every hole is a fish haven. In one, I found a Pacific dog snapper so big I swear it could not get out. Between dives, we spent an hour on a deserted black-sand beach. It's BYO for snacks and drinks on the local dives. After a day of diving, I stopped at a little joint near the dive shop for a lunch of rice and beans, and swapped stories with Dutch surfers who had tried out the

waves at Estero Beach, one mile out of town. On the way back to Sol y Mar, I usually picked up a beer at the outdoor bar filled with locals, sometimes dancing and always listening to loud music. The only other folks at the four-room inn were a Utah couple who were biking all over Panama. One night, I joined them for dinner at Pide, a small restaurant run by an Argentine that serves grilled meat, fish or prawns with the signature chimichurri sauce. Locals and the dive staff are more likely to be found at an Italian-run place that serves good pizza. These are the three restaurants in town, all family-run, outdoors and good joints to make friends and exchange email addresses.

I love being far from destinations where Carlos n' Charlie's is around the corner from the Hard Rock Café. Santa Catalina is on the opposite end of that spectrum. It may not be for long. It's been "discovered," not only by Undercurrent but by land speculators, too. Sol y Mar's owner Luis Silva told me that when he came here 11 years ago, most folks didn't have indoor toilets but now some of them have satellite TV or a nice truck as a result of selling their land. Condos can't be many years off. I felt pretty good about crossing the isthmus ahead of the crowd.

-M.A.



Scuba Coiba charges \$580 for a three-day, nine-dive trip, including meals, cabaña and park fee...Two-tank day trips from Santa Catalina are \$55 for near-shore sites, \$95 (+\$10 park fee) for day trips to Coiba ... Ask for a discount for multi-days diving with more than one person ... Scuba Coiba offers certifications and gear rentals but it only has 3-mm shorty wetsuits, and no Nitrox ... No decent snorkeling from the mainland, but non-divers can tag along cheaply (\$85 for a three-day trip) to Isla Coiba, where there is good snorkeling from the boat ... The best way to reach owner Herbie Sunk was by e-mail -- he was not very prompt with replies but he was helpful, and he also arranges overnight accommodations at a few choices in town ... American, Continental, Delta and Panama's Copa Air fly to Panama City for approximately \$550 to \$650 ... In Panama City, I stayed at Hotel Marbella (\$45 for a double with breakfast included; hmarbella@cablonda.net)... I rented a car, but if you are going only to Santa Catalina and Coiba, you can easily use the frequent buses ... To break up the return trip, I spent a day in El Valle in the hills below the cloud forest near Panama City to do some birding; day trips from Panama City are very easy to arrange to the canal locks, Soberanía rainforest park, or Colón ... Santa Catalina is dirt cheap: A double room at Sol y Mar with mini-fridge, A/C, hot shower and satellite TV is \$40 ... good dinners are \$6, breakfast \$2, and beer \$1 ... Scuba Coiba's website: www.scubacoiba.com.

Get Published in the 2008 Chapbook!

We need your travel review for the 2008 Travelin' Divers Chapbook. Here are the three ways to send it in:

1. Complete the online form and send it back to our website: www.undercurrent.org/subscribers/UCnow/sa_rdrprt.php. (While you're there, sign up for an online membership, and you can search eight years of chapbooks and *Undercurrent*.)
2. Send your report in an e-mail or as an attachment to us at editor@undercurrent.org. Don't forget to put your name on the report.
3. Fill out the form on the opposite page (it is double-sided so you can fill out two trips) and mail it to Undercurrent, 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102, Sausalito, CA, 94965; or fax it to us at (415) 289-0137.

- Ben Davison