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TRAVEL

Making sense of Cuba

The country is full of idiosyncrasies, except when one is underneath the waves



The Bay of Pigs on the south coast of Cuba on August 17, 2006. Best known as the site of the CIA's botched 1961 invasion, the site is now a diving destination.

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Dispatch is a series of first-person stories from the road

There's much about Cuba that just doesn't make any sense.

I sat once in a restaurant that had a dozen tables all adorned in fine linen, set with gleaming glassware and quality china and surrounded by beautiful hand-carved wooden chairs. The staff were dressed immaculately in freshly pressed pants, polished black shoes, starched shirts and sharp burgundy vests. A fine cabinet held a good selection of wines, and the fridge was full of cold beer. The place really seemed to have its act together. There had been investment, clearly, and attention to detail.

Yet in the entire establishment, there was only one menu, a tattered and neglected booklet, and I would have to wait half an hour for it to make its way to every guest at every table before I could look at its single, soggy page.

It wasn't a problem. I had a lot of time and the view was good. It just didn't make any sense.

Cuban dive operations, I would soon discover, can be no less idiosyncratic.

As the guidebook suggested, I sought out the National Parks Office in Playa Larga, on Cuba's southwest coast, to make arrangements. A pictograph of a diver was posted at the door, and inside, the walls were plastered with photos of strange fish and corals galore and divers with silly grins casting columns of bubbles up through clear, turquoise water. This seemed certainly to be the place to book a dive.

"*Lo siento,*" the man behind the desk said. "*No possible.*"

"I see," I said, looking around at all the pictures of people clearly participating in the sport of scuba, and down at a rack of pamphlets containing dive-package details and day rates.

"*Por que?*" I asked.

"*No possible,*" the man said.

Apparently, I'd have to make arrangements through my *casa particulaire* – Cuban accommodations for tourists like me.

"What name your *casa particulaire?*" he asked. "Where you stay?"

Well, I acknowledged, it didn't make any sense, but my *casa particulaire* didn't seem to have any particular name.

"It's got a red roof," I offered, as if that were useful to anyone, and turned to leave.

Arrangements were eventually made, and the next morning a '57 Chevy school bus pulled up at my *casa*, and off we went to the dive centre, a dilapidated concrete structure where Carlos, our dive master, was waiting.



“*Bienvenido*,” he said, issuing me a wetsuit – a fluorescent purple and green affair manufactured some time in 1982 – a pair of flippers (one size 10, one size 12) and a snorkel strapped to a mask with a bungee cord.

I was also given a “Certificate of Discharge,” a strange sort of waiver on which I was required to confirm that I wasn’t pregnant, had no “tetanus spasm,” “active tuberculosis” or “tendency to haemophilia” and wasn’t experiencing any “losing of knowledge.”

At the bottom was the bewildering line: “It is an indispensable requirement that this document could be signed.” What a paradox, I thought, and signed it anyway. Soon we were off to Bahia de Cochinos, a place best known to the rest of the world as the Bay of Pigs, site of the CIA’s famously botched invasion of 1961.

I’d paid for two dives, one in the open bay and the other to a nearby underwater cave. But when we got to the cave site, there was a problem.

“*No possible caverna*,” Carlos said. “*No bateria por lampara*.”

Oh, dear, I thought, and said I’d take a refund.

“Ahhh,” Carlos began. “No possible refund.”

“Not possible?” I asked, recalling another cryptic clause from the Certificate of Discharge: “The diving center is not responsible with the losing of objects, jewels, money in cash, credit cards, bonus or any payment instrument.”

“No, because bus has taken *deniro al banco* already,” Carlos said.

“Nonsense,” I said. We were still standing on the bus.

Coming to terms with this hole in an otherwise watertight pretext, Carlos gave me back my money.

The dive itself was beautiful, an iridescent explosion of multicoloured fish, towering tube corals and tropical barnacles.

We also came across the broken carcass of a U.S. attack boat, laid to rest by Fidel’s forces more than 50 years ago.

It is a strangely serene sight, and smacks of a certain order, underneath the waves, away from the confusion above, where there are no questions or deceptions, where the big fish eat the little fish and life reclaims the scuttled remains of human folly.

It is a little part of Cuba that makes a lot of sense.

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