



Introduction

Why getting to dive in Old Providence and St. Catalina?

The islands of Old Providence and St. Catalina are little known not only by the common man but also by amateurs and diving professionals, and even by coral reefs specialists. Important books lack both descriptions and maps of the islands. So, what is the benefit of exploring such an unknown destination? Or why risk traveling so far to some lost islands of the western Caribbean when you could go to Bonaire or Cozumel?

A panoramic (see cover) or a satellite image (page 5) quickly answers these questions and perhaps provokes yet another question: is it possible that this



archipelago, with one of the largest coral reef complexes and one of the few authentic barrier reefs on the planet, is one of the least known destinations for divers and scientists? This guide shows that these islands have remarkable surprises awaiting to be discovered by those who risk the trip.

The reef formations which surround Old Providence and St. Catalina form a vast oceanic coral reef complex with a barrier reef along the rim, secondary barriers and submerged reefs, coastal lagoon reefs, belt and pinnacle reefs in addition to patchy reefs and lagoonal micro-atolls. Old Providence's barrier reef, with a length close to 20.5 miles, is the second longest barrier reef in the Caribbean and one of the largest and most accessible in the world. Because of their singular significance in the western hemisphere, the islands were declared by UNESCO as the nucleus of the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve, which includes the entire archipelago: San Andres Island, numerous cays, shoals, islets and atolls, which remain unexplored by divers and scientists.

Coral reef appearance and development results from special conditions, the same which are optimal for diving: waters of permanent and profound clarity, warm temperatures, and stability spanning millennia, during which the coral structures are able to reach high levels of complexity and great depth. Here are some of the reasons for diving in Old Providence and St. Catalina: exploration of reefs in their maximum



development stage and, for expert divers and researchers, diving to great depths where, with the appropriate precautions, it is possible to discover unknown spaces where in other places are only deserts of obscurity.

Of course, one finds what is found in the rest of the Caribbean, but at exceptional levels: densely covered submarine terraces with combinations of all kinds of reef organisms such as innumerable algae, sponges, hard and soft corals, anemones, sea snails, fish and other creatures of exotic beauty. Extremely abundant and exceptional in the Caribbean are the impressive walls,



ideal for diving because the cliff faces are carpeted in intensely-colored organisms adapted to the dim light.

To avoid raising false expectations, it must be pointed out, however, that large animals do not abound. Still, it's rare if during a dive one cannot see barracudas, sharks, turtles, or large rays, and it is almost impossible to avoid encountering lobsters, eels as well as groupers and other large fishes. The reef complex of Old Providence and St. Catalina is not an ideal place for those who expect to see dolphins, whales, or enormous schools of large fish, though they do exist and occasionally provide surprises or frights.

On the other hand, it provides a very secure dive with minimal risk of accidents, with full visibility, adequate for both beginners and children and ideal for a detailed observation dive.

You could say that the reef is a giant for miniaturists: clouds of tiny fish of hundreds of different species, cracks, grooves, caves, caverns, walls inhabited by the entire gamut of reef creatures. For large underwater landscapes lovers: the clear waters allows you to see hills, cliffs, gorges, and promontories; the vast geomorphology of marine bottoms is also an object of interest and study. In this way, the reef

complex of Old Providence and St. Catalina is, above all, for the integral diver. For those who value each site and its particularities and who are open to explore new possibilities and places, to enjoy safe dives or assume the risks of more demanding dives, to thoroughly experience wall-diving, to photograph or take video of the beauty of the reef, and to learn more about the sea. It is ideal for those who desire, in the fullest





sense of the word, to submerge in an unforgettable experience.

This guide presents detailed descriptions of about 45 of the best dive sites in the islands. Dive site descriptions, besides including useful information about marine life, offer details about depth, accessibility and difficulty level, which will help you choose with security, according to your skills and abilities, so that you can fulfill your expectations.

Moreover, this guide contains, besides the services offered to divers, information about accommodations, restaurants and other activities, such as walking routes, horse rides, trips, night life, as well as an overview of the

culture, history, ecology and environment in the islands.

Diving and Diving Schools

At the time of writing this guide, there are four diving schools in Providence: Scuba Town, Felipe's Diving, Sony Diving Shop and Sirius Center Diving Shop, which are, in general terms, sufficient to manage the demand, though it would be advisable to contact them in advance in order to optimize their service, particularly in the case of large groups. Each one employs one or two instructors who, for security reasons, participate in all dives, which explains why there has not been any accident among recreational divers. You proceed to the dive sites by boat, and the most frequented sites are located not more than 12 minutes away. The most distant sites require special planning and involve additional costs.

