

bubble^{up}

Scuba vacations are as colorful and varied as the fish you'll encounter. BY JAMES STURZ

Scuba diving lets you cast landlocked worries aside as you explore the vast and silent sea. In this equally thrilling and relaxing pursuit, the most important rule is simply to breathe. Dive vacations range from stays at resorts with dedicated dive centers to cruises on scuba live-aboards, but they all have one thing in common: They make it easy for you to get into the water.

When choosing a vacation, consider these five factors—how intensively you want to dive, what you hope to see underwater, the difficulty of the diving environment and whether you'll want or need to take a certification course while you're there, the comfort and quality of the accommodations (which can vary widely), and what a nondiving companion or you can do that doesn't involve fins. With all those elements in mind, we found the following vacations available around the world.



Reef at Wakaya Club & Spa, Fiji

AMANYARA, TURKS & CAICOS

Turks & Caicos has 463 square miles of coral reef and just 166 square miles of land (including 230 miles of beach for lolling on when you're not in the water). Many of the best dives in the 40-island archipelago are at Northwest Point Marine National Park, off the main island of Providenciales, where the turquoise, cyan and cerulean waters turn Prussian blue at the 7,000-foot-deep coral wall.

At sites like Black Coral Forest, you can descend into a swirl of 60 horse-eye jacks before finning past stingrays, puffers and hundreds of silversides and Creole Wrasses. Or try Amphitheatre, where spider crabs and spiny lobsters are bit players to Nassau groupers, parrotfish, green morays and nurse sharks. The park is a 45-minute boat trip each way from the island's marinas, but it's only a five-minute jaunt from the half-mile white-sand beach in front of Amanyara, which also might be the most luxurious and relaxing resort in the entire Caribbean. Amanyara's dive center caters exclusively to its guests, so the only thing you'll have to do each morning is muster the energy to stir from the king-size platform bed in your private pavilion, where the sweeping views through the towering glass doors, along with the 20-foot timber ceilings, make you feel like you're already floating.

Scuba levels: Beginner to advanced; PADI certifications offered from Discover Scuba Diving to Rescue Diver

Beyond diving: The 164-foot black volcanic stone pool is striking, the new 13,000-square-foot Serenity Villa spa, tennis courts and screening room are simply fun, and all of Providenciales will be at your fingertips.

Cost: \$1,550 and up per night, including all meals, with four-night stays through October; one-tank dives, \$175; amanresorts.com

COCOA ISLAND, THE MALDIVES

Strung across 35,000 square miles of the Indian Ocean, the 1,192 islands of the Maldives look like jewels from above. Imagine rings of powdered porcelain with lush emerald centers, and strands of pearls against sapphire-edged lagoons.

There's just one word in English that derives from Dhivehi, the native language of the Maldives: *atoll*.

Against this beautiful backdrop, add a few thatched roofs and bungalows on stilts, then put them on islands where it's illegal to build higher than the tallest palm tree. In the Maldives, you won't find more than one resort on any one island, but not all islands have access to the same dive sites or the same-quality reefs. Among the very best is Cocoa Island, just a 40-minute speedboat ride from Malé, where all international flights land. At nearby dive sites like Cocoa Thila, you'll latch onto the reef at 100 feet and watch a dozen spotted eagle rays fly past (followed by hawksbill turtles, bigeye trevally, tuna, snapper and gray reef sharks), while Kandooma Caves consists of four fish-filled caverns, including one that's 230 feet long. Back in Cocoa Island's lagoon, baby black-tip sharks and stingrays skulk in two feet of water, while a coral ledge alongside the COMO Resort's over-water villas promises perfect snorkeling for when you find yourself without a tank.

Scuba levels: Beginner to advanced; PADI certifications offered from Discover Scuba Diving to Rescue Diver

Beyond diving: Cocoa Island (aka Makunufushi) measures seven acres, but its COMO Shambhala spa feels like the size of heaven. The island's beach is also one of the loveliest in the Maldives.

Cost: \$680 and up per night; one-tank dives, \$72 (or \$660 for 10 dives); cocoaisland.com.bz

AGRESSORS I AND II, GALÁPAGOS

Most tourists visit the archipelago for the blue-footed boobies, iguanas and giant tortoises, but the biggest draw may be what you see underwater: possibly the greatest concentration of whale sharks anywhere in the world. These solitary behemoths can grow up to 50 feet long, making them the largest fish on earth. Beneath the waves, they look like submerged Greyhound buses. It's possible to see these spotted sharks on nearly every dive off the far northwestern islands of Wolf and Darwin, but you can only visit those islands on a live-aboard. The 100-foot, 14-passenger, nine-crew *Aggressors I* and *II* navigate the route with accomplished grace. What else will you see underwater? Thousands of schooling hammerheads, Galápagos and reef



Clockwise from left: Galápagos sea turtle, Aggressor inflatable dive skiff, Amanyara Pavilion Pond, Wakaya lionfish, Spirit of Freedom on reef

sharks, fur seals, sea lions, manta and eagle rays, penguins, dolphins, turtles and schools of salema fish so thick you'll swear you're swimming through a cave. Between dives, you'll also have the chance to check out the giant tortoises, iguanas, flightless cormorants and magnificent frigatebirds onshore.

Scuba levels: Intermediate to advanced; PADI Advanced Open Water and specialty certifications offered

Beyond diving: Itineraries include hikes on Seymour Norte, Bartolomé and Plaza Sur islands, as well as a visit to the Charles Darwin Research Station on Santa Cruz (2009 is the 150th anniversary of the publication of *The Origin of Species*). If you're in a rush to get back in the water once you're back onboard, each *Aggressor* has a hot tub.

Cost: \$4,095 and up per person for seven nights, including all meals and beverages, land tours, and 16 dives; aggressor.com

WAKAYA CLUB & SPA, FIJI

The ne plus ultra of any diving vacation is being able to grab a captain, a divemaster and a boat and head out to the reef whenever you want—and that's exactly how the scuba program works at Wakaya. But now add a private marine reserve, mantas, hammerheads, hawksbill and green turtles, lionfish, blue ribbon eels, leopard sharks, giant clams and pilot whales, and put them five minutes from the dock of a 2,200-acre private island.

There are just 10 cottage suites, or *buras*, on Wakaya, one of the 333 islands that constitute Fiji, sometimes called "the soft coral capital of the world." A dozen dive sites sit off the island's north end, including Lion's Den, where the reef starts just below the surface and plunges 3,000 feet, and Homestead Pass, where barracudas prowl, garden eels pose, blue anthias swarm and mantas come to feed. When you're not diving or snorkeling, enjoy tennis, golf, catered private picnics, deep-sea and fly fishing or reef casting, and the resort's Breeze Spa. Look up, and you're likely to see peregrine falcons nesting on the cliffs or aging guitarists falling out of palm trees (this is where the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards had his famous spill in 2006).

Scuba levels: Beginner to advanced; PADI certifications offered from Discover Scuba Diving to Open Water Diver

Beyond diving: The resort offers extensive activities, but there's the possibility you might not actually want to leave your *bure*. With a staff-to-guest ratio of 12 to 1, you can expect to be taken care of very, very well.

Cost: \$1,900 and up per night, including all meals and beverages, nearly all activities and two dives daily; wakaya.com

SPIRIT OF FREEDOM, AUSTRALIA

The Great Barrier Reef, located off the coast of Queensland, may be the only living structure on Earth that's visible from space, but it isn't practical to see it from there. Measuring some 1,250 miles and composed of 2,900 single reef systems (and home to 4,000 species of mollusks and 1,500 species of fish), the GBR is best viewed up close from a live-aboard.

The 26-passenger *Spirit of Freedom* leaves Cairns weekly for seven-night cruises to Ribbon Reef, Pixie Pinnacle, Cod Hole and Lizard Island, before heading to Osprey Reef in the outlying Coral Sea. Expect to experience lush coral gardens, 1,500 species of sponges and fish-frantic dives (including with clownfish, sea snakes, Napoleon and Maori Wrasses, and some truly enormous potato groupers), then steep drop-offs, sheer walls laced with fans, underwater mountains and plenty of hammerheads, and white- and gray-tip reef sharks in water so clear that you'll wonder if you're swimming through liquid crystal. Onboard, the 120-foot ship has three decks, so there's plenty of space for sunning and stretching out. But the whole reason for boarding the *Spirit of Freedom* is to get into the water, with the chance of logging 27 dives.

Scuba levels: Beginner to advanced; PADI Advanced Open Water and Nitrox certifications offered

Beyond diving: The goal of the trip is to dive the whole time, but there's an overnight and a morning on Lizard Island.

Cost: \$2,315 and up per person for seven nights; three-night itineraries start at \$1,130; includes all dives and meals, with Australian wines; spiritoffreedom.com.au

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