

MURCIA MISSION



A five-day road trip exploring Spain's Costa Calida ('Warm Coast') entices

WILL APPELYARD – will it meet, or even exceed, his expectations?

THE SPANISH TOURIST OFFICE and our counterparts in the Spanish region of Murcia would be pleased if you could visit... exploring areas of off-the-beaten-track diving along the south-eastern Spanish coast..."

Quicker than you could say *buenos dias* I had thrown together a selection of suitable dive kit and camera gear, barely any clothes, and headed to Gatwick for the two-hour flight to Murcia San-Javier airport.

Esther Garcia Garcia from the tourist board, my land-based guide for the next five days, was waiting. I suddenly felt way overdressed in jeans and a down-jacket for the 25°C-plus conditions.

We drove straight to Cabo de Palos, a coastal town 25 minutes from the airport that boasts a

pristine marine reserve starting metres from the shore.

It was home, I was told, to a thriving, year-round diving community, with several dive-centres and their boats right on the marina.

It was a late afternoon in October, and dive-crew were busy rinsing down gear and filling cylinders ready for the following morning.

I met oceanographer Amelia Canavos, a dive-guide and instructor for local centre Planeta Azul and also manager of the ocean-focused visitor centre. She talked me through the history of the marine park, established in 1995, and the super-sized 3D maps of the area.

These show how the coastal and interior mountain ranges grow smaller as you head east

towards the Cabo de Palos peninsula, yet continue within the ocean, into the deep.

The centre runs a seahorse conservation project, and devotes much attention to educating youngsters on ocean conservation.

One corner is dedicated to the 1906 sinking of the Italian passenger liner *Sirio*, which sits broken into sections strewn on every side of the Bajo de Fuera seamount, within the marine reserve.

The vessel struck the top of the reef, broke in half and sank 24 hours later with the loss of nearly 500 lives. Much of it lies in 50-70m, making it popular with technical divers.

We were in Cabo de Palos not to dive the *Sirio* but to experience a pair of submerged



seamounts in the reserve. We arrived at Naranjito Dive Centre (named after a wreck outside the reserve) next morning and met dive-guides Angel and Angel, one of whom would dive with me.

It was low season, but the centre was a hive of activity. I could pick out a couple of English voices, the owners of which turned out to be holiday visitors, but everyone else appeared to be Spanish, either local or on a short break.

I mentioned "suitable" dive gear and got a bit of stick for bringing a drysuit. Most of the other divers were trussed up in 6mm semis or thicker.

I consider 22° borderline warm, even tepid, and feel it's far less faff getting in and out of a drysuit when diving several times across multiple locations, as I would be. Can I be forgiven?

Only two RIBs are permitted to dive a site at any one time in the marine reserve. One seamount equals one dive-site and is permanently buoyed with a single mooring-line. This rule, designed to minimise diver damage, makes for an uncrowded experience.

There are five main dive-sites, Bajo de Piles, Bajo de Dentro, Hormigon, Islas Hormigas and Bajo de Fuera, where the *Sirio* lies. A RIB ride to any of them takes no more than 25 minutes, and looking over the side of the boat on the way out, I could tell that we were in for some exceptional visibility.

I felt I was owed some decent vis, too, after spending so much of the summer diving UK sites in "varied" vis.

OUR PLAN WAS TO HEAD DOWN to 40m and wind our way up the pinnacle, with a stop back at the mooring-line.

I had studied a model of the seamount, which looked proper mountain-shaped, with the "summit" just below the surface at 8m and each face dropping steep and sheer into the abyss.

The model proved accurate. There was no current, and a cloud of schooling barracuda were circling the top of the mount. I had embarked on this trip with modest expectations, because the "Med is dead", right?

Wrong! Had you blindfolded me and plonked me there I would have sworn that we were diving at some Red Sea site



Above, clockwise from top left: Loading the Naranjito Dive Centre boat; one of the Angels in a cavern; massed barracuda at Bajo de Dentro site; post-dive wine; large grouper at Bajo de Dentro.

accessible only by liveaboard. It was buzzing with life.

I had been promised a real grouper show, and failed to keep count of the fish as we drifted further down the face and into the depths, through a split in the rock and out the other side into the blue. They were big'uns, too.

At 20m, the sheer face on one side of the wall gave way to a cavern, and inside our torches brought the soft corals and colourful flora and fauna to life.

Yet more grouper appeared, though these guys proved difficult for us bubble-blowers to approach.

One eye was kept on our bottom time too, as we were diving on good old-fashioned 21%, but my 15-litre cylinder kept the air-supply in good nick. The last 15 minutes were spent by the shotline watching the show, as shoals of smaller

fish flitted about to be picked off by a gang of gnarly hunting jack. That was before a procession of several hundred circling barracuda stole the show.

As we ascended, the current had begun to pick up. Angel told me later that conditions could change very quickly, with an easy-looking dive in 30m vis turning into a current-fest.

It had been a while since I'd dived from a Continental-based RIB, and I had forgotten how boisterous and excitable they can become. A medieval-looking leather wine bottle was passed about, apparently a post-dive tradition along the Spanish coast. I declined, as I would be diving again that morning.

While unloading the boat and heading to the next dive centre, practically next door, I quizzed Angel about fishing regulations in the reserve.

He said that some fishing was permitted, but only by a few boats. Most fishermen benefitted outside the reserve from the overspill of thriving species.

DIVING WITH THE ISLAS HORMIGAS dive-centre, we headed back to the reserve and the neighbouring seamount, the more-oblong Bajo de Piles. It too was impressive, but we remained shallow and I didn't discover the sort of cavern-like features at Bajo de Dentro. The same super-sized grouper were about, however,



we cruised back to the marina, and it would have been rude to say no.

I quizzed the guys at the centre about the best time of year to dive, and they replied that they were open year-round. I could imagine that a few days hanging out there over Christmas might be fun.

Air temperatures can reach 45°-plus at the height of summer, so October and November are ideal months to visit, with temperatures in the mid-to-low 20s. February should be avoided because of the unpredictable sea state. Rainfall averages only 15-20 days a year.

The Naranjito wreck should have been next on the list, but a misunderstanding about the dive times next morning meant that we missed that outing.

Full of *tapas*, Esther and I loaded the car and headed west along the coast towards our next dive-centre, Rivemar, which lay beside a small resort called La Azohia between the towns of Cartagena and Mazarron.

Centre-owner Sergie was already aboard the boat waiting to leave when we arrived, so we quickly threw on the kit and a freshly pumped cylinder and motored towards a site called the Arch.

It made a change from RIBs to relax aboard Sergie's spacious catamaran-style hardboat. He explained that this stretch of coast was renowned for its cavern- and cave-diving opportunities.

The topography was certainly more rugged and mountainous than that of Cabo de Palos, so I could imagine how it might look below the waves.

As we turned a corner of the peninsula I saw what was essentially a miniature version of Dorset's Durdle Door, only more orange. I was paired with dive-guide Martin, a young Spanish marine biologist with good English and an impressive beard, and wearing a membrane drysuit – I'm not the only one not getting wet then, I thought.

Sergie was also drysuited, with a fitting for dry-gloves on his cuffs. I thought that

and plenty of barracuda to go round.

I decided to pay attention to the macro-life, and spotted several species of nudibranch around the shallower sections. My buddy with his colossal camera set-up managed a few shots of me posing with big grouper.

After 40 minutes the current was pushing us back into the seamount, so we decided to pop over the top and into the lee before finning back to the line.

In such great vis it's difficult to lose the line, but each dive-centre insists that you follow a guide.

A leather wine-bottle came out again as



even at the coldest time of year here when the water temperature dips to just 15° those might be a bit overkill, but Sergie is a highly experienced cave-diving instructor, so I guess that figures.

It was only as I reached 20m that I realised that every single person had left the boat. I just hoped it had been tied on well, and focused on the dive ahead – what could possibly go wrong?

THE CLIFFS CONTINUED below the surface, eventually turning into a sand slope at around 25m. Patches of coarse grass stood a foot tall between boulders, shoals of fish lingering between them.

A large scorpionfish opted not to hang about for a photo, and a free-swimming

Below, clockwise from top left: Returning from a dive at the Cabo de Palos marine reserve; moray eel at Cabo de Cope; jellyfish.





moray scooted by beneath me.

I must have counted eight morays since I'd arrived in Spain, and that number would more than double. The view stretched 30m into the blue.

I was hoping to explore one of the caverns I'd heard about, but was later told that they were dive-sites in their own right. Some of the larger boulders provided swim-throughs and made for excellent photo opportunities.

After 20 minutes of gentle finning along the cliff-face, we hung a left as the seabed rose 7m and the leg of the arch

Above, clockwise from top left: Wreck at Cabo Cope; Cabo de Palos lighthouse; safety stop at Bajo de Piles; octopus at Isla del Fraile; Estela Dive Centre.

Below left: Virgin Mary at cavern entrance.

Below: Cave-diving instructor Sergi Perez.

appeared. In single file we cruised it and back down to 15m to head back.

Many hundreds of fist-sized jellyfish hung about the line, some providing a meal for the fish. I made my way up the line after a pleasurable safety stop photographing jellies, and was glad to be wearing a hood as I accidentally headbutted a couple out of my way.

The boat was still there, as was that leather bottle of sweet white wine – the party had started.

WHILE IN SPAIN, I quickly adjusted to dining at 10pm and the subsequent late nights. The resorts were quiet at this time of year, though it was always possible to find a bar and sit outside in summer attire, sipping *cervezas* and chowing through endless plates of fine *tapas*. But an early start was planned for our journey further west, to the town of Aguilas.

We arrived at 8am. Javier and Serge of the Estela dive-centre, located in the posh-looking marina, welcomed me warmly. Only four of us would be diving, with a local diver called David making up the number.

We loaded two cylinders each into the spacious RIB and motored out to dive a series of artificial reefs off the Cabo Cope peninsula. The azure water looked like liquid glass, and the sun gave the surrounding mountains an orange glow. Diving conditions were perfect.

The site took only 20 minutes to reach, and I was surprised to find that we had the place to ourselves. We tied in and flopped over the tubes and down the line. This dive promised to be a busy one, with a lot to see.

We came across an aircraft tail that housed a small moray, one of five eels we would see on the dive. After that, the

wooden remains of three purposely sunk vessels sat broken at nearly 30m, within easy finning reach of one another. It was possible to see all three at once, and each had its own buoy, visible from the seabed.

As we reached the first wreck, Serge pointed out a conger eel, a beast usually associated with UK wrecks. The wooden structure was a habitat for bags of fish life – grouper, bass, bream and barracuda.

Bottom-time limitations meant that we had only a few minutes to investigate the timber frame of each wreck, because the dive-centre was not equipped to provide nitrox fills – something from which it

Below: One of two dive-boats moored over the Cabo de Palos marine reserve (only two boats at a time are permitted to dive on each site at the marine reserve).

would benefit in the future.

The nitrogen clock ticking, we finned towards the Cave of the Virgin, with its image of Mary placed at the entrance. In single file we entered the 12m-long tunnel at a depth of 15m, our torch-beams lighting up a curtain of orange anthias.

The exit in the ceiling was easy to find, and one by one we popped out of the top, conveniently close to the mooring-line. It had been an excellent multi-level dive-site and a highlight of the week for me. It merits diving more than once.

We swapped our cylinders for full ones and headed towards the last site, below the

sea cliffs of Isla del Fraile. It was Serge's turn to man the boat as Javier and I dropped in, following the wall on our left, to 25m. Our sole aim – to find a seahorse!

Most of the dive threw up nothing that I hadn't seen before that week, although I was impressed by the size of the boulders, and discovered an octopus wedged between them at 20m.

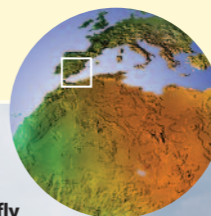
Vis began to deteriorate for the first time, closing in to a mere 15m (I had been spoilt). As I obeyed my computer and headed into shallower water, I noticed Javier rapidly heading deeper, and knew he was in the area known for seahorse sightings. I had already entered into some decompression time, however, so couldn't join him.

When the minutes cleared, I made for the surface for the final time that week. The wine bottle failed to appear – no bad thing, as it was 11 in the morning.

DOES MURCIA REALLY offer "off-the-beaten-track" diving? It's not that well-known a destination to British divers, and certainly the Cabo de Palos marine park offers something different.

For me the world-class diving at Cabo de Palos stole the show, and the artificial reefs of Cabo Cope at Aguilas get my vote too.

There is something for every level, from newbies and advanced sport divers to nutty cave enthusiasts and deep-tec wreck-heads. The 100km of coastline that I experienced over five days provided some exciting and diverse diving opportunities – the region offers a decent alternative to Red Sea diving, and being only two hours' flights away from the UK, what's not to like? █



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Richard flew with easyJet but a number of budget airlines fly to San-Javier. Car hire available at airport.

DIVING ▶ Cabo de Palos - Planeta Azul, www.planeta-azul.com, Naranjito, www.naranjito-buceo.com; Islas Hormigas, www.islashormigas.com; Bulkysub, www.bulkysub.com. State that you wish to dive in the marine reserve in advance, as spaces are limited. C-card, personal ID and insurance details must be presented. Cabo Tiñoso - Rivemar Dive Centre, www.rivemar.com. Cabo Cope & Isla del Fraile - Estela Dive Centre, www.escueladebuceo.com

ACCOMMODATION ▶ Cabo de Palos - Hotel Mangalan, www.hotelmangalan.com. Cabo Tiñoso, Cabo Cope & Isla del Fraile - Hotel Playa Grande, www.hotel-playagrande.com. Hotels closer to each dive centre are available.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round but summer warmer.

CURRENCY ▶ Euro.

PRICES ▶ Flights from around £160 return. Hotel rooms for two cost from around £50 per night (low-season). Cost per dive 30-45 euros.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.murciaturistica.es

