



The getting there

It wasn't very long after we returned from Belize that I got another call from Ofelia. "Paco wants to go to Coiba" she says "he's organizing everything"

By now I'm getting used to these calls from Ofelia so I waited for her to explain.

It seems her son Paco had organized another dive adventure for us so smitten was he with our first trip to Belize.

This time we were on our way to Coiba and there would be 5 of us, Ofelia, Paco, Jessica "Pacos lovely wife" Pilar "Ofelia's daughter" I was also invited otherwise I wouldnt be writting this story would I ?

So off we go all 5 people loaded into Paco's car and as you can imagine it was quite a squeeze in there with all our diving gear, clothes and my considerable amount of camera stuff.

The 3 girls squeezed into the back seat while Paco drove and I sat in relative luxury in the front passenger seat.

Ofelia wouldn't let me in the back with the girls.

We drove for hours and I watched through the now bug splatted windscreen as the sun set over a very windy country road and day turned to night.

Finally we arrived at a very rustic coastal town Called Santa Catalina and found our way to our accommodation.

Ofelia and I were staying in a small hotel while Paco Jessica and Pilar rented a room with the dive operators.



Our panga

The next day we loaded up a very doubtful but colorful panga with 20 dive tanks, 8 people, extra fuel and lots of other stuff for our day trip out to the dive sight which was a bone rattling 2 hour run in open water.

Off we go zooming out of the harbor and into the enormous "Gulfo de Chiriqui" where many a pirate had surely sailed, luckily on this day no pirates but us and the sea was mercifully calm.

The coast of Panama fell away behind us and the island of "Coiba" grew larger on our starboard side. Finally we were within sight of our destination, a tiny island called "Jicarita" that lays on the south end of "Coiba".

As we got closer we took aim at a little Palm lined beach and as the water shallowed it changed to a beautiful transparent turquoise color. Soon after with a crunch the panga slid onto the sand and we all jumped over the side happy to stretch our legs.

It was then that my day went south fast as when we opened the water tight box my camera bag was in we discovered it had filled with water. A hole had developed in the bottom due to all the bouncing around we'd done and the huge quantities of bilge water had flowed in unhindered "WHAT NOOOOO" I yelled as I lifted the now dripping bag into the air.

Right here is when I took a little absence from sanity and the next 10 minutes are not my proudest memories.

After reaching earth again I laid all my camera equipment out on a blanket on the beach and started the loss analysis. My Nikon 70-200 lens was completely full of water, It was a dead issue . All my spare batteries had shorted out and my brand new Nikon D850 was soaked. along with a long list of other very expensive lens's. Ooh what a disaster?.



The beach at Jicarita

Well there's really no point in making everyone else as miserable as I was so we sent Paco, Jessica and Pilar off to dive while Ofelia and I dried and cried.

After we had done all that was doable with the camera equipment we let the sun take over the task and we explored our little island paradise..

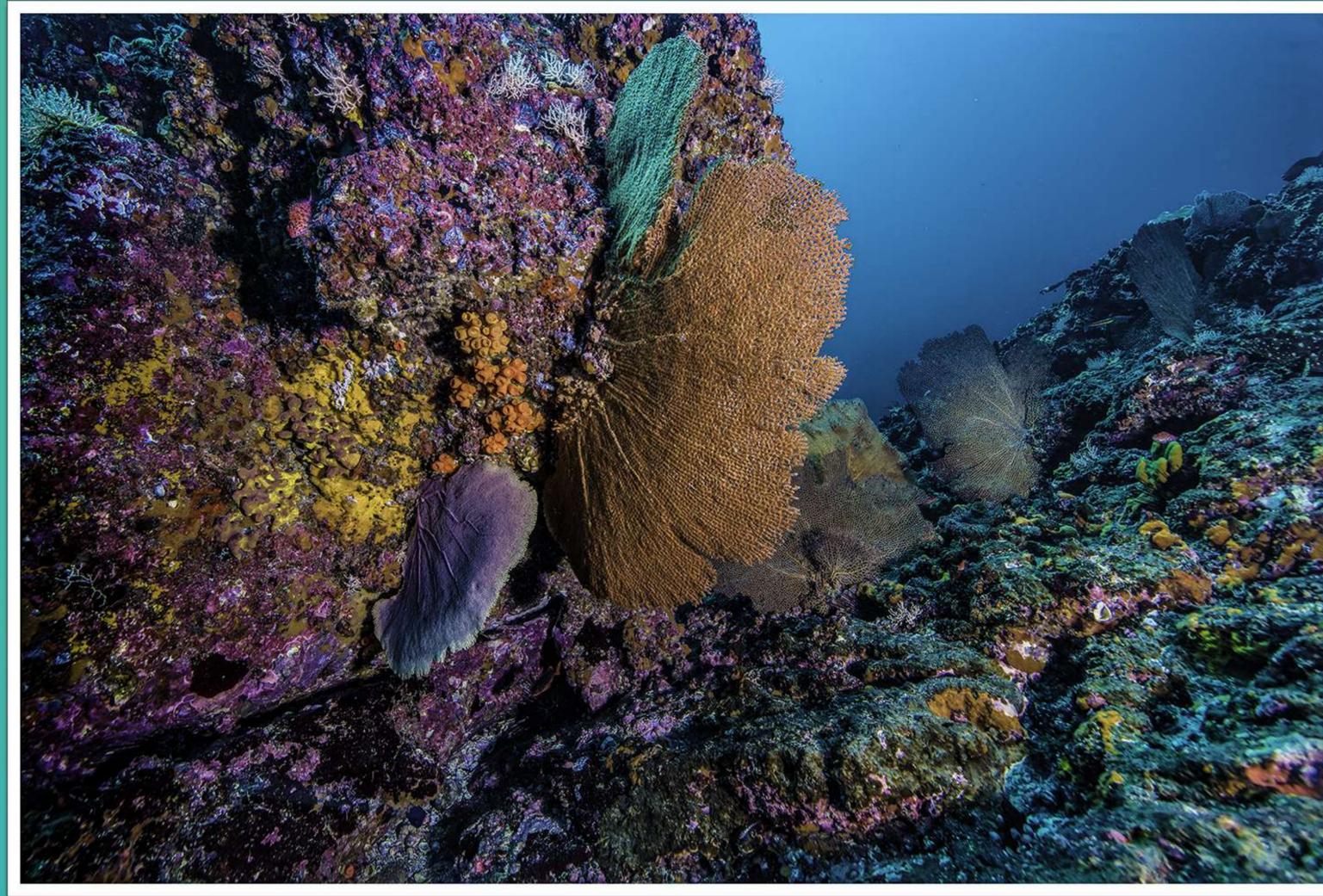
I can tell you that sitting on a beautiful island in the shade of a coconut palm watching the clear blue Pacific lazily ebb and flow onto our sandy little beach has a tremendous calming effect. Before long I had calmed considerable almost returning to my loveable good humoured self. "What the hell" I thought, "I may as well make the best of it"

Little hermit crabs scurried about the beach trying to eat our lunch and quickly disappearing into their shell as we approached. I grabbed my now dry camera and Macro lens and took some pics which had the effect of improving my temperment even more, I was now once again fit to be in public.

Our dive team returned and we lunched while listening to stories of all the stuff they had seen. Luckily they had not seen any whale sharks because that would have sunk me down into depression again knowing I had missed that.



Hermit crab



The diving in this part of the Pacific is very different from Belize or Palau for that matter. Its the same underwater mountain chain as Galapagoes and Cocos Island and swept by the nutrient rich Humbolt current the water is not as clear as some places. The bottom is large rocks with sparse corals and lots of barnicles. There are some very nice colorful Gorgonian corals (fan Corals) and some sponges but not like the warmer tropical waters of Belize.



Pilar rocking it on her second open water dive



Ofelia giving Jessica some mother inlaw advise



Tang

After we had finished diving for the day we did the long trip back to Santa Catalina, our hotel, a great meal and of course lots of camera cleaning. I had escaped with about \$4000 worth of damage but it could have been a lot worse. Such are the woe's of the traveling photographer. Let tomorrow be a better day.

Day 2

After a hardy breaky we set off on another long panga ride to our next dive sight. Today we had a slightly better Panga. We were also better prepared for what to expect and things should move along more smoothly no? No way., when we got out to the dive sight we discovered that they had left Jessica's fins back at base. We had the discussion of both Paco and Jessica diving with one fin each but Jessica rightly decided theres no fun swimming round and round in circles so she sat this one out. Another lesson learned. Don't trust this dive operation with your gear. We had been spoiled in Belize where Ambergris Divers took care of everything. Here we were in a new frontier.

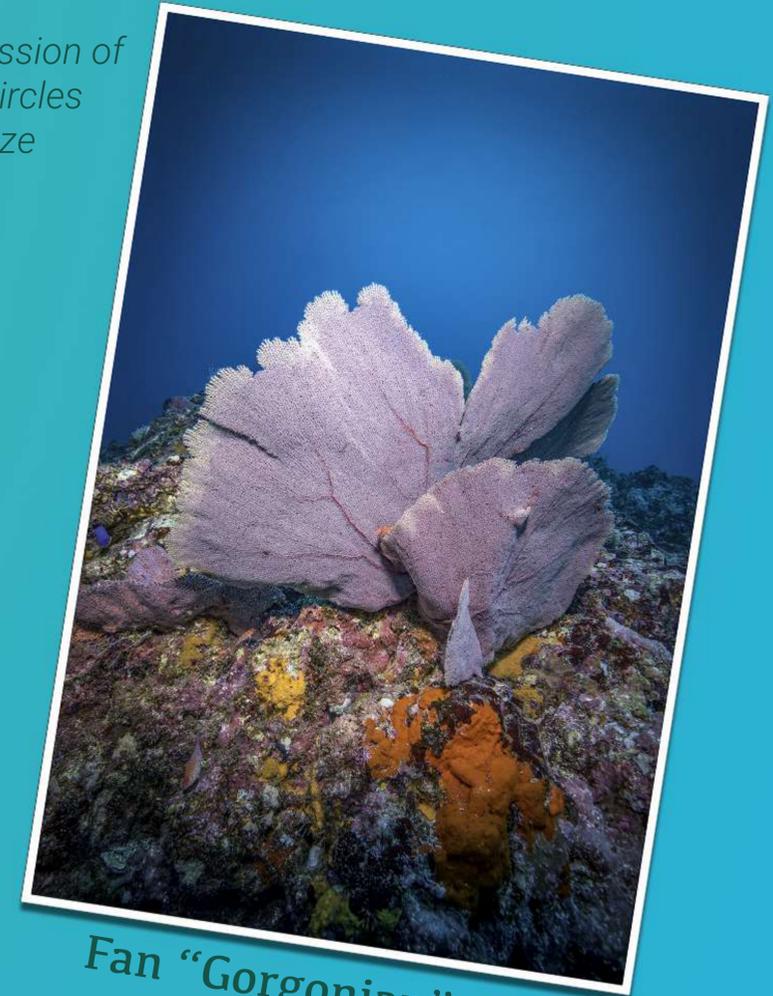
Note : we did find Jess some fins for the rest of the dives.



White tipped reef shark



Morey eel



Fan "Gorgonian" coral

How's this for a wicked lunch stop? Isla Rancharia



Well we dove all day didn't we? stopping only to off gas and for lunch, this time on the beach of one of the most beautiful islands your ever likely lay your eyes on. "Isla Rancheria"

The Island has a study facility for the Smithsonian institute and all of Coiba is a national marine park and world heritage sight.

That evening rather than doing the long boat trip back to Santa Catalina, Paco had arranged a very rustic cabin for us on Bahia Honda "Deep Bay". It was as exotic as it gets watching the late afternoon thunderstorms roll across the jungle covered mountains as monkeys and other critters created scandalous noise in the bush behind us. Of course the girls were more worried about the bugs. I wasn't worried at all, well not much, just a wee bit, maybe some.



The view from Bahia Honda cabins

Day 3

Today we double checked all our stuff, every facemask, every BC and every set of fins were accounted for. Today we were all going to have lots of fun so with a new revived enthusiasm aided by a good coffee buzz we set out to explore anew the underwater world of Coiba Marine Park.



Crown of thorns star fish



Hawksbill Turtle



Frog Fish

Crown of thorns star fish were quite common as were turtles and white tipped reef sharks but the strangest critter of the day was this yellow frog fish that was hiding amongst sponges of the same color. Its hardly recognizable as a fish at all which is exactly the point. A hard lesson learned for any little fish that unwittingly swims to close to it as it will be gulped down in a fraction of a second. Its so fast you cant even see it happen. One second he's there, the next he's not. The only indication he was there at all is a wicked smile on the frog fish's face.



Another day another beach

Again we visited another beautiful beach for lunch and after the last dive of the day we headed back to Santa Catalina. The plan for the last day was to dive on the pinnacle of an undersea mountain out in the middle of the Golfo De Chiriqui. Yooohooooo!!!!



**Ofelia swims in the clear waters of,,,,
OOOPS!!!! wait wrong picture**



**Ofelia swims in the clear waters
of Canales during a lunch break**

Day 4

It was the last day and we headed to sea in a different panga this time worse than the first. By now we were very hardy brave souls and apparently we didn't have to go to far today. Half way out to the sea mount the engine started spluttering and losing RPM. Surprise, surprise. A quick fiddle by the captain "tongue in cheek" and we were off again and got all of another 200 feet before it quit. Another fiddle by our captain "tongue in cheek" and it started once again and from this moment on we limped to our destination roaring passes at a virtual standstill hoping that it wouldnt crap out all together.

With the dive guide taking reference points from the shore we came to a spot in the middle of the gulf. "We're here" he says. "Where" was the cry from all on board. "This is it " he says "this is the sea mount". Several pairs of eyes peered over the side into murky green depths.

Hesitantly we suited up and rolled into the water where looking down I could see our anchor line disappearing into a dark soup. Visibility was maybe 20 feet and the water was the coldest we had experienced in Coiba.

I waited until everyone was in the water and started my descent. Ive already been bitten by a shark once and I felt the odds were that it could only happen to a person once in a life time hence gathering my composure I continued on down into the murkiness.

*At about 40 feet I stopped and looked back. Paco was there behind me **alone** "where are the girls" I motioned in underwater talk which consists of moving your hands over 2 imaginary breasts and shrugging. Paco shook his head and pointed towards the boat now invisible above indicating that they had opted out on this one. Well I can't say I blame them, this is kind of scary but I still had Paco as my shark bait. Out there lurking in the murkiness there could be all manner of hungry critters.*



Paco descends

As we neared the sea mount schools of huge big eyed jack and trevally could be seen. The jacks moved off into the darkness beyond our vision but the trevally decided we were harmless and stayed throughout the dive. My attention however was on the macro stuff and there seemed to be a ton of it here.



The remainder of the dive I chased these little creatures all over the rock. Small blenny's and gobies came out to visit with us. I could of stayed for hours but we were deep and time soon runs out at 80 feet. Reluctantly we terminated the dive and headed up to the boat where we found the girls basking like a bunch of iguanas in the hot Panamanian sun.





It was time to head back to the city and as the sun was setting we pulled into Ofelias apartment building and unpacked all our gear. We had accomplished another voyage into the unknown and came out relatively unscathed.

Stay tuned for the next adventure.



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