

SCUBA DIVER PRESENTS A GUIDE TO

REGIÓN DE MURCIA

THE SIRIO **SHIPWRECKED!**

THE TRAGIC TALE OF
THE TITANIC OF THE MED

GROUPE **GALORE**

MARINE PARK MAGIC
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



10 THINGS YOU MUST DO ON SPAIN'S **COSTA CÁLIDA**

REGIÓN DE **MURCIA** INTRODUCTION



Murcia is a region in the southeast corner of the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, between Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha and Valencia. Occupying an area of just over 11,000 sq km – barely 2.2 percent of the total surface area of Spain! – it is bordered by the province of Albacete to the north, Alicante to the east, Granada, Albacete and Almeria to the west, and the Mediterranean Sea to the east.

The region is a rich mix of dramatic mountainous terrain, barren desert rock, dense forest and fertile agricultural land; the produce from the vineyards in the latter being world-renowned. However, from a diver's perspective, it is the 170km of coastline – comprising coves, beaches, rocky shorelines and sheer, craggy cliffs – known as the Costa Calida that will be of most interest. All along this shoreline, at places such as Islas Hormigas, Cabo de Palos, Isla Grosa, Cartagena, La Azohía, Mazarrón and Águilas, are shipwrecks, walls and reefs, not to mention some of the healthiest marine life in the Med. I have never seen so many huge

grouper – and I mean huge, think a metre to a metre-and-a-half long! – in this body of water, not to mention big shoals of barracuda and all manner of colourful reef fish, nudibranchs, moray eels and octopus.

The icing on this tasty Spanish cake is the climate. Murcia basks in an average annual temperature of 18 degrees C, with hot summers topping out close to 40 degrees C and mild winters only dropping to an average of 11-12 degrees C in December and January. Throw in some 300 days of sunshine a year, and water temperatures between 12-26 degrees C, and you have the perfect recipe for great Mediterranean diving. I'd say a 5mm full-suit is more than sufficient for the summer months (if you are warm-blooded, you may even get away with a 3mm full-suit), but in the autumn and winter, a semi-dry or a drysuit teamed up with a hood is the preferred option for sure.

Mark Evans, Editor-in-Chief
Scuba Diver Magazine



1 Dive the El Naranjito

Lying just over a mile outside the port of Cabo de Palos is the Isla Gomera, commonly known as El Naranjito due to its final cargo – thousands of oranges. Sunk in a storm in April 1946, the 51-metre freighter now sits upright, with the stern in 46m and the top of the superstructure rising to 27m. It is covered in marine growth and penetration is possible into the superstructure and engine room.

2 Try an Asiático coffee

A famous drink in Cartagena, the Asiático is an alcoholic drink made out of coffee, condensed milk and cognac, along with a few drops of Licor 43 and a couple of coffee beans, lemon rind and cinnamon. It is even served in a special thick glass to withstand the heat of it. It has got quite a kick to it, but you will see people drinking it everywhere throughout Cartagena.



3 Greet the grouper at Isla Hormigas

The marine park at Isla Hormigas offers divers the chance to dive among some of the healthiest fish stocks in the Mediterranean. Drop in on sites such as Piles I, Piles II, Bajo de Dentro, Bajo de la Testa or Bajo de Fuera and prepare to be greeted by vast shoals of barracuda, amberjack, trevally and large, quite curious grouper.

4 Marvel at underwater treasures

A must for any diver is a visit to the Underwater Archaeology National Museum, which houses the famous

treasure of the Nuestra Sra de Las Mercedes frigate, which includes more than 570,000 gold and silver coins from the 18th and 19th centuries.

5 Explore the SS Stanfield

The SS Stanfield is a vast wreck with a length of 120 metres and a beam of 14m. It was torpedoed on 26 June 1916 by a German submarine and sank in a depth of 62m. It sits upright on the bottom, but the bow has sustained a lot of damage and split wide open, allowing access into three deck levels and hold number one.

6 Sail or surf the Mar Menor

The Mar Menor – Europe's largest saltwater lagoon, with a surface area of 130 sq km – is a hotspot for kitesurfing, sailing and windsurfing. Being a vast lagoon with a max depth of just 7m, it is a perfect location for both beginners and experienced enthusiasts alike.

7 Go back in time to the Roman era

Check out the Carthago Nova Theatre in Cartagena, which was built in the 1st century BC by Roman Emperor Augustus, but was not discovered until 1990! Now excavated, the interactive Roman Theatre Museum has built up around it, and is a great way to look back into the past.



8 Savour the view from San Juan de Águilas castle-fortress

The sprawling town of Águilas is watched over by the imposing San Juan de Águilas castle-fortress, which sits atop a tall rocky outcrop. It was first constructed in 1579 and then rebuilt in the 18th century, and it has now been renovated and made into a mini-museum exhibit, but just the stunning 360 degree views are worth the visit.



9 Visit the Bolnuevo Erosions

Close to Mazarrón, you can find the weird-and-wonderful Bolnuevo Erosions, bizarre rock formations that have been carved and sculpted by wind and water and resemble something out of a science-fiction movie. Well worth checking out for a photograph.


10 Venture into the Cueva del Agua

The Cueva del Agua cave system is the most-famous cave in the area and actually one of several in the Costa Cálida region. There are over 3,000 metres of lines throughout the Cueva del Agua cave, and the water temperature remains a constant 30 degrees C throughout the year.



CABO DE PALOS

ISLA HORMIGAS MARINE RESERVE



Cabo de Palos is the most-southerly place on the Mar Menor, the shallow body of water separated from the Mediterranean (apart from a couple of channels) by the 21km-long, 300-metre-wide area of land known as the La Manga Strip. Mar Menor means ‘small sea’ in Spanish, and is a great description - it is Europe's largest saltwater lagoon, with a surface area of 170 sq km.

Cabo de Palos itself is a large village, with the Mar Menor on one side and the Mediterranean on the other, but the hub is the quaint marina, which is surrounded by a host of restaurants, as well as being home to the dive centres serving the area, not to mention the impressive Visitors Centre of Cabo de Palos, which has literally thousands of diving books, a 3D model of the region, information about the marine park, local seahorse populations, details of shipwrecks including the tragic story of the Sirio, and a small theatre where you can watch documentaries about a range of subjects. Elsewhere, the imposing lighthouse is worth

a visit, and there is a pleasant sandy beach which joins on to the beaches of the La Manga Strip.

Cabo de Palos is the gateway to the marine park at Isla Hormigas, which offers divers the chance to dive among some of the healthiest fish stocks in the Mediterranean. Drop in on sites such as Piles I, Piles II, Bajo de Dentro, Bajo de la Testa or Bajo de Fuera and prepare to be greeted by vast shoals of barracuda, large and quite curious grouper, tuna, amberjack and trevally. Depths range from just 3m to 60m plus, ensuring there are sites suitable for all levels of diver, from relative novices or those just learning to dive to hardened veterans and technical divers seeking more of a challenge. As well as swarms of marine life and dramatic underwater topography, there are also shipwrecks to explore.

Within the marine reserve, at Bajo de Fuera, you can find not one but three wrecks – the Nord America, the Minerva and the Sirio. All lie below 40m, so these are definitely for the more-experienced diver. Enroute to the marine reserve and just over a mile outside the Port of Cabo de Palos lies

Excited divers prepare to explore the marine park



The rocky reef formations are impressive



The huge grouper are quite friendly and approachable



Shoal of barracuda



the Isla Gomera, commonly known as the Naranjito due to its final cargo of oranges. It sits upright, with the stern in 46m and the top of the superstructure rising to 27m, and offers many penetration possibilities.

Then there is the SS Stanfield, a vast wreck with a length of 120 metres and a beam of 14m. Torpedoed on 26 June 1916 by a German submarine, it lies in 62m, with the deck at 45m, and is perfect for technical divers. It is heavily encrusted in marine growth.

Slightly shallower – it sits in 44m with the deck at 35m – is the 120-metre-long Italian steamship Lilla (also known as the Carbonero due to its final cargo of coal). This merchant vessel was torpedoed by a German submarine some seven miles east of the La Manga strip in October 1917 and is now home to a rich selection of marine life.

CARTAGENA, LA AZOHÍA & CABO TIÑOSO MARINE RESERVE

A short distance along the coast from Cabo de Palos you come to the next diving area, which centres around the shoreline near the city of Cartagena and the small seaside village of La Azohía.

Cartagena is the largest city along the coast, and boasts more than 3,000 years of history, which is immediately evident when you begin to wander the streets and see the rich tapestry of architecture on display. There are a vast array of things to see and do in Cartagena, but make sure you check out the Carthago Nova Theatre, which was built in the 1st century BC by Roman Emperor Augustus, but was not discovered until 1990! Now excavated, the interactive Roman Theatre Museum has built up around it, and is a great way to look back into the past. Also worth a visit is the Underwater Archaeology National Museum (ARQUA), which houses the famous treasure of the Nuestra Sra de Las Mercedes frigate, which includes more than 570,000 gold and silver coins from the 18th and 19th centuries.

A short distance along the coast from Cartagena you find La Azohía. This charming fishing village is perfect for those looking to chill out and relax when they aren't diving. There are a few small shops, a supermarket and pharmacy, as well as a selection of bars and restaurants, but otherwise it is the perfect place to kick back and soak up the sun on the beautiful beaches.

Central to the diving from both of these locations is the relatively newly created marine park around Cabo Tiñoso, which has been up and running for just a couple of years yet is already showing positive signs of following in the footsteps of its longer-established near-neighbour at Cabo de Palos.

La Azohía

Dive sites accessed via La Azohía include Cala Cerrada, which is a sheltered inlet that drops gradually down to 30m and is the perfect spot for a first foray into diving.

More-experienced divers will be thrilled by El Arco, which is one of the region's iconic dive sites, offers a plethora of marine life and has depths down to 37m. Here the archway that gives the site its name looms above water, and the

dive usually begins on the wall and then navigates around a headland and back through the arch itself. At La Farola, on the edge of the cliffs at Cabo Tiñoso, a constant gentle current creates a haven for marine life, with colourful corals, sponges and algae supporting reef fish that draw in a stream of predators including tuna, barracuda, snapper and grouper. Depths can reach beyond 50m, so something for all levels of diver. La Garita is found at the foot of an old military construction, and the rock forms a series of stepped terraces where you can see specimens of the giant triton snail (*Charonia lampas*).

La Azohía is the gateway to the Cueva del Agua cave system, the most-famous cave in the area and actually one of several in the Costa Cálida region – they range in size and difficulty, and include both inland and coastal caves. There are over 3,000 metres of lines throughout the Cueva del Agua cave, and the water temperature remains a constant 30 degrees C throughout the year. A must for serious cave divers.

“ Central to the diving from both of these locations is the relatively newly created marine park around Cabo Tiñoso, which has been up and running for just a couple of years ”





Moray eels



The reefs are thriving with marine life



Cuttlefish



Cueva del Aqua cave system

Cartagena

Dive sites visited from Cartagena include Las Palomas Reef, a large rocky system extending off Isla Palomas which starts with a shallow plateau and then gets progressively deeper and narrower as you head southwest. The nooks and crannies on the reef are home to all manner of marine life, including moray eels and lobster, and always keep an eye put on the blue for passing pelagic predators. At the end of the dive site is a deeper plateau, which drops off to 40m, and here there is the chance of seeing eagle rays.

Just outside Cartagena port you can find El Espeque, which is a huge underwater reef that once boasted a beacon to warn ships of the submerged hazards. This was blown up and sunk when an extension was made to the port, and the remains now lie on the northern side of the reef in 25m. Like the rest of the reef, it is heavily encrusted with marine growth, and as well as the beacon itself there are some walls and steep drop-offs to explore. In the shallows on top of the reef you can find the base of the beacon, as well as a thick chain disappearing into the depths.

At the Isla de Escombreras, there are several diving options, with a couple being suitable for novice divers, though a stand-out is the 500-metre-long wall Pared del Capitan, which is more suited to advanced divers. Expect moray eels, octopus, crabs, grouper, nudibranchs and even, if you are lucky, a seahorse.

Close to the island is Bajo de Escombreras, which is a ridge rising from 35m to just 8m and well stocked with a selection of Mediterranean marine life. Then there is the Centro de Buceo de la Armada, tugboat wreck, which was sunk in the 1950s by the navy to train divers on. It is just 20 metres long and four metres wide, and there is limited penetration into the bridge. A short distance off the port side lies the fuselage of a harrier jet, which was also sunk by the navy for training purposes, and makes for an interesting photo prop. Maximum depth is 20m, with the top of the tug rising to 8m, so this is ideal for all levels of diver.



Cartagena

“ More-experienced divers will be thrilled by El Arco, which is one of the region’s iconic dive sites, offers a plethora of marine life and has depths down to 37m ”

Moray eel



MAZARRÓN

Continuing south from Cartagena and La Azohía, you come to Mazarrón. Set in a wide bay and covering some 35km, there are two main urban centres – the port, and the town capital, some 5km from the coast.

Since it came into being, the name of Mazarrón has been inextricably linked to the mining wealth of its mountain ranges, namely lead, zinc, silver, iron, alum and red ochre. In Phoenician, Punic and Roman times, immense work was carried out in the mines, leaving behind an abundance of archaeological remains, and the Arabs also were attracted to the area for its mineral riches. Its importance rose in the 19th century and early 20th century when iron and galenite were mined, but once the mines were exhausted, Mazarrón developed into an important tourist resort, while simultaneously promoting its seafaring and fishing tradition.

Close to Mazarrón, you can find the weird-and-wonderful Bolnuevo Erosions, bizarre rock formations that have been carved and sculpted by wind and water and resemble something out of a science-fiction movie. Well worth checking out for a photograph.



Mola mola can occasionally be encountered off Mazarrón

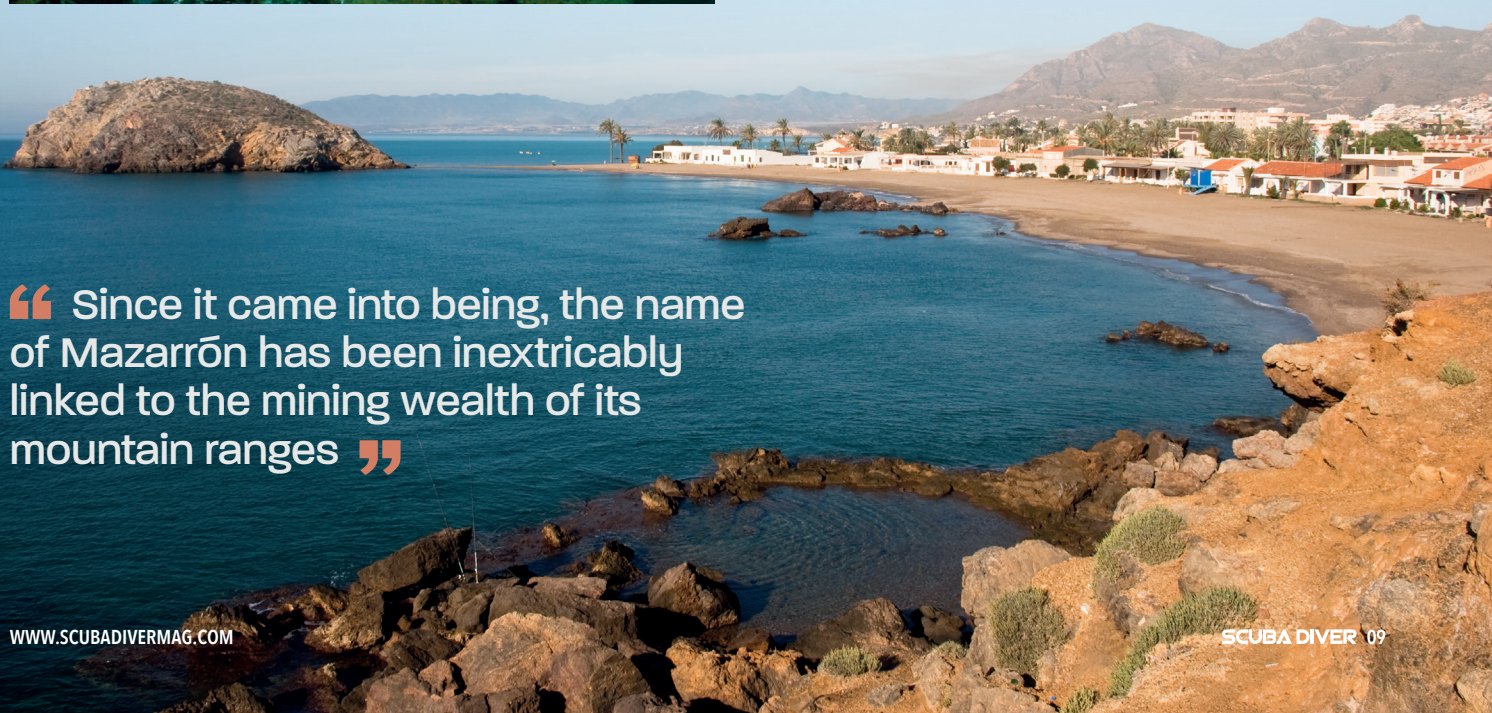


Shoals of fish feed on the reefs

Dive sites that can be visited from Mazarrón include the underwater mountain ridge known as El Bajo de Emilio o Piedra del Muelle, which covers depths from 14-34m and is home to conger eels, moray eels, dentex, grouper, damselfish and sometimes sunfish. At the Azores, which as a maximum depth of 42m, divers can encounter bigger marine life, including grouper, barracuda, moray eels, lobster and tuna.

Sitting in a maximum depth of 35m, and rising to within 28m of the surface, divers can explore the Nalon, a Spanish Navy minesweeper that was sunk as an artificial reef on 6 June 1999 in the Bay of Mazarrón. Measuring some 44 metres in length, the vessel ended up on the bottom in an upright orientation, but it is deteriorating to the extent that it is not recommended to venture inside anymore.

“ Since it came into being, the name of Mazarrón has been inextricably linked to the mining wealth of its mountain ranges ”



ÁGUILAS

The final diving area as you head south along the coast is accessible from the town of Águilas. The town sprawls along the shoreline, with more than 35 sheltered coves, and is watched over by the picturesque San Juan de las Águilas castle-fortress (first constructed in 1579 and then rebuilt in the 18th century).

It can trace its origins back to the Palaeolithic age, with other cultures including Argaric, Phoenician, Roman and Muslim also leaving their heritage behind. It became a boom town in the 19th century, with the construction of a railway line and El Hornillo pier by British companies to enable export of silver, lead and iron, but now it is one of Murcia's main tourist resorts.

There are several dive sites, including off of Isla del Fraile, which can actually be reached from the shore. The dive sites on this island are on the sea-side, and comprise large boulders and rocky reefs offering many crevices and cracks for marine life to hide in, including moray eels, conger eels, lobster and crabs, while shoals of reef fish forage for food. Depths range from 3-30m, making it perfect for all levels of diver.

Around Cabo Cope, you can find what amounts to a series of 'trails' underwater. One leads from a selection of purpose-sunk wooden fishing boats – the Ana Maria and the Nueva Mi Teresa – to the remnants of a light aircraft, sculptures, various huge anchors and other paraphernalia. Expect plenty of moray eels, nudibranchs, damselfish, grouper and other reef fish. There is also La Cueva de la Virgen, a short cavern dive which brings you up into the shallows on top of the reef – inside there is a shrine with a tile mosaic featuring an

image of Mary and her child, which is supposedly good luck for the local fishermen.

The second 'trail' is the ideal site for those with more experience, as depths range from 24-42m. As well as the reef, you can find shipwrecks including the Montoya, El Sable and Hermanos Mayor, with plenty of grouper, barracuda, dentex and even the occasional sunfish.

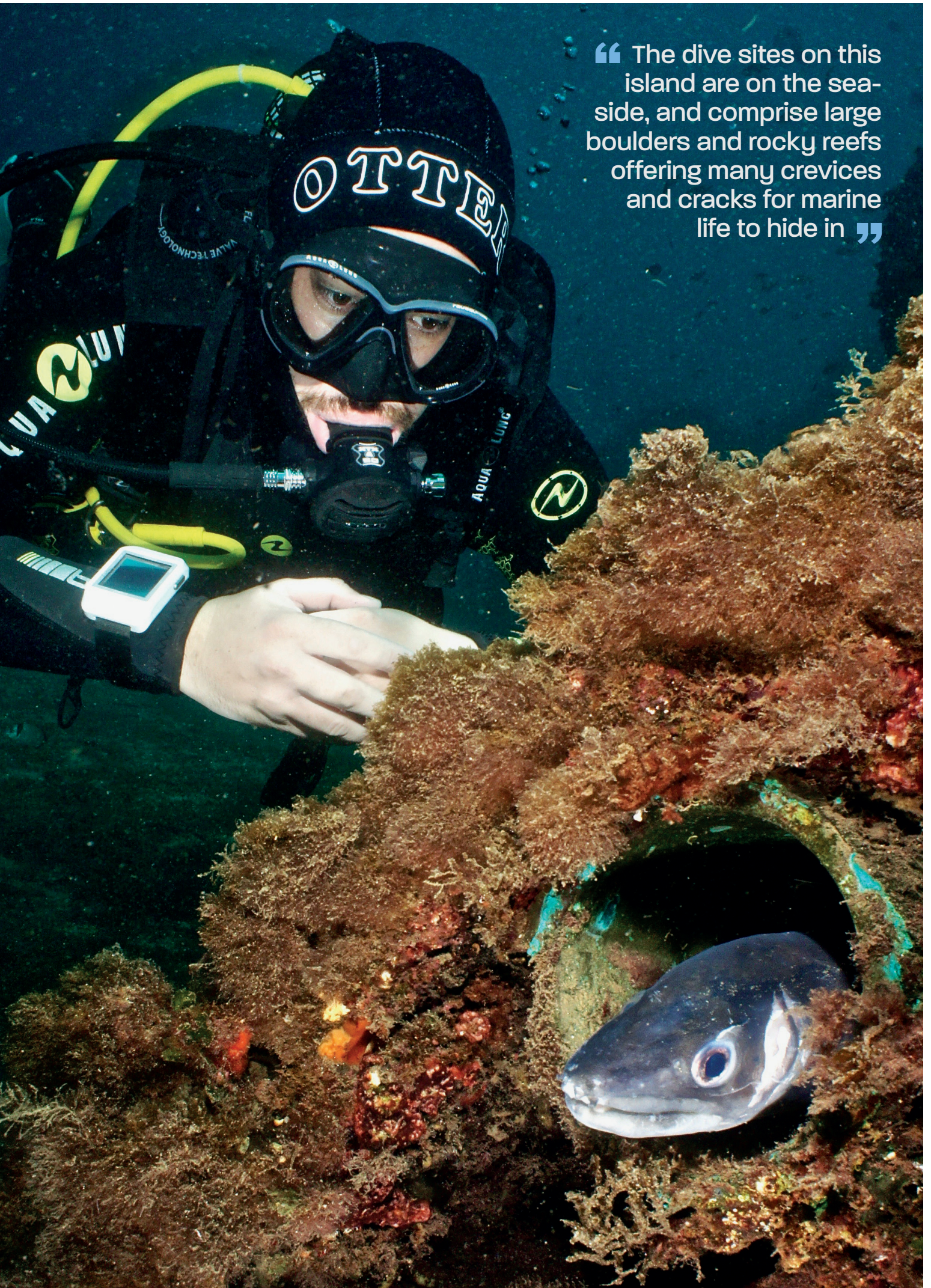


La Cueva de la Virgen mosaic

Remnants of a light aircraft



“ The dive sites on this island are on the sea-side, and comprise large boulders and rocky reefs offering many crevices and cracks for marine life to hide in ”



WRECK

HOTSPOTS

Isla Gomera / El Naranjito

While the marine reserve at Cabo de Palos houses some of the best wrecks in the area, just over a mile outside the port lies the Isla Gomera, commonly known as El Naranjito due to its final cargo – thousands of oranges. It was actually this cargo that caused its demise – in a storm in April 1946, the oranges shifted violently, causing the boat to list and take on water. The crew swam to the shore while the 51-metre freighter slowly sank, and it now sits upright, with the stern in 46m and the top of the superstructure rising to 27m.

It is covered in marine growth – and some trawl nets, so take care – but penetration is possible into the superstructure, engine room and now-empty cargo holds. The large prop is still in-situ, and makes a fine photograph.

The Lilla / Carbonero

The 120-metre-long Italian steamship Lilla, also known as the Carbonero due to its final cargo of coal, was torpedoed by a German submarine on 13 October 1917 some seven miles east of the La Manga strip. Split in two near the engine room, which you can swim through, the wreck sits in 44m with the deck at 35m and is home to a rich selection of marine life, with huge amounts of growth due to the amount of time it has been on the seabed.

Jacks, barracuda and dentex are commonly seen feeding on the shoals inhabiting the Lilla, and large conger eels can be found in the interior. Due to its location so far offshore, the visibility is often excellent – you can expect 25 metres or more.

SS Stanfield

The SS Stanfield is a vast wreck with a length of 120 metres and a beam of 14m. Launched in Liverpool in 1899, it was torpedoed on 26 June 1916 by a German submarine and sank in a depth of 62m. It sits upright on the bottom, but the bow has sustained a lot of damage, and must have impacted the seabed first. It is split wide open and allows access into three deck levels and hold number one.

The torpedo caused significant damage on the port side and effectively split the wreck in two. There are a further two cargo holds to explore, along with the main superstructure. There is even a spare propeller lying on the deck, which sits at 45m. Due to the depth, this wreck is perfect for open-circuit and closed-circuit technical divers.

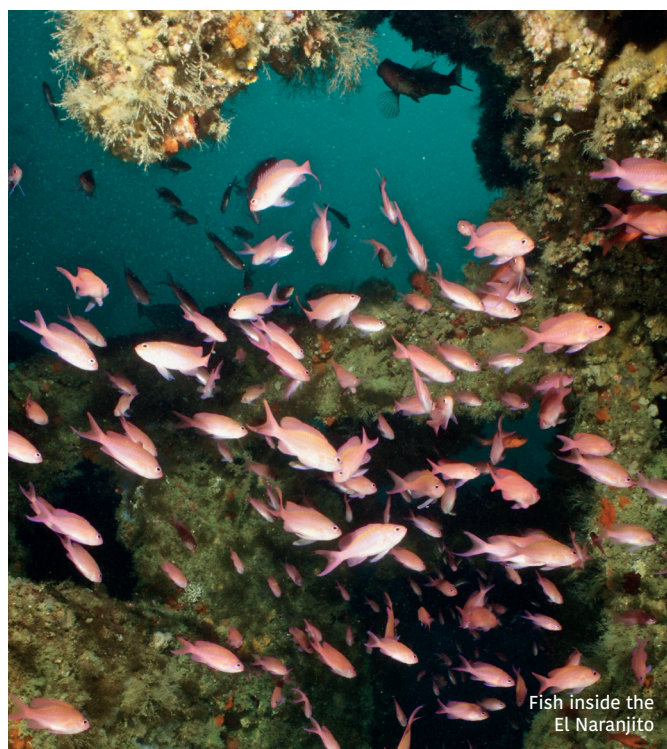
It is heavily encrusted in marine growth as it has been down over 100 years.

Bajo de Fuera

This pinnacle in the Isla Hormigas marine reserve has been a hazard to shipping for many years, as it lies a short distance from the shore yet rises from depths of 70m to just 3m below the surface. The remnants of at least four large shipwrecks can be found at depths of 40m and below.

The El Naranjito is encrusted in growth





Fish inside the El Naranjito



Wreckage on the Bajo de Fuera



Inside the Naranjito



SS Stanfield

The Italian freighter Nord America sank in 1883 after running aground while carrying a cargo of iron ingots, while the Minerva ended up on the rock during a massive storm in 1899. The remains of both are well dispersed, but several sections are still recognisable and open for exploration.

The most-infamous shipwreck is the 120-metre-long, 4,000-tonne Sirio, an Italian liner taking immigrants to the USA, which went down on 4 August 1906 after colliding with Bajo de Fuera. It was massively overloaded, though the exact number of immigrants on board is not known for sure due to improper passenger lists, but the tragic death toll was anywhere from 150-400, depending on the report you refer to. The survivors were rescued by local fishermen and other vessels, including French steamer Marie Louise and the trawlers Joven Miguel and Vicente Lilicano, the crews of the latter both being praised for their heroism. The Sirio gained notoriety not just because of the huge loss of life, but because the captain, Giuseppe Piccone, abandoned ship at the first opportunity, leaving his officers to try and deal with the panicking passengers.

HISTORY

REGIÓN DE MURCIA

The territory known today as Murcia has been inhabited by man for over 1,500,000 years, and this human presence has been a constant factor in the development of the Murcian landscape. The first evidence of the presence of man dates back to the Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon periods, though archaeological finds become more abundant from Neolithic times onwards.

Iron Age remains show the beginning of agricultural development and the domestication of livestock, which accelerated during the Iberian period, while later, commercial activity came to the fore with the Phoenicians, Greeks and Carthaginians. When the Romans arrived, the region entered a period of immense growth as both an economic and political centre in the Mediterranean that was to go on for more than 600 years.

This was followed by an extended period of political instability – a consequence of the disintegration of the Roman Empire – and so began a long spell of Arab domination, beginning in 713 AD. Not only did they officially

found the city of Murcia, but they initiated the large-scale exploitation of the Segura river valley, creating a complex irrigation system composed of canals, dams and waterwheels – the forerunner of today's irrigation network – which enabled them to reap the maximum benefit from the vast expanse of fertile land surrounding the city.

Military pressures from the north and internal political disorders heralded the end of this territory, which fell in 1243 under the vassalage of Castile, and the remains of Andalusia were finally incorporated into this kingdom with the signing of the Granada Peach Treaty in 1492.

From then on, peace came to the Murcian region, and it enjoyed a sustained period of economic and demographic growth, characterised by a major industrial revolution and the rise of in-demand minerals, which then – as the mines eventually were cleaned out – developed into agriculture and tourism. During that time, it remained a vassal kingdom of Spain until the reforms in the liberal constitution of 1812, before finally becoming an autonomous region in 1982.

“ When the Romans arrived, the region entered a period of immense growth as both an economic and political centre in the Mediterranean ”

There are a vast array of historical sites

TOPSIDE ATTRACTIONS

The city of Murcia boasts a rich array of attractions, including a visit to the Cathedral, the ancient Real Casino, and La Fuensanta Shrine, where you can learn about the many different civilisations which have called the area 'home'.

In Cartagena, the Port of Cultures offers a route to go through the whole glorious past of the city in just a few hours. You'll visit the most-relevant monuments and discover how theatres used to be in Roman times, look for enemy vessels from the Homenaje tower of the Concepcion castle, and learn how to use a cannon as if you were a soldier of the 19th century at the Navidad fort.

For the golfing fanatics, Murcia is heaven on Earth – there are no less than 22 top-quality courses over a radius of 50km, each offering their own challenges. For the more-active, there are multiple routes that can be done on foot, on horse or by mountain bike, rivers offering white-water rafting, mountain ranges boasting world-class climbing, a host of options for caving enthusiasts, and locations perfect for hang-gliding, para-gliding and zip-wiring.

Watersports in Costa Cálida

As well as diving and snorkelling, there are many opportunities to sample other watersports off the Costa Cálida. All along the coast you can head out sailing, windsurfing and kitesurfing, or exploring the beaches and coves via kayaks.

To see further afield, many locations offer motorboat rental, or you can go for a blast on a jetski for an adrenaline rush. The Mar Menor is a hotspot for kitesurfing, sailing and windsurfing. Being a vast lagoon with a maximum depth of just 7m, it is a perfect location for both beginners and experienced enthusiasts alike.

For more-detailed information about the above and a plethora of information on the Murcia region in general, check out:

www.murciaturistica.es/en

There are over
22 golf courses



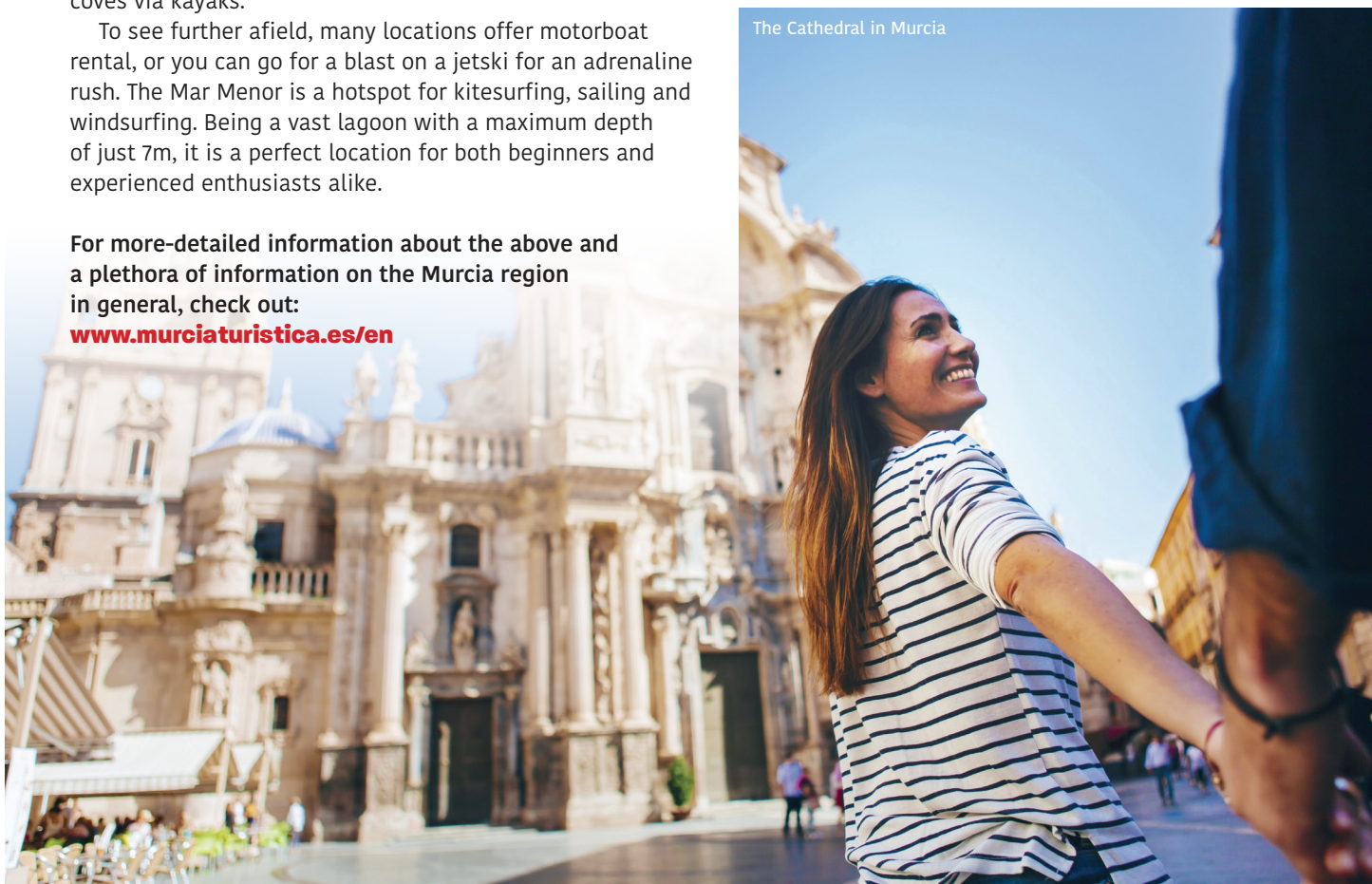
Kayaking at
Cabos de Palos



The region is
famed for its
wine



The Cathedral in Murcia



COSTA CÁLIDA

REGION OF MURCIA · SPAIN

Discover Spain's
most significant
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shipwrecks



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