

Sailing

Welcome to Cuba's wild paradise

You can only reach the tourist-free, unspoilt islands off Cuba's southern coast by boat. Lydia Bell basks in the solitude

Cayo Rosario is a craggy, deserted speck boasting a few shaggy palm trees. We are the only people there. We kayak to shore with our possessions tied up in a bin bag, through lusciously electric-blue waters. Aside from the flotsam (buoys, flip flops, bottles and a deflated basketball for your own private "Wilssssson!" moment) thrown around by Hurricane Sandy, there is a virgin status to this place and its 8km beach. We bob in the surf and smoke in the shade of a lolling palm. We make sloppy sculptures with the creamy sands that mingle with the lapping tide. We chase hermit crabs. We shout "go away" at some vultures. The salty, sun-sated hours pass until we return to the boat.

We are here because our private charter boat, crewed by Deciderio, the captain, and José, a skipper-chef-lobster whisperer, is taking a slow amble around the Archipiélago de los Canarreos, off the southern coast of Cuba.

Slung beneath the mainland's underbelly is La Isla de la Juventud, which has a jagged necklace of tiny coral cays, like crushed-sugar droplets ringed by bright turquoise, extending 110km eastwards across the Golfo de Batabanó. More extensive than the Florida Keys, with hundreds of anchorages, they are Robinson Crusoe sand-specks ending in the developed island of Cayo Largo. There are no tourists, no beachcombers, no cocktails with plastic umbrellas in them, just a corner of unspoilt paradise. You get there by catamaran, with bunks located in the hulls providing a

platform to smooth ocean swells — not that we experience many. The shallow draught of the boats makes them perfect for these islets.

This string of cays has trapped many more ships than it has enticed to stay — divers have found the remains of more than 70 vessels, and many more sank there between the 16th and the 18th centuries. Christopher Columbus is said to have visited on his second expedition in 1494. Pirates certainly dropped in, though the main pirate activity was in La Isla, the biggest island.

The area is still plentiful in green, hawksbill and ridley turtles, and many float past me, beady eyed, while I'm snorkelling. This is prime territory if you like diving.

All the cays have saltwater flats on the mainland side and coral reefs to the south. The seabed is feted for its coral formations, tunnels and steep walls covered with marine life. Much can be seen just by snorkelling, which is all I do. I see a squid gliding alongside a barracuda, and lots of zippy rays. I see a rainbow array of solitary fish, and many, many undulating shoals.

Cuba is actually one big archipelago — 4,000-plus islands and cays as well as the long, loping, crocodile-shaped mainland. On this archipelago within an archipelago, Cayo Largo (28km long, only 3km wide) is king. I confess to an historical lack of interest in visiting, believing it to be a manufactured paradise. It's a great jumping-off point for an archipelago escapade, however, and the

Cayo — hotels notwithstanding — is still pleasantly unspoilt. The northern coast is left to the mangroves, pelicans, iguanas and mosquitoes. Visitors arrive from Havana in a 65-year-old Antonov An-2 biplane with a cruising altitude of 1,200m — to say the flight was scenic is an understatement. The small, rickety craft swoops down to the long, thin spit of coral-over-speckled-periwinkle waters, hazy mangroves and the tufted thatches of hotel roofs. We pick up our boat at the marina, a short bus ride from the tiny airport. The catamaran has six double cabins, all en suite. At £3,600 for one week, at full capacity it's £86 each a day with food and drink thrown in. It's a bargain price tag, with the princely boon that you are mostly alone when you drop anchor: the Virgin Islands this is not. The catamaran pulls into the marina late

in the afternoon, and we head to Playa Sirena, on the other side of the island, by its backstage lagoon, to spend the night. It's the end of the day and the emerald waters are balmy as we swim to shore. In the shallow water, tiny Dr Seuss trees wave and the sculpture-like stump of a dead tree spreads its roots tentacle-like in the water. Rust-red starfish dot the water's edge and a gaggle of fat gulls waddle in front of us, as if leading the way. Only a few straggling daytrippers remain. The sea is still jewel-blue and bedazzling, as if drawn in by a child's crayon.



Paradise Beach, Cayo Largo, the largest island of the archipelago

Sirena is a blessed beach, spared the currents, winds — and hotels — of the south of Cayo Largo del Sur. We stay till sunset then retrace our steps to the lagoon, swimming out in time to watch the sun plow behind the sea like a fat orange popsicle, leaving an apple flash behind it.

The next evening, after our day on the deserted Cayo Rosario, we drop anchor near Canal del Rosario, which offers protection against the winds. We eat red snapper that José, the skipper, harpooned at the reef. We count shooting stars in the blazing night sky while he rhythmically guts and filets the rest of the snapper, and romanticise about sailors on Spanish galleons watching the same stars and hearing the same silence.

Finally, we are lulled to sleep by the faint, rocking movement of the boat. When I wake the next morning we are on the move and José has already caught two

“ Posses of iguanas advance enthusiastically towards you like lapdogs ”

barracuda. We arrive at Cayo Rico, another deserted island, going in by motor dinghy, the keel dragging on the sand. There is a deserted restaurant populated by iguanas and a scattering of old sun loungers.

As you approach, posses of iguanas advance enthusiastically towards you like lapdogs. We commune with the iguanas, walk in the shallows and return to our boat and back to Cayo Largo, where the Cubans have a night of rum and rumba planned. It's the weekly marina party and the village transforms from half-dead one-horse town to explosive party as every Cuban worker on the island gathers to let off steam. We spend a raucous night pool-hustling and go to sleep at 3am, the sound of salsa muted by the water beneath us.

I wake at 10. The perfect hangover cure is to drift dreamily over a coral bed, through shoals of fish, indigo blue and as yellow as a

lollipop lady. Shafts of sunlight pierce the milky-calm depths and some of the fish seem comatose, too, sleepily rocking back and forth with the current. I follow a turtle for a while, wreaths of seaweed stroking my legs. Every once in a while he glances over his shoulder at me, quizzically.

We float on to our next pit-stop. Just off Cayo Largo, a confluence of reef and dune has created a natural swimming pool in the shallows, as warm as a baby's bath, milky streaks of pearlescent sand in the palest aquamarine waters. I lie on a sandslick for an hour, feeling the sun sink deep into my pores.

And so a simple pattern emerges to our sailing holiday: waking on coral reefs to snorkel among turtles, manta rays and shoals of fish, bringing back a childlike sense of wonder; anchoring off deserted islands and swimming ashore, for your own private shipwreck fantasy moment; sunbathing as the ropes on the mast tinkle; eating lobster and snapper that you've watched being pulled from the ocean two hours earlier.

There is no mobile phone reception, no wi-fi and no television. The ocean's movement is conducive to sleep and ten-hour

shuteyes come as standard. This is the holiday equivalent of the best buffalo mozzarella and sunburst-tomato salad in the world: few ingredients, brilliantly realised.

On our last morning I watch José jump into the sea with his harpoon, his knife strapped to his calf. This time he also has a metal rod with a hooked end: it's time to hunt lobster.

I follow him, holding a string bag. Within half an hour it's full of spiny lobsters. He makes it look easy. He dives down to the seabed, sticks his head under the coral and rocks, finds his lobster, then hooks him out with the rod. Sometimes the lobster escapes and swims off, emitting a long, thin scream, with José in hot pursuit. José always wins. The fish go crazy when the lobsters are pulled out of their dens. They attach themselves to them and to José, sucking off any titbits they can.

We stop for lunch at Cayo Sal, a lolling blob of desolate rock, like a micro Falklands. This cay has an saltwater lagoon, loved by seagulls, sea-ducks and other marine birds. There are cat sharks about, but I don't spot one. Instead, I watch a small fish hurtle in and out from behind a rock. He has never seen anything that



RICHARD BRADLEY / ALAMY

Four top catamaran trips



Lake Malawi

Danforth Lodge on the southern shore of Lake Malawi is great for water sports. Tack on extra days (the length of time is flexible) and take their 38ft ocean-going catamaran, *Mufasa*, down the lake. With a dive balcony at the back, the boat can be used as a sailboat or as a cruiser. This is the only boat of its kind on Lake Malawi, and it sleeps up to eight guests. Expert Africa (020-8232 9777, expertafrica.com) has an 11-night Malawi itinerary, including a six-night stay at Danforth Lodge with three nights aboard *Mufasa*, from £3,129pp, with flights, transfers, nine nights' full board and some activities.

Ningaloo Reef, Australia

At the world's largest fringing reef, you can snorkel among 500 species of tropical fish, 200 kinds of coral, plus turtles, dolphins, manta rays and whale sharks. A new luxury catamaran offers 3.5-day cruises around the reef. Choose between diving, snorkelling or kayaking. Certain cruises also include manta ray research. A three-night tour with Sail Ningaloo (sailningaloo.com.au) costs from \$1,700 (£1,132) per person, including all meals, snorkelling, kayaking and fishing.



The Turkish Mediterranean

Adonis shirks the Turkish gulet tradition — this is a super-luxe catamaran which sleeps six (with a master cabin that is twice the size of the others) — and is available for between one and three nights to explore the Lycian coast between Kas and Kekova, with a crew doing the sailing as well as providing breakfasts, picnic lunches and tea. Dinners are eaten at a variety of waterside restaurants. Qualified guests can skipper with a captain on board. Exclusive Escapes (020-8605 3500, exclusiveescapes.co.uk) offers a two-day private charter of *Adonis* from £1,400 including crew and meals.

Sardinia

To Sardinia's north is the Strait of Bonifacio, which separates Sardinia from Corsica. There is always a sailing wind and the Maddalena Archipelago, on the northwest tip of the island is stunning. *Allures* is a 30m catamaran — one of a few mega-catamarans in the world — sleeping eight with a crew of four to five. A performance sailing yacht, *Allures*' twin hull allows for high speeds, a vast deck and there are grand Italian interiors, for those who take sunbathing and style as seriously as sailing. It's not cheap, though — it costs from €57,000 per week for up to eight guests. Details on camperandnicholson.com



Lydia Bell was a guest of Esencia Experiences (01481 714898, esenciaexperiences.com) which has a seven-day, six-night catamaran trip from £3,600. The catamaran sleeps six and the price includes a skipper and all food and drink. Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com) has flights from £667pp to Havana.