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the magazine that's straight down the line...

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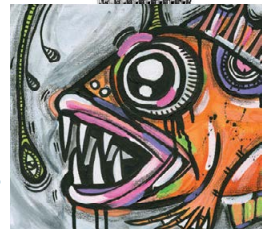


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photographer,  
by Alex  
Mustard

# DIVERNET

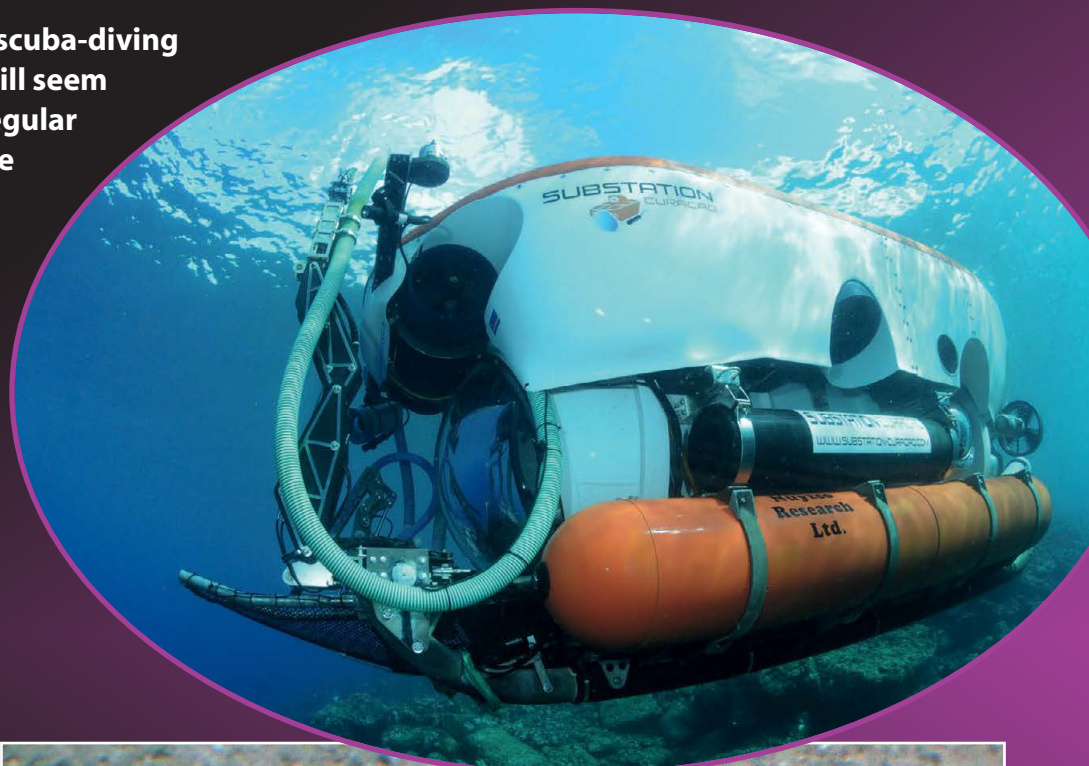
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# DESCENT TO THE TWILIGHT ZONE



Much of the scuba-diving in Curaçao will seem familiar to regular visitors to the Caribbean

but there is one dive that is completely out of the ordinary. So what lies 300m down, on the outer edge of the Twilight Zone? **MICHAEL SALVAREZZA** and **CHRISTOPHER P WEAVER** had to find out but first, for context, some shallower dives were needed...



**T**HE REEF DROPPED OFF suddenly and tumbled into the depths, creating a sheer wall beginning at 14m and extending beyond recreational diving limits. Hard corals mixed with colourful sponges made for an inviting journey along it.

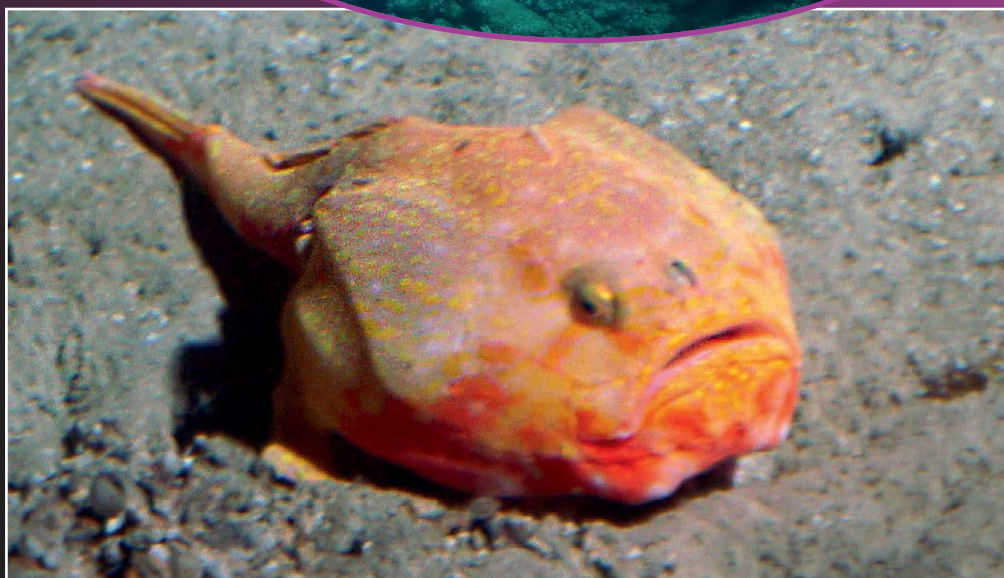
Schools of wrasse and tang darted about, while several wary moray eels poked their heads out of crevices to strike a threatening pose.

This was Blue Bay Wall in Curaçao, on our first dive of the week, and a good start to a trip aimed at exploring the island's deeper reefs and eventually venturing deeper than most scuba-divers ever get to go.

Curaçao is the "C" in the ABC islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao ("B" is probably the best-known to UK divers). It lies just 35 miles north of Venezuela and is 37 miles long and seven wide.

In sharp contrast to the coral jungle that lies just offshore beneath the waves of the warm Caribbean, Curaçao has a desert-like landscape.

Not much more than 50cm of rain falls per year and this, combined with hot and sultry temperatures, gives rise to cactus and other desert flora and fauna. It also means that there is little run-off from the



Top: The deepwater submarine prepares to dive.

Above: At 2400m, the sub camera photographs unfamiliar-looking fish like this.

land, making for invitingly clear waters.

As we traversed Blue Bay Wall, we found ourselves swimming with Nassau grouper, rock hinds and several species of parrotfish. With a water temperature of 29°, we were quite comfortable in our 3mm suits for an extended exploration.

Blue Bay Wall is one of Curaçao's best dives but there are many others to intrigue divers visiting this Dutch

territory. We had soon fallen into a pleasant routine of diving twice in the morning, grabbing a hearty island lunch and spending the afternoon either doing another dive, enjoying time on the beach or getting out and about on the island.

We explored a number of good-quality dive-sites, but describing four will suffice to give a flavour and range of the place.

At Playa Largo Drift we cruised over



a picturesque reef system in a slight current and photographed lizardfish and a peacock flounder along with invertebrates such as feather-duster and Christmas tree worms.

This was a good second dive of the day because it was shallower than the deeper walls, but the “drift” in the name is a bit misleading – far from a strong-current experience, this was merely a gentle flow along the shore.

In Bullen Bay we dropped to 23m and spotted a green moray as well as a giant barracuda patrolling the reef.

This site also features a wall and drop-off, and smart divers keep one eye focused on the deep blue waters away from the reef in case of spotting jack, tuna or the occasional reef shark.

One of Curaçao’s signature dives, Mushroom Garden, is a favourite spot known for its huge coral growths and columns of rock covered in orange cup corals. The “garden” extends over a swathe of ocean bottom and the outcroppings resemble big mushrooms.

We didn’t have the opportunity to do a night dive there but imagine the orange corals would make for striking photographs in the darkness.

**CURAÇAO’S DIVE-SITES** include some fascinating shipwrecks, and one lies at the mouth of Willemstad Harbour.

The *Superior Producer* was a freighter

that sank in 1978 in 30m. When we visit the Caribbean it’s often difficult to imagine ships sinking in these calm, clear, warm seas but water is water.

Bad judgment and poor seamanship can sink a vessel there just as easily as anywhere else in the world.

The *Superior Producer* had left harbour overlaid against the advice of its captain, whose trepidation became reality almost before the crew had finished waving good-bye to people on shore.

The 73m cargo ship was heading for Venezuela for the Christmas shopping season and her hold was full of clothing and alcohol, but the water was rough.

The combination of large ocean swells and overloading spelt trouble and within minutes the cargo had started shifting. The *Superior Producer* sank quickly on an even keel.

Shortly afterwards blue jeans, cotton T-shirts, sheets and crates of whisky began washing up on shore.

It was a Christmas that kept on giving for the locals, with divers getting in on the act to help recover the goods. Within days many islanders were wearing new clothes and some were reeling from the effects of the alcoholic bonanza.

The wreck continues to be a gift to Curaçao – as a terrific dive. Covered in marine growth, it is home to a wide

Above from left: The head of a lizardfish; shrimp and crabs often make their homes among the stinging tentacles of anemones; a French angelfish, though they are often found in pairs.

variety of fish life. We found purple-tipped anemones near the base and on closer examination found that these hosted several species of colourful shrimp. Minor penetration is possible into the bridge area and down into some of the cargo holds.

**THE DEEPER DIVE** mentioned earlier would not be technical but achieved through the use of a submarine. Substation Curaçao, located near the Curaçao Aquarium, takes passengers down to 300m, and we had signed up to see what it was like.

It’s a tourist excursion but we did feel like *bona fide* ocean-explorers as we talked to the tour guides about the construction of the vehicle, the safety measures in place and what we should expect to experience on our dive.

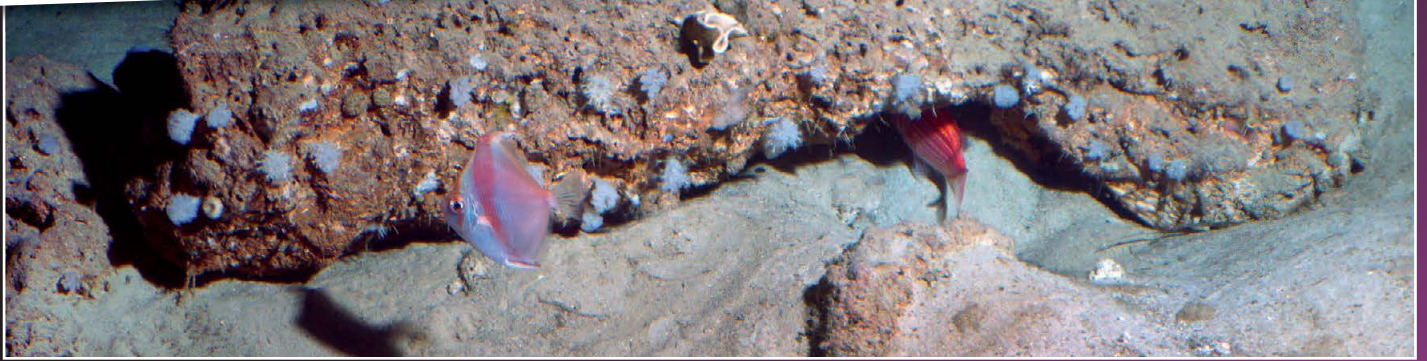
The five-person submarine was built by Nuytco Research and is designed for a depth of 600m, tested to 460m and certified for 300m.

It has a metre-wide front-facing viewport and two other 25cm ports, redundant battery, air and oxygen supplies and uses scrubbers to remove carbon dioxide from the main cabin, so passengers could in theory survive on the bottom for four days should the sub become disabled. Far from that, we hoped to be back in time for lunch.

After a briefing, we entered the sub and got comfortable lying flat on our

Below from left: Like other damselfish, three-spots are unafraid of divers; an arrow crab takes shelter beneath a small anemone; a gaudily-coloured stoplight parrotfish.





stomachs near the front viewport. This position would become a little challenging to our backs as the dive progressed, but the excitement of descending beyond the reach of sunlight helped us to forget about the discomfort.

The sub pushed off from a loading dock and traversed over the familiar-looking reef nearby before starting to descend.

A slight swaying at the surface made us aware that we were inside a vehicle, but once below the influence of the waves its motion became indiscernible.

**A**T FIRST THE DESCENT felt much like any scuba-dive as we watched hard corals, seafans and sponges appear ahead, but because of the curvature of the dome-port everything looked further away and smaller than we were used to. A giant-sized green moray immediately below us looked as if it was 10m away!

Soon, however, things began to feel

**Above:** A small community of fish photographed by the submarine at 180m and (inset) a lionfish at 120m. The bad news for would-be deepwater photographers is that deploying a DSLR is not practical from the sub.

**Below from left:** The strange face of a peacock flounder; a turtle finds respite on the reef.

different. As we dropped below 120m, the darkness was beginning to set in.

Surprisingly, we were still seeing the invasive lionfish at these depths – scuba-divers try to eradicate them from the shallow reefs, but if they are thriving at 120m the challenge of ridding the Caribbean of these fish is far more difficult than we had imagined.

At 180m the sunlight was all but gone. Now we felt that the adventure was really underway. Corals vanished and the landscape became alien and rather bland and rocky.

Inside the sub, quiet and darkness began to envelope us. The whirring sounds of the motors and the occasional communication with the surface alone broke the silence, along with the commentary of the captain.

At 240m, a set of large boulders emerged from the darkness. We saw an occasional deepwater eel slithering along the bottom, along with some shy fish that

resembled squirrelfish. Creeping along the seabed were sea urchins, and an occasional crinoid could be seen on the rocks. All of this was brilliantly illuminated by the sub's powerful lights.

Then, at about 290m, a loud terrifying bang startled us. In that brief moment we couldn't help picturing the submarine cracking open!

**T**HE CAPTAIN ASSURED us that this was nothing to be worried about, simply the metal adjusting to the pressure, but it did serve to remind us that we were at the mercy of the integrity of the submarine, and far from the surface should there be a problem.

With hearts beating that bit faster, we turned our attention back to the underwater landscape in front of us.

We "bottomed out" at 308m, having reached an area of ocean that few scuba-divers will ever see, before beginning a slow ascent back to the world of sunlight,



blue waters and reefs teeming with life.

The ocean floor turned out to be a mixture of rocks and muddy substrate, where we discerned both familiar and unfamiliar marine life.

Seeing species such as squirrelfish and lionfish surprised us only because we were seeing them at such depth. But for us marine-life geeks, it was seeing those species found only in the dark waters of the deep that was the real treat.

We found, for example, red sea urchins that the captain said were poisonous, and a fish known as the peppermint basslet, while sitting on the mud was a dour-looking deep-sea toadfish, presumably waiting for its prey to swim close enough to be pounced upon.

With the optics of the dome of the sub, using a DSLR camera would be difficult as the photos here are those taken from the sub's own camera. But the sightings were fascinating, even as the largely barren deepwater environment stood in stark contrast to the lush coral jungles nearer to the surface, and knowing that we were 300m down was a thrill.

We were excited to have this unique experience under our belts.

**WHILE WE TRY TO** maximise our time spent under water, it's always worth getting out to see what else places have to offer. Curaçao reflects the Netherlands' rich culture in its colourful architecture, and a stroll down the famous waterfront in Willemstad will remind travellers of Amsterdam, while various statues and monuments commemorate the history of the island.

Another striking feature of the harbour is the Queen Emma Pontoon Bridge for pedestrians, which opens every half-hour to allow boat traffic to pass through.

Like clockwork, the alarms go off, the gates close and the bridge's many outboard motors swing the floating bridge open and closed.

It's fun to watch, and even more fun to



be on when the bridge is in motion.

Visitors to Curaçao might enjoy the arid environment, comfortable resorts and sense of rich history and culture but divers know that the real treasure lies where angelfish and butterflyfish meander over healthy reef systems teeming with marine creatures.

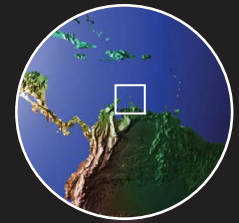
They'll find the frenetic spotted drums, defiant damselfish, protective schools of sergeant-majors and all the other denizens of its coral cities.

Divers are fortunate in getting to see what so many others never will, and if you think it's worth the outlay, deepwater submarine divers belong to an even more exclusive club.

Above: Staircase on the Superior Producer.

Below right: Glasseye snapper are shy reef-dwellers.

Below: Curaçao is true to its Dutch heritage.



## FACTFILE

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Flights from the UK to Curaçao on KLM and Air France.

**DIVING** ▶ Blue Bay Dive, kennethdivecenter.net. Substation Curaçao offers several types of submarine experiences down to the 300m deep excursion, substation-curaçao.com

**ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Mike and Christopher stayed at the Hilton Curaçao, which has since closed, but Willemstad offers options in all price ranges.

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Year-round, but with warmer and clearer water in summer. Caribbean hurricane season extends from June through to the start of November but Curaçao is far south and rarely affected.

**MONEY** ▶ US dollars.

**HEALTH** ▶ Recompression chamber located at the St Elisabeth Hospital.

**PRICES** ▶ Return flights from £480pp. Two-tank dives with Blue Bay Dive, \$110pp. Submarine excursion \$650pp.

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ curacao.com

