

Brazil's Ilha Grande

Laid back & lazy

There are a few places on this planet where things seem to fall into place without any hesitation. Ilha Grande, Brazil, is one of these places. Even on busy weekends, there is a no-stress atmosphere. On the beach, in the garden hammock, or at 20 metres depth—it's all laid back and lazy.

A couple of editions back, our magazine adopted the sub-heading "International lifestyle magazine for divers". Well, spending some days on Ilha Grande definitely felt more like a lifestyle than work. All things connected—the lush green forrests, tiny quiet villages on the water's edge, deserted beaches, wooden schooners anchored in the bays, and the attractions of the deep azur ocean. Arriving on the island—after you have just transferred from either busy Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo—is like stepping onto another planet as soon as you step off the boat.

No diving

Diving is important. Otherwise, I would have written this story for a food magazine. When I am on a dive trip, I want to dive! But this time, it was different.

As usual, I headed for the dive centers shortly after checking in at the hotel, in order to set up things. The conversation I had with a guy from one of the dive centers was short. It went like this: "No diving today because the visibility is too bad."

"OK, what do you mean by bad?"

"10-12 metres! Better wait for another day!"

I know quite a few people who would love to dive with 10-12 meters of visibility—anyday, any where! This time, I didn't really get upset for a cancelled dive trip. I just went back to our hotel, surprising my wife with my sudden return.

She is used to the phrase, "setting up things for

diving", meaning hours of yadda yadda, and wasn't expecting me so soon. So, we picked up our beach stuff, my camera and found a lonely part of a nearby beach and enjoyed a heavenly afternoon of tranquility.

Beach combing

The next day, we stopped by the dive center, but the owner had left for business on the main land. This meant we could spend a whole day exploring the island. You basically have two choices: either going by foot on some of the dirt trails that criss-cross the rugged island, or taking a much more relaxed tour on a so-called schooner.

You often encounter the dark spotted snake eel along the Brazilian coast.



A piece of fruit in the water quickly attracts both Dog's Tooth Snapper and Sergeant Majors'

Text by Arnold Weisz
Topside photos by Arnold Weisz
Underwater photos by Alcides Falanghe

We chose the latter option. These locally made wooden motor yachts, whose riggings are fake, are pleasant ways of visiting other villages and beaches.

There is a wide choice of trips. They all basically stop at a few different beaches and serve warm

The underwater scenery around Ilha Grande is fantastic with its variety. Boulders, canyons, walls and swim through are perfect for both divers and the marine life.

food and drinks on board. Most of them make a snorkeling and bathing stop as well. Sailing around the island gives you some spectacular views of it and the mainland.

Finally diving

After a couple of days beach combing, it was good to be back in the rumble and bumble on board a dive boat. With a mixed crowd of Scandinavians, Germans and Brits, we steamed out of the Bay of Abrão, heading for the

windward side of the island.

Open to the ocean, this area offers the best diving, although there are many dive sites in the strait between the island and the main land as well. Having some newbie's on board we opted for quieter water in a bay. Anchoring up in a secluded bay at little São Jorge Island, we found some nice spots for diving.

The coast of Rio de Janeiro isn't tropical, so don't expect vast colourful coral reefs. That being said,

the marine life is abundant. At any dive site around Ilha Grande, there are some hefty rock formations. The rocks and crevices are hide-outs for a multitude of marine life. There are many swim throughs, but stay away from the black sea urchins, which can give you a few hours of pain.

Even though the dark grottos are attractive, don't forget the blue water or the sandy bottom. There are plenty of seaturtles around, and small groups of batfishes travel by. The wet desert isn't really as deserted as one would think. Bottom dwellers use the sand to hide and wait for a suitable pray to swim by.

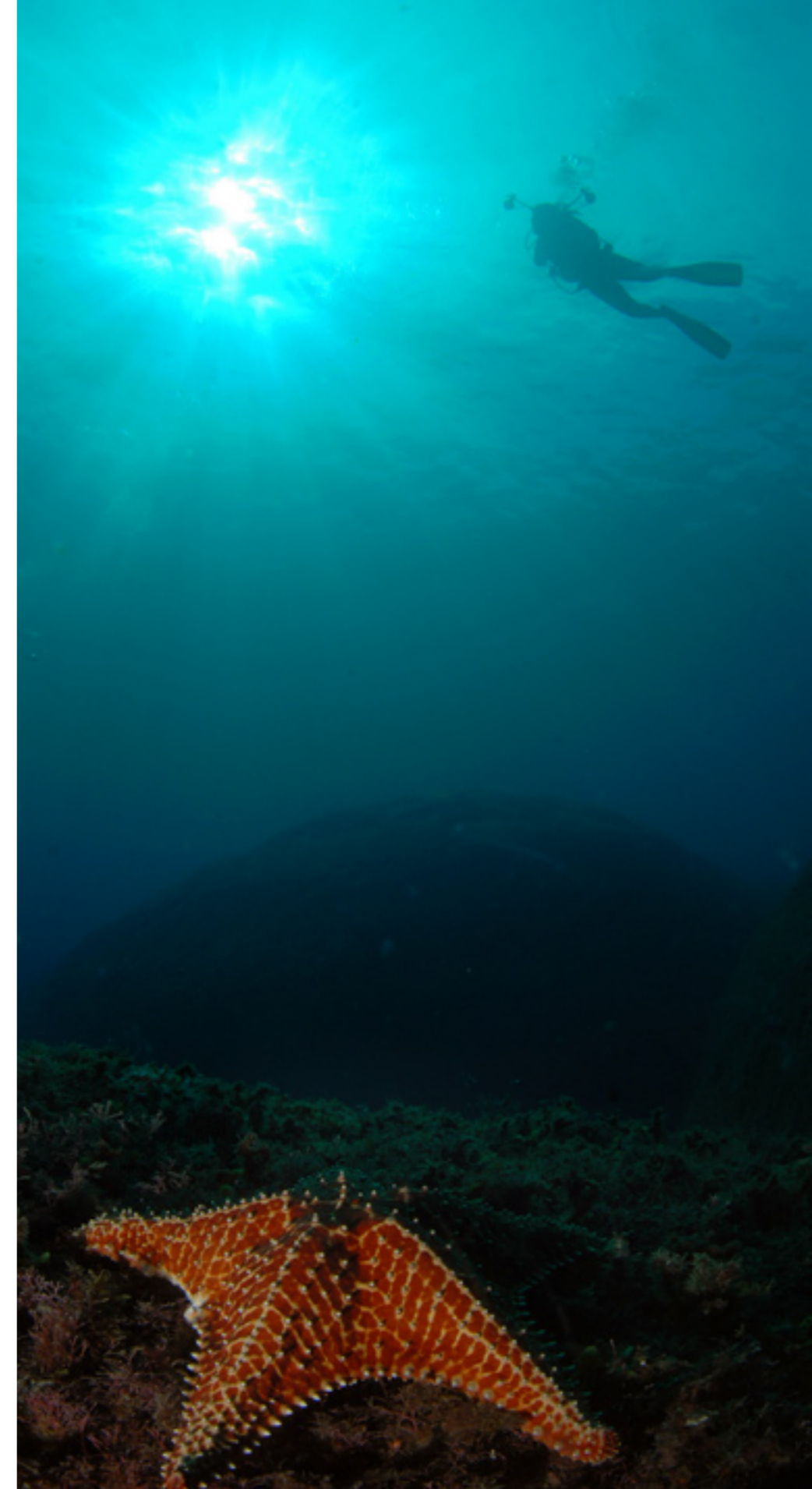
As an ocean current passes the island, the water is nutrient rich. The outer rocks are often covered with corals. What sometimes lacks in visibility, is well made up for by the divers marine life.

For those interested in wrecks, yes there are some good wreck dives to be made here as well, but we have to get back to you on this, for the next feature.

Nature

You can certainly find more beautiful beaches somewhere else on the planet, and you can find more picturesque villages on other islands. But these 193 km² of paradise-on-earth aren't weeks away on a sailboat, or hours in a plane away from civilization. It's just a mere two hours south of Rio de Janeiro, or seven hours on the road from São Paulo. Whatever you do on this island, it's very much connected to nature.

Ilha Grande



Ocean currents makes the waters around Ilha Grande much clearer than for example than other islands a long this coast, like Ilhabela, further south

Ilha Grande



Most of the dive sites offer a diversity that satisfy everyone, from the UW-macro photographer to sea turtle lovers

Even rowdy Scandinavians seem to notch down their cheerfulness after a few beers in one of the many bars and eateries here. Then you will hear the sound of the nature. Like birds and crickets. Accompanied by waves washing up onto the beach and the wind sweeping through the vegetation... and sometimes, even a sigh of happiness can be heard.

Car free

We opted to stay in the main village on the island of Abrao. Here, you will find most of the tourist infrastructure, shops and accommodations. It is still a very low key setting. For those who want even more tranquility, there are a few other options around the island with lone resorts, or tiny villages with a pousada or two.

One of the most enjoyable things on Ilha Grande was the lack of cars. The only things that ran on petrol on land here were the mayor's car and a couple of dirt bikes used by the local police. Even the local police car was an electric golf car. Just be aware of bikers and dogs, which are plentiful here.

Ocean, beach, diving and food!
What more you you need?

Diving Services

The diving services on this trip were provided by Elite Dive Center in Vila Abrao, Ilha Grande. They run a 40-foot custom built dive boat, driven by a 2x300 hp Mercedes Benz.

There is a small cabin and a toilet available. Maximum capacity is 16 divers, but the owner Daniel Gouvêa says that they seldom go out with more than 12 divers. He speaks fluently English. So does his father who functions as a dive guide on board.

The boat usually departs around 9:00 am and comes back around 4:00 pm. All divers get a lunch package and water or softdrinks between the dives. Rental equipment and Nitrox are available.

For more information, please visit:
www.elitedivecenter.com.br ■

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