



# PERFECT DIVER

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ILLES MEDES  
AN UNDERWATER RESERVE

THE MALEDIVES

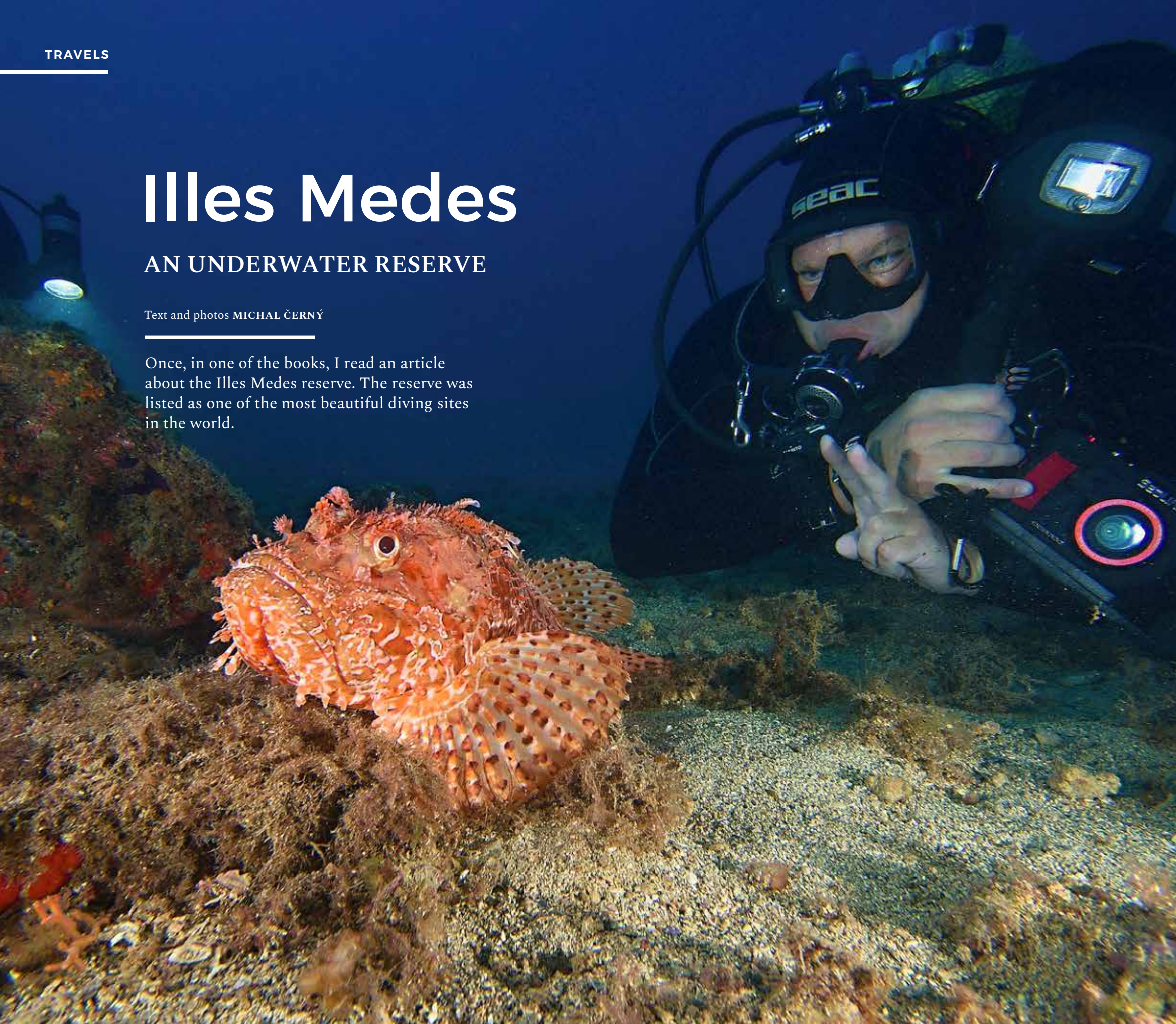


# Illes Medes

## AN UNDERWATER RESERVE

Text and photos MICHAL ČERNÝ

Once, in one of the books, I read an article about the Illes Medes reserve. The reserve was listed as one of the most beautiful diving sites in the world.



A sentence uttered by the author stuck in my mind: *"I have always wondered where all the fish from the Mediterranean Sea went, now I know."*

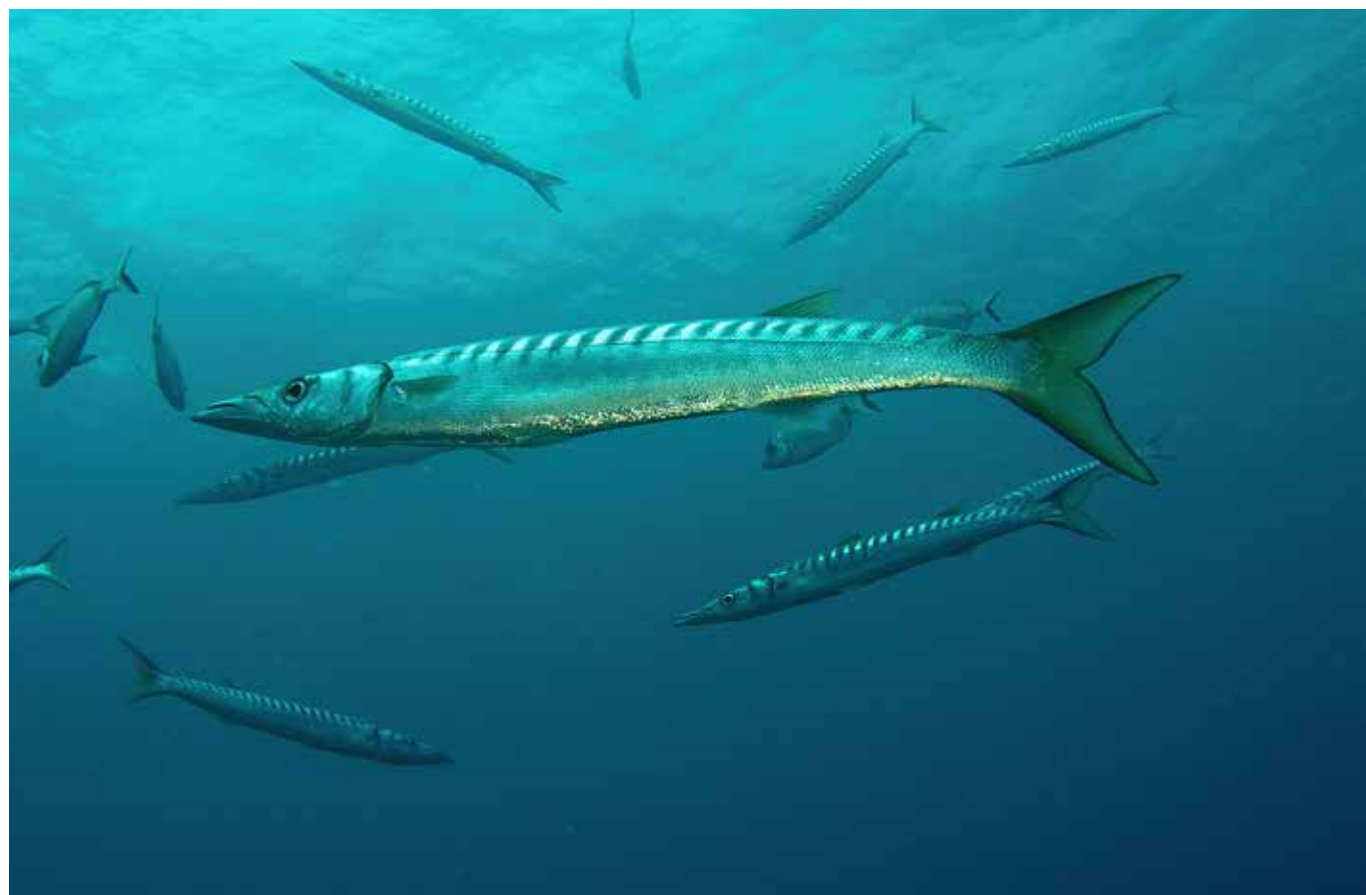
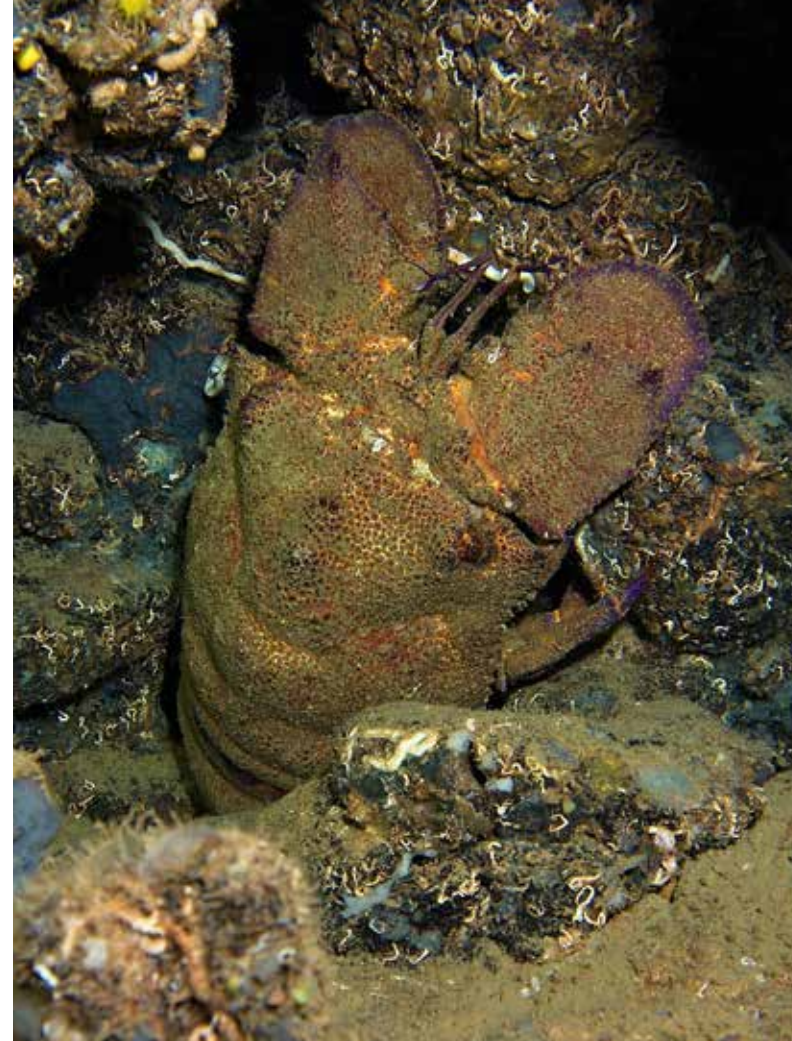
After my more than thirteen visits to this Mediterranean paradise for divers, I can confidently state that this sentence is 100% true. So many different fish cannot be found anywhere else in the Mediterranean Sea.

### HISTORY

The Medes Islands are located in the middle of the Costa Brava, about 100 km north of Barcelona, near L'Estartit. The archipelago consists of seven main islands: Medellet, Meda Grand, Meda Petita, les Ferrenelles, Tasco Gros, Tasco Petit and Carall Bernat. During the Middle Ages, the islands were inhabited. Used and raided by pirates. To this day, you can find round watchtowers here that served the locals as a "voice" announcing the impending attack. Until 1983, L'Estartit was just a small village where the main source of income was fishing from the waters around the islands. However, just this year, the Catalan Parliament approved the area as protected by a ban on all types of fishing. In 1990, this protection was further increased when the entire area of 511 hectares was declared a submarine reserve. Thanks to this, L'Estartit completely changed and the locals began to switch from fishing to tourism. Hotels, restaurants and, of course, diving bases and other centers focused not only on water sports began to appear here. Today L'Estartit is a popular tourist destination mainly for divers from all over Europe.







#### ORGANIZATION AND DIVING CENTERS

Due to the fact that it is an underwater nature reserve, dives are regulated here and you can dive practically only through local diving centers. Another limitation is that divers with OWD or P1 qualifications can only enter the water when accompanied by an instructor or divemaster, this is mainly to prevent damage to the corals (poor buoyancy of inexperienced divers). The maximum permitted diving depth is 40 meters, and the dive time must not exceed 60 minutes.

There are several diving centers here. However, for years we have been using the services of the La Sirena resort, which is one of the largest and best here. It has three large dive boats (each for 20-30 divers) and all are equipped with lifts. Yes, you read that right, each vessel has a stainless steel elevator at the stern for two divers, which you will especially appreciate if there are some waves in the sea. All you have to do is swim to the elevator, which will be about one meter below the surface, stand on it and comfortably board it, and then have them a few steps to your place. Here, too, your equipment has been taken care of. The base is about 300 meters from the boat mooring, however, you don't have to carry your equipment as they will take it in small trucks. You take

the cylinders from the car standing next to the boat and just take them on board.

The equipment at the base is kept by each diver in a box and locked. Neoprene suits are hung in rooms where they are automatically washed with fresh water and dried with warm air. A very convenient solution.

As for the dives themselves, they are unique because you are not attached to the group you came with and you have several choices when and where you want to dive. You book your dives via the computer and each day you can choose from four different dives during the day and, in fact, from three ships. There are as many as 12 dives each day. You choose your time of day and the location that interests you. The boat ride from the port to the spot usually takes around 20 minutes. After each dive, we return to the port. So you can only do one dive per day, which is perfect if you want to combine a family vacation with scuba diving.

Attention! Dives must be booked in advance. Due to the great interest in diving, it is not possible to come and dive. No seats available. I personally book group dives one year in advance. The basic price for diving with ballast and cylinder is about 42 EUR. Thanks to many years of cooperation and vol-





ume discounts, we received a price of about EUR 26 for diving, which is already a very decent price.

#### DIVING

- ▶ Lovers of fish and underwater life will have fun here.
- ▶ There is also something for cavers as the islands are rich in tunnels and caves.
- ▶ There are two wrecks waiting for lovers of sunken iron.

First things first. First, let's look at the **underwater life**. The main attraction, or rather a symbol of the Illes Medes islands, are groupers, specifically grouped groupers, which is rare. It occurs in very large numbers, practically on every dive you can find several individuals growing up to 1.5 meters. In addition, they are used to divers, so it is not a problem to literally swim within your reach, but of course you should not touch them. You will certainly meet them most in spots with tunnels and caves, such as La Vaca or Dofi, which in my opinion are among the most beautiful. If you want to see big fish such as tuna, barracuda, stingrays, be sure to go to places open to the high seas such as Tasco Gros, Tasco Petit or Carall Bernat, where they usually live in larger shoals.

Moray eels, which are also abundant here, will look at you from holes in the walls and from stones on the seabed. In the crevices you can find sea eels, Mediterranean cod, lobsters and various small shrimps. Of course, you will come across





many other species of larger and smaller fish, both common and rare in the Mediterranean Sea. It is worth mentioning the gorgonians that occur on many walls here, creating a beautiful, continuous growth. They are both purple and yellow. There are also several species of nudibranchs that like to stay mostly in places with strong currents, such as the strait between Carall Bernat and Tasco Gros.

**Tunnels and caves** are mainly located at Dofi and La Vaca. You do not need a cave diver's certificate to enter these tunnels and caves as they are all large enough and you can always see the other side through the tunnel. But the light will definitely be useful here. There are several tunnels in Dofi, the largest of which is about 80 meters long and larger in diameter than the Prague metro tunnel. There is also a cave at this location that leads from a depth of 18 meters into an air pocket. It can accommodate several divers, and thanks to the porous rock, the air is breathable. The most beautiful tunnels, in my opinion, can be found in La Vaca. There are actually two

parallel tunnels, one narrow for one diver right next to the other, wide tunnel through which the subway will again pass without any problems. In addition, the entrances to these tunnels are regularly guarded by several groupers.

**Wrecks** are located a short distance from the port, along the coast. The first one is called Reggio. It was a 132 m long ferry that was artificially sunk in 1992 as an attraction for div-

ers. Unfortunately, the best place to sink it was not chosen. Due to storms and strong currents, the wreck gradually broke into three parts, between which today the distance is several dozen meters. With the less visibility we usually see here, it becomes even more difficult to navigate between the individual fragments. Still, there are a few well-preserved that provide interesting views, such as the still standing mast. The second wreck is El Marmoler. Ship carrying a cargo of marble that can still be seen in the hold. It sank after hitting the coast in 1971. However, the distance to this wreck from the port of L'Estartit is over 8 kilometers and the visibility on the wreck is usually poor. I dived here when the visibility right next to the wreck dropped from the beautiful transparency of the sea to about 2 m. Diving bases do not come here too often.

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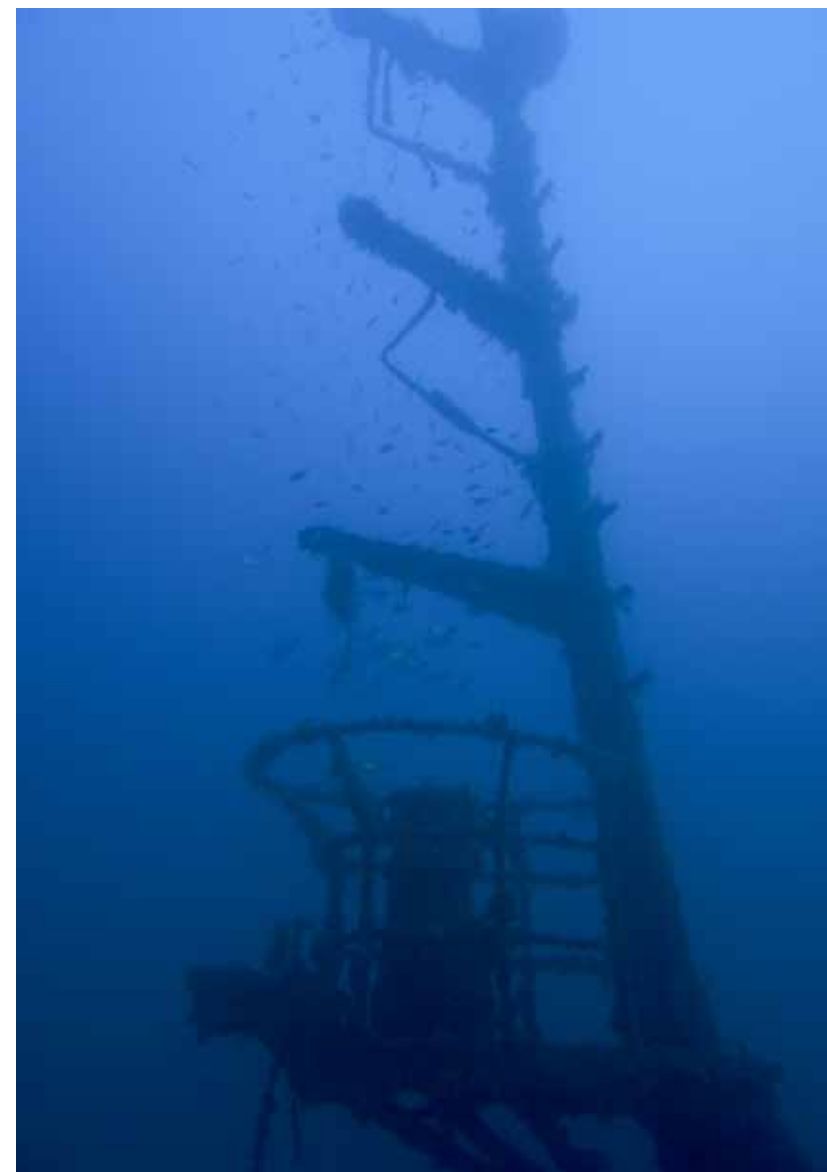


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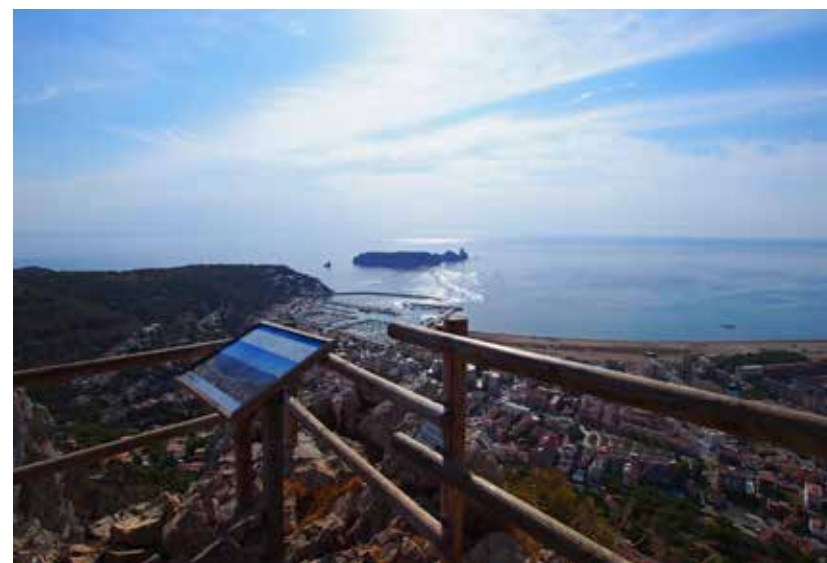


#### TRANSPORT AND ACCOMMODATION

If you go here individually, you can of course fly to Barcelona and from there take a train and bus to L'Estartit. Low-cost carriers fly here, but tickets do not include the transport of more luggage than we, as divers, need. Another option is to travel by your own car. However, it is over 1,600 kilometers from Prague, and thanks to tolls on highways, especially in France, it is not very profitable. We have been using bus transport for years. You spend about 20 hours on the bus, but with a bottle of good drink, time flies quite quickly;) You can stay in one of the hotels or choose apartment hotels with a fully equipped kitchen. So if you don't want to spend every day on eating in restaurants, you have the option to cook for yourself, prices in shops are comparable to prices in the Czech Republic. ■

#### ADDITIONAL ATTRACTIONS

If you don't just want to dive, you will find many other sports and entertainment options here. Of course there is a large sandy beach, you can rent pedal boats, sea kayaks, jet skis, kites and even a new flybording. If, for example, you are going here with a family that does not dive, even they do not have to be deprived of underwater life experience. All you need to do is buy a ticket for one of the glass-floor boats and you will be able to observe how life in the reserve is vibrant. Rocca Maura, 226 meters high, takes about 45 minutes to climb right above the city. It offers a wonderful view of the entire city and islands. If you like monuments, Barcelona is just 100 km away, and tourist buses leave almost every day to visit Barcelona's most interesting places, such as the unfinished Sagrada de Familia church or Antoni Gaudí's Park Güell, La Rambla and singing fountains. North of L'Estartit lies the city of Empuriabrava, known as the Spanish Venice. Here you can rent a boat and cross the canals between the houses.



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