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WARM-WATER DESTINATIONS TO BEAT THE WINTER BLUES

ESCAPE THE COLD-WEATHER DOLDRUMS WITH A TRIP TO ONE OF THESE EASY-TO-REACH DIVE HOT SPOTS

→ Did you have to put on 10 layers of clothing when you walked outside this morning to get your paper? Did you have to dig your car out of a snowbank? Did your tongue stick to the metal pole? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then it's time for a dive vacation to a spot with bright sun, sparkling beaches and clear, warm waters home to fantastic animal encounters. These 10 warm-water destinations feature all this and more, and will provide a lifetime of memories so fantastic, we bet you'll never want to come home.

COZUMEL, MEXICO

You want another stamp in your passport. You want postcard beaches and swaying palm trees. You want spectacular diving — and you don't want to pay through the nose for any of it. What you want is Cozumel, a quick (and direct) flight from plenty of U.S. cities. Though the island hosts multiple cruise ships daily, divers can avoid the crowds by heading to the reefs south of the main town, where the reward is lush hard corals and plentiful fish life. Dive operators along the west coast are within easy reach of dive sites, and an ever-flowing current — sometimes strong — makes for exciting drift dives, wherein you might see multiple turtles but will have time only to wave farewell as you fly past. Must-dos include Horseshoe on Palancar Reef, where you'll drop in around 35 feet into a coral amphitheater filled with blue tangs, parrotfish, turtles and shy green moray eels. More-advanced divers can head farther south to Punta Sur, a deep wall dive featuring coral tunnels and swim-throughs, as well as turtles, eagle rays and reef tropicals. And those beaches? After you surface for the day, bury your toes in the sand with a well-earned *cerveza* in hand. — *Rebecca Strauss*

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BRANDON COLE (2)

Cushion sea stars pack the shallows, and colorful sponges (right) adorn the reefs of Cozumel, Mexico.



The Bahamas features some of the best shark dives in the Caribbean.



BAHAMAS ↑

The Bahamas is one of those magical destinations that even people living in the tropics want to escape to in winter. The country of 3,000 islands, keys and islets features fantastic beaches flanked by glistening five-star resorts and casinos; and though the Bahamas is just a one-hour flight from Florida, it exudes a laid-back Caribbean vibe that is worlds away. For scuba divers, the Bahamas has it all, and more. In the Out Islands, you'll find vertiginous walls packed with colorful reefs and big animals. And Nassau is home to possibly the most famous shark dive in the world — where shark wranglers feed dozens of Caribbean reef sharks — and the

Hollywood wrecks of 007. In recent years, more big thrills have surfaced too, with expeditions farther afield to dive with oceanic whitetips and Grand Bahama's Tiger Beach, where you can dive with one of the oceans' top predators: tiger sharks. If these striped sharks don't make an appearance, you'll have plenty to see with toothy lemon sharks, nurse sharks and the occasional hammerhead. When the day's diving is over, find a deck, grab a drink and warm to the rays of a sun that seems as if it refuses to set. — *DE*

↓ SILVER BANK, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Humpback whales have migration points across the globe where people can spot them breaching and tail-slapping from the surface, but places where divers can slip in alongside them are few and far between. Luckily, one of best in-water encounters happens to be just a short hop from the U.S. — at the Silver Bank between the Dominican Republic and the Turks and Caicos islands. Every winter, this collection of remote, shallow shoals at the

edge of the tropical Atlantic sees thousands of humpbacks, who arrive en masse to mate and give birth in the warm water. Altogether, the Silver Bank comprises the largest marine-mammal sanctuary in the northern hemisphere, and a select group of live-aboard operators has special permission to make contact with these gentle giants in the water. These trips permit only free diving — no tanks allowed — but you won't need scuba gear

because the humpbacks tend to hang around on the surface. To maximize face time with these highly intelligent marine mammals, it's best to float calmly on the surface. Mothers will be watching over their newborns, and they can get spooked if people splash or try to chase them. — *Travis Marshall*

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A humpback whale calf off Silver Bank, Dominican Republic.

BRANDON COLE; OPPOSITE: ALEX MUSTARD