

# CHASING MONSTERS

Words & Photo: Joanna Lentini // Location: Cuba

**G**azing down through a column of translucent green, I contemplated my sanity. The conditions appeared ideal; however, a quiet inner voice pleaded with my innate sense of caution. I fumbled with my fins, fear permeating my every cell. Surely, I was mad even contemplating this? In fact, until this point I hadn't questioned the collective sanity of everyone involved, but as I looked around I could see it as clear as the sky above me. We were all insane.

An intricate maze of mangroves laced the water channel, and what lurked within that network had my thoughts running wild. Catching a glimpse of my reflection amid the chaos, I pondered the risks involved. Three hours by ferry to land, and an unknown distance to proper medical care – not a great worst-case scenario.

Finding the courage to direct my trembling legs over the side of the boat, I positioned my mask snugly into place. I gripped the mouthpiece of my snorkel and slid down the smooth, white, fibreglass exterior. As I submerged, a sense of my vulnerability enveloped me with the water, and immediately I regretted my decision. However, regret was soon replaced by pure exhilaration.

Within seconds of the water closing over my head, he skated across the surface towards me, as if levitating. A resting jaw lined with razor-sharp teeth fronted a heavily armoured exterior. Moisture glistened on a membranous film that drew across his dark, orb-like eyes, each with a single vertical slit. I was grateful for the few feet of personal space he left between us. We exchanged curious glares, but to my surprise

he seemed to quickly tire of the interaction and turned back towards the mangrove.

Entranced by the encounter, I found myself following this 3m-long American saltwater crocodile into its lair. Goosebumps tingled beneath my wetsuit while my anxiety persisted. As I entered the tangled fretwork of trunks and roots, the light dimmed beneath the surface. I glanced back at the boat, but that wasn't the direction I was headed.

Continuing on, a trickle of light fell in through the canopy, barely keeping the darkness in my mind at bay. I came upon the young crocodile resting on a pile of soft earth just below the surface, eyes now protected by that membranous film. It still regarded me, mildly intrigued by my presence but mostly unfazed. I took a relieved breath of salty air. This 'monster' meant me no harm.

I began to weave images of this notoriously feared creature in my mind, a sense of bewilderment overcoming me. How is it that this perfectly evolved animal, which has inhabited the earth for 200 million years, could be so misunderstood? I felt a pang of guilt, even shame. Judging a species on sensationalised hunting or feeding behaviour is unfair. And like most of us, I had previously done just that.

When I first arrived, I thought the most difficult part of the day would be finding the courage to enter the water. Now, looking back past the wake of the boat, my eyes burned from the tears that began to swell. I didn't want to leave. I was proud of myself. But, more importantly, I was incredibly grateful to that crocodile for opening my mind like it had never been opened before.

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A SINGLE MOMENT