

Diving Heaven in the Honduras Roatan

Cryptic
teardrop
crab on
sponge

Text by Robert Osborne
Photos by Robert Osborne
and Scott Johnson at
Seascapesimages.com

First off, a confession. I love diving in Roatan. Why? For a couple of reasons. Number one—the reefs around the island are still in superb shape. Not a lot of ocean-going pelagics, it's true. But I've been diving the reefs of the Caribbean for more than ten years, and I would rank Roatan in the top two. (Bonaire would be my other choice.) The second reason is I can wade through the snow on a wintery morning in Toronto, stumble onto a plane at 8 a.m., and by 2 in the afternoon, I can be stepping off the back of a dive boat in Roatan. What's not to love? As a result, I've dived the island for the past three years in a row.



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And yet the most common reaction I get when I tell people I'm off to dive in Roatan is, "Isn't that somewhere in South

America?" Roatan, it seems, remains something of an undiscovered treasure. So, I've decided to change that. For

those divers around the world who haven't discovered my little corner of the Caribbean, consider this a primer, a sort of *Roatan 101*:

Introduction to the Bay Islands.

Lesson One: The Basics
—Where the heck is it?

Roatan is part of the Bay Islands—a chain of islands off the east coast of Honduras. They consist of Roatan, Utila, Guanaja

and Cayos Cochinos. The two most frequented dive destinations are Roatan and Utila. There are dozens of good dive operations





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Spotted scorpionfish in sponge (left); Diver with giant sea rod, barrel sponge and sea fans on reef (right)

Lesson Two: The North Shore

One phrase describes the North Shore—coral canyons. The place is teeming with them. They're lush with hard and soft coral and teeming with small reef life. They're some of the best I've ever experienced, with overhangs so vast that the dive often seems more like a cavern dive.

Now another confession: I won't pretend that I don't have favorite places to dive and preferred operations to dive with on Roatan. Frankly, I just

on both islands and close to a hundred dive sites to be explored on Roatan alone. Now I'm not about to do a complete inventory of all the dive sites I've visited; that would be like inflicting home movies on invited guests—a cliché for tedium and social boorishness. What I will do is show off my highlight reel, a kind of sneak preview of the

kind of underwater adventures to be experienced.

I break diving in Roatan into three primary areas: the North Shore, the West End and the South Coast. Surprisingly, though the areas are only separated by a few kilometers, the diving can be radically different on each coast.

don't believe it's possible to be some kind of unbiased writing machine. So instead, I tell people about my biases up front, and I try to be as fair as I can.

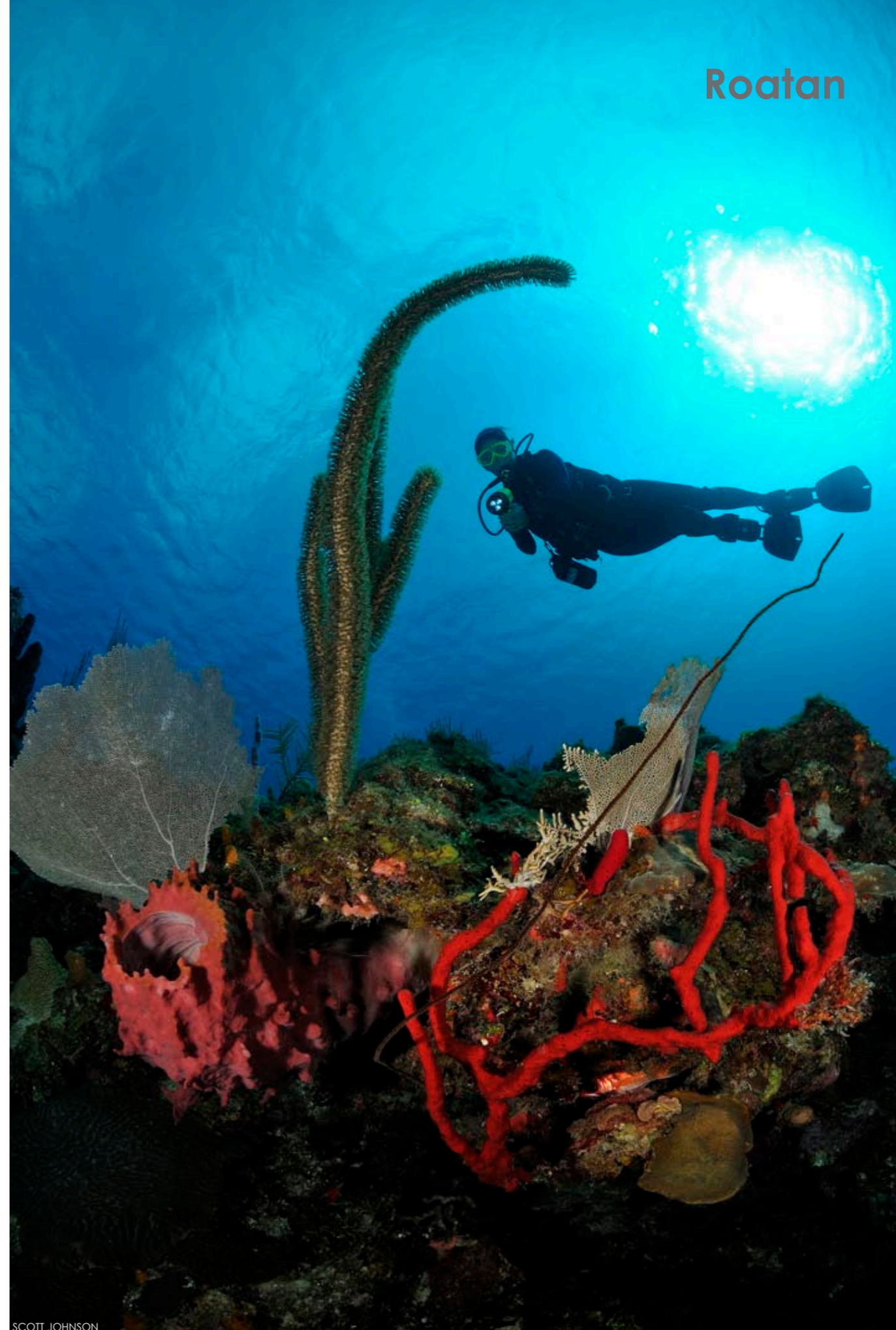
When I'm diving the North Shore, my operation of choice is Subway Watersports at Turquoise Bay Resort. I like the place because of the laid back atmosphere—often I've been one of only two or three divers on a boat, and we've come and gone at our own pace. I also like the fact that from here, you're literally within minutes of many of the best dive sites in the area.

Rock Star. Take Rock Star, for example—about a five-minute boat ride from the dive shop. You drop off the boat, sink down to about 75 feet and spend about 50 minutes meandering through a series of impressive coral canyons. The reef life is abundant and healthy: lots of tubes and vibrant blue sea fans hanging from the hard corals, large purple barrel



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Turquoise Bay Resort



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sponges everywhere and mounds of hill and sheet coral. A closer look at the crevices in the canyon wall reveal a thriving macro community—decorator crabs, lobster, juvenile spotted drum fish and yellowtail damselfish and the usual assortment of parrot and angel fish, grunts, squirrel fish and trumpet fish.

Dolphin Den. A few minutes more by boat and you can dive another one of my favorites, Dolphin's Den, a series of coral tunnels in shallow water (maximum 15 meters). The site gets its name because deep within the tunnels

the skull of a dolphin sits in the back of one of the caves. Our dive master suggests the poor creature may have swum in and become disoriented and drowned.

Aside from the tunnels, the highlight of the dive was finding a large, nearly six-foot nurse shark hanging out in one of the caves. I swam in close and shot picture after picture—it was totally unconcerned.

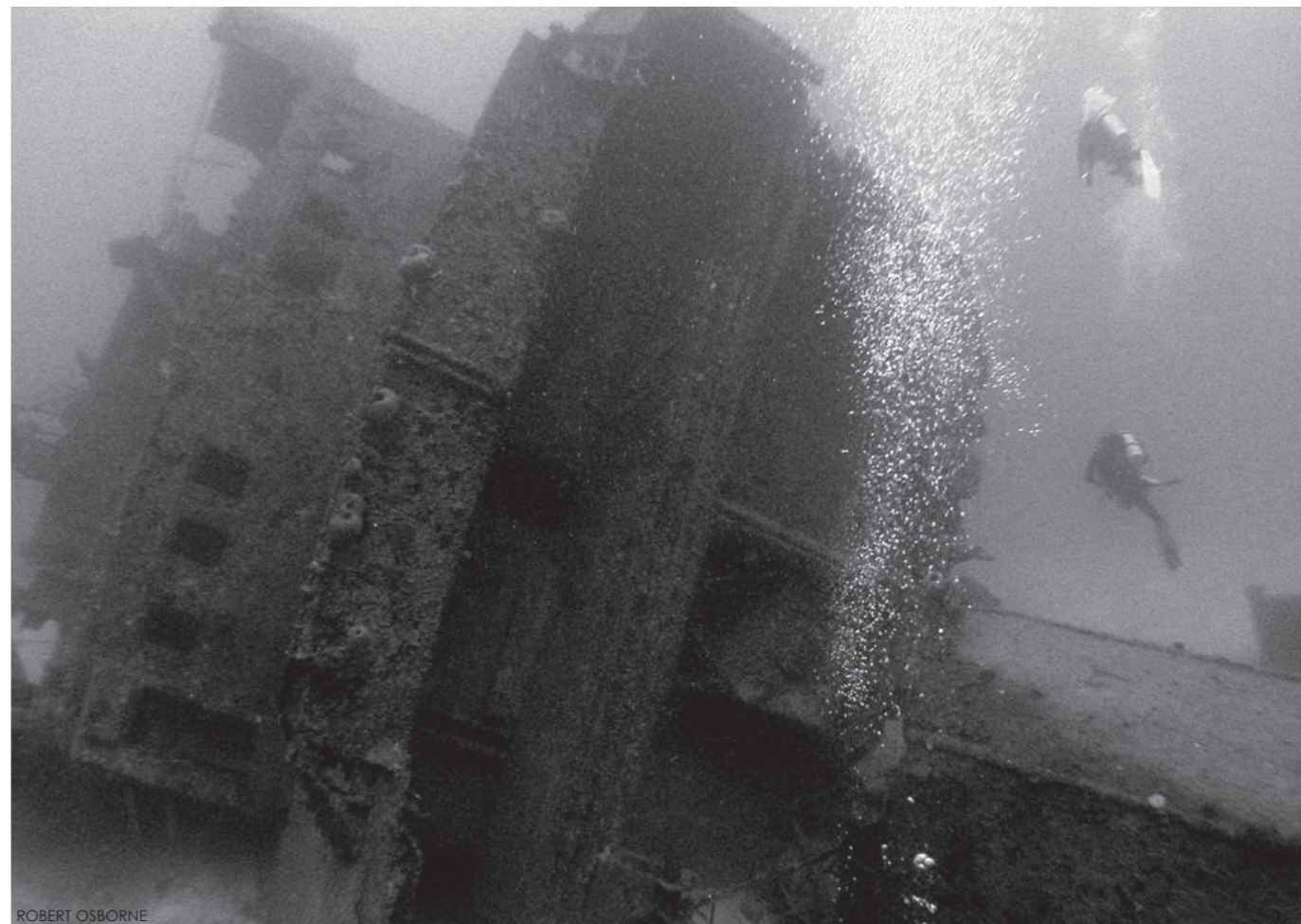
Another dive of note on the North Shore includes Stingray Passage—a large canyon with overhanging coral walls—very impressive. At one point diving this site, I swam through what seemed to be an endless school of creole wrasse. It was everything I'd come to expect from what turns out to be one of the healthiest reef systems

in the Caribbean. On my return trip to the boat we swam through hundreds of black durgions—scattered across a massive section of shallow reef.

Aside from coral canyons, the North Shore also features a couple of impressive artificial reefs. But to get access to them, it's best to move your base of operations a little further west. I prefer to use Anthony's Key Resort and Dive. This is a massive and very high end operation; if you want to pamper yourself, book a week at their lodge. They run a dozen boats and as many as 80 divers every day. The docks are crowded with divers and tourists but don't be intimidated by the numbers. The good news is that Anthony's Key is still first class and only a few minutes by boat from what I would argue is the best dive on the island.



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Creole fish (inset) and school of creole fish; Spotted goatfish; Divers at the wreck of the *Odyssey*





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El Aguila. At about 33 meters, *El Aguila* is on the deepish end for some recreational divers. Typically, you should only have a few minutes of bottom time. But there's a way to

make this dive a lot longer. The wreck sits beside a superb coral wall. So divers can pop down for a brief tour of the wreck, max out their bottom time and then head for the wall.

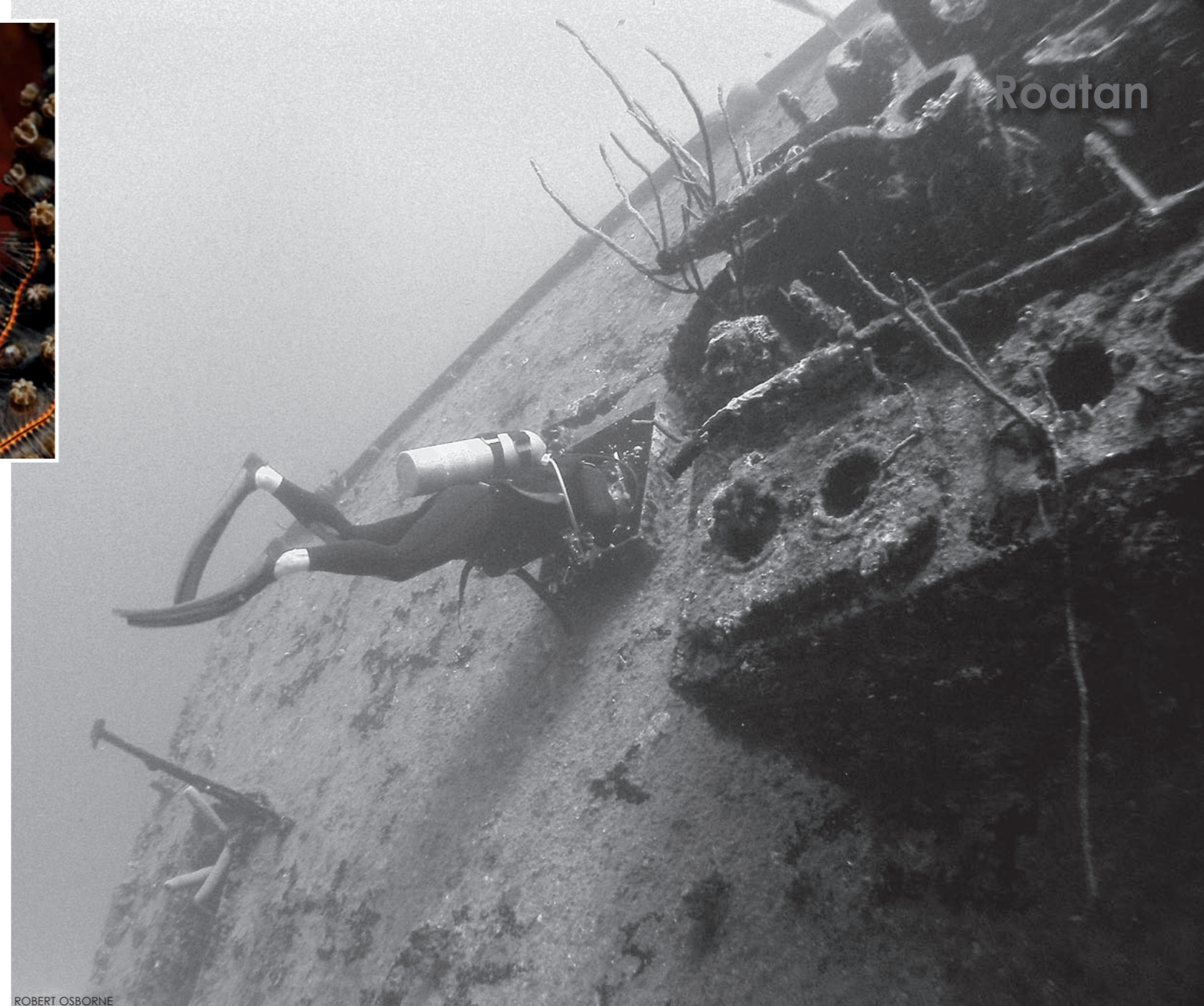


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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *El Aguila* wreck; Flamingo tongue on coral; Diver enters wreck of *El Aguila*; Large grouper

You can extend the dive by exploring the wall in about ten meters of water. It will give you a chance to visit with the groupers—and they're what really make *El Aguila's* site impressive. This is one of the few sites where you'll find an abundance of large sea creatures: huge black and goliath groupers, large green moray eels that often swim freely around the divers and impressively big baracuda. If you dive Roatan, *El Aguila* is a must-do kind of 't-shirt' dive.

The Odyssey. The other artificial reef that's within minutes of Anthony's Key is the *Odyssey*. Again it's on the deep side for some divers—about 30 meters; but again, there is a way to deal with that depth. A quick bounce to the deep part of the hull, followed by a drift towards the main superstructure that sits at only 20 meters depth. This wreck is busted up



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much more than the *Aguila* but still worth a couple of dives.

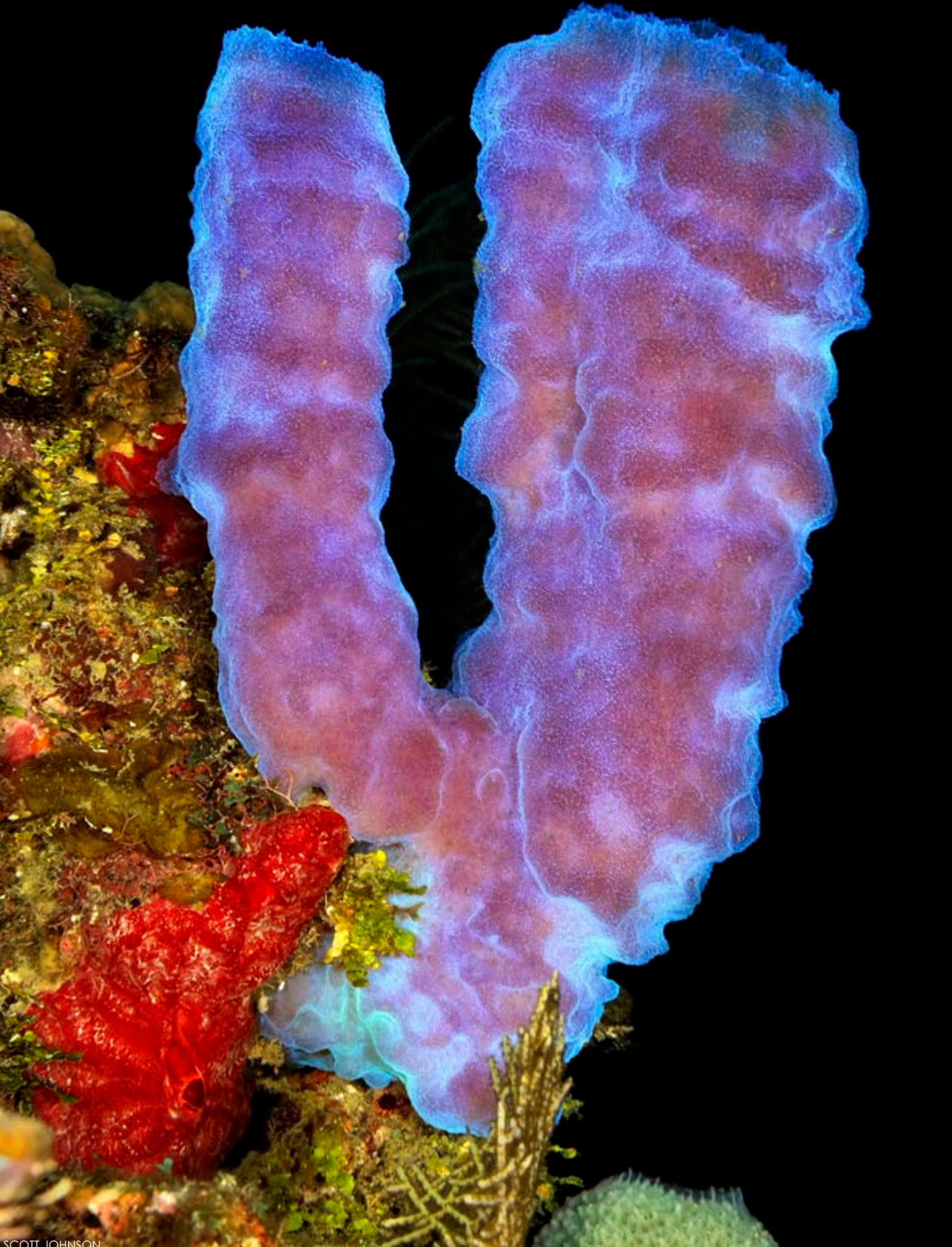
Lesson Three: The West End

The most notable feature of this part of the island is the fact that a large section of the West End is a protected marine park. Now, this doesn't seem to have brought in the large fish, but the place is positively boiling with small fish and macro life.

So, when I'm bored with wrecks and coral canyons and I'm more in the mood for marine life, I'll move again along the coast to the West End. There are a lot of great dive



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operations on this part of the island—dozens—but my shop of choice is Mayan Divers at the Mayan Princess Resort. It's run by Anya and Liber Garido Barnet.

Both expats (she's from Germany, he's from Cuba), they've been on the island for years and know the reef at the West End like the proverbial backs of their



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hands. In fact, last year Anja volunteered to be my personal guide for a couple of days. The result was I saw the reefs in the marine reserve in a way I'd never imagined.

She waltzed me around a series of stunning sites: Overheat Reef, Bear's Den, Turtle Crossing—every one of them pulsing with life. I feel vaguely like I'm swimming through a *Where's Waldo* illustration. The intensity of activity made it difficult to concentrate on any one object. But Anja had no such problem. She pointed out one small wonder after another: tiny spotted nudibranchs,

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Azure vase sponge; Mayan Princess Resort; Redband parrotfish; Banded coral shrimp in sponge; Orangutan crab at West End reef

Roatan

delicate decorator crabs and clear shrimp hiding inside sponges. She also knew all the little swim-throughs that pocket these reefs. Anja continually headed into holes—with me reluctantly at

able to slowly drift up alongside one. This turtle was vigorously munching on a sponge on the reef. It gave me a casual glance and kept eating. Encouraged, I raised my camera and started taking pictures. Still no concern. In fact, it allowed me to get within about a half a meter taking pictures without showing any concern. Clearly, dinner was more of a priority than the annoying, bubbling creature swimming around.



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her heels—only to follow some winding passage for 20 or 30 meters and then re-emerging on another part of the reef (not recommended unless you have a guide).

Fish Den. On the site called Fish Den, I experienced my closest encounter ever with a green sea turtle. I've seen them before, of course. Quite a bit, in fact. But they've always been very shy and not allowed me to get in very close. This time, with just Anja and me in the water, I was



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CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Longsnout seahorse; Reef octopus; Reef shark; Yellowheaded jawfish with eggs in its mouth

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Lesson Four: The South Shore

If I had to describe this part of the island in one word, that word would be *walls*. One of my favorite types of dives, I like few things better than drifting along the face of a wall that drops off into blue oblivion below me. And there are plenty of chances for that kind of diving here.

The South Shore had been relatively unexplored territory for me until recently. I'd done a couple of dives not far from the capitol of Roatan—at Coxen Hole—but hadn't really had a chance to investigate extensively. That changed this year. I was invited to dive this area by Mitch Karlson, the manager of Coco View Diver Resort. A legendary dive operation on the island, it's most definitely designed for hardcore divers. Consider it a sort of liveboard on dry land.

It's not uncommon for divers to log as many as 30 dives in a week—but four a day is the usual number. Part of the reason you can dive so frequently is that only a short swim (100 meters along a well marked underwater trail) from the resort, there are three superb dives: a wreck, the *Prince Albert*; and two walls—Coco View Wall and Neuman's Wall. In one mad day of diving, I hit all three of these sites, and my only regret was that my nitrogen load prevented me from hitting them twice.

Coco View Wall—a choice dive for resort guests at night I'm told—plunges down about 25 meters from the surface and is heavily encrusted with soft and hard corals. I love the under cuts in the wall. Given more time at this location, I would have spent extended periods poking around looking for critters.

Neuman's Wall held much the same

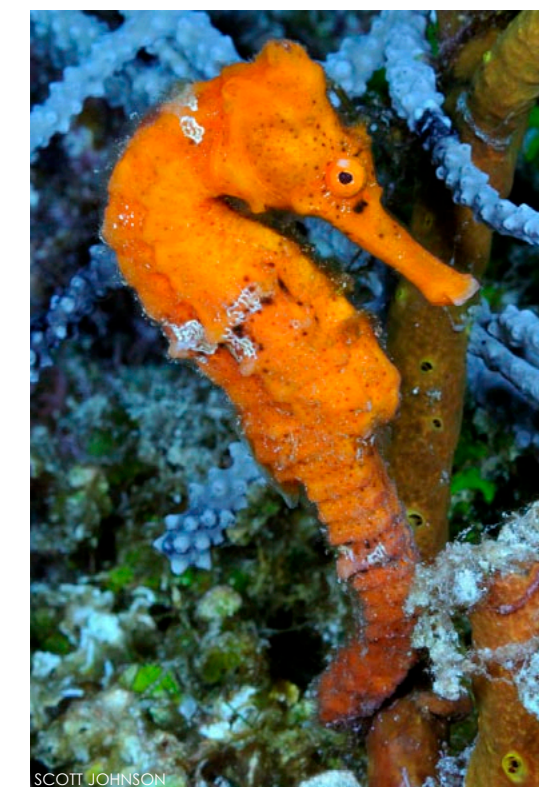
promise of being the sort of place I could happily spend several dives.

The *Prince Albert* is an artificial reef that was sunk in 1987. It's an old tanker last used to ferry refugees from war-torn Nicaragua. The resort owners bought the boat, cleaned it up and made it safe for divers, then sank it just off the coast. Again, the proximity to the resort is one of the most appealing features of this wreck. It's also on the way to both Neuman and Coco View Wall, so you can always stop and explore on the way to and from the other dive sites.

I also took the opportunity to jump on board one of four main dive boats that Coco View runs and went out to dive a site called Menagerie. Aptly named, this wall teems with fish life. I spent the better part of about ten minutes trying to get one good shot of the numerous sea horses that populate the reef. No success, I regret to say. There's also a resident green moray that likes to come out and play. It scared the hell out of a



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couple of the divers in our group by getting a little too intimate.

Sadly, although I've dived Roatan three times in three years, I've yet to make it to what many consider on of the best dives on the South Shore: Mary's Place—another reason to go back next year.

Lesson Five: The Truth

Topside activities in Roatan are also well worth experiencing. There's some exhilarating ziplining through the jungle canopy and a couple of nature preserves—notably and most amusingly, the Mayan Monkey Park. And then there's my favorite—the Iguana Farm. Now, it may sound like a cheesy

tourist attraction, but once you meet Archie Sherman (founder and operator of the farm), you'll change your mind. He's a sweet old islander who started this farm on his property as a way of saving the iguanas from extinction. Iguana is a local delicacy, and the locals had literally eaten almost every lizard on the island. Archie and his brother stepped in and created this protected area. Now there are thousands of the regal lizards on the property. Spend an hour or two with Archie, and he'll charm the hell out of you.

One final word—I did say that I would be up front about Roatan—so here goes. Take a lot of bug juice, really strong



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bug juice—the kind of stuff that soldiers doing jungle training use. There's a tiny insect that exists in abundance on the island. Some people call them sand flies or sand fleas; others call them No See-ums. Regardless, they bite like horse flies and leave a massive welt. Ironically, in three years, I've never seen one. But in one hour of unguarded folly this year, I ended up with more than 30 bites on my back and arms. They swell and itch like mad. I guess even diving heaven has to have a little bit of hell—to keep it real, I suppose.

But if you let a few gnats discourage you from visiting Roatan, then you're missing out on a lot of pleasure at the risk of a little (burning) pain. I'm going back next year. I've heard about a new operation that's setting up on the unexplored East Coast. Stay tuned. ■

Features editor Robert Osborne is an internationally published dive writer, television producer and reporter based in Toronto, Canada.



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Roatan

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Diver with hawksbill sea turtle; Dolphin with trainer and guests at Anthony's Key Resort; Protected iguana in tree at the Iguana Farm; Beach at West End; Ziplining through the jungle is a thrilling activity to do while topside

fact file



Honduras



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACT BOOK.

History In 1821, Honduras became independent from Spain. Free elections led to a civilian government in 1982 after 25 years of primarily military rule. However, the 80's saw the country become a haven for anti-Sandinista contras who fought the Marxist Nicaraguan Government. Honduras was an ally to Salvadoran Government which fought leftist guerrillas. In 1998, the nation was devastated by Hurricane Mitch. The storm killed around 5,600 people and caused about \$2 billion in damage. A slow rebound in the economy followed. Government: dem-

ocratic constitutional republic. Capital: Tegucigalpa

Geography Honduras is located in Central America. It borders the Caribbean Sea and lies between Guatemala and Nicaragua as it borders the Gulf of Fonseca in the North Pacific Ocean and lies between Nicaragua and El Salvador. Terrain is mostly mountainous in the interior, with narrow coastal plains. Highest point: Cerro Las Minas 2,870m. Lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0m. Note: Honduras has just a short coast on the Pacific side, but has a

long one on the Caribbean side, including the eastern Mosquito Coast, which is mostly uninhabited.

Climate In the lowlands, it is subtropical, while the mountains are temperate in climate. Natural hazards include earthquakes, which are frequent, but generally mild. However the country is very susceptible to destructive hurricanes and floods along the Caribbean shoreline.

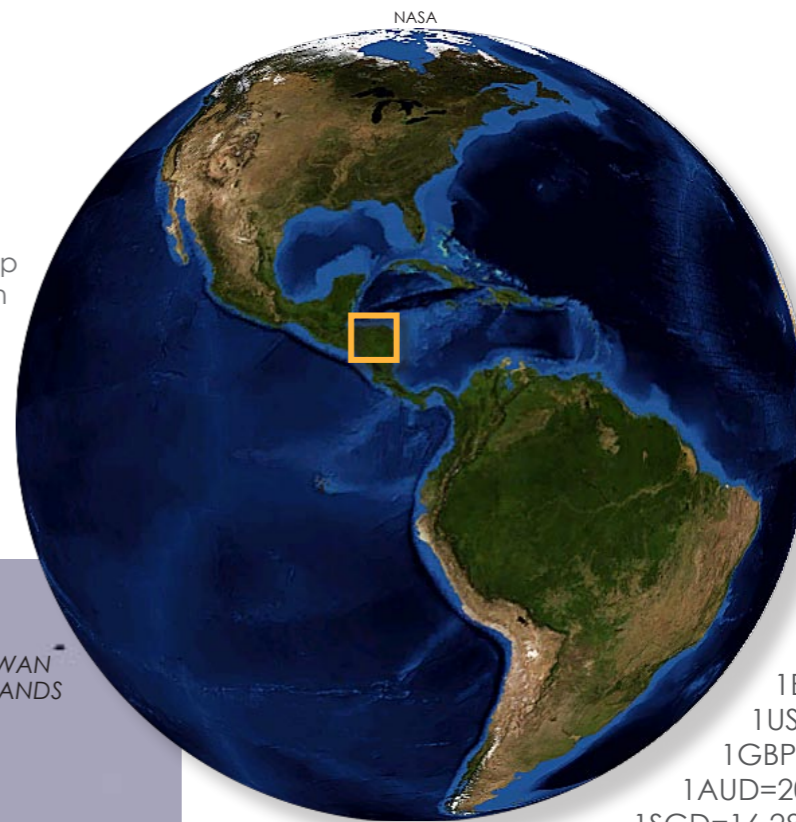
Environment

Honduras is experiencing an expanding urban population. Logging and clearing for agriculture is resulting in deforestation, while uncontrolled development is contributing to further land degradation and soil erosion with the help of inappropriate land use practices including farming of marginal lands. Pollution of the nations largest fresh water source, Lago de Yojoa, is resulting from mining activities and heavy

metals are finding their way into several rivers and streams. Party to the following agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands

Economy As the second poorest nation in Central America,

RIGHT: Global map with location of Honduras
BELOW: Location of Roatan on map of Honduras
BOTTOM LEFT: Anemone on reef



Currency Lempiras (HNL)
Exchange rates:
1 EUR=26.34HNL;
1 USD=19.91HNL;
1 GBP=32.13HNL;
1 AUD=20.63HNL;
1 SGD=16.28HNL



Honduras experiences a severe level of unequal distribution of income and high underemployment. However, the country has diversified its export base from just bananas and coffee to clothing and automobile wire harnessing. While almost half of the nation's economy is connected to the United States, the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has helped create foreign investment since

2006, although problems in crime, security—both physical and political—and perceived corruption, may hinder potential investment. In 2010, the economy was slow in growth—not enough to improve living standards for the majority of the population who live in poverty. Recent administrations have been committed to cutting spending, improving tax collection and getting more foreign investment.

Population 8,296,693 (July 2012) Ethnic groups: Mestizo (mixed Amerindian and European) 90%, Amerindian 7%, black 2%, white 1%. Religions: Roman Catholic 97%, Protestant 3%. Internet users: 731,700 (2009)

Language Spanish is the official language; Amerindian dialects are also spoken

Health There is a high risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever; vectorborne disease such as dengue fever and malaria; and water contact disease such as leptospirosis (2009)

Decompression chamber

Cornerstone Re-Compression Chamber and Clinic
Anthony's Key Resort
Sandy Bay, Roatan
Bay Islands, Honduras

Web sites

Tourism Roatan
tourismroatan.com



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