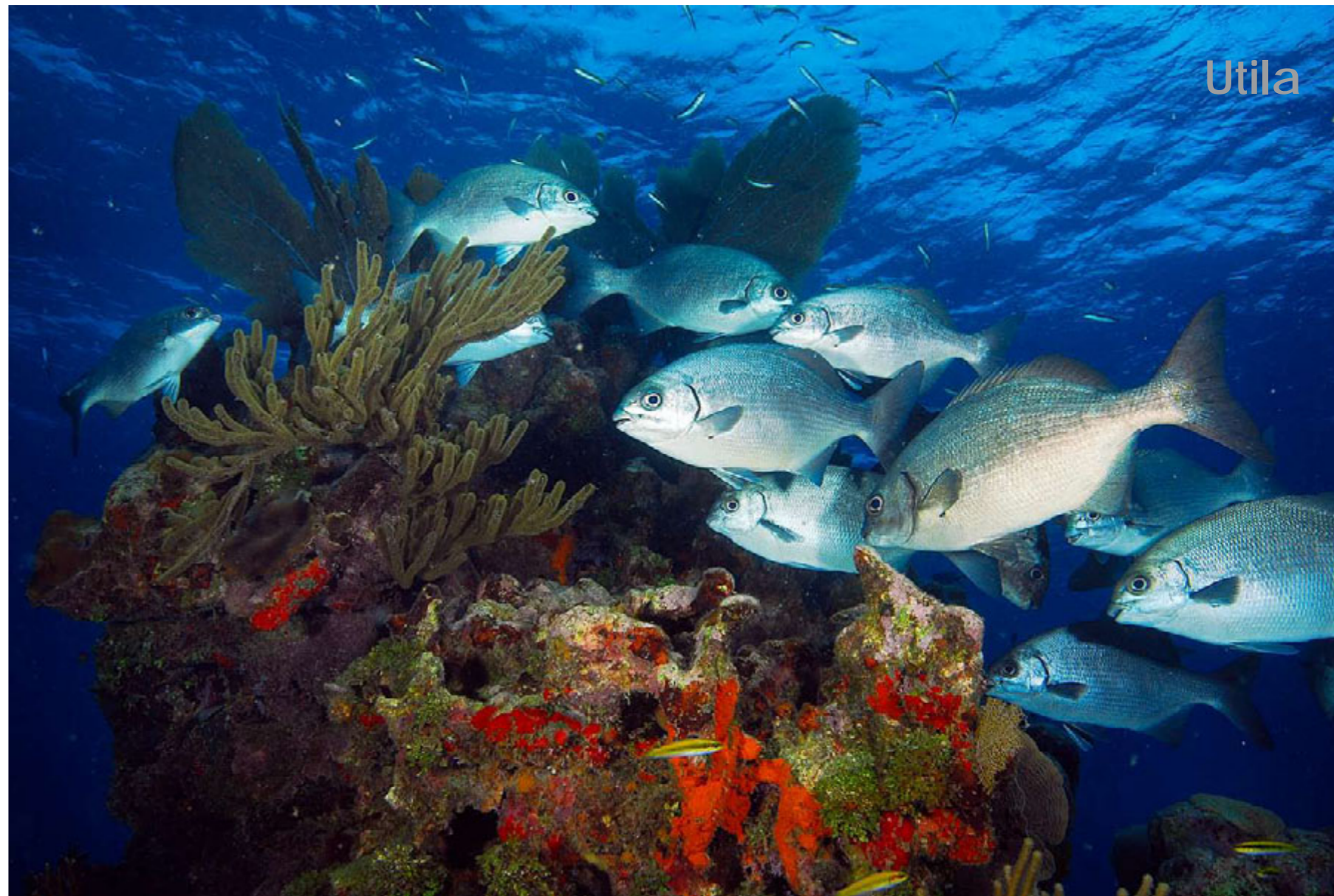


Text and photos by Scott Bennett

# Utila Island

*Jewel of the Honduras*





Utila

“If you’ve been to South East Asia, don’t bother with the Caribbean,” is a phrase I’ve encountered many times over the last decade. Having done virtually all of my diving in the Asia-Pacific, the region’s legendary diversity tends to leave one a tad spoilt. When you’ve dived exclusively in the world’s biodiversity hotspot, it’s all-too-easy to assume that other areas will suffer by comparison. However, when an opportunity arose to visit the island of Utila in Honduras, I was immediately intrigued.

As well as being a totally new part of the world (in my own hemisphere for a change), it was also reasonably close, with a mere two hours time difference. I decided to cast all preconceptions aside and enjoy the diving for what it was. I ended up being in for a pleasant surprise!

Getting there proved somewhat easier than anticipated. I discovered a non-stop service to Roatan from my

home in Toronto on Sunwing, a charter airline that just started flights this past winter. Better still was the fact I could avoid the long stopovers required by connecting flights travelling through the United States.

Four and a half hours after departing cold and drizzly Toronto, I landed at Roatan’s compact international airport. After breezing through customs, I gathered my gear and

I headed outside the terminal. A 20-minute taxi ride delivered me to the West End, one of the main tourist areas on the island. From here, I caught Captain Vern’s catamaran for the four-hour trip to Utila. I was somewhat surprised by the nationalities of the passengers—virtually all of them were fellow Canadians. Then Captain Vern uttered something rather ominous, “It’s going to be rough out there today, so

Detail of fan coral on the reef at Utila (left); School of Bermuda chub (above); Juvenile spotted drumfish hovers over coral (previous page)





Utila



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Swimming pool at the Mango Inn; Utila ferry; Street scene in Utila; Pelican at the pier; ATV's and tourists populate downtown Utila

the north Honduras coast, the Bay Islands consist of eight islands and more than 60 cays. In contrast to the more rolling terrain of Roatan, Utila is quite flat, with the notable exception being the rounded summit of Pumpkin Hill.

eclectic assortment of electric golf carts, ATV's and most surprisingly, Thai-style tuk-tuks. It became immediately apparent that diving is prominently woven into the island cultural fabric, with more "diver

**The island**

Traditionally, Utila was largely a fishing community with the initial settlements to be found on the Utila Cayes, 11 palm-fringed islands off the southwest coast. Only 13km long and 5km wide with much of the coastline dominated by mangroves, the island is virtually uninhabited except for the small fishing village of East Harbour (Utila Town). Due to 300 years of British influence, the main language of the island's 6000 inhabitants is English, whereas mainland Honduras speaks Spanish.

In contrast to Roatan's more mainstream tourist scene, Utila is decidedly more charming, boasting a laid-back Caribbean vibe. Gingerbread houses awash in a range of pastel hues lined the main road, while traffic consisted of an



down" flags draped from buildings and flagpoles than actual Honduran flags! After checking in at the Utila Dive Centre (UDC), I was driven to my home for the week, the Mango Inn. Nestled amidst luxuriant tropical gardens buzzing with hummingbirds, the resort was situated in a quiet residential area of town, but only a 5-minute stroll from the all the amenities and restaurants on the main street.

Later in the evening, I met up with Andy Phillips, UDC's course director. Over a delicious pizza and a few Salva Vida beers at the Mango Inn, Andy gave me

I hope everybody has taken their sea-sick pills." Scanning the waters ahead, I could see a profusion of whitecaps. Yikes!

Within 15 minutes of departure, the vessel started heaving, and so did the passengers. (A word of warning: a lack of sleep, copious amounts of beer and rough seas do

NOT mix!) I speedily shifted to the non-vomiting side of the boat and tried to enjoy the rest of the trip. Fortunately, my stomach contents remained intact. When all was said and done, the trip took an hour longer than expected, and we finally arrived in Utila around 5:00PM. Situated approximately 65km off





a run-down on the island's diving.

Utila's waters are home to over 100 charted dive sites with a variety of environments. Suspended on the rim of the continental shelf, Utila's north side is flanked by submarine walls that plummet to over 1,000m. The drop offs are also home to the island's

most famous resident, the whale shark. The peak season for these gentle giants is between March-April and August-September. As my arrival had coincided with the former, my fingers were crossed!

I also asked Andy about the political events of 2009. While widely reported by the international media as a coup, the local version was somewhat different, with the removal of former president Zelaya being entirely within the rights of the constitution. As is typical in politics, some agreed and some didn't, and demonstrations did take place. As a result, the U.S. State Department slapped a travel advisory on the country and tourism virtually dried up overnight. Utila and Roatan were hit especially hard, as tourism is the foremost component of the local economy.

Despite a few incidents of unrest on the mainland, the Bay Islands remained trouble-free during the entire

Hummingbird build their snug nests out of local materials



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Vase sponge; Mango Inn bungalow; Cozy room at the Mango Inn



Utila

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pederson's cleaner shrimp (left); Utila Beach; Brown garden eel; Four-eye butterflyfish; Longspine squirrelfish

episode. After elections were held in November, a new president was instated and by December, the travel advisory was revoked. Happily for the locals, tourism has since bounded back.

**The diving**

The next morning, I arrived at the dive shop in plenty of time for the 8:00AM departure. It was a full boat, with 14 divers including guides Tyson (a fellow Torontonion) and Josiah. After a recent liveaboard trip in the Philippines where all you had to do was stick out your foot and someone would put a fin on it, I quickly realized

that the UDC was a do-it-yourself type of operation, with everyone responsible for setting up their own gear. It had been so long since I've done so that it was downright embarrassing!

**Spotted Bay**

Our destination was Spotted Bay, situated off the island's northwest coast. Just getting there proved to be an adventure, as the previous day's rollicking seas had not

yet subsided and the half -hour trip was decidedly rough.

After tying up at the mooring line, it was a real production to get everyone geared up and into the water. Tyson was assigned to be my dive buddy, and we opted to wait until everyone else was in first. After being helped to the rear of the wildly heaving boat, I did a giant stride and entered the water.

Despite the extreme surface chop, the visibility was surprisingly good. Descending to the sandy channel below, I got my first look at the reef and was immediately struck by how different it looked. While not boasting the sheer number of corals I'd seen in Asia, the growth was extraordinarily lush. A delirious array soft corals and sponges blanketed the reef, while fan corals were absolutely everywhere, their fronds undulating rhythmically in the strong surge.

Virtually everything in sight was totally new, especially the fish. Although I recognized angelfish, butterflyfish and squirrelfish, the species were unfamiliar. Squirrelfish looked virtually identical to their Pacific cousins, but boasted an impressive dorsal fin when the fish became agitated. Parrotfish were especially abundant and there appeared to be many different varieties (an incorrect assumption, but more on that later). I knew

I would be spending some serious time with the fish ID book back at the dive centre.

After an enjoyable 50 minutes, we surfaced to discover a steady rain had



fast enough! Moving back to the more protected waters of the island's south side, our next stop was Little Bight.

**Little Bight**

Here, a coral-shrouded wall descended 18m to a large expanse of white sand, which was home to large congregations of

garden eels. Sitting in front of what appeared to be a small anemone was an exquisite shrimp. Sporting a pair of long white antennae, its transparent body was accented with an assembly of vibrant purple spots. I later discovered it to be a Pederson's cleaner shrimp, a commonly observed Caribbean species.

commenced. Getting on board proved to be a real challenge as the wooden ladder bobbed madly in the turbulent waters. Due to the surface conditions and strong surge, over half the group had opted to sit the next dive out.

As I sat cold and shivering in the rain, the surface interval couldn't end





A fan coral boasted a trio of small but conspicuous molluscs called flamingo tongues, their creamy shells garbed in a psychedelic wardrobe of orange spots encircled with black. Although the corals have developed toxins to deter predators, these molluscs

have developed a unique strategy to consume their favourite food. Over time, they have evolved a group of genes and proteins called a “defensome” that detoxifies coral compounds.

While scouring the white sandy bottom for additional macro subjects, I was

immediately assailed with a frenetic bout of tank banging. Whirling in all directions, I failed to see the cause of the commotion. That is, until I glanced above my right shoulder—hovering in the water column less than a metre away was a great barracuda! I quickly shifted my position and fired off a series of exposures. Best of all, I was able to capture a few images with a vibrant blue background.

#### Ted’s Point

Still game for more, I headed out on in the afternoon with dive guide, Jeremy, to explore Ted’s Point. The fish life was rife, attracted by a pair strong converging currents that sweep past.

At the eastern end, the wall drops sharply to below 40m, while to the west, a gentle slope lies at 18m. The sandy areas were dotted with coral bommies decorated with sea fans, soft corals and sponges. Feather duster worms were congregated in large clusters, unlike the solitary individuals I’d routinely encountered in Asia.

On the sandy bottom at 20m, a small wreck lay tilted on its side, soft corals

protruding from the underside of its bow like feathery goatee. At our safety stop, we came across a school of large silvery fish, which Jeremy couldn’t identify. They weren’t even in the reef guide; in fact no one seemed to know what they were. After doing some research back home, I discovered them to be Bermuda chub.

#### Topside

Just like its undersea environs, Utila’s topside residents are a diverse lot. An eclectic mix of Spanish, African and English heritage, combined with an assortment of expats from around the

some money exchanged, so I was steered me towards Archie Henderson’s place on the main street near the crossroads. Surprisingly, Archie was no Brit, but thoroughly Spanish!

There was definitely no shortage of local characters. One afternoon, I saw

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Fan corals at Ted’s Point; Sunset in Utila; Young boy shows no fear handling a tarantula local to the area; ATV serves as the family car in these parts



world creates, a rich cultural mosaic that is downright intoxicating. Interestingly, a number of people with English names are actually Spanish, a result of the island’s 300 years of British control.

One night, I needed to get





one fellow speeding by the dive shop with a large scarlet macaw on his shoulder. As a result of this extraordinary cultural mélange, Utila's residents boast a wealth of stories.

One evening, I ventured out to a Mexican restaurant called El Picante, which was situated adjacent to the crossroads on the main drag. The owner, Jean hailed from the Congo of all places. "How on earth did you end up in Honduras?" I queried. "A woman," he responded with a broad grin. His Honduran wife, Theresa, was also the cook, and she served up some of the best enchiladas that I've ever eaten. The drinks menu also offered a rather intriguing concoction called a "Chimpanzee". When Jean told me the contents included dark rum, coconut milk, bananas, cinnamon and crushed ice, I was sold on the spot. It did boast a kick, so I opted to stop at one. A few more and I'd probably be swinging from the treetops like its namesake!

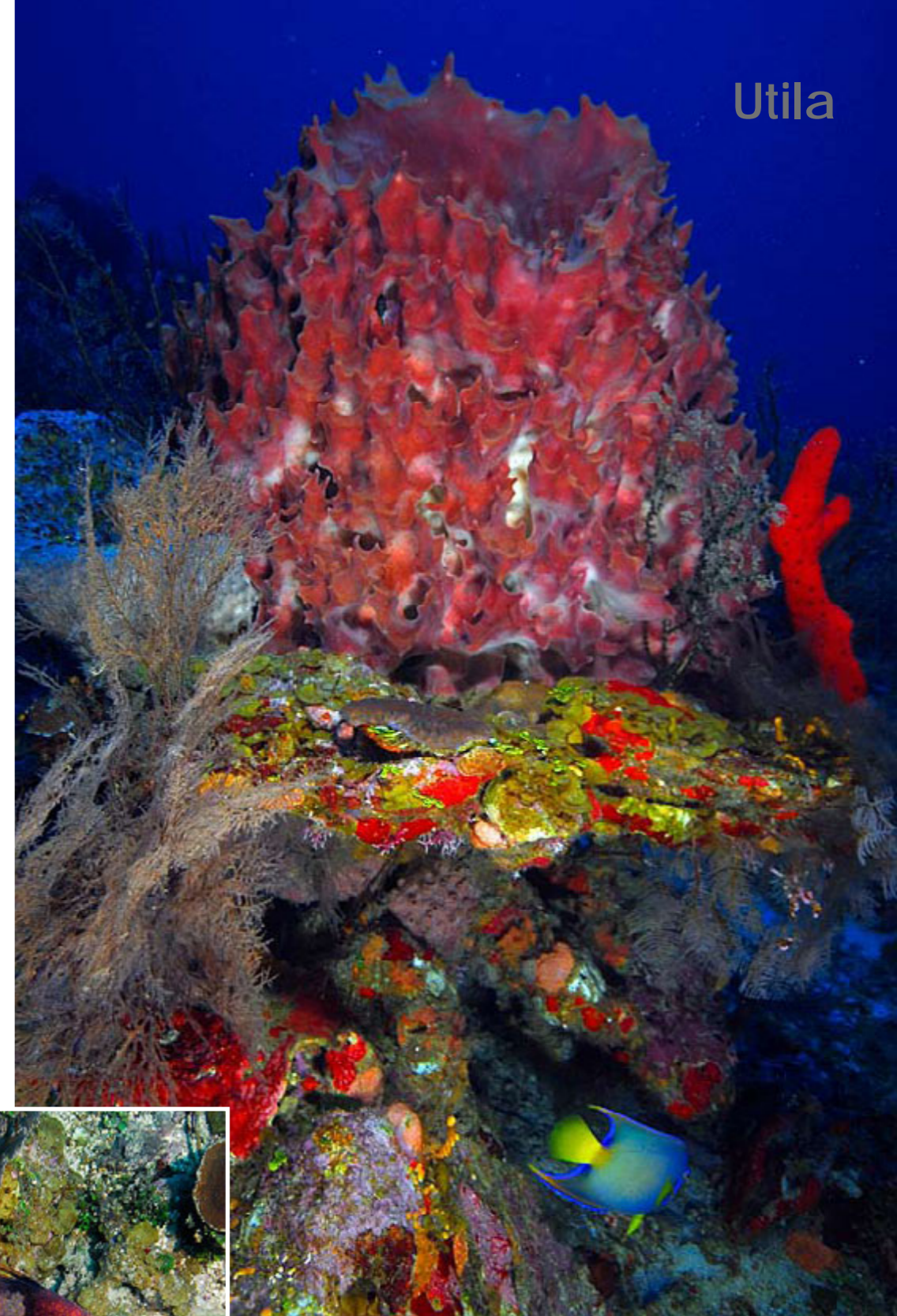
**More diving**

The remainder of the week followed a similar routine, with morning dives on the north shore followed by afternoons on the south.

**CJ's Drop-Off**

In contrast to the south side's gentler slopes, CJ's Drop-Off boasted dizzying walls plummeting to 1,000m. An assembly of triggerfish called black durgeons were on hand to greet us, as we descended 5m to the reef top. Hovering over the rim as it plunged into the abyssal depths below was truly exhilarating.

While descending the wall, frequent computer checks were absolutely essential, as the crystal clear visibility would make it all too easy to exceed recreational diving limits at the drop of a hat. Back on the boat, Ryan, my guide, reckoned it was the best visibility



he'd seen on the island in weeks.

**Big Rock**

After the deeper dives of the morning, the day's final dive at Big Rock was kept decidedly shallower. Within moments, Ryan gestured to nearby coral,

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Barred hamlet; Diver at CJ's Drop-Off; Feather duster worms; Barrel sponge at Pumpkin Hill Banks; Hogfish (inset)





nose puffers and one seriously large dog snapper vying for my camera's attention.



**UDC Jetty**

For macro subjects, I discovered one needn't look any further than the Utila Dive Center jetty, whose wooden pilings are a favourite haunt of seahorses. One day, with a few hours to spare between dives, I grabbed my camera, donned some fins and snorkel and set out in search of them.

Although I did find a couple of banded coral shrimp and a school of grunts, my seahorse search came up empty-handed—that is, until I asked one of the dive instructors above, who informed me there was one attached to a rope right at the end of the jetty. Having a second look, I sheepishly realized it had been right in front of my nose during my initial forage. The experience ended up being a real first: underwater macro photography while snorkelling.

**Black Hills**

A firm favourite amongst many visitors, Black Hills is considered to be one of the Bay Islands' premier dive sites. An isolated seamount, its nutrient-rich waters attract fish like a magnet. It's summit, starting at a depth of 10m, was shrouded

with a patchwork of fan corals, sponges and hard corals. Swirling amongst them were successions of blue tang. French grunts, yellowtail snappers and the occasional grey angelfish. During the dive brief, we were told a large green moray could often be seen patrolling the reef top, and sure enough he (she?) appeared right on cue.

Above the reef, a shimmering school of horse-eye jacks glinted in the blue, joined by several Atlantic spadefish and a school of southern sennet, a species of barracuda. The duration of the dive was spent encircling the seamount's perimeter, and every pass revealed something new. While photographing a fan coral, a large hogfish appeared from beneath one of the fronds. A large wrasse named after the shape of the male's head, they are also highly valued for their meat (which does not taste like pork).

**Duppy Waters**

For our next dive, we headed over to the north



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Dive boat hovers over reef at Duppy Waters; Secretary blenny; Seahorse; Decorated nudibranch (sea slug); Dog snapper

where I barely discerned a diminutive head poking out of a hole. Barely the size of a pencil eraser, its owner was a secretary blenny. Photographing the tiny creature proved especially challenging, as it was difficult enough just SEEING it through my camera's viewfinder!

While a compliant subject, the difficulty of focusing on such a small fish coupled with the incessant surge present made for moments of extreme frustration. Photo subjects abounded for the remainder of the dive, with Pederson's shrimp, arrow crabs neon gobies, sharp-





where these corals can be observed at such shallow depths. Descending the wall, I came across one of Utila's smaller but most spectacular residents. Flitting above a rich tableau of table corals was a juvenile spotted drum. Attired in

plenty of other fish on view including schoolmasters, honeycomb cowfish, blueheads, Creole wrasse, porkfish and groupers.

During our surface interval, we had lunch at a charming seaside restaurant called The Purple Pelican. Sitting astride a white palm fringed beach offering expansive views to

side to Duppy Waters. 'Duppy' translates to 'ghost' in the local dialect, and the site receives its name from the light shimmering over the reef. Legend has it that if anyone sees a flash of light, his or her days are numbered. While no ghosts made an appearance, the reef was wondrous to behold, with exuberant coral growth at each and every turn.

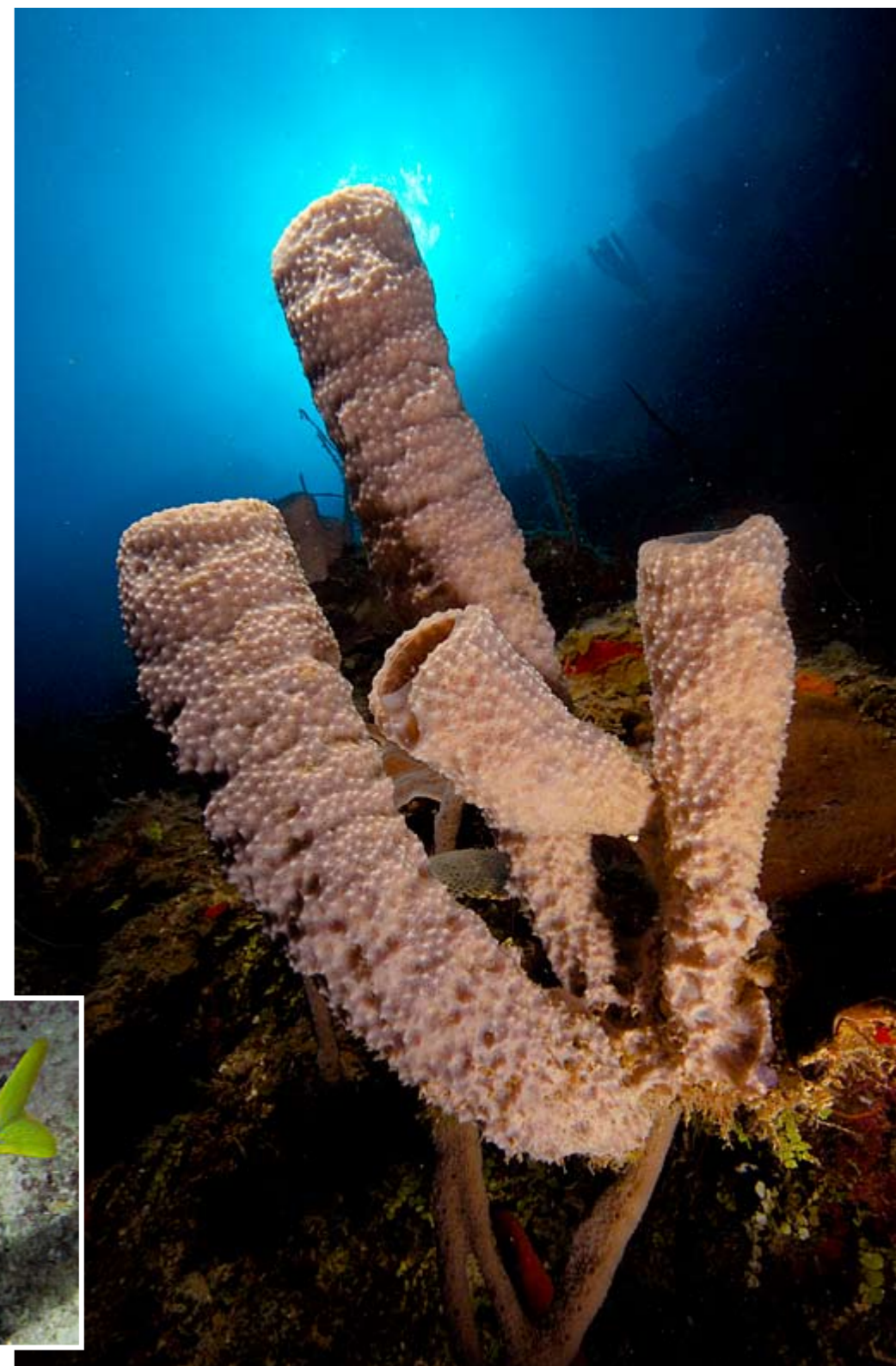
the nearby Cays, it even had a pelican (albeit not purple) perched out front on a wooden pylon

Afterwards, we paid a visit to Black Coral Wall.

**Black Coral Wall**

The site was aptly named, as the walls were home to a profusion of young black coral trees. In fact, it is reputed to be one of the few places in the world

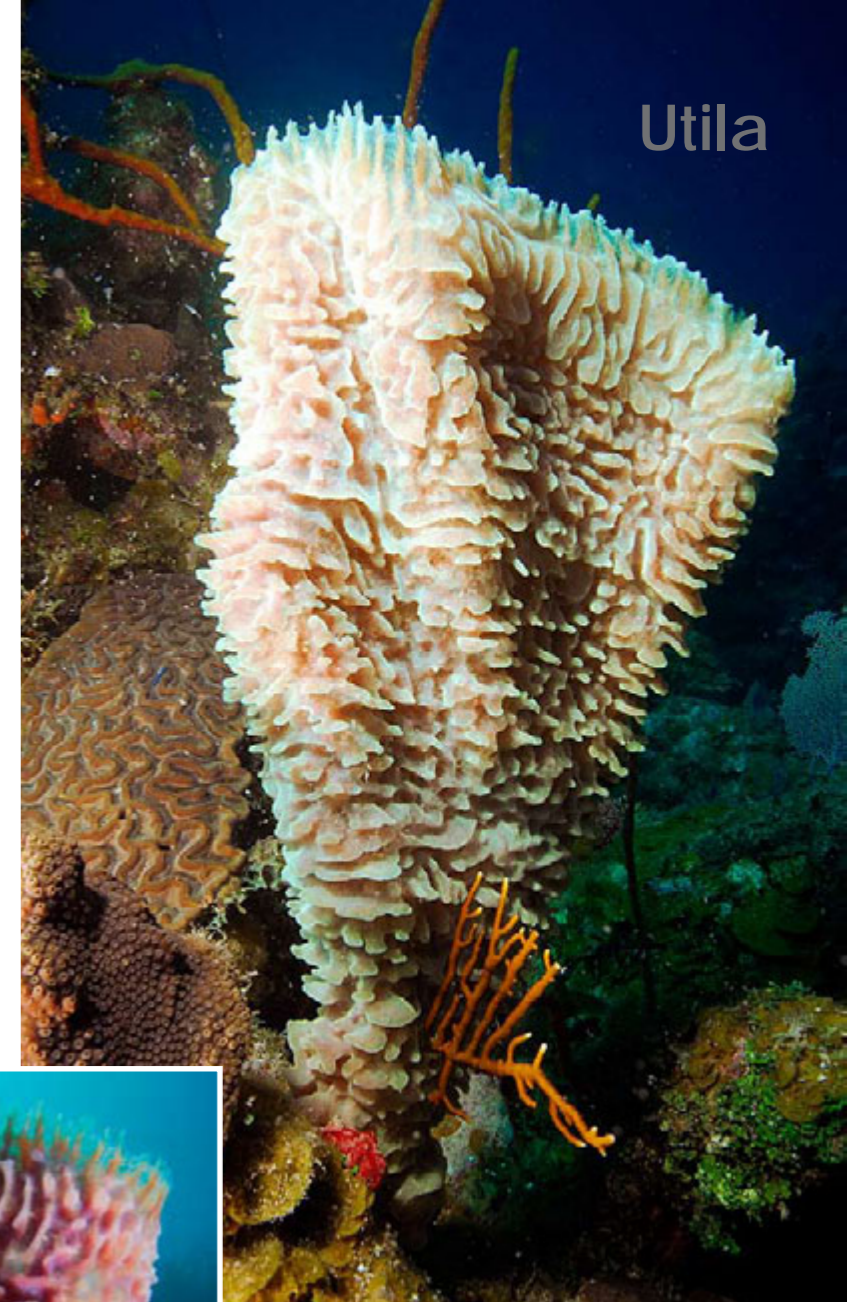
After swimming through a meandering canyon hewn into the reef top, we emerged at a precipitous wall. The waters beyond were hued in the most incredible shade of blue I've ever seen, with visibility easily surpassing 30m. While no whale sharks made an appearance, there were



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Reef scene from Duppy Waters; Lizardfish; Nassau Grouper; Branching vase sponge at Black Coral Wall; French grunt; Tobaccofish



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pillar corals at Black Coral Wall; School of sennet, a species of barracuda; White vase coral and pink vase coral at Black Coral Wall



Utila

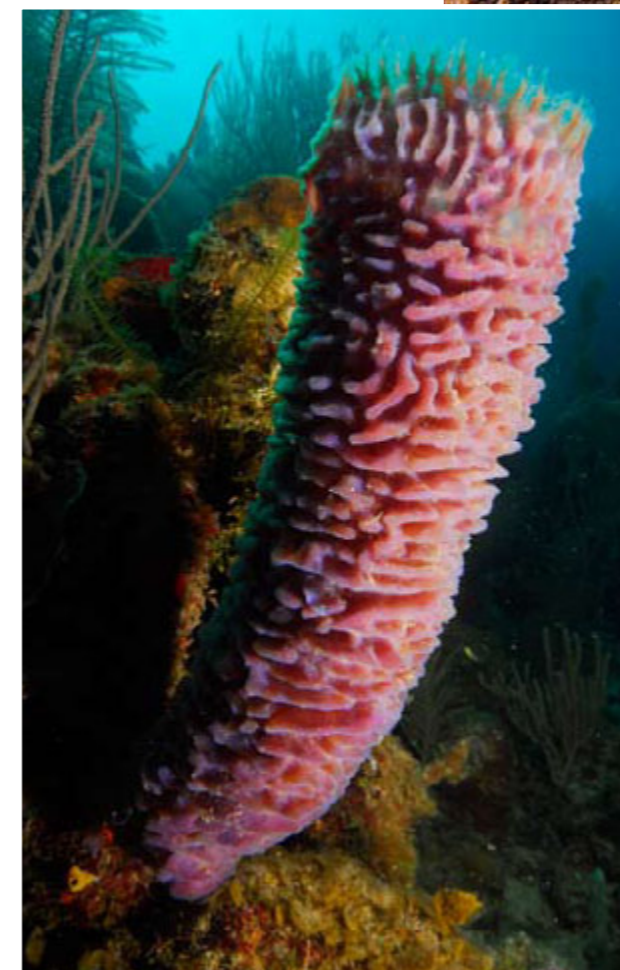
a striking wardrobe of black and white accented by an elegant sinuous dorsal fin, it flitted incessantly above the corals, seemingly oblivious to my presence.

Especially captivating were the myriad of sponges on display. Boasting a wild array of shapes, sizes and colours, they soon became one of my favourite photo subjects. One species, however, was like nothing I've seen before. Standing erect like inverted bugles, vase sponges were garbed in a rich palette ranging from cream to vivid fuchsia. Dominating the reef top was an immense pillar coral. Resembling the ramparts of a submarine medieval castle, the towering spires attracted swarms of Bermuda chub, Atlantic spadefish and a couple of hefty drum fish. I ended up doing this dive several times during my stay. Each visit revealed new surprises, with the undisputed highlight being a pair of spotted eagle rays gracefully swimming side by side.

**Iguana excursion**

One afternoon, I took a break from diving and hopped on a tuk-tuk for a visit to the Iguana Research and Breeding Station (IRBS) on the outskirts of town. Under the guidance of biologist Helder Perez, the project is part of

The Bay Islands Foundation, a private non-profit organization committed to the protection of the country's endangered flora and



fauna through a series of conservation projects.

The IRBS was born in 1997 with the main purpose of protecting and preserving the spiny-tailed iguana, a species endemic to Utila. Known locally as swampers, the iguanas are threatened with extinction due to illegal hunting, uncontrolled development and destruction of their mangrove forest habitat.

The foundation receives volunteers interested in doing scientific research of the island's biology and ecology as well as in participating in the conservation projects for iguanas. Helder then took me on a tour of the centre, which featured a number of informative displays





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Iguana at mealtime; Stoplight parrotfish; Red shrimp; Banded coral shrimp; Juvenile swamper

on the island's ecology. Despite its compact size, Utila is home to a remarkable number of species, with new discoveries being made all the time. One room housed a large cabinet containing a series of incubators, where the iguana eggs are kept prior to hatching. To date, 750 hatchlings have been released in the wild.

Afterwards, we went outside to a series of enclosures, where

termites with wild abandon. Nearby, another enclosure contained a pair of fully-grown breeding adults as well as a large green iguana that was missing its left forelimb.

It was also feeding time for a highland iguana, the third of the island's iguana species. The meal consisted of an odd pairing of fiddler crabs and hibiscus flowers, which the hungry lizard greedily gulped down with gusto.

Perched beside the enclosure door was another island resident, a formidable looking Honduran tarantula. The centre's volunteers wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole, but a small boy gleefully plucked the large arachnid from its perch!

**Night dive**

After rushing back to the dive centre, I was fortunate to join a group of dive-masters for a night dive. Our destination was Silver Gardens, a short boat away. I couldn't wait to see what macro treasures Utila's waters would reveal at night. Frank, my dive guide, soon proved adept at finding critters and my camera's shutter clicked away happily for the ensuing 50 minutes.

Shrimp were everywhere, their beady eyes glowing red in my strobes'





Parrotfish at night (left)  
Red nudibranch (bottom left)  
Spotted scorpionfish at night (below)

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a noise that I first took to be our boatman revving the engine in a series uniform of bursts. Confusingly, it seemed to grow louder and then softer again for no apparent reason. Then, at one point it got REALLY loud. In fact, the sound became so intense I could feel the vibration right down to my very bones! Nearby, I could see Frank diligently searching for something underneath a rocky overhang.

Then, I remembered a conversation from the previous day, and a light went off in my head. It had to be a toadfish! With their broad and flat heads sporting barbels, spiny cheek protrusions and enormous mouths brimming with scores of sharp teeth, these sluggish bottom dwelling fish are more often heard than seen. It certainly was the

case that evening, as the elusive creature retreated into to a dark recess before I was able to catch a glimpse of it.

Still, the dive had one more surprise in store. Just as we were approaching the ladder, a Caribbean reef octopus regarded us suspiciously from the reef top before vanishing under some corals.

While consulting the reef guide back at the resort, I made a surprising discovery. It seems that two of the parrotfish species I had been observing all week was, in fact, one. The stoplight parrotfish undergoes a dramatic colour metamorphosis as it reaches adulthood. Juveniles are light grey in colour with a lattice pattern of chocolate brown punctuated



spotting lights. A couple of familiar faces even showed up: a pair of banded coral shrimp. I even spotted a large bright-red nudibranch, a rarity in Caribbean waters. Although resembling a Spanish dancer, Frank said it was another species entirely.

The sandy area between bommies was crawling with spotted goatfish, while a foraging blue conger eel was an unexpected surprise. In some plac-

es there was almost a bit TOO much life, as the water was literally seething with masses of wriggling red worms. For some reason, they seemed to be utterly entranced by the spotting lights of my underwater strobes, more so than everyone else's torches.

I also had a close encounter with one of the Caribbean's most unusual residents, not visually but audibly. Early into the dive, I kept hearing faint

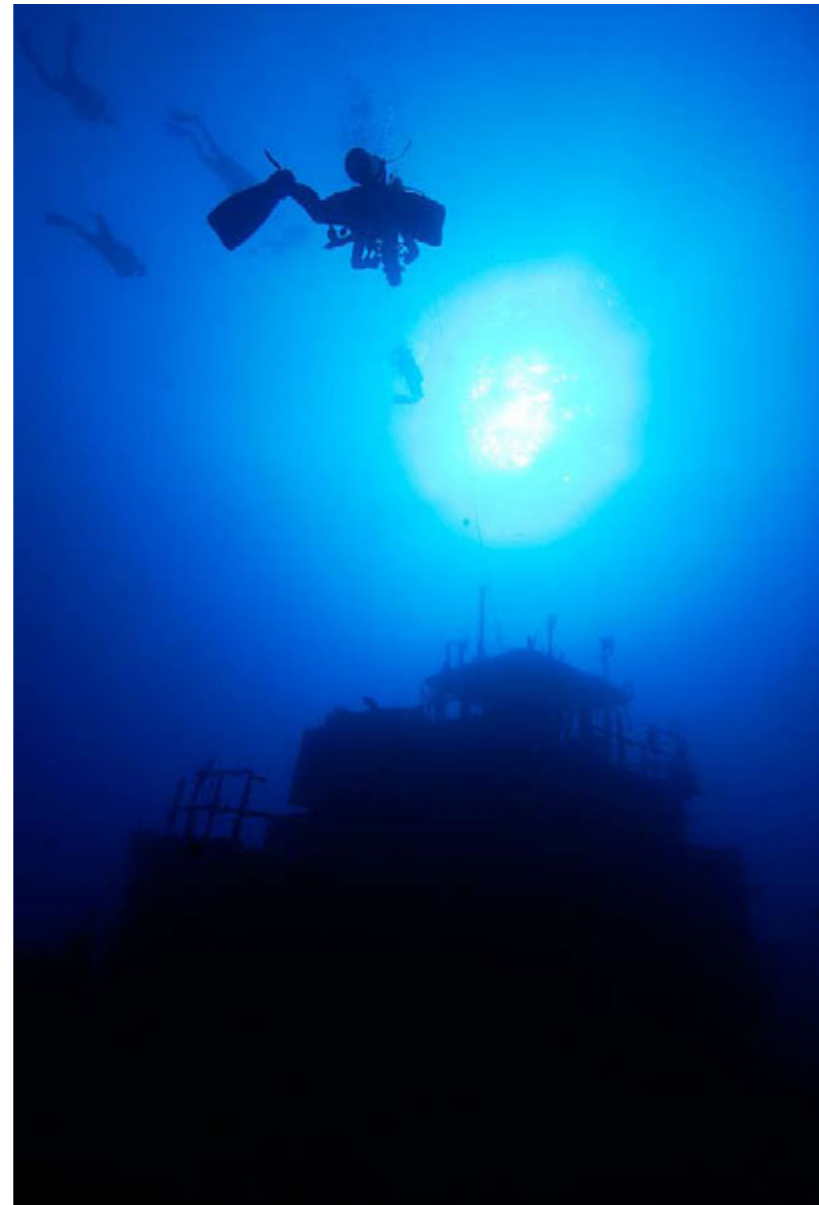
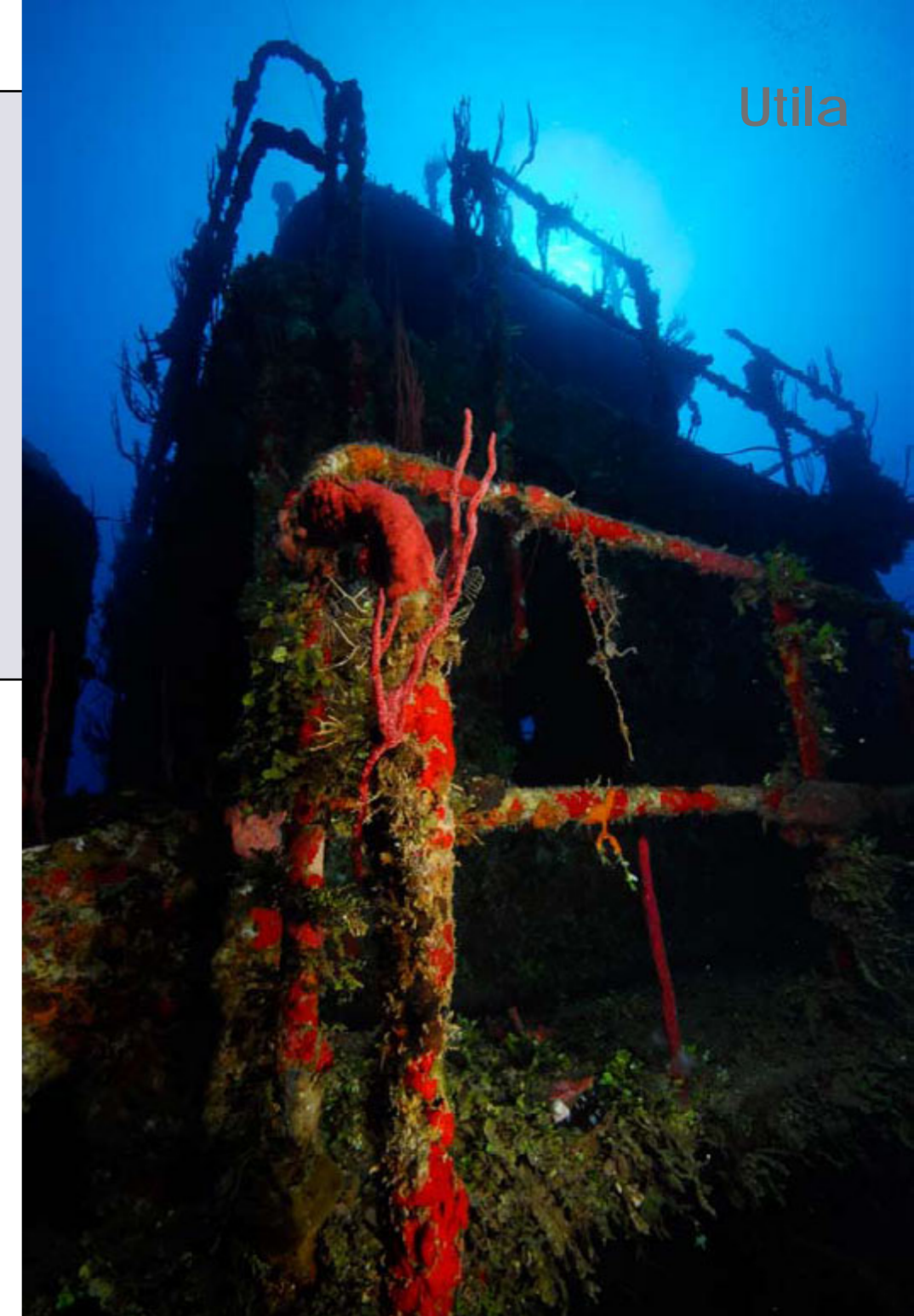


**Lionfish**

The poster said it all, "Wanted: Dead or alive." Emblazoned underneath the bold type was

a large image of a lionfish, Utila's newest and most unwelcome arrival. Since its first appearance in Utila's waters in the middle of 2009, the local community has declared all-out war on this destructive interloper. Just how they arrived is open to a good deal

of debate. One version theorizes that several escaped from an overturned aquarium when Hurricane Andrew slammed into Florida in the 1990s. Others put the blame on Hurricane Katrina. Whatever the reason, lionfish are now firmly entrenched in Caribbean waters with the potential of wreaking environmental havoc on local ecosystems. In their natural home in the Pacific, lionfish breed only once a year, but in the Caribbean, it has been discovered that they breed five times a year. To combat this potentially catastrophic problem, a vigorous eradication programme has been implemented to rid Utila's waters of this uninvited menace. ■



vessel sits upright on a flat, sandy bottom at a depth of 30m. An inter-island supply vessel, it was deliberately sunk in 1998 by the Utila Dive Operators Association to create an artificial reef.

Descending the mooring line into the blue, the ghostly outline of the ship soon became visible. This was one seriously big wreck! Stretching 30m from bow to stern, I could already see the dive time wasn't going to be nearly long enough. Although it's possible to penetrate the cargo hold, I decided to concentrate on the exterior. On the sand below was a decidedly unusual sight: the skeleton of a pilot whale. Nearby, a corroded bicycle tire played home to a lizardfish and arrow crab while a large spiny lobster peered out from an opening at the vessel's base.

Near the bow, an H-bitt for securing mooring lines was enveloped with red star encrusting sponges and capped with a pore rope sponge, looking like an oversize stick of dynamite. As fairy basslets and queen angelfish flitted past, a peculiar jumble of objects caught my attention. On the vessel's uppermost section,

a number of items had been adhered to the railing ranging from a mannequin's head with mask to a PADI card. I later discovered that some divers like to leave personal mementos behind. While everyone doesn't approve of this practice, it has nevertheless become something of a tradition. On a decidedly smaller

by a vivid crimson belly. Adult males are blue-green accented with pink. In most parrotfish, individuals start out as females and change to males. Adding to the confusion is that some spotlight parrotfish develop directly to males from the get go. These individuals often resemble the initial phase, and often display a different

mating strategy than the terminal phase males of the same species. The verdict? Mass confusion all around!

**The Haliburton Wreck**

One of the week's highlights was a dive on Utila's biggest and most famous wreck, the *Haliburton*. Situated off the island's south coast less than ten minutes from town, the



scale, Ron's Wreck is also a lot shallower, lying at a depth of 14m. Since it sank in 1991, the vessel has been colonized

by a veritable tangle of sponges and corals and is home to Christmas tree worms, shrimp and lobsters. The



abundant fish life included blue chromis, Spanish hogfish, four-eye butterflyfish, tobaccofish, barred hamlets and a school of blue tang.

Venturing along the wall towards Ted's Point yielded a few more surprises. Hovering beside a fan coral was a massive yet tolerant Nassau grouper. Unfortunately, I was equipped for macro, so I had to content myself with some facial portraits. A small canyon jutting off the main wall proved to be a real bonanza. After firing off a few images of an arrow crab, I practically bumped into a spiny lobster. A scant metre from that was a massive red crab followed by an adult spotted drum. At nearby Moon Hole, I spotted a gorgeous flatworm flecked with orange spots, something I hadn't encountered during my entire visit.

### Jade Seahorse

Before I knew it, the week was rapidly drawing to a close. However, there was one more land-based attraction that I was told I simply couldn't miss. All week I'd been hearing about a place called the Jade Seahorse, which was barely a minute's walk from my hotel. Comprised of a restaurant, cabins and bar, the somewhat unassuming exterior bore no portent as to the marvels that lay inside. As I entered through the main gate to the garden, I literally stopped dead in my tracks. Before me lay a whimsical setting straight out of Alice's Wonderland.

Over a number of years, the owner has lovingly crafted his verdant property into marine-themed fantasyland of glazed tile, bottles and glass. An unbridled assortment of platforms, gazebos, bridges and pathways were swathed with incredible mosaics jam-packed

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the Jade Seahorse garden created by the owner out of glass, bottles, tiles, ceramic plates and other found objects

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with detail. Overlooking the proceedings was the Treetanic Bar, a ship wrecked in the branches of a trio of mango trees towering over the front yard. There was even a hotel called Nightland, consisting of several private cabins. The detail was astonishing, and the hour I spent wandering the grounds was not nearly long enough. Definitely worth a return visit.

### Pumpkin Hill

On my last diving day, Andy had a very special dive in mind. Like an undersea version of Pumpkin Hill, the Pumpkin Hill Banks is a large and round-topped seamount situated off the island's southeast coast. It was also deep, with the top lying



### Utila Centre for Marine Ecology

Established in 2006, The Utila Centre for Marine Ecology's aim is to improve the welfare and economic growth of Utila by supporting the management and sustainable use of its marine biodiversity. With its unique location and variety of marine habitats, Utila is an ideal centre for ecological research. In addition, the island provides an interesting development model as the community shifts from strong historical links with fishing to its current reliance on reef based tourism.

Currently, Utila's dive industry supports up to 85 percent of the island economy. While global coral reefs face increasing threats, major bleaching events in recent years have hit Caribbean reefs especially hard. The project's goal is to identify and reduce local stressors to coral reefs, to make them more resilient to global environmental changes and will achieve this by integrating targeted research, with ongoing monitoring and community management.

The UCME has grown rapidly to become a focal point for the investigation of tropical marine and island

biodiversity and now provides technical capacity in marine research to the Honduran government. Research focuses on identifying and studying factors that create, maintain and influence the islands biodiversity, providing information, which can guide management decisions and underpin effective conservation. Combining cutting edge marine science with volunteer programmes and educational courses, divers and non-divers alike can assist national and international researchers as they study the island's wealth of biodiversity.

A variety of projects are currently underway, including the establishment of a locally managed conch farm, studies on assessing the extent and health of the mangrove systems, lionfish eradication and studies monitoring local fish populations. The local community is highly supportive of the centre's efforts and is actively integrated into the various research studies, working side by side with marine biologists and conservation specialists to better understand and conserve Utila's threatened marine environment. ■

at a depth of 32m. Swept by strong currents that bring in the nutrients, local fishermen have long known the spot to be a prime fishing ground.

Our group was small, with only myself, two ladies from New York, Andy and Frank. With two of the island's most experienced diversmasters on hand, I knew we were in good hands. I asked Andy if Captain Anthony

needed GPS to pinpoint the exact location. "Not necessary," he responded. "He can find it by sight." Using the outline of Pumpkin Hill and a few distant trees as landmarks, Anthony was able to find the spot with minimal difficulty. To help maximize bottom time (which admittedly wouldn't be long) we went down on Nitrox. Surface currents here can sometimes be strong,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Diver in the sun; Fan coral at Black Hills; Diver and reef at Ted's Point

but we lucked out and were able to descend quickly. As it was a blue water descent, Frank took along a second tank as a safety precaution.

Moments after descending, the seamount's dim silhouette loomed into view. Glancing at the depth on my computer, I saw my bottom time steadily click down into single digit numbers. Due to the incessant battering by strong currents, the summit was covered with short

knobby corals and a plethora of squat barrel sponges. I just got myself in position to take a photo and realized my depth was 42.6m. My remaining bottom time was all of three minutes! Not wanting to go into deco, I reluctantly started to ascend with the others. Final dive time: 20 minutes. Short but sweet.

That sentiment also summed up my weeklong visit. Utila took me completely and happily by surprise. Did it have the

Pacific's biodiversity? Of course not. Instead, I embraced the differences rather than bemoan them and experienced its wonderful dive sites and array of brand-new species. Alas, the whale sharks failed to make an appearance, but the diversity of undersea life, combined with wonderful people and an easygoing island ambiance makes Utila a must for all divers. I guess I'll just have to come back for the whale sharks. ■





# fact file

## Honduras



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

**History** Once part of Spain's vast empire in the New World, Honduras became an independent nation in 1821. After two and a half decades of mostly military rule, a freely elected civilian government came to power in 1982. During the 1980s, Honduras proved a haven for anti-Sandinista contras fighting the Marxist Nicaraguan Government and an ally to Salvadoran Government forces fighting leftist guerrillas. The country was devastated by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which killed about 5,600 people and caused approximately \$2 billion in damage. Since then, the economy has slowly rebounded. Government: democratic constitutional republic. Capital: Tegucigalpa

**Geography** Central America, bordering the Caribbean Sea, between Guatemala and Nicaragua and bordering the Gulf of Fonseca (North Pacific Ocean), between El Salvador and Nicaragua. Coastline: 820km. Terrain: mostly mountains in interior, narrow coastal plains. Lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0m. Highest point: Cerro Las Minas 2,870m. Note: has only a short Pacific coast but a long Caribbean shoreline, including the virtually uninhabited eastern Mosquito Coast.

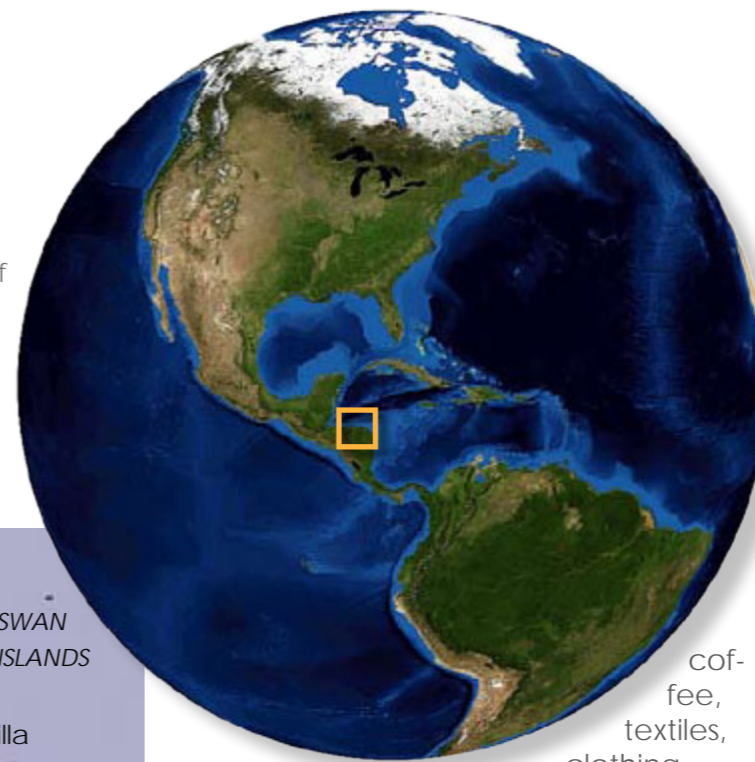
**Climate** subtropical in lowlands, temperate in mountains. Natural hazards: frequent, but generally mild, earthquakes; extremely susceptible to damaging hurricanes and floods along the Caribbean coast

**Environment** urban population

expanding; deforestation results from logging and the clearing of land for agricultural purposes; further land degradation and soil erosion hastened by uncontrolled development and improper land use practices such as farming of marginal lands; mining activities polluting Lago de Yojoa (the country's largest source of fresh water), as well as several rivers and streams, with heavy metals. party to: 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** Honduras, the second poorest country in Central America, suffers from extraordinarily unequal distribution of income, as well as high unemployment and underemployment. The economy relies heavily on a narrow range of exports, notably apparel, bananas, and coffee, making it vulnerable to natural disasters and shifts in commodity prices; however, investments in the maquila and non-traditional export sectors are slowly diversifying the economy. Nearly half of Honduras's economic activity is directly tied to the US, with exports to the US equivalent to 30% of GDP and remittances for another 22%. The US-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) came into force in 2006 and has helped foster investment,

RIGHT: Location of Honduras on global map  
BELOW: Location of Utila Island on map of Honduras  
FAR RIGHT: Detail from the Jade Seahorse garden



wood products, cigars, coffee, textiles, clothing.

**Currency** lempiras (HNL) per US dollar - 18.9 (2009), 18.983 (2008), 18.9 (2007), 18.895 (2006), 18.92 (2005)

**Population** 7,989,415; Below poverty: 59% (2008). Ethnic groups: mestizo (mixed Amerindian and European) 90%, Amerindian 7%, black 2%, white 1%; Religions: Roman Catholic 97%, Protestant 3%. Internet users: 658,500 (2008).

**Language** Spanish, Amerindian dialects

**Health** degree of risk: high: food or waterborne diseases: bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever; vectorborne diseases: dengue fever and malaria; water contact disease: leptospirosis (2009)

**Hyperbaric Chambers**  
Utila Hyperbaric Chamber  
Bay Islands College of Diving  
Utila, Bay Islands of Honduras  
[www.dive-util.com](http://www.dive-util.com)

**Websites**  
Let's Go Honduras  
[www.letsgehonduras.com](http://www.letsgehonduras.com)

but physical and political insecurity may deter potential investors. The economy is expected to register marginally positive economic growth in 2010, insufficient to improve living standards for the nearly 60% of the population in poverty. Despite improvements in tax collections, the government's fiscal deficit is growing due to increases in current expenditures from increasing public wages. Tegucigalpa lacks an IMF agreement; its Stand-By Agreement expired in April 2009 and former President ZELAYA's commitment to a fixed exchange rate undermined a follow-on. Natural resources: timber, gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, iron ore, antimony, coal, fish, hydro-power. Agriculture: bananas, coffee, citrus, corn, African palm; beef; timber; shrimp, tilapia, lobster. Industry: sugar,

