

Text and photos by Daniel Brinckmann

Yap *Home of the Big Stuff*





Yellow, white, black and purple paper fishes inhabit a bommie in Mi'l Channel (left); Lovestoned eagle ray the second before it hits the dome port (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Valerie the manta ray with the tell-tale v-shaped marking on her belly greets a diver

You name it and you know it—the itching and scratching in the morning, those five minutes of mini breakfast, the coffee swallowed so quickly it burns your throat—all for the anticipation of the adventure to come. The Big Game. Every experienced diver knows that feeling, but hardly anybody is able to describe the notion just why one feels a certain day is gonna be *the* very special one.

Probably the most intriguing thing about my "day of days" is that none of the above happened. Actually, it started out worse... much worse. The evening before, dive center manager, Jan Sledsens, and Bill Acker, the owner of Manta Ray Bay Resort in Yap, assembled in front of the weather forecast on the internet. The worried looks on their faces said it all: one typhoon was coming in from Guam in the North, one from that coral patchwork in the East they call the Outer Islands of Micronesia, and finally the last one from the Philippines just after it left Manila flooded and devastated. "This could be too much for the 56 square kilometers that Yap

is," said Bill after taking a deep sip from his beer mug. "The day after tomorrow, we need to tug in the jetty and get the resort storm-proof."

The next morning, the tropical paradise greeted us with its grim face, it was raining cats and dogs, and instead of rushing off to dive boats, everybody seemed to be glued to their coffee cups. Shrugging his shoulders, Jan said: "Okay guys, let's go. The other guests are waiting for their mantas."

The giant rays, one has to know, are Yap's pleasure and pain, at the same time, since many guests are just keen on their flying carpets and ignore even the sharks, the reef and everything in between. Adding insult to injury, no



There to feed the cliché: spinner dolphin family riding the dive boat's bow wave; Two reef sharks on patrol (right); Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers (top right)

mantas had been seen in the last two days, and everybody was pushed to the limit to get the guests "their" mantas.

Green water engulfed us as we navigated through Goofnuw Channel, in the middle of the Valley of Rays. We could hardly find the cleaning station. Even though the water was blooming with plancton, there were no mantas around. "Why didn't I just stay in bed," I thought, but in the next moment, the tables turned.

Driven by an invisible force, a strong current came in from the open ocean, clearing up the water by more than 20 meters. And with



MANTA ETHICS

Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers is the only locality in the world where divers are able to do a PADI "Manta Awareness" specialty. Bill Acker, who basically founded tourism on Yap, and his crew celebrate their 25th anniversary this year—not too bad for a privately owned dive resort in the middle of the Pacific. This is exactly how long the guys have been diving with those elusive flying carpets.

Around 100 different individuals have been recorded and named in the dive center's data base over the years. If you should be one of the happy ones that find a new one, which after all these years still happens, you can gladly give it a name. With six cleaning stations in Mi'l and Goofuw Channel located between 33 and 78 feet, Yap is an all year round destination for manta ray encounters, even though they can often be absent for a few days.

Only last January saw the discovery of a new cleaning station in just 21 feet of depth. "This is a sensible environment," dive center manager Jan Sledsens said, "and that's the reason why we do have a code of conduct for diving at the channel's cleaning stations." First, to sit still on the sandy bottom and swim after the mantas are as much no-no's as touching them. How they get the mantas to hover over your head and make them fill the frame

of your fisheye lens is a different issue you best explore on the spot.

The reef mantas (*Manta alfredi*) inhabiting Yap's waters usually do not exceed a wingspan of 15ft, however there are some special features about the local animals, for instance, with the presence of two white specimens—one aptly named Snowwhite. Judging from the photos, renowned ichthyologist, Helmut Debelius, claims these two animals are "rather unlikely real albinos, but suffering from a lack of pigments". On the other hand, this color variant is much rarer than the black ones ("melanism") that can often be found off Komodo, for example.

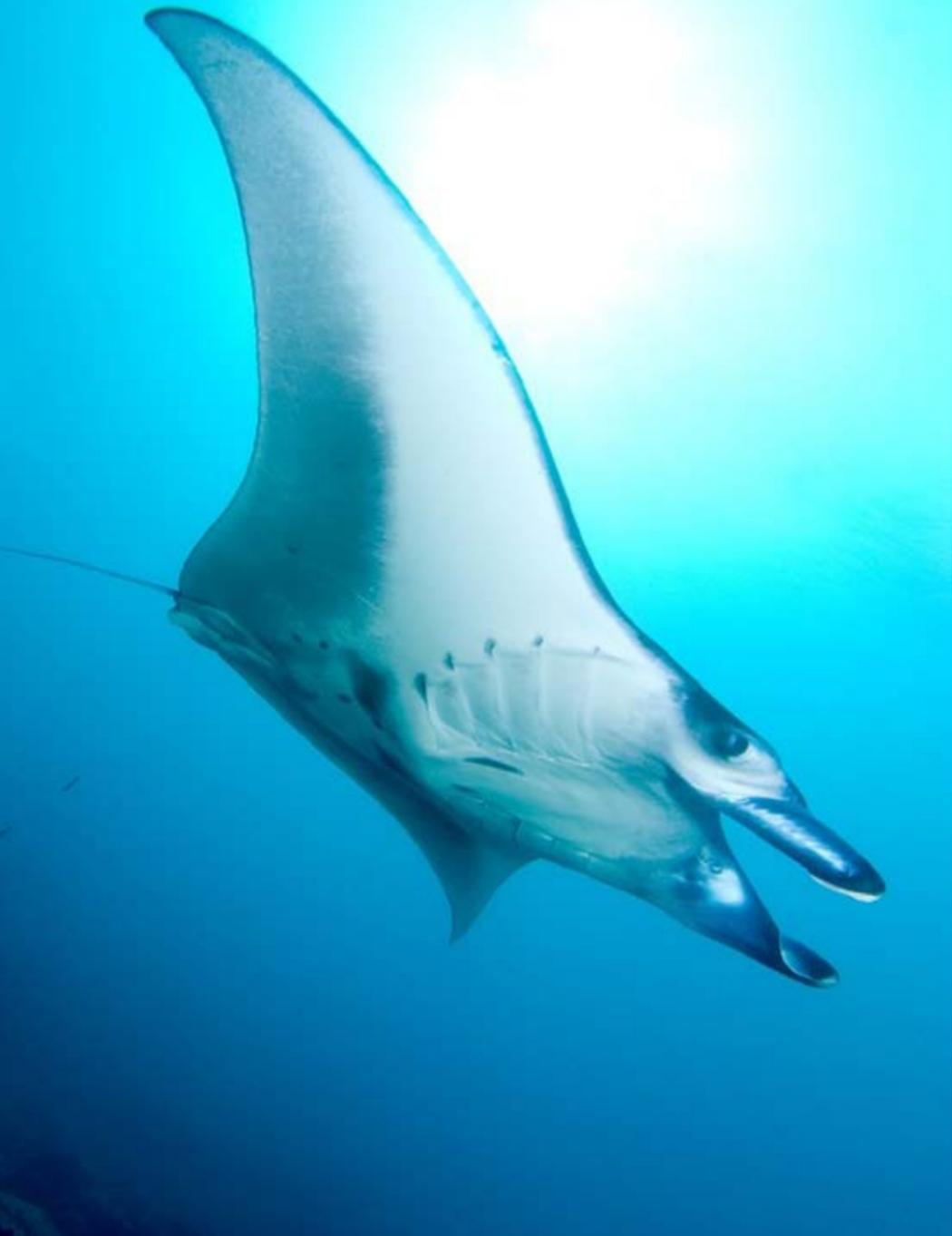
Between December and April, divers that are in the right spot at the right time may witness mating dances in Mi'l Channel. Generally speaking, it is less the numbers but more the quality of the encounters that make Yap an enchanted place to go for the giant rays. But don't let the mantas fool you, diving Yap is so much more, with the steep walls off the west coast, 120 feet plus of viz on the outer reef, the healthy shark population (these days "Vertigo" hosts less divers and more teeth than Palau's famous "Blue Corner"), the pelagics, the critters on the inner reef and the surprise encounters that the open waters off the southern tip may hold for you. See: www.mantaray.com ■

the clear blue water—surprise, surprise—came the mantas. One, two, three, four—one by one, they glided over the rocky channel bottom and rose up to the cleaning station next to our heads.

From the V-shaped blotches on her belly, I recognized Valerie, one of the "friendliest" mantas in Yap, that has a very special habit. Swimming a long curve, she passed me and hovered on top of my buddy's head, going deeper and deeper until she basically sat on top of

his head. Valerie just loves the tiny air bubbles from the regulators. No doubt, if she was human, Valerie would spend her days in a jacuzzi. Mission accomplished! I could almost hear dive center manager Jan sighing in relief.

Pretty much to our surprise, the other mantas also remained motionless. As if they hung on transparent wires, they did not even bother to move a single tip of their black wings. Maybe they saw them coming earlier than we did: a bunch of



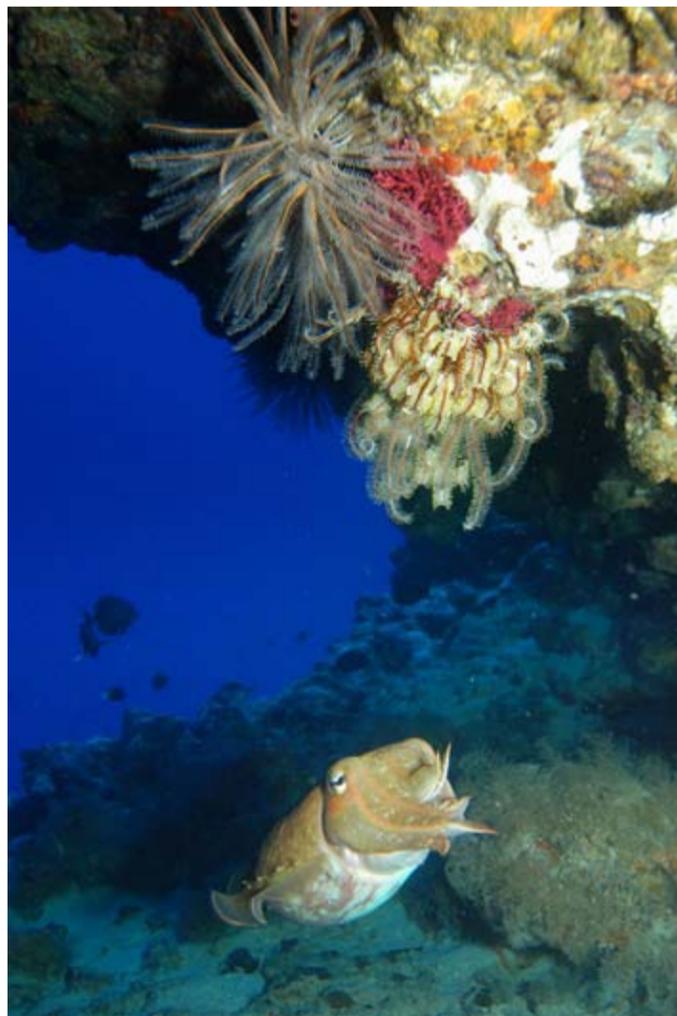
grey reef sharks made their way up the channel, of course, not without taking a closer look at the foreign intruders.

As cool and as bold as they appeared to be, their lively eyes were rolling and revealed that they were not about to miss the slightest movements on our part. For some people, the sharks

ventured closer than they had ever wished.

Orca time

Ninety minutes after we jumped in, we finally breached the surface with nearly empty tanks. The second boat which had just arrived, brought news: "Guys, we've seen a couple of orcas just



Yap

THIS PAGE: Mandarin fishes, gobies and cuttlefish are typical critters; The cleaning stations not only attract mantas, but huge humphead parrot fishes

in front of the main channel," said Captain John with a calm smile, as if to suggest that the movie he'd just watched wasn't too bad.

Initially, everybody started cracking jokes: "Sure, orcas, here in the tropics, we call 'em spinner dolphins, my friend! Let's go for them, and after that, you get us a school of tiger sharks feeding on floating coconuts." However, jaws dropped when John showed us a video on his mobile phone with an orca looking curiously up to the dive boat's bow.

Five minutes later, the plans for any further dives were put to rest for the day, and we were going out with roaring engines. Orca time! "This is like looking for a needle in the hay," I thought to myself, hoping for the best and expecting nothing at all. And there they were—

Would I? Should I?" Before I started thinking too much about the risky part of sharing the water with wild orcas, I grabbed mask, snorkel and fins and slid into the water as calmly as possible. "If they take me for an alternative to Hawaiian monk seals or whatever else, then so be it."

But just like it is most often with so-called dangerous animals, the orcas immediately fled as soon as we saw a glimpse of them. However, the first five attempts proved to be not fruitful at all. All the way we saw nothing but wonderful transparent blue water... up to the moment when a huge black body of at least six meters appeared as if it came out of nowhere.

Resembling a big black torpedo, one of the adult orcas came on a straight head-on course towards

three dorsal fins sticking high out of the water like swords in the air.

"Could I?"

me. I think my heart stopped beating for a second! A heartbeat later, it approached me for a quick sonar scan and quickly passed below my fins. There are hardly words to explain how it felt to be in the water with such a big animal, without a reef at your back, a tank on your back, or even a buddy close to you.

Let's say, it is less frightening than just overwhelming, because you are so much struck by the fact that there is no space for fear in your brain! Needless to say, once we climbed the ladder back onto the boat, we all enthusiastically started shouting, probably so loud even the seagulls were scared away.

In this happy mess, it turned out that the others counted four animals, including a small calf. What a day. From then on, we saw them only a few times, even though our approach got a little more professional—jumping into the water and going after the whales at full fin power obviously did not



Mangrove whiptail rays can often be seen resting

Yap

SHOOTING MANTAS
Obviously, with the exception of shots of the eye or other details, crisp manta photos demand either fisheye or super wide lenses, with an angle between between 8.5 to 18mm. Timing and control of your strobe power is everything. Mantas are highly individual in behavior. Marine biologist and renowned manta specialist Dr Andrea Marshall pointed out recently that "mantas are the only fishes that probably, get "the concept of playing due to their intelligence". Still, not every one of these flying carpets might be in the right mood. With respect to both their future behavior in presence of divers and your very own results, it is recommended to wait for the right moment to pull the trigger rather than to go for rapid fire, which might scare the animals off. This goes especially for cleaning stations, which are sensible environments and crucial to the mantas. At the same time, cleaning stations give photographers extensive shooting opportunities as the mantas will often circle the corals where the cleaner wrasses live and come over to the divers before getting back to body hygiene. Their snow-white bellies will often require low strobe power. However, one is better off if the equipment allows TTL-corrections. With manual settings you will need to be quick, as it can be difficult to trace the manta's next movement. Let the animal come close, wait for your shot and never ever chase it. ■

Sunfishes are rare visitors, but make a good example for special encounters off the island's southern tip

than of proper sized whales. The case seemed to be clear—taking into account that the bull and the cow had a semi-adult and a calf of not more than two meters with them, it was obvious that they were looking for shelter in relatively shallow and safe water just

off the outer reef wall in order to protect their young one from predators like tiger sharks. This said, everybody knew that orcas normally tend to stay and feed in cooler water with only a few exceptions off the Great Barrier Reef and Papua Newguinea.

The next resident population from Yap lives around Okinawa in south of Japan. Still a good share of miles to swim. So, could it get any better at that point? Yes, indeed it did! Not only were we able to track the orcas for the next two hours and spend a few minutes with them swimming in the distance, we saw another high dorsal fin in between the whales when we followed them around the southernmost point of Yap to the west side. "A fifth orca?," somebody thought out loud.

Sunfish fun

Sliding into the water once again, we immediately saw the orcas playing with a massive sunfish before they noticed us and changed directions. And while all of the snorkelers were going after the whales, I rushed after the sunfish with the camera housing in increasingly aching arms.

Running out of air and cursing the



cigarettes from last night, I noticed a small boat approaching. "Hey, wanna ride?" a familiar face shouted. It turned out to be a local marine biologist I briefly met. He threw a line over board, towed and dropped me just in front of the sunfish.

This was my moment—for the next ten minutes, nobody disturbed my tête-à-tête with the beautiful spotted giant. Having seen a number of sunfishes off Estartit

do the job.

You could fin forever, as some red faces indicated, but the animals were always faster even though they did not seem to move at all. We found ourselves in a much better position when we stopped the boat 20 meters in front of them, got into the water, just hoping they

would not change their direction. Quite often, we would see them swimming past us 10 to 15 meters away. In fact, they tended to keep this distance, which did not make things easy for me, as I was equipped with a strong wideangle lens.

Looking through the viewfinder, the orcas reminded me more of sardines



One in roughly 20 curious grey reef sharks (above) resident in the shallows at Vertigo Reef; Hawksbill turtles (left) frequent Mi'l Channel, next to a patch of purple spiny soft corals; Wanyaan Beach can be reached within 20 minutes (right)

ten years," joked Bill, Manta Ray Bay Resort's owner. "I should send you back to f*****g Germany!"

Needless to say, the evening went by much too fast with beer from the house brewery flowing like a waterfall, and the best footage surfacing on the restaurant ship's five-meter outdoor screen.

"Two mantas, whitetips, at least five grey reef sharks, four orcas, a sunfish and two bottlenose dolphins," I thought to myself with a beer in my hand, "This is what I call a good quota!" Cheers!

Take two

Of course, by that time, the seed was planted into the mind of all those who did not have the

and the Azores islands, I can say that this animal had the greatest coloration of all. Certainly it was not the brightest of them. He really did justice to the reputation of a fish with a walnut-sized brain and ran me over with flapping fins more than once.

Once the other seven snorkelers arrived with the boat, the sunfish quickly became more shy, went horizontal and started spinning.

One could tell the animal started to feel stressed, so I decided to leave it alone just to be approached by two bottlenose dolphins for a quick hello.

On board, photo buddy Andy Sallmon gave me a big thumbs up: "You lucky bastard," he yelled while hugging me. "Congratulations on this excellent sunfish footage." Not the worst compliment from a veteran

underwater photographer, who took his first pictures by the time I learned how to walk.

With increasingly rough sea and clouded skies it took us more than half an hour to find the orcas again and decide to head for the coast before we run out of fuel.

Back in the dive center, happy insults are flying. "Now, I hate you even more than I did before—I haven't seen an orca in Yap for



chance to see the whales. So, against all odds and the weather, we went out again the next morning.

After roaming the southernmost point for a while, we found them. To our surprise, one of the adults was missing, but they did not turn away like before—they just ignored us, if we did not get too close. Being the smart animals they were, they really seemed

to become more familiar with the boat and those strange humans in rubber suits watching them from every angle possible. Unfortunately, the cloudy weather and the waves swallowed the last beams of light below the surface, leaving me with low contrast and dark blue water like ink.

While the conditions did not improve a bit the next morning, we could see the whales really



Adult nurse sharks prefer deep overhangs in the channel entrances (left); Dressed for success—Yapese siblings ready for a traditional chamorro dance (far left)

day. "You mean, these black and white whales? Yes, of course we know about them," he said and left us with mouths wide open. "They have been around for almost one month now and always try to steal our hooked tuna."

With stars in his eyes he recounted how one of them jumped out of the water with a shark in his mouth. "Having a really great head-on shot of this would be a good reason to sell all of my equipment and quit diving," I thought. Actually, Stan wondered that we did not hear about the "small whales with the round fins" as he names them.

Back at the hotel, we asked Bill about it and earned shrugging shoulders: "Yes, there is a group of pilot whales living around the island, but you never asked for them, and I thought you'd rather go

diving than spending the day on the sea searching them." If we could only speak "whale" and invite them on a few fishing trips...

Manta Visions

The pioneering dive center of the island, Yap Divers, harbors the photo and video center, Manta Visions, and plenty of dry storage room for housings and other equipment. Or, to put it in a nutshell—16 booths, each equipped with electric looking glasses, charging station with three 220V European style sockets, as well as three 110V US-style sockets and a spacious locker unit. Over the years, pros like Eric Cheng, Marty Snyderman, Andy Sallmon and Bob Halstead rubbed shoulders at Manta Ray Bay Resort, as well as many TV crews up to National



showing off their playfulness. Instead of us approaching them, it was them approaching us, with splashing black and white fins so close to the boat we all got a shower.

The group of Swiss guests on board could hardly believe their eyes and decided to leave the close encounter underwater to me. As it started raining heavily, I was surprised to even see the orcas coming, thanks to their white bellies. Surprise again—they all came towards me upside down and clearly communicating with each other. It really seemed as if the parents decided to show their calf the strange beings that we must be to them. As if to say: "Look, these little humans are not dangerous, they produce bubbles just like us."

Evidently, at this point, the four whales were not uncomfortable with our presence anymore. Maybe it should

have rather been me who feel uncomfortable sharing the water with predators that outgrow a great white shark? Anyway, the Swiss guys slowly dared to go into the water. In the best cartoon style, one by one—with every jump into the water—there was yet one more snorkeler.

Whales, whales, whales...

Leaving the orcas aside for a moment, the true miracle was maybe not even them, but the three typhoons. They could have devastated the island and the surrounding reef, but they all changed directions less than a hundred kilometers off the island. Still the wind and two-meter waves forced us back to the shore, where we decided to go on an island trip.

During our visit in Kaday Village we were surprised to learn that "our" orcas were old news. Stan Fillamed, a 69-year-old fisherman from the village really made our



Orcas roam the seas around Yap (left and right)



The walls of the Western side offers enough subjects to make a good movie as seen on the big outdoor screen of the resort's restaurant schooner Mnuw, *Seahawk* (below); Underwater photographers with their gear (bottom center)

opportunity to sneak in and connect your notebook while you're waiting for your blackened sashimi. ■

Daniel Brinckmann, 31, started diving at age 11 and published his first travel story in a German scuba diving magazine prior to his final exams at school. He then went for journalism and media studies and English at Düsseldorf University. Throughout this period, he worked as a freelancer for the county capital's daily newspaper as well as for other scuba diving magazines. Following his university career, he decided to focus on travel reporting full-time and now works for 11 magazines throughout Europe. His motto: "There are no boring dive spots. SOMETHING can even be found in a dirty little pond, even if it is only a withered lighter with small shells on top!" Photo equipment used by the author includes 2x D90 with 2x Ikelite DS-160/161, Tokina 12-24mm, Sigma 50mm, Sigma 105mm.

used by National Geographic and Discovery Channel, nine years in French Polynesia made him also an expert of marine life in the tropical Pacific. In short, ask him what subject you need and how to get it, and he will very likely bring it to the table—not only the big classics, such as sharks and mantas, but also mating mandarin fishes, white mantis shrimps and a colorful array of leaf fishes just to name a few.

Next August, Schneider will also host the MantaFest shoot-out along with fellow pros Tim Rock, Frank Schneider and—once again—Marty Snyderman.

While there are no docking stations at Manta Visions to catch an immediate glimpse of one's

photographs, Yap's reputation for "big stuff" extends to the screening of images—the restaurant ship beamer screen measures no less than 18 feet and is used for the display of the day's best images and frames virtually every evening at dinner time—a perfect

Geographic.

Apart from the decent infrastructure for us lens geeks, the resident videographer and manager of Manta Vision is another good reason to pick Manta Ray Bay Resort in Yap. Peter Schneider, originally a cameraman for German public TV in Berlin, worked with the likes of Christian Petron (Luc Besson's film, *The Big Blue*) and won an award for his film, *Sharks of Rangiroa, from Legend to Reality*—an uncompromising manifesto against shark fishing, which effectively triggered a federal ban on finning in the Southern Pacific in 2006.

Schneider was also the first to capture not only the mating of manta rays, but their actual copulation in the wild. Not only were his frames



The Islands of
Yap
*Exploring
the Garden of Eden*
Text and photos by Scott Johnson





A Yapese girl (above) weaving a basket at Kaday village



Schooling Pacific barracuda in Goofnuw channel (left); Mangrove-lined German channel (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Leaf scorpionfish on Lionfish Wall

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. When He reflected on His handiwork, God thought, "Is there anything I can add to crown my glorious creation?" His answer, of course, was "Yap!" So, He added the lovely island chain, and then, "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." (Genesis, chapter one — journalist translation)

Of course, in the Garden of Eden, "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." (Genesis 2:25). The naiveté and simple pace of the people in this island paradise were certainly refreshing, once one got used to the bared flesh, of course.

The Yapese are known to be a friendly, but traditional and shy people. Their shyness apparently does

not include their entire wardrobe (although, woman's thighs must be covered at all times, including visitors).

Confused. I admit it. I feel confused and yes, a little bit embarrassed. I am used to seeing canned foods, packaged goods, fresh vegetables and luscious fruit in a grocery store. But the situation here was challenging, as half of the women were fully dressed in

shirts and knee-length skirts, while the others were only covered from their waste down. I did not want to be rude by avoiding eye contact, but I also did not want to stare. Lauren Johnson, my wife, was obviously enjoying my discomfort, though I am sure she was perplexed as well.

Yap is not the land that time forgot, but more like the islands where



the past and present mix in intoxicating ways. We sensed no true clashing of times, where a digitally and mechanically driven world view was trying to forever cover the old, or where ancient ways were attempting to keep out any modernization. Instead, there seemed to be a tranquil blend of traditional village life with more contemporary social elements, such as schools, a hospital and grocery stores.

diagonal, straight-line between Guam and Palau on map, you will find Yap. It is 853km (530mi) miles southwest of Guam and 452km (281mi) northeast of Palau. Yap Proper may seem like one continuous island when pictured on a brochure or the web, but it actually consists of four different islands (Yap Island, Tomil-Gagil, Maap and Rumung) that loosely fit together like puzzle pieces within a barrier reef.

Yap, itself, is a collection of 138 volcanic islands and atolls located in the Caroline Islands of the western Pacific Ocean and slightly north of the equator. If you mark a

Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk (formerly Truk) and Yap, are members of The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), which is a constitutional democracy. It is closely aligned with the United States as evidenced by the Compact of Free Association the two entities signed in 1986. Ultimately, the agreement provides the FSM with security and economic benefits, including regular coverage by the U.S. Postal Service, and the United States

maintains a valuable presence in the region.

Lost in translation

The Yapese absolutely cherish their roots and heritage, yet embrace “sensible” advances in education, medicine, communications and even name changes. The islands of Wa’ab became the islands of Yap due to a miscommunication. According to the Yap Visitors Bureau, “When the first ship to anchor at the central islands arrived. A canoe of local warriors from the remaining islands went out to greet the ship, and through sign language, communicated their desire



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Diver explores one of the many formations at Yap Caverns; Yellowfin goatfish in the shallows of Mi'l Channel; Pajama or coral cardinalfish and mandarinfish; Beautiful six-banded angelfish are common



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Kaday village scene; Nudibranch at Slow & Easy; Living wall of big-eye jacks at Manta Ridge; Resting crocodilefish in Goofnuw Channel

to have the captain come ashore for discussions. As they boarded the warrior's canoe, the ship's captain pointed towards the shore and asked the name of the nearby landmasses. Thinking that the captain was pointing at a canoe paddle held by a navigator in the bow, the warriors responded proudly, "Yap." The name was duly recorded by the captain, and it stuck, so to this day the islands of Wa'ab are known to the outside world as Yap, which translated is *canoe paddle!*

Pocket change

If non-divers outside of Micronesia are aware of Yap, they probably think of it as the Island(s) of Stone Money. The Stone Money, or Rai, are doughnut-shaped disks that were primarily quarried from Babelthaob, Palau. Ranging in size from 4m (12ft) to .3m (1ft) in diameter, the Rai

are easily the largest coins in the world. The ancient Yapese admired the shiny properties of the Palau calcite, so they sent warriors with rudimentary tools in outrigger canoes to hew and transport the Rai over hundreds of kilometers (miles) of potentially treacherous water. Many Rai and the bones of even more warriors ended up on the sea floor between the two states. The difficulty of the journey, including the loss of life and property, that brought a piece of stone money to Yap is one of the most important aspects that determine its overall worth. Other key features that impact a coin's value are its size, shape and texture. The U.S. dollar is now the accepted currency in Yap, but Rai are still used for ceremonial and traditional exchanges, such as marriages and land transfers. Most Rai are never moved and stored in Stone Money Banks in the villages.





LEFT TO RIGHT: Reef octopus at Yap Corner; Male mandarinfish ready for a night on the town; “Just” another nudibranch at Slow & Easy

David Dean O’Keefe, an Irish-American sailor, was shipwrecked on Yap in 1871. His rescue by and subsequent stay with the Yapese endeared the people and location to him. O’Keefe left Yap only to return with a new ship and a grand business proposition. He offered to transport the Rai from Palau in exchange for copra (the dried coconut meat) and beche-de-mer (sea cucumbers). The Yapese not only accepted his proposal, but granted him a 30-year monopoly on the business. While “O’Keefe-money” was valued much lower than the Rai brought by canoe, it allowed more villagers to achieve the status of owning stone money without having to risk their warriors to

obtain it. O’Keefe’s life even inspired the 1954 movie, *His Majesty O’Keefe*.

On wings of mantas

Let’s face it, manta rays put Yap on the radar of the scuba diving world. Mexico’s Revillagigedos Islands, the Maldives (Hanifaru Bay, in particular) and Yap are widely lauded as the hottest of the hot spots for these massive filter-feeders. Lauren and I have been to all three places and can validate the manta mania reputation of each.

What separates Yap from the other two is the same timelessness that permeates the rest of the island state. The Revillagigedos Islands and Maldives encounters are seasonal

events, which means divers have a limited access window each year. In addition, liveboards and a 28-hour crossing are the only way to visit The Boiler, the Revillagigedos renowned manta site. Yap, on the other hand, is open for business year-round and requires only a short boat ride each day. By all means, visit all three destinations and become the envy of manta aficionados everywhere. This will also help you best appreciate the simplicity and consistency of Yap’s manta dives.

There are two types of mantas, worldwide: giant (*Manta birostris*) and reef (*Manta alfredi*). Giant mantas are pelagics that roam vast areas of open ocean, while the reef mantas

tend to take up residence in one area and stay put, though definitely not on the same sedentary scale as the Rai. The mantas seen around Yap are predominantly the resident reef mantas.

If the mantas get credit for putting a marine face on Yap, then Bill and Pat Acker—the owners of the Manta Ray Bay Resort and Yap Divers—deserve to be recognized as their chief publicity agents. In particular, Bill, a Texan from the United States who found Yap and then his lovely wife, Pat, via a tour in the Peace Corps in the late 70’s, is credited as being the person most responsible for bringing recreational diving to the state. I have never met a better





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tion.

Jan Sledsens, a transplanted dive junkie from Butare, Rwanda, is Yap Divers' dive operations manager. He warmly greets us on our opening day of diving, asks if we need anything to get started and then introduces Alex Raimon, Gordon Keiji and Nico Erhieisap, our dive guides and captains for the day. There is nothing per-

functory about the process, though Jan has clearly performed the same ritual thousands of times before.

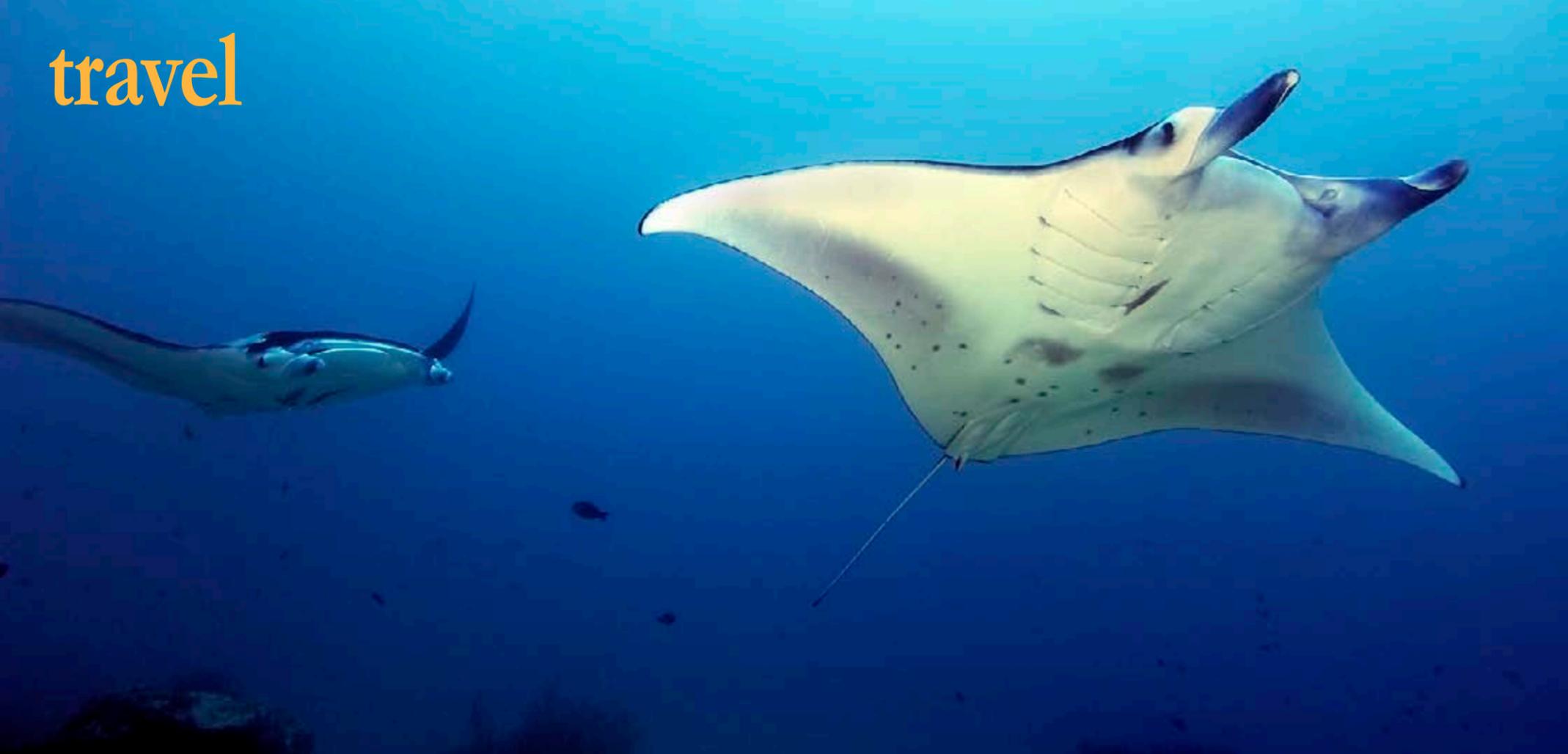
Nico's big smile displays gums and teeth stained bright red from chewing betel nut. The Yapese believe you should always carry a bag during the day (empty hands indicate pending mischief) and a light at night (only trouble makers walk in the dark). Areca nuts, betel leaves and lime, the essential ingredients in a good betel nut chew, are in the bags of most. You learn to watch where you step in the Garden of Eden or you will become a part of the chewing experience, one way or another.

Our three escorts put our gear, including my two Aquatica housings equipped with a pair of Sea&Sea YS-250 strobes

each, in the boat and then we were off. We slowly made our way through the mangrove-bordered German Channel until the boat stopped. The tide was still so low that Nico and Gordon jumped out

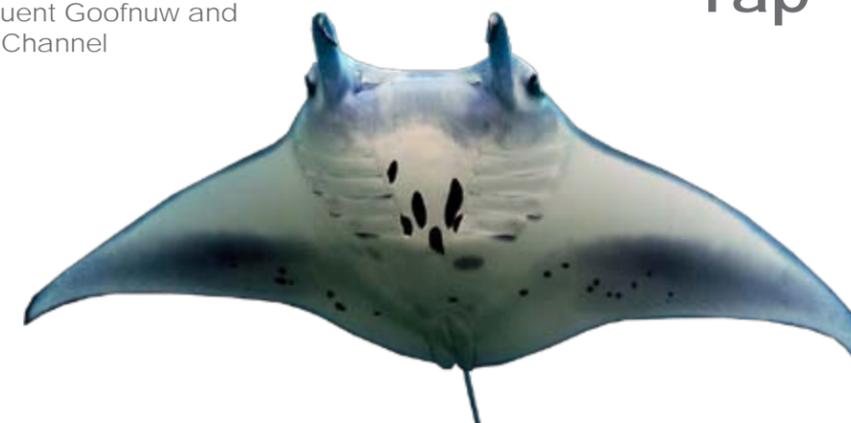


CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Lionfish are plentiful at Slow & Easy; Brilliant leaf scorpionfish at Magic Kingdom; Soft corals in Mi'l Channel; Fire dartfish hovering above the sand at Yap Caverns; Princess damselfish at Yap Caverns



THIS PAGE: Some of the majestic manta rays that frequent Goofnuw and Mi'l Channel

Yap



and pushed us until it was safe to use the engines once again. The Germans who originally carved out the channel, and the Japanese who then refined it before

and during World War II, apparently could not do anything more to improve navigating the low tide conditions.

The best time to dive for mantas is

on an incoming tide. This floods the channels with clear water from the open ocean, gives rays and other animals a jet stream to ride inside the barrier reef and carries divers in to the safety of the islands instead of out towards the unprotected sea. By the time we reached our drop point in Mi'l Channel, it was apparent that the tide had started to turn.

In the winter months, which is usually from December to April, mantas congregate in great numbers in Mi'l Channel to mate. During the summer, they tend to prefer Goofnuw Channel. When not mating or feeding, the mantas flock to cleaning stations in the respective channels so industrious Bluestreak Cleaner wrasse (*Labroides dimidiatus*) and other small fish can rid them of parasites in their mouths, around their gills and on their skin. It is basically the manta version of a

manicure.

Yap Divers focuses on putting their guests on rocks and dead coral around the cleaning stations, so the largest rays can glide over the divers' heads and at times, around them, during the alternating circling and cleaning process. Since the cleaning stations are relatively shallow and the divers are given IMAX-like seats, the only thing preventing extended bottom times is the amount of air the excited divers waste while acting like children being presented with a parade of gifts on Christmas morning.

We suited-up, hit the water and followed Nico and Gordon to a site called Manta Ridge. We literally had to swim through a veritable wall of big-eye jacks, or trevally (*Caranx sexfasciatus*), in order to reach the coral formation at 16.8m (55ft), which is home to all the eager beauticians that keep the



Yap



rays coming back for more. A three-meter (10ft) manta was already circling when we arrived.

Over the next hour, we observed and photographed rays gracefully gliding around us and taking turns being cleaned. This unique form of aquatic ballet was quite peaceful and certainly not the adrenaline rush one feels during a death defying stunt, like child rearing, or white-knuckling a roller-coaster. In fact, the mantas own apprehension appeared to be linked to our breathing rate and general state of calm. The more we relaxed, the closer they came.

Getting sharky with it

Hi. My name is Scott. I am a sharkaholic. I have hit most of the planet's celebrated shark dives at least once. If you want to dive with bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*), look-up Beqa Adventure Divers in Fiji. For tiger sharks (*Galeocerdo cuvier*), lemon sharks (*Negaprion brevirostris*) and Caribbean

reef sharks (*Carcharhinus perezii*), you should try a Little Bahamas Bank charter from the U.S. Cocos Island. Costa Rica and Ecuador's Darwin Island in the Galapagos Islands are your best bets for schooling scalloped hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*). Great whites (*Carcharodon carcharias*) are the featured attractions at Guadalupe Island, Mexico. And, the Southern Red Sea and Cat Island, Bahamas, are the last reliable footholds for oceanics (*Carcharhinus longimanus*).

My recommendation for grey reef sharks (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) is right here in Yap. Where Bill Acker has succeeded in marketing the mantas, he has done a poor to average job of letting us know about his sharks. Maybe Bill was trying to keep it a secret, but the proverbial cat is out of the bag now. I have never enjoyed watching or photographing grey reef sharks more than at Vertigo Reef.

Vertigo, located on the eastern side of Yap Proper, features a reef that

THIS PAGE: Grey reef sharks at Vertigo





starts as shallow coral gardens and then plunges to more than 100m (300ft). The blue water drop-off is captivating and the perfect backdrop for the shark feed. Frozen bait is placed in impact resistant crates that permit water to flow-through, but keep the bait relatively intact as sharks try to get it. The crates are then secured mid-water by ropes attached to both a buoy and rock on the bottom. The result is an irresistible enticement for the sharks to come calling and to stick around as happy divers observe them in water that is not fouled by free-for-all feeding. Once the dives are over, the divers return to the boat and the sharks are finally rewarded for their patience. It is a win-win, all-around.

Forty or more grey reefs and a

hand full of blacktip reef sharks (*Carcharhinus limbatus*) and whitetip reef sharks (*Triaenodon obesus*) greeted our arrival. Lauren knows I rarely need her services when I am dancing with sharks, so she found a nice comfortable piece of dead coral from which to watch the action. Meanwhile, I positioned my back to the crates, faced the blue and waited for the sharks to approach. Though there was a greater sense of urgency displayed by the sharks than the graceful mantas in the channels, the sharks clearly responded to human anxiety

in a similar fashion. The slower my respirations and beating heart, the more the animals focused on the bait and less on me. This meant I could take shots at point black range without my flashing strobes causing the hungry creatures undue stress.

Sex, sex, sex

As the days of our two-week stay continued to melt away, Bill and his crew entertained us with sun dappled swim-throughs at Yap Caverns, macro-gone-amuck at Slow & Easy and thrilling drift dives through the channels. And yet, these daytime adventures simply could not scratch the itch that was only satisfied when watching the passionate sex of the locals in the light of the moon.

Night after glorious night, we politely declined Bill's generous invitation to join him in the *Mnuw's* Crow's Nest for a round, or ten, of beer. He brews the libation in his own 600-liter micro-brewery in the hotel's lobby. Bill is proud of his beer and a firm believer in its "Drink, Pee, Repeat!" slogan, so it is hard to turn



THIS PAGE: Glimpses of the Manta Ray Bay Resort





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Giant feather duster worm at Lionfish Wall; Yapese dance during a Kaday village tour; Hawksbill turtle resting in Mi'l Channel

him down. Additionally, the *Mnuw*—the South Seas schooner that doubles as the hotel's restaurant and bar—offers a great view of the sunset over Tomil Harbor, so, it, too, is tough to pass-up. Still, the unbridled flirting and rampant sex that was soon to engage just a short boat ride away was too alluring for such seasoned voyeurs to stand.

Rainbow Reef was the scene of the unbridled debauchery. At dusk, we descended to the great depth of 6m (18ft) and waited for the players to show themselves. We used red filters in our Princeton Tec flashlights because our subjects, mandarinfish (*Synchiropus splendidus*)—the most exquisite fish in the sea—are leery of bright lights. In addition to the red filters, we have learned to arrive early, so we and the life around us can adjust to our pres-

ence. It took time for our eyes to get used to the dim light and even longer to finally notice the apprehensive little fish weaving through the coral, as its desire to mate started to consume it. We were learning to build patience during these dives just like a weight-lifter slowly added muscle.

When the sun finally bled into the horizon, the mandarinfish prepared for another early night on the town. Mandarinfish maintain complex social structures, as evidenced by these nightly mating rituals. Community members look for action in the same locations each 24 hours, which simply means mandarinfish have their own version of a local street corner. Males are generally larger than females and occasionally extend an elongated, pointed dorsal fin in a regal display. I suppose any male this pretty

needs to do something, anything, to advertise its prowess.

Mandarins throw caution to the wind as the courtship nears its climax. Once the female acquiesces to the male's passionate pleas for sex, these bashful, gentle creatures rise, side by side, from the top of the coral, shimmy against one another, release their respective cargos of eggs and semen, then flip their tails to scatter the combined offering before rushing back to safety. This unusual, frenetic boogie may be repeated multiple times. Each occurrence increases the possibility of offspring, but also places the fish at their most vulnerable position to predators.

Paradise Found

In the beginning—before we had met Bill or even researched the destination—

Yap was not on our bucket list of places to visit. In fact, we knew very little about the islands. While wrapping up a project for a client, my client shared details of his recent trip to Yap with me. His spontaneous testimonial on Yap started us on a path that ultimately led to underwater mandarin sex, will-work-for-food sharks, hygiene-conscious mantas and burn-your-bra shopping. Yap is not the "hand me down" offspring of Palau or the place to waste a few days at the end of a long holiday. It is an idyllic tropical paradise that is fortunately well off the beaten path. If one day you make your own pilgrimage to Yap, please remember to tell Bill we said, "Mogethin!" (hello) and be sure to look the locals in the eye when you go shopping. ■

fact file



Yap



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Both Germany and Spain claimed Yap in the mid-1870s. In 1886, Pope Leo XII settled the feud by awarding Yap and the other Caroline Islands to Spain, but granted Germany commercial rights. Spain made a tidy profit on the deal when it turned around and sold Yap and the remainder of Spanish Micronesia to Germany for US\$4.5 million 13 years later. As a result of World War I, Japan was awarded all the Pacific islands north of the Equator via the Treaty of

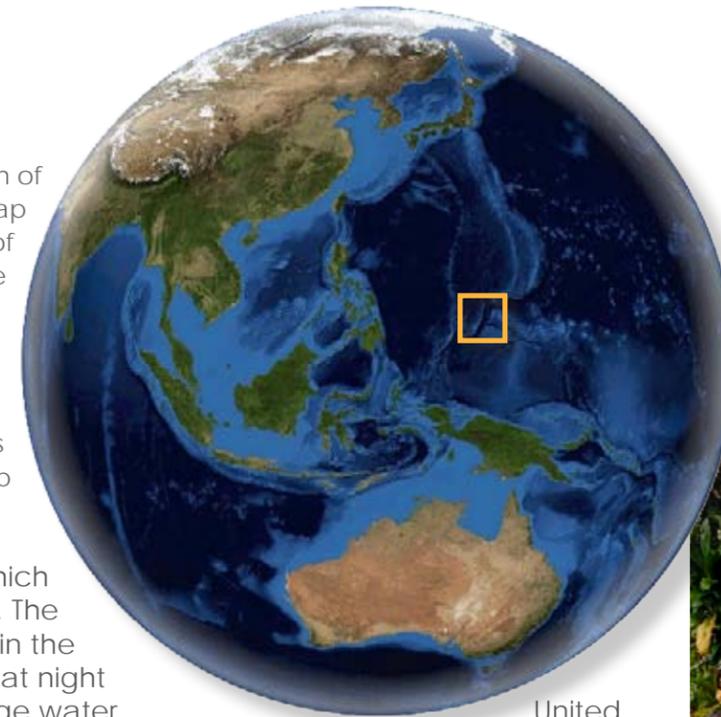
Versailles. Japan then surrendered Yap to the United States after a World War II battle in 1945. The creation of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) was ratified in 1978. The Compact of Free Association between the United States and FSM went into effect in 1986, which formalized the relationship between the two entities.

Geography Yap is a collection of 138 volcanic islands and atolls located in the Caroline Islands of the western Pacific Ocean and

slightly north of the equator. If you mark a diagonal, straight-line between Guam and Palau on map, you will find Yap. It is 853km (530mi) miles southwest of Guam and 452km (281mi) northeast of Palau. Yap Proper may seem like one continuous island when pictured on a brochure or the Web, but it actually consists of four different islands (Yap Island, Tomil-Gagil, Maap and Rumung) that loosely fit together like puzzle pieces within a barrier reef.

Climate Tropical, which means hot and humid. The average temperature in the day is 27°C (80°F) and at night 21°C (70°F). The average water temperature is 28°C (81°F). North-east trade-winds typically blow from November to April, which results in slightly less rain and humidity.

Economy According to the U.S. State Department (www.state.gov), under the terms of the Compact of Free Association, the



RIGHT: Location of Yap on global map
BELOW: Location of Yap on map of the Caroline Islands in the North Pacific
BOTTOM LEFT: Children perform traditional dances for guests of Yap

Guest stands next to one of the largest coins in the world. Stone money, or Rai, is still used in traditional weddings and land transfers on Yap

United States provided the FSM with about US\$2 billion in grants and services between 1986 and 2001. The Compact's financial terms were renegotiated for the 20-year period 2004 through 2023, with the aim of encouraging sustainable development. The United States will provide almost \$100

million in direct assistance every year until 2023, which includes the systematic reallocation of a portion of the direct aid to a jointly managed Trust Fund. Additional federal grants to the FSM total approximately \$35 million annually. Tourism and fishing play key roles in the economy.

Currency U.S. dollar

Population Approximately 11,500

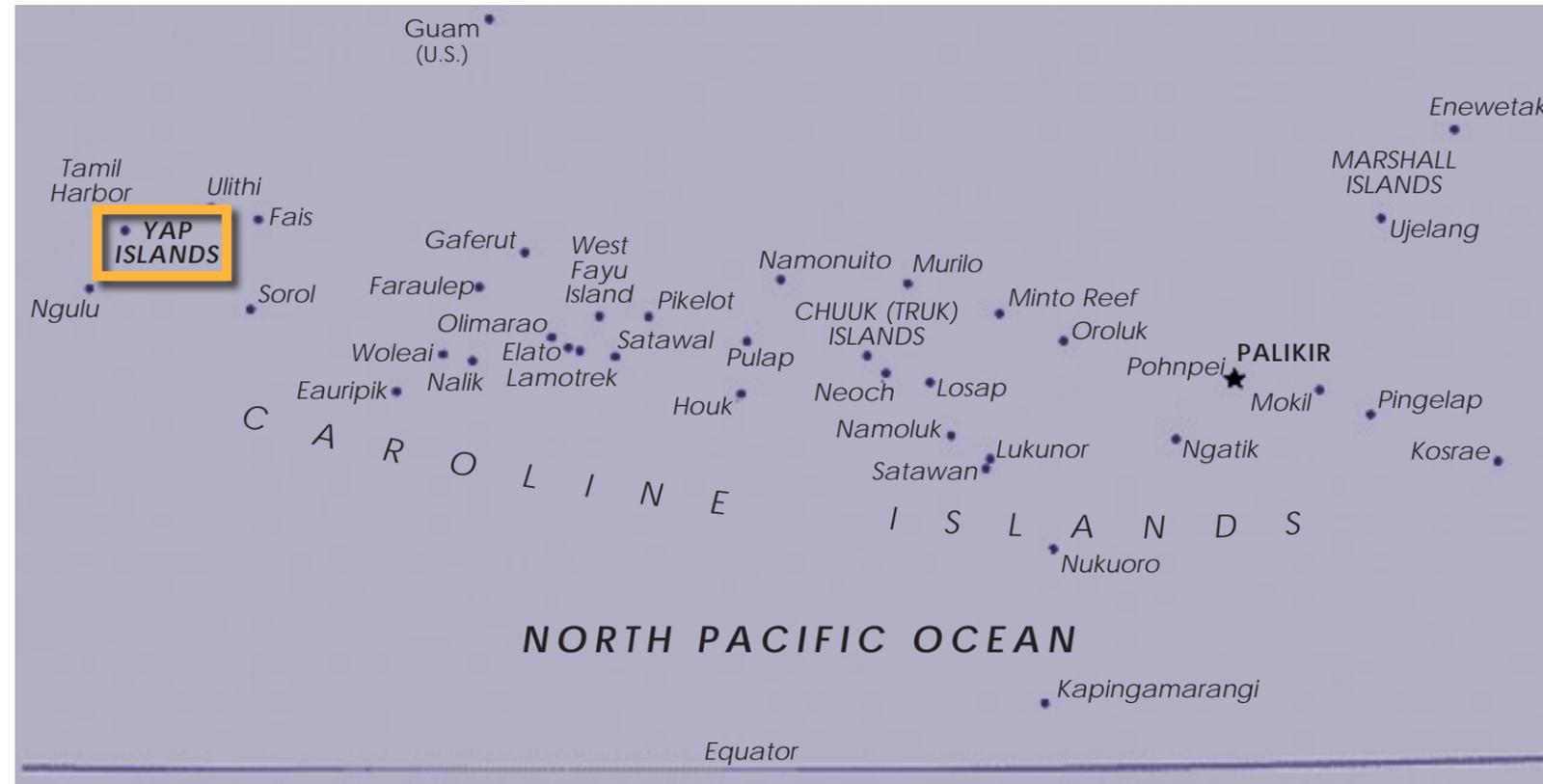
Language English is the official language of Yap State, but these four other



languages are also spoken: Yapese, Ulithian, Woleaian and Satawalese.

Hyperbaric Chambers The Yap State Health Department manages a recompression facility in Colonia Hospital. Volunteers from both the hospital and the diving community run it.

Websites
Manta Ray Bay Resort
<http://www.mantaray.com>
Yap's Visitor Bureau
<http://www.visit Yap.com>



Alone At Last Southern Belize

Text by Kelly LaClaire and photos by Kate Clark





A diver investigates a cup coral that has attracted a lion fish, a species not native to the waters of Belize (left); Sharp-nosed puffer fish; Loggerhead sea turtle heads to the surface for a breath. PREVIOUS PAGE: Divers explore the coral around Glovers Atoll

Hello. My name is Kelly and I'm a dive-aholic. I freely admit it. I'm unabashedly, totally and completely addicted to travelling the world scuba diving. I love soaking up foreign cultures and engaging in lively conversations with friendly locals. I love sampling exotic foods that make your mouth sing and your stomach angry. I love taking that first giant stride into turquoise waters and discovering what new and fascinating critters await in the depths below. Heck, I even love the long and cramped, often overbooked and under-serviced flights one has to endure to reach these remote destinations.

But there is one thing I am not a fan of—and I'm pretty sure I'm not alone here—and that is the sagging, bitter disappointment I always feel when having to share my vacation with packs of people crowding every dive site and swarming each sight-seeing destination. It's not that I'm selfish—well, okay, maybe I am just a little—and it's not that I don't want fellow travellers to have great vacations and wonderful excursions for themselves, because I really do. They deserve it just as much as anyone else.

But let's face it. Don't we all yearn to show up at a world-class dive spot hardly anyone knows exists and get to explore it all by ourselves? Haven't we all fantasized about laying a towel under a swaying palm along some deserted stretch of white sand beach and feel that blissful contentment of knowing you've got the whole place to yourself? Haven't each one of us stood in line with scores of other tourists waiting to see some natural wonder the

guide-book promised was a "three-star, sight-seeing must" wondering, "What's with all these people?"

You may be suffering under the delusion that all the great vacation destinations have already been discovered—that crowded dive sites, clogged beaches and endless lines are just a fact of life. Well, let me disabuse you of that idea here and now, loyal readers, because I have been to a place that defies even your grandest holiday wishes—Southern Belize.

Hopkins Village

Glover's Reef Atoll. As I watched the gleaming white sands of the Hopkins shoreline grow fainter, my cousin and photographer, Kate Clark, said out loud what I was already thinking, "No one's out on the beach yet—I guess they're all still in bed." She turned back around and stretched out on the large bow of our dive boat, soaking up the morning sun. It takes about an hour and 20 minutes to reach Glover's Atoll, an



Not native to Belizean waters, the lionfish is a beautiful pest rising uncontrollably in population (far left); Divers with hawksbill sea turtle on reef (left); Diver at ledge of coral with red sponges along Glover's Atoll (below)

tube sponge to get a quick look at us but quickly realized we were no threat and went back to their never ending game of chase.

A pair of spiny lobsters twitched their tentacles nervously, trying to shove themselves further back into their hiding place as Kate moved closer for a picture or two. When she got the one she wanted, she took her reg out and flashed me a big smile, shaking her thumb and pinky at me, "This is so awesome!"

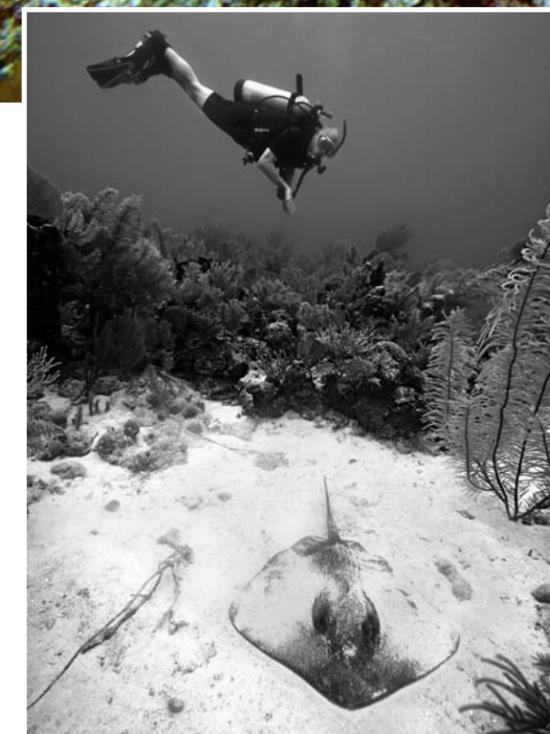
Rocky shelves and overhangs covered with red and green tube clusters dominated the seascape, and we immediately began searching for nurse sharks and morays. Neither showed themselves, but a curious hawksbill turtle came to greet us and inspected the

glass on Kate's housing before finding a spot to rest next to a glowing azure vase.

We slowly finned up a few meters and watched a pair of gray angelfish swimming in lazy, twisting loops around a group of star coral. They disturbed a sizable grouper that had his mouth open for a few tiny fish busily cleaning his teeth.

The current pushed us gently along the coral cliff for the next 20 minutes. Stoplight and butterfly fish darted in and out of craggy alcoves and a small school of barracuda eyed us with resentful suspicion.

I checked my air pressure and signalled to Kate that I needed to start ascending. She looked at her own gauge, still showing plenty of air left, and I could see no sign that she was exasperated by her time



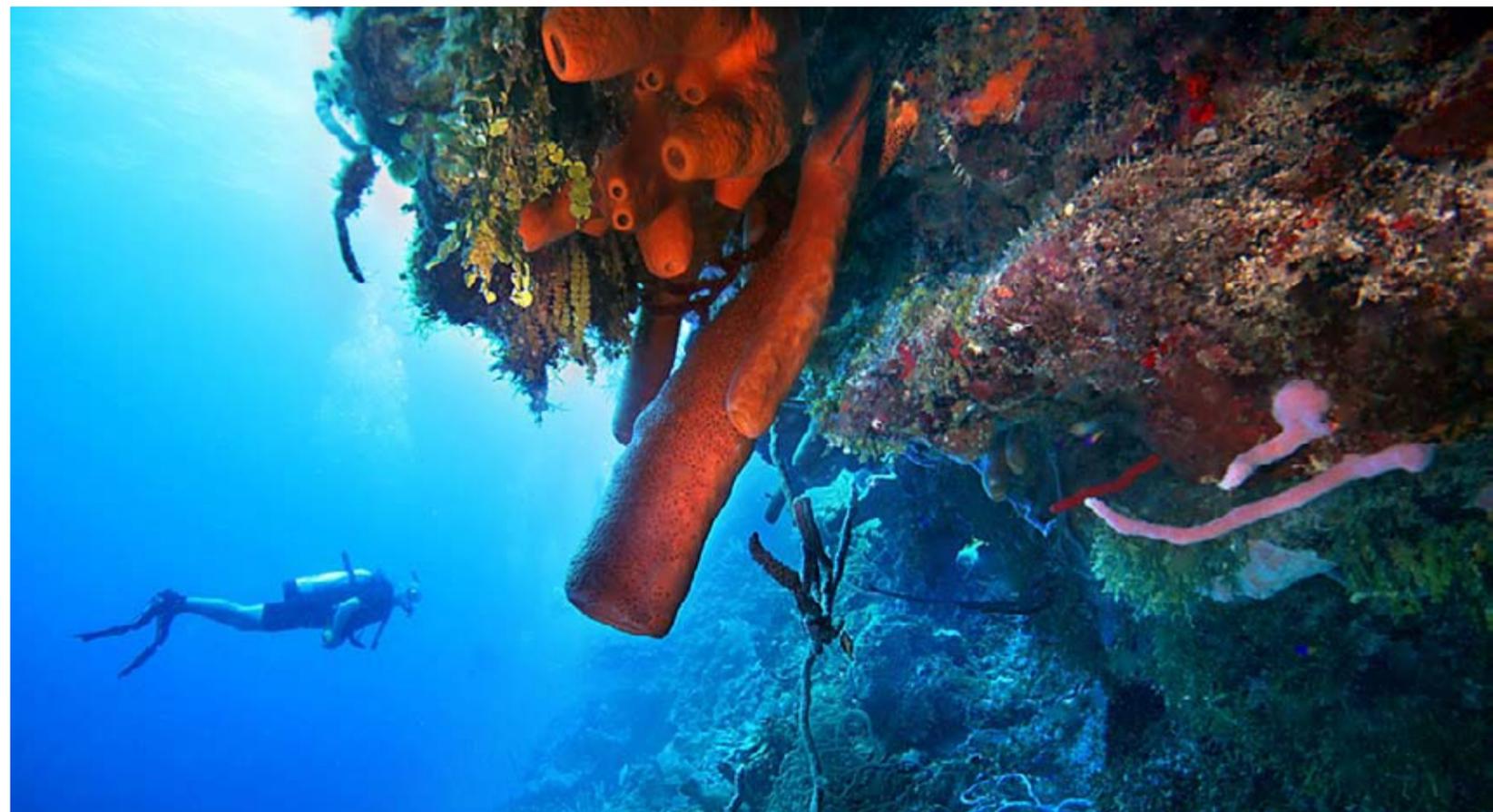
Diver and caribbean whiptail stingray at Glover's Atoll

unspoiled ring of lush islands on the world's second largest barrier reef, but we both considered this a plus. It gives you time to wake up and shake off the cobwebs of jet-lag (or the foggy-headed remains of too many drinks the night before) while getting to enjoy the gentle swells and soft breeze of the Caribbean.

When we arrived at the southwest wall—the first of three dives that day—our small group began stepping off the stern. As I awaited my turn, I scanned the flat sea, and I was surprised that we were the only boat in the area. C-Dog, one of our dive masters, had told me earlier

that Glover's was a popular site due to the pristine waters. So, I was expecting other dive operators to be bringing groups out that morning. I thought briefly that our early start was the answer, and when we popped up, I would see several boats close by.

I took a giant step off the boat relishing the warm water and remarkable visibility. We dropped swiftly, levelling off and letting the mild current push us over the giant forest of purple sea fans, elkhorn, tube sponges and wire corals. Our dive master was right; Glover's is absolutely teeming with life. A large school of black durgeons stopped circling a giant





Beautiful red fan corals branch out of the reef along Glover's Atoll (left); A small school of blue tangs graze along the coral mounds of Glover's Atoll (above)

heading towards a sprawling field of sea grass was carving long, distinct, double tracks in the sand.

After 50 minutes, it was Kate that was pointing her thumb towards the surface, and I was stunned to find I had as much air left as she did. Back on the boat, suck-

ing on Jolly Ranchers to get the salt out of our mouths, I couldn't help myself. "You're slipping in your old age, Miss Clark. Seems as if you may not be the breathing machine I always thought you were!" I went on this way for five minutes, grinning widely and feeling horribly proud of myself.

Finally, she could stand no more. "You know, I was trying to let you feel good about yourself," she said. "But now, you're just being completely obnoxious, so I'll let you in on a little secret. My computer hose was leaking like crazy the whole time, and my tank was only filled to 2600 psi. Yours was at 3300, and you still came up with the same amount of air as I did." She was standing over me at this point, and I was beginning to shrink under the onslaught. "So shut your trap, LaClaire, you're still an air hog!"

Hamanasi Dive & Adventure Resort

It was mid-afternoon as we approached the long, sparkling beach of Hopkin's village on our return from Glover's, and I was amazed to see that the white sands were still empty. I turned to Kate, "This is spring break, right? I mean, I don't have

being cut short. In fact, Kate has been forever patient with my apparent lack of lung capacity, and I owe her a debt of gratitude that she never seems to hold it against me.

We surfaced after our safety stop and I immediately looked to see if any other boats had appeared. I was pleasantly surprised to find we were still alone on the water.

Long Caye Wall. Jacques Cousteau once said that the Long Caye site at Glover's was one of his top-ten favorite dives. I would have to agree. It's an easy dive with almost no current and shallow depths, so the colors are brilliant and vivid. As with all the waters of Belize, the visibility easily extends beyond 40 meters (120 ft) so keep an eye on your depth gauge.

At the top of the great wall, dozens of sandy cut-throughs leading in and out

of towering coral heads can be explored and the site abounds with brightly colored fish, stingrays, eels, green turtles and nurse sharks.

At only 15 meters, we reached the brilliant white sand bottom and headed for the massive coral mounds marking the lip of the wall. A few divers swam through the tunnels in the rocky outcroppings while our dive master pointed out two adult spotted drums being swarmed by seven or eight tiny juveniles—their long, wispy fins fluttering. Two more hawksbill sea turtles made an appearance, and a lone hermit crab



Blue chromis and silt-pore sea rods at South Water Caye



Large hermit crabs can be found in sandy patches between reefs at Glover's Atoll



Aaaaah... cold Belikin beer

my dates wrong, do I?" She shook her head and smiled. "I love it here!"

We unloaded our gear provided by the operator—all of it high-end and in perfect condition—onto Hamanasi's long dock and walked through the scattered palms lining the beach of the carefully tended property. If you're unfamiliar with the resort, let me give you a brief introduction.

Named Belizean Hotel of the Year in 2009 and rated as one of the top ten hotels in the world by Trip Advisor, Hamanasi—meaning *almond* in traditional West African parlance—is a five-star, eco-friendly adventure lodge that has everything you could ask for. The quiet, secluded grounds are lush with native plant species, the rustic and charming tree-houses are replete with every imaginable amenity, and service takes on a whole new meaning here. Hamanasi's motto is, "Bring the guests into our home and treat them

like family. Deliver the vacation of a lifetime—no less!" It's obvious they take that credo to heart, because the staff will do absolutely anything to make you happy.

We once tested this by asking Chef Sheridan Polanco for what is arguably the world's best key-lime pie at 11pm—long after the kitchen was closed. We were brought out two plates and coffee within seconds. But it's not just the visitors who are important, the resort takes its commitment to the local population seriously, hiring exclusively native Belizeans, donating supplies to local grammar schools and providing higher education scholarships. They are fiercely protective of the environment and dedicated to responsible, sustainable tourism.

Katrina, the concierge, had our guest house made up, and after we made ourselves comfortable, she took our dinner reservations and gave us a brief tour

around the grounds. I asked her about the apparent lack of visitors and the empty beach. "It's always like that here," she replied. "It may not seem like it, but in fact the hotel is fully booked right now. Hopkins is a slow, quiet place, and that's what we love about it."

We spent the rest of the afternoon sitting by the pool, sipping cold Belikin beer and napping in the hammocks hung between the palms lining the empty beach. We had the place all to ourselves, and the only sound was the gentle surf breaking a few meters away.

South Water Caye

The next morning, before leaving for South Water, we were treated to a tasty variety of fresh fruits, newly baked pastries and Hamanasi's breakfast buffet of eggs, potatoes, bacon, coffee and juice.

The ride out to the reef was much

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The national beer of Belize, Belikin can be enjoyed at any cool spot along the Hummingbird Highway; Brightly colored and extremely inviting, the exterior of Hamanasi Resort completes the tropical relaxation of Southern Belize; Clean and comfortable beds greet travelers; Along with stellar service and impeccable accommodations, Hamanasi Resort also offers five star dining; For guests looking for a bit more privacy, Hamanasi offers several secluded Tree Houses that sit amidst the shade; Hamanasi's tree house rooms offer a shady porch for lazy afternoon naps. See: www.hamanasi.com



of banded shrimp congregating on a sponge that would make Shaquille O'Neil look positively puny and paused to get a picture. Nearby, a grumpy looking eel brandished its teeth and lashed its tail back and forth warning us to stay away.

We let the current take us along the coral face, and soon we heard Sam-I-Am wrapping his tank. He pointed out a much larger and much friendlier green moray poking his head out of his den. He was easily two meters long (6ft), and Kate and I waited for the rest of the group to get a good look before we lagged behind to take a few photos.

As I watched her preparing for the shot, I found myself marveling at the amount of skill and effort it requires to get a quality underwater image. Fighting the current, Kate had to set the shutter speed, change the light settings, manually situate her strobes and avoid scraping her knees and shins across the jagged corals below her—all this while

shorter than the previous day, but we had plenty of time for sunbathing and a few conversations with several of the people who were joining us. This is one of my favorite parts about the scuba experience—meeting interesting people who have travelled the globe in search of blue water adventure. It's always a pleasure to connect with someone from halfway across the world and compare notes on gear, dive locations, shark sightings and the fascinating similarities and differences of foreign customs.

Sam-I-am, another of our dive masters, called out the five minute warning, and we all began slipping into our wetsuits. Watching fellow divers ready themselves for upcoming dives

is wonderfully exciting for me. You get to see adults suddenly become childlike with eagerness and enthusiasm for what's to come. Life seems to pulse through them, and that contagious surge of emotion sweeps itself over the whole boat until everyone is absolutely giddy with the prospect of getting back in the water.

Jason's Wall. Our fist site, Jason's Wall, was nothing short of spectacular. Towering coral heads rise up like monoliths on the precipice of an imposing sheer face that falls more than 400 feet. We levelled off along the edge of the drop off, and a hulking Jew fish scowled at us, as we passed. Kate spotted a group



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Two French angelfish at Jason's Wall; Blue tang and branching tube sponge at Fourth Cut where life is tucked into every crevasse, such as banded coral shrimp found in the folds of a large sponge (center); Nassau grouper and azure vase at Jason's Wall



LEFT TO RIGHT: Lack of overcrowding—guests willing to hike to the upper falls in Cockscomb Basin will often be rewarded with a gorgeous private swimming hole; Seahorse at Salt Water Caye; Much of Belize is covered in porous limestone creating caves like this one and the famous Actun Tunichil Muknal cave

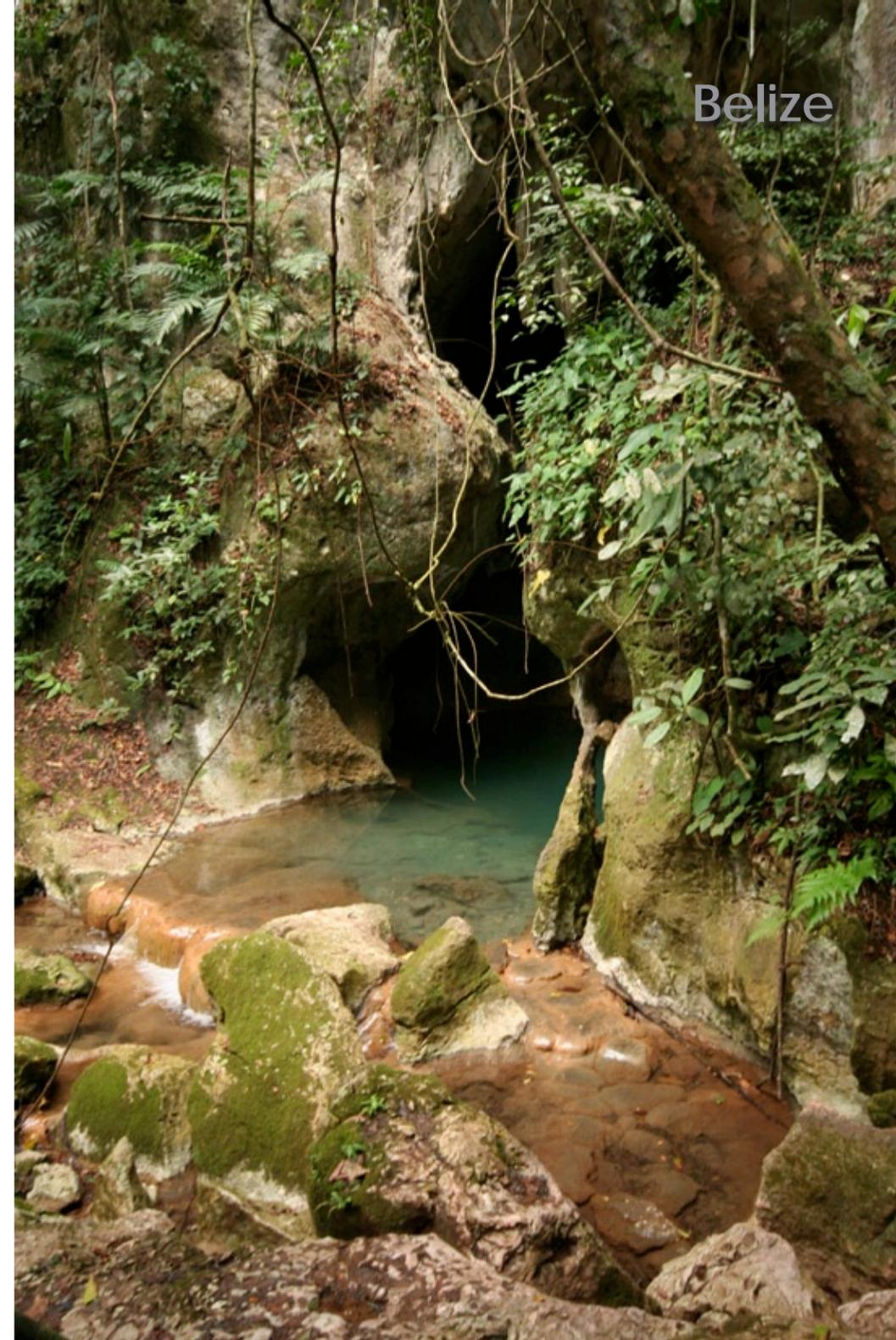
on her macro lens and checked her housing, I wandered the shoreline. There is a little resort on the island, but I only encountered one small group of college kids sunbathing and swimming. Further on, I came across a few snorkelers splashing along the reef that curls around the backside of the cayes. Other than that, the island was empty, save a catamaran bobbing up and down in the cyan waters a few meters away. I sat down, digging my toes in the warm sand and took a large, satisfied breath.

told her if she ever got that close to one of things again, I'd take her camera away.

Our surface interval took place in South Water's protected lagoon, and the crew cut up mango and watermelon for snacks. Just off the dock, Kate found an area of shallow water (only a few centimeters deep) where a small yellow stingray and three tiny black seahorses were foraging for food. While she put

Jaguars, tapirs and snakes —oh my!

Less than 30 minutes drive from Hopkins village is the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. Established in 1990 as the world's first and only jaguar reserve, the dense jungles and rugged moun-



Yellow stingray blends into the sea floor at Salt Water Caye

keeping the twisting eel focused in the frame and not scaring the chary animal back into its hole. I realized that she had her wide-angle on, and I admit, I was more than a bit nervous when, after her equipment was set and ready, she got so close to the moray that the rounded glass dome of

her housing was less than a centimeter from its open mouth.

Later, as we sat on the bow feverishly telling each other how incredible the dive was, she showed me the moray eel shot on the LCD screen of her digital camera, and I hugged her effusively in congratulations. Then I

tains of Cockscomb cover roughly 388 square kilometers (150 square miles). It is also home to the greatest density of jaguars in the world.

We arrived in mid-afternoon after a morning on the water to take a short hike and escape the heat. Kate and I were joined by two more of our cousins who had

flown in the night before.

The ranger station provided us with a map of the basin's trails, advising us to watch our steps and stay on the paths, as the rainforests of Belize are home to one of the deadliest snakes in the world—the Fer-de-Lance. If you're bitten by one, you have 30



Stewed chicken, beans n'rice with a cold Belikin is typical Belezian fare

minutes to receive the anti-venom or the neurotoxin kills you.

We said a short prayer that none of us would encounter one and set off through the tangles of the reserve. The path we chose was a rather easy hike to one of the region's many waterfalls, and en-route, we crossed paths with Belize's national animal, the Baird's tapir. He was young and small but quick, and we only got a quick glance of his small elephant-like trunk before he disappeared into the bush.

The sound of the river grew louder and louder as we continued on, and soon we came to a small waterfall that emptied into a large, clear pool surrounded by thick jungle foliage. We wasted no time jumping in.

The four of us swam under the falls

for 20 or 30 minutes before discovering a group of natural waterslides eroded into the dark black river bed that swooped down in terraced sections. Perfectly smooth and concave, each stone chute is a few meters long and spills into a larger pool below creating an idyllic natural playground, just right for an afternoon cool down.

As we towelled off and put our shoes back on, Tracy summed up the day best. "I can't believe we're the only one's here," she said. "I mean, this place is amazing and no one seems to know it exists."

Gladden Spit

—Whale shark country

Forty miles south of Hopkins, at the end of a long peninsula, flanked

Green moray eel with coral fan and blackbar soldier fish at Salt Water Cayes (left); Placencia sunset with sailboat (inset)



SO, SHOULD I RENT A CAR OR WHAT?

When visiting the Northern Islands of Belize renting a car is usually not necessary. However, if you're staying in the South, I highly recommend that you do so. I'm not saying a vehicle is absolutely vital, as most hotels have shuttles for excursions, but if you want to do some sight seeing on your own time and visit the most secluded spots, renting a car is a great choice.

- **We picked up a gas friendly 4x4** (a must if you'll be visiting Mayan ruins or nature parks) from the friendly and accommodating folks at Jabiru Car Rentals and made the trip from Belize City to Placencia in just under three hours. The drive through the lush rainforests and dense jungle covered mountains is spectacular and relaxing but there are a few things you need to be aware of when driving in Belize. Here's a short list of things to keep in mind:

- **Night driving.** Many flights coming into Belize City arrive in mid-afternoon, so chances are you'll be doing some of your driving in the

dark as you head south. This is not a big problem but I will warn you that the highways are poorly lit and road signs, while sufficient, are few and far between so keep your eyes peeled. Don't let this worry you as Jabiru gives you excellent road maps and Belizeans are super friendly and will be more than happy to give directions if take a wrong turn.

- **Speed bumps.** To cut down on speeding through the villages, the Belize Transportation Department has constructed "speed bumps" the locals call sleeping policemen along the highways, specifically at the beginning and end of each town. The term "speed bumps" is in quotes because they are really more like colossal, concrete road monsters waiting to eat your tires and chew up your suspension. Seriously . . . I'm not kidding, they're about 8-10 inches high. Each one is supposed to be coated with bright, reflective paint but only a few of them are so if you're driving at night and you see a yellow warning sign, for God's sake,

SLOW DOWN!!

- **Narrow crossings.** The highway that runs North to South is just two narrow lanes and you'll have to cross at least four or five extremely narrow bridges (one lane only) that only accommodate one car at a time. Slow down and look out for oncoming traffic before crossing.

- **Road animals.** In and around the villages, the main roads are used for all kinds of foot traffic: horses, mules, bicycles and, of course, like any Caribbean destination, stray dogs and cats. Most pedestrians are difficult to see due to the inadequate street lamps and they like to take evening strolls down the middle of the roads so keep your speed to a minimum and watch carefully.

Again, none of this should deter you from renting a car and driving in Belize. It's a small country and having a vehicle makes it much easier to see as much of its natural beauty as possible during your stay. Just use common sense and keep your speed to a reasonable pace. ■



Belize

Azure vase with tube sponges (left) and coral garden of sponges, fan coral and azure vase (far left) at Salt Water Cayes

collective bubbles would simulate the spawning of the snapper and the release of their eggs, a principle source of food for the whale sharks. If there were any of the 20-ton fish nearby, they would come to investigate.

Kate and I were beyond excited. Many divers classify a whale shark sight-

master at Seahorse, used the time to brief us on the area and how the dives would be structured. Once we reached the edge of the reef, he told



Green moray eel at South Water Cayes

by a giant lagoon on one side and the Caribbean on the other, you'll find the bright and cheerful village of Placencia.

We arrived the first day of the full moon and were there to dive for a week searching for whale sharks with Seahorse Dive Shop. Started in 1992 by town dignitary and environmental champion, Brian Young Sr., Seahorse is world famous for pioneering whale shark diving in Belize.

Kate and I showed up at the dive

shop with pastries for the crew from a local Swedish bakery. Mr. Young was preparing our boat, Deep Blue, and his oldest son, Brian Jr., helped us with our equipment. Sean Young, Brian's middle son, greeted us affectionately in unintelligible Creole slang and loaded a cooler full of Belizean stew-chicken on board. I had heard of this dish and was assured Sean was a master at preparing it.

The ride out to Gladden Spit took over an hour. Doren, resident dive

us, the boat would sail out into the deep blue where giant schools of cubera snapper came to spawn in the days following the full moon. Brian Sr. would use sonar to find the school and, once over the top of it, we would get in and hover in a tight circle above the swarming fish. Our

GROWING PAINS

Placencia, for better or worse, has been discovered by the world at large and is growing at a steady pace. Compared to other well-known vacation destinations, it is still relatively small and unspoiled by hordes of tourists, but expansion and increasing popularity has forced the peninsula's residents to make some tough decisions regarding the future.

Brian Young Sr., a tourism board member, invited us to a town hall meeting of sorts at the village's soccer field where a couple hundred locals, business owners and tourist officials debated whether or not Placencia should allow cruise ships to construct a port of call in its harbor.

The economic recession and the resultant slowdown in tourism has hit the Caribbean hard the last several years and several locals, desperate for any trade dollars, were hopeful that cruise ship passengers would bring much needed finances into the area. But the majority of attendees were fervent about preserving their natural resources and keeping companies like Carnival out of Placencia's waters.

"Our reefs are all we have and we have to stand up and defend them," said one local guide in attendance. "And even though I'm watching my fellow Belizeans struggle, we can't give in to the ruination the cruise industry will bring for a little bit of fast money."

I asked Brian, as a local business owner what he thought. His answer, like his character, was passionate and heart-felt.

"I'm not in favor of bringing in massive, tourist-filled boats like they do in Belize City," he said. "The cruise trade has been a nightmare up there, and I won't allow that to happen here. But what I would like to see are small, 100-150 passenger boats come in for short stays throughout the year. We did this in the 90's and it worked well. The village was never overrun, and the tourists hired guides for diving, fishing, inland tours and nature walks.

"It worked well, and it can work again. We just have to be careful that our reefs and our lands remain the number one priority, or my grandchildren are going to be in trouble. We can't just look at a short term solution, we need to be looking at how our decisions today will affect our country and our families for the next several hundred years. If we make the right choice now, even though it may be tough for my generation, it will help sustain future generations. And that's far more important."

Well said, Brian. The world needs more people like you in it. ■



Belize

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver hovers over sleeping nurse shark at Salt Water Cayes; Green cup coral and close-up of sleeping shark at Salt Water Cayes; Seahorse and trumpet fish at Salt Water Cayes

open ocean. You have no frame of reference, and you're totally surrounded by an endless expanse of blue stretching to infinity in every direction. We descended rapidly, trying to get below the swells and not wanting to lose the snapper.

ing as the Holy Grail of diving, and we are no exception. Once we crossed the outer reef and entered the large, heaving swells of the open ocean the boat was immediately tossed back and forth in great listing yaws. A couple snorkelers who had joined us couldn't take it and spent the rest of the afternoon vomiting over the rails. After ten minutes of searching Brian Sr. yelled out from the captain's chair, and we all jumped in as fast as possible.

Doren tapped his tank, beckoning us to follow, and off we went, down and down into the emptiness. After a few minutes of searching, Doren pointed out the silhouettes of thousands of twisting and slashing fish about 15 meters below us. We had been instructed to level off at 22 meters (70ft) and under no circumstances were we to drop below 25 (80ft)—that would only push the school down deeper and end our dive.

of fish began to ascend, and soon we were only a few meters above them.

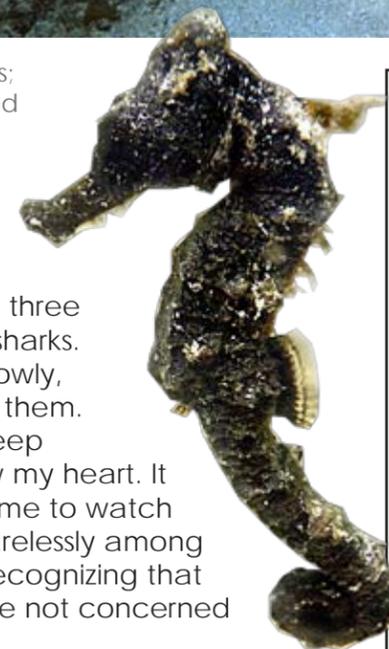
Cuberas, I realized, are big fish, easily over a meter (3ft) in length and weighing close to 25 kilos (40 lbs). We followed them for quite awhile, as they drifted along, and soon we were joined by a second school—this one made up of several hundred horse-eye jacks.

The bright silver jacks seemed fairly inquisitive and surrounded our small group of divers, circling us in a spiraling column rising towards the surface. For a moment, I forgot about the snapper, but a large shifting shadow below caught my eye, and I turned back towards the cubera.

Three bull sharks, thick and lethal, cruised through the center of the school. My heart began thudding rapidly in my chest, my breathing involuntarily quickening. I'd never seen bull sharks before, and I'm not ashamed to admit I was a bit frightened. I could feel my body galvanize with adrena-

lin, and I grabbed Kate's arm, pointing at the three fierce-looking sharks. She nodded slowly, enraptured by them. I took a few deep breaths to slow my heart. It calmed me some to watch them move carelessly among the snapper, recognizing that these bulls were not concerned with us.

After 40 minutes, Doren sig-



SEAHORSE DIVE SHOP

—Tradition and excellence

I cannot say enough about the folks at Seahorse. This family-run dive business truly takes you in and makes you feel like one of their own. They treat you to homemade meals, let you fish off the stern at sunset on the trips back home from the reefs, invite you for drinks at local eateries where Carleton and his band play reggae tunes, and best of all, these guys know where to dive.

You'll more than likely be begging for a trip out to the Blue Hole, and they will be more than happy to take you, but listen when they suggest alternative sites with even more eye-popping scenery. I won't write the names of some of these dives here, lest I spoil their secrets, but let me assure you, they can take you to a few places you won't believe. Our favorite was a cave dive safe enough for any advanced cert. carrier that will absolutely blow your mind.

Opening his doors in 1992, Brian Young pioneered not only whale shark diving in Belize (he was featured in *National Geographic* and several other major publications) but also paved the way and led the efforts to establish marine parks, marine reserves, and protected fishing grounds throughout the reef.

If you find yourself in Placencia, there really is, in this diver's opinion, no other choice than Seahorse. You won't be disappointed. Visit: www.belizescuba.com ■



Still intact ancient Mayan steale carving (above) at ruins of Nim Li Punitt found via dirt road (right)



my heart. There is something indescribable about the whole place that seems to seep into your bones and radiate through your soul. No matter what we were doing or who we were with, I found myself not wanting to

leave.

The locals are friendly, laid-back and personify the word, chill. The village itself is dominated by colorful clapboard houses, locally owned guest houses and beach side eateries, our favorites being the Tippy Tuna and the Barefoot Beach Bar. Placencia

also boasts some of the best beaches in the country, and you'll be hard pressed to find more than a handful of people on any of them.

The village is a perfect "base camp" for visiting Southern Belize as inexpensive puddle jumpers fly in and out regularly from Belize City, and now that a brand new highway has been completed, it is easier than ever to get to. We

had planned a couple of inland adventures between diving days to check out what Southern Belize had to offer and, believe me, it does not disappoint.

Our first excursion took us less than an hour away to a Mayan ruin that our guide book dismissed as "unremarkable". Factually, I think the author must have been dropped on his head as a child, or maybe he was ridiculously hung-over when he visited, because the partially reconstructed sight of Lubaantun is absolutely breathtaking. This site is easily accessible by car, and despite

the slightly smaller size, it's still very worth a visit and should not be missed.

After a short tour of the visitor's center, the four of us hiked among the towering rock structures and crumbling ruins, marveling at the complexity of the site. It was hard for me to wrap my mind around the precise mathematical symmetry used to build each structure. The amount of physical labor it took to construct the city was baffling.

We met a small group of Belizeans in sweat-soaked khakis who worked for the archeological

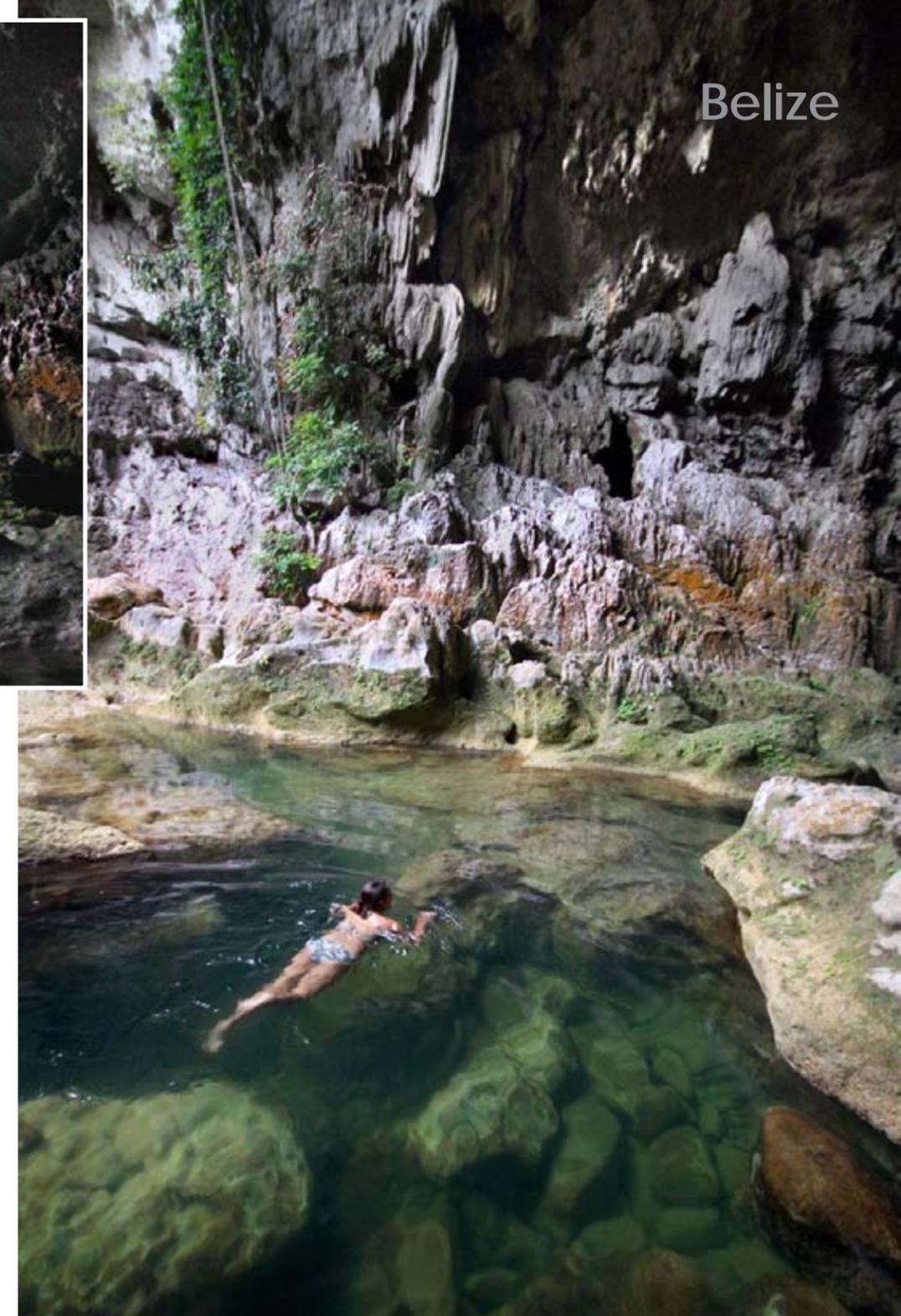
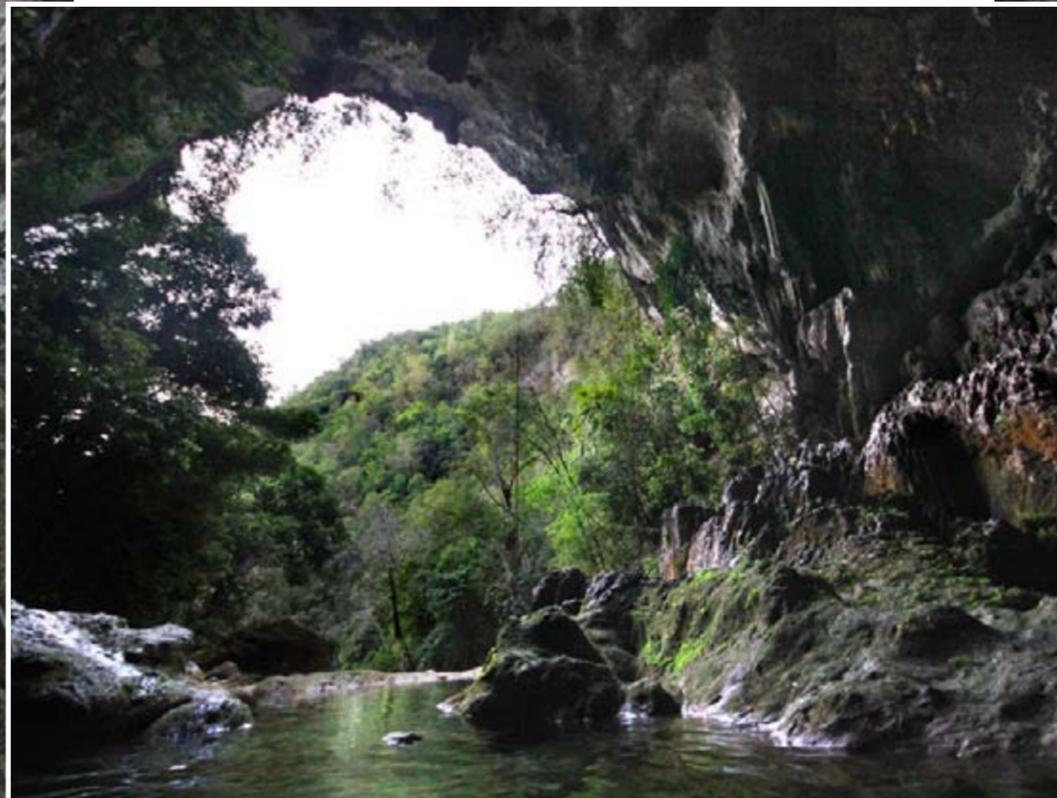
TOP TO BOTTOM: The largest, most impressive Mayan ruins in southern Belize are at Xuantunich; Ancient Mayan steps at Lubaantum's ruins; Friendly archeologists can be found roaming the ruins at Xuantunich

naled the end of the dive, and we headed up. No whale sharks today.

Placencia

—Crown Jewel of Southern Belize I'm not sure what it is exactly, but Placencia stole a piece of





LEFT TO RIGHT: Dwarfed by the size of the cave opening, writer Kelly LaClaire gazes out at the Belizian rainforest that surrounds the cooling waters of Blue Creek Cave; View looking out of the cave entrance at the dense Belizian forest; A guest enjoys a refreshing swim at the cave

society, hacking back the ever encroaching jungle with nothing more than a few machetes. They were obviously hot and tired but seemed more than happy to stop and talk with us about Mayan culture and the various architectural aspects of the site. Lubaantun, they told us, is only one of two known sites in the Mayan world where all the rocks used in construction were smoothed down to have rounded shaped edges. No one knows why this was done.

I would like to have stayed there the rest of the day, exploring the ancient city's nooks and crannies, getting lost in its history, but the sun was beginning to sink and we wanted to get to our next destination before sun-down.

As we were leaving Lubaantun, I looked back at the stone pyramids and green fields, counting the other visitors. I only saw one.

A short drive later we arrived at Blue Creek, named for the river that runs through the vil-

lage. A few ladies lined the road selling Mayan trinkets and baskets while others sat on boulders in the creek washing clothes with stones. We set off on a clearly marked trail that follows the river and weaves its way through the trees and vines for about a half mile before it ends at the mouth of a stunning six-story cave.

After we swam in the pool at the cave's entrance, we pulled out our dive lights and gave three local kids five dollars each to take us spelunking into the black depths of the giant cavern. Cave systems like these are ubiquitous in Belize and spelunking is a popular sport with locals and visitors alike.

Our adolescent tour guides told us that Blue Creek cave extends back for over six miles, and that if you go back far enough, you'll find an underground waterfall that crashes out of the ceiling of the cavern. Thirty minutes in the spooky black interior was long enough for us, and we decided to turn

back.

Outside, the sun was setting, and we got in another swim before a few swooping bats that had come out to hunt chased us out of the water and back towards our car.

Guess how many tourists we saw.

Silk Cayes

We spent three frustrating days in search of the world's largest fish, but Mother Nature is often fickle, and the whale sharks never made an appearance. Kate was getting restless. So far, she had very little opportunity to get some macro shots. So



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Happy snorkeler and loggerhead sea turtle at Silk Cayes; Trumpet fish at Silk Cayes; Caribbean whip tail stingray; Doctor fish; Brain coral and cleaner goby

the best snorkel dive of my life. Had that been our only time in the water, our entire trip would have been worth it.

On the ride back to Placencia, Carleton Young (aka "Patu")—Brian Sr.'s brother and part owner of Seahorse—handed Kate and I an ice cold Belikin and toasted our visit. He invited us to come back next spring break for a diving trip though the Cayes and down into Panama aboard a catamaran he charts called the *Wild Orchid*.

"Geeze, Carleton," I said smiling, "We'll need to think about that."

I mean, we had planned a whole rain-filled weekend of diving in the

to keep secret. As we approached, I saw an old wooden boat bobbing up and down—its crew a group of leathery-skinned free divers cleaning the day's catch. Our group slipped into the water with just our snorkel gear and were treated to the best deco stop ever. Two giant loggerheads were sparring under the bow for conch scraps, and three or four spotted eagle rays slowly circled the stern waiting for their chance. Several large sting rays fluttered along the grassy seas bed, and a blacktip reef shark, followed by three nurse sharks came to investigate the free meal of fish offal being thrown overboard. It was



freezing Puget Sound with 30 other divers and two scuba classes. It's gonna break my heart to have to give up the double 60mm wetsuit I usually shove myself into to keep my heart from stopping, just to come back here." "I guess that makes sense," he laughed, sweeping his hand towards the empty sea. "It's pretty

awful out here—and the crowds here are pretty hard to put up with." ■

Kelly LaClaire is a dive writer based in Portland, Oregon, and his cousin, Kate Clark, is an underwater photographer from the same city. They travel as a team to cover dive locations in the Americas, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

the crew at Seahorse took us out to a string of deserted islands known as the Silk Cayes where the reefs are rich and vibrant even at considerable depths. Perhaps the sea life there felt sorry for our previous days of fruitless searching because they came out in force. Turtles, eagle rays, eels, countless species of fish and a solitary reef shark all came to say hello. It was as if we brought along a diver's bucket list and got to check off nearly every item on it in one spectacular dive.

We ate homemade barbecue and fresh tuna salad under the shade of palms while watching a family of pelicans swoop and dive for fish at the island's edge. A group of three friendly and playful dolphins had come to investigate the small group of snorklers who were with us, and they were laughing about the experience while sitting in the sand.

Before we left for the day, our little boat stopped at a location I have sworn

fact file



Belize



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Belize was the site of many thriving Mayan city states until their mysterious decline at the end of the first millennium A.D. The British and Spanish fought over the land throughout the 17th and 18th centuries until it formally became the "Colony of British Honduras" in 1854. Full internal government was granted in 1964 and in June, 1963, the official name of the country was changed to Belize. Territorial disputes between the UK and Guatemala continued for years and delayed the independence of Belize until 1981. Guatemala refused to recognize the new nation until 1992 and the two countries are involved in an ongoing border dispute and military groups still patrol Belize borders near

the Guatemalan borders although no incidents have been reported for years. Tourism has become the mainstay of the Belizean economy. Current concerns include the country's heavy foreign debt burden, high unemployment, and one of the highest prevalence rates of HIV/AIDS in Central America. Government: Parliamentary Democracy. Capital: Belmopan

Geography Belize is located in Central America, bordering the Caribbean Sea, between Guatemala and Mexico. Coastline: 386km. The terrain is dominated by lush tropical rainforests and low mountains in

south. Lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0m. Highest point: Doyle's Delight 1,160 m. Note: Belize is the only country in Central America without a coastline on the North Pacific Ocean.

Climate Tropical; hot and humid. The rainy season runs from May to November and the average rainfall is 60 inches per year in the north and around 150 inches in the south. The dry season is February to May. The average temperature in Belize is 81 F. Belize has a hurricane season (June to November) and coastal flooding can occur but is not common.

One of the nicest things about Belize is the fact that all beaches are public property, so if you're walking around and find a nice shady hammock under some palms, buying a drink from the local restaurant or bar will earn you the ticket to enjoy that portion of the beach all day

RIGHT: Location of Belize on global map.

BELOW LEFT: Map of Belize

BELOW RIGHT: Belizian breakfast of black beans, eggs and fry jacks—deep-fried pieces of dough—available at the Maya Beach Restaurant in Placencia



Environmental issues

Deforestation is a concern; water pollution from inadequate sewage systems is a problem in localized areas; agricultural runoff is a factor in in-land areas. Belize is party to: Biodiversity agreements, Climate Change pact, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification treaties, Endangered Species acts, Hazardous Waste laws, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution treaties, Wetland salvation and preservation, Anti-Whaling laws.

Economy Tourism is the number one foreign exchange earner in this small economy, followed by exports of marine products, citrus, cane sugar, bananas and garments. The government's expansionary monetary and fiscal policies, initiated in September 1998, led to GDP growth averaging nearly 4% in 1999-2007. Oil discoveries in 2006 bolstered this growth. Exploration efforts have continued and production has increased a small amount. Growth slipped to 0% in 2009 and 1.5% in 2010 as a result of the

global slowdown, natural disasters, and the drop in the price of oil. With weak economic growth and a large public debt burden, fiscal spending is likely to be tight. A key government objective remains the reduction of poverty and inequality with the help of international donors. Although Belize has the second highest per capita income in Central America, the average income figure masks a huge income disparity between rich and poor. The 2010 Poverty Assessment shows that more than 4 out of 10 people live in poverty. The sizable trade deficit and heavy foreign debt burden continue to be major concerns. Natural resources: garment production, food processing, tourism, construction, oil. Agriculture: bananas, cacao, citrus, sugar, fish, shrimp and lumber.

Currency Belizean dollars (BZD). The Belizean dollar is pegged to the American dollar at 2 to 1.

Population 321,115 (July 2011) Ethnic groups: mestizo 48.7%, Creole 24.9%, Maya 10.6%, Garifuna 6.1%, other ethnic groups 9.7%. Religion: Roman Catholic

49.6%, Protestant 27% (Pentecostal 7.4%, Anglican 5.3%, Seventh-Day Adventist 5.2%, Mennonite 4.1%, Methodist 3.5%, Jehovah's Witnesses 1.5%), other religions 14% (2000 census).

Language Spanish 46%, Creole 32.9%, Mayan dialect Spanish 46%, Creole 32.9%, Mayan dialects 8.9%, English 3.9% (official), Garifuna 3.4%, German 3.3%, other languages 1.4% (2000 census).

Hyperbaric Chambers San Pedro, Ambergris Caye
Emergency: 501-226-2851
ambergriscaye.com

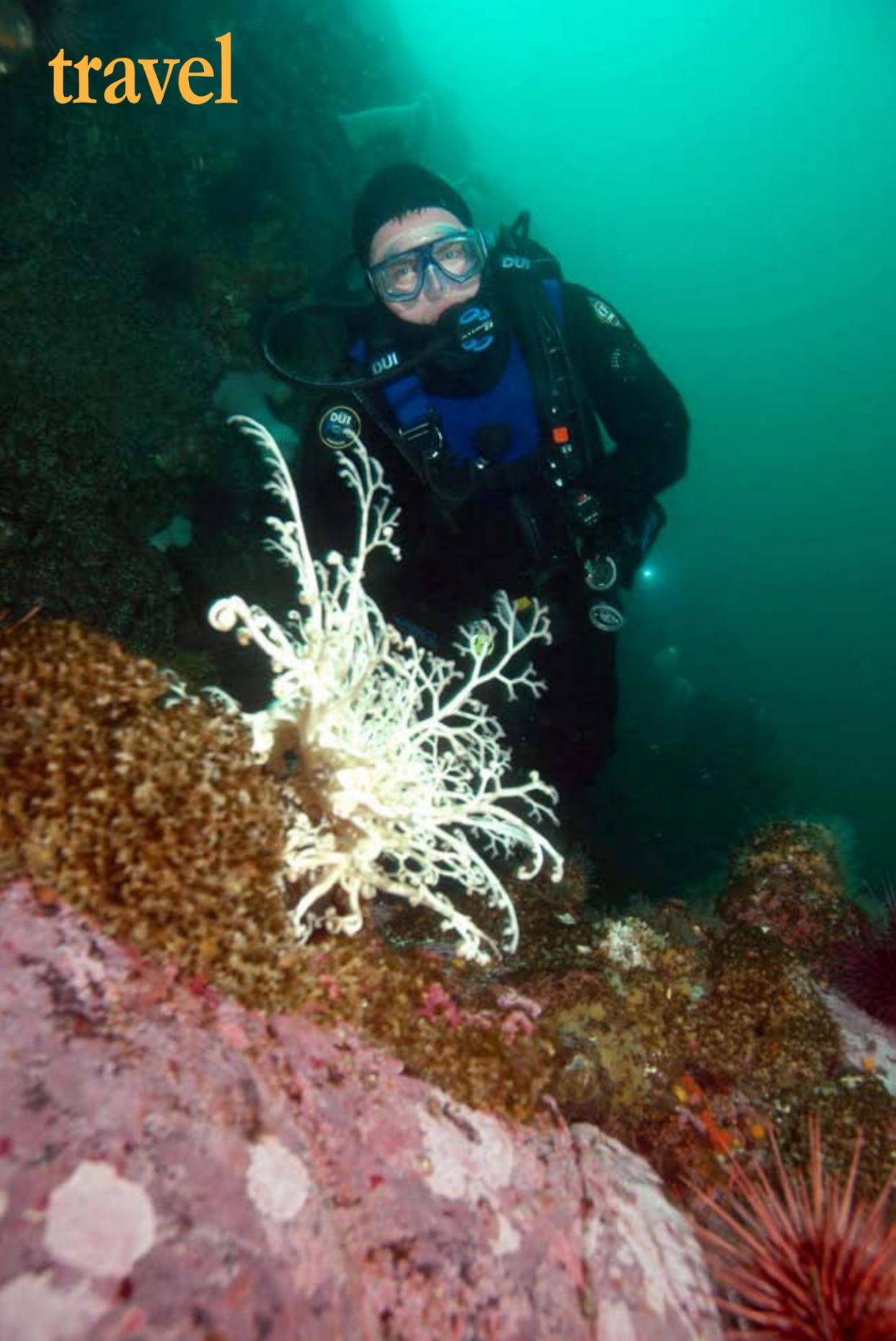
Websites
Placencia Tourism
www.placencia.com





British Columbia's
Port Hardy
aboard the Nautilus Swell

Text by Barb Roy & Wayne Grant
Photos by Barb Roy



It wasn't until Wayne and I were actually leaving Port Hardy aboard the new liveaboard dive boat, the *Nautilus Swell*, that I realized how much I missed this area of British Columbia. The beauty of a calm ocean at sunset with fresh air all around and the tranquility of stillness allowed the hustle and bustle of city life to simply melt away. Only the sounds from squawking seagulls taking flight and the chattering of bald eagles could be heard.

With the smell of dinner baking in the oven and a warm hot coco in hand, we rested against the boat's wooden rail enjoying the scenery. I was smiling because I could hear no ringing cell phones, no emergency vehicle sirens racing by and no worries to clog my brain with irrelevant particulars. A full week of escape from work is what Wayne looked forward to—especially the eating, sleeping and diving parts liveaboards seem to specialize in!

Al Spilde, a seasoned mariner for over 25 years and very familiar with this region, was our captain for the journey and predicted fair weather and good underwater visibility ahead. The rest of the crew included Chris and Belinda Miller, also longtime BC divers who have worked in

the liveaboard industry for years. And our hostess, Claire Brosser, was determined to make everyone's adventure a memorable one.

Hussar Point. Of the three dives listed for the day, our first was a checkout dive at Hussar Point, just around the corner from the world-famous Browning Wall. Now most of you might think a checkout dive would be barren and sandy, hosting little to no life with plenty of room to once again become familiar with buoyancy skills. In Port Hardy, this is not the case. Here, every site is an awesome dive, chocked full of reefs, beautiful walls and something to see at each site.

From the 38-foot aluminum dive skiff, *Inde*, we all peered down into the water

Diver and basket star at Port Hardy (above); The crew of the *Nautilus Swell* in Port Hardy (top right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver explores Browning Wall



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Inde* dive skiff at Port Hardy; Quillback rockfish at Lucan Chute; Diver shakes hands with an octopus at Browning Wall; Happy divers on the *Inde* get ready to dive

in anticipation, as Al moved closer to the wall. White and orange anemones clung to the rocks just below the surface and the schooling rockfish seemed to be in the hundreds, as they gathered in the

boat's shadow.

Although the *Swell* will accommodate 12 divers comfortably, our group had nine, but only eight were diving. Needless to say, we divided up the 12 dive stations

on *Inde* and had plenty of room for pony bottles, camera gear, video systems and so much more!

Diving

Everyone entered the water and descended into a lush forest of kelp. It was easy to follow the fronds down to the main part of the reef where everyone went in different directions. Wayne and I swam along a wall at 60 feet, admiring the colourful anemones, small darting gobies (fish) and beautiful brightly colored orange-peel nudibranchs. Wayne thought the large white basket stars were exceptionally cool to watch, as they slowly unraveled their branch-like arms in

the mild current to feed.

Continuing on, we came across a tiny juvenile Puget Sound king crab sitting on a piece of kelp which was gently flowing in the current. The little crab, about the size of a person's hand, was a photographer's delight, boasting colours of red, yellow and splashes of radiant purple.

I have always found that it is captivating experiences like this—watching basket stars open up or a tiny crab surfing the current that makes dives like this so rewarding.

Other divers in the group enjoyed grunt sculpins, red Irish Lords and crimson anemones with candy-striped shrimp using the base of the anemones for



Swell

Rockfish school (far left) at Browning Wall; Belinda (left) of *Nautilus Swell* with platefuls of yummy seafood for dinner



visit the realm of deeper dwelling residents.

The wall is located on Nigei Island in Browning Pass, north of Port Hardy. The island itself is covered by a dense forest of hearty coastal trees, which seem to almost touch the water's edge. Other parts of the wall however are solid rock, revealing a sculpted topside terrain tinted with nature's gold and brown colours.

Within ten minutes after descending, Wayne and I came across our first octopus. It wasn't very big but moved contently around and over the wall's crowded collage of life. For a while, I thought Wayne and the



Location of Port Hardy on global map (above); The *Nautilus Swell* is a 90-foot classic tug boat (left and right)



shelter. Probably the most treasured critter sighting, however, was a medium sized giant Pacific octopus out in the open. We were told it played with the divers for many minutes before moving on to other things of interest.

Back on the boat everyone shared their experiences, viewed one another's images and watched videos. After a scrumptious breakfast the next dive was Browning Wall, a dive site we were all excited about.

Wayne laughed at me when he saw my camera was in its housing and ready to go on the boat at least an hour before the dive! What can I say?

Browning Wall. As with the previous dive we saw hundreds of small rockfish next to the wall near the surface. Lengthwise, the site stretched horizontally a couple hundred feet and down to over 200 vertical feet. Unfortunately, we left the technical gear behind—although Trimix would have been wonderful on this dive, allowing us to





THIS PAGE: Picturesque Port Hardy sports some the most awesome sunsets and rainbows



octopus were playing hide and seek because he would move behind a cluster of finger sponge and the octopus seemed to sit up and look for him, then it would do the same behind pink soft corals with Wayne trying to find it.

After about 15 minutes of photographing their play, we continued along the wall, staying in the 40-70 foot range. Visibility was always around 70 feet with my computer informing me the water temperature was 47 degrees Fahrenheit.

Every day in this small slice of Canada's paradise was gratifying, yielding octopuses or wolf eels on almost every dive and plenty of whales, dolphins, sea lions and otters to see and photograph. We had the

option of doing at least three dives per day, every day and the occasional night dive.

Claire always had hot chocolate and freshly baked cookies still warm from the oven waiting for us after each dive. I can't say enough about how good the food was, which I believe is a big part of a liveaboard experience. The meals were always just prepared and varied to provide a tasty selection to meet anyone's palate.

Alex Rock. One of my favorite dives was at a remote site called Alex Rock. I would have to say the word "wow" doesn't do it justice for a description. Two playful sea lions greeted us with their large puppy-

dog faces, performing before us a dance of speed and nimble grace.

Moving down the reef's sloping side, we came across hundreds of large black rockfish intermingled with equally large yellowtails hovering in midwinter. They seemed to peer at us with their inquisitive eyes, as if we were their afternoon diversion. Perched on various rocks and outcroppings, male and female kelp greenlings and quillback rockfish watched us as well.

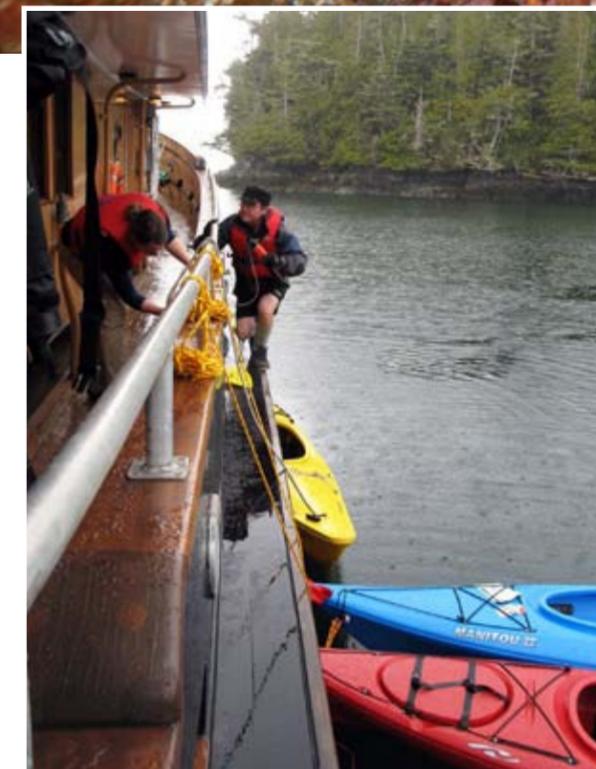
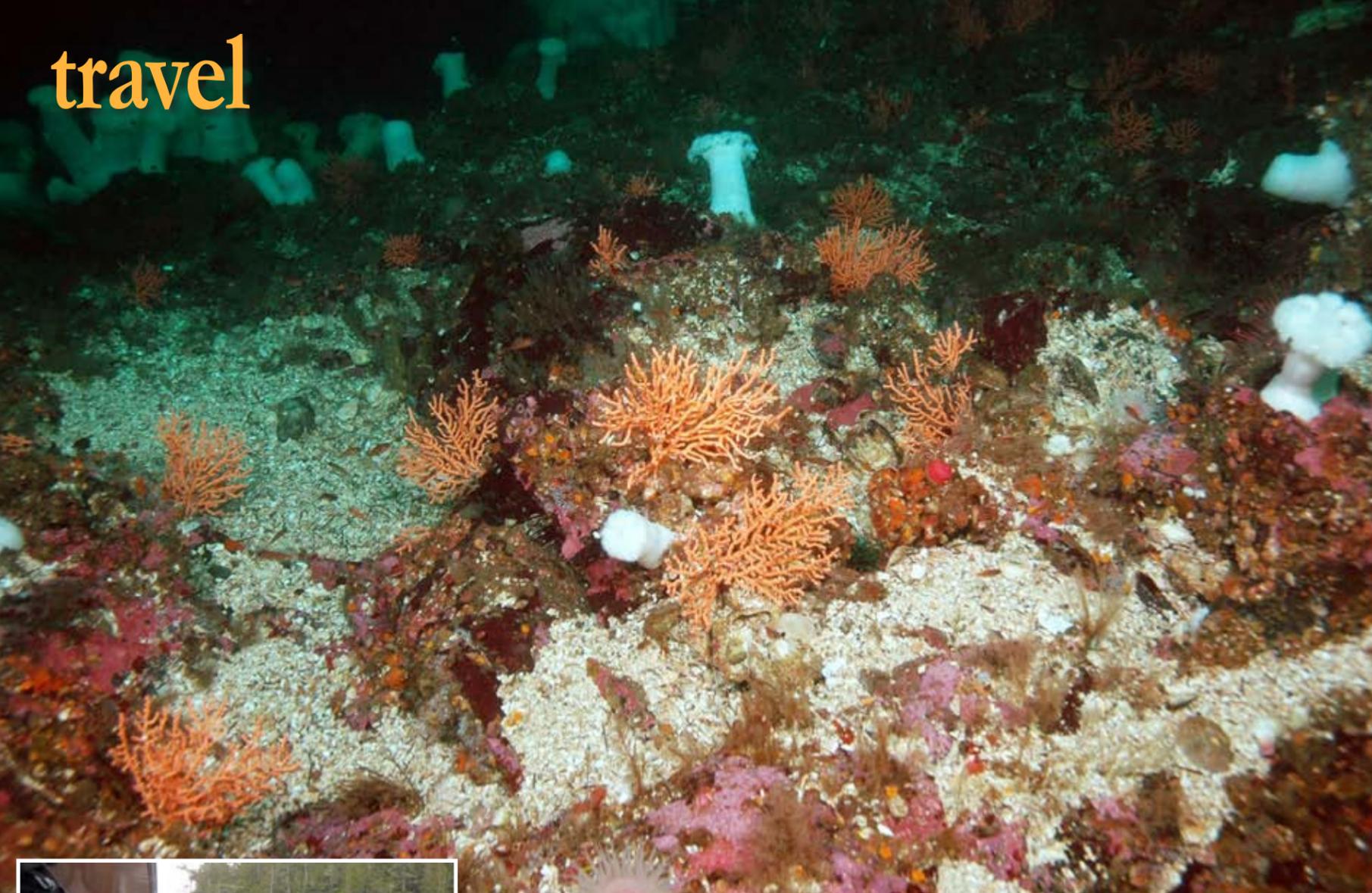
The photographers in our group with close-up lenses were happy to find pink and red soft corals, orange tunicates, large acorn barnacles, delicate hydroids and assorted shades of sea stars. Throngs of pink, white and red crimson anemones

gave the reef splashes of color. Around the lower sections of kelp stalks, smaller brooding anemones could be found, many hosting tiny clone polyps.

The highlight of the dive for Wayne and I was coming across several small pink gorgonian sea fans in 70 feet of water. A few feet deeper we found a whole field of them! We were delighted since this type of gorgonian is usually found at depths of 90 feet or greater.

In an effort to see if they followed the wall down, Wayne dropped over the ledge to deeper water, but didn't see any more. He did however see more basket stars, of all shapes and sizes.

Wayne and I ended up using a patch of kelp for our safety stop. Within it we came upon a thick layer of bull kelp resembling tall flagpoles with wide golden ribbons blowing in the wind (current). Giant kelp intertwined, creating a sheltered canopy for otters floating above and millions of small fish swimming below. I really enjoyed burying myself and camera in the fronds, uncovering one layer after another to see what lay below.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT INSET: Wayne Grant goes kayaking off the *Swell* in Port Hardy; Gorgonians at Alex Rock; The *Nautilus Swell* cruises Port Hardy; Diver exits the water onto the *Inde*

Strawberry Hill, Fantasy Island. The dives that followed were at places resembling their names like Strawberry Hill (which I was able to name!) and Fantasy Island. The Strawberry Hill site reminded me of outer west coast dives because of the underwater terrain covered in small red anemones. Above the water the huge boulders were bare from winter storms of crashing waves. At Fantasy Wayne played with wolf eels while I photographed a selection of invertebrate life!

Fish Bowl and Snowball. Fish Bowl was another site worth mentioning because in only 20 feet of water the marine life revealed within the bed of kelp at the top of the reef was like discovering a new

world. Wayne later said the site should be renamed to Salad Bowl since the kelp was so varied. The colour I guessed was partly from the fresh early spring growth.

Forming multiple small patches at the top of the reef was an almost iridescence purple and blue branching seaweed which shimmered in the early evening light. Behind it a light pink coralline algae highlighted its effects. When the kelp and algae was moved away we were thrilled to find millions of snails, chitons and limpets! Some of the lined chitons were extraordinary in their designs.

Nudibranchs were also everywhere, some with lacy circular egg casings nearby. Tiny abalone, shrimp and a few sea spiders made their home here as well.

While the other divers explored the depths we decided to remain at the top of the reef because there were plenty of things to see.

Snowball, Lucan Chute & Toy Boy Gap. At Snowball we found millions of small white anemones. Lucan Chute had huge sea lions, large Puget Sound king crabs and many more current-dwelling inhabitants than we could count. Toy Boy Gap was where I found an immense Puget Sound king crab with two small females. The trio was surrounded by yellow sponge, pink soft corals, with a shallow bed of kelp above them.

Tonight was no different than any night

so far, as we patiently waited for dinner while enjoying a glass of chilled red wine or a cold micro brew beer from the boat's selection (additional fee). Some nights 'B' has treated us to fish or chicken, but one night we devoured Prime Rib! Tonight the menu hinted of crisp fish tacos and tender beef enchiladas smothered in cheese. What a treat...

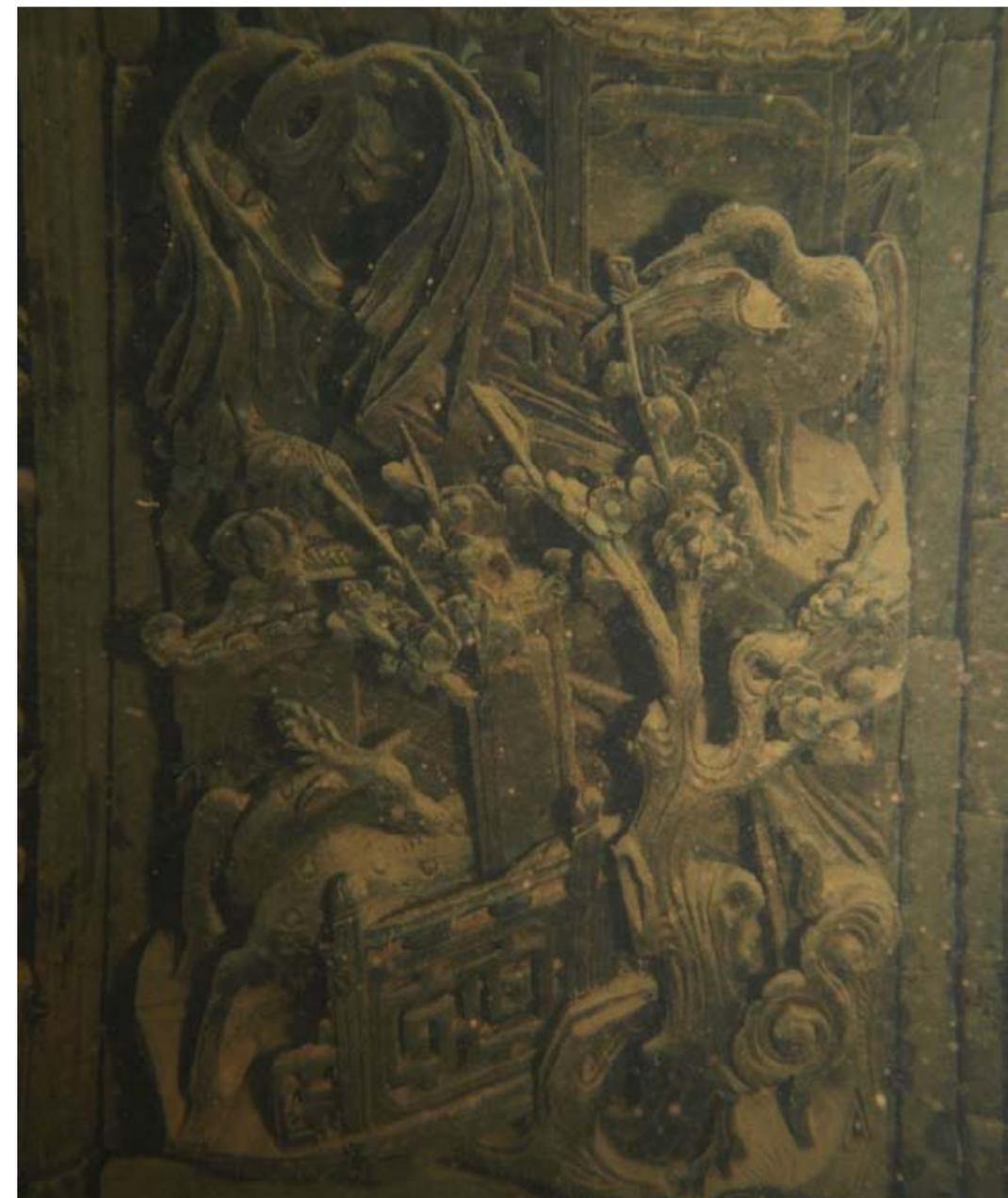
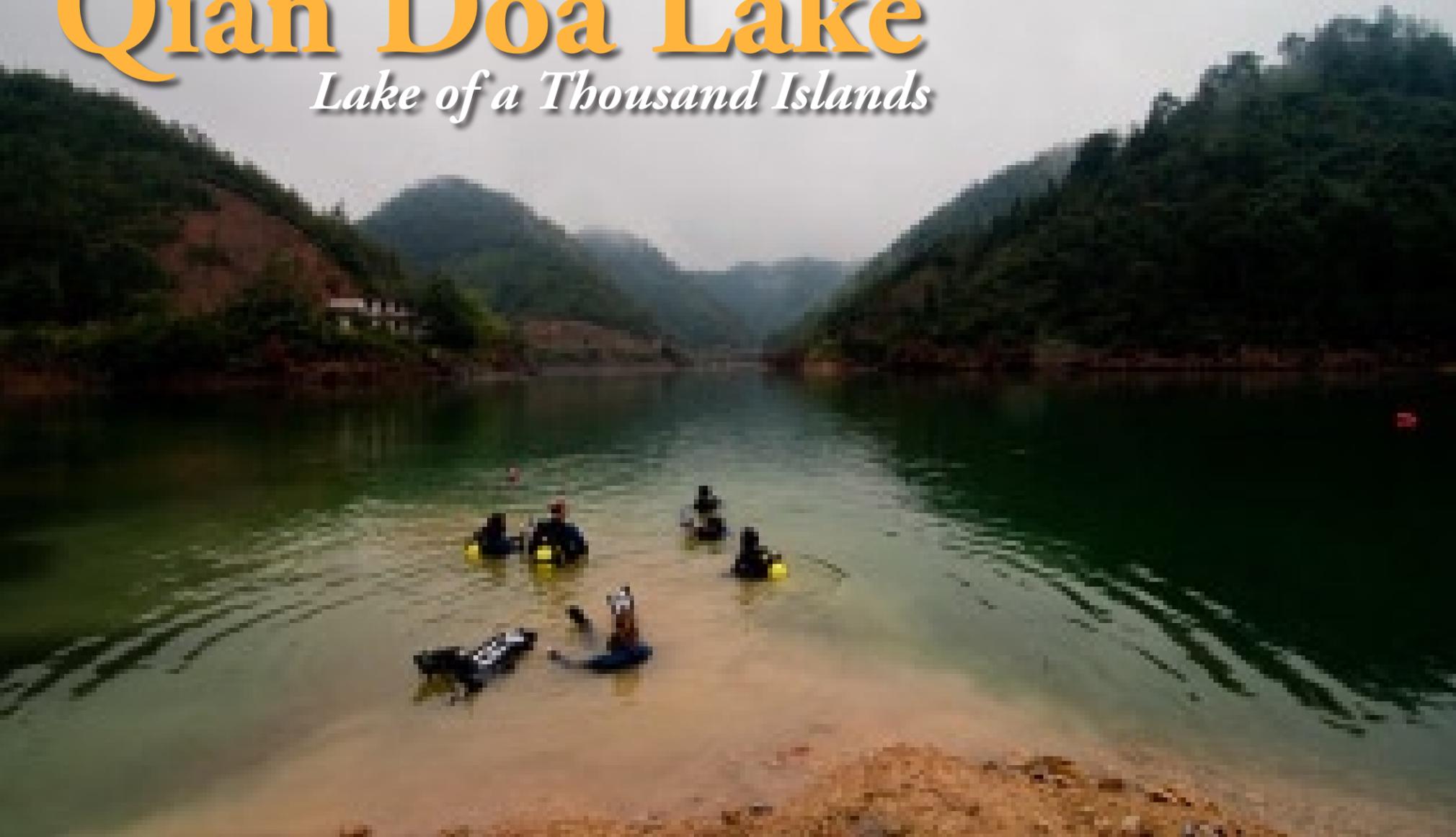
The Nautilus Swell, a refurbished 90-foot tugboat will be operating in the Port Hardy area during the Spring and Fall months, with excursions to Alaska throughout the summer. For more information contact www.nautiluswell.com or call 1-604-657-7614 for reservations. ■

Diving the Lion City

Qian Doa Lake

Lake of a Thousand Islands

Text and topside photos by Don Silcock
Underwater photos courtesy of Big Blue Diving



When I was asked to do an 18-month assignment in China in 2008, I thought the last thing I would need would be my diving and underwater photography equipment—but that was before I stumbled on the local diving community in Shanghai, where I was living.

I was quite surprised to discover that there are actually a few dive shops in Shanghai, but they seem to exist solely to train expats and take them on trips outside of China, as there is literally nowhere to dive around the city or along the nearby coastline because of the scourge of pollution.

Then I heard about Big Blue Diving, run by Leigh Chan, and their trips to Qian Dao Lake some five hours south-west of Shanghai in Zhejiang Province.

Qian Dao Lake was created in

1959 as part of the Xin Anjiang Dam and hydro power project—the lake being the reservoir for the power plant, but displacing some 290,000 people in the process. Many of these people's descendants had lived in the area since the main town, called Lion City was first established about 1,800 years ago. Lion City now lays 30-40m underwater but was found again when the main Chinese TV station, CCTV, located it with sonar as part of a project into lost ancient treasure.

A subsequent survey by professional divers found an intact wall running around the exterior of the city in a circular pattern, inside of which were many traditional Chinese buildings, many dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Big Blue had some recent photographs on their site from the exploration dives they had conducted, but they warned me that visibility could be pretty bad on the bottom and the lake itself was cold.





all non-diving related gear and head for the dive site.

From the hotel, it was a 20-minute drive to the lakeside area where we were to kit up and, for those of us who were diving on the Lion City, board the “dive boats” to take us out on the lake.

The area we were using to kit up looked like it would eventually be the driveway to a well-heeled local's weekend lakeside retreat. The dive boats were local fishing boats, who are apparently taking advantage of the laws of supply and demand, to charge very high



Undeterred, I signed up for the next trip and arranged to bring all my dry suit diving gear, plus my camera gear, back with me to Shanghai, and one Friday night in September 2008, we were off in the Big Blue bus for a weekend of adventure!

Six at night is not a great time to be trying to get out of Shanghai, and it seemed to take

hours to get onto the new freeway heading south to Hangzhou. We stopped at the last service station before we left the freeway and headed west for Qian Dao, which signalled the change from modern China, with its idiosyncratic versions of western facilities, to the “real China” (read poor, but very interesting).

We did manage a couple of

beers and a snack at the service station though, and then it was back in the bus for another couple of hours until we got to the edge of the Qian Dao National Park and our hotel for the night.

Five hours sleep later, it was up again, and after a quick local breakfast, we were back on the bus making our way to catch the ferry that would take us across

the lake and to the town nearest to the site of the submerged Lion City.

The ferry journey was quite memorable because the lake with its 1,078 large islands and couple of thousand smaller ones is really very scenic. From the ferry, we got to our one-star hotel (the best in town—seriously!) and checked in, so we could dump



City boarded the dive boats and chugged out to the dive site, guided by Leigh Chan of Big Blue Diving and his GPS. It was very peaceful out on the lake, almost serene in a sense, because apart from a large ship about a kilometer away, we were the only people out there.

When we arrived at the dive location, we were given a good briefing by Leigh and warned that the visibility may be quite bad, then it was into the water and, after a quick OK all round, we started our descent.

rates to use them because there is simply no alternative.

The rest of the weekend's participants were using the trip to Qian Dao lake to complete certification dives and exercises from the shore area.

Those of us who were diving the Lion

At ten meters, I could tell that this was going to be quite an interesting dive, as it was going dark rapidly. At about 20m, I was no longer able to see my gauges, and shortly after



my descent halted, I landed in what felt like deep and very soft silt.

At that point in time, I have to say that I was a little concerned—I appeared to have zero visibility, my buddies had disappeared during the descent, I was a very long way from any possible support and I was wondering how to explain all this to my wife, should I ever see her again.

I managed to turn the light on one of my strobes, and by manoeuvring the strobe right next to my face and holding my gauges very close to my mask, I was able to see that I was at 28m depth. My immediate thoughts were not entirely

positive, but I thought follow the rules and wait for a minute or two to see if my buddies find me.

What I should have done, given the fact that I had brought my underwater camera gear all the way from Australia to photograph Qian Dao Lake, was take a photograph—but at that point in time, my self-preservation instinct had overcome any creative impulse!

But let me recreate the scene with the following "artist's impression": I subsequently returned safely to the surface and did another two dives that day, the second being a complete replication of the first but without the camera, and the



third, a kind of navigation exercise following a bearing Leigh provided to get us at the Lion City. I was diving that time with a nice lady from Canada who suggested we hold hands on the way down to avoid the inevitable separation.

On arrival back down on the lake bottom, we commenced the

navigation exercise—which was not easy in almost zero visibility—and after about five minutes of following the bearing we literally bumped into a brick wall. Carefully moving sideways down the wall, we found a corner and carried onwards on the bearing, only to suddenly realise that we may well be inside a building!

other obstruction.

Within 5m, we knew that our path to the surface was clear, and to great relief, made a controlled ascent and safety stop at 5m before getting back to the boat in general agreement that the diving was over for the day and for me—well that was it for the whole weekend, as I saw no

enjoyment in doing it again. On the boat on the way to back to shore, it became obvious why the underwater visibility was so bad. The fishermen explained that the large boat in the distance was actually a dredger—no wonder it was zero visibility on the bottom!

While the diving part of the weekend trip to Qian Dao Lake was memorable for its challenging nature, it was not the most enjoyable set of dives I have ever done. However, the evening spent at the hotel and the drive and ferry trip back to Shanghai

were quite remarkable. It was late afternoon by the time we left the lake on the Saturday, and it was starting to go dark. As we drove back to the hotel, we noticed that there were no lights on in town, and when we did get to the hotel, it was without a single light on. Apparently, power cuts are quite common in this area, as there is an overall power deficit, so the lights are turned off in the remote locations to allow them to stay on in the large cities of Shanghai and Hangzhou.

However, my thoughts were

more on how we would get dinner if there was no power?

It turned out that the hotel kitchen staff were able to produce an excellent multiple course meal by candle light using charcoal braziers to cook the food. The only negative being that the beer was warmish, but after a couple of them, it did not seem to matter too much!

Altogether the trip to Qian Dao rates as one of my most unusual ones ever, and yes, I would go again, but I would want to know if that dredger was still operating on the lake first. ■