

# Costa Brava *Spain*

Text by Larry Cohen. Photos by Larry Cohen, Olga Torrey, Martine Desitter



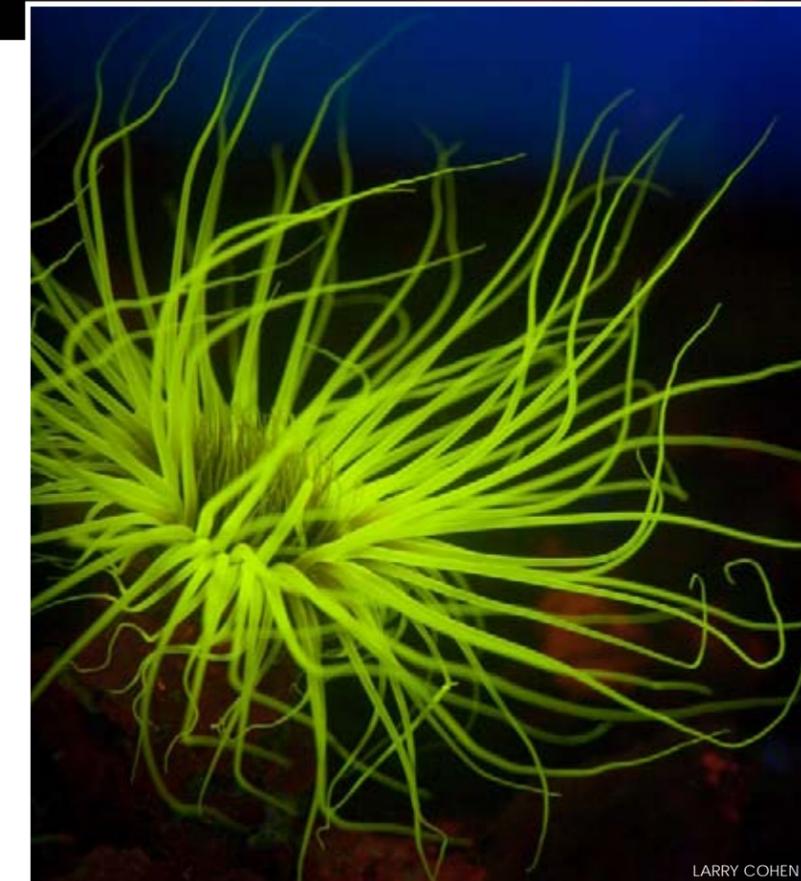


LARRY COHEN

Fluorescent leopard slug, *Peltodoris atromaculata*; Port Lligat (right); Red starfish (lower right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Dive master Saara-Kaira Takala with Mediterranean gorgonian, *Paramuricea clavata*



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Fluorescent tube anemone, *Cerianthus membranaceus*

When people from the United States go on a European vacation, diving is usually not on the agenda. But the Costa Brava area on the northeastern coast of Spain offers some interesting diving. It might not be as colorful as the Red Sea or Indonesia, but add on the cultural experience, and it is worth a visit. Divers from France, Belgium, Switzerland, Netherlands and the rest of Europe have been coming here for years. This is the journey of two divers from New York City, as they explore Spain's sites and culture above and below the water.

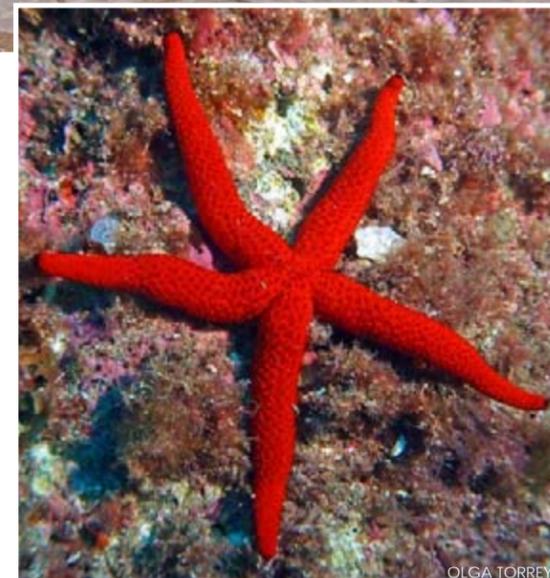
### Barcelona

Barcelona is about a two-hour drive from Costa Brava. On a trip from the United States this a great place to start. Barcelona offers world-class museums, cuisine and beaches. It is also a party town with plenty of clubs, and bars. Just strolling along the streets from neighborhood to neighborhood is an adventure. People watching, viewing the architecture and visiting the cafés is very compelling. Arriving from New York City on the red-eye, the time difference does take its toll. Arriving in Barcelona mid-morning, the local custom of a siesta seemed appropriate before hitting the streets.

An evening walk in the Gothic

Quarter was the perfect start for our exploration of the city. The narrow streets have an abundance of restaurants and bars located in ancient Roman style buildings. Las Ramblas is one of the wider streets in the area. It is primarily a pedestrian walk with only two narrow one-way traffic roads on both sides of the central area. This gives the boulevard a street fair ambiance 24 hours a day.

Having only one full day in Barcelona, we decided to concentrate on the architecture of Antoni Gaudí. Gaudí was born in 1852 and died in 1926. He was part of the Catalan Modernista (Modernism) movement. This widescale movement reached



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its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries across all of the arts. Gaudí's work transcended mainstream Modernism, having an organic style inspired by nature.





Gaudí rarely drew detailed plans of his works; he would create three-dimensional scale models while he was conceiving the ideas. A Gaudí building is so unique, even people who know nothing about architecture or Gaudí will intuitively be able to identify one. For this reason, UNESCO recognized his buildings as World Heritage sites in 1984.

La Pedrera is one of Gaudí's main residential buildings and is extremely imaginative. It is located at Passeig de Gràcia 92. This

structure is more a sculpture than a building. It was built during the years 1905–1910, being considered officially completed in 1912. The roof is unusual; its architectural and sculptural elements can be seen from the street. Ventilation shafts and chimneys are decorated with broken fragments of tile. The stone railings around the perimeter follow the shape of the façade. You could tell Gaudí was fond of a harmonious solution between the curves of the façade and roof.

Casa Batlló is the total restoration in 1904 of an old conventional house built in 1877. The building is located at Passeig de Gràcia 43. Gaudí replaced the original facade with a new composition of stone and glass. He redesigned the external walls to give them a wavy shape, which was then plastered with lime mortar and covered with fragments of colored glass and ceramic discs. The balcony railings are in the shape of a mask. The building was highly criticized during construction for its radical design. But in 1906, the Barcelona City Council deemed it one of the three best buildings of the year.

La Sagrada Família is located at Carrer de Mallorca 401 in the centre of Barcelona. It has become one of the most universal symbols of the city. Construction on the church began in 1882 by the diocesan

architect Francisco de Paula del Villar. At the end of 1883, Gaudí was commissioned to carry on the work. He did not abandon this project until his death. The church presents a great depiction of the relationship between man, nature and religion through its architecture and façade sculptures. Construction on the church is still taking place today. It is anticipated the church will be completed in 2026. This will be the centennial of Gaudí's death.

When walking around Barcelona, you see signs everywhere of the Catalan independence movement. What is now the northern region of Spain was part of Catalonia since the Middle Ages. The people of this area have their own culture and language. With unemployment in Spain at an all time high, many people believe the area would be better off as an independent state. A flag with red and yellow stripes and a white star inside a triangle symbolizes the movement. This flag can be seen hanging on many balconies along the streets of Barcelona.



THIS PAGE: Scenes from Barcelona; Buildings by the great architect Antoni Gaudí can be found throughout the city, including La Pedrera, Casa Batlló, Casa Milà (top right) and Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Família (top left) still in progress

Streets of Barcelona are lined with scooters and Vespas

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## The drive

Getting around Europe by train is supposed to be very easy. But to get to Hotel Cala Joncols in Rosas would have required a train to Figueres, a bus to Rosas, and then a pick up with the hotel's car. We decided that renting a car would be a more practical way to go, considering the cases and cases of equipment.

Prior to departure, we arranged to rent a Peugeot Partner, which is a small van. We went with Sixt, a popular rental company in Europe that now has a few locations in the United States. We picked the Hilton



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Hotel at Diagonal Mar, since it looked like it had easy access outside the city. The car rental agent spoke fluent English and gave us directions on how to exit Barcelona and get to Rosas. Once I remembered how to drive a manual transmission car, the drive went rather smoothly.

## Figueres

Upon leaving the main highway, we decided to take a detour to the town of Figueres. This town has a compact historic area that has the ambiance of the Gothic Quarter of Barcelona but on a much smaller scale. The town was established during the 10th century, according to the records from the Sant Pere Monastery. The Sant Pere church is still at this location. The name *Figueres* means fig trees, which are abundant in the area. It is the last major town before crossing the border into France.

The main attraction here is the Dalí Theatre-Museum, of course

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featuring the work of Salvador Dalí. This is the largest surrealist object collection in the world. The museum is located on the site of the former Municipal Theatre—a 19th century building that was destroyed at the end of the Spanish Civil War.

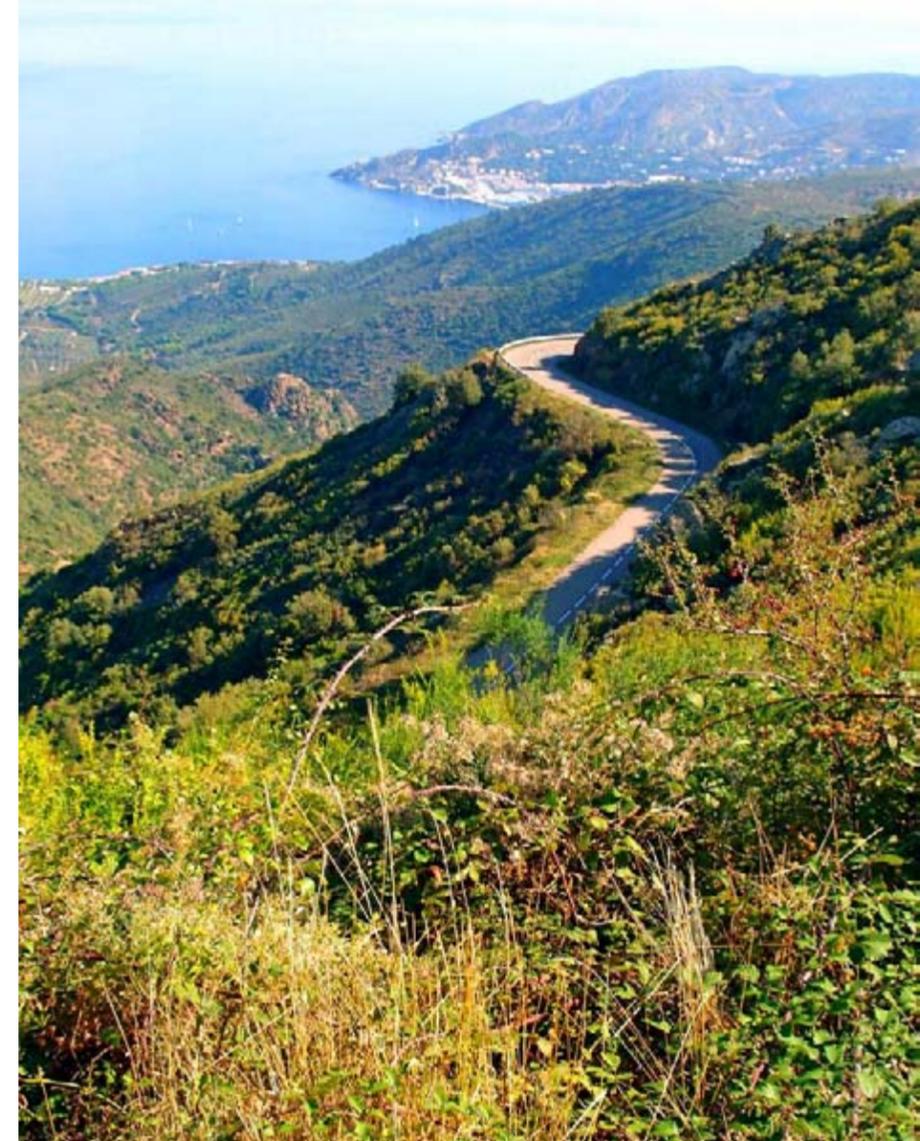
Dalí purchased the old theatre and created his own museum in the town where he was born. Showing up at the museum on a Monday, it was closed, but the building itself and the surrounding sculptures were certainly worth the visit.

## Getting there is half the fun

After leaving Figueres, we did get lost going to Rosas. The road between Figueres and Rosas had a number of roundabouts.

There were signs, and then they would just disappear, so we did not know in which direction to head. After getting directions from someone who hardly spoke English, we managed to arrive at the marina in Rosas. Here, we found someone who spoke fluent English, and we asked for directions to Hotel Cala Joncols.

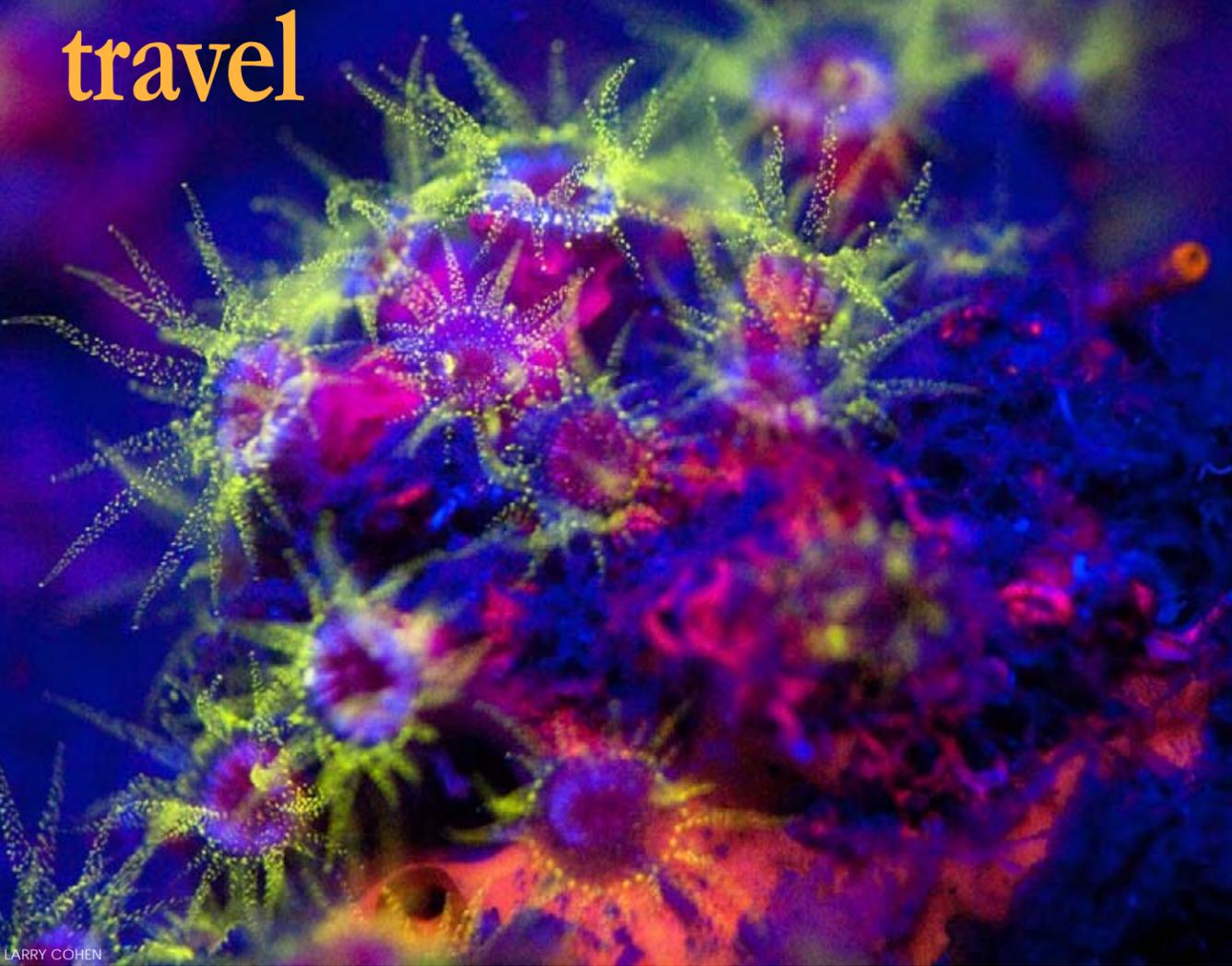
They directed us to a road up a steep hill. This two-way road was narrower than most one-way roads on the U.S. east coast. The road also overlooked a



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LEFT TO RIGHT: Hotel Cala Joncols, nestled on a hillside; Fluorescent sunset cup coral, *Leptopsammia pruvoti*; Female blenny, *Tripterygion*, and bigscale scorpionfish, *Scorpaena scrofa*; Diver Martine Desitter enters swim-through at La Caverna

fright factor, it was a picturesque ride. Most of it was through the Cap De Creus National Park. This is the most easterly point of Spain where you see the last glimpse of the Pyrenees before they plunge into the Mediterranean Sea. Part of the park is underwater, but it is also known for bird migration. Kites, eagles and honey buzzard are just a few of

the bird species that migrate past the park. Bonelli's eagles and sea birds including Cory's, balearic and yelkouan shearwaters call the park home.

Finally arriving at the hotel, we were so happy to get out of the car. When we commented on the experience, a hotel

staff member asked jokingly, "So, you don't like Spanish super highways?"

### Hotel Cala Joncols

Besides diving, the theme of this hotel is *adventure*. Kayaking, hiking and mountain biking are some of the other activities. When there is a full moon, you can do a night kayak tour, which includes a guide and a bottle of cava (sparkling wine). This out-of-the-way establishment has 33 rooms, and many of the guests come back every year. The hotel is only open from April to October.

The place has a fascinating history. Jose Gomez and his wife, Maria Fernandez, came to Rosas in 1969. Jose worked as a gardener for the hotel's Italian owners. In 1970, Jose and Maria rented the hotel from the owners and ended up purchasing it in 1995. Their two sons, Michael and Manuel Gomez Fernandez, now run the hotel.

They also run a water taxi to Port Lligat. This is the village where Salvador Dali lived. Port Lligat has been represented in several of Dali's paintings, such as *The Madonna of Port Lligat*, *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)*, and *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*.

With all the outdoor activity, food is very important, and Cala Joncols does not disappoint. All the Spanish and Catalan food is very local. The family owns its own 21-foot fishing boat, which provides the seafood for the hotel. The olive trees on premises produce 3,000 kilos of olives a year, which are used to produce olive oil for the hotel.

### Diving

Euro-Divers has been running the five star PADI facility at Cala Joncols since 2003, but the dive operation has existed for 20 years. Euro-Divers also has operations



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Delicious meals and stunning views greet guests at Hotel Cala Joncols



LEFT TO RIGHT: Common octopus in sand of house reef in front of Hotel Cala Joncols; Anemone, *Alicia mirabilis*, closed up, opens at night; Shark egg case of nursehound, *Scyliorhinus stellaris* (inset right)



in Croatia, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Maldives, Mauritius, Oman and Thailand. The international staff in Spain is led by the husband and wife team of Jan Boelen and Martine Desitter from Belgium. Etienne Zind from France is the dive center manager. Dive masters include Mauro Valverde from Uruguay, Saara-Kaira Takala from Finland, and Dennis Rabbeling from the Netherlands. Dennis is also the resident photographer.

Euro-Divers' season runs from April to October, but many locals dive all year round. Water temperature is 55°F (13°C) in the winter and can get as warm as 73°F (23°C) in the summer. Besides the staff, guest instructors come in to teach specialties including rebreather, side-mount, photography and marine biology. They also run an IDC (instructor development course) course. Michael and Manuel Gomez Fernandez own the 60-foot dive boat, and

they rent it to Euro-Divers. The boat with two diesel engines features an hydraulic lift instead of a dive ladder. Diving with double tanks and photo gear, this setup is a pleasure.

### Safety

Safety is a major concern for the diving and other adventure activities. Euro-Divers does not allow decompression diving and limits run times to one hour. In Spain, the law states that you cannot dive deeper than 130ft (40m). In case there is a problem, Martine is a trained EMT (emergency medical technician). The hotel is secluded, but from June to September, there is a Red Cross station just 20 minutes away. In Rosas, there is a small hospital and a large one in Collado de Fenés. There are recompression chambers in both Palamós, Spain, and Perpignan, France. Both of these locations are about 43.5 miles (70km) away.

### Diving the beach

The beach right next to the hotel is full of tiny creatures. This is far from a pretty dive site. Mostly gray with plenty of silt, it is the Spanish version of muck diving. Diving in less than 20ft (6m) of water, one can encounter tiny scorpionfish, octopus and squids. The trained eye can spot a number of different species of seahorses. We spotted a small goby, which was being very aggressive. Upon later examination of the photos, we saw that the tiny creature was protecting a nest with eggs.

It also pays to check under the silt. Our eagle-eyed guide Dennis spotted an outline



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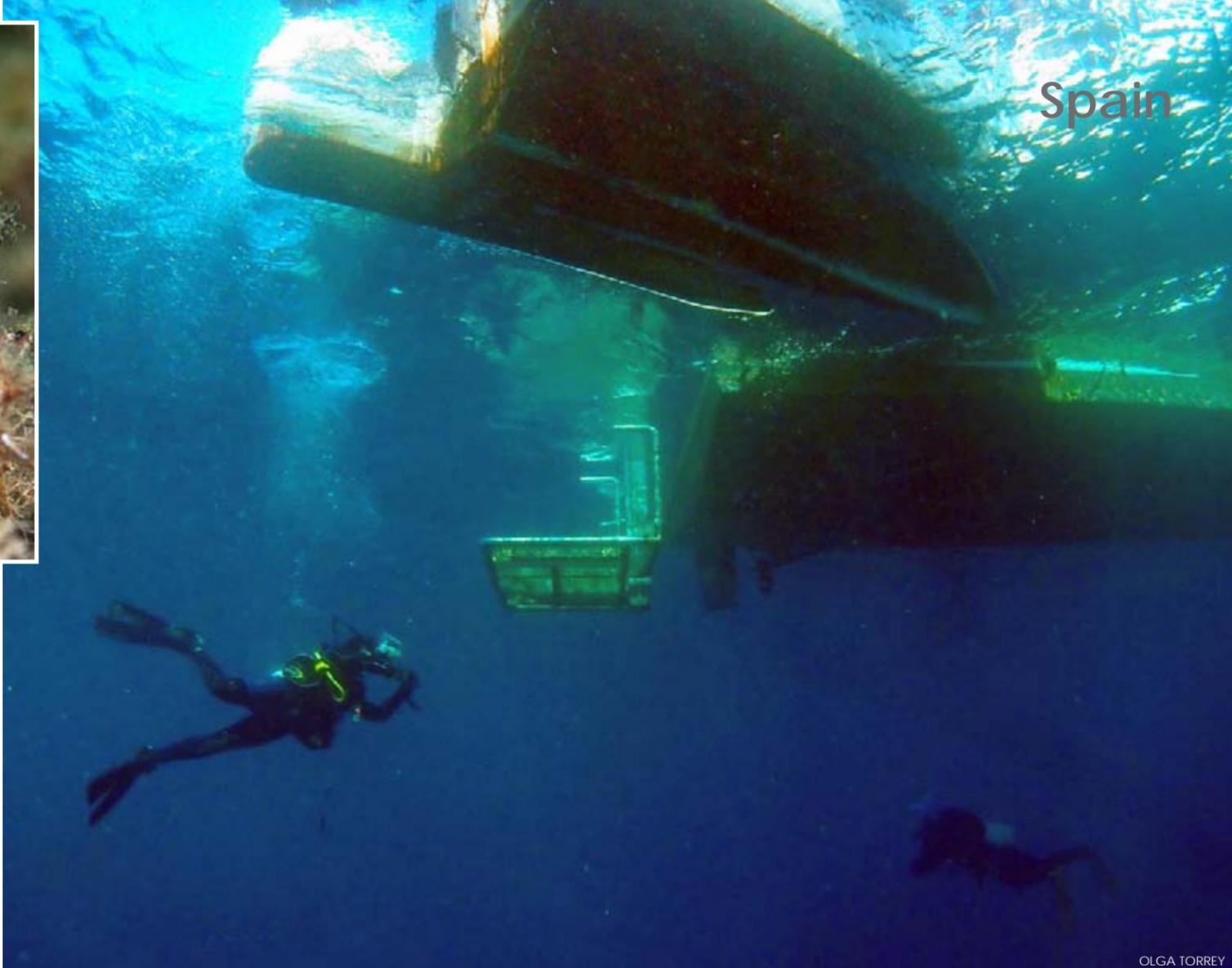
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LEFT TO RIGHT: Yellow sponge, *Clathrina clathrus*; Long-snouted seahorse; Hydraulic lift on dive boat provides easy access



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it does appear that over-fishing has taken its toll. There really is not a large number of fish compared to other dive locations. But the dives are still worth doing.

There are many smaller creatures including an assortment of nudibranchs. Most of these tiny animals can be seen swaying in the current on a colorful gorgonian. But we also saw one the size of a dinner plate. Octopus, moray eels and seahorses can also be observed on these dives. There is a small shipwreck at El Bisbal. Here, we saw a spotted stingray.

### Fluorescent diving

Fluorescence is the absorption of one wavelength of light and the re-emission of another different wavelength of light. A fluorescent object under white light reveals the object's true color. Under ultraviolet (UV) light, the object absorbs the blue and re-emits a glowing fluorescent color. This is different than phosphorescence, or bioluminescence. Marine life that fluoresces has the ability to convert one color into an entirely different color. Scientists are not

sure why marine life produce fluorescence. Some believe marine life fluorescence is a way for them to express themselves, similar to our moods. In any case, it is a unique way to observe the underwater world.

The way this works is you have a special orange filter taped into your dive mask. You then use a special ultraviolet LED dive light. In order to see the fluorescence, we have to remove all the white light. So, these dives should be done at night or in one of the small caves.

In order to do photography, we taped the special orange gel onto our lenses. We then mounted the special ultraviolet LED dive lights to our strobe arms. Between the blue dive lights and the orange



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With special filter masks, divers can see fluorescence as in this tube anemone

in the sand. After some gentle fanning he uncovered a large skate.

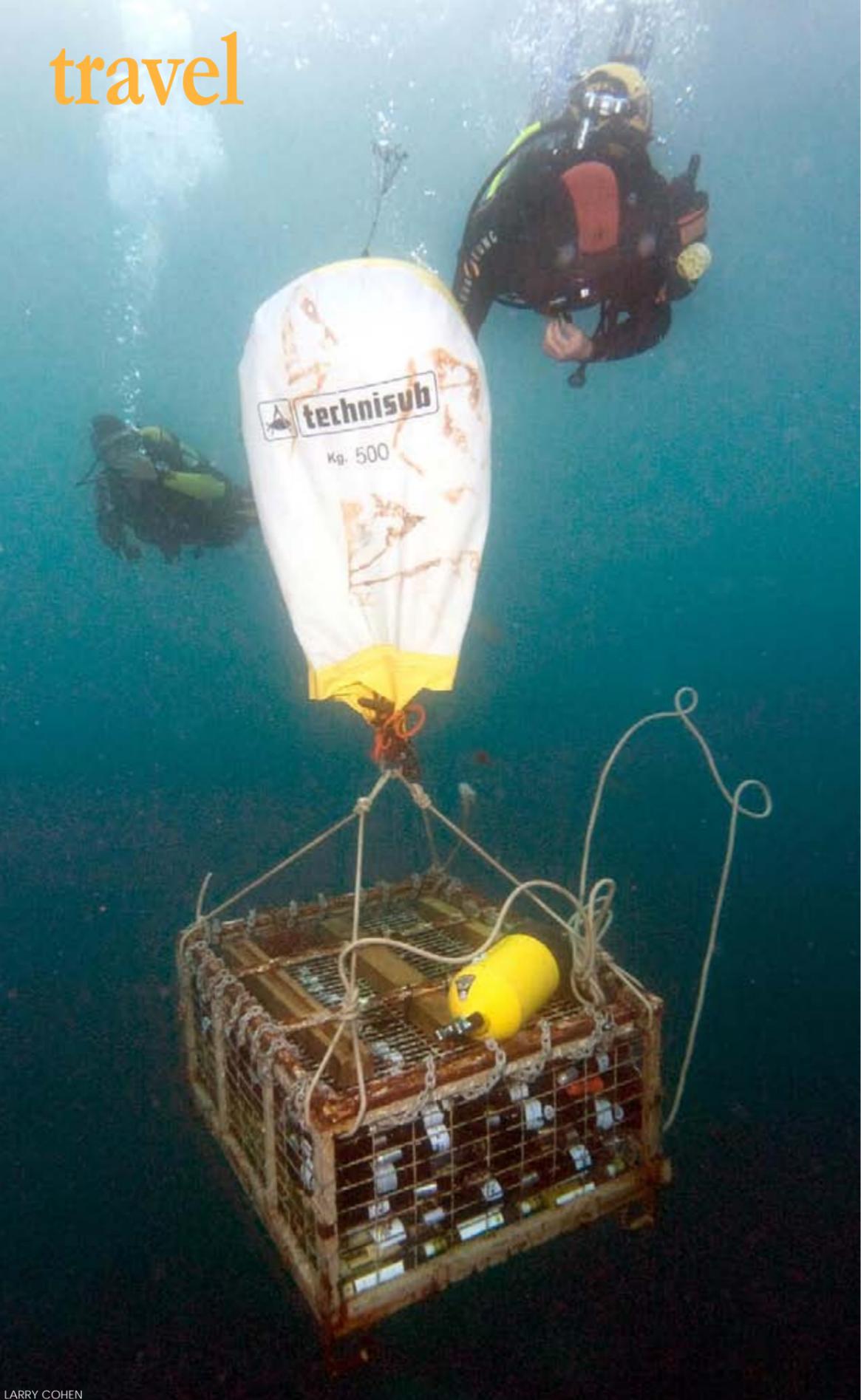
### Boat diving

Dive sites such as La Caverna, Norfeu Nord, Punta Prima, Trencat, La Piscine and El Bisbal are only about a 10- to 15-minute boat ride away. All of these sites are part of the Cap De Creus nature reserve. These sites have a rocky terrain with many swim-throughs and small caves. The walls are decorated

with gorgonians of many different colors. Red gorgonians are very common in the Mediterranean Sea, but the multicolored ones are only found in a small triangle that includes Rosas, Cadaqués and L'Estartit.

On these walls is a variety of marine life. One can spot grouper, barracuda, scorpionfish and a variety of gobies. Mola molas can be spotted at the end of May to the beginning of June. Although these sites are in a nature reserve,





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Divers sinking wine in crate (above); Fluorescence of tube anemone is revealed (right)



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Euro-Divers staff prepare wine for sinking (above); A taste of the sunken wine (right)

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filters, you lose a significant amount of light. We pushed the ISO to 1000 but were still shooting at a slow 1/15th of a second shutter speed. In order to get sharp images, we had to brace ourselves creating a human tripod with our elbows. It would have been much better to have UV filters to place over our strobes. This way, we would not have had to deal with the slow shutter speeds.

The other problem with fluorescence photography is that we needed to have the special orange filter over our eyes to find our subjects, but then had to remove the filters so we could use our cameras. We wore welding masks over our dive masks with the filters taped into the visors. The plan was to leave the welding masks on, raising and lowering the visors as needed.

Well, so much for plans! As soon as we jumped in the water, the welding masks floated off our heads. We kept putting them back on and making them tighter. But no matter how hard we tried, the welding masks would not stay in place. So, we just hand held the welding masks, while trying to shoot. This was frustrating and comical at the same time. It is amazing we captured any photographs at all. But the entire process was well worth the effort. Seeing marine life in, literally, a new light was one of the highlights of this trip.

Sinking of the wine

Espelt is a large family-run winery five miles (8km) from Cala Joncols. Damia Espelt is the owner, and now Anna Espelt is in charge. Three years ago, the Espelt family, Cala Joncols and Euro-Divers decided to do an experiment. The Euro-Diver staff sunk a number of crates of wine to 33ft (10m). The wine was retrieved eight months later and tested. Both expert wine tasters and lab testing showed that being under pressure did improve the wine. The wines sunk were very young, and they matured faster under the Mediterranean Sea.

The wines sunk during our visit were Vailet (white), ViDivi (red) and Escuturit Brut Cava (sparkling). The process was fascinating. Two huge locked crates filled with wine bottles were placed on the beach. Lines were attached connecting the crates to the boats, and the wine was dragged into deeper water. Lift bags were attached to the crates so they would float until they were positioned over the spot they would be sunk. Once over the spot, divers carefully removed the air from the lift bags

lowering the wine to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Then a small amount of air was added to the bags, and the crates were moved into the exact spot. After this, all the lines were removed.

These days, the underwater wine is only being served at Cala Joncols, being sold for double the normal price. If there is a small group of divers at the hotel when it



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MARTINE DESITTER

Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey ready to dive with special masks to see fluorescence in marine life on the reef



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Scenic point on Costa Brava (top right); Precious coral, *Corallium rubrum* (top center); Nudibranch *Cratena peregrina* (left)



NASA

is time to retrieve the wine, Euro-Divers runs a scavenger hunt. The locks are removed, and any diver that finds the crate can take one bottle of wine.

### Special grouper study

Rosas and San Carlos De Rapita are the largest fisheries in Catalonia. Confraria de Pescadors de Roses is an association of individual fishermen from these ports, but they act as a corporation. Having power in numbers, they buy their equipment as a group, saving money.

Besides running fishing boats, they farm 50 tons of Luvina (sea bass) a year in the Bay of Rosas. They also produce fish products including jars of Fumet de peix (fish stock). They started selling this product in January 2012 and have sold over 30,000 jars worldwide. Keeping the local flavor, the caps have an illustration of a wave and the La Ciudadela de Rosas, which is the old fort overlooking

the Bay of Rosas. All together, they sell eight to 11 million euros worth of seafood a year. The fish market in Rosas is operated like an auction. Buyers from all over Spain come to try and get a low price on large quantities of seafood.

Antonio Abad Mallol is the president of Confraria de Pescadors de Roses and works closely with government agencies and environmental groups. One of his most important programs is the XRAQ scientific project. This is a group of many projects to help the fish population in the area. Biologist Anna Nebot and Pablo Bou are the coordinators. Many different universities do the research, and Anna and Pablo make sure the data gets used. Antonio and the staffs at Cala Joncols and Euro-Divers are working with the local fisherman. If fishermen catch groupers with eggs, the fish are not brought to

market. Instead, they will be held, studied and released. The fisherman will be paid the same amount of money as if the fish were sold for food.

Groupers are one of the many fish species that change sex. The females are small; as they grow larger they become males. The large males tend to get over fished. Another project is to take the small females and inject them with hormones. This process will turn them into large males. They are then reintroduced into unprotected areas where they can be fished. During our dives, we only observed small groupers once. Hopefully, these projects will increase the grouper population.

Diving the Costa Brava region of Spain is a perfect addition to a vacation in Europe. Hotel Cala Joncols offers enough

adventure activities to keep non-diving family members happy while the diver is exploring the sites under the Mediterranean Sea. This is easy recreational diving. There might not be enough fish to please some critter hunters, but there are still plenty of subjects for the underwater photographer. The fluorescent diving and the sinking of the wine were very unique underwater activities to experience and enjoy. ■



Global map (above) with location of Spain; Location of Cala Joncols on map of Spain (left)

Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey are underwater photographers based in New York City.

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# Equipment *at depth*

Edited by Peter Symes & Rosemary 'Roz' Lunn



## Apex XTX200

At first glance, the new XTX200 has had a visual makeover. The compact, environmentally sealed, over-balanced diaphragm first stage has been redesigned for improved gas flow. It also comes with an optional 5th Low Pressure port for optimal elegant hose routing. Design attention has also been paid to the purge button and diver adjustable controls; the Venturi lever and Cracking Resistance Control benefit from improved ergonomics. Other improvements include the Diver Changeable Exhaust System (DCE) on the second stage. This gives the diver the option to change from a small to a large exhaust. The thought behind this is that the large exhaust reduces bubble interference, (a feature sought by photographers), whilst the lighter smaller exhaust is better for travelling. [www.apeks.com](http://www.apeks.com)

## Atomic Aquatics T3



"Coming soon to a dive shop near you." Information about Atomic Aquatics' new top end regulator, [which we understand will hit the market in March or April], is still scant, and we don't have that many details on it, other than it's lighter than the T2X, which is not being discontinued in favour of this new regulator. The T3 will have a three-year/300-dive service interval non-contingent lifetime warranty. [AtomicAquatics.com](http://AtomicAquatics.com)



## Casio Logosease

Casio has developed a pocket-sized transceiver that lets divers converse with each other underwater. At 107 grams, it is lightweight and small enough to attach to the strap of a diving mask. No full face mask needed, divers can talk normally with the scuba regulator in their mouths. Ultrasound and bone conduction technology enables wireless communication. Just by lightly tapping the device once, you can switch between reception and transition modes. Digital speech conversion technology helps make garbled underwater speech easier to hear. Waterproof performance up to 55 meters (180 feet). [www.yamagata-casio.co.jp](http://www.yamagata-casio.co.jp)



## UnderSee Defogger

We have all had that 'one dive' where, for no apparent reason, our mask fogs up and it turns into a dive from hell. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it was possible to resolve that problem underwater. It would seem that the makers of UnderSea Mask Defogger have heard our prayers. They have developed a patented product that can be applied in seconds, during a dive. Simply open the pack and remove the applicator pad. Take your mask off, apply, and then shake the mask for 2 - 3 seconds to rinse. Replace your mask, clear and the manufacturer states that your mask will be defogged. The only downside that we see is the environmental impact. Will every diver religiously dispose of the packaging and product upon surfacing? [www.underseedefog.com](http://www.underseedefog.com)



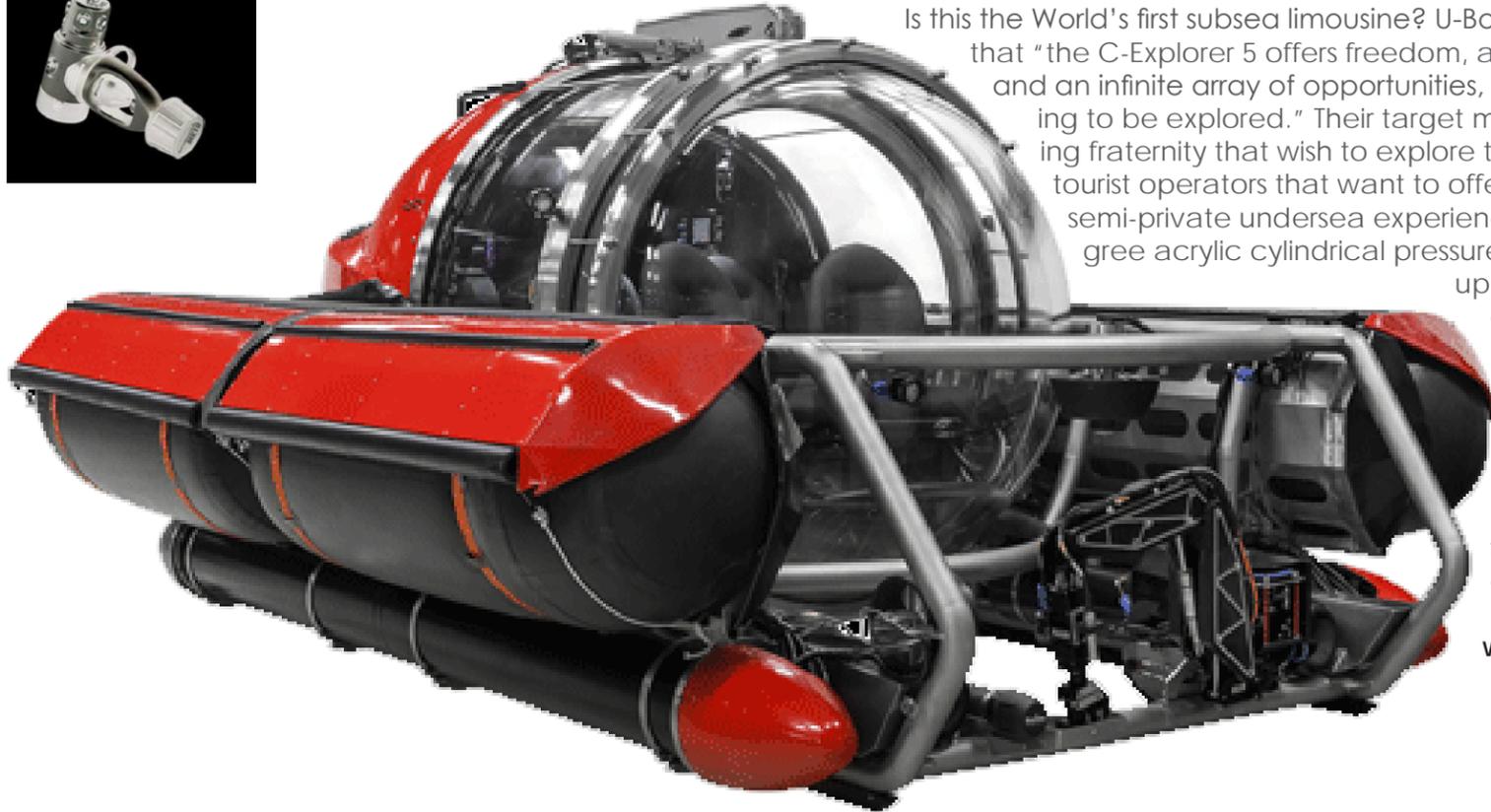
## DiveRite XT2

Dite Rite's remit was to create a second stage that delivers outstanding performance and simplicity, that can be routed either right or left handed, that required no extra parts or adjustments to change the routing. The result is the XT2 ambidextrous second stage, a pneumatically balanced downstream regulator. Features include a unique deflection ring to maximise performance whilst deterring free flow; all internal moving parts are Teflon® coated for cold-water diving; a compact, yet easy to grip dive / pre-dive switch to avoid surface free flows and a long bite orthodontic mouthpiece to reduce jaw fatigue.. [www.diverite.com](http://www.diverite.com)

## C-Explorer 5

Is this the World's first subsea limousine? U-Boat Worx state that "the C-Explorer 5 offers freedom, autonomy, vision and an infinite array of opportunities, that are just waiting to be explored." Their target market is the yachting fraternity that wish to explore the the ocean, and tourist operators that want to offer their clientele a semi-private undersea experience. The full 360-degree acrylic cylindrical pressure hull accommodates up to 5 people and can dive to 300 metres. Features include 6 powerful thrusters, a robotic manipulator arm, imaging sonar, high-intensity LED lights and a small Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV); for those times when you want to explore places the C-Explorer 5 just can't reach.

[www.uboatworx.com](http://www.uboatworx.com)



## Nocturnal Lights

The M700t technical LED dive light is the latest offering from Nocturnal Lights. It is ultra compact and can be held or mounted. There are two power settings; 300 lumens / 4 hours burn time or 700 lumens / 1.5 hours burn time. The all light head acts as a heat sink, so that you can also use it pre and post dive on the surface. A built in controller monitors the heat generated by the bulb and cuts the power accordingly. This uses 2 x CR123 batteries (available globally) and there is the option to fit a rechargeable lithium ion battery and charger. These are available from Nocturnal Lights. [Nocturnallights.com](http://Nocturnallights.com)

## Titanium Boot

This new lightweight boot is made 6mm SCS Titanium Open Cell neoprene which Camaro writes is so flexible that no zip is required and its snug fit reduce water entry to a minimum. The coating repels waters and also helps neutralising bad odours.

[www.camaro.at](http://www.camaro.at)



## Sola Nightsea

Fluorescence diving and photography continues to evolve with the DEMA 2012 launch of Light and Motion's (LAM) 'Sola Nightsea'. This has a respectable pedigree - it was developed in conjunction with Nightsea and leading fluo-scientist, Dr Charles Mazel.

Industry rumour has it that everyone who has played with it say it is a fantastic light, and it will get you excited about night diving. The Sola Nightsea blue light allows you to see a hidden world when you 'fluo-dive', because it is a 'fluorescent exciter'. Various proteins in the bodies of coral, jellyfish, anemones etc fluoresce when they are illuminated by a light of a certain wavelength. LAM state that the Sola Nightsea is five times more efficient at exciting fluorescence than a UV 'Black' light, hence the fluorescence you see is brighter and more vibrant. We suspect the scientists are itching to get their paws on it - fluo photography can be a useful research tool. [www.lightandmotion.com](http://www.lightandmotion.com)



Hollis state that their side mount systems "SMS" have been designed not only for cave and technical divers, but for any diver. This looks to be an ideal solution for ladies who want the redundancy of diving a twinset or doubles, but don't want to carry the weight on land. There are two versions of this BCD. The sport version has the low pressure inflator (lpi) hose routing over the left hand shoulder. It is aimed primarily at recreational diver who wants the ease and comfort of side mount diving, but prefers their lpi to be routed in the traditional manner. Meanwhile the cavern or technical version has the low pressure inflator hose elbow routing from the left hip area to avoid overhead interference and potential snagging. The one-size-fits-all harness is based on a minimalist design. We have been advised by Hollis that this hugs the body in a snug manner, and is easily adapted for your own comfort zone. It looks to be a good solution for travelling divers and comes ready to dive out of the box. [hollisgear.com](http://hollisgear.com)

## Hollis SMS 50 Sidemount



# Diving Heaven in the Honduras Roatan

Cryptic  
teardrop  
crab on  
sponge

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

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



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

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

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

*Introduction to the Bay Islands.*  
**Lesson One: The Basics**  
—Where the heck is it?

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

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





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

## Lesson Two: The North Shore

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

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

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

kind of underwater adventures to be experienced.

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

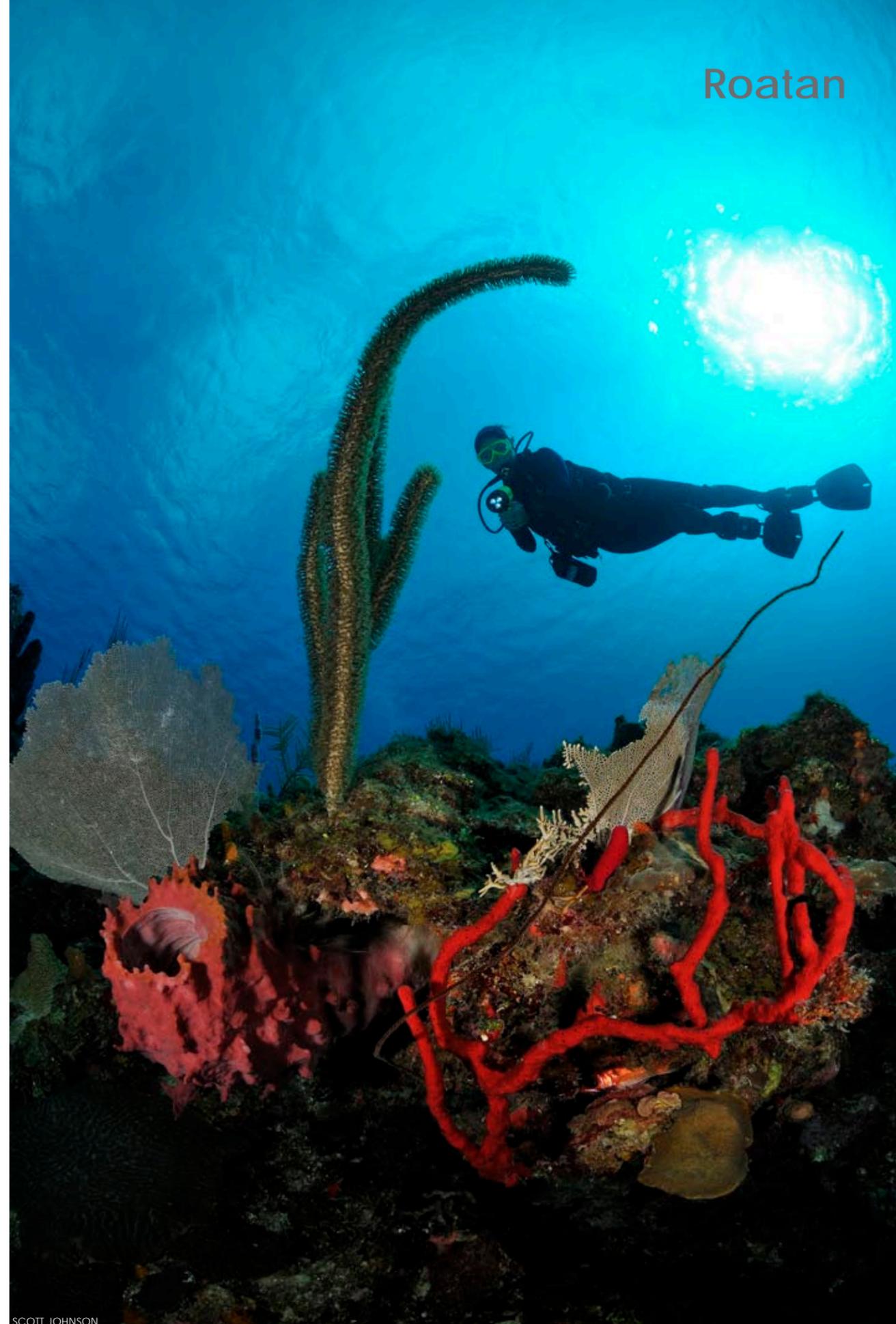
don't believe it's possible to be some kind of unbiased writing machine. So instead, I tell people about my biases up front, and I try to be as fair as I can.

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

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



Turquoise Bay Resort



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

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

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

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

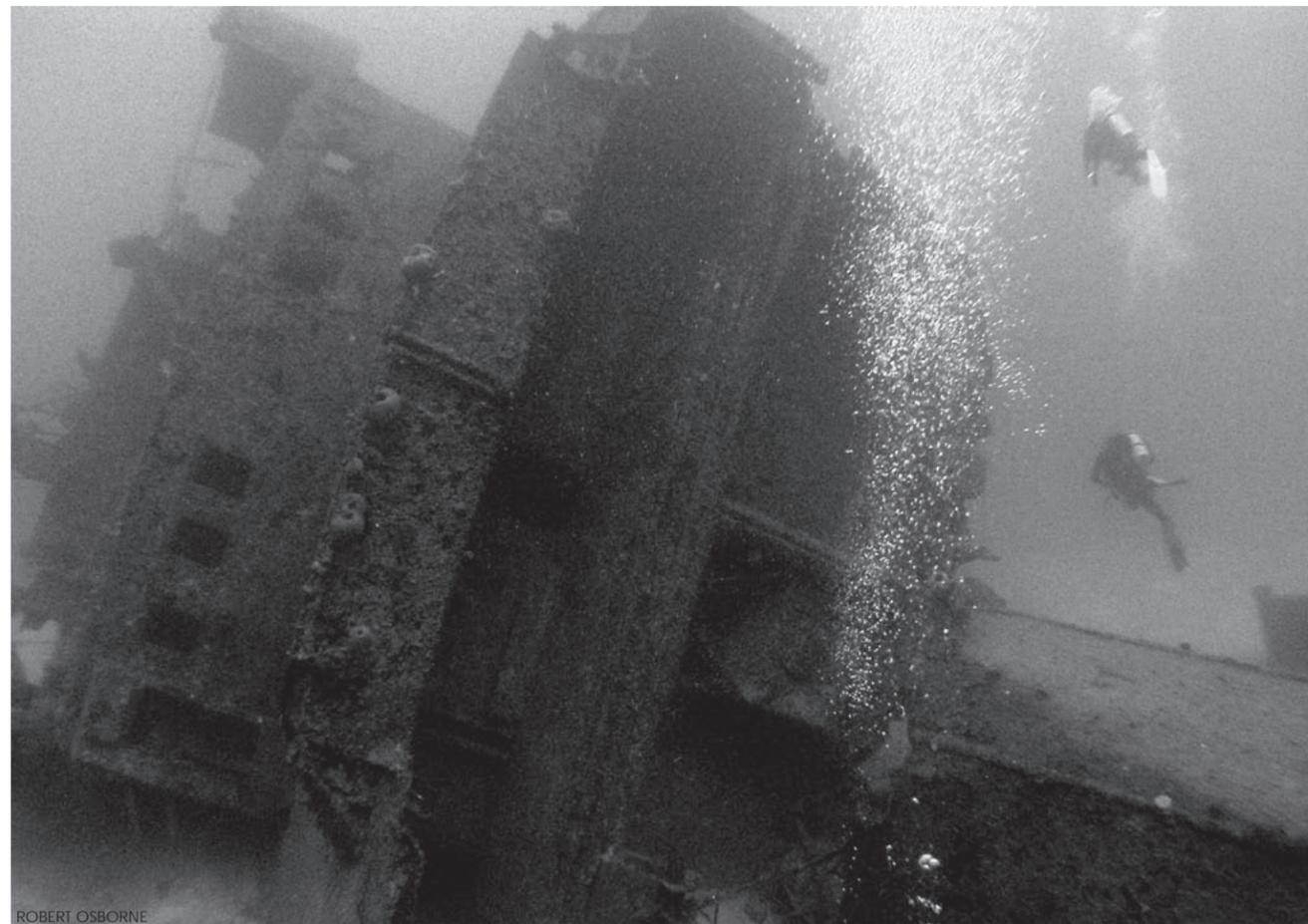
Another dive of note on the North Shore includes Stingray Passage—a large canyon with overhanging coral walls—very impressive. At one point diving this site, I swam through what seemed to be an endless school of creole wrasse. It was everything I'd come to expect from what turns out to be one of the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

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

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



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





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

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

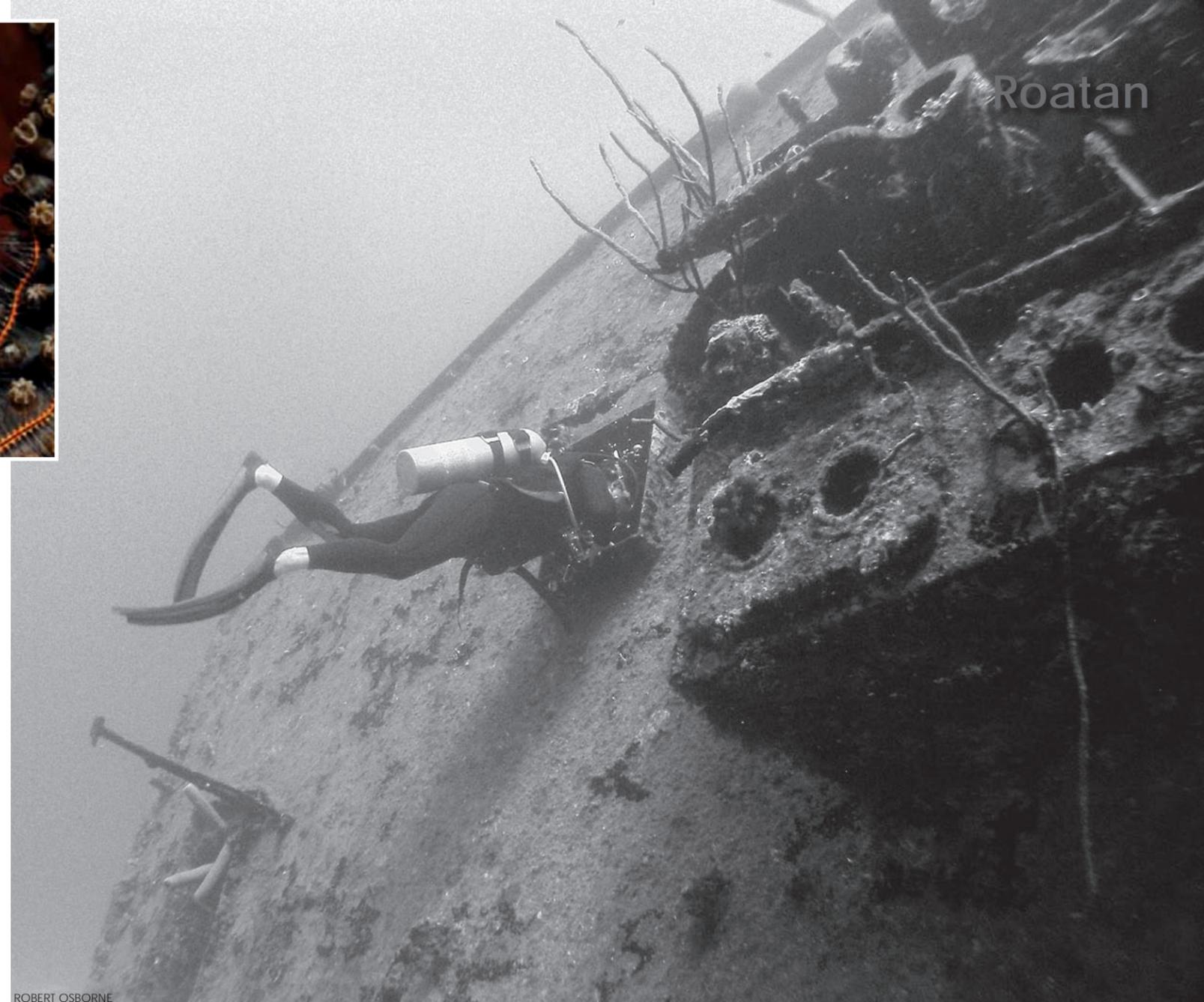


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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *El Aguila* wreck; Flamingo tongue on coral; Diver enters wreck of *El Aguila*; Large grouper

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

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



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

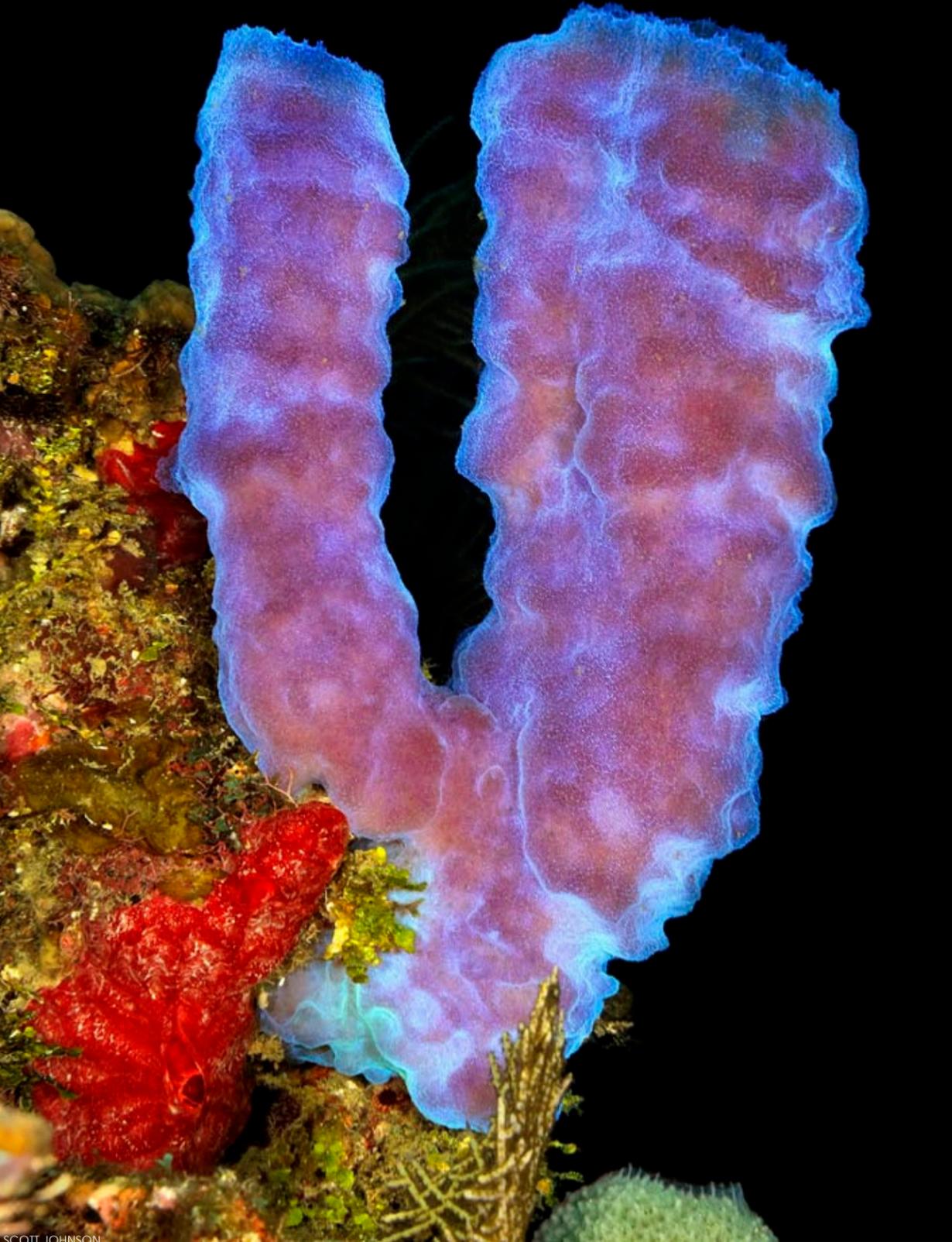
**Lesson Three: The West End**

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

## Roatan

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

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



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

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





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

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### Lesson Four: The South Shore

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

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

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

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

Neuman's Wall held much the same

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

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

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



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

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

### Lesson Five: The Truth

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

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

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



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

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

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



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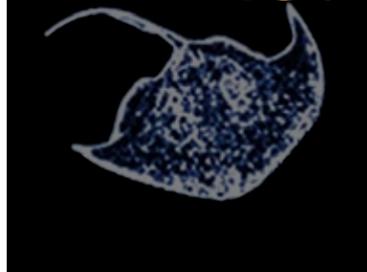


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## Roatan

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

# fact file



## Honduras



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACT BOOK,

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

ocratic constitutional republic. Capital: Tegucigalpa

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

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

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

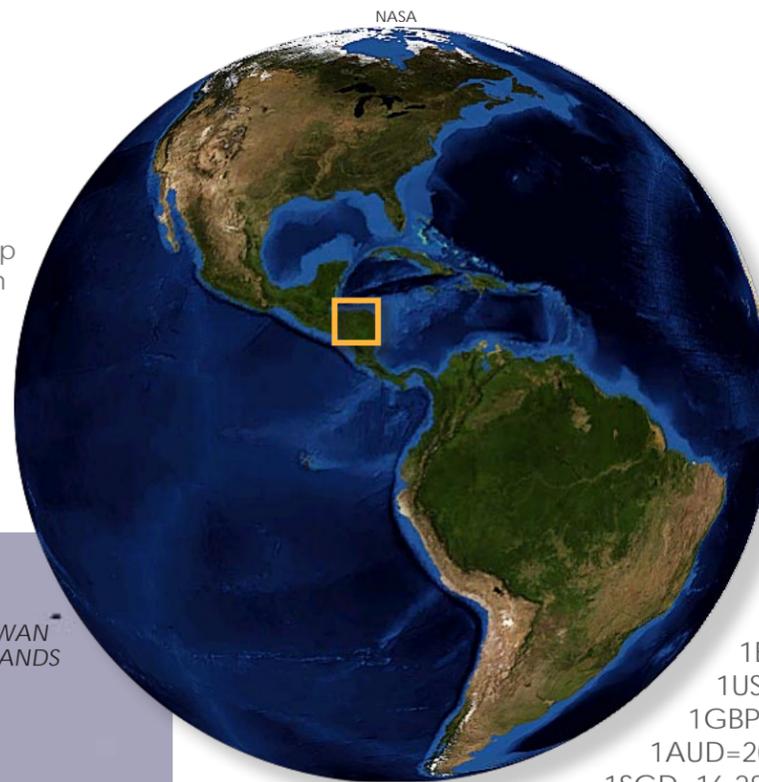
### Environment

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

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

**Economy** As the second poorest nation in Central America,

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

### Decompression chamber

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

### Web sites

Tourism Roatan  
[tourismroatan.com](http://tourismroatan.com)



ROBERT OSBORNE

# Kosrae & Pohnpei

*Micronesia*

Crystal clear  
waters and  
white sand  
beaches

Text and photos  
by Brandi Mueller

The idea of diving Micronesia forms dreams of warm, crystal blue waters with big animals, wrecks and mantas. Most divers probably include it on their dream dive destination list, or, those who've been there eagerly recommend it to dive buddies and reminisce about sharks, mantas and the beauty of these wonderful islands. Palau's Blue Corner sharks come swimming back into view, mantas by the dozen from Yap and the anemone covered wrecks of Chuuk. But what about the other islands of Micronesia? Little known Kosrae and Pohnpei, both part of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), contain the same beauty and wonder as their better known neighbor islands, but are visited far less often.





Long House at the Village Resort (above) and *Nembrotha kubaryana* nudibranch (right) on orange sponge, Pohnpei

I had returned from my second trip to Palau and, like the first trip, it was amazing. I was anything but disappointed with ten female grey reef sharks on one dive at Ulong Channel, ripping currents at Blue Corner and the curious mysteries of unidentified Japanese World War II wrecks. But along with the remarkable marine life, pristine corals and spooky wrecks, my dive group and I found crowds of people, with several boats at each dive site, lots of other divers hooked into the same areas, and restaurants and resorts congested with other divers and tourists.

It's not that I don't like diving with other people... well, okay, it is. I want paradise to myself, or at least just for me and the group of divers I prefer to travel with. So when my dive buddy—who didn't get to go with us to Palau—wanted to go diving in Micronesia

six months later, I wasn't thrilled. I loved Blue Corner, but not with two other boat loads of people flying by in front of my group and interrupting our shark show. So, I set out to find us that untouched, perfect reef, the one reef that no one else knows about yet.

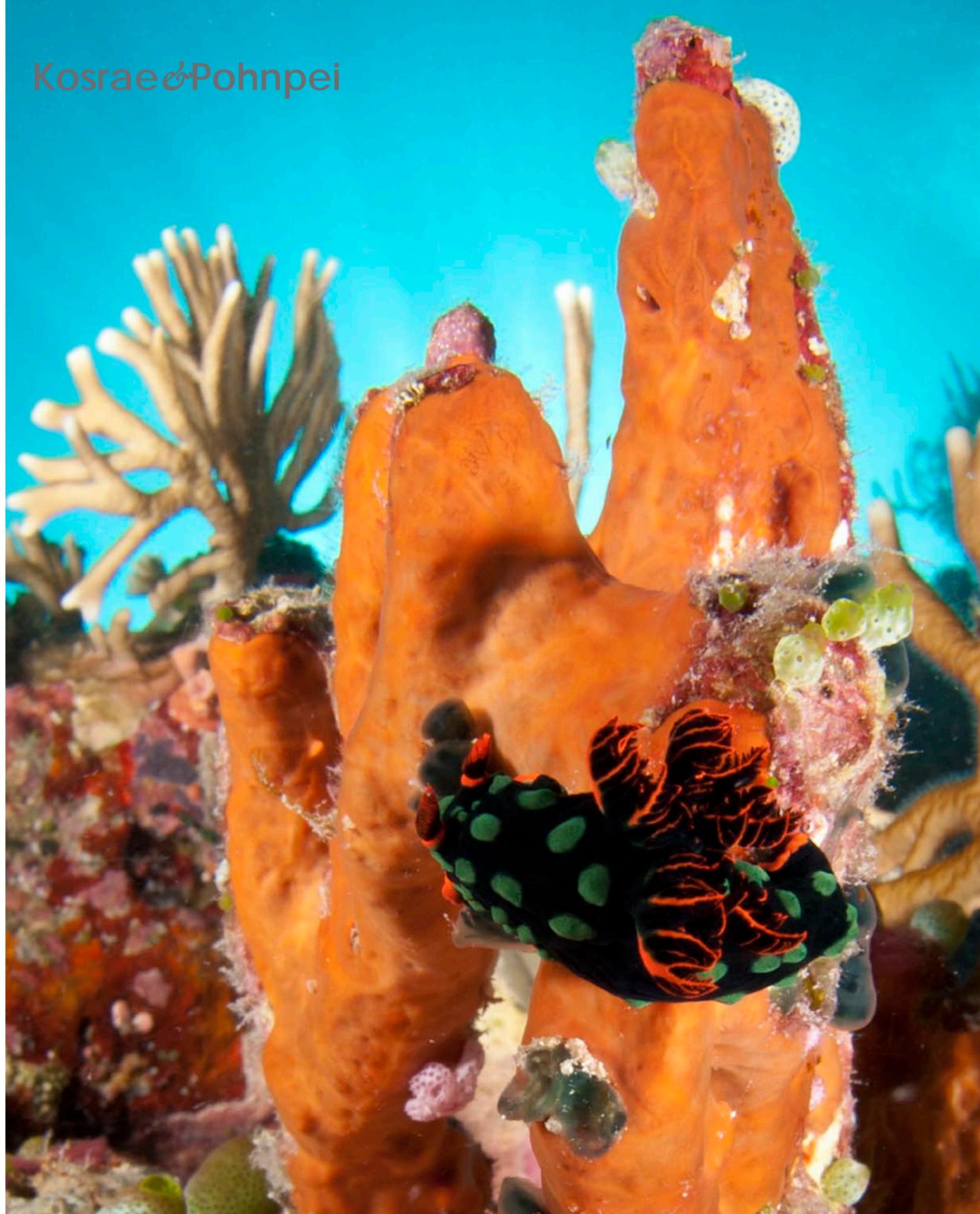
The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is made up of four island states: Pohnpei (the capital), Kosrae, Yap and Chuuk. Located just north of the equator and all having played a role in WWII, these islands have world class diving. We had heard of Chuuk and Yap, so we choose to go to Pohnpei and Kosrae. If anyone was going to ask us, "Why?" We were ready to answer, "Why not?" Of course, we couldn't tell anyone where we were going just yet, as we didn't know how to pronounce the islands' names. (Pohnpei is pronounced *pon-a-pe*, and Kosrae is *kosh-rye*.)

### Pohnpei

It's cliché, but we wanted to go off the map. And my mother pointed out that not all maps have these small islands marked. Amazing adventures never were supposed to be easy, so we decided we would go, a week on each island. Our first stop—Pohnpei. A plane change in Hawaii or Guam is required, to board the "Micronesian Milk Route", which visits Majuro, Kwajalein, Kosrae, Pohnpei and Truk.

Our flight left Honolulu at 6AM for another nine hours in the plane, and at each island stop half the passengers on the plane had to disembark for a security check and then would re-board about 45 minutes later. As the plane descended to Pohnpei, 3,240 miles southwest of Hawaii, through the window we saw a lush, green, heavily forested island with almost no buildings or

## Kosrae & Pohnpei





Lizard on Pohnpei (left); Keperhoi waterfall (above); Colorful soft corals on reef at Pohnpei (right)

Pohnpei has the most land, the most people (estimated around 34,000) and the most development of the FSM. It's boasted to have the friendliest people. Birds flit about everywhere, several of which are endemic or only found on Pohnpei, and there are several species of lizards commonly seen. Pohnpei's only original mammal is bats, and with humans came rats, dogs, pigs and most recently deer.

It's thought that the first settlers to come to Pohnpei migrated from Southeast Asia to Yap and the FSM and then southward to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. Historically, Pohnpei was divided into five tribes, with the tribal chiefs having complete control of the land, the people and everything on it. It's likely the five tribes battled amongst one another.

The first European documentation of the island of Pohnpei was from a Spanish ship in 1595, but they did not go ashore. Second contact was likely an Australian ship in 1825, and the ship was chased off by natives in canoes. A Russian ship in



1828 also attempted to land but could not due to native resistance, but for the first time, native Pohnpeians came aboard their ship. Due to whaling, more and more ships came to Pohnpei in the 1800s and with them they brought small-pox, which caused a huge epidemic and many casualties.

Pohnpei has been occupied by several countries, the first being the Spanish in 1886 as part of the Caroline Island chain in 1886. In 1899, the German Empire purchased the Caroline island group, part

of the Marianas and the Marshall Islands, which was then granted to Japan as they assumed control of all German colonial possessions north of the equator in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I.

Although the FSM played quite a large roll in World War II, no shots were fired on Pohnpei. The island was bombed significantly during the Japanese occupancy and then the island was abandoned by the Japanese. Although there are no battlefields, there are some remnants of

the Japanese occupation on land. Hiking into the jungle can be quite an adventure for a WWII history buff, as there are anti-aircraft guns, a few pillboxes and trenches that are carved-in tunnels. This is all mostly off the beaten track, and it's a good idea to find a local guide or at least get very good directions before setting off by yourself into the jungle. There are rusted gun emplacements, an overgrown airbase (where we had lunch one day), bunkers, bomb craters and several rusted tanks.

houses. The airport consisted of a large, outdoor shack-like building. We collected our luggage, which was hand carried from the plane and placed in front of us with the plane still in view and went to meet the small van waiting for us.





Nudibranch on reef at Pohnpei; Waterbeds with mosquito nets (center) in a treehouse bungalow (below) at The Village Hotel on Pohnpei; Large, branching, cup coral (*Tubastrea micracantha*), Pohnpei (right)

turn slowly to light blue and daylight revealing flat, blue seas. After a leisurely, relaxing breakfast, it was time to dive.

We took a three minute pick-up truck ride down the hill to the water where our captain met us. Dressed in discarded Navy coveralls, he helped

diving and more often than not keeps the lagoon calm and smooth. As the only divers in the whole resort, we had the boat, a divemaster and the captain to ourselves.

After a 45-minute boat ride, we reached our first dive site just outside the barrier reef, Mwand Wall. Back rolling off the boat, we descended down a sheer wall covered in bright orange and yellow sponges and forest green branching tubastrea coral. A slight current carried us from the ocean side of the lagoon into the lagoon. Swimming sideways on the wall were so many brightly-colored fish, it appeared as if the wall was mov-

ing. The wall sloped down to just past 100ft and then turned to rubble and sand further down. One shark cruised with us for a while, and at the end of the dive, we were on top of the wall at 15ft, perfect for a long safety stop, and I found several anemones to photograph.

Wide-eyed with excitement after

In 1947, Pohnpei became part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands created by the United Nations administered by the United States (as trustee only) and became part of the Federated States of Micronesia in 1979.

### Diving

On the short ride to the Village Resort, we drove through Kolonia, often referred to as "the metropolis" of the FSM. Although not what you would expect from a metropolis, there was a small traffic jam caused by some children playing soccer in the street. On the side of a small cliff overlooking the ocean sits the Village Resort with tree house bungalows, our home for the next week. Thatch roof, mosquito nets and waterbeds (yes, waterbeds!) Nothing seemed more like paradise until we got in the water the next morning.

There is no rush in the Pacific though. With the time change, we woke up before dawn and headed to the Long House where meals are served. Being that it was before 5 AM we made ourselves comfortable on puffy lounge chairs out on the gazebo. We were unexpectedly surprised when the lone security guard appeared out of the darkness with a coffee pot and poured us two cups of coffee. We watched the stars slowly disappear, as the black sky



us onto the small flat bottom wooden boat. Sitting on the engine, our captain drove us away from the Village through mangroves so dense we had to duck a bit and out into the lagoon.

Pohnpei is surrounded almost entirely by a barrier reef, which protects the island, making for amazing pass



## Kosrae & Pohnpei





the first dive, our captain took us to a dive site called Manta Road. I have always thought that once you named a dive site after something, you never see it again, but as we finished our surface interval in the sunshine, we had already seen at least two mantas on the surface. Feeding on the nutrients brought in during tidal changes, the mantas are present several times a day and do large belly rolls toward the surface as if dancing an underwater ballet. This site is great for non-divers as well because the mantas come right up to the surface.

For lunch, we stopped at a beautiful uninhabited islet with mangrove trees dotting the coastline where we had a pack lunch prepared by the Village.

Wrapped in eco-friendly banana leaves were our pre-ordered rice mixes, with our choice of chicken, pork, shrimp or veggies. After two amazing dives, we were hungry, and almost as good as the food tasted, was the fun of throwing the banana leaves in the water afterwards, creating no trash. After eating and a nice long surface interval, we were back in the boat headed for a third amazing dive.

Back at the Village we settled in at the Long House for a few beers and dinner and were amazed by the food. Melt-in-your-mouth ahi tuna (just caught by a staff member, our servers pointed back to the kitchen to point him out), local mangrove crab, steak, tuna, mahi-mahi and macadamia nut chicken. If the huge proportions didn't fill you up, the desserts were to die for. Flaming bananas foster made at your table, homemade cookies, and my favorite, the homemade sorbet-like ice cream made on site with fresh fruits from the island (the soursop was amazing!)

The next day, with good weather



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Diver and mantas at Manta Road; Tiny shrimp on anemone; Pipefish and golden damselfish, Pohnpei; Delicious ahi tuna for dinner



THIS PAGE: Nan Madol, the “Venice of the Pacific”, on Pohnpei. Massive stones, possibly from a quarry on the other side of the island, were used to build Nan Madol. It is unknown how they were moved to this location



on our side, we took a two-hour boat ride across the channel to Ant Atoll. With beautiful white sand beaches covered with palm trees reaching over the ocean, above water is almost as good as under the water. The sun lit up the reef through the clear water and revealed huge schools of fish, giant orange sponges, sea fans and soft coral. A turtle swam by the wall, munching on some coral, and our dive guide pointed

out four different species of nudibranchs.

### Nan Madol

The island of Pohnpei is beautiful topside as well. A day excursion can take you swimming under waterfalls, hiking through rainforest, visiting WWII remains and walking among ancient ruins. Pohnpei is home to Nan Madol, often referred to as the “Venice of the Pacific”. Likely built around

the 11th century for religious and political means, these ruins can be visited by boat and you can walk among large stone wall structures, which still stand.

The mysteries of Nan Madol are numerous including who built the structures and how they got the massive stones to their current location. The nearest and likely quarry is on the other side of the island, although some legends say they came from Yap, over 1,000 miles away. One myth suggests that twin sorcerers levitated the stones from the quarry to where they stand now.

### Kosrae

After a week on Pohnpei, we enjoyed a short hour-long flight to Kosrae, called the island of the sleeping lady. As you land, you can see the mountain formation that looks like a sleeping lady. Although we loved the romantic jungle atmosphere of the Village on Pohnpei, we were thrilled to reach the Nautilus Resort with glorious air conditioning, a TV and a fully enclosed room, so there was no need for mosquito nets.

We were picked up at the airport by Doug, co-owner with his wife Sally, of the Nautilus. Doug was delightful during our whole trip. It was as if we were visiting a good friend we hadn’t seen in,

well, forever. He dove with us, and his excitement for the diving and living in Kosrae was infectious, making the great diving even better.

Much smaller in population, Kosrae has less than 7,000 people. Similar to Pohnpei and other Pacific islands, Kosrae had a tribal society with noble chiefs controlling the land and commoners working the land, who served the chiefs. Nobel lineage was determined matrilineality, or traced through the mother or female

ancestors.

The first European contact is thought to be in 1824, and the first missionaries came in 1852, converting most of the island to Christianity by the 1870s. Religion is still a very important part of today’s culture in Kosrae. Similar to Pohnpei, Kosrae fell under German rule in 1899 and



# Kosrae & Pohnpei

eral years ago, the Kosrae dive operators in association with the government put in 58 mooring buoys around the island to stop anchoring. At most sites, the boat is moored to a buoy, the divers jump in and drift to the next buoy where the boat would be moored and waiting, preventing coral damage from anchoring. Almost all the dives are sloping wall dives providing excellent safety stops with as much life at 15ft as at 100ft.

Our three dives a day



ready to dive. Again we were the only divers (almost the only people in the whole resort) and Doug and a crew member drove us ten minutes to the harbor. The boat was a bit more modern than those in Pohnpei, providing more shade and an endless supply of delightfully sweet Kosrae tangerines and apple-

bananas just off the tree. cleaner shrimp, all right next to each other! And then my dive buddy kept pointing at the edges of the anemone, and it took me a bit to see that there was a red-eyed, purple-clawed crab peering out at us from just below the two anemones. I could have spent numerous dives just at the spot, but Doug pointed out a huge school of barracuda off the wall, so we kept swimming.

Our second dive was at The Jacks, a dive with a reliable school of jacks right off the wall. After gawking at the huge school, the focus was back on the reef, and there were cleaning stations almost everywhere we looked. Wrasses were under every crevice waiting for a parrotfish or a moorish idol to stop in, get cleaned and then pass through leaving room for the next patient.

Being off the tourist track, Kosrae has very few divers. The reefs are nothing but pristine. To keep this unspoiled ecosystems intact, sev-



didn't seem to be nearly enough. On each dive, we were overwhelmed by the diversity. We were torn with

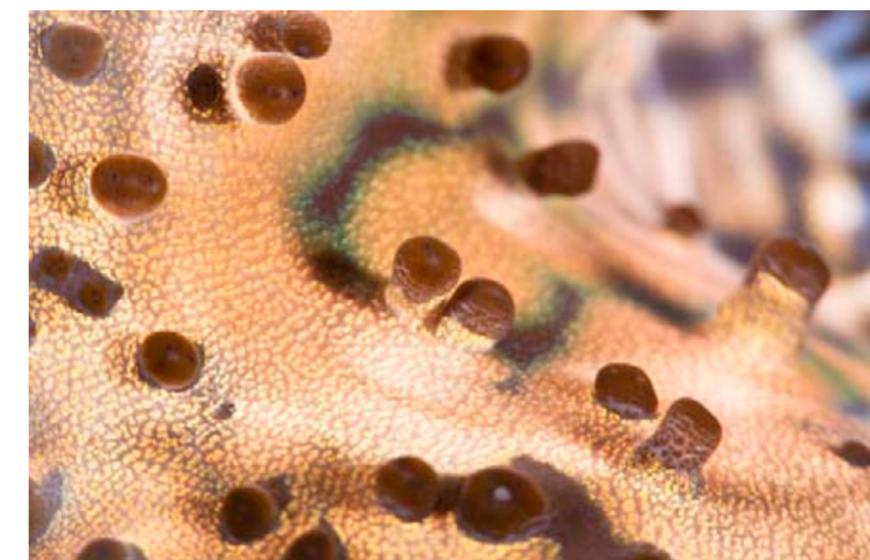
then Japanese rule after WWI. No WWII battles occurred on Kosrae, although a Japanese garrison was stationed there with more than 4,000 Imperial Japanese Army men and a company of tanks. Tunnel bunkers can see be seen on top of some of the islands peaks. During the Trust Territory period, Kosrae was considered a municipality of Pohnpei, but in 1977, it became a separate district. Kosrae joined Yap, Chuuk and Pohnpei to form the Federated States of Micronesia in 1979.

### Diving

It had been two days out of the water due to the no diving after flying rule, and we were more than

cleaner shrimp, all right next to each other!

Kosrae has calm waters and amazing visibility due to fringing reef surrounding the island. Our first dive site was at Walung Drop-off, and we were immediately blown away by the massive hard coral formations from the shallows (15ft) down to 120+ feet in a gradual wall. We didn't know what to take photos of first! Before the dive, Doug had told us of two anemones next to each other. Right under the boat, at about 20ft, he motioned us over to a green carpet anemone with a brilliant purple anemone next to it. We couldn't believe our eyes—two gorgeous anemones, two different fish species, and we counted five species of



The mantle of a giant clam (above); Crab peering out from between two anemones (top left); Flatworm on coral head (top right), Decorated dartfish (bottom right), Kosrae



Kosrae & Pohnpei

Boasting Micronesia's best pizza, we were not disappointed, and the fish was fantastic. Much of the vegetables were grown on-site and local, and exotic fresh fruit is abundant.

While both islands are laid back and much slower than city folk may be used to, Kosrae takes "island time" to a whole new meaning. There is a 25mph speed limit enforced on the whole island, and some of the largest speed bumps I'd ever seen (they looked more like speed mountains!) And Sunday is truly a day of rest. Not only does everything shut down, but it is actually illegal (and enforced) that there is no drinking, diving, swimming, fishing, boating or any activities on Sundays.

A trip to Pohnpei or Kosrae is not complete without tasting the local spirit of choice, Sakau. It's actually a type of kava made with crushed roots of a pepper plant, which is mixed with water and squeezed through hibiscus bark. The taste is similar to dirt and causes the mouth to numb, and often a relaxed, calming feeling occurs.

### Afterthoughts

Like most dive trips, our two weeks flew by, and before we knew it, we were back on an airplane headed home. Although the flights were long, it was entirely worth it for the untouched, pristine and least touristy islands of Micronesia. We found the diving fairly easy with warm water, light currents and unspoiled reef life, and there were no big groups of

divers at all. Although the big creatures were not as numerous as off Palau, there were reliable sites for sharks and mantas, and large schools of barracuda and jacks were common. The macro life was far better than Palau on both islands, especially Pohnpei, with its very colorful soft corals. It was a great trip for seeing healthy reef life and enjoying the extremely relaxing, slow paced, beautiful islands. Pohnpei and Kosrae are a must for anyone trying to get away from the crowds, but still wanting fantastic diving. ■

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what to photograph, not being able to decide if we should shoot macro to capture the flatworms, nudibranchs and numerous juvenile fish, or to shoot wide-angle and capture the colorful reef, occasional sharks that cruised by, turtles and massive schools of jacks, barracuda and other fishes.

Dartfish are one of my favorites, and on almost every dive, we saw fire dartfish, and a few times, we spotted the more rare decorated dartfish. Schools of purple and pink anthias flitted about the reef (often getting in the shots of other fish). And rare juvenile fish that I often spend whole trips looking for were seen on almost every dive. Turquoise and purple giant clams dotted the reef and blennies peaked out from every nook and cranny. On our last dive of the week, Doug pointed out not one, but three yellow leaf scorpionfish. There was never a dull moment. Overall, the diving was fairly easy, with some

mild currents, great visibility and full of life.

### Topside attractions

Kosrae also has its own ruins. Although not as grand as Nan Madol, Kosrae has its own ancient site, the Lelu Ruins. Architecturally similar in building materials and design to Nan Madol (and thought to be built within 500 years of each other) the ruins suggest historical interactions between the two islands. Free to the public, easy to get to, although not quite maintained as well as Nan Madol, the Lelu ruins are a few minutes' walk from the Nautilus Resort. Bird watching, waterfall tours, hiking and kayaking are also available.

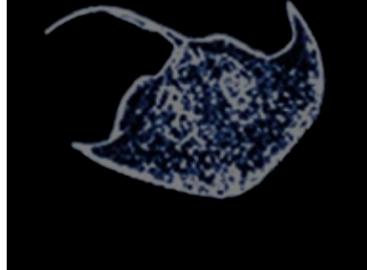
The small island doesn't have many dining options, but we were more than happy dining at the Nautilus. They offered breakfast, lunch and dinner, with enough options to keep us trying new things every day.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Goby on coral; Sunrise view from the gazebo at the Long House at The Village Hotel, Pohnpei; Blenny sticks head out of a coral head, Kosrae; Anemonefish, Pohnpei; Author Brandi Mueller



# fact file



## Kosrae & Pohnpei



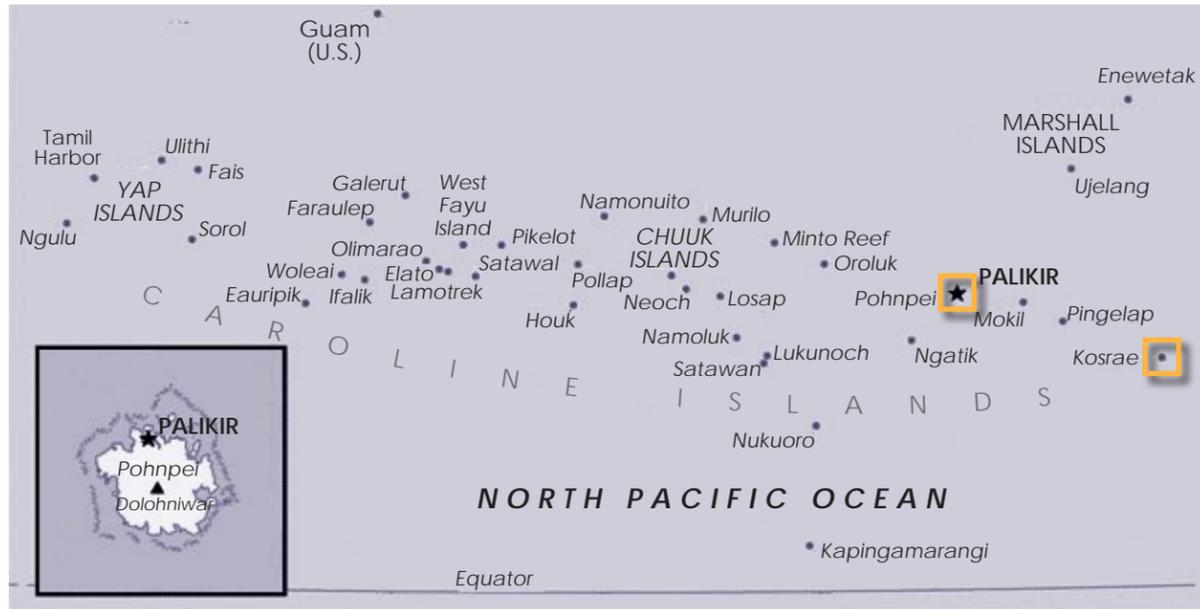
SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, VISIT-FSM.ORG

**History** The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) was formed in 1979 including Pohnpei, Kosrae, Yap, and Chuuk (Truk). Currently the FSM is independent under a Compact of Free Association with the US. Occupied by the Japanese prior and during WWII all four islands played a role and evidence of battles remains both on land and underwater. Government: Constitutional government in free association with the United States. Capital: Palikir

**Geography** All four islands are located in the North Pacific as part of the Caroline Islands. Both are extinct volcanoes and the islands are mountainous with tropical jungle. Pohnpei is the largest of the FSM islands, has the highest point, and is mostly mangrove along the coastline with a surrounding barrier reef and outer atolls. Kosrae has both mangrove and sand beaches. Coastline: 6,112km

**Climate** Equatorial tropics with average temperatures of 23-30°C (75-86°F) year round. Heavy rainfall year round with summer and fall being the wettest. Little typhoon risk (June to December). Water temperatures are warm with 27-28°C (80-83°F).

**Environment** Overfishing, climate change and pollution pose



challenges. The FSM is party to: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection

**Economy** The economy of the FSM relies heavily on fishing and subsistence farming. High-grade phosphate is the only mineral deposit worth exploiting. The tourist industry has potential but is hampered by the remote location and a lack of sufficient facilities, as well as limited air connections. Between 1986 and 2001 the United States provided \$1.3 billion in grant aid under the original terms of the Compact of Free Association. The amount of aid has since been reduced,

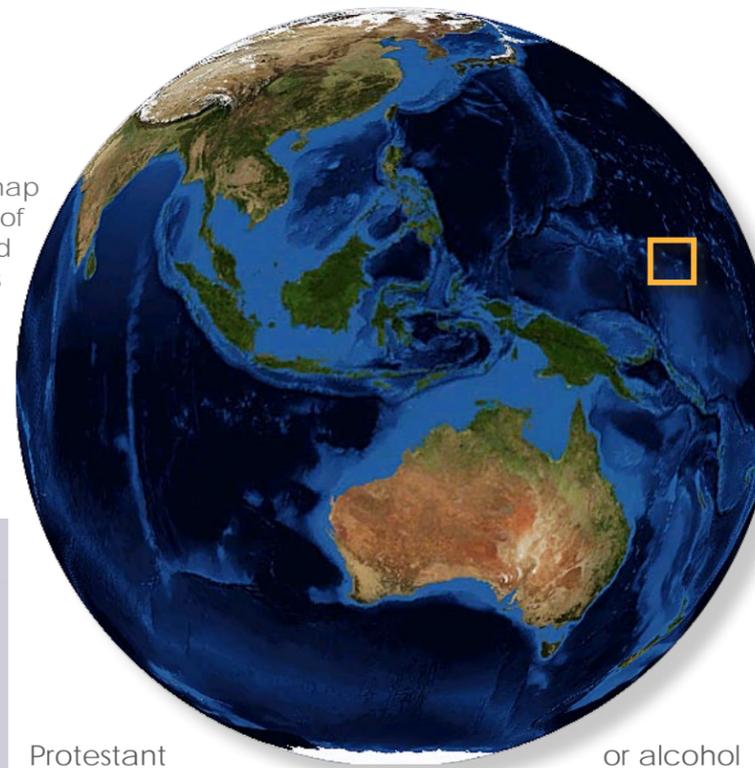
but the Amended Compact of Free Association with the United States guarantees significant annual aid through 2023, wherein a Trust Fund has been established with annual contributions by the United States and the FSM to in effect provide payouts in perpetuity to the FSM after 2023. Despite this move, the medium-term economic outlook looks fragile due to current slow growth of the private sector.

**Population** Pohnpei: 35,000; Kosrae: 7700; The FSM has several ethnic groups: Chuukese 48.8%, Pohnpeian 24.2%, Kosraean 6.2%, Yapese 5.2%, Yap outer islands 4.5%, Asian 1.8%, Polynesian 1.5%, other ethnic groups 6.4%. Religions: Roman Catholic 52.7%,

RIGHT: Global map with location of Kosrae and Pohnpei Islands

BELOW: Location of Kosrae and Pohnpei on map of Micronesia

BOTTOM RIGHT: Christmas tree worm



Protestant 41.7% (2000 Census) Internet users: 17,000 (2009)

**Currency** U.S. Dollar. The islands have few ATMs, although they can sometimes be unreliable.

**Language** Both islands have their own language (Pohnpeian and Kosraean) but English is widely spoken and taught in school. Japanese is also sometimes spoken in tourist establishments.

**Health** There is no risk for rabies or malaria, but occasional risk for Dengue. FSM is very close to the equator, so be aware of heat and sunburn. Local hospitals are on each island but have very few resources. Major illnesses should be flown to Guam (~3 hours) or Honolulu (~7 hours).

**Security** The islands are very safe in general. Be aware of weekend night driving when local consumption of sakau and/

NASA

and Friday, and from Guam on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Kosrae flights from Honolulu on Monday and Friday and from Guam on Tuesday and Saturday. From Honolulu the flight makes stops in Majuro, Kwajalein, Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, and Guam and reverses the next day. There are no flights in or out on Sundays.

**Topside attractions** Both islands also have hiking, kayaking, bird watching, surfing, kite boarding, snorkeling and fishing.

**Dive gear** Although rental dive gear is available, it is limited due to the remoteness of these islands. It's recommended you bring your own gear and do not expect to be able to buy gear or parts or have gear serviced on either island.

**Attire** Conservative dress is suggested when leaving resorts, especially on Kosrae, with sleeves for both sexes and pants or skirts covering the knees for women.

**Web sites** Tourism Micronesia [www.visit-fsm.org](http://www.visit-fsm.org)

or alcohol is common. Local customs include 'borrowing' things such as if you leave your sandals outside a house and someone needs a pair, they may be 'borrowed'. But there is no issue in hotels or resorts with theft.

**Cuisine** Most diving packages include meals. Both islands have several restaurants with very good food, but sometimes limited choices. Things listed on menus were not always available, so checking what the daily specials are is recommended. Each island offers a few restaurants and very small grocery stores.

**Decompression chamber** Pohnpei has a chamber, Kosrae does not. Guam or Honolulu, Hawaii, are the next closest locations for chambers.

**Dive season** Year Round.

**Getting there** The islands are only serviced by United Airways and require a stop in Honolulu or Guam. Pohnpei flights are from Honolulu on Monday, Wednesday

