



A male pikeblenny with display fin



Half Moon Caye

LIGHTHOUSE REEF

This atoll is probably Belize's best known and most popular due to the **Blue Hole** (Natural Monument). While this icon of Belize diving makes the atoll a major attraction, it is really the stunning walls, heavily adorned swim-throughs and clear, blue water that make it a favorite of both longtime Belize divers and complete novices.

The best way to see the sites and sights is via a live-aboard ship. The commute from site to site is minimal and the best sites, based on wind and weather, can be chosen at sunrise and throughout the day. There are also some fascinating night dives. Another easy option is to stay on one of the cayes lodges. There are some beautiful, rustic accommodations on the atoll and also at Turneffe.

Lighthouse Reef is home to Half Moon Caye Natural Monument, a National Park managed by the Belize Audubon Society. Half Moon Caye is home to a colony of rare red-footed boobies which can be observed up close. Camping is sometimes an option at this small island.

The atoll is 50 miles out to sea and the furthest out of the Belize atolls, so there's a good chance of seeing pelagic life, with clear water and uncrowded dive sites.

Lighthouse Reef

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Inside the atoll heading to Blue Hole



26 BLUE HOLE

Location: Center of Atoll

Depth: 10-140ft (3-43m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced



This may not be the best dive in Belize but it certainly ranks as one of the most popular. Known worldwide, the site makes for a unique entry into anyone's dive log. Typically, this is a very short dive combined with a lengthy deco stop, long surface interval and fairly shallow second dive. Dive days tend to be centered around and dictated by the Blue Hole dive. The main points of interest, giant stalactites from times past, don't pop into sight until you're pretty much at the safe sport diving limit, and the stalagmites are even deeper.

A geological wonder, from an airplane the Blue Hole appears almost perfectly round but at sea level it is too large to get this perspective – even from the top of a high live aboard. Charters are available at the municipal airport in Belize City for about the same cost as a dive trip. In less than an hour, one can make a quick aerial flight out to Lighthouse Reef to circle the Blue Hole and get a good look at its naturally circular form.

Getting here by boat varies depending upon your starting point. For live aboards, it's a relatively short morning trip from the night moorings down south. For those coming from Dangriga and Placencia, it can mean an overnight camp out on Half Moon Caye, and it's about two to three hours with good seas from San Pedro or Belize City.

By sea, some nifty meandering by an experienced boat or ship captain through the central inner reef of Lighthouse Atoll is required. The usual entry

area is a passage in the natural reef that was blasted by the crew of the *Calypso* before the days when destroying coral reefs was considered taboo. This was 1978 and Captain Cousteau and the crew went on to film the inner walls of the Blue Hole for the TV series *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, putting it forever on the diving map and beckoning divers to follow in the Frenchman's fin kicks.

Once a dry cave, rising sea levels over thousands of years and perhaps a falling reef submerged it. When the dome of the cave collapsed – bingo, a blue hole!

A sheer-sided wall drops about 100ft to an undercut filled with stalactites. Deep blue in the center, the hole forms a perfect 1,000ft diameter circle on the surface. Inside is said to be 430ft deep, but as much as 200ft of this may now be filled with fine silt, sand and other natural debris. At 130ft depth, one can find the world's largest known underwater dripstones, or stalactites.

Live aboards normally moor on the northwest side, where there is also a cut and some room to swing out over the hole due to the normal prevailing winds. But they enter from the south where the "Cousteau channel" offers easiest access. Charter boats from San Pedro and Belize City normally anchor right by this south entrance.

The stalactites are a bit shallower here and operators have attempted to create an attraction by chumming for sharks. This impromptu feeding creates quite a frenzy, which draws big groupers and Caribbean reef sharks. Divers normally hide under the boat while the sharks churn the surface dashing for the fish bits offered. While exciting, this isn't considered overly safe. Bull sharks have made an appearance here on occasion and their high testosterone levels make them a bit of a worry even without getting them into feeding mode. Nevertheless, feeding is pretty much a daily sight for those doing their deco stop.

On the northwest side, the fish life is a bit more subdued, as live aboards don't condone the feeding, in accordance with conservation rules.

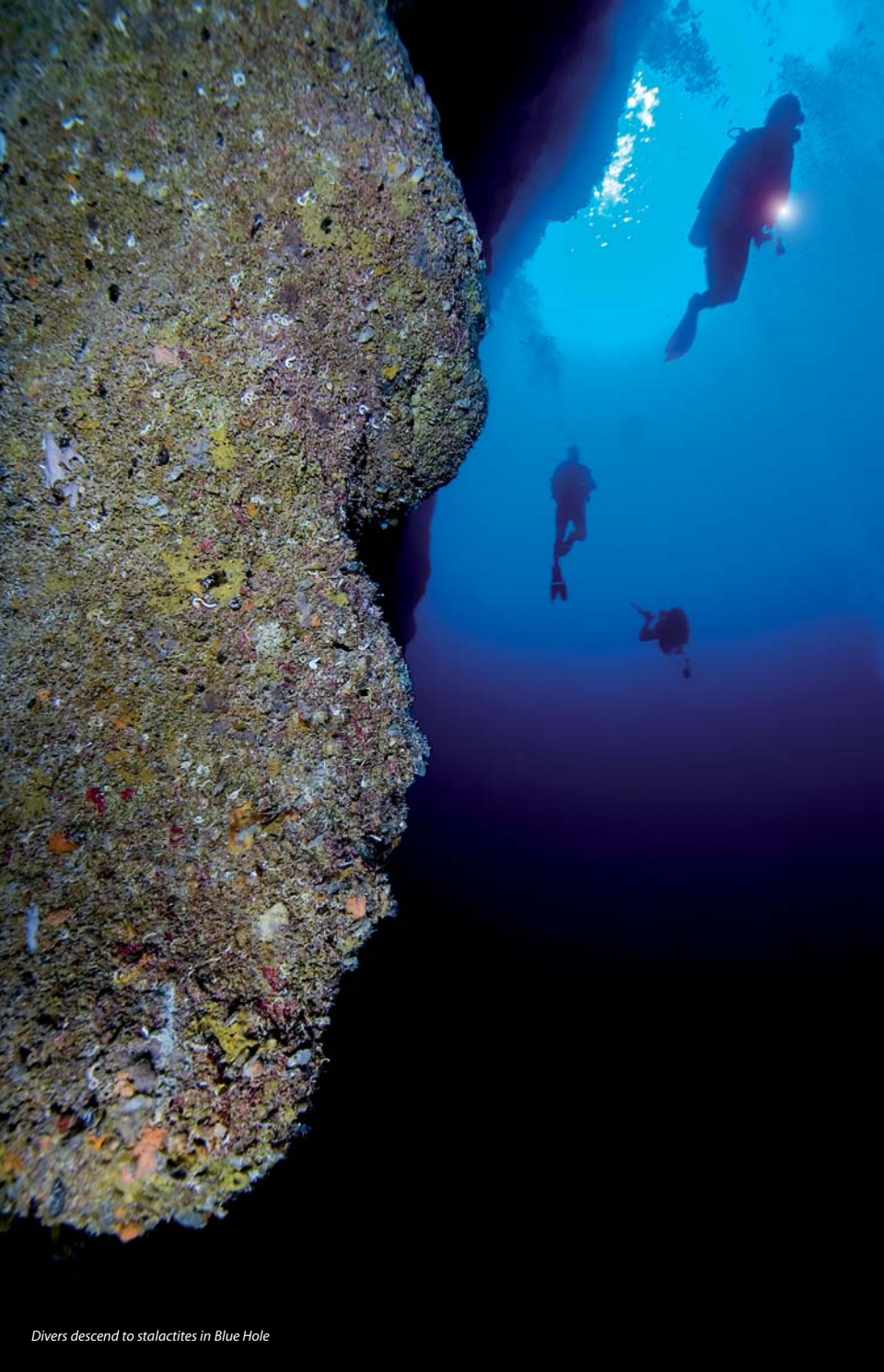
Descending the sheer wall, anticipation builds as the water darkens. The Blue Hole doesn't usually have great visibility in the first place and the deeper one goes, the more light is absorbed, adding to the anticipation and eerie feeling. At 90ft or so, the undercut of the old cave comes into view and the feeling quickly turns to awe as the huge stalactites (or dripstones) come into view, many covered in sessile marine growth.

Divers can venture inside the cave at 130ft to 140ft to swim in and out of the hanging formations, while a look down below will reveal huge stalagmites complimenting the upper dripstones. There's very little in the way of fish life or invertebrates in here.

Being deep and dark, you're bound to feel some stage of narcosis. Be aware of everything... your mood, air, bottom



Divers descend into the Blue Hole



Divers descend to stalactites in Blue Hole

time and depth. If you think it's the best dive EVER, it may be time to come up. Start to ascend with at least 1500psi in the tank as it's farther up than you think. The whole deep part of the dive on air will probably be less than 10 minutes unless you have made some special tech arrangements. Do 30ft, 20ft and 10ft stops. At the end, spend five minutes at 10ft to 15ft along the upper reef, looking at the soft corals and fish life, including squid.

For those not keen on diving this deep, consider snorkeling so you can have a nice long and deep dive later when everyone else is going shallow. Snorkeling isn't too exciting along the hole's edge (unless you want to take your chances at the shark feed). Head out into the upper reef of the inner lagoon itself for some good coral growth and better fish life.

This is undoubtedly a unique plunge, so if the opportunity presents itself, the Blue Hole should be done at least once for a look at some of nature's most creative undersea topography.



A rare Caribbean torpedo ray

27

PAINTED WALL

Location: 1.5 nautical miles (2.4km) north of Long Caye

Depth: 15-130ft (5-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



If you're just into poking around, this is the reef for you. The anchorage is shallow at 15ft to 30ft before the wall drops off. Painted Wall was named for the large numbers of painted tunicates found here. Actually the most common invertebrates on the reef, these resemble small sponges and filter feed as well. Living in colonies of sometimes hundreds, tunicates can be beautiful, with those being translucent and a shockingly vivid blue. Look for colonies at the base of soft corals.

Numerous elongated and round coral heads are scattered all over this reef top, interspersed with pleasant, sandy valleys. Both green and goldentail eels make their homes here, along with lots of juvenile tropicals, smooth trunkfish and resting porcupinefish. Look closely and you may also spot lettuce nudibranchs.

Over the wall, look for numerous blennies including the beautiful little arrow blenny and the diamond blenny. Eagle rays like this part of the wall and will swim out into the blue and occasionally swoop in on divers. Arrow crabs live in crevices and sponges at cleaning stations. The elusive seahorse has also been spotted here in the 50ft to 60ft depth range.

This is a good night dive as well, with all manner of lobsters to be found including Spanish, slipper and spiny varieties. Octopus can be seen out looking for prey, as can some big crabs. Look into the blue and your light may also catch the eyes of squid.

A guide observes a gray angel



28 THE AQUARIUM

Location: Northwest Corner of Long Caye
Depth: 25-130ft (8-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This site is popular as a second or third dive for the many day boats that visit the **Blue Hole**. Yellowtail snapper, chub and the occasional groupers can be very friendly here. This is probably due to some shops feeding them in the shallows, just a couple of coral heads west of the mooring.

The Aquarium is popular as it has so much variety and is a shallow 20ft at the mooring and reeftop. There is a well-developed spur-and-groove formation at

this site but it is also worth the short trip away from the wall into even shallower waters to see some very healthy elkhorn and pillar corals in clear blue water.

You will notice a mild current here most of the time; this is what attracts the fish and makes it such an aquarium experience. The reef has little in the way of swim-throughs but falls off nicely at 30ft onto a wall with many cuts and protected areas full of fish life. If you swim west along the wall away from the mooring, the current can actually pick up a bit, so be aware of what the ocean may be doing in this area. If not doing a drift, which most dive operations don't do, swim east for the easiest return to the boat.

There are some nice growths of black coral deeper at The Aquarium along with some deepwater sea fans. Parrotfish and jacks are commonly seen as well.

29 SILVER CAVES

Location: Northwest of Long Caye
Depth: 20-130ft (6-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



A sheer wall features at this site, along with caves that seasonally have silversides in them, which can make for good underwater photos. Even if the site's somewhat long swim-through and small side tunnels aren't full of tiny fish, there is plenty of other aquatic life to see. The long swim-through starts at around 70ft on the wall before moving up to 20ft to 25ft in the shallows. The exit is to the left as you swim up, with some false exits which may have silversides in them as well. There is also a long sandy chute to the north of this open swim-through.

Look for juvenile angelfish, soapfish, arrow crabs and both banded and yellowface shrimp around and in the sponges. Numerous cleaning stations exist along the outer wall so go slowly and also check the many sponges and undercuts for signs of invertebrate life. Look too for the beautiful little peppermint shrimp in yellow tube sponges under the mooring.

Out on the wall it is common to hear toadfish calling. Great sponge growths such as rope sponges, big barrel and vase sponges encrust the outer wall and yellow tubes are seen in the shallows.

Look for filefish and big-eye jacks under the mooring, yellowtails and eels in the many cracks and caves, plus many tarpon and some barracuda.

Decompression here is easy and you may see a lot of fish life while off-gassing. This is also a wonderful place to spot 'lurking' fish such as spotted scorpionfish and sand divers. If that's not enough to keep you looking, eagle rays have been spotted here too.



Silversides in Silver Cave

30 CATHEDRAL

Location: *West of Long Caye***Depth:** *25-130ft (8-40m)***Access:** *Boat***Expertise Rating:** *Intermediate*

Deep overhanging coral plates, shallow tunnels and well-adorned reef fingers accent this popular site, which is great for big sponges on the outer wall, including bright red rope sponges, big barrels and some very large yellow tube sponges. Marauding schools of blue tang and cleaning Creole wrasse swirl to the reef top in a flurry of color, and you'll also find lots of yellowtail, great barracuda, indigo hamlets, octopus and occasional queen angelfish in varying sizes.

Large-eyed toadfish call along the outer reef, their deep sounds reverberating through the water. Look for them under the overhangs.



Sea plumes

Big midnight parrotfish like to roam the upper reef, crunching off coral bits to get the algae, and make pretty photo subjects if you can get them to slow down from their daily menu long enough to pose.

This reef is also home to some corkscrew anemones, Pederson shrimp and arrow crabs, while the outer wall has arrow blennies and sponge-dwelling spikefin blennies in residence.

You may find that although the site's wall is gorgeous, the labyrinth of coral passageways at 40ft is what really enralls you. These lead to other passages and out to sand chutes – do a little of both for the best experience. Reef sharks have also been seen off the wall here.

31 LONG CAYE WALL

Location: *West of Long Caye***Depth:** *15-100ft (4-30m)***Access:** *Boat***Expertise Rating:** *Intermediate*

If you have the opportunity to dive twice here, try one dive with a wide-angle lens and another with macro to bring back memories of the best of both worlds. The reeftop is in 15ft to 30ft of water with the drop-off starting at 30ft before falling into the depths.

This wall is covered in black coral of the gray sea fan variety. Divers seasonally spot sergeant majors guarding eggs on the wall, roaming barracuda, and juvenile spotted drums, which make good photo subjects.

In the shallow corals there are corkscrew sea anemones with Pederson shrimp and snapping shrimp. Yellowhead jawfish make homes in the sand, while lizardfish, porcupinefish, lobsters and green morays are all seen frequently.



A giant barrel sponge full of life



Split crown feather duster

32 QUE BRADA

Location: West of Long Caye
Depth: 25-130ft (4-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



There are quite a few dive sites named Que Brada in Belize. Literally translated, it means 'break in the reef'. The Que Brada here is an undersea ravine north of the mooring that dramatically divides the reef wall.

The mooring sits atop a coral head at just 20ft and the nearby sand is interspersed with numerous coral heads in the 15ft to 35ft range. Sea turtles have

been seen in these shallows so keep an eye out for munching reptiles. Big tilefish also have their nests at this site and peacock flounder blend in with the sandy sea floor.

Another sandy bonus is the presence of yellowhead jawfish, which may be incubating eggs from the protection of their sandy holes. In the corals look out for lettuce slugs and reef mantis shrimps.

The Que Brada cut starts in 50ft then falls to 80ft and is well-adorned on both sides. The outer wall features growths of rare black coral, bright orange elephant ear sponges and barrel sponges. Other critters which can be seen at Que Brada include reef octopus, green and goldentail morays and channel-clinging crabs.

33 UNO COCO

Location: West of Long Caye
Depth: 25-130ft (4-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Sitting just off the southern end of Long Caye this site is great for long dives and looking for smaller reef species. It can also be done as a deep dive as the wall starts at only about 33ft before falling off to a deep shelf at 115ft and plunging into the abyss. The mooring itself sits atop a sandy plain in about 25ft of water.

The corals and wall edge are both topped by a jungle of sea plumes, while the sponges here add a lot of color. Red rope sponges, yellow tubes and orange elephant ears all make for a kaleidoscope of color when a photographer's strobe is directed their way. Lots of Creole wrasse course the reef here and look also for a school of bigeye jacks that like to hide under the protection of a moored live aboard.



Scrawled filefish

Swim over the edge, south as deep as you like, then head back around to the mooring after you reach a large crevasse-like formation along the wall. Look for tiny slender filefish taking refuge in soft corals at the reeftop.

This makes a great night dive. Look for basket stars at the top of the wall. Schools of squid float through the inky water at night; use your dive light to look for eyes. Many members of the puffer family fish, such as the porcupinefish, balloonfish, and web burrfish are common night performers here.

34 LONG CAYE RIDGE

Location: West of Long Caye
Depth: 25-100ft (8-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Long, deep and very much alive with fish life, this site has a very interesting spur-and-groove system with some good swim-throughs.

Underwater photographers should note the sand here is particularly beautiful, being quite white. However it is very fine and can be disturbed easily, causing backscatter, so keep an eye on other divers and your overhead environment, as your bubbles can dislodge sand from above.

A mini wall area drops off with a gentle current flowing over it. Yellowtails, grunts and trumpetfish gather here around stands of sea whips and gorgonians. Look for eels in the reef cracks and crevices.

Yellowhead jawfish like this sand and can be seen popping up from their holes to feed. Look for the males who carry the eggs in their mouths – they'll be sitting in the top of their holes. Another odd fish here is the bandtail puffer with a belly lined with dots. Other macro



A jawfish comes out of its hole

subjects include fire red file clams with snowy white tentacles, and small anemones with their commensal shrimp or arrowcrabs. In one tiny corkscrew anemone on this reef, there was a Pederson shrimp, red snapping shrimp and arrowcrab all enjoying the same habitat. The small shells of single-tooth simnias blend in very well with the branches of purple gorgonians also found here.

For the patient diver, treasures abound. These include harlequin pipefish and slender filefish. Divers often remark at the large amount of sea urchins at the site even during the day. Look also for octopus and nudibranchs come nightfall.

Live-aboard ships here become a refuge for some pretty schools of fish, most notably bigeye jacks and yellowtail snappers. Large and solitary great barracudas also come around to check out the action, as do large black grouper. This can be a great wide angle spot for photographers to play with fish schools as they move with the current and swinging ship.

35

JULIE'S JUNGLE

Location: Southwest of Long Caye

Depth: 30-130ft (9-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate

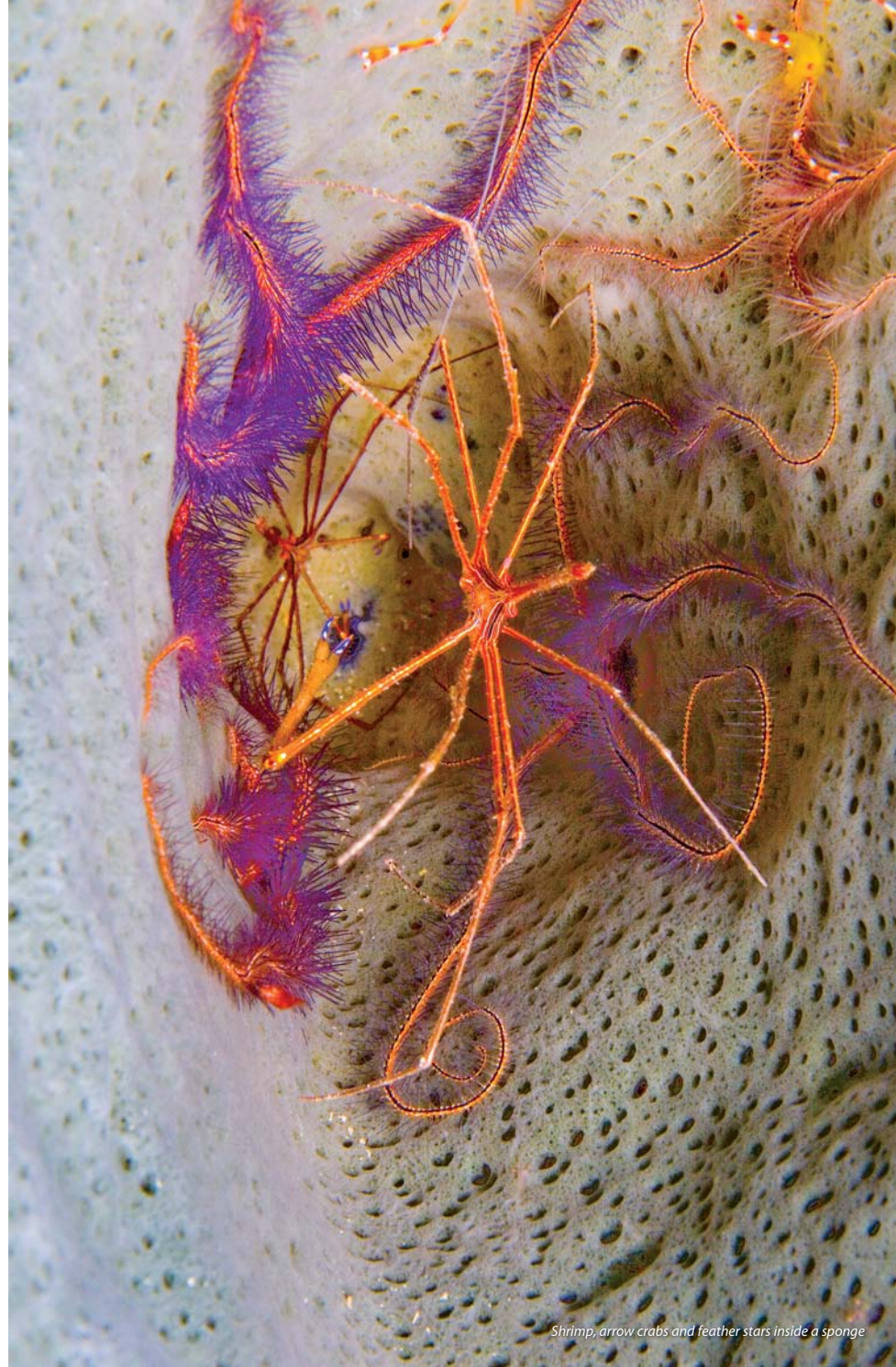


The mooring here sits in 30ft of water giving access to reef structures with growths of soft and hard corals. This reef is highlighted by a well-developed spur-and-groove system, whose deep grooves feature coral growth along the sides. Take time to look for hiding lobsters and crabs in these areas.

The outer reef drop-off is at 50ft and falls off quickly. The main invertebrates to be seen are large yellow tube sponges, rosy barrel sponges with lots of brittle starfish, gorgonian sea fans and solid growths of rope and finger sponges.

Julie's Jungle is one of those spots that attract fish beneath the moored ship, so look for shoals of horse-eye jacks, solitary giant barracuda and the occasional visit from a large grouper.

The reef itself is home to some stunning sea anemones with Pederson shrimp within them, gray and French angelfish, marauding Creole wrasses and yellowtail snappers. This dive can be done over the wall or just at the drop-off top and along the coral heads, making for a long exploration into aquatic things both great and small.



Shrimp, arrow crabs and feather stars inside a sponge



Hermit crab

36 HAT CAVE WALL

Location: Southwest corner of Long Caye
Depth: 30-130ft (9-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



A good spot for macro shooters, the sandy flats near the mooring hold a variety of small sand dwellers.

Hat Caye itself is the small island between Long Caye and Half Moon Caye. The mooring sits in about 20ft of water in a broad sandy area that has some scattered coral heads and larger, well

adorned coral promontories in 35ft to 40ft of water leading to the drop-off.

Some attractive sandy channels are to be found between these sizeable coral structures: look in the sand for southern stingrays, peacock flounders and possibly electric rays, foraging conch and tilefish near some of the coral heads. Next, head over to the larger corals and wall, where the size of the sponges here is a key feature.

At the 80ft mark, there's plenty going on along the reef wall and out in the blue. Look for occasional eagle rays and Spanish mackerel. The wall itself has impressive growths of deepwater sea fans, rope and yellow tube sponges and hiding hamlets. Check for coral shrimp and arrow blennies in the rope sponges.

37 ELKHORN FOREST

Location: 1.75 nautical miles (2.4km) east of Long Caye
Depth: 35-130ft (11-340m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Sitting in a protected elbow on the southwest side of Long Caye, this site is named for the elkhorn corals, some up to 20ft tall, in the reef shallows toward land. Damaged by two hurricanes a few years back, some of the coral is now re-bounding well.

The shallows up by the elkhorns are home to yellow coney – a beautiful but shy grouperlike fish. Divers also report seeing Caribbean reef sharks in the depths, and the blue water is also roamed by eagle rays who may venture into the sandy flats near the mooring at 35ft to 45ft, if you're lucky.

Numerous sea fans and sea rods can be found along the tops of the reef at 40ft to 50ft. Most divers like to dive in the 35ft to 60ft region here as the fish life is best up shallow. Look in the upper reef growth for the beautiful scrawled filefish. Other creatures to look for include harlequin bass, green moray eel and various lobsters and crabs in the hideaways.

A red hind devours a spotfin butterflyfish



38 EAST CUT

Location: Southeast of Half Moon Caye
Depth: 35-130ft (9-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate

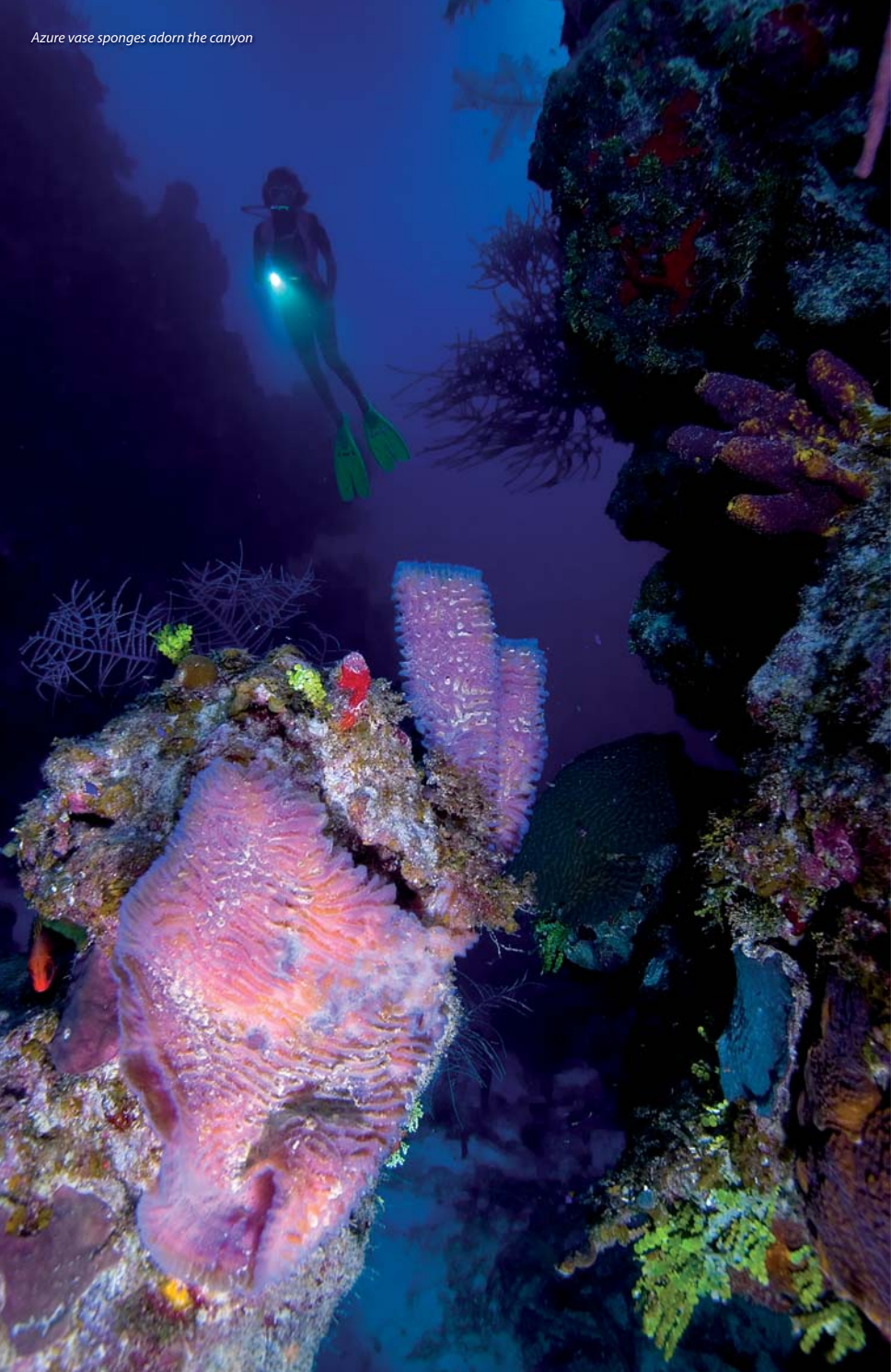


The East Cut is a deep wall with impressive gorgonians and deepwater sea fans, some enormous barrel sponges and appealing topography. The sponges are major nurseries for juvenile fish.

Up in the shallower part of the reef, the top is littered with sea plumes and fans. Look west of the mooring for octopus dens with telltale empty conch shells at their doors. The sand also holds garden eels and peacock flounders.

The fish population is quite diverse with colorful scrawled filefish, queen triggerfish and some (not so) shy hamlets that can often be seen mating at dusk. You can also hear toadfish sounding off everywhere. For macro enthusiasts, there are peppermint gobies on the wall.

This site has lots of shallow channels and small stuff found under the holes. After dark, look for night blue parrotfish and others sleeping. Big channel clinging crabs will also emerge from the outer reef crevices.



39 CHAIN WALL

Location: 1.7 nautical miles (2.4km) east of Long Caye
Depth: 35-130ft (11-340m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Chain Wall has a sandy and grassy plain marked by a buoy in 30ft of water. This whole reeftop stays fairly flat and consistent at 35ft to 40ft until the wall drops off at 50ft. The site has one of the new mooring eyes

The sand and crevices feature low coral and are home to southern and roughtail stingrays, tilefish and lizardfish. Macro opportunities here are good and both 60mm and 105mm macro lenses are handy. There are many types of shrimps and crabs. Also watch for tiny squat lobsters and decorator crabs, conchs in the sand, schoolmasters in small shoals and rays followed by jacks.

The deep, sheer wall decorated with beautiful sponges holds residents such as a giant moray. There are stunning sponges on the wall. Look also for large and well-fed queen, gray and French angelfish weaving in and out of cover.

40 TARPON CAVES

Location: South of Half Moon Caye
Depth: 24-130ft (7-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



The big attraction here is a chimney marked by a stand of three large vase sponges. This long tunnel starts at roughly 40ft, then goes down in an elbow to the right before opening up in a big crevice at 95ft. There is also a



A blenny moves along a sponge

hole right next to the chute with silver-sides inside. Go back up to the shallows this way.

This entire reef is a great place to explore – just watch your depths. The structure has numerous holes and swim-throughs and the outer reef contains multiple cleaning stations. Marine life here includes tarpon, sea turtles, tiger groupers, horse-eye jacks, ocean triggerfish, massive midnight parrotfish and eagle rays.

Up top in the grassy flats under the mooring, look for porkfish, groupers, jacks and huge gray angels. This site is also home to a scientifically undescribed and minuscule sea hare. It is a vivid maroon and yellow color, smaller than your small fingernail, and lives in the sand flats west of the mooring. Look for something that resembles a small patch of dirt.

A diver with horse-eye jacks at dusk



41 HALF MOON CAYE WALL

Location: South of Half Moon Caye

Depth: 24-130ft (7-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This site is a little different than many of the others along this reef, as the mooring sits on a broad sandy plain, which runs to the bird sanctuary on the west side of Half Moon Caye. Boobies and big frigates nest here and circle the sky over live aboards. There is also a sea turtle nesting program on the island and a couple of rangers to keep an eye out for poachers.

Head out over the sandy plain and look down over acres of sand – home to countless garden eels. This is also the habitat for Caribbean conch, along with some opportunistic hermit crabs who have grabbed conch shells – look for the trails and tracks of both. You'll also see southern stingrays and, if you're really lucky, electric rays with their light brown coloration (don't try to touch one... the shock carries 140 volts!).

Past the sand and across some small grass patches beautifully adorned castles of corals are home to lots of fans and sea whips, as well as shyer creatures including toadfish, black and tiger groupers, blue parrotfish and the stunning little harlequin pipefish. A few tarpon also inhabit these sheltered caves and crevices.

On the other side, a pretty sheer wall starts at 40ft with sandy crevices and lots of sponges and hard corals. Look under the plate corals for toadfish, harlequin pipefish and tiny arrow blenny. In the blue you may see great barracuda, ocean triggerfish or even an occasional Caribbean reef shark swim by. The usual shoals of Creole wrasse are also found here, along with plenty of other marine life.

When returning to the ship, check out the mooring, which has become a small cleaning station – juvenile gray angelfish, banded shrimps and even an occasional lobster can be seen hanging around. In the sand you can also find the odd little yellow-face pikeblenny, which can be spectacular when its fore-dorsal fin is up.

Under the ship itself, expect to see some tarpon, bigeye jacks and perhaps even a big barracuda.

42 SHARK POINT

Location: Southeast of Half Moon Caye

Depth: 30-130ft (9-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Shark Point is a deep site starting 45ft at the top of the reef but actually falling off to a wall with beautiful sponge and coral fan growth at about 70ft, then extending into the abyss. Nice growths of healthy plate coral mark the drop-off.

The deeper of the area's walls is rich in fish life, with many black groupers, Nassau groupers, Caribbean reef sharks and cobia during the grouper's spawning period.

Outside spawning time, look for bluestriped grunts, permits and cero in the area. Barracuda are also common.

The mooring is in a sandy area in 50ft of water, with some scattered corals at around the same before the wall. Conch and eagle rays can be seen here, while octopus make their dens in coral heads and eagle rays pass by in the blue past the wall.



A miniscule sea hare unidentified by science

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