

A well-camouflaged decorator crab



## TURNEFFE ISLANDS

The Turneffe Islands Atoll is the largest of the offshore trio and also the closest to the Belize coastline. Here you will find an area dominated by purely mangrove islands. These mangrove ranges, both offshore and coastal, make Belize diving special as they are the nurseries on which almost all marine life depends to ensure juvenile protection and biological productivity.

Although the atoll is best known for its walls, there are many shallow sea gardens and bright sand flats inside the reef which are excellent for scuba diving.

Undoubtedly, the highlight of Turneffe Islands diving is a spot called **The Elbow**, located at the atoll's extreme

southern tip. Here at the convergence of several ocean currents you may dive through enormous schools of permit, snappers, eagle rays, Atlantic spadefish,

Turneffe Islands	GOOD SNORKELING			
	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
17 SANDY SLOPE			•	
18 AMBER HEAD SOUTH & NORTH			•	
19 TRIPLE ANCHOR			•	
20 SAYONARA			•	
21 THE ELBOW				•
22 MYRTLE'S TURTLE			•	
23 BLACK BEAUTY			•	
24 FRONT PORCH			•	
25 GRAND BOGUE II			•	

grouper and jacks numbering at times in the thousands. Visibility here ranges from great to rather poor, depending more on the wind direction than currents. A lot of wave action can stir things up in the mangroves, carrying nutrients into the water and reducing the visibility. But on a good day, this atoll holds many pleasant surprises.

Diving here can be done by staying on one of the lodges on the atoll's cayes, by live aboard, or by day trip from Belize City and the San Pedro area.

The northwest site moorings normally sit in 35ft to 40ft of water and the reef becomes a spur and groove system that leads to a vertical wall. This drops to a sandy shelf around 100ft to 120ft at most sites, then falls off again past sport-diving limits. The northwest side is protected from the occasional strong eastern and southeastern winds that sometimes blow in, so divers can visit these sites all year round and in most types of weather.

When the wind shifts to the north northwest, blowing down from the US Gulf, sites on the east side are divisible. This reeftop and wall starts a bit deeper in the 40ft to 60ft range, and is known for being less of a slope and quite sheer in some spots. The reeftop also has interesting swim-throughs and some tight spurs and grooves.



## The Offshore Atolls

Lighthouse Reef Atoll, Turneffe Islands Atoll and Glover's Reef Atoll together cover more than 400 square miles with a total 140 miles of drop-off walls. Incredibly, these atolls comprise as much reef surface as the Belize barrier reef itself! Unlike Pacific atolls built on volcanoes, these sit atop two parallel submarine ridges close enough to the surface to allow the formation of massive coral and sponge growths.

At night with the Milky Way overhead, the Caribbean moon rising and the jacks and yellowtails playing and feeding in a live aboard's lights, this can be a superb experience. The sky is alive and shooting stars are common.





A porkfish

## 17 SANDY SLOPE

**Location:** West of Northern Lagoon  
**Depth:** 40-100ft (12-30m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



This is a popular stop as it is normally sheltered from prevailing winds and divisible most of the time. A mooring on the site sits in 40ft of water: follow the mooring line down to the sand and start to explore.

There are scattered coral heads and a gradually sloping reef that hits flats at 100ft. If you swim to the south, the slope will be steeper, while the north end is more gradual. There are some nice deepwater sea fans and mesh gorgonians quivering in the gentle current. Look also for big yellow tube sponges.

The shallow part of the reef is most alluring with numerous coral formations and plenty to see. Look for the beautiful giant anemones – inside you can find Pederson shrimp and porcelain crabs hiding among the purple-tipped tentacles. Cowfish and moray eels are residents in much of the coral cover.

## 18 AMBER HEAD SOUTH & NORTH

**Location:** West of Northern Lagoon  
**Depth:** 25-130ft (9-40m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



This is basically a big slope with many small coral heads and plenty of fish and invertebrate life on each of the coral enclaves. This can be a long shallow dive and may be done as a beginning dive at the start of a live-aboard week, or as one of the last dives before heading back to Belize City.

The mooring sits in shallow water at 25 to 30ft. The bottom is white and sandy but interspersed with garden upon garden of small coral clusters topped by sea rods, purple sea fans or spreading hard corals. Look in these for big, green moray eels, spotted morays, numerous cleaning stations with arrow crabs and banded shrimp and lots of tube sponges with fish inside – spotted groupers particularly like to rest in these.

Lobsters can be seen in many underhangs as the reef deepens. Deepwater sea fans also feed here and if you look



Whitespotted filefish

## Yikes! Baby Jellies

In May and June it is possible to get outbreaks of thimble jellies – great for mantas and whale sharks which feed on them, but not so great for divers. This isn't because the jellyfish sting badly, but because their larvae seek warm, moist places such as the inner folds of a wetsuit.

From here, larval jellies burrow into the softer parts of the body such as the neck, behind the ears, underarms and the back of the knees, and (God forbid) the crotch. They then itch like crazy, which can last from a few days to several weeks.

People often get infested from a previously used wetsuit or diveskin (or even bikinis or trunks) that hadn't been washed thoroughly.

The stinging nematocysts within the larvae or egg are tough guys, staying functional for a long time.

To prevent getting these under your skin, use lots of greasy sunscreen on vulnerable parts of your body. Australian brand sunscreens may be the best, as Aussie standards are much stricter as to how well a sunscreen stays on in the water. You can also apply white vinegar to exposed parts of the body after a dive where jellies are seen. Always be sure to wash your wetsuit and swimwear after a dive, then change to dry gear.

closely you may see decorator crabs or tiny gobies hanging around in them. Cowfish take refuge in the upper parts of the reefs, while sea turtles roam in and out of the corals. Remoras are often seen in the area too, looking for something to cling to.

This can be a nice, long exploratory dive with an abundance of marine life and healthy corals to see. You don't have to go deep here to witness great fish variety and plenty of cleaning action.

## 19 TRIPLE ANCHOR

**Location:** Southwest side of Turneffe Atoll

**Depth:** 45-100ft (14-30+m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



The mooring here is at the 45ft mark near one of three anchors. There are no wreck remains but the anchors are distinctive. Swim around the area at roughly the same depth and look for one anchor in the sand; the other two will also be evident as they are firmly stuck into the overgrowing reef – despite being submerged and overgrown for centuries, they are still recognizable. No one really knows why they are here; perhaps they mark the location of a pirate's treasure chest!

The rest of the dive is also interesting, with a wall that starts deep at 100ft encrusted in a beautiful collection of big barrel sponges. There are attractive overhangs where spotted toadfish can be heard calling, and queen angelfish can be seen moving in and out of the reef's honeycomb. Gray and French angels are also impressive; with a taste for the numerous sponges they have grown large.

In the shallows, look for roaming lobsters. At night, tarpon come in to hunt in the periphery of live aboard's lights.



Banded butterflyfish

## 20 SAYONARA

**Location:** Southwest side of Turneffe Atoll

**Depth:** 30-100ft (9-30+m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



The *Sayonara* was purposely sunk as an artificial reef in 1985 and is now a magnet for marine life. Once a passenger and cargo ship that was owned by one of the cayes lodges, its wooden frame is pretty well broken up now, but still attracts plenty of fish. It is also full of macro possibilities for underwater photographers looking for the little stuff; some fish here are used to being fed and are quite approachable.

Head down the mooring line to 35ft and look for the wreckage just southeast toward the shallows from the mooring pin. On the mooring itself is a hole where a hefty channel-clinging crab sometimes hides. The small coral head just southeast of the mooring is home to a spotted moray.

There are scattered coral heads, some rather large at 20ft to 30ft high, as you head toward the reef's deeper reaches. Look in the sandy channels here. At 60ft to 80ft, yellowhead jawfish pop up and down from their holes, so look closely at each to see if any are holding and incubating eggs in their jaws.

This site is also known for both whitespotted and whitestriped toadfish – check in the deeper reaches under plating corals. A powerful light will help to see their eyes reflect back, and you will no doubt hear them here.

The deep reef near the drop-off has decent giant barrel sponges and some cluster tube sponges. Look for giant barracuda that patrol in the grooves. After inspecting the deep reef, come back into the shallows and look around.





Pederson cleaning shrimp and small anemones can be found in the corals and a large trumpetfish lurks near the moorings. Schools of horse eye jacks also like to swim under the boat as it swings on its mooring.



## 21 THE ELBOW

**Location:** South of Big Caye Bokel

**Depth:** 60-130ft (18-40m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Advanced



This is one of the few drift dives along the atolls that is actually a true drift dive – if the currents are cooperating. It can only be done in calm conditions, and given the site's exposure, that isn't a constant. When it can be dived, divers hope for some solid current action as this attracts the big schools of fish, which in turn attract Caribbean reef sharks, the occasional hammerhead, mantas, schooling eagle rays in groups of up to 40 or 50 and lots of other pelagic life not normally seen at calmer sites.

Located where the currents run along both sides of the atoll convene, The Elbow can be a fast drift. One divemaster noted that the first time he did it, he shot along the wall so fast his dive was all but over in 10 minutes. So he sur-



facted and was dropped off at the start of the dive again – twice more!

While this isn't the recommended approach, all the excitement and action of a drift dive is to be found here when conditions are right.

The shallow mooring is in 25ft of water. Look carefully under the reef structure right in front (northeast) of the mooring, as spotted toadfish have been seen here before. The reef has scattered corals rising up to 20ft and then falls down to a wall at 50ft. The current normally runs southwest along

here but look to see which way the fish are pointed to make sure – fish schools will face into the current.

The best action is over the edge at 60ft to 120ft. Look out into blue water to see cubera snapper schools, horse eye jacks in large numbers, Atlantic spadefish, reef sharks, king mackerel and lots of other pelagic life. Also peer into deeper cracks and canyons along the wall for some very large groupers. Watch your time and depth here – it can get tricky if you drift too far out. The wall itself has lush growths of tube and bar-

rel sponges, with many active basslets and chromis. Beautiful gorgonians also thrive here.

If the currents are too strong, make your way back up the wall and into the shallows for a long deco stop. If you have been carried off, make your deco stop then surface so your boat or Zodiac can pick you up. Common and bottlenose dolphins come here too so keep an eye out for these curious marine mammals – they may zoom in to have a look at you or follow the pickup boat back to the mother ship.





## 22 MYRTLE'S TURTLE

**Location:** Northwest of Big Caye Bokel

**Depth:** 35-130ft (11-40m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



This site is named after a resident green sea turtle, dubbed 'Myrtle', that appears seasonally. The deep wall here is well beyond sport diving limits but it contains some stunning reef formations, sponges and plenty of shelter for marine life.

Starting in 35ft of water, it has a fantastic spur and groove system. The reef slopes to 60ft, then drops sharply to a wall that starts at 160ft. Since it is near **The Elbow**, snapper and jack schools can be seen here as well. Also keep an eye out for seasonal Spanish mackerel, eagle ray squadrons and that elusive manta ray.

## 23 BLACK BEAUTY

**Location:** Southeast of Big Caye Bokel

**Depth:** 45-130ft (1540m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



This site was named for the black coral that was once found here but it has long since been harvested. If you start at the deepest part of this reef and work your way up through the many fingers and sandy chutes, you'll be pleasantly surprised. Located near the famous Elbow, the chance of seeing eagle rays, turtles, tuna and a few pelagics and sharks are favorable here – watch the blue. The mooring sits in about 50ft of water and the ship swings out over a steep hill cut with fingers and covered with sponges and corals.

Look for large sea rods swaying in the current, and gorgonians of varying sizes everywhere, from along the wall to the upper reef flats. Schools of yellowtails and Creole wrasse course the edge of the reef in large schools, and huge blue parrotfish can be seen roaming the walls, occasionally biting off a hunk of coral.

Cleaning stations in the sand chute corals abound and you can find barber pole shrimp in the barrel sponges. Blennies like the various tube sponges, while big yellow and purple sponges add color. Gray and queen angelfish forage here along with porgies and cowfish.



Gray angelfish





Up top, the groans and grunts of the rare spotted toadfish, which is endemic to Turneffe, can be heard clearly. Their sounds carry for a great distance so it's often hard to tell where they are. Look under ledges as they sit on the sand beneath protecting outcrops. If you see one of these catfish-like creatures, approach slowly and breathe easily. This may allow you to get close enough to quietly observe the strange little guys.

The upper reef also has small anemones with commensal shrimp, lots of gobies and even a lobster or two. This

area is dotted with many coral heads and sandy patches between. All have a good selection of sponges, sea fans and sea fingers – look in these for trumpetfish.

Located on the exposed outer reef close to the southern end of Turneffe where the atoll's currents meet, this site also faces the open sea, so swell and surge can make this a tough dive to tackle, if at all. But when conditions are right it's an amazing dive with much to offer the photographer, from macro to wide angle.

## 24 FRONT PORCH

**Location:** Northwest of Big Caye Bokel

**Depth:** 35-130ft (11-40m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Named for the front porch of the Turneffe Island Lodge which virtually overlooks the site's mooring, this is an interesting dive with plenty of coral heads along the upper reef. This starts where the mooring sits in 35ft of water and runs down to 45ft before falling off at the 50ft mark. The very deep wall here goes beyond the normal sport diving limit.

Look for hunting trumpetfish as you go down the mooring. Large southern stingrays can be found in the sand channels of the grooves here, and chan-



nel clinging crabs can be seen in holes in the reef. Out in the blue, eagle rays often swim by. There are very large coral formations that have formed near the edge of the wall. Back away from the wall's lip are numerous small coral heads covered in soft corals and fans.

Spotted toadfish endemic to Turneffe have been seen and especially heard in this area. Look around for a glimpse of this special little fish or ask your guide if they know where one lives. Hamlets, grunts and groupers can all be found along the reef.

## 25 GRAND BOGUE II

**Location:** Northwest of Big Caye Bokel

**Depth:** 25-130ft (8-40m)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



The mooring starts in 35ft of water, sitting out in the middle of the sand. Look for peacock flounder, southern stingrays and conch as you descend and explore. In the 35ft to 45ft range there are scattered coral heads and lots of sand. As you explore the various coral habitats, expect to see lobsters, slipper lobsters, morays, gray angels and spotted drums both juvenile and adult phases.

A large sand chute runs from 50ft to 80ft out to the drop-off, with good growths of pink vase sponges and big yellow tube sponges. If you swim right as you exit the chute, the wall is pocked with lots of cuts and caverns, including a large one just southwest of the chute. Look for turtles resting on the ledges here.

To the left there are crevices holding queen angelfish and tiger groupers. Swim back up to 60ft then head back toward the mooring, where hunting around at 45ft often produces more sand critters and ubiquitous yellowtails.

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