

Giant anemones come in various colors and are frequently home to several species of shrimp



Cozumel Dive Sites



Bar jacks are often seen over sand near slopes and dropoffs

Cozumel Dive Sites

	GOOD SNORKELING	BOAT ACCESS	SHORE ACCESS
1 PARAÍSO REEF NORTH	•		•
2 THE JUNKYARD (FORMERLY AIRPLANE FLATS)	•		•
3 PARAÍSO REEF SOUTH	•	•	
4 PARQUE CHANKANAAB	•		•
5 LA QUEBRADA OR BEACHCOMBER CAVERN			•
6 THE FELIPE XICOTENCATL WRECK			
7 TORMENTOS REEF		•	
8 YUCAB REEF		•	
9 EL PASO DEL CEDRAL REEF		•	
10 TUNICH REEF		•	
11 CARDONA REEF		•	
12 SAN FRANCISCO REEF		•	
13 SANTA ROSA REEF		•	
14 PALANCAR REEF		•	
15 PUNTA SUR		•	
16 COLOMBIA REEF		•	
17 MARACAIBO REEF		•	
18 COLOMBIA SHALLOWS		•	
19 PUNTA DALILA		•	
20 DZUL-HA	•	•	
21 SAND DIVER'S SECRET	•	•	•

1

PARAÍSO REEF NORTH

Location: Just north of the El Cid La Ceiba Beach Hotel
Depth range: 40-50ft (12-14m)
Access: Shore



Paraíso (Paradise) Reef North is a series of backbone-like strips of coral running parallel to the shore, which can be intersected by swimming perpendicular to the shore out to a depth of about 40ft to 50ft (12m to 14m). If you exceed this depth you've overshoot the reef, so turn around immediately and head back toward shore. Paraíso Reef North lies just seaward of a sand flat marked at its shoreward edge by what's left of a sunken airplane (see **The Junkyard**). To find Paraíso North Reef, swim from the plane remains offshore toward the wall, bearing slightly to the right (northward). It is about a five-minute swim from **The Junkyard**.

The reef consists of large coral heads and sponges up to 6ft (2m) in diameter.

Not all brain coral colonies are hemispherical domes



Large schools of iridescent blue chromis fish form clouds above the reef, and if you hunt carefully around the sandy

Avoid the International Pier Complex

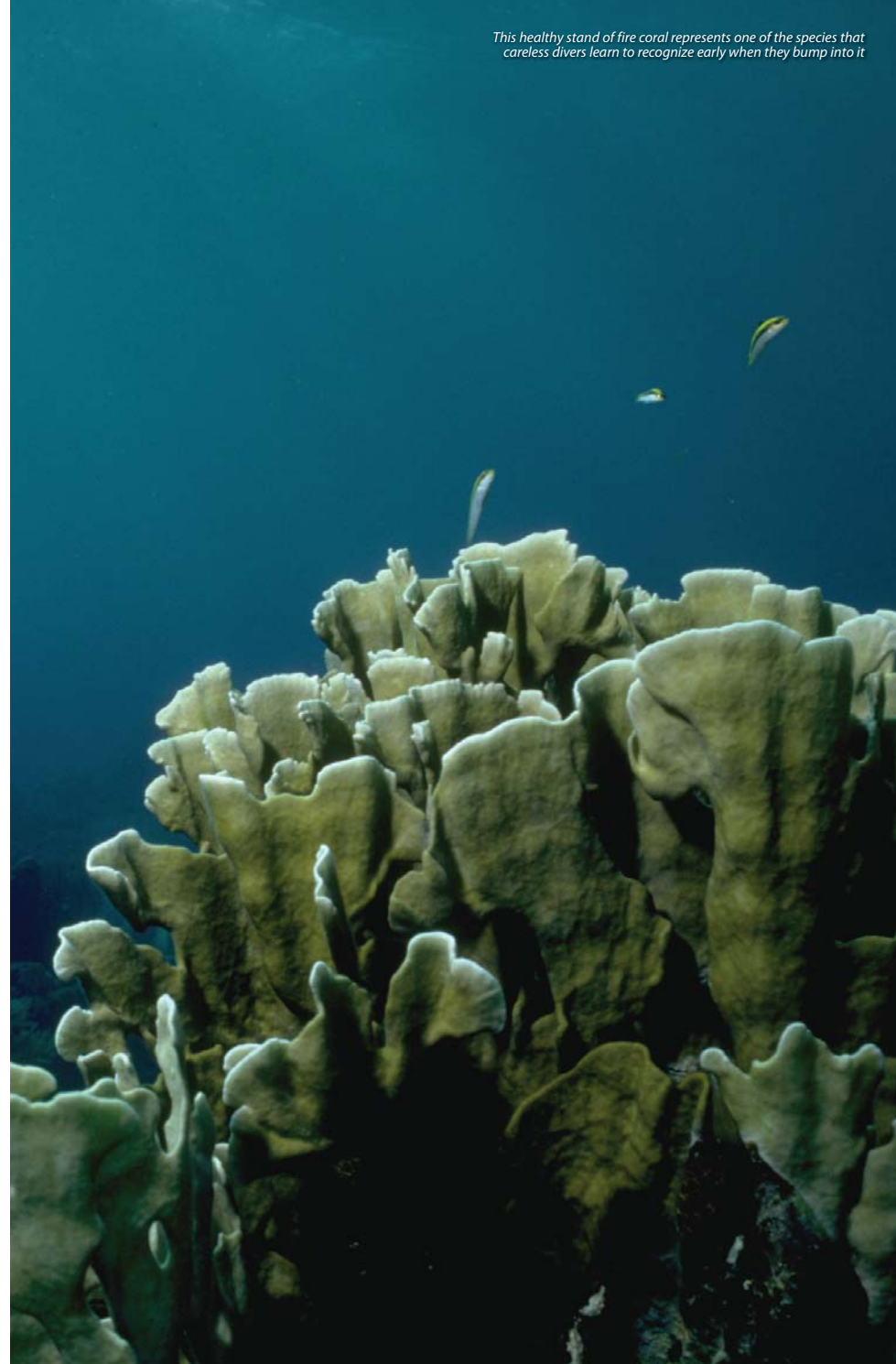
In order to stay well clear of the International Pier complex, don't dive or swim south of the El Cid La Ceiba Beach Hotel. The piers are well guarded and illegal for divers or swimmers to approach due to post 9/11 security concerns. The hazards presented by cruise liners, ferry boats and other vessels are very real.

For that matter, quite a few boats pick-up and drop-off divers at the various piers bordering **The Junkyard**. Keep your eyes open on the surface, and don't ascend without listening and looking for approaching boat traffic. The hand or head you save could be your own!

bases of the big coral heads, you may catch a glimpse of a splendid toad-fish striped in blue, white and yellow. Paraíso North is a few hundred feet long and is probably best visited as part of a longer dive, perhaps starting at this reef and proceeding inward to end near the front of La Ceiba.

Paraíso North is far enough offshore to be subject to the influence of strong currents, and if you're headed to or from this reef you may have to correct for drift. If you're carried northward by the current you will find the handiest exit at the next hotel pier. If you're carried southward, stay on the bottom, avoid the area of the International Pier complex (see below), and exit at the La Ceiba Hotel.

There is often boat traffic in this area so if you're on or near the surface, keep alert and be prepared to get out of the way of vessels that may not have seen you.



The Junkyard is the easily accessed site of an old airplane used as a movie prop. Today, not much of the plane is intact, and piles of junk have been dumped there.
Photo: G. Lewbel



2

THE JUNKYARD (FORMERLY AIRPLANE FLATS)

Location: In front of the El Cid La Ceiba Beach Hotel

Depth range: 10-40ft (12-14m)

Access: Shore



The Junkyard (formerly Airplane Flats) stretches from the front of La Ceiba in the south to just north of the next hotel (its name has changed several times in recent years, but most locals still call it the Sol Caribe, while others call it the Crown Paradise). Most of the terrain at The Junkyard is rather flat, but there's a lot to see. Snorkelers will find this an excellent spot to see fish and gorgonians (sea fans).

On the sandy bottom directly out from La Ceiba in about 40ft (12m) of water, there is some wreckage left from an old twin-engine airplane placed here as a prop for the movie *Survive* by film director Ramon Bravo in 1977. It's been broken up badly by storms, which have moved it around. Be careful not to get snagged, and look out for sharp metal edges. Many fish have made it their home over the years, and octopuses are not uncommon.

Exposed metal surfaces remain fairly clean due to the scraping bites of parrotfish, whose toothmarks can be seen on the metal along with the graffiti of thoughtless divers. Also, look for purple patches of sergeant major eggs on the pieces of the plane. The eggs will be guarded by expectant – and aggressive – parents that will nip divers who get too close.

Unfortunately, the area is also littered with old tires, barrels, pipes, cables and other large pieces of junk. If it ever gets cleaned up, we'll change its name in this book back to 'Airplane Flats.' Snorkelers can rent gear from the full-service dive stores at most of the hotels along the waterfront.

Due to easy access and lights at the hotels and docks, this is a near-perfect site for night diving. If there's any current running, you might consider jumping in at the up-current end of the site (usually, but not always, La Ceiba) and exiting at the down-current site (usually the Sol Caribe) to save yourself some swimming.

Near shore are some elkhorn coral heads, though the best formations have been battered by major hurricanes in 1988 and 2005. Long-spined sea urchins are common around these coral

heads – be careful not to touch or step on them. Beds of gorgonians begin at a depth of around 10ft (3m) and continue seaward on a shallow shelf, which is ideal for snorkelers. At night, basket stars are frequently seen spread out on top of gorgonians, feeding in the dark. There are also big open areas on the shelf with a few small coral heads. These areas are excellent places to look for large rainbow parrotfishes, especially when the sun is low in the late afternoon. You'll see them feeding on the bottom, picking at plants and chunks of coral. The shallows are patrolled by territorial damselfish that, despite their diminutive size, are inclined to nip at offending divers.

The shelf breaks at the edge of a sand flat about 30ft to 40ft (9m to 13m) deep, where a low-profile coral reef replaces the gorgonian beds a few hundred feet from shore. The most characteristic species are leaf or ribbon corals.

This reef is an ideal warm-up dive. There is enough open space over the sand to practice buoyancy control, and enough fish action to keep the dive interesting. The coral is not in very good shape due to heavy traffic and storm damage, but you'll find plenty of things to see. The fish are accustomed to hand-outs, so don't be surprised if you're mobbed by Bermuda chub or sergeant majors. Due to the large amount of trash on the bottom, keep your eyes open and beware of sharp or entangling objects.



The sand flats and grass beds along the shore are home to many conch, but not all conch shells are inhabited by snails. This 'squatter' is an opportunistic white speckled hermit crab.

3 PARAÍSO REEF SOUTH

Location: South of the International Pier Complex

Depth range: 35-45ft (11-14m)

Access: Boat



Paraíso (Paradise) Reef South consists of two long ridges of coral running end-to-end parallel to shore and surrounded by sand, at depths of about 35ft to 45ft (11m to 14m). It lies to the south of the International Pier complex and is sometimes visited by charter boats and dive operators after a deeper wall dive, or as a third dive of the day. It is also a favorite among dive operators for night dives, since it is a short boat ride from most hotels and is fairly shallow. It may also be reached easily from the shore, but boat traffic makes that inadvisable. While it's a bit deep for most skin divers, the near-shore ridge is a good reef to snorkel over and watch scuba divers. Look out for boat traffic!

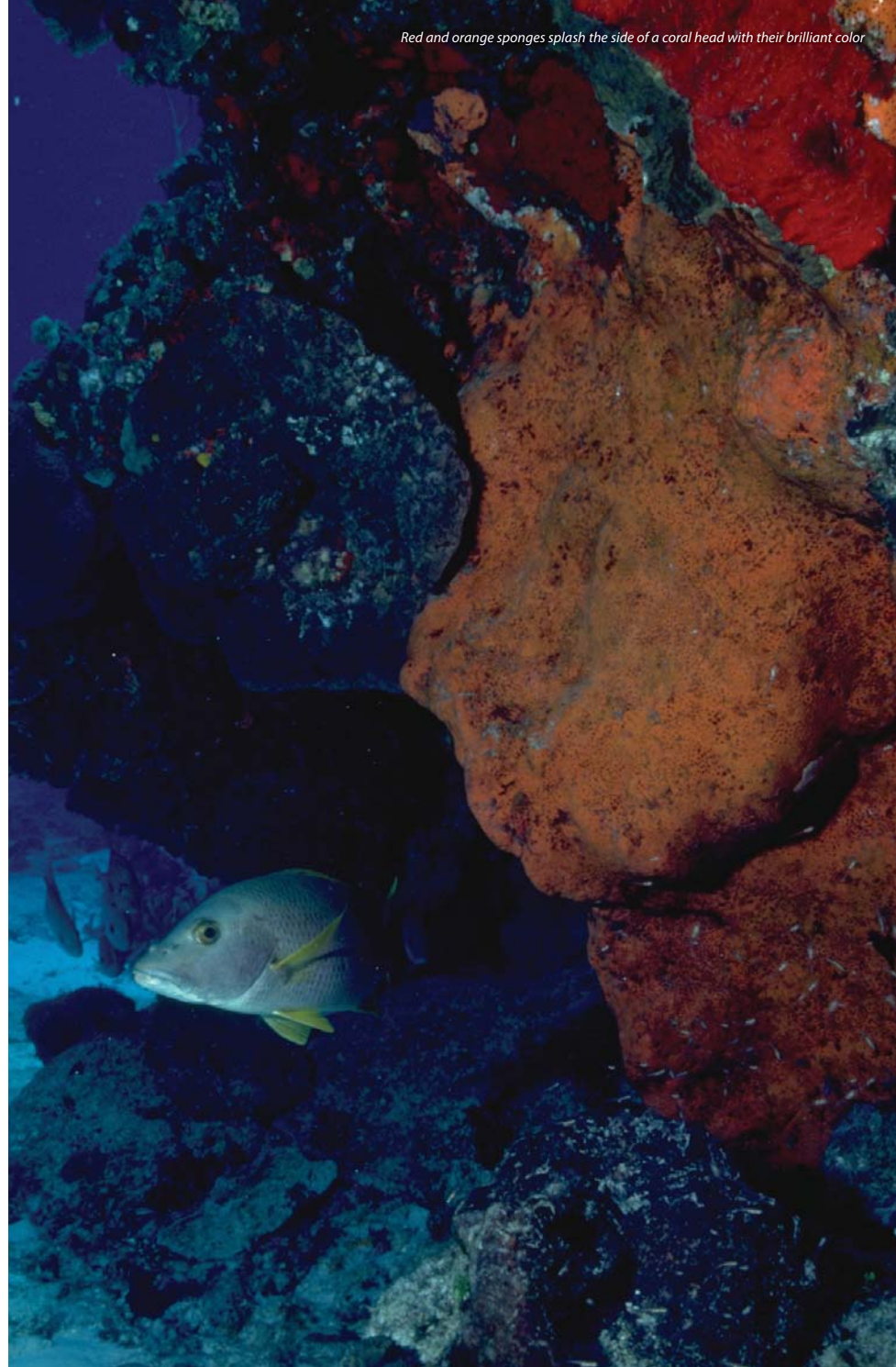
Paraíso Reef South is home to many tame fish that have been fed by dive guides. If you're hoping to see large, bizarre filefish, or French and gray angels within arms' reach, you probably won't be disappointed. The coral formations are medium-sized and this entire reef is relatively low in profile. The small crevices at the bases of the coral heads shelter many squirrelfish during the daytime, and serve as 'toeholds' for the six-foot-long (2m) sea cucumbers that stretch out on the sand at night to feed. The reef is ideal for photographers, since depth control on the fairly level bottom is far simpler than on any of the walls. If you're planning to make a wall dive while in Cozumel, you'll find when the current is running, Paraíso South is a good place to get some experience in drift diving techniques over level bottom before you hit the drop-offs.

If the current is running to the north, drift along the coral ridge with it. The first ridge is several hundred yards long and ends abruptly in sand at its northernmost point. If your air and bottom time permit, continue swimming toward the north, but angle to your left (westward or seaward) about 30 degrees from the line of the reef when you leave the first ridge. You will come to the southern tip of the second ridge within a minute or two. The second section runs parallel to the shore, but slightly seaward of the first, and is about the same in length. The second section also ends in sand at its northern tip. There is a small third section farther north and more seaward still, but it is near the International Pier complex and should be avoided (see Avoid the International Pier Complex! box). If the current is running to the south, ask to be dropped on the northern tip of the second ridge, and do the dive just described in reverse.

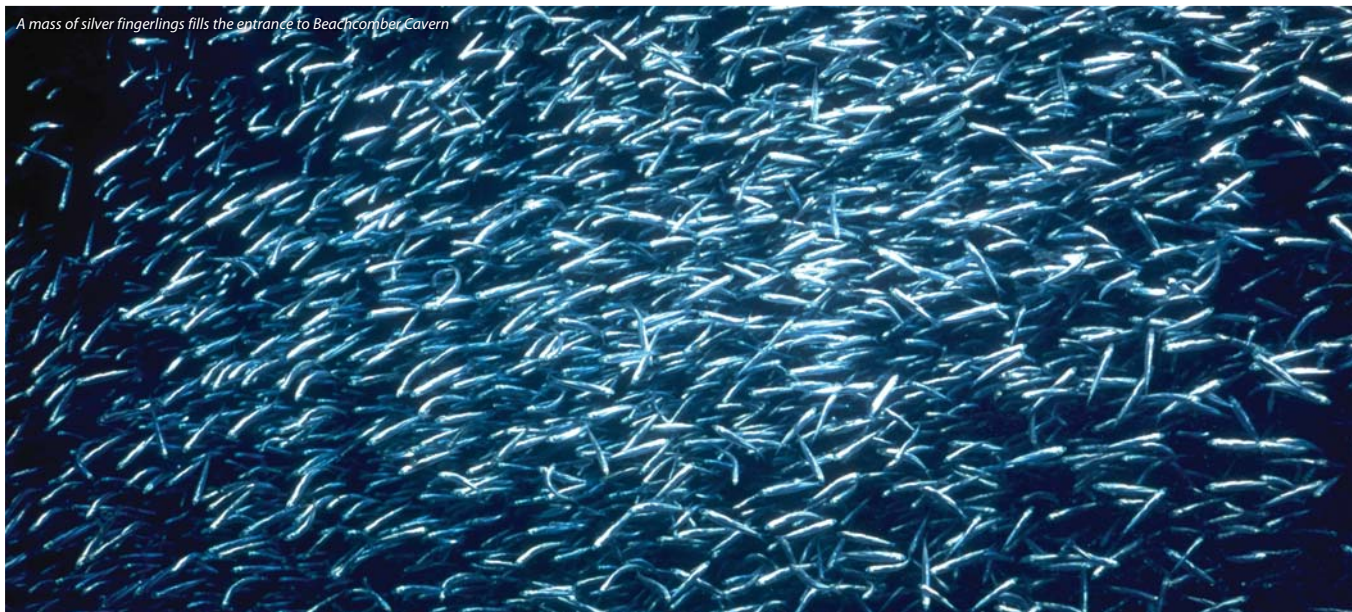
Tame fish such as this French grunt are a photographer's delight at Paraíso Reef South



Red and orange sponges splash the side of a coral head with their brilliant color



A mass of silver fingerlings fills the entrance to Beachcomber Cavern



4 PARQUE CHANKANAAB

Location: 9km south of San Miguel on the road to Punta Sur

Depth range: 10-40ft (3-12m)

Access: Shore



Parque Chankanaab (Chankanaab Park; entry \$12) is one of the most popular snorkeling sites on the island. The site is also used for scuba training purposes and for 'rusty' divers to refresh their skills before diving the deeper sites.

There's a botanical garden, a Mayan museum, sea lion shows and a captive dolphin encounter, and the site has facilities for gear rental and air fills. It is a popular weekend location for island residents due to picnic facilities and shops selling snacks.

Concrete steps and ladders provide easy access to the 10ft (3m) deep bottom. There are large schools of tame,

'pre-fed' fish – especially grunts and snapper – that can nearly always be found under large ledges within a few yards of the steps. Photographers will find these fish cooperative and used to divers (they've appeared on several posters!).

The area just offshore has tall patch reefs separated by sand channels. Local tourist interests have placed a small wrecked fishing boat on the bottom just a few hundred feet off the steps (look for the mast sticking out of the water), and an assortment of old cannons and anchors on the sand flats near shore.

Unfortunately, Chankanaab is usually mobbed by groups of tourists from the cruise ships who snorkel en masse. Experienced divers will probably want to avoid Chankanaab, although photographers may enjoy watching and shooting the chaos. Chankanaab also offers easy access to **Beachcomber Cavern** (see next site), and is the present location of Cozumel's famous 'Christ of the Abyss' statue.

Lush gorgonians populate shallow sandy areas where hard substrate is available for attachment



5

LA QUEBRADA / BEACHCOMBER CAVERN

Location: Southern edge of Parque Chankanaab

Depth range: 15-30ft (5-9m) outer cavern

Access: Shore



Just to the south of the main Chankanaab access points are several entrances to a large cavern that lead to a cave and penetrate the island for an unknown distance. The site is often called Beachcomber Cavern in memory of a fine seafood restaurant (the Beachcomber) that used to sit above the entrances of La Quebrada. The site can be found easily without this landmark.

To get to the entrances, swim on the surface a few hundred feet (around 100m) south (parallel to shore) from Chankanaab, staying close to shore until you are facing a large channel-like cut in the shore. Face the shore and you will see a narrow boat channel about 20ft (6m) wide and about 10ft to 15ft (3m to 5m) deep. It's open on the seaward side and comes to an abrupt end about 50ft (15m) in from the shoreline. You'll be looking at the mouth of it from the seaward side. The main entrance (and exit) to the cavern is just to the left of the cut, on the north side of the rocks that mark the northern edge of the cut. The main entrance is shaped like an inverted triangle, about 10ft to 15ft (3m to 5m) on each side. There are several alternative entrances and exits on the north side of the boat channel. Most of these openings are large enough for several divers to pass through side-by-side, but you should stay out of the channel if there are any waves or swells to avoid getting beaten against the ironshore. If conditions are not completely calm, you may get shredded in the channel.

Glassy sweepers hover just inside the mouth of Beachcomber Cavern. With their oversized eyes, these hatchet-shaped fish prefer the semi-darkness of the cave to the dazzling brilliance of the daytime reef



The main entrance to the outer cavern is usually filled with small, silvery fish that form a solid-looking curtain from surface to bottom and side to side. The curtain will part dramatically as you swim through. Both the main and alternative entrances open into the outer cavern, which consists of a large central room about 20ft to 30ft (6m to 10m) in diameter and about 10ft (3m) high, supported by numerous pillars. The outer cavern ceiling does not enclose any air-spaces, but has some small holes (too small for a diver to fit through) which stream in beams of sunlight. Several dark, smaller side rooms open onto this central room, and tunnels lead to the inner portion of the cave. The outer cavern and inner cave have areas of soft,

The Green Mirror

La Quebrada cavern is famous for a peculiar hydrologic phenomenon that can result in some amazing photographs. Fresh water has saturated the island and, in some locations such as this, seeps back into the sea as if from a sponge. The fresh water is usually colder than the ocean, but it is so much less dense than salt water that it floats on top if protected from turbulence. The cavern provides this protection, allowing a reverse thermocline with warmer water below colder water. The fresh water usually forms a brilliant green-colored band a few feet thick on the surface – sometimes even producing a mirror-like reflective layer 3ft or 4ft (1m) beneath the surface. Try to see it on your way in before your bubbles and turbulence have disturbed the layer. It's most visible from within the cavern, looking outward through the entrances. After you leave the outer cavern exits, you can feel the cold, fresh water on the surface and see the shimmering mixing layer where the salt and fresh water combine.

Warning!

Specialized training and equipment for cavern or cave diving techniques are essential to enter any cavern or cave safely. If you do not have this training and equipment, stay outside the entrances. If you bring a flashlight to the entrances, you will be able to see nearly all the outer cavern without having to go inside yourself.

La Quebrada's cave has not yet been fully mapped, though a few divers have penetrated it for some distance. Due to lack of information about the inner portion, the authors recommend strongly against entering any sections of the cave except for the outer cavern – the area in which certified, trained cave divers can remain within sight of, and immediate reach (one breath) of, an exit to the outside. Diving the inner portion should be done only by experts equipped and trained for exploratory cave diving.

silty bottom that can be resuspended in the water by swimming, so be very careful not to stir up the bottom or you'll lose visibility! Within the dark cavern you'll be able to see a variety of nocturnal fish (glassy sweeper, bigeye, glasseye snapper) and possibly a large grouper or two taking a nap during the day. Urchins sometimes hide near the entrances in the shadows, so use your lights before touching down.



Octopus are most easily found during night dives when they forage over the reefs

6

**THE FELIPE
XICOTENCATL WRECK***Site closed*

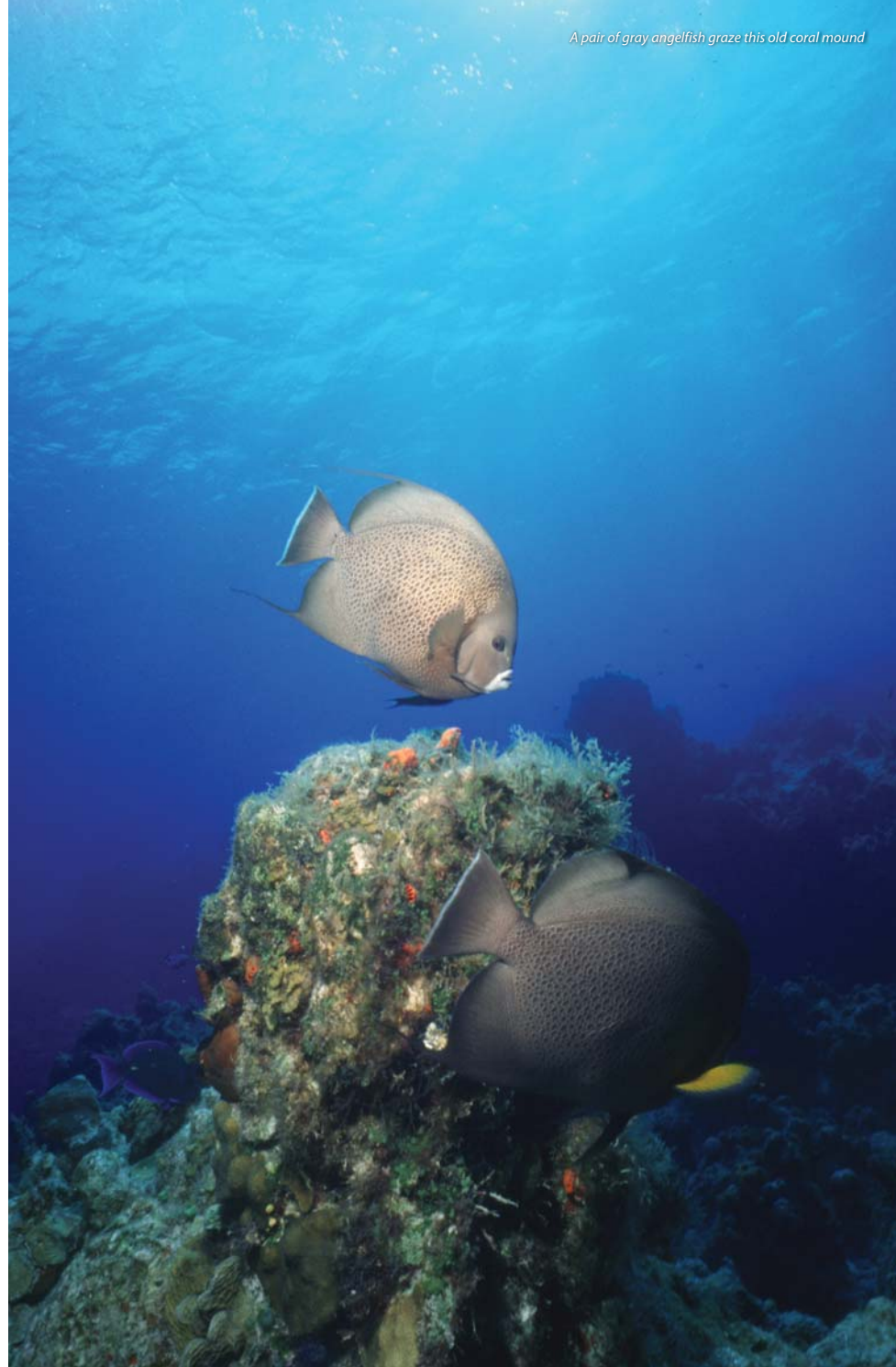
This wreck, also called C-53, is not really a wreck, in the true sense. As our friend Dr Paul Barrett put it, 'We don't crash airplanes in national parks so we can hike to them. Why do the same thing underwater?' The Felipe Xicotencatl did not sink in distress, but was put on the bottom intentionally to attract divers. However, as of April 2006, the Marine Park authorities have closed the site for diving because of hazardous conditions,

and have warned dive operators not to take their customers there.

Instead of sealing the hatches and doors to prevent people without wreck diving training from venturing inside, whoever prepared the ship for its ritual sinking chose to leave most entry points open. Some parts of the wreck are unstable, there are reports of 'moving metal,' and it's possible to penetrate a considerable distance into the wreck. As a result of these safety concerns and the present prohibition on diving the site, we have decided not to include it in this edition and do not advise divers to visit the ship until it is both legal and safe.



*The hanging vine green alga has calcified 'leaves' and is a major contributor to sand creation
Photo: G. Lewbel*



A school of grunts hang out under the reef during the day



7 TORMENTOS REEF

Location: Just south of Parque Chankanaab and La Quebrada
Depth range: 50-70ft (15-20m)
Access: Boat



This reef is similar in many respects to **Yucab** and **El Paso del Cedral** reefs. The coral heads on Tormentos Reef are a bit taller (10ft or 3m) than those on **Yucab**, and a bit lower than those on **El Paso del Cedral**, but the fauna and topography are comparable. The back sides of the coral heads provide resting places out of the strong south – north prevailing current, and you'll find end-

less subjects for macro photography on the undersides of the heads. Lobsters and nurse sharks are abundant in the crevices on the north sides of the coral heads. Tormentos is a great place to see big black grouper, smaller yellowmouth or scamp grouper, barracuda, and pairs of white-spotted filefish. The white sand dunes inshore of Tormentos are also spectacular.

Tormentos Reef is long enough that you're likely to burn a full tank before you run out of coral. If you lift off the bottom into the current, you'll usually be carried along without putting any effort into swimming. To take a break, just duck behind a coral head and hug the sand on the downstream side. For safety, stay with fellow divers (especially your dive buddy) and your dive guide.

8 YUCAB REEF

Location: Between Tormentos Reef and Punta Tunich
Depth range: 40-60ft (12-18m)
Access: Boat



Yucab ('Yocab' on some maps) is for those who like drift diving. It's sometimes a second dive of the day on boat dives, as it is possible to see a reasonable amount of the reef without exceeding 50ft (15m).

The reef runs parallel to the current direction and is surrounded by brilliant white sand. Large ripple marks can be attributed to the strong current that usually sweeps over the area from south to north. Big coral heads stick out of the sand to a height of 5ft to 10ft (2m to 3m). Divers will find some refuge from the current on the down-current sides of these heads, along with a truly marvelous collection of animals hiding out in the backwaters. The down-current ends of coral heads have been sculptured and weathered by sand scour, and many caves and ledges harbor schools of fish, large lobsters, crabs and the like. Still photographers will probably get frustrated by the current in most spots, but may shoot down 'on the deck' in the eaves of the coral heads. Video photographers will love Yucab. Fish drift along with divers when the current is strong. Very large white-spotted and scrawled filefish frequent Yucab Reef.

Yucab Reef comes to a distinct northern end, marked by a huge coral mound at about 60ft (18m), beyond which the sand slopes rapidly downward toward the wall. Divers should make their ascents on sighting this mound at the northern tip of the reef. As with other drift dives, it is important to stay with your guide or divemaster, since

charter boats usually drift above groups, following their bubbles, and pick up all divers together at the end of the dive.



Sponges of many colors encrust the coral overhangs

This giant anemone is surrounded by a stand of watercress algae. The white areas on the algae are calcareous material which eventually falls to the bottom as sand, sometimes passing through parrotfish guts on the way



9

EL PASO DEL CEDRAL REEF

Location: Offshore of El Cedral (inland, not visible from sea)

Depth range: 40-60ft (12-18m)

Access: Boat



El Paso del Cedral Reef is a long, backbone-style reef similar to **Yucab** and **Tormentos**. All three reefs have large, relatively low-profile coral heads along a ridge that separates a shallow sand flat from a deeper sand flat. The terrain on El Paso del Cedral is higher in profile above the sand, but there are more sandy stretches between coral heads at El Paso del Cedral. The tops of most coral heads lie in the 40ft to 50ft (12m to 15m) depth range, with bases in sand on the seaward side at closer to 60ft. Most of the coral heads are in a fairly straight line with respect to prevailing currents, meaning you can ride the flow and see most of the reef. After you think you've run out of coral, a gentle left turn across the sand will take you over an additional section.

10

TUNICH REEF

Location: Near Punta Tunich between Punta Tormentos and San Francisco Beach

Depth range: 60-80ft (16-24m)

Access: Boat



Tunich is almost always washed by strong currents. Expect an exciting, high-velocity drift dive along the rim of a drop-off, where currents are usually strongest. Unlike many of the more traditional reef dives on Cozumel, Tunich does not have steep buttress and

A close inspection of coral overhangs will reveal numerous species of sponges, gorgonians, corals, and small, cryptic shrimps, crabs and fishes



groove coral formations. A beautiful white sand flat at about 60ft to 80ft (16m to 24m) borders a fairly gentle slope that falls off into deeper water at around 45 degrees, dropping toward the abyss. The edge of the drop-off is an excellent place to see schools of barracudas and larger pelagics such as turtles and eagle rays. Thousands of other fish are usually there, including huge rainbow parrots and groupers, along with more queen triggerfish than you're likely to see anywhere else.

The main attraction at Tunich is its basket sponges, whose cavities face toward the north, away from the current. Each basket sponge draws water in through its outside surface, extracts oxygen and nutrients from the water, adds carbon dioxide and wastes, then dumps the filtered water out the central cavity. These cavities face down-current so already filtered water can be carried away, and the current at Tunich nearly always runs toward the north. Other kinds of low-profile sponges are also



This school of predominantly bluestriped grunts was easily approached by a slow moving diver

common here. Look out for big, flat brown patches up to 10ft (3m) across, with small siphons sticking up to pump exhaled water away. These flat sponges, in particular, should not be touched; they can produce instant 'sponge rash' and itching.

11 CARDONA REEF

Location: North and offshore of San Francisco Beach
Depth range: 60-80ft (16-24m)
Access: Boat

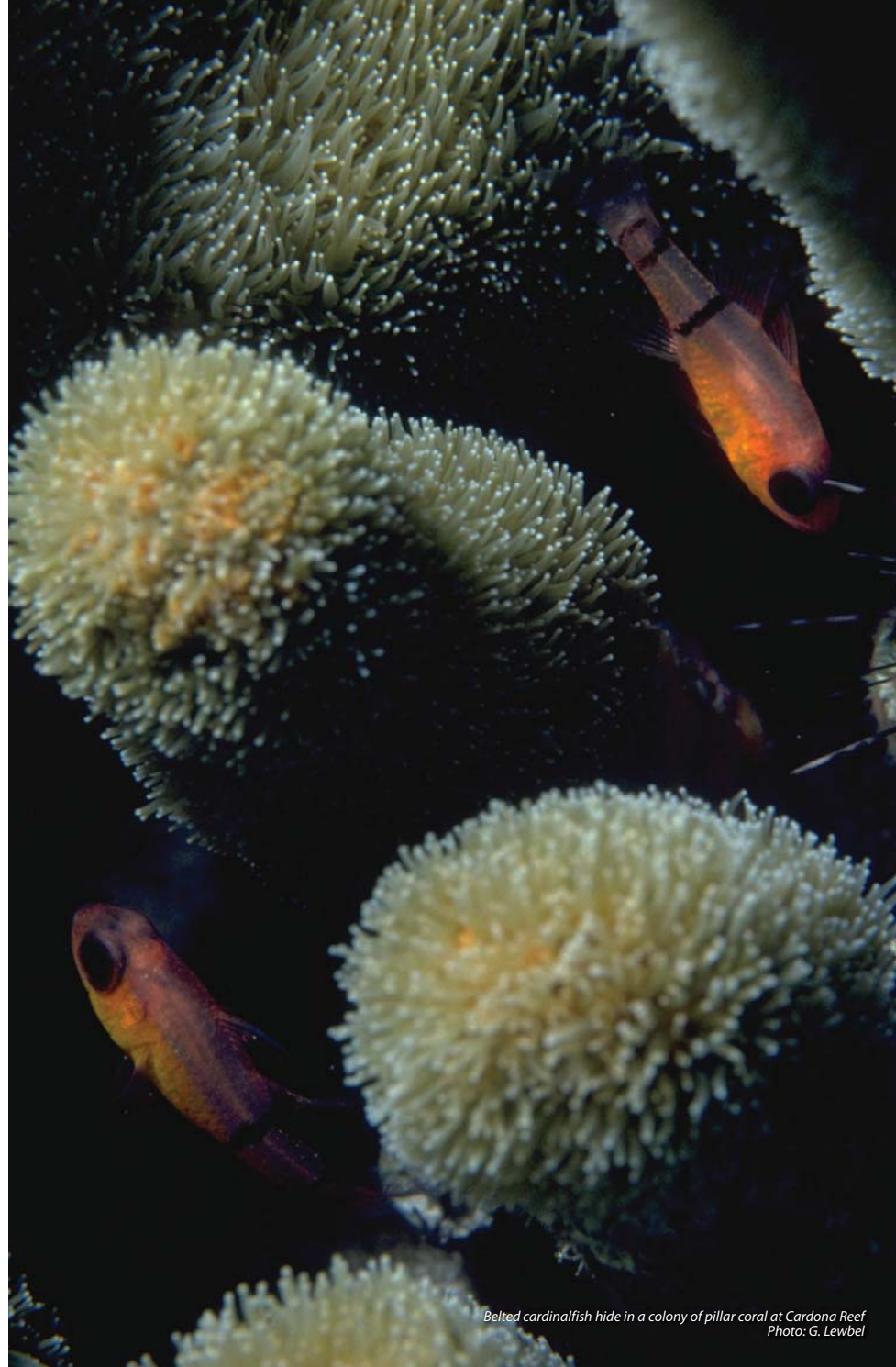


Cardona Reef is a good choice for a second boat dive after visiting **Santa Rosa, Palancar, Colombia**, or the other reefs near the southern end of the island, especially if you've already seen enough parrotfishes and giant coral heads for the time being. This could be considered a connoisseur's reef, mainly interesting to divers looking for unusual species of fish. Bring a flashlight on this dive to look under coral heads and ledges.

A low-profile reef with relatively few big coral heads, Cardona is better known for its long ledges and overhangs. Most of the ledges parallel the shoreline, forming a series of ridges.

Nocturnal Fishes by Day

The ledges at Cardona Reef provide shelter for some very large schools of nocturnal fish that hide under the overhangs. As a general rule, you can recognize nocturnal fish by two characteristics: they hide in caves and other dark places during the daytime, and they have big eyes with large pupils for effective night vision. Look for hatchet-shaped glassy sweepers, red-and-silver-barred glasseye snapper and a variety of squirrelfish. Cardinalfish are also easy to find at Cardona Reef, though they often hide among the spines of sea urchins. If you're taking pictures, you'll probably be able to get close enough to these small, beautiful fishes for a good strobe-lit shot, since many ledges are both large and roomy enough to lie beneath.



Belted cardinalfish hide in a colony of pillar coral at Cardona Reef
 Photo: G. Lewbel



Crevices and slots at San Francisco Reef offer refuge and surfaces for many of the same organisms often found under overhangs

If you're used to diving in cold water where algae is plentiful and you're wondering where the plants are on coral reefs, you'll find them under these ledges. A flashlight will help you see bright green, wingnut-shaped algae hanging down in areas of reduced light.



Yellow stingray

12 SAN FRANCISCO REEF

Location: *Directly off San Francisco Beach*

Depth range: *20-60ft (6-18m)*

Access: *Boat*



San Francisco Reef consists of a fairly low-profile coral strip on the lip of a drop-off. If you have never made a wall drift dive, this might be a good one to start with, since the edge of the drop-off is shallower than many other walls on Cozumel.

the reef and over to the west, be careful about your depth – you'll be looking down into the drop-off. The white sand to the east of San Francisco Reef is a good place for stingrays and conch.

13 SANTA ROSA REEF

Location: *Offshore of Playa Sol and Playa San Francisco*

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

Access: *Boat*



Santa Rosa Reef shares a number of features with **Palancar, Colombia**, and other coral buttress areas on the lip of the drop-off. It has tall columns of coral with vertical walls cut by channels, which slope from the white sand bottom on their shoreward side down near-vertical, terraced canyons on their seaward side. As on the other buttress reefs, enormous plate corals, mammoth-sized sea fans and spectacular sponges are common here.

The best diving is along the seaward faces of the buttresses, where divers can look down into blue depths and up along sheer cliff sides. Santa Rosa does differ from the other reefs in the diversity and quality of its caverns and grottos, though. If you want photographs or views of divers silhouetted in the mouths of caves or dropping through narrow slots between walls, this is your reef. Tame, hand-fed groupers are common here as well.

Santa Rosa Reef is known for strong currents, so drift diving is the norm. Be sure to monitor your own depth and time, because other divers may follow different dive profiles up and down the walls. Stay together with your dive guides or divemasters and with your group, as 'live' boating is typical and your boat will try to pick everyone up in a group down-current from your starting spot.

In some places, the lip is as shallow as 20ft (6m), though 50ft to 60ft (15m to 18m) is more typical. Even if you have lots of experience on walls, you'll enjoy the extra bottom time you can get on this reef by staying shallow.

The reef is an excellent spot to see filefish, angelfish, trumpetfish, and other common reef species. It is also known for its sun anemones, which look like beds of small green grapes, up to a foot across. The many nooks and crannies here shelter large lobsters, and you can often find bigeye, sweepers, and other nocturnal fish hiding in the crevices during the daytime. If you stray off

14 PALANCAR REEF

Location: South of Punta Dalila off Playa Palancar

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

Access: Boat



Palancar Reef, the most famous on the island, is renowned for its towering coral buttresses. Similar in topography to **Colombia Reef**, this is a long stretch of apartment-house-sized columns reaching as shallow as 30-40ft (10-12m) in some areas but anchored on the edge of a vertical drop-off. Between the columns are white sand channels and caves on the sheer sides of the buttresses. It is possible to stay shallow here by not descending between buttresses or along the seaward faces, but most of the diving is along the outer wall.

An especially popular area, called the Horseshoe (La Herradura), has been the subject of many photographic studies and posters.

Another excellent area for a second dive is Palancar Gardens, which has miniature buttresses, canyons and terraces, with drop-offs starting as shallow as 30ft (10m). It is not possible to 'see Palancar' in one dive or 20, since the reef is tremendous in size, and charter operators frequently visit different areas to provide variety for their clients. If you take pot luck, you won't be disappointed.

Strong currents sweep the area, and most boats operate unanchored, dropping divers off upstream of the dive site and picking them up at the other end. Stick with your group and guides or divemasters to facilitate pickup once on the surface. As with any other wall dive, be sure to monitor your depth and time carefully.



These brilliantly colored gorgonians are present in the deeper, more shaded regions of Palancar Reef

Small gobies are commonly found in large barrel sponges



15 PUNTA SUR

Location: *Near the southern end of Cozumel*

Depth range: 60-130+ft (9-40+m)

Access: Boat



The majority of the diveable area of Punta Sur is deeper than most of the other wall dives on the island. Along the crest of the drop-off, there are large buttress formations of coral with caverns and channels similar to those at **Santa Rosa Reef**. The tops of the formations reach 60ft (18m) or so at the shallowest, but most of the good scenery lies below 80ft (24m) on the face of the wall. Bases of buttresses grade steeply into a sandy slope at depths too great for sport diving. The inshore sides of the buttresses rest on a deep sand flat (120-130ft) and the seaward sides of the bases are even deeper.

Punta Sur has many caverns and tunnels penetrating the wall. Best known of these is the Devil's Throat, which has become a popular (and dangerous) dive. Much of Punta Sur looks like a single

long row of apartment buildings rising sharply on both seaward and inshore sides. The inshore sand flat spills over between the buttresses and flows down the drop-off, producing beautiful sand 'waterfalls' and rivers.

This dive site is one of the best places to find pelagic fishes such as sharks, horse-eye jacks and eagle rays. Too deep for most divers, its coral and sponges have not yet felt much impact from careless knees and misplaced fins. With any luck, it will remain the province of very experienced divers, who (presumably) have the necessary buoyancy control and diving skills to keep it in pristine condition.

Warning!

The Devil's Throat and other tunnels are suitable only for trained, certified cave divers with experience in deep diving. This location requires penetration of a very deep, lightless passageway in a full 'restricted overhead' environment, without direct and immediate access to the surface. If you are not fully qualified and equipped for this kind of specialized diving, do not attempt it.

Divers are dwarfed by the towering corals of Cozumel's deeper sites



16 COLOMBIA REEF

Location: Near the southern end of Cozumel

Depth range: 60-130+ft (9-40+m)

Access: Boat



Colombia Reef is one of the great coral buttress areas located along the lip of the drop-off toward the southern end of the island. Huge pillars of coral loom over white sand on the shoreward side and slope downward on the seaward side to successive terraces below. Tops of these pillars are mostly in the 60-70 foot (18-20 meter) range, while the narrow passageways and channels between them open onto the nearly vertical faces of the seaward side. You will find gigantic plate corals and huge sponges interspersed with anemones, gorgonian sea fans and a wide variety of other attached organisms. Many fish live among the pillars and in holes,

caves and crevices formed by the reef. Photographers will probably want to set up for wide-angle work, at least on a first dive, as the three-dimensional relief of this site is second to none in the world.

The typical boat dive here will be a drift dive, since strong currents prevail, but as in **Palancar**, you can usually find shelter from currents by taking advantage of the irregular terrain. Some protection from water movement can be had on the backside of pillars and in channels, but you can expect to cover quite a distance on one tank. As on all other wall dives, your selection of depth can range from the tops of pillars to whatever your own judgment (and your guide) will permit.

As boats operate unanchored, picking groups up at the end of the dive, be sure to stay together with your dive guide or divemaster and the rest of your group. It's a long way to shore! Current direction on Colombia is quite variable, and large eddies and swirls are typical.



The plentiful queen angelfish are seen in shallow as well as deep sites



Large barrel sponges approaching two feet in height are thought to be roughly 50 years old

17 MARACAIBO REEF

Location: Off the southern end of Cozumel

Depth range: 100-130+ft (30-40+m)

Access: Boat



Maracaibo Reef is a deep reef at the southern tip of the island. If you want to dive Maracaibo, you'll probably have to get together with enough people to charter a boat and captain for the day, rather than ride on an 'open' boat. We recommend you choose an operator you have already worked with, one not foolish enough to take unknown clients on this dive.

In general, captains on slower boats will refuse to dive Maracaibo, since the run there and back takes a full day from town. Newer resorts near Punta Sur provide much faster access. All members of your party should be advanced, very experienced divers who are certified and trained in deep-diving techniques. Due to its location, Maracaibo is less protected from weather and the ride there is often wet and rough, so if you're prone to seasickness you might want to sit this one out.

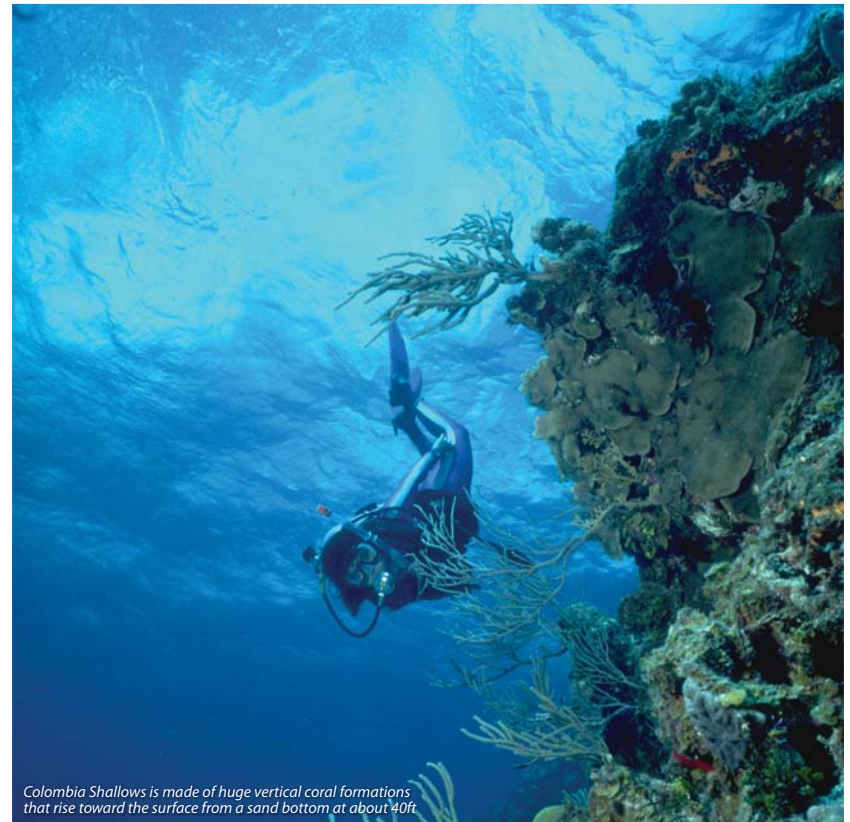
Maracaibo is a buttress reef, with the inshore edges of most buttresses at depths of 100ft (30m) or more. The offshore wall lip is at least 120ft (36m) deep in some locations, so make sure you watch your depth gauge! The coral formations resemble the other large drop-off wall reefs (eg **Santa Rosa**, **Palancar** and **Colombia**), with tunnels, caves and vertical walls interspersed with broad sand channels. Very large buttresses are typical. It's not worth the trouble to get to Maracaibo just to see coral, however. You can view spectacular coral and sponges at the other reefs more easily, less expensively and with a shorter boat ride.



Pay particular attention to your instruments on Maracaibo. It's all deep

Shark Watching, Maybe!

Many divers who visit Maracaibo go specifically to see sharks. While these creatures are frequently spotted at Maracaibo, you can't always count on finding them. Blacktips (of several closely related species) are most common, but it is also possible to encounter hammerheads, shortfin makos, lemons, tigers, bulls or others that you may not really want to meet up close and personal. Some years few sharks are seen, while during others they are seen on most dives. Big schools of eagle rays and mantas have also been sighted here.



Colombia Shallows is made of huge vertical coral formations that rise toward the surface from a sand bottom at about 40ft

18 COLOMBIA SHALLOWS

Location: Near the southern end of Cozumel inshore of Colombia Reef

Depth range: 20-40ft (6-12m)

Access: Boat



An excellent two-tank dive trip would start on the wall at Colombia and move in to the Shallows for a second dive. However, Colombia Shallows is visited less often because most boat operators from town prefer to take divers to **Paraíso**, **Yucab** or other more northerly reefs (near lunch and home port

on their second dive of the day. If you want to dive these southerly reefs back-to-back, be sure to make the necessary arrangements before leaving dock.

Like a miniature **Palancar Reef** without hordes of other divers, Colombia Shallows is a good area for beginners, since currents tend to be light and there's lots of clear space to sit down on sand and between walls of coral. This is a great place to practice hovering. Furthermore, the restricted bottom depth lets photographers take wall-type shots without fear of dropping off into an abyss while focusing. Snorkeling is excellent above the coral heads at this site, but keep an eye out for all the boat traffic in this area!



Most of the mass of these orange/yellow vase-like boring sponges lie beneath the surface of the coral head

19 PUNTA DALILA

Location: Northern-most end of the Palancar Reef complex
Depth range: 45-70ft (12-14m)
Access: Boat



Punta Dalila is often visited as a good second boat dive after going to one of the deeper nearby reefs such as **Palancar** or **Santa Rosa**. It has a pronounced terrace or step-like structure, with a shallower sand flat inshore of it, and a deeper sand flat on the offshore side.

On the inshore side of the coral, the broad sand flat is about 40ft to 45ft deep. This sand flat is home to lots of stingrays, which you can sometimes see excavating pits to feed, and other sand-dwellers. See the **Sand Diver's Secret** site description for information about typical animals you can see if you stray off the coral. The current is often very strong on Punta Dalila, as shown by the

large 'waves' or dunes you'll see on the sand flat.

Bordering the inshore sand flat is a long, narrow strip of coral parallel to the prevailing current direction, usually south to north. The coral rises up to 5ft to 10ft above the level of the sand flat, and is honeycombed with slots and crevices. These crevices harbor large black sea bass, schools of grunts and snappers, cowfish, eels, triggerfish, and many others. Above the coral and over the sand flat, you're likely to see quite a few barracudas that can make the job of holding position in a strong current look effortless.

The seaward side of the coral strip is quite a bit deeper, mostly in 65ft to 70ft depth range. It falls off rapidly into much deeper water as you go away from the reef, although most dive guides will want you to stay over the coral strip so you can stick with your fellow divers. If you drift along the base of the coral strip on this side, you'll see lots of small and medium-sized barrel sponges.

20 DZUL-HA

Location: Between the Fiesta Americana Hotel and the El Presidente Hotel
Depth range: 10-30ft (12-14m)
Access: Shore



Dzul-Ha (Dzul Ha without the hyphen on some maps) is a broad, shallow area ideal for snorkeling and shallow warm-up beach dives. It's on the coastal road. As you drive south of town, after you pass El Cid La Ceiba hotel, you'll see signs for the El Presidente Hotel. Follow these signs to hug the coast. You'll need to get off the new main road south of town, which runs a bit inland. Head south of the El Presidente and you'll come to Dzul-Ha, which is marked by a little thatch-covered 'palapa' snack bar, parking spaces, and knick-knack stands on the coastal frontage road. There are several small concessions where you can

rent snorkeling gear, have a cool drink, and relax in beach chairs after the dive.

The easiest entry and exit is adjacent to the snack bar, where a concrete boat ramp leads down into the water. Parts of the ramp are covered with slippery algae, so watch your step. Once in the water, you'll be standing on a very gently-sloping plateau of limestone that extends offshore for several hundred yards, gradually getting deeper. Once out of the surf zone, you'll see individual small coral heads and gorgonians, with a few sponges here and there, and lots of fish. There is a deeper drop-off beginning in about 40ft of water, but there's more to see in the shallows. You can expect parrotfish, wrasses, queen angels, cornetfish, blue tangs, and many other species nibbling on the bottom or hunting one another.

There are few large coral heads or other big terrain features on the bottom, but plenty of snorkelers. This is a popular spot for commercial snorkeling trips. You may encounter rows of people – often wearing water wings or snorkeling buoyancy vests – standing or swimming in line with their guides, or even swimming over to check out the scuba divers. Look out for boats that often drop off and pick up snorkelers in this area.



Dzul-Ha beach offers facilities where you can dry out and have refreshments before catching a taxi back to your hotel
 Photo: Carolyn B. Martin



A diver discovers a heart urchin in the sand flats

The conch's eye is at the end of a stalk
Photo: G. Lewbel



21 SAND DIVER'S SECRET

If you enjoy diving away from crowds, and need a change of scene, Sand Diver's Secret is for you. You won't find it on any map, but you already know how to get there – just stop on the way to or from your favorite reef, or take a detour away from the drop-off out onto the sand. Chances are good your fellow divers will think you've lost your way, but you can surprise them when you bring back a detailed log and a bunch of photographs of all the things you saw on the sand that they didn't. Most diving on Cozumel takes place over reefs, which accounts for a very small fraction of the actual diveable area – there is a lot more sand than coral. Divers who get dropped over sand flats usually keep

their heads up and fins moving until they find 'the dive site' (ie, the coral). They thereby miss some of the most interesting animals and one of the most fascinating underwater habitats. That's the Sand Diver's Secret.

To appreciate sand flats properly, you'll have to get right down on the bottom with your mask a few inches from the sand. Before you settle, look for stingrays and make sure there's nothing under you other than sand. Notice that sediment differs in coarseness from one sand flat to another, and within a sand flat from spot to spot. The smallest particles collect where current velocities are lowest, and vice versa. Water movement can easily carry off fine particles, whereas coarse, gravely sand requires faster currents to move it. The texture of the sand provides an index of the aver-

age current velocity: big chunks indicate high speeds, while fine, soft sand means slower currents. Patterns of marks in the sand can also tell you something about water movement and direction. High-speed currents heap coarse particles into big sand waves, while slower ones produce only ripple marks in finer sand. Larger sand particles are found toward the tops of sand waves or ripples, and finer particles collect in quieter water in troughs between the waves. Ripples and sand waves are oriented 90 degrees to the average direction of water movement, just like sea fans, and can therefore also be used to help you navigate on the bottom.

Many so-called 'infaunal' animals live in sandy environments, including clams, burrowing shrimps and other crustaceans, and worms. Most are large enough to see, but remain buried below the surface, invisible to divers. Deeper burrowers have tubes leading to the surface to obtain food and oxygen, and to discharge wastes. Infauna sometimes filter plankton from the water, or feed on microscopic 'meiofauna' – tiny animals that live between the sand grains, forever wandering in a maze of particles that to them must seem as huge as boulders.

'Epibenthic' animals live on or near the surface of the sand, sometimes feeding on infauna or small attached plants. Some epibenthic animals are tiny, such as the schools of clear mysid crustaceans (the size of brine shrimp) that are usually mistaken for juvenile fish. Larger forms include heart urchins, hermit crabs and conchs, which can be found by following their tracks across the sand. Heart urchin tracks look like meandering ridges a couple of inches high, while conchs leave a smooth groove. Hermit crab tracks show small depressions where their legs touch the bottom and an irregular trough where the shell drags. Sea stars, long-spined urchins and big snails such as tritons are

also prominent epibenthic beasts. Because other animals eat them too, quite a few epibenthic species are nocturnal, spending daytime buried in sand or beneath the edges of coral heads.

A variety of predatory fishes feed on infaunal and epibenthic animals. Rays, peacock flounder, guitarfish, and skates treat the sand flats as a cafeteria with an excellent selection, open 24 hours a day. Stingrays dig obvious pits in the sand by flapping their 'wings' and excavating worms and clams. These pits are sometimes 6ft across and several feet deep. Other fishes such as bar jacks and smooth trunkfish hover above feeding rays, picking out any stray infaunal animals that are stirred up. If rays aren't working, trunkfish can do their own smaller excavations by blowing water out of their mouths onto the sand. You can attract both bar jacks and trunkfish by simulating a ray and digging a pit. Many fishes will be attracted to the sand plume you create, hoping to find themselves a snack.

We hope you won't simply pass over the sand flats on your way to the coral. As long as you're burning air and time, why not have a good look around as well?



Huge "waves" of sand dunes form in some areas exposed to strong currents

You will have to be very alert to spot animals such as this crab, which is colored like the sand and is often buried with only its back and eye stalks visible



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