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How would you describe a country with more coral walls, shipwrecks, and miles of barrier reef than a diver could traverse in a lifetime? In one word – Belize.

Now imagine a remote atoll located many miles off this Belizean barrier reef system, with palm studded white sandy cayes, vast turquoise lagoons, a prehistoric blue hole, and boundless lush reefs. Such is a Caribbean atoll known as **Lighthouse Reef**.

Up until 1990 this most distant atoll could only be reached by boat, which required an average run of five to seven hours

one way. However, now thanks to a paved airstrip on Northern Caye, adventuresome divers can easily experience the best reefs that Belize has to offer with only a 20 minute commuter flight out of Belize City.

The development of Northern Caye is all part of an up-scale property known as Lighthouse Reef Resort. This superbly appointed dive resort is situated amongst hundreds of mature coconut palm trees, which were once part of a coconut plantation dating back to the 1800's. Upon arrival, via an 18 passenger twin engine "otter" commuter, guests are treated to a welcome rum punch and a general briefing from the resorts manager. After this orientation all guests are shown their rooms, where each guest's baggage has been delivered. Now the only remaining task is to separate your dive gear and place it on your front porch for the next mornings first dive.

After an anxious evening, divers awoken to a hearty breakfast, and soon thereafter make their way down the beach to one of the resorts dive boats. Almost magically your dive gear has been placed in mesh bags, with your B.C. and regulator rigged and ready.

The resort has two well-equipped dive vessels. The primary boat, *Ace In The Blue Hole*, is a 32 foot Hatteras powered by twin diesels. This stable dive platform is set up to handle a maximum of 20 divers. However, the resorts' divemasters attempt to keep the diving at a more intimate level. When the number of diving guests exceeds eight to ten divers they commonly utilize their second boat, a 24 foot center console, *Papa's Dream*.

The resorts location at the extreme tip of this expansive atoll provides a typically calm dive environment with average visibility in the 80 to 140 foot range. One extremely exciting dive location is known by the appropriate name **Hanging Gardens**. This dramatic wall dive which starts off in a mere 40 feet drops vertically for the first twenty feet, and then abruptly becomes undercut. At this inverted juncture divers will come upon a remarkable underwater spectacle.

Huge orange tube sponges clustered amongst purple vase and scarlet red rope sponges hang suspended in a near vertigo image. As strobes illuminate these brightly hued invertebrates, it almost seems as if an aqua garden has been purposefully cultivated along this upside down world. Just below this suspended plantation, and at a depth of 60 to 80 feet, massive gorgonians and black coral jut out from the recessed vertical wall to form an underwater forest.