

the vertical wall starts to recede, followed by a radical undercut cavern ceiling at 120 feet.

Now, almost at once divers are overwhelmed by the massive stalactites which hang at lengths of 25 feet from this submarine cavern. Maneuvering in and around these inverted monoliths brings on a feeling of euphoria enhanced perhaps by nitrogen in the blood stream at 130 feet, a visual and emotional sensation I refer to as "The Jules Vern Syndrome." On a previous, planned decompression dive here in 1984 we chose to transit the southeast wall to chart the various cave systems caused by the preceding ice ages. Our staged decompression dive took us to 240 feet which represented the sea level some 11,000 years ago.

Upon exploring this cave system, stalactites along with stalagmites were found to be more developed. Shining our lights downward past the sand ledge at 260 feet it was possible to see yet another cave system at a distant 350 to 400 feet. This deeper system formed during an even earlier ice age of 15,000 to 18,000 years ago represents the sea level during this time period. Such a dramatically lower sea level precipitated the original limestone leaching thereby creating the initial subterranean cavern.

For obvious reasons dives to the second chamber at 240 feet are not offered by dive operators in Belize and should not be attempted by sport divers. Beyond this, the very same images of stalactite formations are better viewed at the no decompression depth of 120 to 130 feet range (which by the way was transfigured ONLY 10,000 years ago).

After the Blue Hole dive, its usually common to have lunch on shore at the Half Moon Caye Sanctuary. Here you can climb the lighthouse or visit the red-footed boobie bird nesting observation station.

After lunch divers are shuttled to the leeward side of the atoll, to a remote destination known as **Silver Caves**. At this westward portion of the atoll perimeter the reef wall starts at 40 feet and drops off out of sight. What is so unique about this location is the vast frame work of coral formations, which form interconnecting tunnels and cavities. Occasionally schools of glass minnows almost magically materialize, but quickly part and disappear as one penetrates these aqueous corridors.

While anchored at Silver Caves the *Belize Aggressor II* was seen in transit to a

different site along the Westward wall. Presently two *Belize Aggressors* dock at the Fort George Hotel Marina. These top notch live-aboards also offer a viable means by which divers can comfortably and safely visit and dive this remote atoll. With the *Aggressors* tying up at the Fort George Hotel dock, dive gear and baggage is easily transferred if first staying at the Fort George. Three other premium quality hotels are now also available to the traveling diver in Belize City: The newly finished Biltmore Plaza, with its beautiful courtyard and pool; the Ramada Royal Reef, offering a picturesque view of the harbor; and The Villa Hotel with its victorian elegance. Each of these hotels also offer a wide variety of land and river tours.

The Abyss

As our dive boat returned to Northern Caye all on board heard rumors of yet another exotic dive still to come. The next day these rumors unfolded. Venturing out to this dive site almost directly in front of the resort, we received an intriguing pre-dive briefing on an underwater realm each diver would remember as the **Abyss**. The Abyss, a submarine cave entrance at the base of a dramatic wall, had everyone's heart pounding. With eager anticipation divers suited up in record time.

Upon entering the water here, one will be struck by just how deep this site actually is. As you approach the wall traveling mid-water over a sand and coral speckled bottom, the bottom begins to simply slide away deeper and deeper. More specifically, the bottom profile here is like a giant concave

sand chute flowing downward to the cave entrance.

Suddenly, at 130 feet and directly in front of the wall a vertical solution pipe bisecting the wall comes into view. This peculiar bathymetric formation leads directly to, but does not connect with the cave entrance, and appears as if it was almost purposefully bored.

Adjacent to this structure and guarding the cave entrance at approximately 200 feet lurks a very mean looking five foot barracuda. Not wishing to disturb his eminence, and with our computers approaching their no-decompression limit, we proceeded up the escarpment. At about 90 feet an inquisitive green moray eel, looking as if we were his first visitors in some time, slithered forth to see if we were friend or foe. After a few captured images we completed our advance toward the surface.

Sandbore Caye

Following another sumptuous meal back at the resort, a small group of guests opted to visit **Sandbore Caye**, home to the red and white lighthouse that overshadows the resort. As this assembly of sightseers passed over the tapestry of sea life between Northern Caye and Sandbore Caye a huge school of bonefish appeared, quickly scattering as the boat approached.

On shore the more adventuresome members negotiated the sometimes precarious steps to the top of the lighthouse. From this vantage point a true perspective of the atoll and its northern landmasses is possible.

The gin clear waters provide a transparent medium to view the variety of coral,

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