



SPORT

DIVER

12

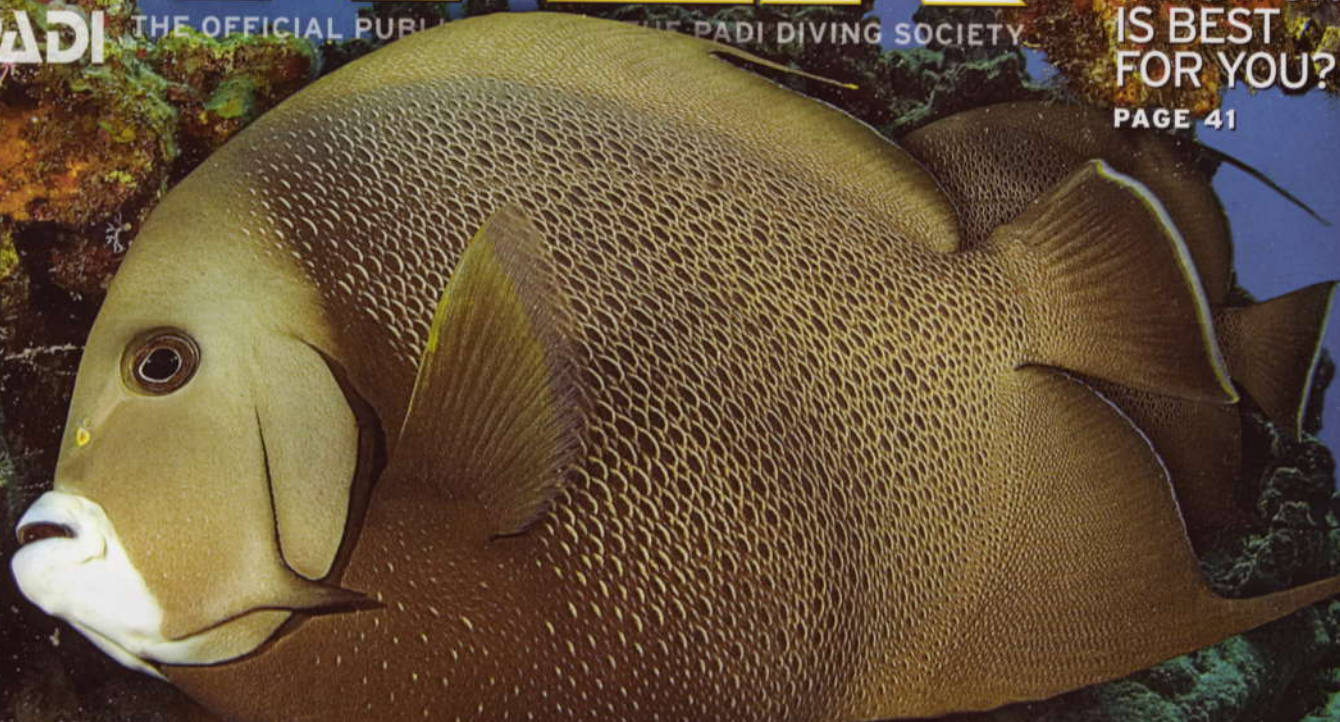
**TOP
REGS**

WHICH ONE
IS BEST
FOR YOU?

PAGE 41



THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE PADI DIVING SOCIETY



DISCOVER THE DRIFT OF

Cozumel

PAGE 70

7 CITIES UNDER THE SEA

Sunken Cities of **EGYPT**, Greece, **ITALY**,
Japan, **TURKEY**, Israel, **CAYMAN** PAGE 48



NO STROBE? HOW TO SHOOT AMBIENT LIGHT

HONDURAS TROPICAL TRANQUILO

PADI DIVING SOCIETY TAKES ON TAHITI

sportdiver.com
JULY 2007 Vol. 15 NO. 6
U.S. \$4.99 CAN. \$5.99



An aerial photograph of a tropical island, likely in the Bay Islands region. The image shows a large bay with a sandy beach and a coral reef extending into the deep blue ocean. The water near the shore is a lighter, turquoise color, indicating shallow depths. The island's terrain is rugged and appears to be covered in dense vegetation. The sky is a clear, deep blue.

TROPICAL TRANQUILO

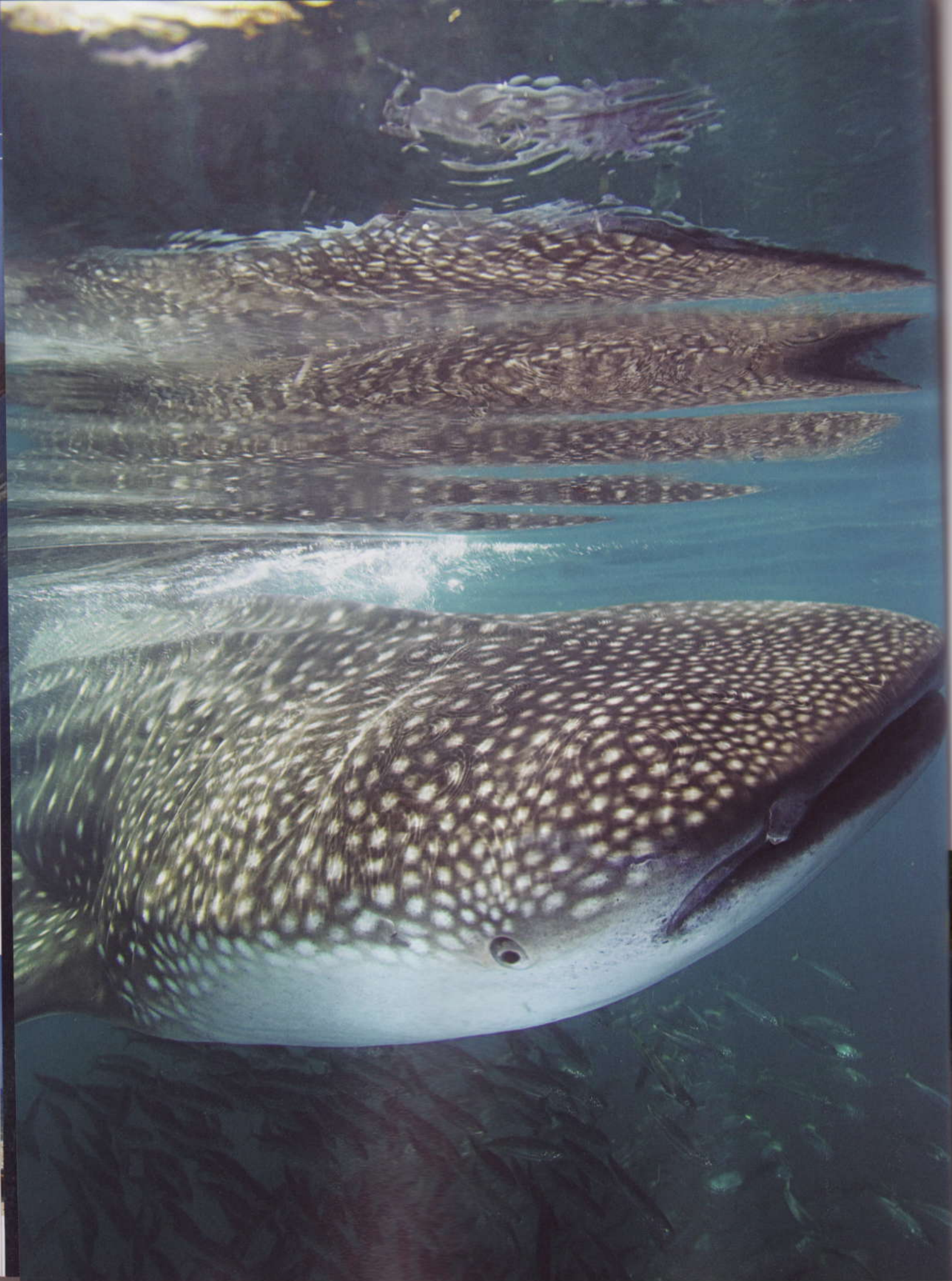
Bay Islands

by TED STEDMAN PHOTOS by TY SAWYER



SETTLING INTO THE PULSE OF THE OCEAN

AHHHHHH ... I'M IN THE ZONE, on a magic-carpet ride swooshed along by an invisible thermal genie. The sand channel I'm gliding over is like a sugar-white highway, and I level out in a narrow slot between steep walls of tangled rainbow coral while listening to the soothing soundtrack of exhaust bubbles. Then – whomp! End of the road. The highway spills off the ledge like that, and I hover over a bottomless azure void just as a hawksbill turtle with a serious overbite flutters by three arm lengths in front of my mask.



"THIS ISN'T INTIMIDATING DIVING. YOU CAN DIVE AT ANY DEPTH YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH AND SEE PLENTY ..."

Ahhhhhh! If they could bottle the serenity I'm feeling, Zen masters and prescription drug makers would be looking for work.

It's all like an adrenaline rush in reverse, which is exactly the point. In Spanish it's called *tranquilo*, and it's been this way ever since I set foot on the Bay Islands of Honduras.

Gearing up this morning at Fantasy Island Resort, a PADI Gold Palm operation on Roatan, I aimed a slew of first-timer questions at dive center manager Roberto Melendez, resident PADI Professional. Three questions in, he flatly held up his hand.

"This is your first visit to Roatan?" he said, already knowing my answer.

"Yeah, first visit to Honduras, too."

"OK, let me tell you something," said Roberto, whose NFL-like physique makes you want to pay close attention. "First, this isn't intimidating diving. You can dive at any depth you feel comfortable with and see plenty, as little as 15 feet even. Secondly, this is easy diving — no stress allowed."

He broke into a broad ear-to-ear grin, warmly putting his hand on my shoulder the way only a best friend does. "Hey mon, leave your worries behind. Now go dive!"

The three main constituents of the Bay Islands — Roatan, Utila and Guanaja — are as dive-centric as they come. They're the tops of an underwater mountain range called Bonacca Ridge, fringed with dynamic reefs just a few kicks from shore. And they have the good fortune of being poised at the edge of the continental shelf near the quadruple-digit-deep Cayman Trench. That means wall diving — plenty of it.

RECONNOITERING ROATAN

After the morning's dive at Little French Cay Wall, our gang of eight gases off before motoring out to CoCo View Wall and the wreck of

LIVING LARGE Opening spread: **View of the Coronas islets from the Clark's Cay helicopter.** Below: **Rafting on the Cangrejal.** Right: **Dispensing Salva Vidas at the Beachside Bar, Bay Islands Beach Resort.** Opposite: **Whale sharks are often seen near Utila.**

the *Prince Albert* — the front yard of Fantasy Island and Coco View resorts. You can kick out to the site, sure. But remembering Roberto's decree about stress-free everything, our group has no qualms with the chauffeured option.

It's an abrupt drop, from sandy 15-foot sea-grass-strewn flats to a nearly 90-degree wall plummeting to a 150-foot shelf and beyond. I descend to about 90 feet and survey the giant green barrel sponges clinging to outcroppings, obvious standouts among frilly sea fans sa-shaying in the gentle current. I poke my head in a dark crevasse and spotlight a gargantuan crab with claws as big around as a man's forearm. Barracuda hang almost motionless in a large sunny alcove, and a good roll call of parrotfish make a racket with their coral chomping. Sergeant majors, their egg masses purple smears on nearby rocks, gently nip at me.

We fin a short distance to the intact, upright *Prince Albert*, a 140-foot freighter that sank in 1987 and sits at 85 feet. Viz is good, and as we pull alongside I see the wreck is enveloped in soft coral and is home to a gazillion silversides hovering inside the bridge and in open hatches. I work my way up to the aft deck and see exquisite bouquets of red and purple tube sponges and sea fans. A school of yellow snapper looks almost translucent under shafts of sunlight. Going back to shore seems a shame.

For the next couple days, I come to understand how Fantasy Island's name came about. Wake, have breakfast, watch the antics of white-faced capuchin monkeys in the trees, dive throughout the day

Hang With the Ancients

If your travel schedule allows it, go to Copan Archaeological Park in northwestern Honduras and view fantastically intricate steles and striking pyramids built by the Maya more than 1,000 years ago.

- 1. **Mary's Place** (Roatan)
- 2. **Valley of the Kings** (Roatan)
- 3. **Coco View Wall/The Prince Albert** (Roatan)
- 4. **Black Hills** (Utila)
- 5. **Labyrinth** (Utila)

MUST DO
MUST DIVE

LEFT: ANDY MURKOVSKY/APICS.COM; BELOW: TED STELDMAN



I SEE **GROUPERS AND GIANT CRABS**, THEN SPOT A NURSE SHARK TAKING A SUBMARINE SIESTA UNDER A LEDGE ...

(never more than a five-minute hop away), swap tales at dinner and at the bar, then repeat. And repeat. And repeat.

Along Roatan's 33-mile length lie at least 132 recognized dive sites of all calibers. The north shore is the place to scout for big pelagics — normally what divers chase. Here on the south side out of French Harbour, though, the dives have their own headliner acts in the form of magnificent soft corals and sponges. And our three daily boat dives don't disappoint. At nearby sites like Valley of the Kings and Too Tall Too Small, and especially at Roatan's most famous dive site, Mary's Place, lush quilts of softies thrive.

Mary's is a special spot created by prehistoric volcanic activity that formed a fissured undersea maze. Drop in and it's a tapestry of sponges, and hard and soft corals, all teeming with a wild assortment of finned critters. From a 20-foot shelf the coral wall falls vertically over 100 feet onto a sandy slope that slides into darkness. Sprouting from the steep walls are collections of rope and tube sponges, of huge orange elephant ear and azure vase sponges, sea fans and whips — all competing for precious real estate to survive. In the wall's deeper fissures, I see regal gorgonians and black coral, groupers and giant crabs, then spot a nurse shark taking a submarine siesta under a shadowy ledge. French angelfish, squirrelfish, tassel-finned spotted drums and trumpetfish are all around. It's transfixing, an underwater zoo where every recess splits into adjoining corridors with more surprises.

What's next? An island off an island sounds extra idyllic — the essence of tranquilo, I decide. On Roatan's north shore, that's where I find myself when I put my head down at Anthony's Key Resort, another PADI Gold Palm Resort. After arriving in the early evening, I knock back a few Salva Vida beers from the treetop deck bar perched on the hillside and watch a sunset to end all sunsets while reviewing dive options with the psyched-up dive clientele. When I get my fill, I take the 30-second water-taxi ride to the resort's palm-shaded private islet. The last thing I hear is the gentle lapping of the sea from the gorgeous over-water bungalows.

AKR's the place where you can book dolphin encounters and

open-water dolphin dives. My sights are set a bit deeper, and our svelte group of five plus divemaster heads to the day's three-dive-site cluster along the western end of Roatan's north shore. Double-D Wall is first up, another minutes-away wall dive with shallow flats that give way to a precipitous drop — a pleasant recurring theme in the Bay Islands, I'm finding. The soft corals and sponges are more sparse than on the south shore, but taking up the slack are schools of horse-eyed jacks, rotund, loping groupers and a squadron of tarpon cruising in the distance, looking like silvery torpedoes reflecting the splintered subsurface sunlight.

Our day's last AKR dive is at Spooky Channel, a channel formed by an ancient river valley opening to the barrier reef with pinnacle-like coral mounts. Spooky? Perhaps. The side walls of the channel almost connect — not a place for claustrophobics. But by my reckoning, the sun streaming through 100-foot-viz waters gives the impression of a light-filled chapel. I earn my wings by gliding through a series of fairly narrow swim-throughs without ever once grazing the coral walls.

UTILAN UTOPIA

The minute you land on Utila's Spartan airstrip, you sense the island's free spirit. Where Roatan has posh resorts, sleek boats, hip restaurants, late-model SUVs, a real-deal air-conditioned airport and 30,000 residents, Utila has an earthy streak with its compact, low-key resorts, roving backpackers, electric golf carts, cheaper prices and the mellower community vibe of just 3,000 independent souls.

When I land at the remote, roadless Laguna Beach Resort, that free spirit melts into tranquility. The 10-minute boat ride from town takes me to a low-slung array of bungalows sprinkled along a spectacular white crescent beach and backed by a mangrove-lined lagoon. It's noon and everybody's out diving, so I grab one of the kayaks free for the taking and head into the mangroves, watching brown pelicans

WATER WORLD Clockwise from top right: The wreck of the *Odyssey*; boardwalk at CoCo View Resort; a pregnant female Caribbean reef shark at the Mano a Mano shark dive.



Deco Stops Honduras

Between Roatan's hopping bars and well-done restaurants, check out the popular new **Roatan Butterfly Garden**. For high adventure, Roatan has three **Canopy Tour** operators, the newest being a two-kilometer zip-line course in the **Gumbalimba Nature Park**. Just a few steps from AKR is the **Roatan Museum**. Go, because through artifacts, maps, murals and nature displays, you'll come away with a brief, enlightening (and free) lesson on the culture and history of the Bay Islands. On Utila, visit the **Jade Seahorse Restaurant** for fine food. Then wander its **Treetanic Bar**, which seems like a sprawling stage set for *Alice in Wonderland*. Or boat among the mangroves of the Amazon-like **Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge**, about 20 miles west of La Ceiba on the mainland.

DESTINATION PRIMER

AVERAGE WATER TEMP: 78-83°F **WHAT TO WEAR:** 3/2 mm fullsuit or shorter **AVERAGE VIZ:** 70-100 feet **WHEN TO GO:** Year-round; for whale sharks, go March-April and August-September.





GUANAJA

RISING

We're hovering over Southwest Cay. The water's so clear it seems we can see to the bottom of the ocean from our bird's-eye view. From 100 feet above the sea, we can easily see a dark spot on the seafloor on the ocean side. It's the *Jado Trader*, a 240-foot island freighter that was sunk as an artificial reef in 110 feet of water. Massive grouper, legions of yellowtail and even the occasional shark call this site home. But right now, we're headed for Clark's Cay, a small private island off the east coast of Guanaja.

The owner of Clark's Cay, a successful businessman from Navarre, Florida, has taken Guanaja under his wing, and the island's resurgence is palpable. He's brought in craftspeople, doctors, dentists and other trade professionals to train the local people, giving them the knowledge, skills and tools to fill the infrastructure needs of a burgeoning hot spot.

There was a time during the 1980s when Guanaja was the "it" place for edge-of-the-earth diving. But dive resorts that were once filled to the brim with intrepid divers year-round now sadly sit in ruins. But, it's on the map again. And the diving that once filled the pages of dive magazines with superlatives has waited patiently to once again entertain divers from around the globe. Topside, the island still remains a slow-paced outpost of incredible beauty. Its famed Bonacca Town still thrives, an island in the lagoon, part Venice, part pirate village, where most of Guanaja's inhabitants live, especially now with the Florida connection.

Forgotten undersea kingdoms circle the island. Although the *Jado Trader* remains one of the Caribbean's best

wreck dives, sites such as Jim's Silverlode and Vertigo, also off Southwest Cay, are once again reclaiming their place in logbooks. Both sites sit along the barrier reef that wraps around the island like a string of emeralds. And steep walls at both sites are thick with deepwater sea fans, massive barrel sponges, soft corals, sea rods and a dizzying array of marine life, with grouper, yellowtail, queen angels and a host of eels leading the parade. But if you want to try the locals' favorite dive, you'll need to head to the island's west coast, just outside the canal that cuts the island in half, to a place simply called the Pinnacle.

The Pinnacle rises from a sand bottom at 135 feet to within 55 feet of the surface. Black coral forests dominate the seascape, along with piles of marine life, from schools of jacks to sharks to clouds of blue chromis. Most dives on this site are spent spiraling up from depth to the peak of the Pinnacle. And if this is where the locals go, you'll definitely want to request this dive — perhaps a few times.

But the true testament to the untouched and renewed allure of Guanaja are the dive resorts such as Castaways Resort, Coral Bay Dive Resort, End of the World Resort and Nautilus Dive Resort. Divers will once again be including Guanaja on their must-dive life lists. And if you'd like to engage in a bit of philanthropy, contact the owners of Clark's Cay, and they'll arrange some class time for you with island people who are fully ready to put their home back on the dive-travel map.

Special thanks to Bill Pullum and all of our friends at Clark's Cay. For more information on "voluntourism," visit travelocity.com/travelforgood.

COMING-OUT PARTY Guanaja's amazing reef-scape is once again front and center on the world dive stage, thanks to an international effort and lots of hard work on the part of the islanders.

AND THEN I SEE IT THROUGH THE DEEPWATER HAZE — THE GAUZY DARK SILHOUETTE OF SOMETHING TRUCK-SIZE BIG.

dive-bomb the lagoon for dinner. Only one boat scoots by in the distance as I slowly explore the huge, empty, Eden-esque lagoon, and I can't help but think that what I'm seeing is virtually unchanged since Columbus first laid European eyes on these islands.

Hanging out at Laguna Beach Resort, I find, is something I could get used to. Go ahead and raid the bar: It's on the honor system and you just initial a list. Hungry? If it's between scheduled meals, whatever's available in the kitchen is up for grabs. For free. Need something else? Knock on the manager's door and ask. Internet? Bring your laptop and the wireless connection is strong (and also free) from the lodge. The turquoise waters of the Caribbean gently lap on three sides. Shoes and shirt? Are you kidding?

And the diving is just as loose and easy. When I meet Jodie Fackrell, the feisty Brit expat PADI Professional here, I'm thoroughly instructed not to touch a thing. Almost. "Just empty your weights," she tells me. "We'll set up your tanks and do the rest."

That sounds slightly unconventional, but I'm surprised again when the second half of our two-tank dive is a do-it-yourself affair where our group of eight is dropped off in a channel and we dive the reef back to the resort's pier. There's no dive-master, but the group has been here a few days and knows the drill — it's a Laguna Beach Resort exclusive, it turns out. On our way back we spot a portly hawksbill turtle at about 60 feet, rooting away at the base of a barrel sponge and entirely oblivious to the group of bubble-blowing gawkers. When we make it ashore, we walk along the empty, pristine white-sand beach back to the lodge, then rinse off, help ourselves to ice-cold Imperial beers and relax without another soul in sight.

Utila has around 100 named dive sites, most being of the wall and canyon variety within swimming distance from shore. So I'm keyed up when I learn we're breaking ranks and heading 15 minutes into the blue to dive the south Utila seamounts called the Black Hills. Any structure popping up in the open ocean means fish are givens, and predictably, the location was a hotbed of local fishing until diving preservationists began ruling the roost. From a 200-foot base, the deepwater pinnacles charge up to a 45-foot depth, and before we drop in Jodie gives us some safety-oriented advice. "Cruise the edge of the pinnacles, but stay alert to currents and depths. You can drop deep here in seconds if you're not paying attention."

Duly noted. We keep it all in check as we fin around the periphery of the oval-shaped mound while French and queen

angelfish dart through luxuriant gardens of whips, sea fans and tube sponges. The north and south sides of the mound have sharp drop-offs plummeting into nothingness. And then I see it through the deepwater haze — the gauzy dark silhouette of something big, as in truck-size big. Plan the dive and dive the plan, right? Curiosity can wait.

On our way back to the resort, we get a radio call about fish boils. In this neck of the Caribbean that usually means one thing: whale sharks. Within minutes we're at the ready, decked out in snorkeling gear and prepared to back-flip like paratroopers on cue. Jodie and the captain scout the sea. The boil fizzles, then it moves 300 yards to the east. Soon we're playing a game of tag, trying to creep up on the boil — and surreptitious whale sharks, we're guessing. An hour passes and still no confirmed sightings, so the

crew calls it a day. "Sorry guys, no whale sharks today," Jodie says. It's only a slight bummer, all things considered. Then I wonder about that stealthy dark figure I saw lumbering beneath the Black Hills like an apparition from the abyss.

(Continued on page 96)

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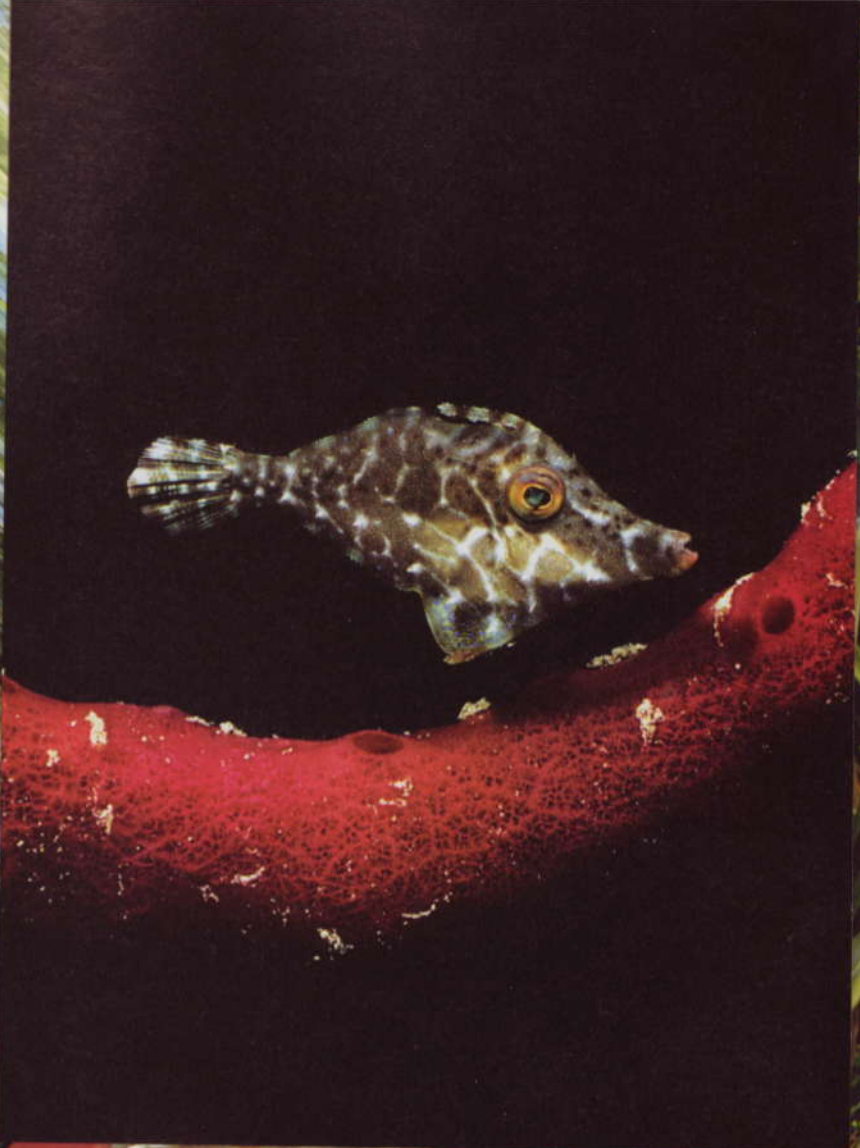
THRILLS Right: Leaping dolphins at Anthony's Key Resort. Opposite, clockwise: Rainforest canopy zip-line on Roatan; a juvenile trunkfish on a Utila reef; a sleepy good-morning smile from a young Garifuna girl.

BRING BACK

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BAY ISLANDS (Continued from page 68)

MAINLANDING

A week of diving primes me for some topside time, and in Honduras the options are wide open. From the mainland town of La Ceiba, I head a short distance to the fancy eco digs of the Lodge at Pico Bonito. As the Spanish name promises, the namesake mountain is indeed beautiful, the country's third-highest mountain at nearly 8,000 feet and a centerpiece of Pico Bonito National Park. Straight from my woody cabin, I

hike steep trails smothered by a dense rainforest canopy to the Rio Colorado and refreshing Mermaid Falls.

My next few days are a blur of eco and adventure activities that seem fitting conclusions to round out my Honduran odyssey. Whitewater rafting on the Cangrejal River slaps me in the face and quickens my pulse with frothy Class III-IV rapids. With a naturalist calling the shots and identifying a litany of birds, I ply the backwaters of the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge by boat. Caimans and crocs lurk here, too, somewhere beneath the

FOR MORE INFORMATION



More on the Web:
For a complete guide to Honduras, go to sportdiver.com/honduras.

tea-colored waters and amidst a twisted labyrinth of thirsty mangroves as impenetrable and wildlife-rich as parts of the Amazon.

Maybe the most intriguing topside excursion comes during a visit to the Cayos Cochinos, a small archipelago of two islands and 13 cays — some nothing more than sand spits — lying northeast from La Ceiba and about nine miles from the mainland. Natural attractions are draws; the reserve is filled with unspoiled reefs and a flourishing marine life largely off limits to anything beyond snorkeling and diving. But the real reason I book a tour through the Lodge at Pico Bonito is to see the Garifuna people.

The Garifuna are the descendants of several indigenous Caribbean groups, along with escaped African slaves. In the Cayos, most live on a single islet that might total an acre, if that, with a dozen or so palms and rustic homes made from the simplest of materials. When our small group arrives by boat, it's as

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Travel Candles

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if we're invisible, and the lithe, dark islanders go about their daily business. Kids play au naturel in the water; women prepare meals; men congregate under shady palm cabanas after fishing sorties. I circle the island in five minutes, taking it all in and imagining I've slipped into an 18th-century time warp.

The sun blazes like a blowtorch and I'm withering, so I take a dip and head to a shady cabana where our group decompresses from the heat. There's one refrigerator on the islet, powered by the sole generator, and as luck has it beers

are for sale at \$2 a pop. We're not shy, and we each savor the cold liquid like it's our last. It's still and utterly baking hot, not a breeze or a cloud in the sky. No one moves or talks — too much effort. Is this tranquilo or what?

Special thanks to Fantasy Island Resort (fantasyislandresort.com), Anthony's Key Resort (anthony'skey.com), CoCo View Resort (cocoviewresort.com) and Laguna Beach Resort (utila.com), the Lodge at Pico Bonito (picobonito.com) and the Honduras Institute of Tourism (letsghonduras.com).

HONDURAS LISTINGS

Guanaja

DIVE CENTER & RESORT
Coral Bay Dive Resort
coralbay.ca

Roatan

Roatan Air Services
roatanair.com

DIVE CENTERS

Alton's Dive Center
altonsdiveshop.com

Coconut Tree Divers
coconuttreedivers.com

Dockside Dive Center
dockside Dive Center.com

Fantasy Island
fantasyislandresort.com

Ocean Connections
ocean-connections.com

Reef Gliders
reefgliders.com

Roatan Divers
roatandivers.net

Subway Water Sports
subwaywatersports.com

DIVE RESORTS

Anthony's Key Resort
anthony'skey.com

Bananarama Resort & Dive Center
bananaramadive.com

Bay Islands Beach Resort
bibr.com

CoCo View Resort
cocoviewresort.com

Fantasy Island
fantasyislandresort.com

Pura Vida Resort
puravidaresort.com

Las Rocas
lasrocasresort.com

Sunset Villas
roatansunsetvillas.com

Turquoise Bay Dive & Beach Resort
turquoisebayresort.com

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deepblueutila.com

Utila Dive Centre
utiladivecentre.com

Utila Watersports
utilawatersports.com

Utopia Village
utopiadivevillage.com

DIVE RESORTS

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utila.com

Mango Inn
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Utila Lodge
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