
Belize it or not

Half Moon Caye and Lighthouse Reef - November 20, 2017



Surprise

When I think of dive safaris I usually think of far away places like Palau or Wakatobi in Indonesia and while they are ooh soo beautiful they require you to sell of all of you assets to be able to afford them.

Not so Belize. A quick 2 hour flight from Miami you are in paradise and while a little extra effort is required to get to Half Moon Caye its certainly not the monumental challenge of arriving in Palau.

Half moon Caye is a true coral atoll, one of the few in the Atlantic. It is located at the south east end of Light House Reef and just a few miles off the coast of Belize.

Apart from being absolutely gorgeous with white sandy beaches and covered in palm trees it is also home to the only colony of Red Footed Boobies in the western Caribbean and therefore an Belizean Audubon Society protected sanctuary. "Smart birds to live here"

Underwater is another thing all together with the most amazing display of Coral growth, sponges and wildlife you are likely to see in the Caribbean



Underwater

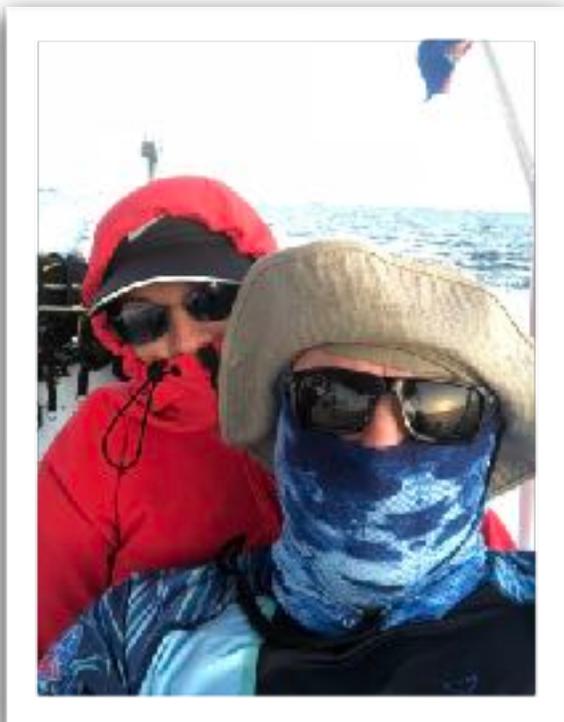
Our story started in Ambergris Caye about 2.5 hours boat ride to the north where we had spent the last few days diving with my friends Karen and Roberto Canul “owners Ambergris Divers”. It was Roberto who promoted the idea of a visit to the more remote sights of Belize so after checking the weather for several days we decided the 25th of Nov looked like the perfect day for this jolly little adventure. Boy did we ever get it right.

25th Nov 2017

As the sun rose above The Western Caribbean we found ourselves loading up Ambergris Divers magnificent 43 foot twin engine dive boat with about 30 dive cylinders plus a guzillian gallons of fuel, all that weight I was sure would sink the boat but no way.

By 6.30am we’d cleared the barrier reef at San Pedro and were flying across a mildly choppy ocean towards the Blue Hole and Lighthouse reef.

Don’t kid yourself that this is in the tropics it doesn’t get quite cool. At 6.30 in the morning with a relative wind speed about of 28mph its gets little nippy out there on the ocean, even in Belize. Fortunately we had all come prepared and suffering was reduced to a little tooth chattering.





As we progressed the day slowly warmed and the ocean calmed and by the time we had reached the shallows of Light House Reef the sea was like a sheet of glass.

The way in to the Blue Hole is riddled with hazards and slowed our approach as we zigzagged our way past a million hull crunching coral heads. It seemed to me like the perfect opportunity to get out my drone and follow our progress.



With my drone pointing down at us from several hundred feet the image on my iPad turned from turquoise waters with scattered reef to a magnificent perfectly round area of dark blue water. We had arrived at the Blue Hole of Belize.

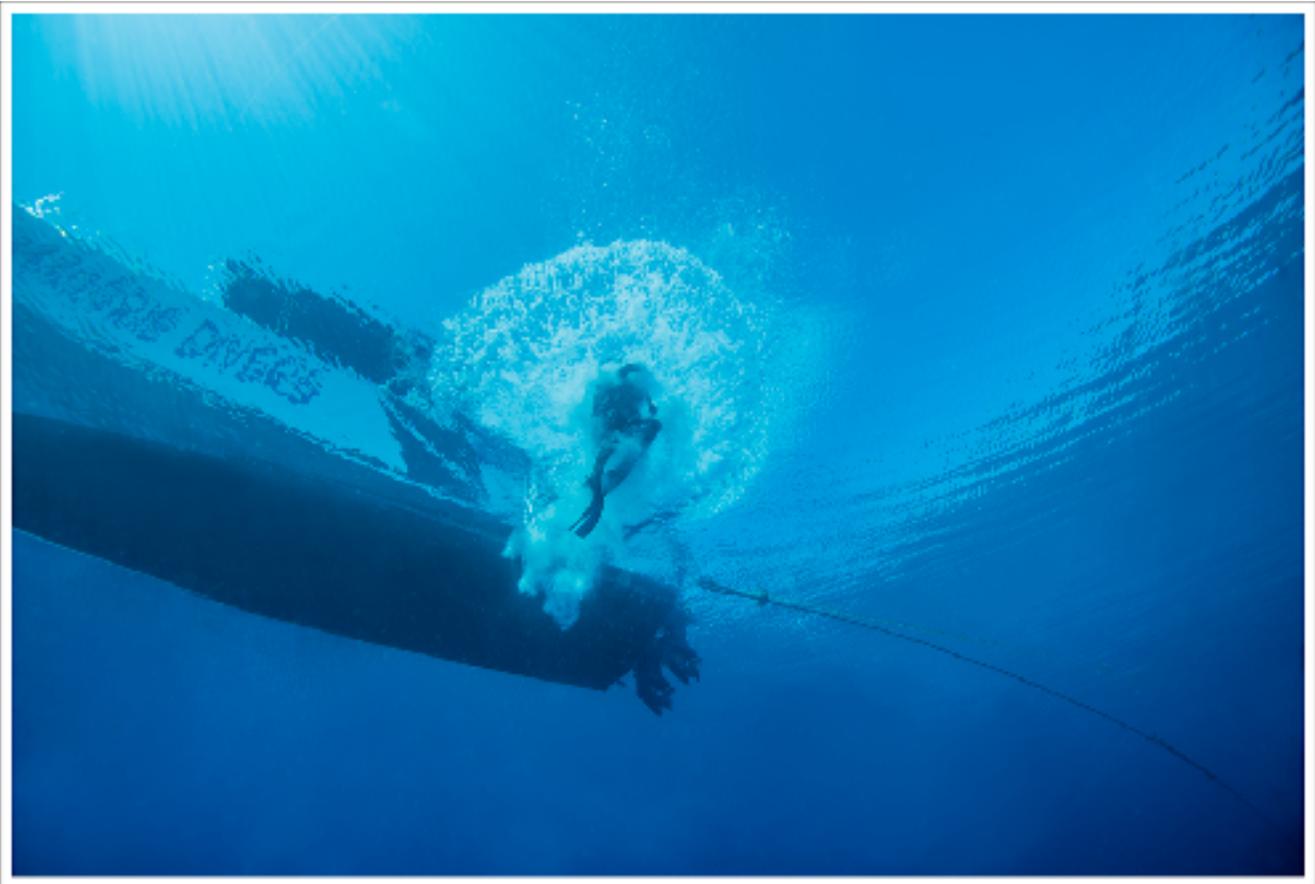


The Blue Hole is an ancient cave system that formed during the the last ice age.

At some point in history the roof caved in leaving a 600 foot hole in the ground that gradually filled with water as sea levels rose. I had done the dive several times before so I elected to stay on deck with my drone while Roberto, Ofelia and Paco descended the 100 or so feet to see the huge stalactites that had formed there over millennia. Being quite deep it was pretty much a bounce dive and they were soon back aboard the boat and ready for the next part of the adventure.

After our quick stop at the Blue Hole we set out for Half Moon Caye just a short run in slightly deeper water allowing us to once again get our dive boat up on a plane. The 2 big Merc outboards purred like kittens and we skimmed across the surface towards our next dive.

Lighthouse Reef a vertigo producing wall that drops off to thousands of feet.



The water is incredibly clear with visibility in excess of 100 feet as we descended onto a gently sloping sand bottom to about 30 feet where I settled to check my camera and all its settings before continuing with the dive.

All checks done we swam towards the dark shadow of the reef in the distance which was morphing slowly into a blaze of color and shapes as approached.

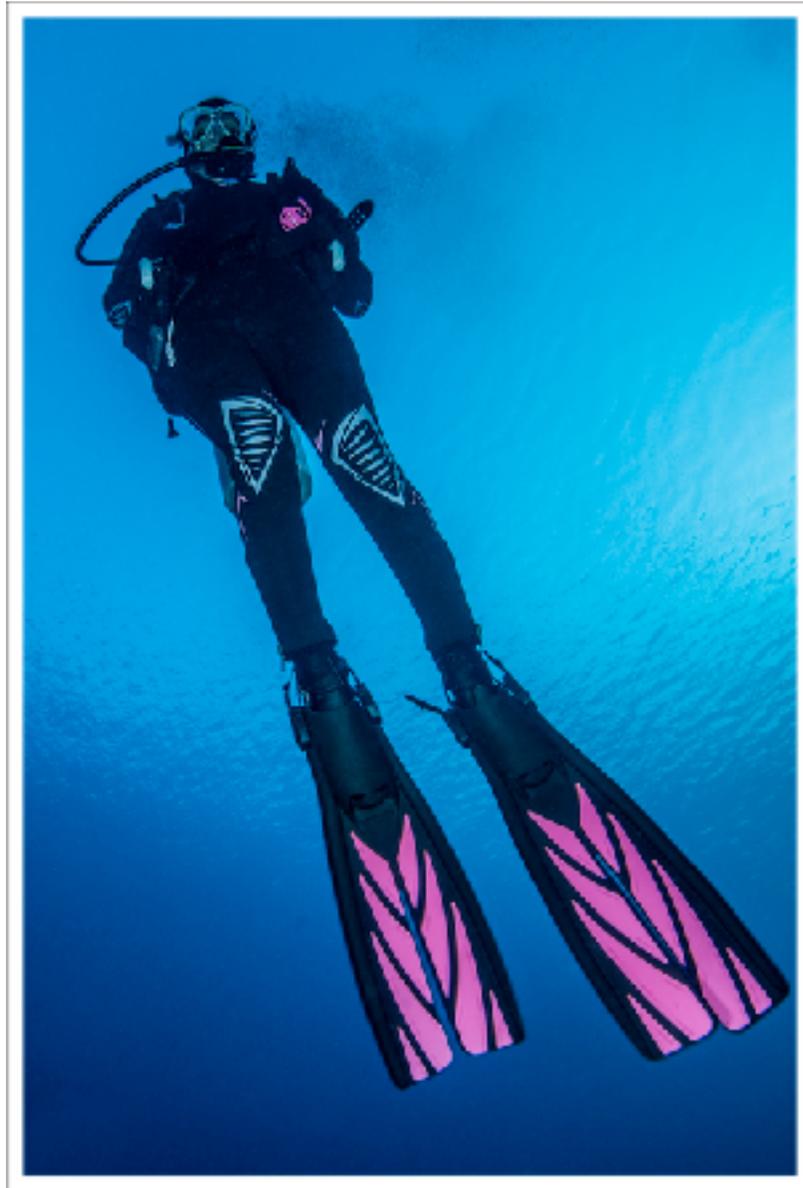
We could see lots of swim throughs and holes where countless fish darted about vying for my attention, but alas I had my sights set on the wall which I knew from a previous visit to be absolutely magnificent.

Passing over the reef there was an abrupt drop-off and the water darkened into a deep mysterious blue where one could imagine all kinds of critters hanging out.

No sooner had I reached the side of the wall when I noticed a Black tipped reef shark way above me and I snapped off a couple of quick shots. Before I had time to check exposure his mate came in for a closer look. In the water not 5 minutes and already having the time of my life.



I descended to about 70 feet and began a swim along the drop-off accompanied by my



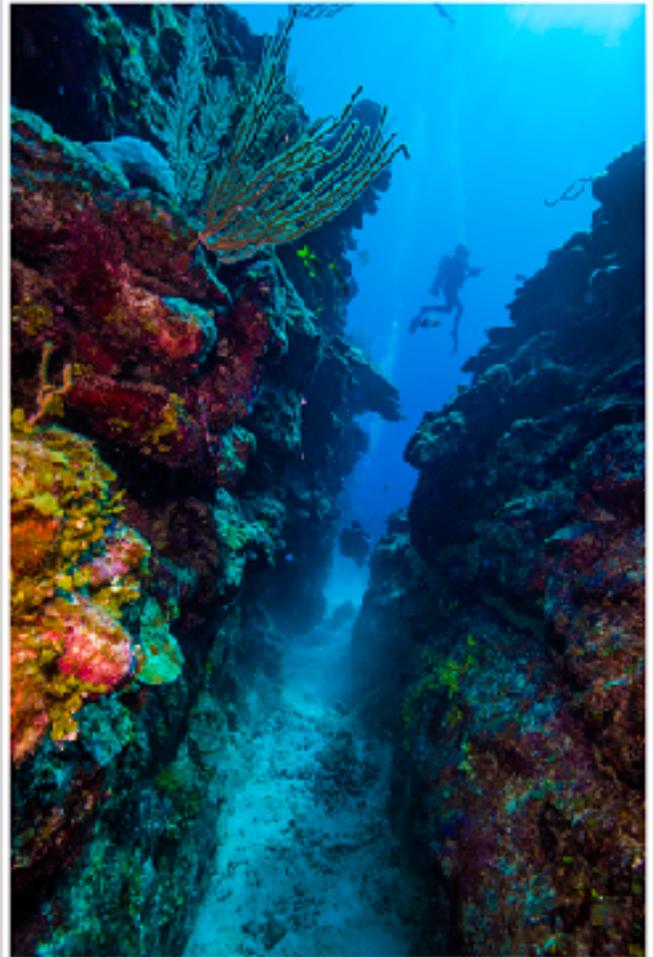
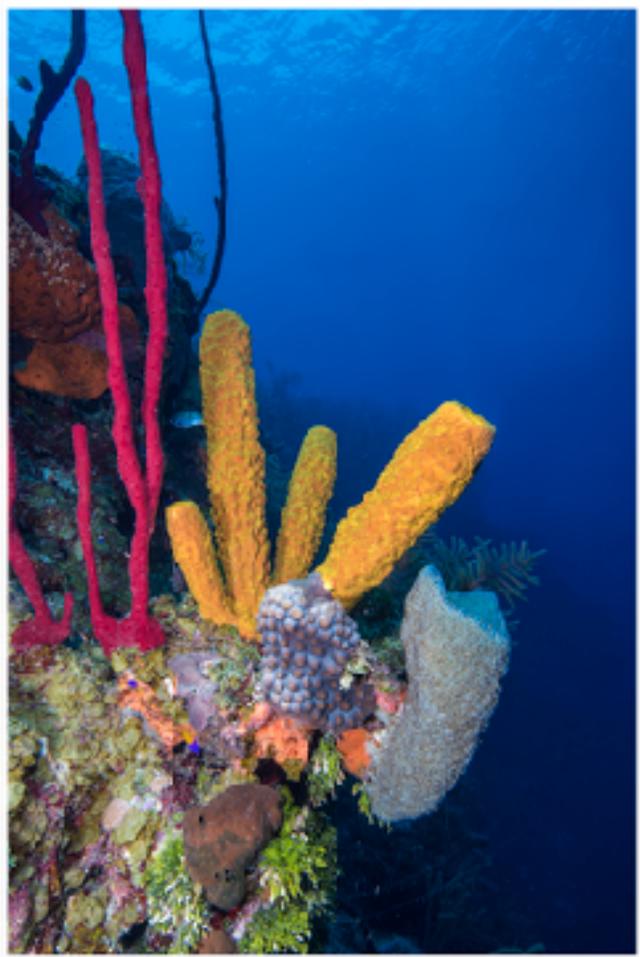
dive buddy Ofelia. Also very obviously enjoying herself apparent by the fact that she was grinning so much she almost lost her regulator. This is the kind of dive divers dream of. Clear water, lots of big animals and amazing reef.

As we swam against a very slight current we passed huge Barrel sponges gorgonian Coral and bright yellow red and purple tube sponges that at this depth appeared colorless until I lit them with my big underwater strobes.



Ofelia swims past a beautiful yellow tube sponge in about 70 foot of water on Lighthouse Reef



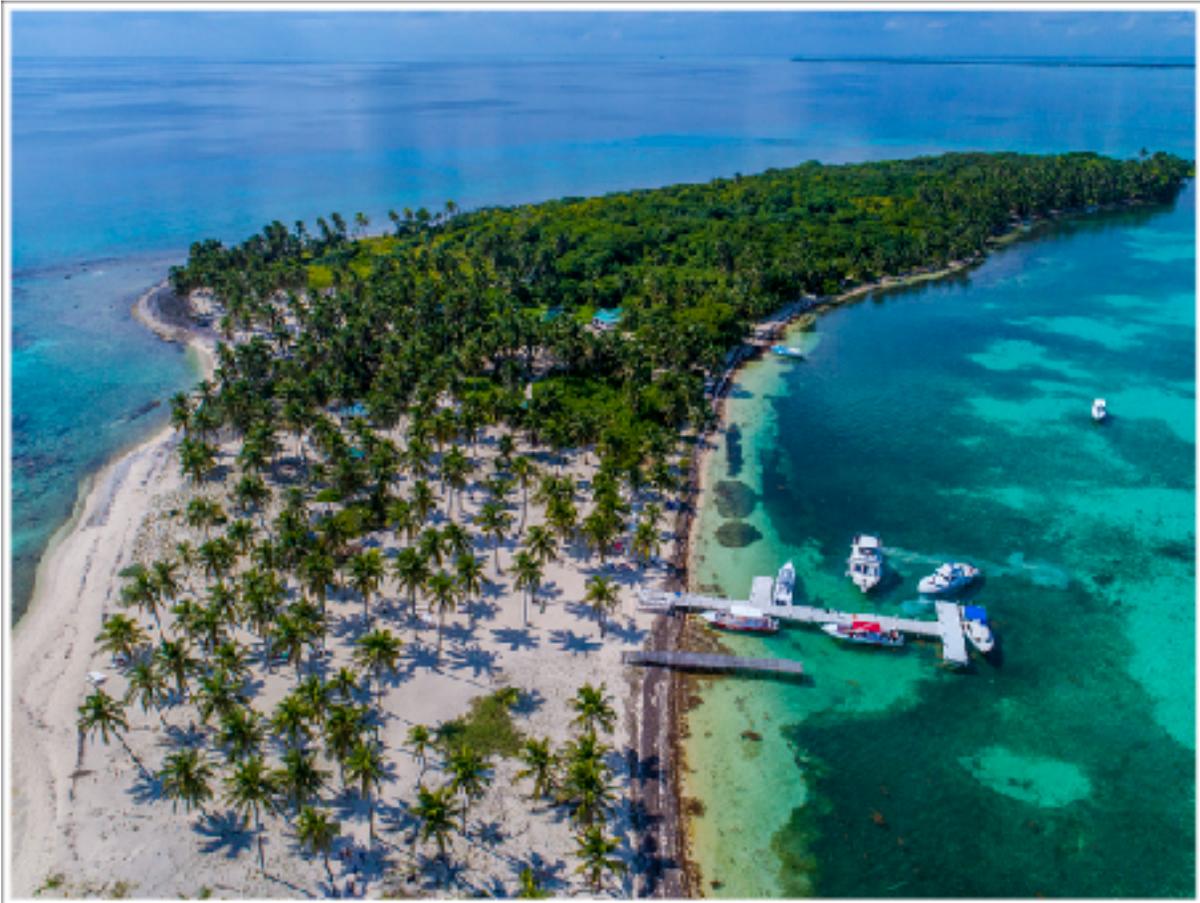


Nearing the end of the dive we swam through an opening in the reef which angled up into shallower water and watched as the large grouper led our dive master to a hole where invasive Lion-Fish are hiding. Amazingly enough they know who's got the spear and yes that's right, both the Grouper and reef sharks have learned to lead the diver with a harpoon to the Lion-Fish where after being speared the Lion-fish are then fed to the grouper or shark in question to be devoured with no hesitation at all.

How cool is that?



Half Moon Caye



Once we were all back aboard the boat we scooted over for a lunch stop on Half Moon Caye where we rested and warmed our bodies in the warm Belizean sun.

I get pretty hungry when diving so I really enjoyed the food that Roberto had provided and after devouring enough food to satisfy a Blue whale we took a walk along the beach and through the little forrest to visit the Red Footed Booby colony. Aah a stroll in the sun felt really good. Now I needed a hammock.

Before I can navigate to one of several hammocks hanging invitingly from the palm tree's Roberto yells DIVE TIME.

We are going to a place called "The Aquarium" which sounded right up my alley so the hammock would have to wait.

After a quick 5 min run the dive boat came to a gentle stop on the mirror flat Caribbean Sea and I had to delay my dive prep for a moment to just take in this scene.

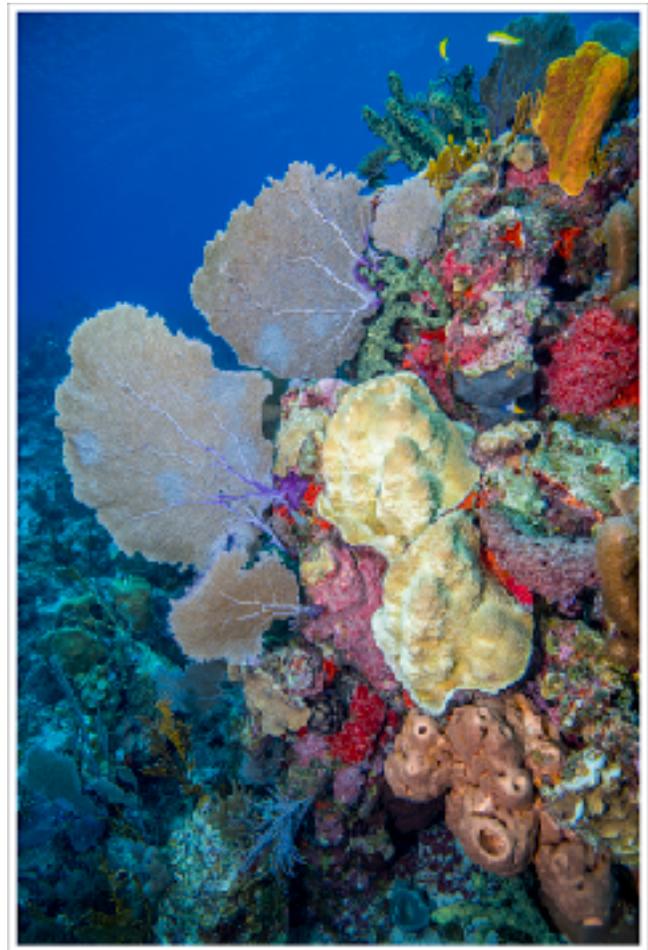
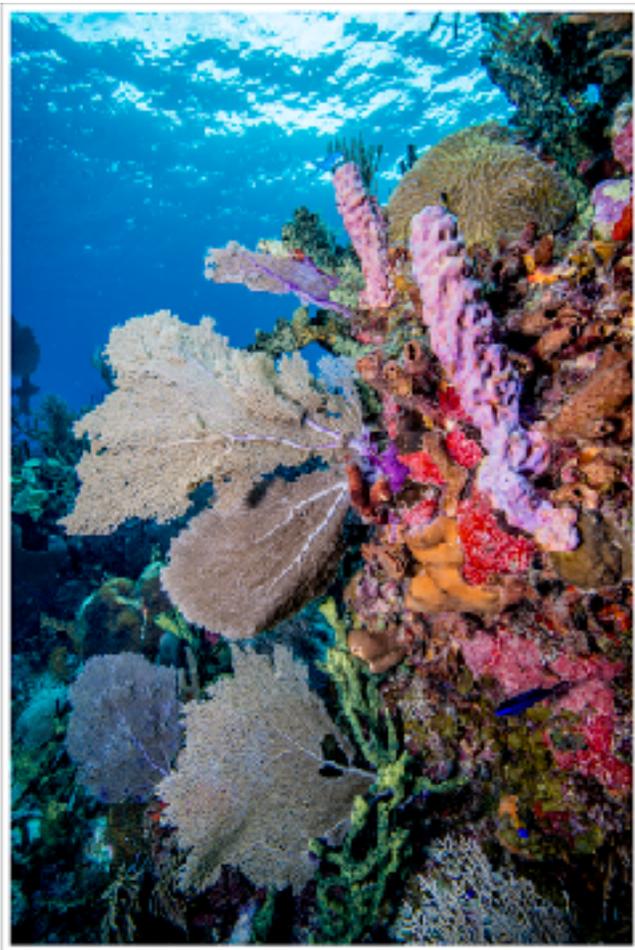
How do you photograph a feeling or describe this moment?

We were drifting on a glass like sea, from horizon to horizon there was not a ripple on the water.

Looking down it appeared that we were floating on air the water was so clear.

About a mile to port Long Caye shimmered like an emerald on the calm sea and astern the island we had just left. There was the gentlest of breeze and the temperature was just perfect. We were having a Zen moment. The temptation to just sit there and soak up some rays was pretty intense but we were here to dive so I shook my head and suited up for the next immersion.

The Aquarium.



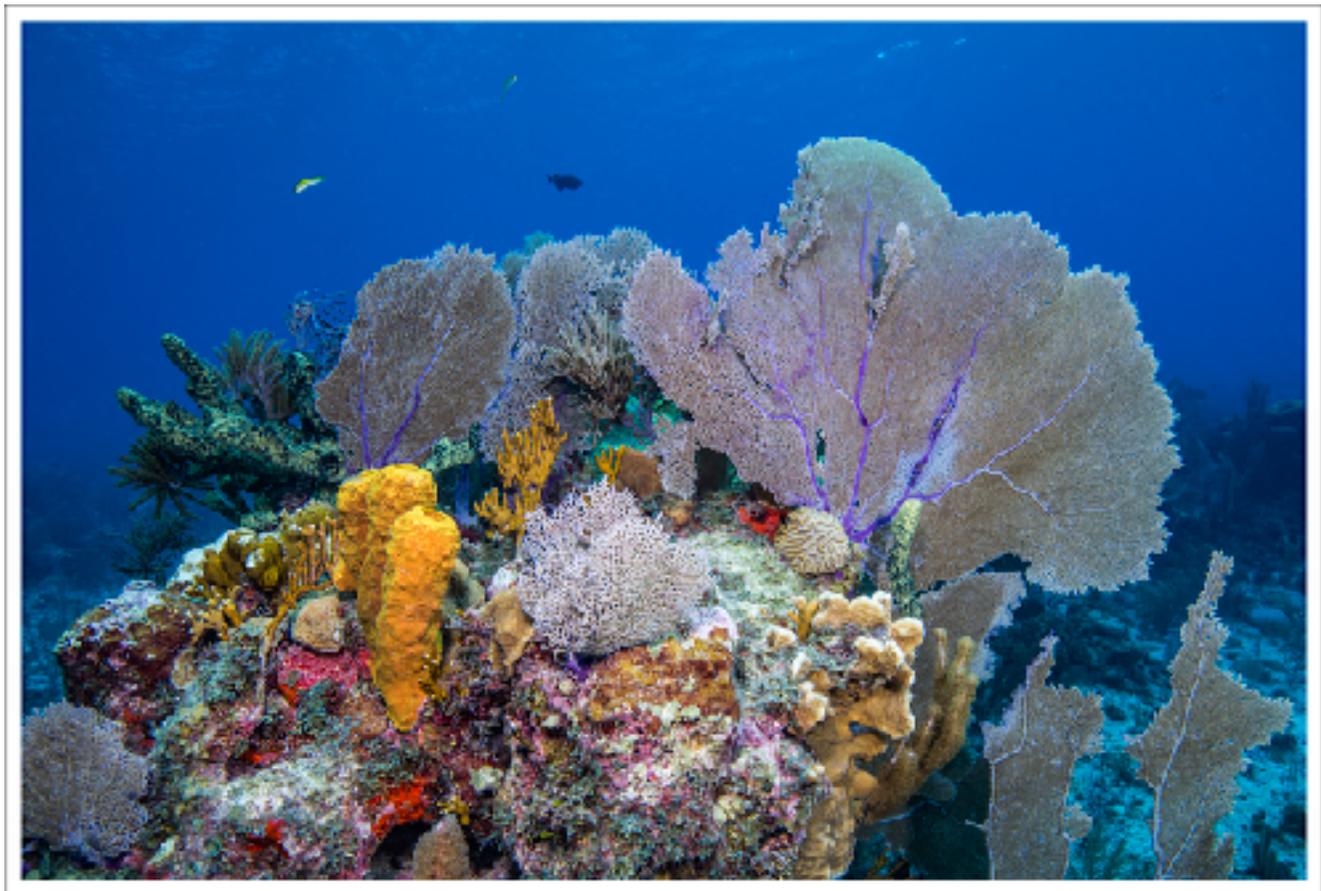
Now I'm a coral lovin freak and after my bubbles dissipated and my vision cleared I truly did not know which way to go. In every direction there was amazing color.

Pink Sponges, yellow sponges, purple fan corals hard corals soft corals, red sponges brain corals in every direction and all in what appeared to be in pristine condition.

I frantically take photo's as I knew this dive was not going to be anywhere near long enough, it was mind blowing. For an underwater photographer it is Paradise. I was dreading the thought of ever leaving the water.

Every where I looked another amazing Coral head and over to my right another deep drop-off.

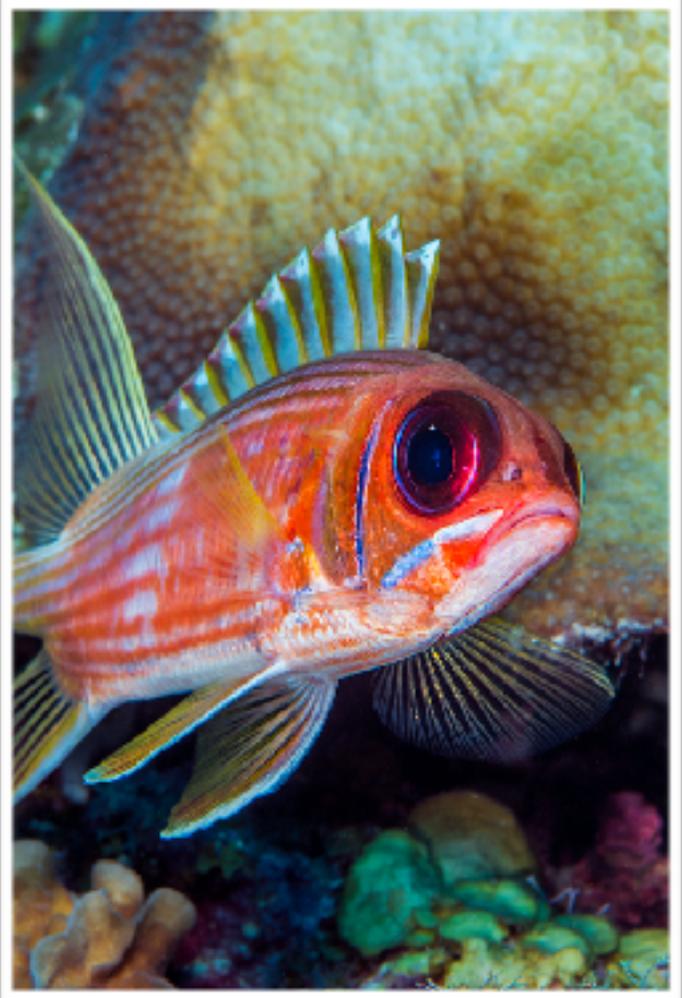




My dive buddy was constantly tapping me on the shoulder and signaling me to follow. "LEAVE ME ALONE" I yelled through the water as I was frantically trying to take in the amazing panorama and capture as much as possible in the short time we have underwater. Its just not fair. The needle on my pressure gauge was dropping way to fast.



Ofelia was having a blast.





Aaah but we must all at sometime come up for air and as my tank showed signs of imploding due to my sucking it dry I reluctantly returned to the surface.

In the boat patiently waiting for me the smiling faces of my friends who were all as euphoric as myself. What an absolutely magnificent dive.

We then set out for the long run back to Ambergris Caye and as the sun was playing its last tune we pulled into Roberto's dock in San Pedro.

Thanks to the owners and crew of Ambergris Divers. Ambergris Caye. Belize.

My dive Buddys Ofelia Mendez, Paco Crespo and Jessica Murphy for sharing this beautiful day with me.

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