

# Great Blue Hole

text and photography by Bill Becher

## The Deep Mystery of Belize

**We jump into the water as a pair of bull sharks swim past. As we descend into the depths of the Great Blue Hole off the coast of Belize, the light slowly dims. Bubbles from our regulators form silvery plumes that cascade to the surface.**

I face the limestone wall to stay oriented. Otherwise, I would be floating in a featureless void - except for the Nassau groupers and an occasional shark that slowly circle in the gloom. For no apparent reason - perhaps because they're messing with our minds - some of the fish swim on their sides.

At 60 feet (18m), there is a noticeable thermocline as we descend into cooler water.

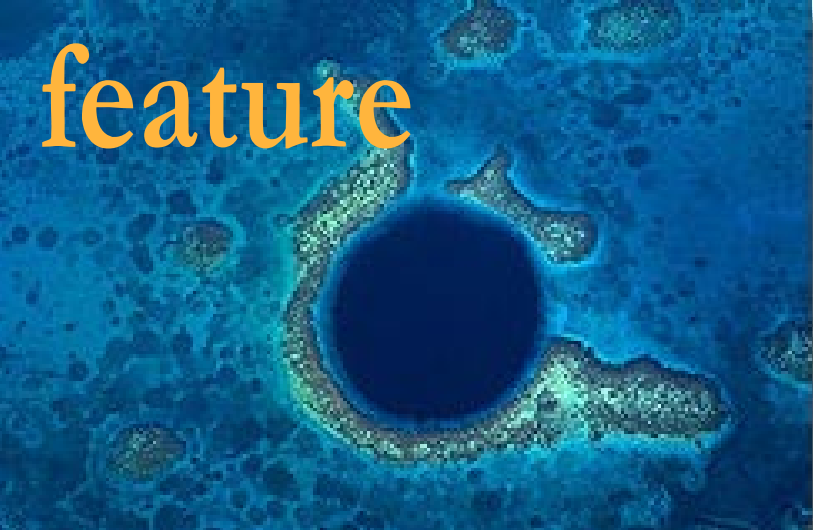
When we reach 110 feet (33m), we see giant stalactites hanging from a limestone ledge. Slowly finning, we pass them in what amounts to a topless underwater cave. Because so lit-



Aerial view of Blue Hole. Photo courtesy of Belize Tourism Board.







# feature

tle sunlight penetrates to this depth, we don't see much evidence of life. Below us is a purple emptiness.

Jacques Cousteau popularized this dive after he anchored the Calypso here in 1972 and explored the Great Blue Hole. During the Ice Age, the hole was above sea level and part of a complex of underground caves. The roof of the hole collapsed. As the ice melted, the seas rose more than 300 feet (91m) and the cave became a sink hole 1,000 feet (300m) across and more than 400 feet (122m) deep.

Seen in an aerial photograph, the Great Blue Hole looks like an eye - an unblinking, perfectly round blue iris in the midst of a coral reef. Not surprisingly, the Great Blue Hole has become Belize's most famous dive site.

Belize, formerly known as British Honduras, is a tiny country wedged between Mexico and Guatemala below the Yucatan Peninsula on the Caribbean side. It is protected by the second-largest barrier reef in the world, after Australia, making it a prime site for divers and snorkelers.

The Great Blue Hole is at Lighthouse Reef, the outermost of Belize's three coral atolls about 60 miles (96 km) from the mainland. I was diving with Turneffe Flats Lodge, a fly-fishing and diving resort.

## Blue Hole



Divemaster Juan Vasquez inspects a barrel sponge on a dive at Half Moon Caye.



TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM: Aerial views of Blue Hole. Photos courtesy of Belize Tourism Board.







feature

Divemaster Juan Vasquez feeds bread to yellow tail snappers at the "Aquarium," a dive site at Half Moon Caye.

## Blue Hole

Non-divers came along for this adventure. They were able to snorkel the colorful reefs surrounding the Blue Hole and then visit a nature sanctuary.

Before our dive, Juan Vasquez, our dive master, sketched the Blue Hole on a white board and went over the dive plan and cautioned us about the hazards of deep diving.

The Great Blue Hole pushes the limits of sport diving. Divers descend to 130 feet (40m) or more, where the stay is limited to eight minutes to avoid decompression sickness.


Nitrogen narcosis, also called "rapture of the deep," often affects divers who venture below about 120 feet (36m). It's not unpleasant for many, like the buzz from a three-martini lunch. But "narced" divers have been known to die doing foolish things, like taking

their regulators out of their mouths and handing them to fish.

Vasquez reminded us that good buoyancy control is essential in diving the Great Blue Hole. At about 60 feet (18m), water pressure causes divers to lose buoyancy. Without adding air to our buoyancy compensators, we could free-fall toward the bottom, over 400 feet (122m) down.

And of course you can always just run out of air. At 130 feet (40m), divers breathe five times as much air as on the surface - and it goes quickly. Vasquez dangled a spare tank and regulator 18 feet (5m) below the dive boat to make sure we would have enough air to make a five-minute safety stop at the end of the dive.

Despite the hazards, virtually all divers dive the Blue



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Divers rest and allow nitrogen absorbed during the 130 foot plus (40m) dive at the Great Blue Hole to dissipate on Half Moon Caye, site of a nature reserve and nesting area for red-footed boobies and frigate birds that nest on the island.





## Blue Hole

Hole safely. It is protected from currents and provides a safe learning environment for deep dives.

On the way back to the surface, we saw a spotted moray eel while the bull sharks circled past. After our safety stop and surfacing, we needed to take a long break to allow the nitrogen in our bodies to dissipate.

Our dive boat took us to Half Moon Caye, which looks like everyone's vision of a tropical island: white sandy beaches with swaying palm trees and a patch of jungle inhabited by green and spiny-tailed iguanas.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch and a short hike through the jungle to a reserve for the nearly extinct red-footed boobies and more common frigate birds. An iguana gave us a stony gaze from its perch in a tree.

A ladder provided access to a viewing platform at treetop level, where we saw nesting boobies and frigates. It was mating season, and the male frigate birds inflated bright red neck pouches to impress the females.

The frigates wheeled over our heads, came in for awkward landings and panted in the steamy heat as they sat on their nests.

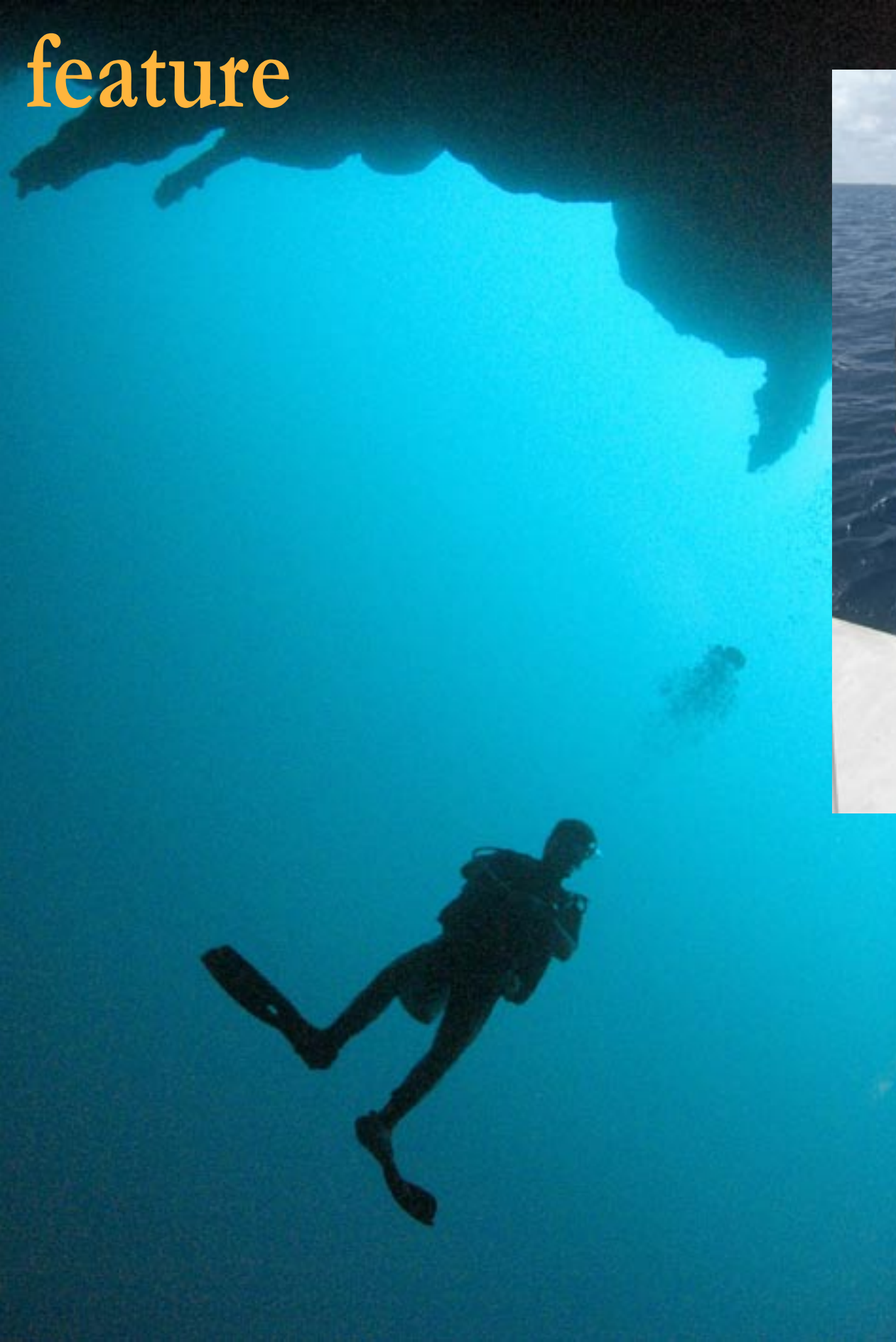
After the break, the snorkelers explored the water from shore while the boat took the scuba divers to a classic wall dive where we saw pristine coral, giant sponges, lobsters, purple sea fans and too many kinds of fish to list.

We cruised through underwater tunnels in the reef as colorful parrotfish filled the water with grinding sounds as they nibbled at the coral.

Divers and fish suspended below overhanging stalactites in the Great Blue Hole, which is over 400 feet deep.







## Blue Hole

Diver Rob Greene after diving at Half Moon Caye, site of the famed "Great Blue Hole."

One of the divers, Rob Greene of Costa Mesa, said he counts the Great Blue Hole and surrounding water as one of the top 10 "must-dive" spots in the world. He was blown away by the variety of sea life and the pristine condition of the reefs.

The boat picked up the snorkelers, and we went to our final dive and snorkel spot: "The Aquarium."

Here in the shallow water,

Vasquez opened a bag of bread underwater and was quickly surrounded by colorful yellow-tailed snappers.

I didn't pass them my regulator. They seemed to be breathing underwater without any help.

### IF YOU GO

There are many scuba diving operations in Belize - based in Belize City or Ambergris Caye - that visit the Blue Hole. Turneffe Flats offers saltwater fly-fishing, scuba diving and marine ecotourism for up to 16 guests at a time. Air-conditioned beach front cabins, proximity to unspoiled coral reefs, personalized service and small dive groups are part of the charm of this intimate resort set on a tropical atoll. Dive instruction is available on site. Information: (800) 815-1304 or visit [www.tflats.com](http://www.tflats.com). ☒



A spiny-tailed iguana greets divers resting between dives at Half Moone Caye. The island has been a nature reserve since 1928.

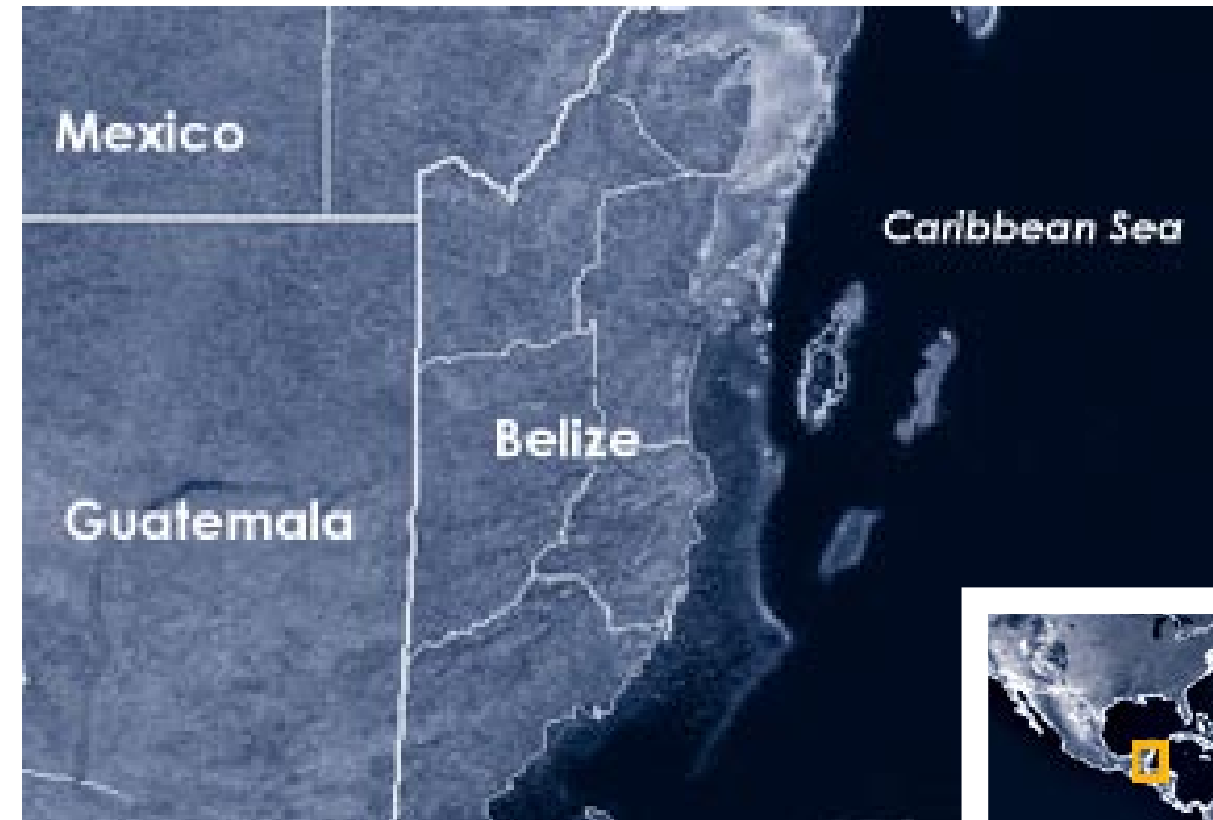
A diver descends to 140 feet (43m) below sea level at the Great Blue Hole. The Blue Hole was made famous by Jaques Cousteau when he dove here from his ship, the Calypso, in the 1970s.





# fact file

## Blue Hole, Belize



**Geography** Area 22,963 sq. km (8,866 sq. miles) Belize lies south of the Yukatan on the eastern shore of Central America and borders the Caribbean Sea. Mexico lies to the north and west of Belize. Guatemala lies on the western border of Belize. Capital: Belmopan (pop. 4,500).

**Climate** Subtropical 10°C (50°F) - 35.6°C (96°F); Rainfall averages 1,295 millimetres - 4,445 millimetres. Dry season: February to May.

**Population** 170,000. Creoles 30%; Mestizos 44%; Garifuna 7%; Maya 11%; East Indians 2.1%; others include Caucasians 8%; American, Arabian, Lebanese and British.

**Languages** English (official), Spanish, Maya, Garifuna (Caribbean). Fifty-eight percent of the population is under the age of nineteen.

**Currency** Belize Dollar (Bz\$).

**Electricity** 110 Volts A.C. as in the United States. Most power provided by Diesel/Generator Sets.

**Health** Potable water is available in Belize. When in doubt, drink boiled or bottled water. Belize City

has a well staffed hospital and several private doctors. District towns and larger villages have hospitals or clinics. Inoculations are not required for entry, however anti-malaria tablets are recommended for long trips in the jungle.

**Diving** The barrier reef of Belize has been named one of the Seven Underwater Wonders of the World. Water visibility often reaches 100+ feet (30m); water temperature is approximately 80°F (27°C); calm waters most of the year. Dive options: offshore resorts, live-aboard boats, charter boats from several dive resorts on the coast.

**Protected Marine Areas** The Belize Barrier Reef, Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve, Hol Chan Marine Reserve, Blue Hole National Park, Half Moon Caye, Glover's Reef, South Water Caye Marine Reserve, Laughing Bird Caye, Sapodilla Caye, Port Honduras.

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