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FOR SAVVY
DIVERS



LIVEBOARD BELIZE *SUN DANCER II*

BEYOND THE BLUE HOLE



DIVERS ARE SMITTEN BY THIS PARADISE — AND FOR MUCH MORE THAN ITS MOST FAMOUS SITE



BY TARA BRADLEY

The bell rings and we gather around the dry-erase board on the middle deck of *Sun Dancer II* like an amped-up soccer team. Second Capt. Megan O'Meara has created an illustration of Belize's iconic Blue Hole, our first dive of the day. Sipping just-brewed coffee, I expect a briefing filled with secret caves, lost treasures and mythical creatures hiding in the depths.

I'm still waiting for a spine-chilling anecdote when O'Meara summarizes: "It's basically a big blue hole, but the topography is impressive, and great for photography."

She's right. The 400-foot submarine sinkhole in the heart of Lighthouse Reef Atoll drips with underwater structures, stalactites and stalagmites. Yet, by our fourth day at sea, we've become a little

spoiled. Where are all the sharks? It also doesn't help that my GoPro has stopped working.

Back on board, a busted O-ring confirms my fears.

"You never know what you're going to get," O'Meara says. "I'll never forget the time I was diving with a pod of dolphins and almost missed the whole experience because I was fussing around with my camera settings. I've learned that sometimes you just have to enjoy what's happening around you."

A SHARKY START

Belize is located on the Caribbean side of Central America, bordered to the north by Mexico. It's easily accessible from the United States, with daily flights into Philip S. W. Goldson International Airport in Ladyville, a short drive from Belize City. From there, the Radisson at Fort George dock provides the perfect spot for a rum runner before boarding the Dancer Fleet's 20-passenger dive yacht *Sun Dancer II* for five-and-a-half days of nonstop diving.

Our first dive of the trip begins at Site Y on the southwest side of Lighthouse, where we explore a wall that begins with a smooth, sandy bottom. On descent, stealthy moving shadows along the reef's edge materialize into two feisty blacktip reef sharks. Greeting us like playful Labs, they circle our group in innocent curiosity, until they decide they are more interested in our cameras than us. After a few lens bumps, they depart as quickly as they arrived.



Lighthouse Reef's Blue Hole may be the best known site in Belize, but encountering blacktip reefies is a real adrenaline rush.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: GREG LECOEUR; COURTESY AGGRESSOR (2)

5 REASONS TO CHOOSE BELIZE
SUN DANCER II



01

VIP DIVING

When you swim up to the ladder, don't be surprised if one of the divemasters jumps in the water to remove your fins for you — the Aggressor and Dancer Fleet crews are known for their attention to their guests. Once you're back on board, you can take a warm shower and dry off with a heated towel.

02

NITROX, NITROX, NITROX

Multilevel profiles make nitrox your best bet for making the five dives a day you're likely to log. It also helps that you've got instructors on hand, so you can make the ocean your classroom.

03

BANANA BREAD

Each meal is like your very own

feast (hello, taco night!) but nothing beats getting out of the water to warm, just-baked banana bread. Surface from your night dive, and you're treated to a steaming cup of spiked hot chocolate.

04

SO LONG, SOCIAL MEDIA!

Even the biggest social-media mogul will secretly enjoy being forced to log off. Your best read for the next few days will be the good old-fashioned kind — a book.

05

DIVE BUDDIES FOR LIFE

Divers usually just like one another. "You spend the entire trip with the other divers, allowing you to get to know everyone on a more personal level," says Caffery Joseph.



Squadrons of torpedo-shaped reef squid are often spotted at night; one way they communicate is by changing colors.

"I was so busy looking at the wall that I almost missed the sharks, until one of them just about clipped me," my partner and dive buddy, Jamie Connell, says once we're back on board.

Big-animal encounter complete, we aren't disappointed in the wall either. With viz at 100-plus feet, we can see the reef is in such good shape — with the exception of a few lionfish not yet picked off by the crew — that it's obvious the only people who explore these parts are the finned kind.

"It's clear the Belize government has taken a lot of effort and care in protecting the marine environment," says fellow passenger Caffery Joseph.

Indeed the reef speaks for itself. On our next dive along Half Moon Caye Wall, we spot a curious green moray eel weaving through the crevices of the coral, a couple of angelfish darting about on a supersize sponge, and a pack of tarpon showcasing its version of an underwater square dance. Of course, no wall dive is complete without an eagle ray drive-by — we get one of those too.

THE AFTER-HOURS CLUB

Belize is the perfect place to fine-tune your night-diving skills, to see another side of these untamed waters.

At dinner, forgo the unlimited wine for a night dive afterward. That's when the ninjas come out to play. Basket starfish unfurl tangled legs into open water;

octopuses and green moray eels hunt; and sleeping parrotfish tuck themselves safely away in their made-to-fit bubblelike cocoons.

"I saw sharks, turtles, eels and lovely coral," says Caffery's wife, Rebecca, after one of our evening dives, at Lighthouse's Long Caye Ridge. "But the smaller fish were my favorites because there were so many of them."

While the active critters at night are the big draw for many divers, some discover that not having the visual distractions of the daytime reef makes diving easier.

"I found that I went through less air," Jamie confides. "It was also easier to navigate, knowing that many of the cool things weren't far from the anchor line. Right under the boat I spotted a seahorse and an octopus, and caught a green moray eel tearing into some unfortunate fish."

Caffery also experienced some firsts on the post-sunset dive. "Rebecca and I found an electric stingray — that was a first find for me," he says. "And we saw a red seahorse, a pair of scorpionfish — very hard to spot, but cool when you can find them — and a school of squid, all of which are pretty amazing to find out in the open," Caffery adds.

THE LAST FLING

As every diver knows, your next dive promises the possibility of being your best. For us, that comes during our final dive at week's end, at Sandy Slope, west of Northern Lagoon in Turneffe Islands Atoll. Turneffe is the

largest of Belize's three atolls and the closest to the mainland. Sandy Slope is a popular spot, and we soon see why. All our favorite creatures make an appearance: A curious grouper follows us; a swirl of blue tangs darts along the reef; an octopus tries to blend in with a coral head; and a loggerhead turtle nibbles on sponge, with his angelfish sidekicks coming in from the back for scraps.

We hit our safety stop under the boat, and a 10-minute finale strikes up, from a 100-plus orchestra of horse-eye jacks. If you haven't had the honor of hovering in the middle of a school of these silvery gents, add it to your list — you'll get some killer video too. Burning my borrowed camera battery dry, we head for the surface.

Then, as if O'Meara had cued the encore herself, we are welcomed by a pod of dolphins playing in the wake of a passing boat. I hastily try to squeeze a last bit of juice out of my battery, but the camera stubbornly goes dark. I start for the boat to grab a backup when I remember O'Meara's advice, and stop to enjoy the next 20 minutes of dolphin time — and come away with one memorable surface swim that will be tough to top.

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO Belize's high season is November to May, making hotel rooms cheapest June through November. If you're looking for the big guys, peak whale-shark-sighting season is April to May.

DIVE CONDITIONS Visibility is affected by daily tidal changes, although seasonality plays a part; the clearest seas are March through June. Water temperatures hover between 78 and 82°F, with warmer readings in summer. A 3 mm wetsuit is recommended.

OPERATOR Dancer Fleet (aggressor.com) operates the 138-foot steel-hulled *Sun Dancer II*, which carries up to 20 people in 10 staterooms, and departs from Belize City, Belize. Trips run from Saturday to Saturday. Shared public areas include the galley for dining, dive deck and two sun decks.

PRICE TAG Prices start at \$2,495 per person, double occupancy, nitrox not included, for seven-night cruises with five and a half days of diving.

FROM TOP: COURTESY AGGRESSOR (2); SHUTTERSTOCK

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