

Diving Belize

with Lee Hutchins

Belize is considered by many to be one of the great diving destinations. As such, when my wife and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary this year, we decided to take a two week dive vacation to Belize aboard the Belize Aggressor III and a small, adult only, boutique resort on St George's Caye.

Upon arrival in Belize, an Aggressor staff member met us at the airport to ensure we got to the boat at the Belize City Radisson Dock and settled in. The Belize Aggressor III is a purpose built dive yacht. The staff at Aggressor put a lot of thought into her design. She is outfitted so a crew of 6 can cater to the needs of up to 18 paying passengers. There is also sufficient Nitrox and fresh water capacity for everyone including hot showers at the end of each dive. The dive deck sports a large camera table with plenty of charging power and compressed air. Each guest is given a dive station with a tank and a "wet" gear locker to store all their loose gear between dives.

Sunday morning found us moored over our first dive site, a fantastic breakfast, and an extended dive briefing explaining how the

diving was to be managed during the week. The dive briefs always included: the boat location on the site map, the weather and water conditions, any special considerations, and most importantly, points of interest and what critters we could look forward to finding.

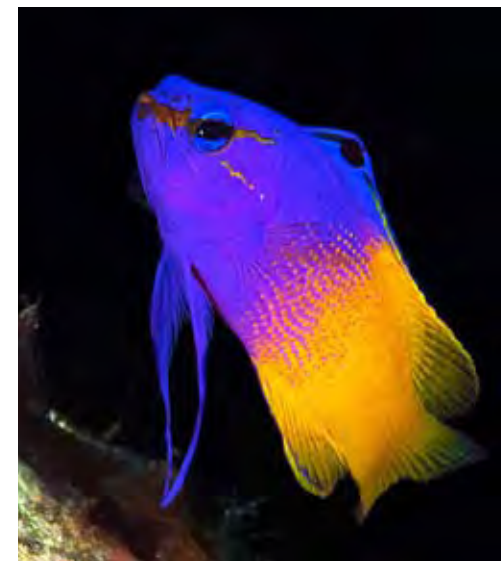
A crew member always manned the dive deck as the surface Dive Master to ensure getting in and out of the water is done in a safe and organized manner. The comings and goings are tracked with: who, time in, time out, depth and dive duration. The ship's captain - the Photo Pro, the second captain, engineer - the videographer and dive deck manager all took turns leading us in the water. Divers were free to follow or explore on our own - with a buddy of course. Once the boat was safely anchored, the dive deck was open and we were free to come and go as we pleased. Most everyone chose to dive on the suggested schedule however, with this large of a group, my wife and I opted to explore on our own for most of the week allowing greater freedom for photo shooting.

Diving in Belize is special it is part of the 3rd largest barrier reef in



(Above) Tarpon feeding on Silversides. Nikon D80, Ikelite Housing, DS125/160 Strobes. Tokina Fisheye 10-17mm F3.5-4.5 DX at 17mm, 1/200 sec, F/10

(Right) Fairy Basslet Nikon D80, Ikelite Housing, DS125/160 Strobe. Nikon AF Micro Nikkor 60mm 1:2.8D, 1/200 sec, F/16





Wrong Lens for the subject but you shoot what you have! Nikon D80, Ikelite Housing, DS125/160 Strobes. Nikon AF Micro Nikkor 60mm, 1/125 sec, F/4

the world. This reef extends from Cancun, south to Belize and around the corner into Central America proper. The off shore islands are really Mangrove covered atolls atop the reef. The reef drops off rapidly once you reach the limit of the atoll. This creates the spectacular walls for which Belize is famous. Because the Aggressor acts as your dive boat and provides all the living arrangements,

most of the week can be spent on the outer atoll known as Light House Reef. Since it is a several hour boat ride for mainland based divers, most of the dive sites are only visited by other Aggressor guests. With all of the organic matter coming out of the Mangroves, the reefs are very healthy and there are plenty of opportunities to get to know and marvel at underwater critters.



Christmas Tree Worm. Nikon D80, Ikelite Housing, DS125/160 Strobes. Nikon AF Micro Nikkor 60mm 1:2.8D, 1/125 sec, F/10

Light House reef is also the home of the famous Blue Hole. The Blue Hole is a 1000 foot diameter 400 foot deep sink hole that was created when a large cave collapsed millennia ago. Since this is considered the signature dive, the crew makes a special attempt to work it in. The weather has to cooperate since the approach is tight and a misstep can result in a spoiled week for everyone, not to mention

the damage to the coral. The cave ceiling is 110' below the surface. Hanging from the remaining ceiling, there are 10-foot and larger diameter stalactites that extend down well below recreational dive limits. For someone wanting to take their camera, definitely think wide-angle. The videographer and the second captain accompanied us.

For this dive, the crew had

special procedures to keep everyone safe including Nitrox 24, a strict stopwatch of 9 minutes at the depth of 130 feet, a 1-minute swim at 60 feet with an extended stay in the shallow sand and coral for our safety stop before returning to the boat. This was the only dive they required us all to stay together. This approach worked well and we all stayed out of decompression trouble with our computers.

After the Blue Hole dive, the boat headed for Half Moon Caye. Half Moon Caye Natural Monument is special as it is home to the only viable nesting colony of Red-Footed Boobies in the Western Caribbean. We spent an extended surface interval walking on the beach and bird watching. The other cool thing about this island, is it's also home to a virtual Geocache, so I was able to add Belize to my list of cached locations.

Other than Tuesday and the Blue Hole, the crew moved the boat to the first dive site of the day while we ate breakfast allowing for two dives in the morning. While we ate lunch, they'd move the boat again and to a new spot for opportunities for three more afternoon and night dives. After each dive, there was always a hot shower and warm towels available at the back of the boat. After each of first dives of the morning and afternoon, we were greeted with freshly baked snacks. Finally, there was wine and beer on board, but the crew kept a strict policy of "first drink; last dive" for the day. Our group did not have enthusiastic night divers, so the adult beverages normally started after the last afternoon dive and leaving the night dives to just a few die-hards. I loved having the ocean almost to myself!

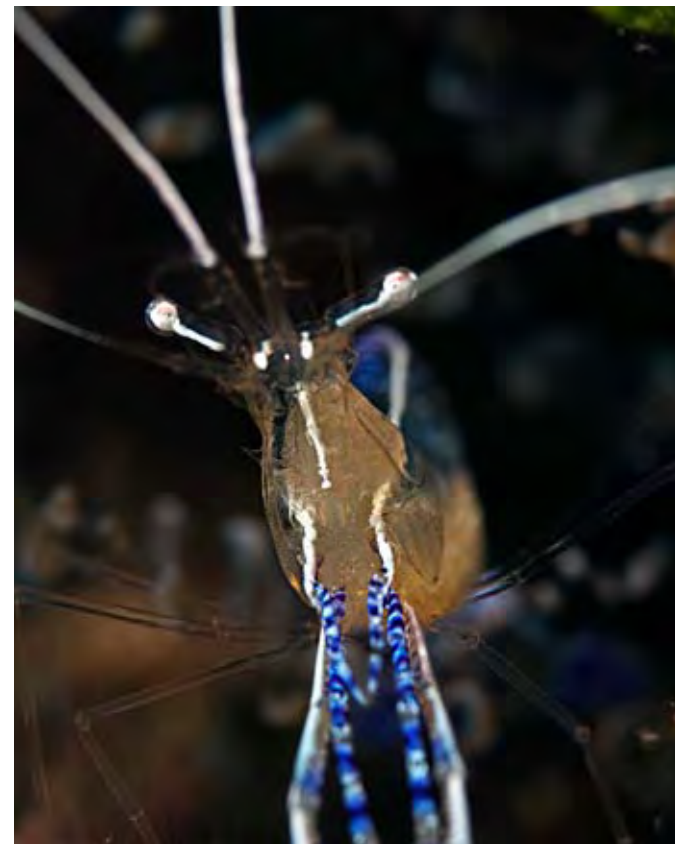
The food was outstanding. My wife has some food allergies and the cook crew went out of their



Sailfin Blenny. Nikon D80, Ikelite Housing, DS125/160 Strobes. Nikon AF Micro Nikkor 60mm 1:2.8D, 1/125 sec, F/10

way to ensure her special diet was followed, often making special versions of what the rest of us were eating.

The crew also made it known that for those who wanted to dive even more, divers were welcome to do a dawn dive at the night anchorage. Although I am pretty hard core, getting up early every morning was a bridge too far. By the end of the week, I had spent more than 26 hours



Pederson Cleaner Shrimp. Nikon D80, Ikelite Housing, DS125/160 Strobes. Nikon AF Micro Nikkor 60mm 1:2.8D, 1/125 sec, F/18

underwater exploring 11 great sites. The weather cooperated and allowed us to dive both the East and West sides of Light House Reef and Turneffe Islands. Memorable night dives included watching an octopus attack an underwater housed Go-Pro camera on a pole, and watching a bunch of 5 foot and longer Tarpon feed on a school of silver sides under the boat as it swung back and forth at anchor. The memorable day dive took place at a site