

HOLE IN THE OCEAN

Once a week, TIL visits Belize's famous Blue Hole and Half Moon Caye Natural Monument. We're the first operation to reach the site; a plus, as the earliest arrivals are greeted by the clearest water. As we stop in the shallows, my mind struggles to understand how the purple sea fans wave right below us, while a stone's throw away it looks like a Herculean hole punch was exercised on the reef.

The dive unravels the mystery. At about 115 feet, I can see cavernlike depressions in the walls replete with enormous stalactites. At first glance, it appears to be a well-created Disney set, but it's not hard to imagine when the entire hole was a massive cavern, long before the roof collapsed untold millennia ago. The Blue Hole is a sinkhole, like those that stud my home state of Florida, only on an enormous — and underwater — scale.

Part of the fun of the day trip to Lighthouse Reef Atoll is the stop at beautiful Half Moon Caye for a delicious picnic lunch under the swaying palms. The island is preserved by the National Audubon Society and is an important nesting region (Continued on page 87)



The Guide to Belize

average water temperature 80°F what to wear 3-5 mm fullsuit average viz 50-150 feet when to go year-round, but April-June seems to provide consistently great weather; March is best for the whale sharks off Gladden Spit

Must Do

Hol Chan Marine Reserve and Shark Ray Alley

Between the depths of 4 to 30 feet, be prepared for close encounters with Southern stingrays, spotted eagle rays and very friendly nurse sharks. The reserve is easily reached via Caye Caulker, Ambergris Caye and even by speedboat from Belize City.

Must Dive

Gladden Spit A deep reef off the South Water Caye Marine Reserve, where, from April to June, dog and cubera snapper gather in huge numbers to spawn. Whale sharks frequent this spot during that time to feed on the eggs.

Southwest Caye Wall

Here, wedge-shape coral ridges are separated by wide, shallow sand channels and end with dramatic drop-

offs. Graceful gorgonians, wire coral and some very attractive and photogenic sponges adorn the overhangs, which are ideally suited for dramatic and colorful photos.



Half Moon Caye Wall

Swim through the many sloping grooves with fabulous overhangs found along the coral rim. Peer out to the edge of the wall where fish hide under the massive coral formations.

Middle Caye Wall Clear water and minimal currents allow you to see at least two terraces without making a dive below 100 feet. A large

variety of marine life can be found in a small area because reef zones are seemingly condensed.

Blue Hole A perfectly circular sinkhole that measures 1,000 feet across and 412 feet deep. The highlight is dropping down to 125 feet and gazing at the bizarre stalactites that drop 20 feet from the ceiling of wall caverns.

Live-Aboards

Belize Aggressor III (aggressor.com) and Peter Hughes' *Sun Dancer II* (peterhughes.com)

Must Have

If you have any Belizean dollars left over, locate a wooden bowl carved from the unique Zericote tree (referred to as *Chakopte* in Mayan). The tree is a sustained species in Belize.

Rigged & Ready



HydraLight ZipAway

Duffel As much intra-island travel involves small boats like Zodiac inflatables, stash your dry items in a waterproof duffel that folds and zips away for easy packing. seattlesportsco.com



Quad Headlamp

Perfect for tooling around caves or midjungle accommodations, Princeton Tec's Quad headlamp is waterproof up to 1 meter and lasts 150 hours. princetonotec.com

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