



Taking the plunge

It can be difficult to find tranquil respite in the 21st century. *Upward Curve* takes a deep dive in search of calmer waters in Belize, Micronesia, Malaysia and Mexico

BELIZE

Through detailed exploration, scientists have determined that the Great Blue Hole of Belize was created approximately 153,000 years ago, with formation continuing through ice ages 66,000-, 60,000- and, most recently, 15,000-years ago.

The hole sits at a depth of 35 meters – where sea level was 8,000 years ago – and there are some stalactites today as a result of mineral rich water seeping into a cave. That means the cave was dry and above sea level at some point.

The study also shows that between the last two ice ages, there was an earthquake that tilted the cave by 12 degrees. By the time the roof collapsed creating the Blue Hole, the cave was beneath the water level.

Today, 70 kilometres off the mainland and Belize City (Central America), it is one of the best dives in the world.

The shallow waters surrounding the Blue Hole are rich with an abundance of marine life and dense coral growth. However, sheer walls limit the amount of sunlight entering, which creates a dim environment, except when the sun is directly overhead. Poor water circulation restricts the nutrients available, and limits marine inside the hole itself. At certain depths, the water becomes anoxic,

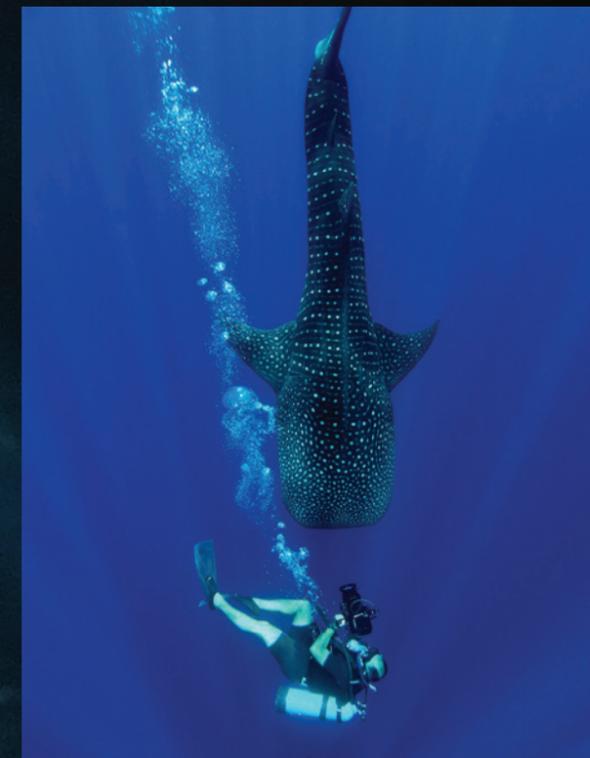
meaning it does not have sufficient oxygen to sustain life.

Crystal clear waters and marine species that include Caribbean Reef Sharks, Hammerheads and Bull Sharks surround the hole that is approximately 300 meters in diameter and 124 meters deep.

The dive is not as much about the marine life as it is about experiencing the stark beauty of the site. It starts in the reef,

alongside the hole, before passing through the ten-metre deep rim which slopes for around 15 metres, until it drops straight down. The recessed cave at 43-metres is guarded by six-meter tall stalagmites, stalactites and mind-altering limestone formations.

Dive operators in Placencia (southern Belize), or in Ambergris Caye, offer day trips to the Blue Hole and the Lighthouse Reef Atoll. belizescuba.com



MICRONESIA

Blue Corner Palau is one of the most action-packed scuba dive sites in the world, with up to 13 different species of sharks circling just beyond a plummeting reef wall. Sharks, turtles, anthias, butterfly fish, and the popular Napoleon wrasse cruise by in the swift currents that can change at any given moment, in any direction.

For this reason, Blue Corner is considered a 'drift dive' with a visibility ranging from 14-18 metres to 17-plus metres. The reef hook was invented here in Palau to keep divers safely in one place, to reduce air consumption, exertion and to ultimately protect the reefs from damage.

So divers can relax and stay still while the action creeps closer and glides along in the currents formed along the reef wall.

When conditions are right, divers can easily drop in at the majestic dive site Blue Holes and drift all the way down to Blue Corner where you "hook in" for the show of a lifetime.

The different shark species and snappers glide by in the current and, when the show is over, divers can glide over the reef to see sleeping sharks and beautiful coral formations. Schooling trevally and barracuda linger not too far off the reef too.

Palau can be reached from Manila, Seoul, Tokyo and Taipei. palaudiveradventures.com ►

Far left: Diving in the cenotes off Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula offers some of the world's most spectacular experiences
Left: It's not unusual to come face-to-face with a whale shark in Micronesia's famous Blue Corner Palau



MALAYSIA

Barracuda Point can be found just off Sipadan Island, 35km south of Semporna on the coast of Malaysian Borneo's Sabah.

You can dive here year-round, but the best time is from April to December, with top conditions in July and August. It rains a lot between January and March, making for limited visibility.

Its geographic location and unique structure allow for a concentration of huge schools of pelagic predators in these waters. With impenetrable walls of barracudas circling around and above divers, countless species of smaller fish coloring the reefs, and turtles swimming undisturbed all around, it's a magical dive spot. Barracuda point is also still one of the few

places left in the world where you can encounter swirling schools of jack fish. With hundreds of fish swimming in unison and perfect synchronisation, they often block out the sunlight with slow and winding movements that open up to form whirlwinds as an inquisitive diver passes.

Grey reef sharks patrol the reef in search of lunch, with large tuna and giant solitary barracudas scanning the perimeter of the wall. Turtles, napoleon fish, and eagle rays are often encountered too.

sipadan.com

Above: Parrotfish at Sipadan Right: A shoal of barracuda off the Point Below: Ik-Kil cenote



MEXICO

Cenotes are natural swimming holes formed by the collapse of porous limestone bedrock, to reveal a secret subterranean world of groundwater pools. Most cave cenotes have fresh water that has been filtered by the earth, making them so clear and pure that you can see straight through to small fish in the plant life below.

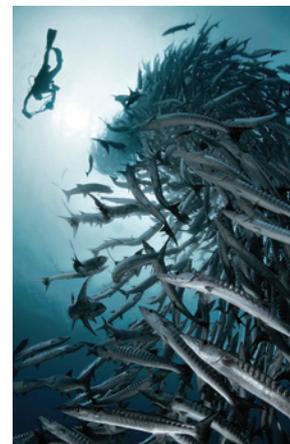
Open-air cenotes also have clear water, and often are home to vitamin- and mineral-rich algae that nourish and protect human skin.

The Mayans revered cenotes because they were a water source in dry times; the name cenote means 'sacred well'. Mayans settled villages around these spiritual wells and believed that they were a portal to speak with the gods.

Swimming in the pristine waters feels like stepping into prehistory, where giant tropical trees and vines form wild cathedral walls leading up to shafts of sunlight.

Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula is world-renowned for its cenotes diving, but also offers reef scuba dives, a bull shark feeding dive, American Crocodiles at Chinchorro Banks, and whale shark and sailfish snorkelling off Isla Mujeres.

Each cenote (cavern) is a different dive experience,



blending magnificent stalactites and stalagmites, dark corners, crisp sun rays and views through the crystal-clear water into the jungle canopy above. Many cenotes have haloclines, where top freshwater blends with the lower salt water – creating an incredible swimming experience.

There are two distinct diving opportunities off Isla Mujeres that attract divers and underwater photographers from around the globe; swimming with sailfish from mid-December to mid-March, and swimming with whale sharks during the summer.

Underwater photographers are thrilled with the clear waters, which allow for aquatic-playground shots in high-definition clarity. yucatandivetrek.com. ■