

cavernous insides, and endless corridors of the *Coolidge*, and gargantuan Boris and the treasure booty of small rare critters at the deco stop are the memories that haunt me. Yes, indeed, my gamble paid off, many times over.

— K.K.



Diver's Compass: Nai'a: 800-903-0272 (U.S.), 011-679-450382; fax 011-679-450566; e-mail naia@is.com.fj; website www.naia.com.fj. Prices for all-inclusive Nai'a cruises run \$3,600/10 days, \$2,500/7 days; itineraries vary...Though this trip was a "trial run," Nai'a plans a return to Vanuatu early in 2002...Video/photographers catered to; E-6 processing done whenever 10 rolls accumulate, multi-system TV/VCR (DV, VHS, Hi8 in PAL and NTSC)... Nikonos V equipment, Mako-housed Sony SC-100 digital videocams available for rent...DiveAlert or

noise-maker and "safety sausage" virtually mandatory; if you arrive without a safety sock, one is provided...Nitrox available...Novice divers will be looked after, but probably not best place for novices... Smoking permitted but contained to upper and open deck...Aquamarine: phone/fax 011-678-36196; e-mail aquamrne@vanuatu.com.vu; website www.aquamarine-santo.com. Aquamarine can arrange lodging and land tours in Santo...Boat dive @ US\$28 for ten - \$32 single, shore dive \$23, cave diving by arrangement...Instruction available...Nitrox 50% available to trained divers for deco...Fills were always good...Some Scubapro rental gear available...Some repairs, limited sales...Chamber in Santo, once again covered by DAN insurance...Aquamarine has two boats, full safety gear...Deco Stop Lodge: phone 011-678-36175; fax 011-678-36101; e-mail deco@vanuatu.com.vu; website www.vanuaturism.com/deco_stop...Deco Stop \$62 for two in double room with breakfast...Bug-free, secure gear wash and storage area...Bush and kustom village visits can be arranged...Vila has some nice restaurants, several \$40-60 hotels, and some wannabe casinos...Unlike Honiara or Port Moresby, one can walk around at night in safety...Best diving in dry season...Wet season Feb. - April; cyclone season Nov. - April...Temps average 78° F. our summer to 84° F. our winter ..Viz 30 - 100+ feet...Wear protective suit, gloves, etc. for all wreck penetrations...Take all film, batteries, etc....220 V/50 Hz, Australian plugs, occasional interruptions...Vanuatu time is 19 hours ahead of Pacific Standard Time.

Behemoths in Belize

scheduled whale shark trips in Placencia

If divers kept life lists like birders do, a whale shark would be near the top, up there with rarities like ivory-billed woodpeckers and quetzals. Every diver I know who's seen one has a story to tell, but usually they're chance sightings -- it was just his lucky day. As far as I know, Sea Horse Dive Shop in Placencia, Belize, is the only dive operation in the Americas -- and one of the few in the world -- to offer a regular program of planned whale shark dives, as opposed to snorkeling or chance dive encounters. Though Placencia's an interesting -- albeit slightly funky -- village, it wouldn't ordinarily be high on my list of diving destinations. But the chance to dive with whale sharks makes it special.

At lengths up to 55', whale sharks are the world's largest fish and are sharks, not whales. Their immense, gaping mouths are adapted for filtering plankton and small bait fish through specially adapted gills. These white-spotted behemoths

migrate three times a year, in the fall, winter, and spring. Fall and winter they are following spawning tuna, and it's strictly snorkel action. The May/April migration is for the cubera snapper spawn, and these fish hang deep, so the action is on scuba. You might wait the whole trip for the moment when a whale shark slowly materializes, but when that moment comes, it's unforgettable. For me the most breathtaking moment was when a 30-footer rose slowly from the depths, passing 15' below my fin tips, its mouth open until it closed to swallow the catch.

The prop flight in from Belize City provides a good view of the 16 miles of thin Placencia peninsula that ends in the village of Placencia, population about 1000. The small Tropic Air shack on the dirt airstrip serves as cell-phone control tower, business office, baggage claim, waiting room, and cold drink stand. They called me a taxi, which arrived in a swirling red cloud from the dusty, unpaved road. A short, inexpensive, and kidney-stimulating drive and I was in the village center, with polite islanders going cheerfully about their daily routine. Once you initiate contact, the only attitude here is good.

I stayed in one of five small cottages at the Tradewinds, less than 10 yards from a calm, picture-perfect, semicircular bay. Situated on a point, with a collapsing pier in front, it was blissfully quiet, the night stillness broken only by rustling palm fronds and the occasional smack of a falling coconut or mango. The large-grained sand beach had potential, but was badly in need of the litter and rake patrol. The cottage had excellent screening, although if the louvers were open, passersby could peer in. (Somehow in sleepy Placencia, it doesn't seem to matter.) The entire area was mercifully sparse, though not without mosquitoes and no-see-ums. The digs sported a fan, medium-sized fridge, coffeemaker, and several unshaded bulbs on the ceiling, but no phone or TV. The small bathroom had a vigorous toilet and plenty of hot water, and well-worn but fresh towels and sheets arrived daily. The experience was altogether tropical and profoundly relaxing -- all for the very comfortable price of \$US55/night high season/holidays (less at other times). It's a modest walk to several other reasonably priced, basic hostels, such as Westwind and South Water, which range from \$35 to \$80 a night, depending on the season and unit. Many of these mid-priced hotels lack a/c, but most have fans. I looked at the Westwind, which was much like the Tradewinds but not quite as decent.

Rum Point Inn and Kitty's Place are more upscale, but farther out of town. Kitty's had six rooms, three cabanas, and two apartments. I checked out the cabanas, which didn't seem as nice as the Tradewinds cottages, but they were slightly less expensive, which probably accounts for their popularity with backpackers. Rum Point is a 10-acre property with bar and restaurant and 10 cabanas on the bay, plus a dozen suites set further back, as well as a pool and a/c, both rarities in Placencia. Its dive op has a comfortable Pro 42, and they also offer interesting side trips to ruins and rivers. Of course, it's also more expensive, running about \$125-145 a night in high season.

There is no restaurant or bar at the Tradewinds, but the one concrete sidewalk on the sand winds its way through the tiny town, past several eateries. I liked Omar's tiny spot for a full breakfast and the fresh tortillas with homemade guava

Tradewinds/Sea Horse Dive Shop

Diving (with whale sharks)	★★★★★
Diving (without whale sharks)	★★
Accommodations	★★★
Ambiance & Attitude	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Money's worth (with whale sharks)	★★★★
Money's worth (without whale sharks)	★★
★ = poor	★★★★★ = excellent
	(Caribbean scale)



jelly. For dinner, I found that the Galley grilled a mean pork chop, thick and juicy, and offered frozen shrimp with butter and garlic, curry, or Creole sauce. The shrimp dishes were the most expensive on the menu, about US\$12. The Kowloon/Flamboyant prepared good Chinese dishes, including chicken chow mein, and wok beef with gravy & onions on rice. The most expensive dish on the menu was about \$US8. The Pickled Parrot served a decent pizza and turned out to be the spot for drinking and socializing. They had a wild party with a band while I was there -- at 1 a.m. the place reeked of sweat and coconut oil.

Whale shark dives are the province of Sea Horse Dive Shop, which was only about three blocks away from the Tradewinds. That's not far to walk, but somehow it seems further when your gear is piled in the Tradewinds' lone wheelbarrow and you're marching along behind like Farmer McGregor, pushing it down the street. I only treated Placencia to that sight once, though. After that first morning I rinsed my gear each evening, Sea Horse stowed it securely at the shop overnight, and rigs were always on board when I arrived the next morning.

Sea Horse is owned and operated by Brian Young, a Placencia native, with the able help of his wife Ardie, sister-in-law Julie, brother-in-law Louis, and a plethora of agreeable, young assistants. Brian has been instrumental in promoting diving and conservation in Placencia and is currently active in World Wildlife Fund efforts to make the Elbow and Silk Cays area, where the whale sharks migrate, protected marine reserve. He fished and dived the area for years before opening the shop about five years ago. Now he's diligently charting whale shark sightings, marking locations with GPS. It's hard to imagine a more pleasant, laid-back op. Boats left when everyone arrived, often not until 9:30 or so, but no one hurried and no one worried. Briefings were good, and generally, divers were given lots of freedom on the 40-minute to one-hour dives.

Brian runs three boats: a 33' with twin 150 Yamahas that carries 14 divers, a 25' with a single 115 Evinrude that carries 4 to 6 divers, and a 19' skiff powered by an 85 Yamaha that takes 2 to 4 divers. All are short on space when filled, and during my visit the larger two were always nearly full of U.S., Guatemalan, and European guests. Half the days both boats went to the same site, and half the days they went to different ones. The main boat has O₂ and a first-aid kit; communication is by cell phone. Exits/entries are anywhere and anyway you can manage them; railings on the two larger boats make them challenging. Boats had portable rung ladders, but the ladder on the second boat was one rung too short, which caused a good bit of grumbling.

EQUIPMENT TIP: BLACK LIGHT DIVING — Underwater photographers looking to add a new twist to the shots from night dives might want to look at them in a new light — and we mean that literally. The light we're talking about is fluorescence — ultraviolet light sources trained underwater, creating whole new color patterns and displays. Some of this is visible to the naked eye. Water absorbs the colors from white light with increasing depth, with reds and oranges being absorbed first. At depths below 60', orange shouldn't be visible. If you see an orange coral at this depth, what you're seeing is the coral absorbing ultraviolet light, giving it an orange appearance. A photograph destroys the illusion, and the coral appears dull brown.

This effect can be enhanced with ultraviolet light. Shrimp take on an eerie blue glow, and hydroids, nudibranchs, and bristleworms luminesce with strange colors. Corals tend to be especially vivid under ultraviolet light, and critters that are good at camouflage can be exposed with fluorescence.

If the notion sounds intriguing, marine biologist Charles Mazel has developed a small u/v light source for divers, the NightSea UltraBlue dive light, which retails for about \$140. Check out some of his strangely colored underwater photos at www.nightsea.com. For more information, call toll-free 877-436-9262 or e-mail NightSea at nightsea@nightsea.com.

The most entertaining of our group of five experienced divers was Pepito, an instructor from Guatemala City, who was all of 5'4" and feisty as a bull shark. When not eating, sleeping, or diving (which left precious little time), he would often remark quite seriously, "you know, I'm going to have to beat you" to the head shrinker in our group, who was a 6'1", 235 lb. weight lifter. Pepito brought Matzo with him to make his parents happy but had no real clue when Passover was, so we ate them with our rum and cokes before going out to dinner, sometimes with such distinctly un-Kosher morsels as tinned mussels.

We usually held our surface intervals on board. Snorkeling was possible, but due to depth and viz I couldn't see much. Lunch also was usually on board, but sometimes on Silk or Tobacco Cay, where there's a small restaurant. Ardie worked up a toothsome baked red snapper to send along, and accompanied it with either rice or beans, occasionally salad, and water and thin fruit juice. It's not much variety, but I didn't go away hungry.

The whale shark drill is 2 dives a day: a morning dive around 11:00, finning as deep as 90' or so, looking for the schools of cubera snapper. If spotted, the dive group is to congregate tightly above, creating a large column of bubbles that hopefully will attract the curious whale shark, who may think it's a chimney of spawn. I found this a low-yield dive as spawning typically doesn't take place until later in the day, though sightings sometimes occur. The afternoon dive starts around 3:00 and seems more likely to deliver. (Take a hint from when the whale shark research vessel starts diving, which usually isn't till late afternoon.) Areas of spawn can clearly be seen by around 5:30, but the crew doesn't like diving this late since you won't get back to shore until well after dark. Nevertheless, insist on diving as late in the day as possible.

Brian often snorkeled, sometimes for half an hour, looking for the snapper. When he found them, we got in. When he didn't find them, well, we got in anyway, but I'm not sure why. If you fail to see the spawn fish, you'll most certainly fail to see Mr. Big.

Ah, but what an inexpressible thrill when these docile plankton-eaters do appear, silent, graceful, and colossal. Their magnificence makes it difficult not to strike out to cruise alongside or reach out for a touch. But I learned to restrain myself, as such behavior only drove them away. If you do attempt to follow one, Brian will grab you; if you touch, you're back on the boat. I observed him restrain a photographer by the arm and another diver by the fin when they bolted for one. And this is as it should be.

Belize Coral: End of a Millennium

Apparently the coral devastation at MoHo Reef and other locations along the Belizean barrier reef has gotten scientists'

as well as divers' attention. The story is starting to sound familiar: during the summer of 1998, sea temperatures ranged between 30 and 31.5° C (86 - 88.7° F) for a period of several months. As was the case in Palau, the Maldives, and other areas, these sustained high temperatures drove out the endosymbiotic algae the coral is dependent upon, and the coral bleached and finally died. According to American researchers reporting in *Nature* last month, almost all the *Agaricia tenuifolia*, the most abundant coral on Belize's reef, died, and other corals were damaged. As has been the case with coral bleachings from Australia's Great Barrier Reef to Christmas Island, Thailand, and the Philippines, the increased water temperatures and increasing frequency of El Niño weather patterns was linked to global warming.

Of course, it's a difficult link to prove. How do we know, the argument goes, that such periodic die-offs aren't a natural phenomenon, something that's been going on forever that we just didn't know about until people started diving? The study by Alabama's Dauphin Island Sea Lab set out to address that question by drilling 12 core samples from the reef, then using radiocarbon dating on the samples to determine whether the earlier loss of coral species to disease and the recent death of *Agaricia* corals were unique or episodic events. The results showed no similar die-offs in the reef's 3,000 year existence, and researchers determined that these "were novel events on a time scale of millennia."

Based on an article in *Nature* by Richard B. Aronson; William F. Precht; Ian G. Macintyre; and Thaddeus J. T. Murdoch

On my last dive of the trip, we didn't go in until after 5 p.m. The minute we hit the water, four bottlenose dolphins, including a juvenile, came to play at close quarters. They were stunning with the late afternoon sun reflecting off their unblemished silver-gray skin as they shot about like a squadron of air-show jets. Soon, however, a 25' whale shark languidly cruised overhead, dwarfing the footprint of the dive boat floating above. Three more appeared during the dive.

The days we didn't go for whale sharks, I found the dives largely disappointing. There weren't a lot of fish, and reefs were hardly pretty. The Shark Hole dive, at a premium price of \$100/two-tank day, was mildly interesting (though not interesting enough to keep me from feeling slightly resentful about the premium charged). At 40', a section of a large collapsed cave dome appeared in the sandy bottom. As I dropped through the 10' opening, a pure sand bottom loomed about 110' below, photographically scattered with cushion stars. The roof had a couple of decent-size stalactites, but not much else. Some king-size nurse sharks were hanging out here, but they bolted for the black depths as soon as I penetrated their domain. While watching other divers rise out of the opening into the sunlight, I noticed a small shark begin to enter, but it soon did a comic double take and was gone like a shot.

On Second Cut, a wall dive you can take quite deep, a squadron of 8 spotted eagle rays came in at close range. The other dive worth remembering, MoHo Reef, was only memorable because it was utterly dead -- it looked like ground zero for a thermonuclear device. I did not see so much as a single living polyp of coral, and, if touched, what obviously was once a lush reef tumbled down in a melancholy heap. The abundant clusters of blue bell tunicates, which have an affinity for dead reef, appeared all the more vibrant against this background of devastation. Sea Horse should be ashamed to take anyone to MoHo Reef.

In five days of diving, I saw whale sharks two days. That's consistent with Brian's estimate that one will see them 8-10 days a month during the spring migration. If that's accurate, then chances are you'll make at least one encounter if you go for a week at prime time.

For me, a couple of fruitful dives made this trip worthwhile. But, had Lady Luck been elsewhere, I would have found the diving profoundly unsatisfying. (The northern Belizean atolls are far superior.) The hour-plus rides to the sites are tiring in themselves, and vigorously finning through featureless open water in modest viz in search of these behemoths can be mind-numbing and bone-deep fatiguing. But when Lady Luck does strike, you wouldn't want to be doing anything else. Swimming with a whale shark is one remarkable experience, and it will go right to the top of your lifetime list, no doubt about it.

-X.D.



Diver's Compass: Sea Horse Dive Shop: 800-991-1969; phone/fax 011-501-6-23166; e-mail seahorse@btl.net; website www.belizescuba.com. Tradewinds: phone 011-501-6-23122; fax 011-501-6-23201; e-mail trdewndpla@btl.net. American, Continental, and TACA fly to Belize City; Mayan-Island and Tropic Air offer flights into Placencia. C-cards checked, no checkout dive. 2, occasionally 3 dives/day; I did 11 dives in 5 days. Aluminum 80s, full fills, no Nitrox...Full line of well-maintained rental gear, but no camera rental, photo processing, or repair facilities... whale shark dives were \$US100/2-tank day; regular dives \$US65...Ice chest served as camera rinse tank...Cash, major credit cards accepted, dive shop added 3.5% surcharge on credit card transactions...Water temps 79-83°, air temps low-mid 80s days, upper 60s nights...Wet season June-November, dry season December-May...Smoking permitted anywhere, anytime.