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Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

North to South in Yucatán

Looking for satisfaction along the Caribbean coast

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Dear Fellow Diver,

"The pristine beach pictured in your brochure is a 30-minute walk from here," I told him. "I haven't seen so many giant cockroaches, spiders, and black scorpions in the middle of the night since the time I slept on the jungle floor. I know I've prepaid for a week, but I'd like to leave this morning," I said.

The proprietor of the Caribbean Reef Club assured me in a calm voice, "I understand. It's not a problem. The stateside office will refund your money."

When they wailed, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try, try, try, you might just get what you need," I don't think the Stones had dive travel in mind. But that's exactly how it worked on this trip to the Yucatán.

What I wanted was an easy-to-get-to, inexpensive, off-season destination with plenty of diving and other things to do. My solution: buy a cheap August package to Cancun out of the daily newspaper (airfare from Houston and three days' accommodations at the Cancun Marriott for \$340) and then head south along the coast to get away from the crowds and find better diving. I chose the small village of Puerto Morelos, 20 miles south of Cancun, with the Caribbean Reef Club as a home base. When that didn't work out, I packed my dive gear in my rental car and tried, tried, tried a sampling of what the Yucatán had to offer.

Puerto Morelos

I didn't leave the sleepy little village without diving, of course. I dropped by Sub Aqua Explorers on the corner of the plaza. Shedor Muñoz, the proprietor, was a straight shooter. He answered my questions candidly as he scrutinized my C-card.

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Reader Dr. Steve Aycus, Aspen, Colorado, had better luck at Puerto Morelos and rated the diving much higher than I did (4/95). He found Enrique Juarez (87-10230), a fishing guide who takes only experienced divers.

J. Q.

. . . The man had a bloody bandage on his leg. He pointed to the eel grass and told me that while walking there he had been attacked, for no reason at all, by an eel.

Akumal is an ideal place to travel with kids. The snorkeling is excellent in the bay, with lots of protected shallow water and nearby lagoons with swimming pool-like conditions.

J. Q.

"Yes, Hurricane Gillbert did tear up parts of the reef. No, the diving is not better than Cancun, just different."

Sub Aqua is, well, a hands-on kind of operation. I waded out to the open panga with my equipment and an aluminum 80 and heaved the anchor. The divers who had called from Cancun wanting to see the sleeping sharks never showed, so the two of us, plus a local woman who couldn't swim but was learning to dive, made the ten-minute run out to the reef.

The reef was shallow; to get below 50 feet you'd have to dig a hole. The surge along the inside of the reef required a wait-then-go-with-the-flow style of diving. I looked for the dolphins I'd seen on the surface, but all I could find were a couple of foot-long lobsters under a ledge and a basketball-sized porcupine fish in a cave. Everything was in constant motion. With 40- to 50-foot visibility, I could see a fair number of tropicals churning in the surge. I swam out through a cut in the reef and was caught up in a swirling, frenzied mass of sergeant majors. Below them, a school of juvenile blueheaded wrasses lined up and took turns biting a point on the reef. Fifty minutes into the dive, just as the action was picking up, Shedor gave us a thumbs-up and we returned to the unattended boat.

After a ten-minute surface interval, we were back in the water. This was the shark dive, which consisted of Shedor racing around peering into nooks and crannies until he found a lonely, diver-sized nurse shark in a cave. Once he had pointed out the sleeping shark, it was back to the boat.

On the way back I asked if he had enough sites to keep a diver happy for a week. His reply: "If they were a happy person."

Down the Corridor

Things are changing rapidly along the coast. Once-peaceful Playa del Carmen has blocked off car traffic on the beachfront road, and along a pleasant walkway a hundred or more shops and restaurants now fill with tourists. The small, isolated cove of Xcaret, which just a few years ago was at the end of an unmarked footpath, is now a giant water slide costing \$25 per person.

I drove another 25 miles down the coast, along a highway swarming with butterflies, and stopped in at Capitán Lafitte Resort. In this lush, tropical setting, about 60 rooms and beachfront bungalows face the turquoise water along a beautiful stretch of white sand beach. Sharing the beach next door is KaiLuum, with furnished tent accommodations. An *In Depth* correspondent took a look at the diving here in our September 1991 issue. His conclusion was that the deeper reefs were in good shape, shallow reefs not so good, with not many fish and mostly drift diving in current, and that if you wanted more than two dives a day, you should go elsewhere. I went elsewhere, moving on down the coast.

Akumal

In the evening, a middle-aged German couple stood by the edge of the bay, performing the same ritual I had witnessed

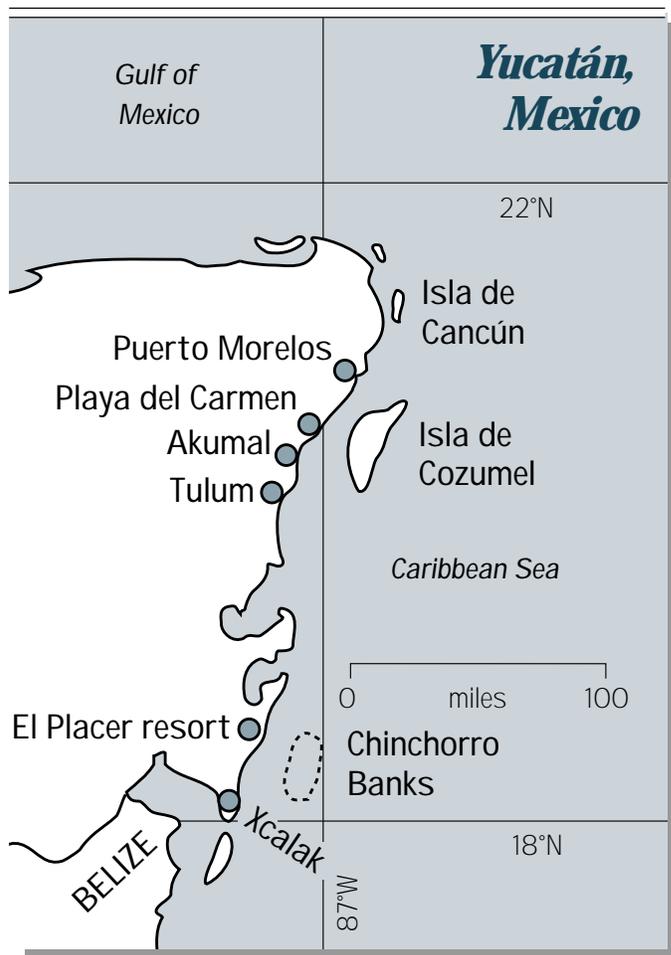
the previous two nights. Talking in low voices, they kept pointing to a spot in the eel grass a few feet offshore. The man had a bloody bandage on his leg. By the fourth night I had to ask. He pointed to the eel grass and told me that while walking there he had been attacked, for no reason at all, by an eel.

After checking out several resorts along the coast, including the new ones springing up on the road south of Tulum, where lobster dinners can be had for \$4 and rooms for \$20 a night, I had ended up at Las Casitas on Akumal Bay. The air-conditioned, two-bedroom, two-bath, full-kitchen bungalow was just steps away from good snorkeling, a short walk from dive shop and restaurants. Just what I needed.

The Akumal Dive Shop is a well-run, efficient operation with single-tank dives leaving at 9:00, 11:30, and 2:30. I signed my name on the blackboard outside the shop, showed up on time, carried my equipment out to the open panga anchored in the bay, and within ten minutes was back-rolling into the water. The spur-and-groove coral formations make an interesting dive if you want to enjoy neutral buoyancy and cruise through narrow canyons and swim-throughs, but the sparse fish life, lack of critters, and regimented procedures downgrade the diving for experienced divers.

The Cave Diver's Disneyland

The other underwater worlds around Akumal have thought-provoking names: Temple of Doom, Sacred Cow, Room of Tears, Tomb of the Ancients, Car Wash. Getting to the cenotés (pronounced see-no-TAYs) or sinkholes along the Yucatán Peninsula is part of the adventure. A couple of them are right off the paved highway; many require a bit of a walk or a ride in a vehicle built to handle the rough terrain. There's one cenoté that's accessible by foot only, and pack horses carry your gear; you walk, your equipment rides. As you stagger down the paths to the more remote sites, your senses are bombarded: the smell of the jungle, flocks of beautiful butterflies in every color imaginable, brightly colored birds flitting through the undergrowth, tree iguanas staring down at you from their Jurassic Park settings. You hear strange rustlings and patterings from animals you can't see and can hardly imagine; the only sounds you recognize are bird calls, the buzzing of insects, and the grunting of your companions. Suddenly you come upon an assortment of holes in the ground -- some huge, some so small you can hardly get down into them with your tanks on your back. At some cenotés, you do a giant stride 10



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to 15 feet into the water. At others, a handmade ladder built entirely of logs, limbs, rope, and vines leads down to a dry landing area from which you stage yourself to the water's edge.

Most of the *cenotés* are "white" systems, with stalactites, stalagmites, and soda straws varying in color from a light brown to dazzling white. White sand dunes scalloped over the years by the movement of water give you the feeling you're flying over the Rocky Mountains in January. The halocline, a weird, wavy boundary between warm salt water below and cool fresh water above, shimmers like a mirage until disturbed by your buddy's finning, and then creates trails behind him like the contrails behind a jet. A few *cenotés* are "dark" caves, and in these, the same geologic formations loom like the interiors of centuries-old European cathedrals and castles where the burning of a million candles and torches over hundreds of years has coated the surfaces with a sooty patina.

To view these underwater systems, I went to Aquatech/Villas Derosa, my right-on-the-beach base of operations for a week. Owned and operated by a couple of hard-core cave divers, Tony and Nancy Derosa, Aquatech is designed with the diver's requirements in mind. From the flexible meal schedules to the abundance of hardware to the detailed pre-dive briefings, the infrastructure is there to give cavedivers everything they need.

The dive group determines each day's routine. Want to hit it early? Get up, fix your own breakfast from the groceries supplied, load equipment into the designated van, and slip

beneath the surface as the sun comes up. More civilized groups may elect to delay their departure until 8, 9 or 10 a.m.; it's your call. After diving the morning's site, you return to the Villas, change over to a new set of double 80s, and wait for lunch to be served in your room between 12:30 and 2:00. (If you get back early, you get lunch early; return later, it gets there later.) Then off to the afternoon

dive, back to home base, and wait for the evening feeding frenzy where, once again, the meal is delivered to your room, family style, between 6:30 and 8:00.

Vans are the primary means of transportation to and from the sites, and one of the members of your group becomes the designated driver for the week. A couple of the vans have lived a hard life indeed. Ours, an old Dodge, had a couple of interesting tires on it, a notable lack of a muffler, and a tendency to overheat. On the second day, a rear tire blew out on a back road. We got the vehicle jacked up, removed the lug

The Doom Room

The Temple of Doom has lived up to its name. Last August a dive shop in Cozumel organized a *cenoté* dive on the mainland. They hired an open-water instructor from Playa del Carmen, who took the shop owner, his wife, and six other non-cave divers to the Temple of Doom. They swam past the warning signs that caution you not to enter unless you're a qualified cave diver. When the instructor finally looked back, four of his group were missing; three were dead. Cave diving is serious diving. Proper training is essential — and be sure you can trust the person in charge of the dive.

J. Q.

nuts, and discovered that 50,000 miles of bad road had welded the hub and wheel into a single chunk of corroded metal. Using a piece of a cinder block we found beside the road, we took turns beating on the rim until we finally knocked it free.

Later in the week the van's temperature gauge went into a hard right bank. An inspection of the coolant level revealed that the system was dry. We discovered an old well alongside the road homesteaded by a swarm of bees that showed little inclination to share. Moving at a very slow pace, we managed to fill a few bottles without getting stung. We topped off the radiator, started the engine, and watched in dismay as the coolant quickly drained out. Our bee man made another sortie into enemy territory while Mr. Goodwrench duct-taped and wire-wrapped the leaky hose. This fix got us to the next dive site and back to the Villas without incident. The Dodge was repaired overnight.

I still give Aquatech/Villas Derosa two thumbs up. The rooms and the food are above average, the attitude of the staff superior, and the diving truly world class. Besides catering to true-blue cave lunatics, they offer training in open-water, cavern, cave, and Nitrox diving, as well as open-water dives in the ocean and escorted tours for the uninitiated into some of the caverns. If that's not enough, they'll take you deep-sea fishing or arrange for tours of the local Mayan ruins. They've redefined "full service."

Chinchorro Banks

Lots of divers are lured to the Yucatán by the promise of diving the Chinchorro Banks. Twenty to thirty miles offshore, this large reef structure is about the size and shape of Cozumel -- 30 miles long by 8 miles wide. Getting there is the problem; if the weather doesn't cooperate, the hour-or-longer boat ride can turn nasty.

Leaving Akumal, I drove down the coast to the remote El Placer, a new resort with four or five rooms that will sleep doubles or triples. It's managed and owned by Tom and Gerri Steddum of Midland, Texas, who also own the Scuba Shack in Cozumel. Just dropping in, I found the place full, but they managed to scare up a meal that was typical divers' fare -- hearty, and lots of it. The divers staying there were content to regale me over dinner with stories of making only one crossing in the 36-foot aluminum boat to Chinchorro Banks during the week but finding excellent diving. Next time I'll call ahead, even in the slow summer season.

However, I did manage to make it out to the banks in a privately owned ponga. On my first Chinchorro dive, along the central western edge of the reef (where the visibility and diving are supposedly better), I began by dropping down to 115 feet. I found a sandy bottom slope covered with large coral heads -- the most pristine coral I've seen in the Caribbean. On the occasions when I instinctively reached out to touch some dead coral to steady myself for a photo, I couldn't find any.

. . . Chinchorro has the most pristine coral I've seen in the Caribbean. On the occasions when I instinctively reached out to touch some dead coral to steady myself for a photo, I couldn't find any.

Visibility was a fine 150 feet. Large colonies of garden eels occupied the sandy areas. Eight- to nine-foot sponges -- tube, barrel, and elephant ear -- as well as gorgonians competed for space on the condo-sized coral heads. Black coral trees draped the sides at 60 feet, a sure sign of minimal commercial activity. Reef fish life was prolific, but the only pelagics I saw were a couple of lonely jacks.

On the second dive, visibility dropped to 100 feet. This dive, with a steeper slope and more densely packed coral heads, was in territory that was just as untouched and had just as much fish life as the rest of Chinchorro. After 30 minutes I ran out of reef (not surprising, since we were essentially diving parts unknown), so I angled up along the sand and stumbled onto a conch ménage a trois in progress in full public view of the largest number of fully grown queen conchs I've ever seen -- one every 10 feet or so.

My overall reaction to diving here was excitement: here was an enormous, beautiful reef structure, virtually untouched by commercial fishing as well as divers, in very clear waters. Though I didn't see any exciting walls

or pelagics, I was told they're there -- along with some 400 wrecks. The boat ride out is a bit longer than I'd like; next time, I'll plan on staying out for at least three dives. I'd love to spend time out here either diving with someone who knows the best dive spots or just exploring by myself. It's not often you get to dive in such conditions so close to home, especially without bumping into 15 other groups of divers.

The Never-Ending Story

I did make it to the Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza and Cobá, but I could have taken the ferry over to dive Cozumel . . . I could have stopped and dived at numerous places between Cancun and Akumal . . . trekked into the Biosphere and hired a boat to find the manatees in the bay . . . followed the dirt road to the bottom of the peninsula to Xcalak and sampled the diving at the very remote Costa de Cocos Resort . . . but I had used up all my time and spent all my money. More money than I thought -- the calm voice at the Caribbean Reef Club that assured me that I would get a refund charged me \$500 for the single night!

J. Q., W. D., J. M.

Ditty Bag

Check your local travel agency or newspapers for packages to Cancun, including a surprisingly large number of direct flights from major cities. Cleveland, for instance (Cleveland to Cancun, direct??). Shop rental cars ahead of time, as prices vary wildly. . . . The coin of the realm is the new peso -- at 5.6 pesos per dollar, subject to change daily. U.S. dollars are gladly accepted by almost everyone. Bring small-denomination bills, \$20 or smaller. I negotiated \$100 a night at Las Casitas Akumal (91-987-2-25-54 or fax 90-987-4-23-71). . . . For Aquatech I recommend you book direct; phone or fax 52-987-4-12-71. For certified cave divers, a week's stay was \$850 and was truly all-inclusive. The cost of the training packages varied: cavern was \$950, cave \$1,275. This included seven nights' accommodations, three meals a day, all the special equipment you'd need, and all transportation. The Turquoise Reef Group represents a large number of the Yucatan properties and is a good source of information (800-538-6802 or 303-674-9615). . . . I booked the Caribbean Reef Club with Akumal Vacations, 800-448-7137. They were polite and efficient -- until it came time to refund my money. I would not use them again.

**I broke my own rule --
never pay cash up front,
always use a credit card,
especially with small,
little-known operations.**

J. Q.