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Ben Davison's

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Risky Times on the Yucatán

Banking over Chinchorro Bank . . . on second thought, take the boat

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Editorial Office:

John Q. Trigger, Editor
In Depth
P.O. Box 90215
Austin, TX 78709

Subscription Office:

Ben Davison, Publisher
P.O. Box 1658
Sausalito, CA 94966

Dear Fellow Diver,

The 45-minute flight south from Cozumel was uneventful, but when we arrived at our destination we didn't taxi to the terminal. Instead, the captain hefted the anchor down the aisle, opened the hatch, and threw it overboard. This was the Chinchorro Bank, one of the last great underutilized diving destinations in the Caribbean. I had arrived by seaplane, and there was no Chinchorro Bank International Airport -- just a lone dive boat.

Chinchorro has been a mystery to me for years. Twenty miles off Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and as big as the entire island of Cozumel, Chinchorro has been a tough destination for divers to reach. Several resorts along the Mexican coast have lured divers down with promises of diving the pristine bank, but few have been able to deliver. Some have been downright ripoffs. The remote southern resorts of El Placer and Costa de Cocos manage to take a few divers out to the reefs each year, but because of Chinchorro's distance offshore, these trips are subject to the mercy of the weather gods.

The immensity of the reef complex, the difficulty of getting to it, and the scarcity of dive captains who know the area well probably account for the mixed reports, ranging from fantastic to just so-so, that have trickled into *In Depth* and *Undercurrent* over the years. Last year one of our correspondents got in a couple of promising dives on a quick trip, but I wanted to see the Chinchorro Bank for myself.

From the Heights to the Depths

And what better way to see than to start with a grand view from high above. Trans Caribe Airlines had been flying tourists out of Cancún to Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, and the Mayan ruins of



. . . Within a half hour of our soaring overview, I was deep in the turquoise water on the western side of the bank.

Chichén Itzá in a 19-passenger seaplane. Now they had a new idea: pick up divers in Cozumel and fly them out to Chinchorro for a day's diving. The Mexican government had given them permission to land on the bank, and at considerable risk to my life (it turns out), I was doing just that.

As the plane approached Chinchorro, the monotonous deep blue of the Caribbean gave way to multiple shades of turquoise -- and we were over the bank. The pilot flew a broad circle to give us a good view, but the southern end of

Chinchorro was out of sight somewhere off distant Belize. Mangrove-covered sand spits broke the surface in places; a small lighthouse here, a vacant fishing shack there, and nothing else but crabs. On the west edge were sloping walls, with shallow coral heads like lunar craters between them; along the ocean side, deep blue dropoffs with several exposed wrecks. The diving possibilities looked endless.

As we glided down, I saw a dot on the water -- the 30-foot dive boat that Tom Biller had brought up from Costa de Cocos in Xcalak. Soon we were skimming across the waves, and suddenly the plane became a boat; it doesn't take long for a seaplane to stop flying and come to a halt.

I climbed out onto the pontoon and breathed the sea air. Another minute or two and I was in the dive boat for the short run to the dive site -- and within a half hour of our soaring overview, I was deep in the turquoise water on the western side of the bank.

Soaking It Up with Sponges

The reef was wild and woolly, untouched. Drifting down to 80 feet, I cruised along a steep-sloping wall and into a multi-colored forest of sponges in variety, size, and numbers I've never seen before in the Caribbean: seven-foot-long yellow tube sponges, fluorescent purples, giant barrels big enough to throw a party in, red elephant ears reaching from the toes of my fins to the tips of my outstretched fingers. Black coral was everywhere, even in 40 feet of water. Other corals were clean, bright, and pristine. I wanted to drag out Paul Humann's coral book, but somehow it had missed this trip. My mistake.

Hunting Rainbows in Palau

Navot Bornovski of Palau's *Ocean Hunter* has come up with a new way to reach the remotest of the remote atolls of Palau — via the *Rainbow Hunter*, a seaplane. The Grumman HU-16 Albatross has air conditioning, beds, and hot showers. The plan is to fly from Palau to one of the many remote atolls that are too distant to be practical for a live-aboard. The plane will land on the water and then become a live-aboard for five nights. The return trip will no doubt be a low-flying affair. The cost, on the other hand, is a high-flying \$5,995. Contact See and Sea at 800-434-3400 or 415-434-3400, fax 415-434-3409, or at divxprt@lx.netcom.com.

J. Q.

Above, on the surface, the wind was kicking up, causing visibility to drop into the 40- to 70-foot range. I was disappointed; my buddy had seen 100-150 feet the year before. It was drift diving, but the current was almost imperceptible. This was probably not always the case, as the sponge life was most prolific on the lee side of the coral heads.

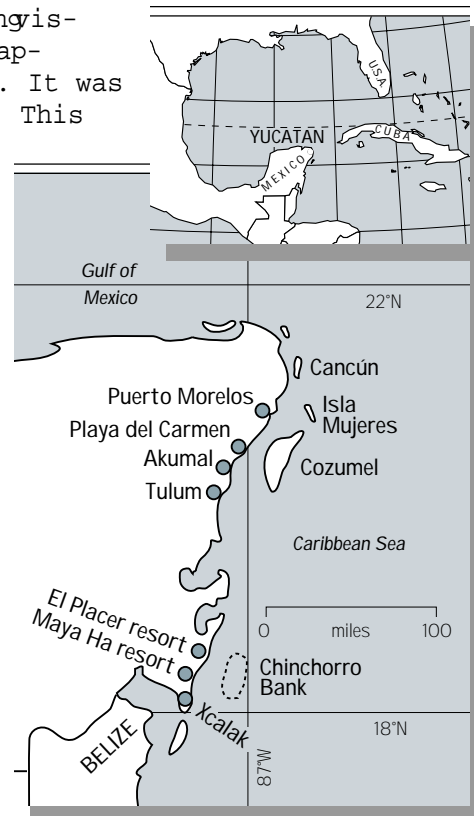
Fish life on this first dive was so-so, nothing larger than a football swimming with me. However, the next day, when I visited the same part of the reef, I was overwhelmed by the number and variety of reef fish: slender silver sennets at the surface, a school of jacks circling in midwater, and ocean triggers, queen triggers, filefish, cowfish, trunkfish, and cocker spaniel-sized groupers cruising the virgin corals below. A couple of eagle rays sailed by overhead. The abundance of damselfish hovering above the large coral heads reminded me of the Pacific.

A Gourmet Free-Diving Boat Captain

Moving into a sandy area at 50 feet, I settled down next to one of the many queen conchs plying the ocean floor and watched its slow pace. Out of the corner of my eye I saw another conch leave the bottom and shoot straight upward. After the dive, I would be reunited with this flying conch in the form of a delicious fresh salad; Tom Biller had been free diving and plucking conchs from the sandy bottom.

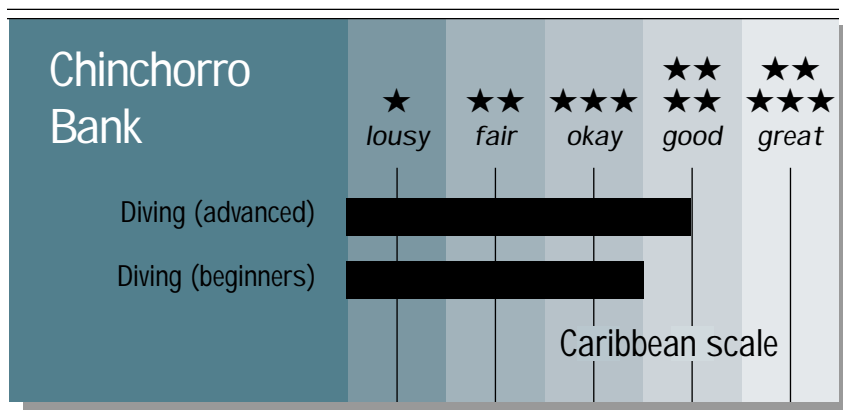
Tom Biller is a lanky and somewhat laconic character with a good sense of humor. His skill as a free diver was no surprise; I knew his company, Biller Spearguns in California. He was an able boat captain and good company. His boat was a comfortable enough craft to dive from -- wide and stable with a covered cabin for hiding from the sun. It carried enough aluminum 80s for nine of us to do three dives in a day without refilling. Exit was stride off the back or roll over the side, with a decent rear ladder for returns. As experienced divers, we had total freedom to choose our depths and times.

Coming from Xcalak, at the bottom of the Yucatán Peninsula, just above Ambergris Caye in Belize, Tom normally dives the southern stretches of the reefs, but he had some knowledge of the middle dive sites (for him, another hour-plus boat ride added to the hour and a half it took him just to reach the southern end). On top of that, he was taking us to the northern end to dive the remains of a cannon-toting galleon.



Yucatán

Xcalak is pronounced "schka-LAK."



Yo Ho Ho and a Pile of Cannons

. . . Because strong currents wash directly onto the ocean side of Chinchorro, wrecks ranging from ancient wooden to modern steel hulls are virtually stacked on top of each other. The same currents usually keep divers out of this area.

There was some confusion as to the nationality of this wreck. It may have been a Dutch galleon, but because of the many large cannons scattered about the ballast rock pile, many think it was a pirate ship. The depth was only 20 feet, so I had plenty of time to poke around the rocks for artifacts -- not that it produced any results, but I did manage to find the impressively large, picturesque anchor some distance from the ballast pile.

Because strong currents wash directly onto the ocean side of Chinchorro, wrecks ranging from ancient wooden to modern steel hulls are virtually stacked on top of each other. The same currents usually keep divers out of this area, but safe conditions do occur from time to time, particularly in the winter when the occasional norther blows in.

After a day of diving, the seaplane took off in a spray of saltwater, taking back all but three divers who wanted to stay and sample more of what Chinchorro had to offer. We had made arrangements to stay at Maya Ha, a resort under construction on the mainland directly opposite the middle of the bank. Tom would use his boat to ferry us back out to Chinchorro the next day. After that we were left with only a small panga to make the one-hour ride. Unfortunately, the wind continued to strengthen, making the journey too difficult to attempt.

My Conclusion (Almost)

With only six dives in, I still consider Chinchorro a mystery. Although my first day of diving the western edge of the middle region was a little disappointing, my second day there was about as good as it gets in the Caribbean -- and the galleon at the north end is a hoot for shipwreck and history buffs. In other words, my report is the same as those that have been coming in over the years -- mixed. I will go back again.

Ditty Bag

With the seaplane a pile of scrap, the best way to get to Chinchorro for now is to dive with Tom Biller at Costa de Cocos Resort in Xcalak (800-480-4505 or 011-983-8-78-24), or from La Placer, just north of Majahual (888-230-3463 or 713-426-7531). Both places offer close-by diving as well as trips out to the banks. Maya Ha Resort, still under construction, will have around 52 beds in Mayan-style villas, restaurant, pool, dive shop, and hyperbaric chamber when it opens (scheduled for early next year). Current plans include a large dive boat that can make it out to the banks in all but the worst of seas. If this comes to pass, the resort's location directly behind the middle of the banks will give it not only the shortest trip but also the most protection from the open sea. This could become the most reliable way to dive Chinchorro. For information on Maya Ha, fax 011-52-987-30912. The Mexican government has announced that all fishing on Chinchorro will be prohibited and says it will enforce the policy. In a push to promote tourism in this remote part of the Yucatán Peninsula, it is also building an airport near Majahual to make it easy to reach Maya Ha Resort and El Placer, and another in Xcalak. Plans are also afoot to pave the rough dirt road that now leads down the coast.

The seaplane was great adventure, but cross it off your list. The next time it took off after it left Chinchorro, a control cable broke and the plane crashed and burned with 15 people aboard, killing one or more passengers. I now have a recurring daymare: as I sit on the plane looking down at the blue ocean, single strands of control cable in the fuselage beneath my feet are snapping, one by one -- twang, twang, twang.

On the other hand, I always escape in the last reel.

John Q. Trigger