



Honduras'
Cayos Cochinos

— Pristine Diving in the Bay Islands

Text and photos by
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The Cayos Cochinos is a group of small islands just between the mainland of Honduras and Roatan. Cochinos Cays are a group of two small islands—Cayo Menor and Cayo Grande—and 13 more small coral cays situated 30km (19mi) northeast of La Ceiba on the northern shores of Honduras.

We can't say Honduras is unknown to scuba divers. Roatan is known and so is Utila, both of them dive locations that do attract scuba divers, mostly from the United States, and do provide plenty of dive centers and all the dive logistics keen divers do expect.

The Cayos are part of the Bay Islands (Islas de la Bahía). Some people still like to call them Hog Islands, referring to the famous pirate Henry Morgan (ca. 1635–1688) who—according to legend—"planted" hogs on these cays so he and his pirate fellows would have meat on their return trips. ^[1]

Around 100 people (the Garifuna) live on these islands, and yes, scuba-diving is possible here! "The Cayos Cochinos reefs are the least disturbed ecosystem in the Bay Islands," stated Dr Matthias Hammer in National Geographic. "The waters around this collection of coral cays are a marine biologist's dream: protected by the government, off-limits to commercial divers and fishermen, and busy with creatures that may not yet have names." The German conservation biologist made several expeditions to this region. ^[2]



Established as a key area of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System (the world's second largest barrier reef, right after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia), the Cayos and surrounding waters were declared a marine reserve in 1993, in order to protect all marine and



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terrestrial flora and fauna within a 460 sq km area. Laws prohibit all commercial fishing, netting, and trapping within the marine park. Local Garifuna people are permitted to fish with hand lines, but prohibited from netting and spear fishing. Since 1994, the Honduras Coral Reef Foundation is in charge to preserve the natural beauty of the area.

The Honduras Coral Reef Foundation (HCRF) has a marine biology research center on Cayo Menor (the smaller one of the two main islands) where scientists and students of marine biology from all over the world are welcome as guests to do their field research. Accommodation in cozy bungalows and catering is provided.

Diving style

I have to confess that I love the oceans

and all marine life, but I am very far from being even close to a marine biologist. I apologize in advance for my inability to give proper identification to the living things I saw during my dives in Cayos Cochinos. But what I would like to share are my visual impressions and a few of my adventures, experienced as a diver and photographer.

The luxury of diving places where only very few have dived before requires a readiness for adventure and a willingness to accept compromises. But it all pays back a hundredfold.

If you are used to staying on huge liveaboard dive boats, where staff prepare your scuba gear while you

sip your morning coffee on the upper deck, you might need to re-think your expectations here, because diving on Cayos Cochinos is different.

Most of the visitors to Cayos Cochinos were day guests who joined a 45-minute boat ride from the city of La Ceiba (on

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the main land) and spent their day visiting the islands, looking out for the pink boa constrictor (it is only found there), hiking the trails through the jungle, going snorkeling or perhaps scuba diving. But most of the daily guests were more interested in the pink boa and in the souvenirs some of

the local Garifuna people were selling, despite the fact that there were dive centers in La Ceiba that provided everything one would need for scuba diving.

Getting there

After a 34-hour trip flying from Izmir in Turkey to Istanbul, then to

London and Newark, and finally to San Pedro, I arrived in Honduras. What time was it? Ah, nine hours earlier than home! Then I took a

two-and-a-half hour car ride from San Pedro to La Ceiba, the city that is also widely known as "Gate to the Bay Islands". It is also known

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as Honduras' party town and they perform some dances there where the "hips don't lie".

When in new places, I always love to check out the marina. Well, there was nothing to check out in La Ceiba, as the boat picked me up directly from the beach of my hotel. That was pretty cool. My dive boat was actually more a sort of power canoe, but that didn't matter. The boats were designed to pick guests up from the beach and bring them to the Cayos Cochinos as fast as possible.

The approach to the Cayos Cochinos gives one a sort of Robinson Crusoe feeling; there was sand, palm trees and everything one would expect from a Caribbean island—no cars,

no roads, no bikes, not to mention, the crystal clear turquoise waters. Production teams of the television reality show, "Survivor", from Spain, Italy, Greece and Israel, do sometimes hire one of the smaller islands for their production. But don't believe that all those "Survivor" candidates actually stay on the island with one shack and three palm trees all the time—I saw them enjoying happy hour at the hotel bar.

The underwater world

Well, I think I am expected to stay very serious here and not drift into euphoria, when talking about the underwater world of Cayos Cochinos. But that is easier said than done after diving here.

I have never seen such rich



diversity, especially of corals, in any of my 4,000 dives around the world. There were plenty of different species of hard and soft corals growing almost to the surface of the water. The soft corals were waving in the currents, following the gentle music of the sea. I felt like I was the first diver ever to dive these waters.

Yes, we divers are not supposed to touch anything—"leaving nothing behind but bubbles." However, at dive sites around the world where a growing dive industry performs thousands of dives and every operator involved seems to just have profit in mind, responsible divers can do the best they can to not touch corals, but sooner or later, we will notice the negative effects of intensive diving at such areas anyway.

Cayos Cochinos was different in this regard. There were limits and restrictions to the amount of divers that could be at any one dive site, and the entire

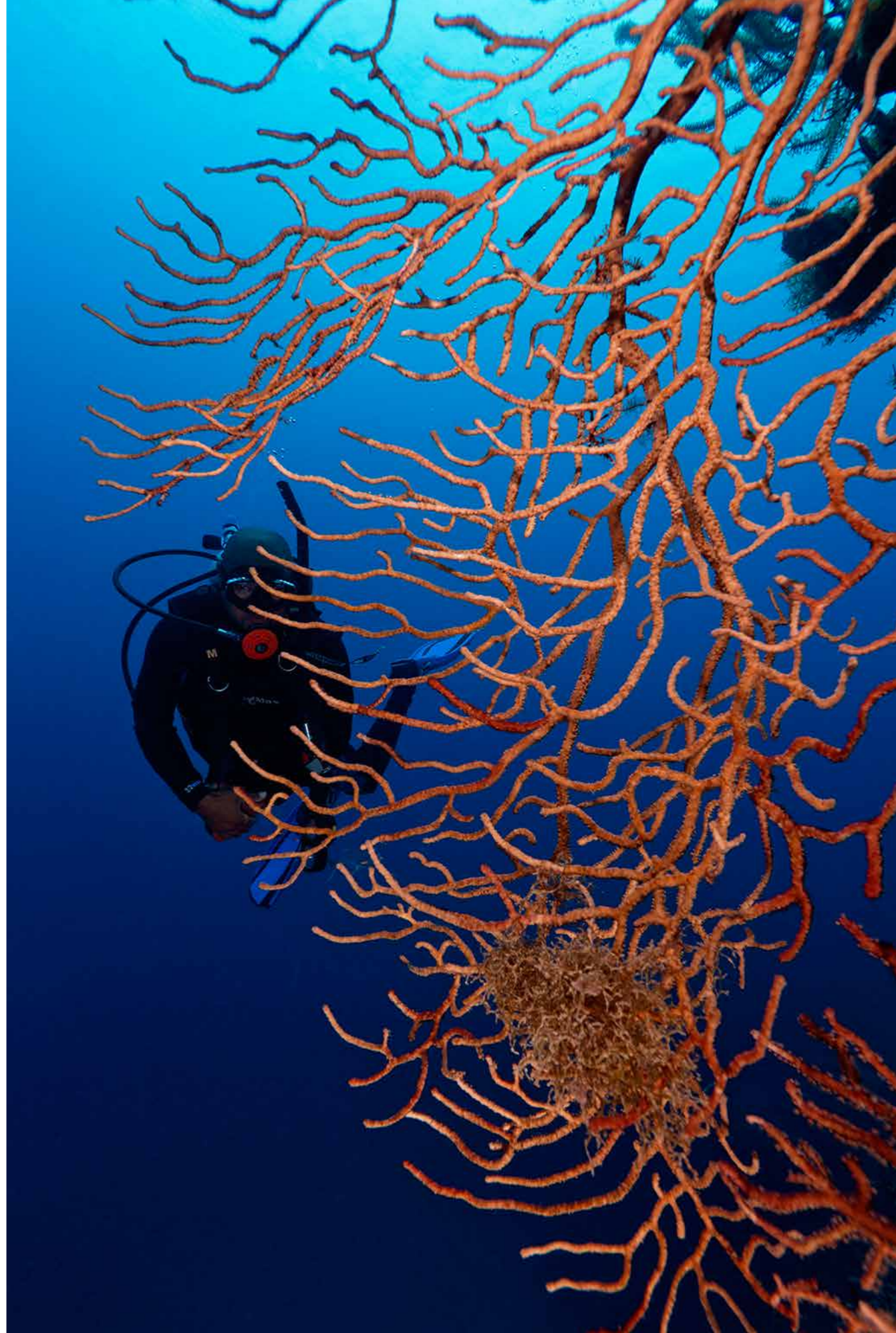
concept of scuba diving activities done here followed the strict principles of ecotourism, promoting a deeper understanding of the fragility of coral reefs. Quality instead of quantity.

While no coffee was served during the boat trip, there was world-class dives at top-quality spots, and yes, one had the dive sites (almost) all to oneself.

While I was diving there, I was accompanied by the dive guide and one of the marine biologists of the Honduras Coral Reef Foundation. There were no other dive boats in sight, and we had the reefs all to ourselves.

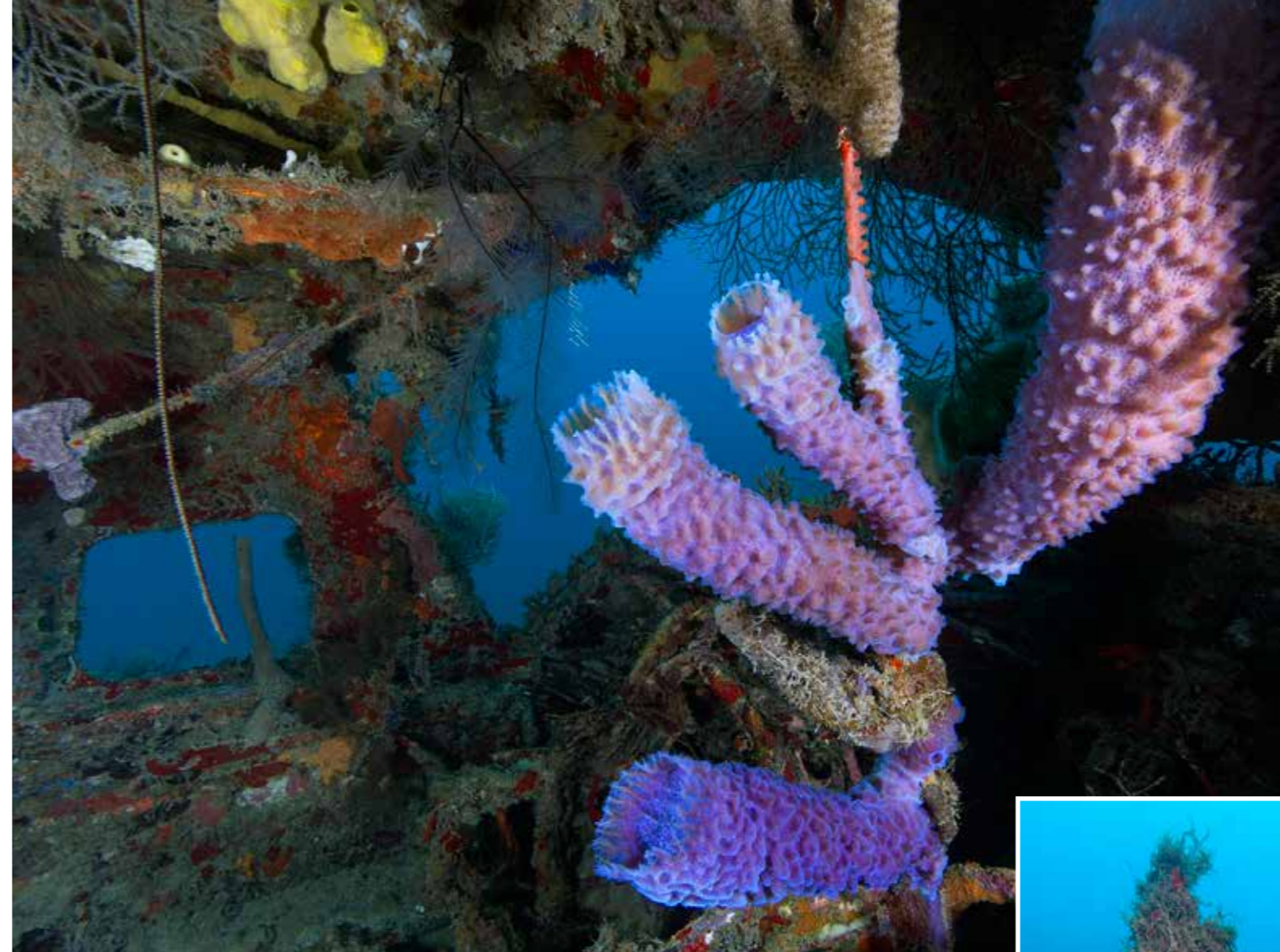
Pelikano Uno. In terms of diving and underwater photography, I would say that the dive site called

Pelikano Uno (close to Cayos Mayor) was a dive spot every keen diver and photographer should put on his or her bucket list. The boat anchored (moored) at the edge of a reef, which was basically shaped like a long saddle. We descended to 4m and already found ourselves surrounded by thousands of soft corals. It was actually impossible to



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find an empty space—a space where no coral was growing.

We then continued our way with the saddle-shaped reef to our left. The reef descends in cascades and comes to an area where one can find beautiful isolated corals. Again, there were plenty of them. Once our pressure gauges demanded that we turned back, we just ascended back to the top of the reef, following the saddle-shaped reef until we spotted the boat. If one prefers to stay longer, one can find plenty of things to see in just five to six meters depth. Current was no big deal, and just for the record, in June, which was actually the off season, the water was 27°C. A 3mm shorty would do.

Other dive spots worth mentioning include: El Avi6n, Roatan Banks, Punta Pelicano, Cabeza d Le6n, Arena La Grupera, El Jard6n, Cayo Timon and Wilfried's Bell.

Wrecks. The highlight of all the dive sites was, of course, the corals, but there were also two wrecks to explore. El Avion is a wreck of a smaller aircraft (probably a Piper plane), which is covered by plenty of different corals. Wilfried's Bell is a wreck of a Bell helicopter, which was dropped down on the reef in 2008. The chopper rests nicely isolated on sandy ground, a cool playground for underwater photographers if the visibility is good, (which, sadly, was not the case when I dived there).

El Jardin, El Jardin offered nice underwater topography, with several reef pinnacles, sandy areas with sand eels and also a couple of enjoyable swim-throughs. Very close to this site is a small bay where you can leave the boat, enter the jungle and find yourself some fresh fruit. But beware where you step, because there are fragile corals





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everywhere, even in 50cm shallow water.

Roatan Banks. Roatan Banks was a massive reef in between Cayos Cochinos and Roatan. Jacks, barracuda and snapper, turtles, rays, groupers and every type of coral and reef fish could be found here. This, however, pretty much depends on the time of the year. February to May are good times to visit. When I was there in June, the rainy season started, resulting in a bit less fish around.

The Roatan Banks were, with a depth of 30m, the deepest dive site of my stay. All the other dive sites I dived were in a depth range of five to 20m and, as such, suitable for divers of all levels.

There are roughly a dozen different sites to dive in the waters of Cayos Cochinos, but due to the outstanding

diversity, you can easily dive every spot two to three times and never discover everything. I dove Pelikano Uno three times and felt like I had not even discovered 50 percent of that dive site.

Notes to underwater photographers

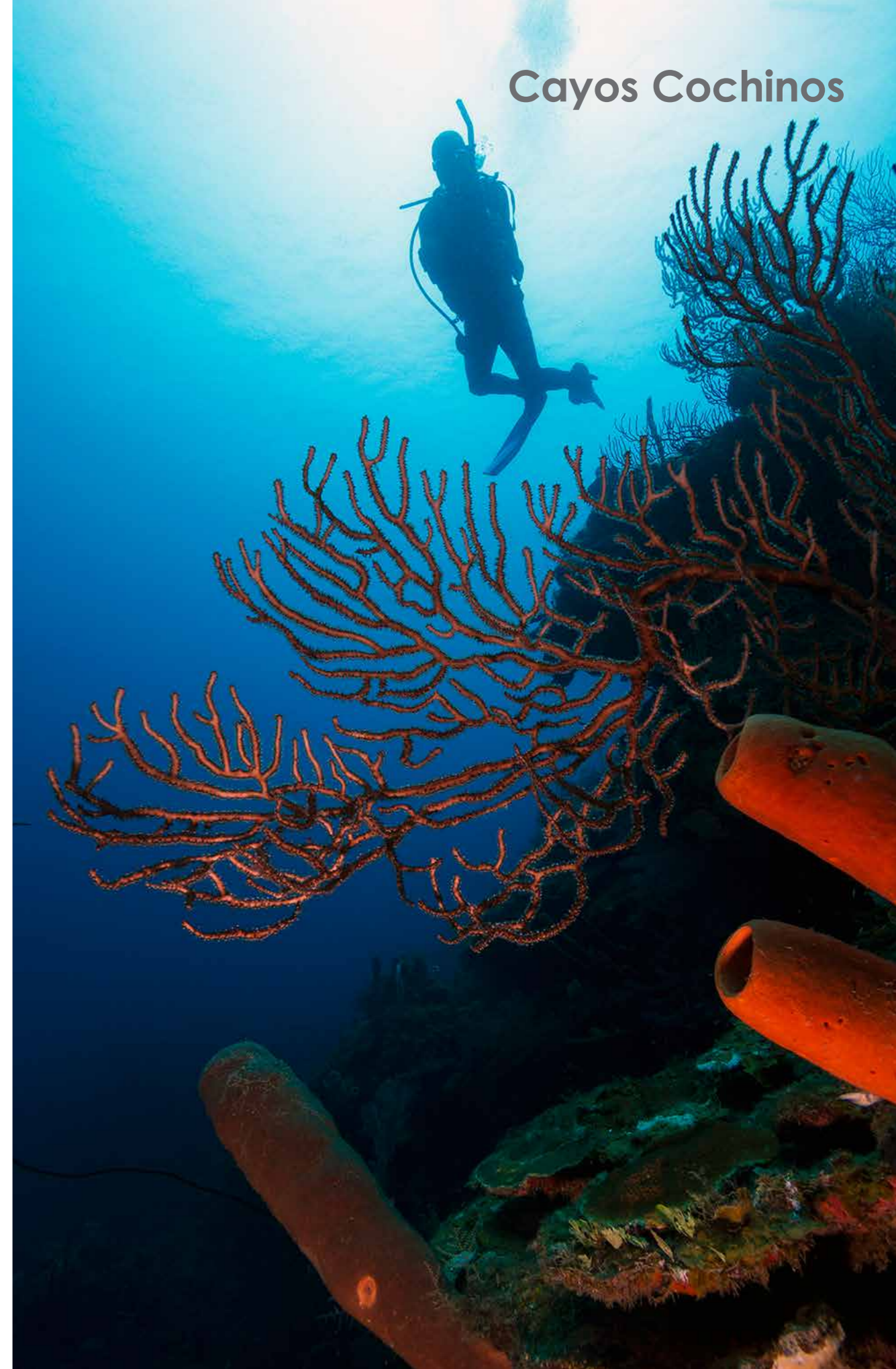
Bring everything you've got. There is plenty to shoot for wide-angle and macro fans alike. Keep in mind that Cayos Cochinos is one of the most untouched dive areas on the planet. There is no need to swim around for long time, searching for interesting subjects to shoot. It is more about coming to a decision about what not to shoot, as you are surrounded by plenty of life and photogenic subjects.

Some areas close to the islands are so shallow that snorkeling with your camera



is the proper option, providing you with lots of photographic opportunities, even with working with ambient light only.

Cayos Cochinos





Underwater, visibility starts to drop by the beginning of June. The best underwater visibility I found was roughly at 25m; the worse was at just six meters. But I was told that in the months prior to June, 30 to 35m visibility was considered to be normal, with over 40m visibility on some lucky days.

To those who are interested in marine biology, I suggest you contact the research station of the Cayos Cochinos Reef Foundation. They know the place and everything that grows, crawls and swims there the best. There is even an option to dive with one of their marine biologists. Remember what National Geographic said about the place: Plenty of species in those waters do not even have a name yet. So, if you ever want to discover a new marine species and give it a name, here is your chance!

How to get there

There are several regular flights

from Newark, Houston, Fort Lauderdale, Atlanta and Miami to San Pedro Sula, Honduras. It is about 2.5 hours by car (transfers are offered by tour operators and dive centers) from Pedro Sula to reach La Ceiba (or just hop on a short charter flight), the gate to the Bay Islands. Twice a week there is a flight from Grand Cayman directly to La Ceiba. If you are already on Utila or Roatan, you can reach Cayos Cochinos by private boat charter. From the island of Guanaja, there is a ferryboat that goes to La Ceiba.

Accommodations

The most relaxed and comfortable way to dive at the Cayos Cochinos is to stay in the Palma Real Hotel and let its new dive center—the Diving Center Palma Real Hotel located right at the hotel's pool—arrange your dives. Hop on the speed



boat right at the hotel's beach to enjoy a couple of dives at Cayos Cochinos and make a stopover at the island of Chachauate to meet

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the Garifuna people. Alternate places to stay (that do not have their own dive center but are connected to one) include La Delphina, Rainbow Village Hotel

and Partenon Beach Hotel.

Things to know

- Sand flies! Nasty small monsters. Better bring some spray.



Cayos Cochinos

- Honduras produces some of the finest rums of the world and the country's Imperial beer is not too bad, either.

- Bring sun protection and lots of water to drink. It is very, very hot.

- The currency of Honduras is the Honduras Lempira, but US dollars are widely accepted. Exchange rate: 1 USD = 22 Lempiras. ■

Rico Besserdich is a widely published German photographer, journalist and artist based in Turkey. See: Maviphoto.com.

SOURCES:

[1] [HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/HENRY_MORGAN](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Morgan)

[2] [HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/CAYOS_COCHINOS#CITE_NOTE-NATGEO-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cayos_Cochinos#cite_note-natgeo-1)



fact file



Honduras



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK; XE.COM

History In 1821, Honduras became independent of Spain. Military rule followed for two and a half decades until 1982, when a freely elected civilian government came to power. The country proved a haven during the 1980s for anti-Sandinista contras fighting the Marxist Nicaraguan Government. Honduras was also an ally to Salvadoran Government forces, which were fighting leftist guerrillas. In 1998, the country was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, which killed around 5,600 people and caused about US\$2 billion in damage. The economy has slowly rebounded since then. Government: Democratic constitutional republic. Capital: Tegucigalpa

Geography Honduras is located in Central America and borders the Caribbean Sea, between Guatemala and Nicaragua. It also borders the Gulf of Fonseca (North Pacific Ocean), between El Salvador and Nicaragua. Coastline: 820km. Terrain is mostly mountainous in the interior with narrow coastal plains. Lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0m. Highest point: Cerro Las Minas 2,870m. Note: While the country has a short Pacific coast, it has a long Caribbean shoreline, including the mostly uninhabited eastern Mosquito Coast.

Climate Lowlands are subtropical; Mountainous regions are temperate. Natural hazards include common but mild earthquakes as well as frequent damaging hurricanes and floods along the Caribbean coast.

Environmental issues

Challenges include expanding urban population; deforestation due to logging and clearing of land for agriculture; soil erosion and further land degradation accelerated by uncontrolled development and farming of marginal lands; heavy metal contamination of freshwater sources by mining activities.

Economy

Honduras is the second poorest country in Central America. It suffers from extremely unequal distribution of income, as well as high unemployment and underemployment. Heavily reliant on a narrow range of exports such as apparel, bananas, and coffee, the nation's economy is vulnerable to changes in commodity prices and natural disasters; but, investments in the maquila and non-traditional export sectors are contributing to a gradual diversification of the economy. Almost half of the country's economic activity is directly tied to the United States. In 2006, the US Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) came into force. It has helped increase investment, however security and political issues may be deterring potential investors. Marginal economic growth in 2010 will not improve living standards for those in poverty, which is almost 65 percent of the population. The fiscal deficit is growing, despite improvements in tax collections because

of increases in current expenditures to cover increasing public wages. In 2014, the country embarked on a three-year IMF stand-by arrangement to improve its poor fiscal situation. Further plans by the government address challenges in stimulating economic growth, increasing fiscal responsibility and transparency, modernizing the judicial system, improving infrastructure, reducing violence and promoting educational opportunities.

Currency Lempiras (HNL) Exchange rates: 1USD= 22 HNL; 1EUR= 24.85HNL; 1GBP= 33.69HNL; 1AUD= 15.83HNL; 1SGD= 15.58 HNL

Population 8,746,673 (2015 est.); Below poverty: 60% (2010 est.). Ethnic

RIGHT: Location of Honduras on global map
BELOW: Location of Cayos Cochinos on map of Honduras
LOWER RIGHT: Diver on reef off Cayos Cochinos



groups: mestizo (mixed Amerindian and European) 90%, Amerindian 7%, black 2%, white 1%. Religions: Roman Catholic 97%, Protestant 3%. Internet users: 1.7 million

Language Spanish and Amerindian dialects

Health There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such

as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and typhoid fever as well as vectorborne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria (2013).

Hyperbaric Chambers

La Ceiba Decompression Chamber
La Ceiba, Barrio Bonitilla
tel. 3334 9345

Utila Hyperbaric Chamber
Bay Islands College of Diving
Utila, Bay Islands of Honduras
www.dive-util.com

Websites

Let's Go Honduras
www.letsghonduras.com

