

***BELIZE CRUIZE***  
***ON THE***  
***NEKTON PILOT***  
***DECEMBER, 2000***

We spent our December, 2000 dive vacation in Belize aboard the Nekton Pilot. We had taken the Bahama Adventure cruise on the Pilot in the summer, and were happy to be return guests. The boat was as nice as we remembered, with limited rocking motion, comfortable accommodations, spacious common areas, and good food.

We flew on American Airlines from Charlotte through Dallas-Ft. Worth to Belize on Saturday. The lay-over in DFW was extended by about two hours, but we made it to Belize by about 4:30 p.m. "Mikey C" picked us up at the airport, along with about half a dozen other Nekton divers, and transported us all to the Radisson Hotel for dinner while the boat was being prepared for our arrival. That evening, we met the other guests and crew at the general briefing.

Our cruise carried about 30 divers and 10 crew, and we got to know everyone fairly well over the course of the week. The boat's typical daily schedule was breakfast at 7:00; morning briefing at 8:00; diving until 11:45; lunch at 12:00; afternoon briefing at 1:00; diving until 5:45; dinner at 6:00; slide presentation at 7:00; night diving at 8:00.

Capatin Ephey, Mikey C. and Chef Pam took good care of us once again. We got acquainted with some of the guests, like Gerry & Norm, but there didn't seem to be as much camaraderie among the divers as on the Bahamas cruise.

The diving on this trip was good, but somewhat repetitive. Due to weather conditions, we spent the majority of our time along the western side of Long Key. We dove in Half Moon Key on the eastern side of Long Key only one day, and off Turneffe Islands on one day. Most sites were walls with a reef on top. There seemed to be a lot of sand on the tops of the reefs and on many of the walls that had less steep slopes due the hurricane three months earlier. Several of the sites where the wall was essentially vertical were really nice, but others were not that impressive. The lack of variety was somewhat disappointing, and the majority of the sites seemed very similar. Sites that stood out as our favorites on this included Que Brada, Sweet Revenge, Silver Caves, M&M's and Aquarium, all on the western side of Long Key.

Overall, the weather was nice for this trip. The skies were a little overcast on Sunday and Monday, but Tuesday was the only day we saw rain.

We saw many common reef fish at most sites. Fairy basslets, blue chromis and creole wrasse were particularly prevalent. We saw free-swimming green moray eels at three different sites. We also saw a white-spotted toadfish at one site, but he was hiding and could not be photographed. Spotted eagle rays joined us on two dives. We saw lobsters, king crabs and large basket stars on virtually every night dive, as well as an occasional octopus.

This vacation will be memorable for several reasons, most notably for both of us having a stomach virus and for losing my underwater camera.

On our first night aboard, Darren got sick around midnight and continued into the next morning. We thought he might have food poisoning from a hamburger we ate the night before in Belize City. We were only able to do two dives on Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, and Darren felt bad the entire day. On Monday, Darren was fine, but I got sick just before dinner and was ill throughout the night. I felt better and was able to hold down bread and liquid on Tuesday and we managed to dive 5 times. By Wednesday, I was fine and we were both feeling good.

The other major mishap of the week was losing my camera in 2,000 feet of water. On Tuesday, when we finally felt like doing our first night dive, I somehow failed to clip my camera to my BC when getting situated in the water. I discovered that I didn't have it about half way along the swim from the boat to the wall. However, Darren didn't realize that I had dropped it until we were doing our safety stop at the end of the dive, and he was quite animated with his gestures when he finally understood that I had dropped \$800 worth of camera gear to the bottom of the ocean. The Nekton crew was great and let me use one of their Nikonos rentals free of charge for the remainder of the week.

## DAILY DIVE REPORTS

Sunday was our first dive day in Belize. Overnight, we had traveled from the port in Belize City to Half Moon Key. Darren was still feeling very sick and weak, so we only made two dives today. In the morning, I managed to get our gear set up without making too many mistakes while Darren rested so that he might be able to get in the water.

The morning dive sight was Dolphin Pass on Lighthouse Reef at Half Moon Key. The site consisted of a wall with sand flats and coral heads. (This terrain proved to be very typical of most of the sites we dove in Belize.) This was a nice dive under partly sunny skies, and there were large numbers of fairy basslets and blue chromis all over the reef. We also saw a huge hogfish as well as a large group of garden eels that retreated into the sand when approached.

Our afternoon dive was at a site known as Scorpio on Lighthouse Reef – a wall punctuated with sand chutes. This was another enjoyable dive under partly sunny skies. Sightings here included a number of angelfish, including French and queens, as well as parrotfish. We saw our first lobster of the trip on this dive.

By Monday morning Darren felt much better and we managed to make all four day dives. However, I became ill just before dinner, so we missed the night dive again.

Our dive sites for the day were both off the western side of Long Key. The morning dives were conducted at M&M's – a very pretty site. Here we saw large barrel and tube sponges and lots of reef fish. We spotted a few trumpetfish, including one small one hiding in the sea rod coral. We were joined by a fairly large school of horse-eye jacks swimming in circles at the hang bar on both dives. During our second dive of the morning, we were startled by a huge free-swimming green moray eel who swam right by us.

The afternoon dives were at a site called Aquarium. This was a nice wall with a reef on top that was full of life. There were many large sponges along the wall and lots of fish everywhere, including indigo hamlets, parrotfish, butterflyfish, wrasses and damselfish. We also spotted a good many brittle stars on smaller sponges. Another large green moray came swimming by us here.

On Tuesday Captain Ephy moved the boat to the Northern Key for a change of scenery. The plan was for the crew to install a new mooring at an unexplored site here, and the guests were given the opportunity to name this site since we would be the first divers to check it out. Unfortunately, this was a very poor location with terrible visibility and lots of sand covering everything, with very little color. Captain Ephy turned the boat around after the first dive and took us back south to Long Key for the afternoon dives. We voted unanimously to name the site "Sandblast Alley."

The afternoon dives at Sweet Revenge made up for the morning's disappointment. The wall here was beautiful, and we saw lots of life, including our only turtle of the trip and a large scrawled cowfish. With both of us finally feeling well, we made our first night dive here, and it was superb. We saw several species of sea urchins, lobsters, a stingray, an octopus roaming around, and some large basket stars along the edge of the wall. Unfortunately, we have no pictures from this dive because I lost my camera upon entering the water.

Wednesday's dive sites were conducted on the western side of Long Key again. The morning dives were quite nice at Long Caye Ridge – a wall with pronounced finger formations. The skies were mostly sunny and visibility was quite good, and there was a lot of life here. In addition to many common reef fish, we saw a scrawled trunkfish on the first dive and a very large barracuda who was spooking the jacks under the boat when we ascended. On the second dive we found a scorpionfish in the sand who remained completely still while I snapped some macro shots of him. We also saw our first spotted eagle ray of the trip swooping by near the wall.

Our afternoon and night dives were at Dos Cocos – a site with more limited visibility that lacked an abundance of fish life, so the dives here were not very remarkable. The highlight of the afternoon dives was spotting another large free-swimming green moray eel. On the night dive, we found king crabs and hermit crabs, as well as a number of basket stars along the top of the wall. We also saw an octopus and some sleeping parrotfish.

On Thursday morning, we dove at Silver Caves on Long Key. We were treated to a spectacular display by two spotted eagle rays swimming out along the wall and swooping by us as they came in to feed. The rays made this one of the most memorable dives of the trip. There was not an abundance of fish life at this site, though – we saw porkfish and squirrelfish and some butterflyfish, but not much else on the first dive. On the second morning dive, we spotted a large porcupine fish as well as a pretty pair of French angelfish swimming in unison and feeding around the coral.

The afternoon dives were conducted at Que Brada – an absolutely beautiful wall with spectacular color – macro heaven. This was probably my favorite site of the entire trip. We saw purple and white-speckled tunicates, Pederson shrimp, knobby anemones, banded coral shrimp, Christmas tree worms and feather stars. It seemed as though every square inch of the wall had something interesting to offer. The night dive here was impressive, too. We found ruby brittle stars, king crabs, a sharptail eel, and a slipper lobster who was moving a conch that looked larger than him.

Overnight on Thursday, Captain Ephy piloted the boat to the Southwestern side of the Turneffe Islands for Friday's dives. We were really excited and expected to end the trip with some awesome dives here, but we were disappointed. The morning dives at Twin Palms at Cay Bokel were characterized by very low visibility under overcast skies. Captain Ephy sent several crew members on the skiff to check out another site, but they couldn't find any clearer water, so we stayed put. The first dive was really colorless and unremarkable. Several divers found a white-spotted toadfish that we had been instructed to look for, and we managed to find him on our second dive. He was hiding under a rock, though, and too well-hidden to photograph.

The afternoon dive at Triple Anchors on Turneffe Islands was equally unimpressive. This was a patch reef with very little life, and the dive was again characterized by low visibility. We were surprised by the near absence of fish life and the dullness of the scenery, and we ended the dive early.

## DIVE LOG

### **SUNDAY, 12-10-00**

#### **DOLPHIN PASS (HALF MOON KEY)**

10:00 a.m.      81°F      26 min.      85 ft.

*Wall with sand flats on top. Lots of fairly basslets and blue chromis, garden eels, huge hogfish.*

#### **SCORPIO (HALF MOON KEY)**

3:00 p.m.      81°F      35 min.      75 ft.

*Wall with reef and sand chutes on top. Many parrotfish, angelfish, jacks.*

### **MONDAY, 12-11-00**

#### **M&M'S (LONG KEY)**

8:45 a.m.      78°F      36 min.      90 ft.

*Very nice dive on wall with reef on top. Large sponges, lots of reef fish, schooling jacks under the boat.*

10:30 a.m.      76°F      30 min.      95 ft.

*Huge free-swimming green moray eel, grouper being cleaned.*

#### **AQUARIUM (LONG KEY)**

1:15 p.m.      81°F      47 min.      81 ft.

*Super dive with lots of life. More large sponges, pretty corals and abundant reef fish including indigo hamlets and butterflyfish.*

4:30 p.m.      81°F      40 min.      97 ft.

*Variety of reef life; another free-swimming green moray eel.*

## TUESDAY, 12-12-00

### SANDBLAST ALLEY (NORTH KEY)

8:30 a.m.      81°F      47 min.      80 ft.

*Sand-covered reef with low visibility and lack of color and life.  
Overcast skies.*

### SWEET REVENGE (LONG KEY)

1:30 p.m.      78°F      47 min.      94 ft.

*Overcast sky with rain but lots of color. Sea turtle, large scrawled  
filefish, numerous angelfish.*

4:30 p.m.      79°F      51 min.      90 ft.

8:00 p.m.      79°F      43 min.      86 ft.

*Nice night dive – octopus, stingray, basket stars, lobster, sea urchins.*

## WEDNESDAY, 12-13-00

### LONG CAYE RIDGE (LONG KEY)

8:30 a.m.      80°F      44 min.      85 ft.

*Nice wall with reef fingers. Huge sponges, queen angels, blue chromis,  
fairy basslets, damselfish, grunts, squirrelfish, scrawled trunkfish.*

10:30 a.m.      81°F      45 min.      91 ft.

*Spotted eagle ray, scorpiafish, brittle stars.*

### DOS COCOS (LONG KEY)

1:30 p.m.      81°F      47 min.      76 ft.

*Low visibility; limited life. Banded shrimp, free swimming green moray.*

8:30 p.m.      79°F      39 min.      60 ft.

*Octopus, basket stars, sleeping parrotfish, sea urchins.*

## THURSDAY, 12-14-00

### SILVER CAVES (LONG KEY)

8:30 a.m.      80°F      42 min.      91 ft.

*Clear blue water; abundant purple sea plumes; various reef fish, etc.*

10:40 a.m.      81°F      49 min.      90 ft.

### QUE BRADA (LONG KEY)

1:15 p.m.      81°F      46 min.      60 ft.

*Beautiful wall with vivid sponges. Flamingo tongues, purple tunicates, Christmas tree worms, banded and Pederson shrimp, knobby anemone.*

4:15 p.m.      81°F      48 min.      67 ft.

8:00 p.m.      79°F      42 min.      62 ft.

*Octopus, slipper lobster with conch, ruby brittle stars, sharptail eel.*

## FRIDAY, 12-15-00

### TWIN PALMS (CAYE BOKEL – TURNEFFE ISLANDS)

8:15 a.m.      78°F      35 min.      86 ft.

*Overcast sky; very low visibility with lots of debris in water. Lobsters, large grouper, midnight parrotfish.*

10:45 a.m.      81°F      40 min.      76 ft.

*Still low visibility but partly sunny. Toadfish, carpet anemone.*

### TRIPLE ANCHORS (CAYE BOKEL)

1:15 p.m.      81°F      50 min.      85 ft.

*Dive on patch reef under mostly sunny skies but limited visibility. Not a lot of life or color.*