

// SIGHT TO SEE

# BLUE HOLE, BELIZE

Karen Worrall discovers why the world's largest underwater sinkhole is a subaquatic fantasyland

## THE LOWDOWN

The Great Blue Hole lies 62 miles off the coast of Belize, sheltered by a small atoll (a ring-shaped reef) in the center of Lighthouse Reef.

The atoll was formed 70 million years ago, while the 984ft wide chasm is the result of repeated collapses of a limestone cave system during the last Ice Age. Water filtered through the rock for centuries creating green-blue and orange-pink stalactites and stalagmites, before collapsing to create the 410ft chasm. Then, as the polar ice caps receded, the Caribbean ocean filled the space.

Archaeological evidence shows Maya inhabited nearby islands. Spanish explorers charted the coastline and offshore reefs of Belize and Yucatan. Charles Darwin proclaimed the reef the richest and most remarkable in the western Caribbean. It began to be fully explored in the 1970s when Jacques Cousteau kick-started dive travel, and its reputation has grown since.

The hole's appeal comes from its scale and wildlife. Descending into the deep blue abyss, advanced divers traverse the domain of sharks — nurse, hammerhead, blacktip and Caribbean reef — and giant groupers, on their way to the hushed void beneath. Divers are rewarded with the sight of hundreds of ancient limestone stalactites and algae-covered cave formations (technically called speleothems).

While a handful of explorers have made the trip all the way to the bottom, most settle for the 130ft mark, which requires a PADI or equivalent deep diver certification. Non-divers can join boat tours to snorkel the surface — the thriving shallow coral reefs encircling the hole are home to resplendent reef fish — or take a small plane tour to view it from above.

## THE ESSENTIALS

Tours run from Belize City with pick-ups at Tourism Village for cruise ship guests. Scuba and snorkel tours are full days with early starts. All equipment, transportation, instruction and entrance fees are provided. One-hour small plane trips over the hole and surrounding atolls are also available.



## DID YOU KNOW?

THE BLUE HOLE IS THE LARGEST SEA HOLE ON EARTH, AND IT'S ALMOST PERFECTLY CIRCULAR. IT'S PART OF THE SECOND-LARGEST BARRIER REEF IN THE WORLD.