

Cave Diving – "Most Beautiful"

"They are the most beautiful caves in the world", Agnes Milowka had told me after her 2009 trip to the island of Abaco in the Bahamas. "Sure" I thought "but she hasn't been to Mexico yet". I couldn't imagine anything better than the Yucatan caves I saw in 2009. But I decided to have a look anyway and arranged a trip for May 2010.



Forrest looking for the blue hole outflow.

I had been to the Bahamas once before, to the island of Andros in 1998 (see Guidelines 68, March 1999). There are a number of Inland cave dives on Andros, including Stargate Blue Hole and many ocean blue holes. At Small Hope Bay lodge on Andros I looked at maps of several of these caves and saw a lot of surveyed passage at over 300 feet deep. This is when I first saw Brian Kakuk's name, as most of this deep mapping was done by him. Brian is still in the Bahamas and he has spent more than 20 years in the exploration and study of the Bahamian underwater caves. He now lives on Abaco and runs "Bahamas Underground", taking tourists like me to look at the caves.



Forrest and the author at entrance to Dan's Cave.

When Forrest Wilson and I flew into Marsh Harbour on Abaco, Brian was there to meet us in his van. It was only a short drive to Brian's house and dive shop, which shares a compound with the Bahamas Cave Research Foundation office. The "Friends of the Environment Cottage" is there too and this provided us with very convenient accommodation for the week. It was only a short walk to Brian's van and dive shop. Brian guides a maximum of two cave divers. He regards any more than two divers as too risky for the fragile caves. Side mounted cylinders, whilst not mandatory, are a very good idea, since most of the beautiful areas are not accessible to back mounting divers.

Most of our diving was done in Dan's Cave which is still growing as Brian continues to find new passage. It contains all types of cave, from huge Nullarbor style passage, to tight and delicate areas. No two dives were the same and all were wonderful. The water is fresh above about 10 metres and then you enter the salt water. There are many intensely decorated chambers at depths up to 20 m, but some sections of passage were 45 metres deep. We dived with nitrox, and

decompressed on oxygen after every dive. Between dives we sat in the woods near the cave entrance, ate our lunch, and swatted the large "Doctor" flies which came to feed on our blood. Brian



The Bahamian curly tailed lizard.

has made friends with the local Bahamian curly tailed lizards. They emerge from the bushes to eat freshly swatted doctor fly from his fingers. These lizards look like a creation of Micheal Leunig and provided good entertainment. The weather was warm and humid so after lunch it was a pleasure to slip back into the 25C water.

We dived one ocean blue hole and it was interesting to swim along a winding cave passage as the marine environment slowly changed to the more familiar cave environment. This cave is tidal and Brian had timed our dive so that we swam in against the current, but had the pleasure and safety of the current helping us out. At one point we found a hole in the floor which was gushing cool clear cave water, contrasting with the warmer sea water.

Ralph's cave has an area called the "Glass Factory" and a feature of this area is a dense collection of soda straws called the "Frozen Rain". Brian describes entering this area as "swimming through a chandelier". That was exactly how I felt as I crept along the floor of the cave trying to avoid the mass of delicate speleothems just above my head. Brian watched us very carefully through the delicate areas and was ready to grab a fin or push us down if we got too close. A feature of these caves is the purity and transparent nature of the calcite formation. We could see right through many of the shawls, and large stalagmites would light up if we placed a primary light on one side. In the glass factory the stalactites and straws had reached an ancient water surface at one point in their growth. Huge single crystals of calcite began to grow underwater, producing rose like formations and soda straws with large single crystals attached to the end. Most of these crystals look like perfect drawings from a crystallography text book. The frozen rain is probably the second most beautiful thing I have ever seen. No human artist could produce a sculpture of such complexity. It was created at least 10,000 years ago but it is so sparkling clean it could have been formed yesterday. This demonstrates the absolute purity of the ground water in the area.



The crocodile skull.

In Lost Reel cave Brian showed us a complete skeleton of a crocodile. It was in perfect condition and curled up as if it were sleeping. Then, like a magician, Brian would feel carefully in the silt and produce large sections of tortoise shell. Crocodiles and tortoises are both extinct in the Bahamas. However remains of both have been found in many of the caves. One tortoise shell shows crocodile bite marks, which indicates that they once cohabited on Abaco.

The final dive of our trip was a double stage dive to Fangorn Forest in Dan's cave. Fangorn Forest is about 20m deep but we had to pass through a tunnel at 45m to get there. One of our two stages had a richer nitrox mix and we dropped this before we passed the deep section. All our

remaining cylinders were all breathable at 45m. Fangorn Forest is the most beautiful place I have seen. The density, complexity and colour of the formation is amazing. It's a big area too. I was able to look in all directions and the formation went as far as I could see. It was truly breathtaking! This can be a problem underwater, I kept checking my gauges to see how much gas I had left.

I didn't take my camera underwater on any of these dives. I wanted to experience the cave in real time without the hassle of taking pictures. However, other people have taken some excellent photos.

Photos by Wes Skiles can be seen in the August 2010 issue of National Geographic. The web sites listed below also have some excellent shots. There is also a request for letters of support for cave conservation to be sent to the Bahamian Prime Minister. Brian is hopeful that the area of the caves will be made a national park to protect the caves and the pristine ground water which preserves them. Please consider adding your voice in support of this.

Agnes was right. They are the most beautiful underwater caves in the world!

<http://www.bahamasunderground.com/>

<http://www.bahamascaves.com/blueholesconservation/sabhca.html>

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/08/bahamas-caves/skiles-photography>

Ken Smith.

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