

# SCUBA

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The Official Magazine of Britain's Biggest Diving Club

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## MEXICAN CAVE!

Cenotes and crocodiles  
in Travel Special



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A diver is seen swimming through a dark underwater cave. The scene is dramatically lit from above, with numerous vertical shafts of bright green light filtering down through the water. The diver is positioned in the center of the frame, illuminated by these light shafts. The cave floor is covered in dark, rocky terrain with some greenish algae or coral growth. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ethereal.

TRAVEL SPECIAL

# Caverns and crocodiles of the Yucatán

On a trip to Mexico, underwater photographer **Tony Baskeyfield** was hard pushed to choose between the stunning calm of the cenotes or the excitement of diving with crocodiles

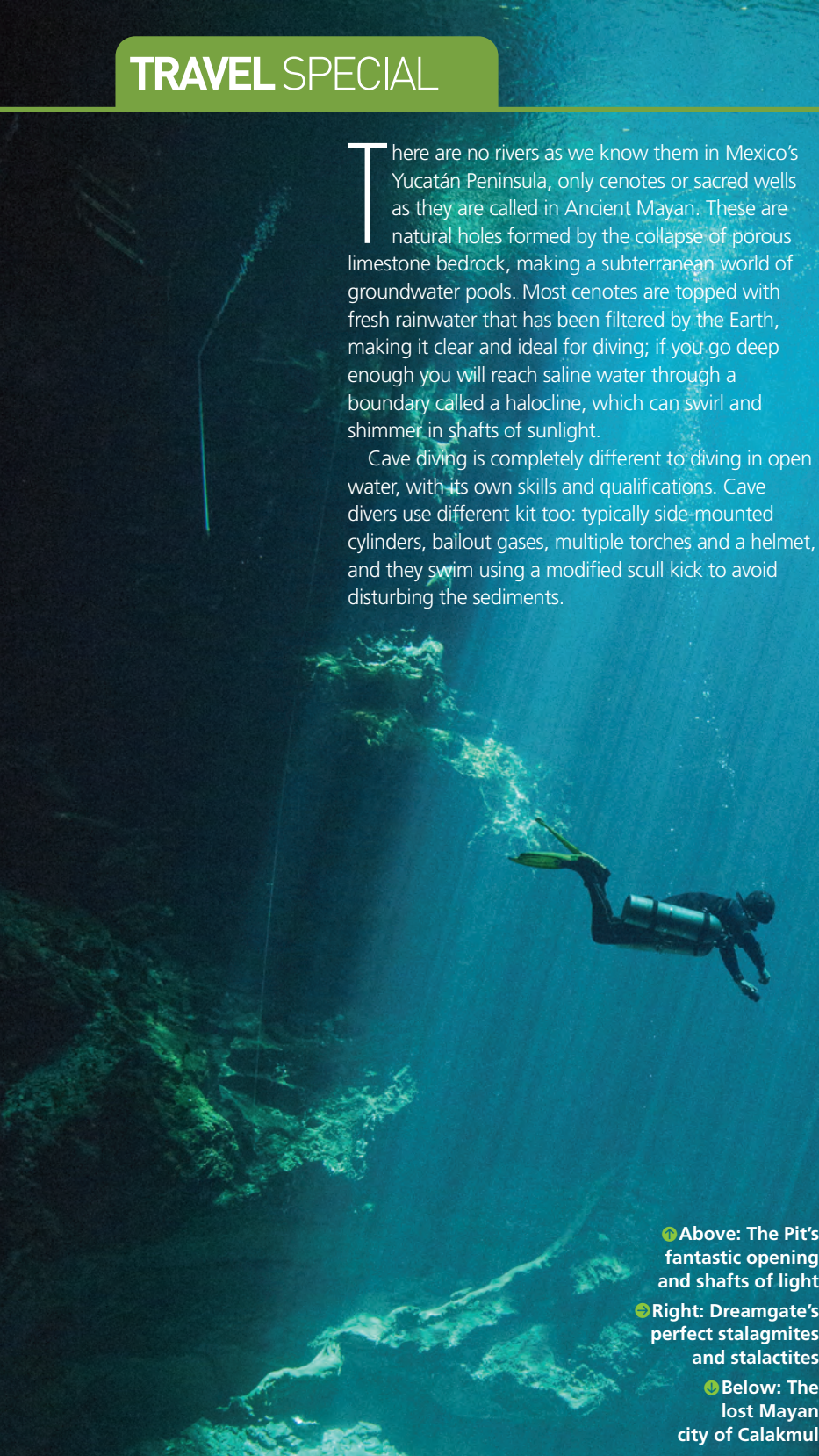
📍 Above: Beautiful shafts of light at Ponderosa

There are no rivers as we know them in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, only cenotes or sacred wells as they are called in Ancient Mayan. These are natural holes formed by the collapse of porous limestone bedrock, making a subterranean world of groundwater pools. Most cenotes are topped with fresh rainwater that has been filtered by the Earth, making it clear and ideal for diving; if you go deep enough you will reach saline water through a boundary called a halocline, which can swirl and shimmer in shafts of sunlight.

Cave diving is completely different to diving in open water, with its own skills and qualifications. Cave divers use different kit too: typically side-mounted cylinders, bailout gases, multiple torches and a helmet, and they swim using a modified scull kick to avoid disturbing the sediments.

Unless you've got the kit and are qualified, you can't go into a cenote on your own. I went cavern diving in the cenotes: if you can see natural light at the end of a cave or tunnel, it is a 'cavern' dive and my buddy, fellow photographer Terry Steeley and I wanted to dive in the cave entrances, where the best light is for photography. Guides take a maximum four divers – with the least qualified at the front and the most experienced at the back – and there is usually a rope to follow. Not surprisingly in this closed-overhead environment there are strict rules on air management, using the rule of thirds, to plan to use one-third of your available gas on the way in, one-third on the way out, leaving a third in reserve.

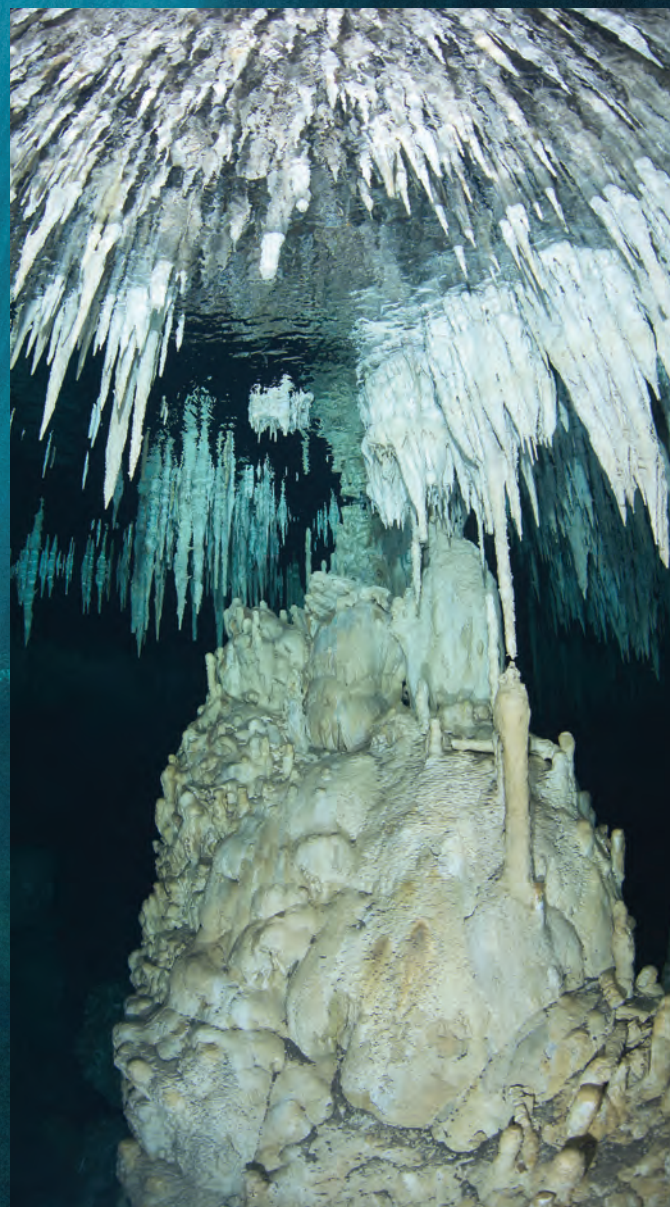
We hired a guide to take just the two of us diving and to model for our photographs. We each took around 500 shots per dive. Our time was spent paying minute attention to every photographic detail. After each dive, I had plenty of post-production thoughts on how to shoot for the next day, what settings I'd use, where I'd position myself. It was extremely boring for the model who was sometimes hovering in the same spot for up to 30 minutes, but for us it was fantastic to make, and take, this opportunity.



📍 Above: The Pit's fantastic opening and shafts of light

📍 Right: Dreamgate's perfect stalagmites and stalactites

📍 Below: The lost Mayan city of Calakmul



## • The Pit at Dos Ojos (Two Eyes Cenote)

### 30M DIVE (119M CENOTE)

Only 20 minutes from Puerto Aventuras, the Pit is the deepest cenote in the state of Quintana Roo at 119 metres. We arrived early for a morning deep dive and to get the best light penetration. Divers used to jump from the edge into the water; these days there are steps to make it easier. Terry and I spiralled down through the halocline at 20m, then descended to 30m where there is a layer of hydrogen sulphide, formed by microbacteria in rotting vegetation. This is not good for your skin and leaves red marks. Divers complain of tingling lips, and if too much contact with the skin is made, it can bond to the haemoglobin in the blood, affecting off-gassing and

deco and leaving divers more prone to decompression illness. The light here is eerily fantastic and blue as we dipped in and out of the hydrogen sulphide layer, where shafts of light touch the fallen tree branches that protrude from the misty layer.

## Dreamgate

### 6M

Situated deep in the jungle near Dos Ojos, Dreamgate is bursting with pristine stalagmites. I followed the rope and it took only 15 minutes to swim around. Then I did it in reverse to see it all again from a different direction! This untouched cavern offers two magical dives in crystal clear water. Excellent buoyancy control is required due to the fragile and delicate

• **Below: The Pit is eerily fantastic at 30m with a fallen tree branch sticking through the hydrogen sulphide layer**



• formations of stalagmites and columns found here. I loved the sensation of flying among the delicate and beautiful structures.

### Ponderosa

14M

Ponderosa – also known as the Garden of Eden – is a very large and exceptionally beautiful cenote near Playa del Carmen, just two miles south of Puerto Aventuras. Entry is an easy walk down stairs to a platform. This spectacular pond with its crystal clear water is full of life. At the entrance to the awesome cavern there is a thick halocline and fantastic light. The variation of temperature between the fresh and salt water is surprising. Good in the morning and in the afternoon, the light rays here are lovely to photograph. This cenote makes a great second dive.

### Angelica

30M DIVE (60M CENOTE)

Angelica, in Tulum, is the furthest cenote from our base. We take 40 minutes to get there but it is worth the journey. The 'Little Angel' is hidden away in the jungle and is totally different from the others. There are no big caverns or passages, this is just a deep opening, dropping to 60m. The top is 28m of fresh water with crystal clear visibility and then below is salt water that enters from the sea. At 29m there is a layer of hydrogen sulphide. This layer gives the appearance of mist floating over a river on a frosty morning, separating the fresh water from the salt water below. Out of this misty surface pokes the top of the collapsed cave ceiling and some dead tree branches. It looks like an island with trees on it. What a truly beautiful sight it was with our torchlight illuminating the hydrogen sulphide cloud. •

➔ Right: Water lilies at Car Wash

⬇ Below: Sunrise at Xcalac on the Mexican Caribbean

➔ Far right: A diver hovers above Angelita's misty hydrogen sulphide layer

⬇ Below right: Dreamgate's stalagmites adorn the cave



## Diving the caverns

Caverns are defined as large areas with no restrictions, ceilings and some visible light. The viz is typically 12-13m. Under local rules, you are allowed to venture to a maximum of 60m from the openings, and you are supposed to stay within your no-decompression time. There are equally strict environmental rules: you are supposed to dive gently and slowly, reducing drag from your kit, taking nothing and touching nothing.

» **Taj Mahal, leading to Sugar Bowl and Esmerelda**

12M

The light is beautiful at Taj Mahal, three miles south of Puerto Aventuras, with yellow and blue rays shining into the caverns below. We swam from the entrance into a wide cavern underneath: an air-filled bat cave where light enters through holes in the ceiling and penetrates the water like laser beams. Along the cavern floor there are hundreds of stalactites lying in the sediment and a bit further along we enter the sugar bowl, a second small cenote where there is an amazing light show from the jungle above. Taj Mahal is decorated with stalactites and there are lots of haloclines in the deeper areas that created spectacular mirror-like effects as we swam through the layer of salt water below the fresh water. We ventured a bit further and spent 30 minutes in Esmerelda; we were just a couple of metres below the surface and the tannins in the rain had made the water turn yellow.

**Nicte Ha at Dos Ochos**

26M

Nicte Ha is a quiet and stunningly beautiful cenote located along the gravel road that leads from Highway 307 to Dos Ojos. It is about a 20-minute walk from the highway to the entrance road. This quiet pool of crystalline water leads into a cavernous overhanging area. It is less crowded than the larger cenotes, and with several shaded seating areas makes a lovely spot for a dive and a picnic. Just a short walk down a gravelled path leads to Motz Sai Ha, where a steep stairway leads into a cavernous expanse of azure water. »

**Going croc**

A croc trip is not for the faint hearted. It is completely off the beaten track, but I was rewarded with an experience of a lifetime when I got in the water with wild American salt water crocodiles off the Yucatán Peninsula.

Jabier, the owner of the XTC Dive Centre, started the croc trips four years ago and in that time only 300 people have come to see them. This trip is completely out in the wild with no creature comforts, staying in fishermen's huts on stilts, but on the last night we bought 20 lobsters from the fishermen next door for \$10 and had a feast.

The crocs are late risers and don't get up till midday, so in the mornings we went outside the atoll to dive. A small group of crocodiles have become accustomed to coming out to clear, shallow water so you can have close encounters with large, and often multiple, crocodiles. On the boat, one of the crew tosses in fish to draw the crocs in. We get in the water only when Ryan our wrangler says it is safe. He has an 8ft pole with which he manages the crocs. We also have two spotters who check that other crocs do not sneak up behind us. These are American crocodiles, not as big or aggressive as the salt water crocodiles of Australasia or the Nile crocodiles of Africa, but nevertheless a major predator that grows to four metres or more.

One morning we dived the wreck of the Ginger Scout, a 20-minute boat ride away. The seabed is full of gorgonian fans all facing the same way, with a big propeller and winch gear to swim through. Then back at base we engage with the crocs for the rest of the afternoon. We take turns to get as close as possible and when I'm face to face with a croc in the water, I can hear it growling at me. When I get a chance, I swim underneath a croc to get a shot. On the third day we dive with three crocs, which are getting livelier and seem to be scheming to get through our defences. We were told that no one has ever been hurt by a croc here but they are wild predators and we still have to take care.

📍 Below: Crocodile in the sea grass

📍 Below right: Our Palafito – home for the next three days.

📍 Right: The crocs get pretty close!



## • Aktun Ha, or the Car Wash

16M

There is no mystery as to how this cenote got its name: it was actually used to wash taxis in the past. Entry is easy with the water level just a few inches below ground. On the floor there are dead tree branches and growing water lilies. The lily leaves turn purple and the floor of the cenote is covered with a thick bed of green algae. The water is emerald green, fading through a cloud of blooming algae. The light falling through the roots creates a beautiful effect and the large cavern behind is beautifully decorated. There are plenty of small fish and I've heard of sightings of little crocodiles and fresh water turtles here. •

• Below: The midday sunrays at Sugarbowl



## Essentials

**GETTING THERE:** We flew from Gatwick to Cancun in Mexico with British Airways. Return economy flights cost from £500-£600, plus £60 for an extra 23 kilogram bag. To reach the crocs it's a five-hour car trip South to Xcalac fishing village on the Caribbean at the Mexico / Belize border. After an overnight stay at the XTC Dive Centre, we left the mainland in a twin-200hp-engined boat heading to Banco Chinchorro, a coral cay 36 miles off the Yucatán Peninsula. An hour later we arrived at one of seven fishermen's huts called palafitos standing on stilts in the sea. The accommodation is extremely basic – a few hammocks in a shack, with a hole in the floor to serve as a toilet.

**DIVING AND DIVE CENTRES:** When you're in with the crocs, the sea temperature varies from 27-29°C, so T-shirts and shorty wetsuits are the order of the day, with hats to prevent sunburn. In the cenotes the temperature drops to 24-25°C so a full wetsuit is needed, plus a thin pair of booties and hood. Our itinerary, including accommodation, six days diving (18 dives), tanks, cenote fees and all transfers cost around £1,200 per person. There is a BSAC Centre in the area, Underworld Tulum, which can arrange similar itineraries. Email [lanny@underworldtulum.com](mailto:lanny@underworldtulum.com), or see the website [www.underworldtulum.com](http://www.underworldtulum.com)

**CENOTES:** Under The Jungle, Entrance to Cenote Tajma Ha, Km 264 Carretera, Federal 307 ([www.underthejungle.com](http://www.underthejungle.com)).

**CROCS:** Yucatan Dive Trek with XTC Dive Centre, Km 54 Camino Costero a Xcalac, 77940 Xcalac, Quintana Roo, Mexico ([www.xtcdivecenter.com](http://www.xtcdivecenter.com)). Prodivers Mexico can arrange cenote dives, great white shark trips and visits to the Cozumel marine park. (<https://prodivemex.com>).

**ACCOMMODATION:** There are plenty of apartments and hotel rooms to rent in the Cancun area, ranging from £60-500 per day. For the cenote diving we based ourselves in a studio apartment in Puerto Aventuras, 50 miles south of Cancun. Our dive guide picked us up each morning and took us to the Under The Jungle dive centre a mile away to collect our dive gear and then onto Cenote locations each day.

**TOPSIDE ATTRACTIONS:** On our return to Cancun we went to the Biosphere Reserve at Campeche to see the lost city of Calakmul, with its 6,000 Mayan structures. We climbed three of them. There were no ropes or barriers here and no other tourists either; we saw five other people all day. This is the domain of wild jaguars; we saw fox cubs playing, wild turkeys, a couple of boar and one evening three million bats emerging from a cave.

