

Diving Cozumel

By Mike Ault

I recently returned from a family vacation to Cozumel where I was able to squeeze in a few dives. For those that haven't been to Cozumel I highly recommend it, it is more laid back than Cancun but has more fun than Cabo San Lucas or Mazatlan. We stayed at the Melia Resort and Golf Club on the end of the island. Unfortunately the current brings lots of particulate and floating matter from the mangrove areas right in front of the hotels beach so I can't really recommend it for the beaches, in my opinion they should build a breakwater up current like the one that sits down current (for the next hotel) as the breakwater there has resulted in crystal clear water for the next hotel downs beaches.



The Brown Water Beach, it could be helped by another Breakwater up current.

As to food at the Melia, there was plenty of it, but unfortunately the quality only gets a 7 out of 10 as they seemed to be trying to please the middle of the road palette and thus end up with middle of the road food. Other than the beaches and the middle grade food, the rest of the hotel was great and the people where very friendly and helpful.



Looking Back Towards the Hotel

We arrived on June 7, 2008, a Saturday and I didn't get to dive until Monday, June 9, 2008 which also happens to be my birthday. My first two dives were with "Diving With Martin" (DWM) who runs out of the International Pier. Of course I had to take a taxi too and from the International Pier but that probably would have been the case with however I dove with due to the location of the Melia. DWM has two small boats and a cabin cruiser, and normally runs small groups of 6-8 divers. In my first dive set there were only 5 divers so there was no crowding and everyone had plenty of room to gear up. You put your regulator and BCD out and the crew will set it up for you if you desire as well as take it down and reset it during the interval. Every tank I got was at least 3000 PSI and everything appeared well maintained.

The first dive on the 9th was on the Columbia Reef. It was a fairly shallow dive with my max depth only reaching 76 feet with an average depth of 53 feet. The temperature from the surface to the bottom was a uniform 80 degrees. If there was one thing I would say about how my camera behaved this entire trip as far as diving, it would be to say it was troubled. Between mis-queuing the strobe, not getting proper exposures and then throwing ERR99 as well as battery issues, I had loads of fun swearing through my regulator. I did manage to get a few pictures however. I also tried out a HelmetPro Camera which I had attached to the top of my Ikelite housing for my Canon 20D between the strobes.

All the dives were made using my 3 mm full wetsuit with 5 mm neoprene booties, I was perfectly comfortable as was Susan on all of our dives.

The reefs seem to be recovering nicely from the hurricane damage from a few years ago, the shallow reefs bore the brunt of the damage but are coming back strongly.



New Growth on the Reefs



Visibility was Excellent

The reef was alive with fish, parrot fish of all colors, Grey, French and Queen angles, Spotted File fish, Trigger Fish and Queen Trigger as well as barracuda, Yellow Stripe Grunts, Pork fish, Trunk fish, Schoolmasters and the usual Blue Tangs and Groupers. After 36 minutes down we surfaced and had a 56 minute surface interval.

The next dive was on the dive site Punta Tunich. This second dive on the 9th was a little bit faster drift dive with a max depth of 69 feet and an average depth of 45 feet. We saw one of the largest Puffers I have seen and had a pet Remora that wanted to become attached to us. We also saw a large, free-swimming Green Eel and a large Grouper.



Large Puffer

Again I was pleased by the evident new growth and vitality of the reef, we saw many schools of fish and a great diversity of species. The area had many swim thrus and coral heads to explore.



Large Black Grouper

The water clarity was excellent with visibilities often in the 100 foot range.



Good Visibility (if you ignore the strobe backscatter!)



Our Pet Remora

After the second dive we headed back in to shore and after a brief stop to exchange air bottles, called it a day.

During my off time the family and I did a jeep tour of Cozumel including the turtle and crocodile preserves, the snorkel area near Punta Sur, the light house, the tequila museum and the San Gervasio Mayan ruins. I really enjoyed the preserves and seeing the crocodiles up close as well as the Mayan ruins (were I got completely soaked with a sudden storm and caught poison ivy) and of course the Tequila museum (with plenty of taste testing!)

The turtle preserve area had several nest sites in the soft sand, but we didn't see any turtles as they normally only come ashore at night. The preserve is not open to people at night because they would disturb the turtles and, the crocodiles come out of the swamp area at night!

The crocodile area had a walkway that let you walk right over the top of the wild salt-water crocodiles. With the help of a telephoto you could get right up close and personal! The area also had a tall tower from which the view was superb! On the way out of the snorkeling area we had to pull over and let some cars pass, as I looked out the side of the jeep I saw some old crocodile eggs laying right beside the road!

The snorkeling was fun but it was a bit choppy and reminded me again and again (as I spit out seawater) why I prefer diving!



Our Jeep Caravan



Up Close with the Crocs



The Light House



The San Gervasio Mayan Ruins



The Tequila Museum

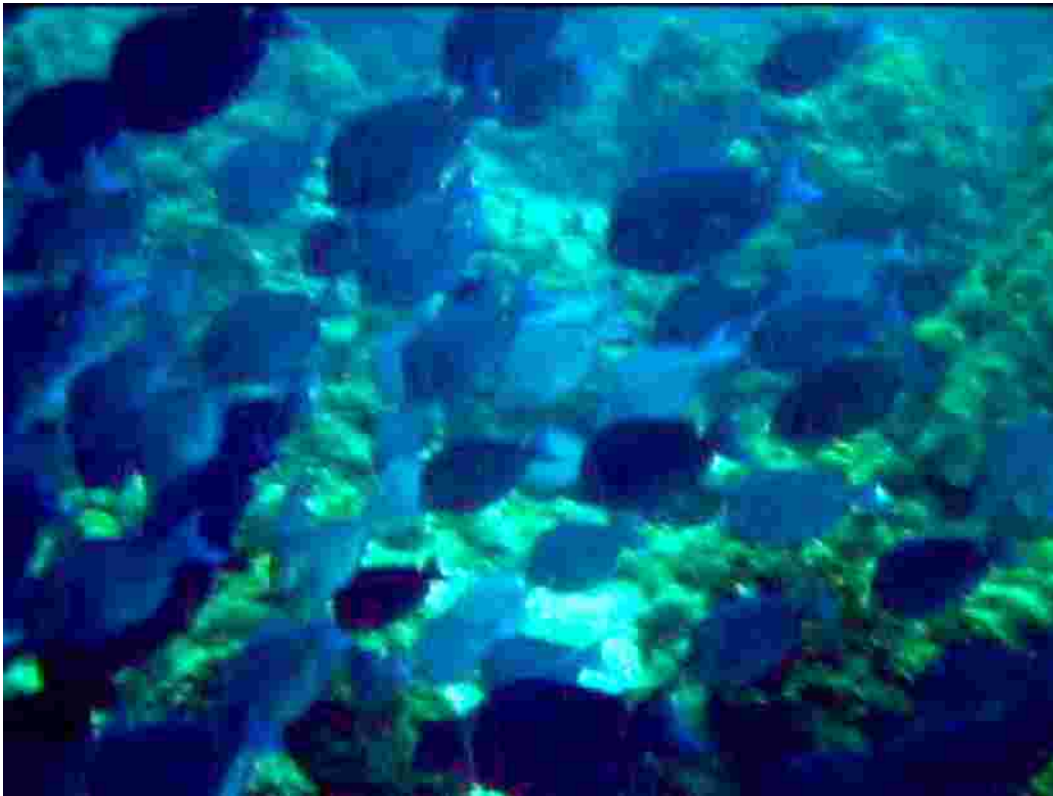
Needless to say after a whirlwind tour of the island I was ready for some nice relaxing diving! On the 11th Susan and I both got to go back to DWM and do an afternoon two-tank dive. As with my previous trip with DWM there were only 4 other divers with Susan and I making six in all. Since Susan is only Scuba Diver qualified I hired an additional DM to be with her as required by her level of certification. The Canon decided to pitch a ERR99 fit after just a couple of pictures so I used the Helmet Pro in video mode to record the dive then captured images from the video, so sorry for the lack of quality in the images! Anyway, our first dive was on the Palancar Reef with an average depth of 27 feet and a maximum depth of 55 feet (for me) with a water temperature of a uniform 80 degrees. We saw lots of life and was treated to a fly-by by a sea turtle. The dive was a slow drift with loads of swim thrus. We had an overall bottom time of 44 minutes.



Susan on the Way Down with DM



We Saw Several Schools of Fish



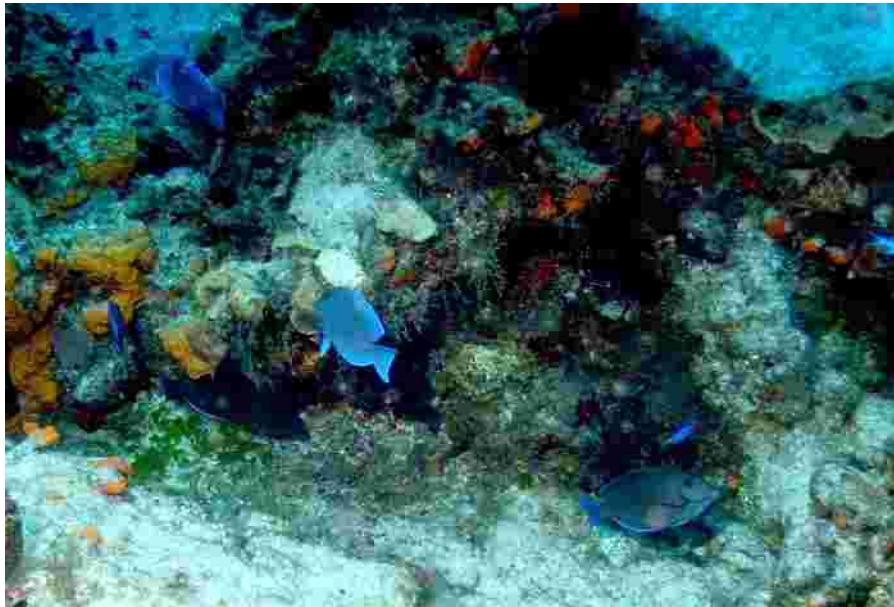
Blue Tangs (From Video)

Let me tell you, Susan is to be commended, she started a couple of years ago being terrified of the water, to the point of not being able to put her face in, now she will soon be fully Open Water certified, I am very proud of her!

On the next dive I was able to rest the camera to clear the ERR99, but for some reason the flash sync wasn't functioning properly the last half of the dive (I think the cord was loose and may have had a partial sort) this was not the best trip for me and the camera! Anyway, we dove the Paso del Cedrel dive site. Susan had problems clearing early in the dive so she aborted and the DM sent me to finish the dive with the rest of the group. It was probably the fastest drift dive I have been on yet with a pace that was equal to a fast walk or better. We had an average depth of 27 feet and a maximum depth of 43 feet with a 42 minute bottom time. The temperature was a uniform 80 degrees top to bottom. As with the other dives there was a great abundance of life on the coral heads.



Pork Fish on a Swim-Thru Exit



Some Blue Tangs

After the second dive we headed back in and spent a relaxing night at the resort with our two daughters, son-in-law and most importantly, Mikie our grandson.



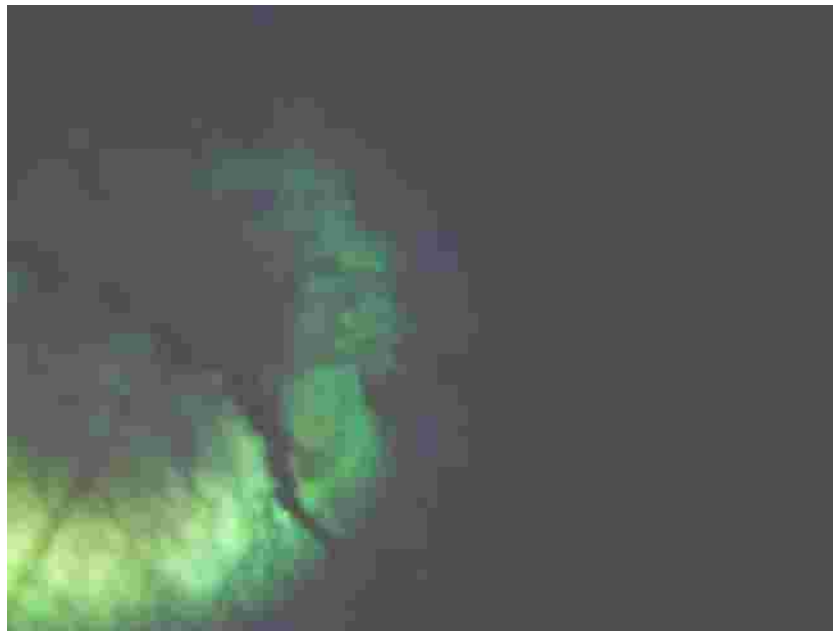
Mikie Enjoying the Playset at the Resort

The next day, the 12th, I set out on something I have wanted to do for a long time, dive the Mexican Cenotes. I grabbed the ferry at 8am and by 9am had been picked up by Scuba Caribe at the ferry landing in Cancun. We loaded my gear into the truck and set off for the dive shop. At the dive shop I filled in the needed paper work and got to rest a bit while everyone else got their gear fitted. All-in-all there where about 8 of us that were diving the Cenotes, two groups of 4.

We drove to the Mexican Riviera region near the Pointe Adventura development. We pulled into the Kukulcan Cenote area (comprising the Kukulcan and Little Brother Cenotes on the Choc-Mool cave system.) After a detailed briefing we donned our gear and tramped the several yards from the parking area to the Cenote entrance. After a weight and equipment check we entered the Cenote with our guide. Unfortunately, the fully charged battery (at least I thought it was) gave up the ghost and I have to use video captures from the Helmet Cam for the first Cenote dive pictures.



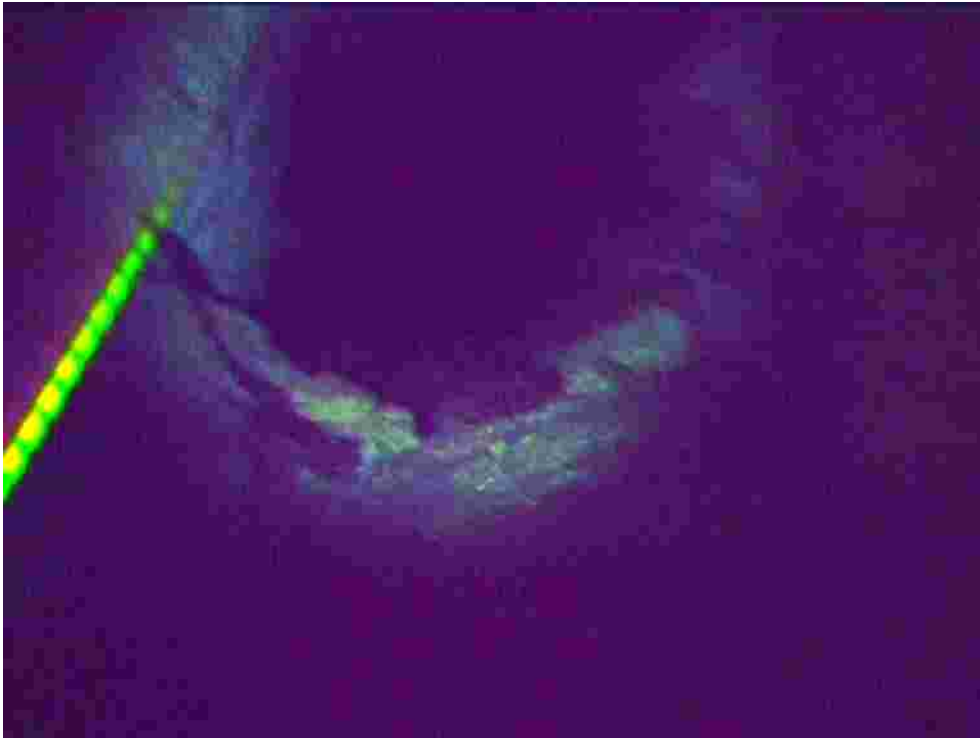
Looking Back Towards Entrance



Follow the Rope!



Danger! Don't Go Beyond This Sign!



Over Deep Holes Going to Unknown Caverns



Back at the Entrance

The first dive on Kukulcan Cenote was fun, but other than rock there wasn't much to look at, although my first encounter with a true halocline was interesting. The average depth was 27 feet with a maximum depth of 43 feet and a dive time of 42 minutes. We used the rule of thirds for air consumption with 1000 psi in, 1000 psi out and 1000 psi reserve. The water temperature was 76 degrees. The limestone is rippled and cratered and pockmarked from the centuries of acidic water attack that created the cave system, in many places you can see the huge slabs of stone that have fallen from the ceiling.

After a 36 minute surface interval we put back on our gear and headed to the Little Brother Cenote. The entrance was through a narrow cleft with narrow steps, you had to be real careful with the steps in dive gear. Entrance to the water was easy with either a back fall in or steps or a ladder.



Surface Entrance to Little Brother

The play between dive lights and the camera strobe led to some interesting light effects when I looked at the photos later it appeared we were diving in the aurora borealis or a close cousin. It didn't help that the camera refused to acknowledge that it had a strobe (even though it fired it) which led to long exposure times (and hence a bit of blur).



Strobes Plus Dive Lights Led to Interesting Light Effects

One of the really interesting features of Little Brother is that it lets on to a part of the cave system that has a massive set of stalagmites and stalactites in a partially dry pocket as well as submerged versions.



Watch Your head!

In the air chamber there were also huge tree roots poking down through the ceiling. Please excuse the glare artifacts on the pictures in the air chamber as I was not able to clear the port lens of water as I treaded heavily to keep the camera out of water to take the above-water pictures. A neutrally buoyant rig gets quite heavy when you pull it most of the way out of the water!

In the air chamber there was a fine patina of dust and fine particles on the water surface, the guide explained that this was due to the vibrations from divers making noise and talking in the chamber.



A Large Tree Root

As with most Cenotes the water in Little Brother and Kukulkan was crystal clear (except where the divers stirred it up, leaving you feeling at times like you were literally flying.



Look Ma! No Hands!

Other than getting to dive with Susan, the Cenote dives were the highlight of the dives on the Cozumel dive trip. If you want to see more dive and Cenote pictures, visit www.scubamage.com and go to the pictures section.

Well, the Little Brother dive with an average depth of 21 feet and maximum depth of 41 feet and temperature of 76 degrees and bottom time of 47 minutes was a great dive on which to end the Cozumel dive trip. I only hope I can go back with a better functioning camera and video setup and truly show the Cenote as it should be shown!

I ended up having to meter using my dive light against neutral colored stone then move the camera into position and take the shot, it got me some decent shots but I don't believe it is the way things are supposed to work! Next time I will use full manual with a f-stop of 8.0, exposure of 250 (sync speed for the strobes) and a ISO of 100 instead of trying to rely on automatic or program settings.

On the next day I changed the lens on my camera to the kit lens and of course changed the port to fit the lens and went snorkeling, the lower port latch wasn't fully latched and with a glug! Glug! The Canon 20D met a horrible death. Luckily I have it insured and already have the replacement. I sent the housing and sync cord in for inspection and rework so hopefully next time everything will work properly!