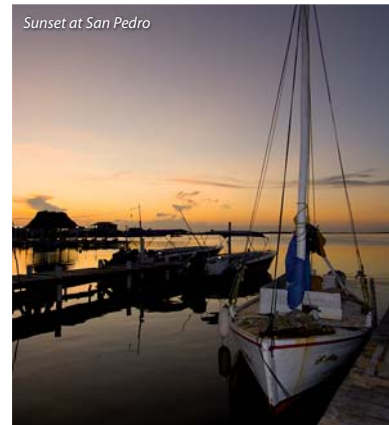




Fairy basslet

Northern Cayes



AMBERGRIS CAYE

The laid-back island atmosphere divers crave when coming to the Caribbean or Central America really comes to the fore when you arrive in San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. Sandy streets, colorful signs and homes, and friendly people are what divers come to the western Caribbean for – and here they get it. The tiny airstrip sits right near the beach and many hotels are within walking distance of the runway. You can get off the plane and just stroll across the tarmac into the hotels such as the Sunbreeze Hotel. You put your stuff in your room and just keep walking through the courtyard to the beach, where you find restaurants, bars and, most importantly, the sea.

San Pedro is a small place with three main sandy streets lined with shops, cafes, delis, local stores and internet outlets. Many residents get around on electric golf carts or bikes, so its pretty quiet and pollution free at the height of a hot, sunny day. The beach scene is a mellow affair with weekend live bands churning out '70s rock and reggae as people sip Beliken beer and watch the light fade into night.

Dive operators depart mostly from docks on the east side of the island. Among the farther sites, there are almost daily trips to places like the famous **Blue Hole** at the northern atoll of Lighthouse Reef (an extremely popular but rather longish trip). Those craving a shorter boat ride can experience the nearby barrier reef dives that are, for the most part, just five to 15 minutes from the dock. The barrier reef is quite close to the Ambergris Caye and diving is quick and easy, though visibility isn't always prime and it can be somewhat surgy, so some divers will put up with the long boat ride to get better visibility and drop-off clarity. Others prefer to make more dives close by, (most shops run up to four a day plus a night dive), or just be back from diving quickly to enjoy the beach and island scene.

The southern end of the barrier reef here has the Hol Chan Marine Reserve, which was established more than two decades ago, and the profusion of marine life is a testament to its success. A lot of the reserve is shallow and in many

Ambergris Caye		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
1	MEXICO ROCKS	•	•		
2	BOCA DEL RIO - STATUE			•	
3	TRES COCOS			•	
4	TACKLE BOX CANYONS	•		•	
5	MERMAID'S LAIR			•	
6	ESMERALDA	•	•		
7	TUFFY CANYONS	•	•		
8	THE BORDAH (BORDER)			•	
9	CYPRESS GARDEN			•	
10	PILLAR CORAL		•		
11	EAGLE RAY ALLEY			•	
12	HOL CHAN CUT	•	•		
13	SHARK RAY ALLEY	•	•		



cases the sites are just for snorkeling. While the reef is fishier in the south, the north holds more formations, with deep spur and groove cuts and interesting terrain.

The good dive operations, like Aqua Dives at the Sunbreeze Beach Hotel, have spacious and well-powered dive boats, oxygen, modes of communication and first aid kits on board. They generally moor to buoys and dive a circuit back to the moorings or go from one mooring to another. This makes for relaxed, guided dives around the specific area. The dives are all well-briefed and the divemasters may even carry reef ID cards, so those new to Belize waters can find out on the spot what they are looking at. Aqua Dives provides two divemasters in the water with one leading the dive and one trailing, so you dive in a loose group but have someone to keep you headed in the right direction.

The village of Caye Caulker, south of Ambergris Caye, is a smaller and somewhat less developed place that can be reached by water taxi. Dive shops here have some of their own barrier reef dives and also come up to the San Pedro and Hol Chan sites.



Grunts in shallow water

1 MEXICO ROCKS

Location: 4.5 nautical miles (9.7km) north of San Pedro
Depth: 10-25ft (2-8m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



This shallow, pretty site is also snorkel friendly. Mexico Rocks gained the attention of conservationists decades ago when it was recommended for designation as a marine sanctuary in 1978. The reason? The site is a unique patch reef system within the northern lagoon and is also considered important for fishery resources. Here snorkelers find some beautiful corals and sandy white bottoms in normally clear waters. The *Montastrea annularis* corals seen here are patch reef builders unique to the Northern Shelf Lagoon. The dominance of this large boulder coral in patch reefs is rare in Belize, with only one other location of such patch reefs at Glover's Reef, an atoll to the south. There are 30 hard corals found here. The site's status is still under consideration as a reserve.

Lots of small creatures abound between the sand, turtle grass and coral heads, including flounders, walking hermit crabs, conch, stingrays and hogfish.

Schooling fish make refuge in the larger corals, so look for schools of grunts and schoolmasters. There are many cleaning areas; banded shrimp and Pederson shrimp have cleaning stations along with active cleaning wrasses.

The expansion of development in Ambergris Caye and San Pedro is evident in the scattered holiday/retirement homes and resorts along the shore adjacent to the site. San Pedro holds the great majority of the caye's population, and is roughly 4.5 miles to the north. But divers make the trip up here to get away from the crowds at Hol Chan.

2 BOCA DEL RIO – STATUE

Location: 2 nautical miles (3.2km) northeast of San Pedro
Depth: 35-130ft (11-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate and/or with guide



This site is closer to the channels around San Pedro where at least 35 dive sites are in very close proximity, spreading a couple of miles down to the Hol Chan Marine Preserve. Most have buoys but that is largely dependent on sea conditions, and funds and time available for replacement.

The underwater terrain at Boca del Rio is a spur-and-groove system, which is the major feature all the way south along the sites here. These systems typically feature rolling coral hills broken up by sandy channels. Marine life thrives under the protection of the ledges that meet the sand and create overhangs, caves and tunnels. The spur and groove canyons run perpendicular to the coast and lead out to a drop-off that forms the outer edge of the barrier reef. The barrier reef is close to the mainland along this coast and very close to bustling little San Pedro, which makes it a lure to divers who love these easy and fruitful reefs.

Near the Boca del Rio mooring is a statue of Christ, one of many beneath the Caribbean. The dive shops also call this site 'Christ of the Abyss' or 'Statue'. This is one of the few sites with healthy staghorn coral left undamaged in recent hurricanes. The channel also has plate corals that get more numerous as one heads toward the outer drop-off.

First, head along the spurs then out to the wall where you'll see attractive sponge life. Swim out to about 90ft to get a good look at the lush growth

and some big coral heads supporting life. Big barrels and tubes can be found here and turtles are often seen at this drop-off. As you head back in, you may see big rays and the ubiquitous nurse sharks, which may sleep in the sand or move over the coral hills. The statue stands in the shallows at 60ft and can make for a good photo prop. The inner reef is 35ft deep and an open water, 15ft deco stop can be made before heading up to the boat. Some guides go from mooring to mooring here while others may return to the same one, depending on your group of divers.



Soft corals and sea fans

3 TRES COCOS

Location: 2 nautical miles (3.2km) northeast of San Pedro
Depth: 50-130ft (15-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Tres Cocos is a beautiful spot for the first dive of the day. It's a bit deeper than most, with coral head rising up to 50ft and a wall and spurs that spill out from 90ft to 120ft. The marine life here is wonderful with thick growths of star corals, big plating corals, red rope sponges and soft sea whips, and gorgonians on the upper reaches of the spurs.

It is easy to go deeper than you may think here as the water can be clear and the wall mesmerizing, so keep an eye on your gauges. Listen and look for the toadfish calling and hiding under the many big plates here. You may also see arrow blennies.

This place is renowned for shoals of schooling fish, including snappers, horse-eye jacks and spotted eagle rays. Even Caribbean reef sharks have been spotted in the blue water here, as have Atlantic spadefish in flowing schools.

Up at the 50ft mark, black durgions will hang in the water column along with Creole wrasse. Look also for colorful blue chromis in the shallower parts of the reef. Do a proper deco stop at the mooring, which rises up from the 50ft mark.

4 TACKLE BOX CANYONS

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.6km) southeast of San Pedro
Depth: 40-90ft (12-27m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



There are many piers off the east coast of Ambergris Caye at San Pedro. The one with a big store in the middle is called Tackle Box. Offshore at this pier is a great site with big, steep coral grooves and lots going on along the sides of its big walls. The outer reef is also worth a look, and there are swim-throughs in many places along the drop-off and on your way there. Have your guide lead you through a few the swim-throughs for a bit of safe exploration. Look for some encrusted marine life along the sides – perhaps you'll see a lobster in some of the deeper crannies.

Head out along the outer wall and look out for pelagic fish and the attractive outer reef growth. Lots of gray angels and redband and stoplight par-

rotfish can be found at this site along with blue chromis. Other fish species to look for include foureye butterflyfish, French grunts, indigo hamlets and sand tilefish in the sand grooves.

The reef top here is at the 35ft to 40ft range, with a slow and easy swim at the end of the dive.



5 MERMAID'S LAIR

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.6km) southeast of San Pedro
Depth: 40-100ft (12-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



There are no dragons guarding the lair here. The mermaid may be in the form of a fairy... fairy basslet that is. This is a very fishy place with an upper reef that's good for photography and fish hunting. Many of the better guides bring fish ID cards with them and will point out fish of interest such as the grouper-like coney. Since the reeftop here is at 40ft and falls into grooves that run out to about 80ft on the outer wall, this spot is used as a second dive or for a first checkout dive for newly arrived divers.

Bluestriped grunts, porkfish, the occasional Spanish hogfish and stoplight parrotfish are found all along the reef top and in the sandy grooves. Critters like nudibranchs, banded shrimp and juvenile spotted rums all like this habitat.

6 ESMERALDA

Location: 1.5 nautical miles (2.4km) southeast of San Pedro
Depth: 30-60ft (9-18m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Divers like this reef as the fish are friendly and the terrain is a joy to navigate. If you want to see a nurse shark, this may well be the place to do it up close and personal. While it's not supposed to be a common practice, the nurse sharks here are obviously given some tidbits by at least some of the guides as they have become quite docile. They can be closely approached, may approach you, and are even held by some guides.

Aside from this little spectacle, the reef also has lots of other attractions. If dived shallow along the low spur and groove system inside the barrier reef

drop-off, there are many small passages and tunnels near the wall for exploration. It is also located near the Tuffy Cut and has plenty of fresh water running through, so visibility is normally quite good. Look for eagle rays around the drop-off area before heading back in to the sand channels where the various hard corals and overhangs provide good habitat for assorted critters. There are still some good growths of staghorn coral here despite past hurricanes.

This is one of the few reefs in the area where goldentail moray eels (which are great photo subjects) seem to be much more common than on other San Pedro reefs.

Look for small creatures like arrowcrabs and lettuce slugs, and juvenile and adult spotted rums. The bigger corals provide shelter for schoolmasters and squirrelfish. Large sand divers also like to perch atop the coral heads.

This reef is normally done as a fun, shallow dive in the 30ft to 60ft range and offers a lot of bottom time.



A Pederson shrimp and a corkscrew anemone

7 TUFFY CANYONS

Location: 1.6 nautical miles (2.3km) south of San Pedro

Depth: 35-100ft (14-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Tuffy Canyons is marked by deep grooves and a long narrow tunnel that can be a real test for the somewhat claustrophobic. This high-walled passage leads to an opening at 80ft to 90ft onto the reef drop-off. Look for some attractive sponges in the deeper reaches and the occasional eagle ray passing by if you cruise the drop-off area. There are deep cuts all along the wall and into the upper reef flat.

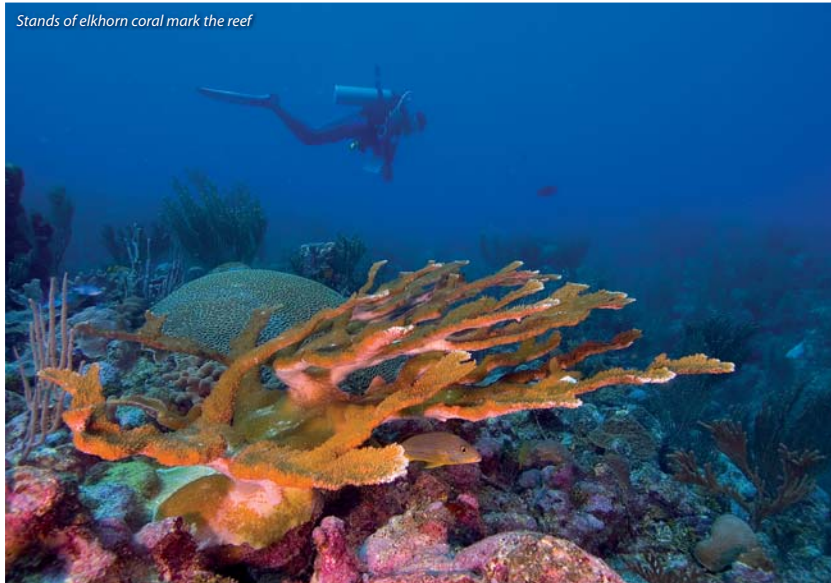
This may be the first dive that you do. There is a big sandy area at the bottom of the mooring, so dive shops often take newly arrived divers here for a good buoyancy check and warm up. Look for

critters in and around the huge cement block here.

Look for marauding nurse sharks hanging around the entire dive and floating up and over the ridges. The scattered large coral heads and rocky formation along the reeftop hold young filefish, a big channel clinging crab or two, and spotted drums. Look also for a jack school up in the water column and down below many cleaning stations, where blue head wrasse and juvenile blue heads clean porgies.

This site is notable for its small stands of staghorn coral, and some divers have seen the stunning juvenile threadfin African pompano swimming along the drop-off. It is located close to the Tuffy Cut, one of the major passes in and out of the lagoon for San Pedro dive boats. Snorkelers sometimes explore inside the reef near the cut. *Tuffy* was the name of a shrimp boat that met its demise here and you may see some pieces in around 20ft or so. Intro and beginner dives are done here to avoid the marine park fees.

Stands of elkhorn coral mark the reef



Feeding the Fish



To feed or not to feed? That seems like it is always the question.

From **Shark Ray Alley** to the outer reefs, some of the stingrays, nurse sharks, yellowtail snappers, green morays and black groupers are just too friendly to not have known a handout or two.

Some argue that feeding changes a fish's natural behavior and may be harmful to their natural abilities to forage for food. And, if fed the wrong thing – like greasy Vienna sausage – can be harmful.

Others feel it is just a slight alteration of the norm. They argue that divers like fish feeds, as the fish come closer and interact with them. Photographers rarely complain when a sea creature gets close enough for a mug shot.

This is one controversy that will no doubt continue as long as there are visiting divers and divemasters who want to entertain their guests. One thing for sure is that the feeding should be left to the divemasters. Lurking barracuda can shred a hand in seconds, poor-sighted moray eels can leave a mean tear to the skin and aggressive stingrays don't bite but can leave a mean hickey. These and other fish are all inherently dangerous and frequently present at fish feeding sights. Divemasters are normally on the lookout for fish that could pose a threat to a finger or hand and react by hiding the food, stopping the feed or moving away. If there is going to be fish feeding on your dive, leave it to the divemasters so you can come home with as many working digits as when you left.

8 THE BORDAH (BORDER)

Location: 3 nautical miles (4.8 km) south of San Pedro

Depth: 50-100ft (15-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Situated right on the edge of the Hol Chan Marine Reserve (just outside or along 'the bordah'), this is a good deep site with interesting terrain and marine life.

The Bordah does not have a mooring. Descend to the deep reef and follow the fingers out to the drop-off; the passages and fingers leading out have many overhangs and swim-throughs and are really good for trying to find nurse sharks and lobsters. The site has a bunch of very large and attentive yellowtails as well. The deep, sandy crevices lead to the outer drop-off at 90ft.

This is a scenic area with huge barrel sponges in a beautiful grouping. There are also some yellow tube sponges, lots of plate corals, small growths of star and brain corals, an occasional eagle ray, and the calls of toadfish. Shine a light under the layer of plate corals and you may see one's eye reflect the light back. Along with the lush sponge life, there's one lone, big barrel sponge that is a busy cleaning station at the end of the main finger. There's lots of activity at the outer wall on this reef.

Head back along the upper reaches of the fingers for possible sightings of Atlantic spadefish, bi-color coney or green moray eels hiding among the purple sea fans, sea rods and sea plumes. The reef bottom is about 50ft deep, so head up for a deco stop and watch the action in the water column. While hanging on to the deco line, look for schools of bar jacks feeding in the open water.



A hawksbill turtle and bluehead wrasse

Hol Chan Marine Reserve

Hol Chan Marine Reserve may be the country's most popular marine attractions, with hundreds of people snorkeling and diving here every day. Head out to Tuffy Cut and go south for a couple of miles and you're there, just off the southern tip of Ambergris Caye in a vast blue inner reef area. The color is quite stunning and the underwater life is a thrill for divers and snorkelers.

It is also extremely diverse. Recent surveys show more than 160 species of fish have been identified in the reserve along with nearly 40 species of coral, five type of sponge, eight kinds of marine algae, two seagrasses, and marine mammals including the common dolphin, spotted dolphin and the West Indian manatee. Three sea turtle species – the loggerhead, green and hawksbill – are also found in these waters.

This is Belize's oldest marine reserve and the name is taken from the Mayan words for 'little channel'. The entire reserve centers on this cut (quebrada). It is narrow and shallow at 25 yards (23m) wide and 30feet (9m) deep but is big on marine action.

The government of Belize established the Hol Chan Marine Reserve on May 2, 1987. It is set up as an interlinked system of coral reef, seagrass and mangrove habitat and is divided into four zones – marked on the surface by buoys. A small fee is charged to those who use the resources both inside the reef and outside.

Zone A – The Reef

Zone B – The Seagrass Beds

Zone C – The Mangroves

Zone D – Shark Ray Alley

Shark Ray Alley was officially declared Zone 'D' of the Hol Chan Marine Reserve on August 31, 1999. Due to its protected status, what was once a depleted fishing area has now re-generated. It provides a popular diving/snorkeling experience for visitors and an important refuge for marine life along the northern barrier reef.

9 CYPRESS GARDEN

Location: 3 nautical miles (4.8km)

south of San Pedro

Depth: 50-100ft (15-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Cypress Garden is within the Hol Chan Marine Reserve boundary and the diverse fish life may hold testament to the fact that reserves do work. This site is a pleasure to dive with lots of resting nurse sharks, turtles, black grouper and tiger grouper. Descend down the anchor line and explore the various undercuts.

Some are very pronounced and provide great habitat for small invertebrates like arrow crabs and various shrimps.

The protected areas also support spotted drums of all sizes. Within the corals are cleaning stations populated by bluehead wrasse.

The coral growth here is interesting as well. Flower corals, thin leaf lettuce corals and some nice stands of the fairly rare pillar corals are seen along the reeftops here. Sea rods and sea fans are also plentiful.

The reef is also home to the big yellowtails, assorted crabs, French grunts and smaller groupers. This is a good second dive if done shallow. There's a lot to observe here, especially in the smaller end of the spectrum. Don't be surprised

to see more than one grazing sea turtle along the reeftop as well.

Slightly south is the site **Cypress Tunnels**, a series of deep tunnels and swim-throughs exiting at 100ft and below at the outer wall. A dive light is helpful here. The upper reef has a healthy collection of plate corals similar to that of **The Bordah**.

10 PILLAR CORAL

Location: 3.5 nautical miles (5.6 km) south of San Pedro
Depth: 40-70ft (12-21m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



A reserve site with a spur-and-groove reef, similar to nearby **Cypress Gardens**, this spot has some namesake healthy pillar corals that stretch to the sky and attract small fish life. Near the mooring there are also some staghorn corals that have survived past storms and are trying to rebound. These provide good shelter for small fish shoals but can be a bit surgy at times. There are abundant areas of purple sea fans, sea rods and small hard coral head.

Pillar Coral is a popular dive. It is part reserve, which means the fish life here is richer and more diverse than nearby unprotected sites. Big groupers, mainly tiger and the black variety, are seen around the pillar corals and have even been known to come up mid-water and greet divers, probably looking for a food handout of some sort.

The large variety of fish here includes the beautiful scrawled filefish, porkfish and schools of bar jacks in blue water. Other schooling fish include Bermuda or yellow chubs, black margates and yellowtail snapper.

Eagle rays also make an appearance and are reported to even come in small

Hol Chan Cut Night Dive

This is the most likely spot divers wind up when night diving in San Pedro. If the currents aren't too strong, it is a super spot to see what comes out and runs around in the sand at night. Make sure to bring a powerful light. Get down into the sandy area of the channel and flash the light off into the distance along the sea floor – many pairs of eyes should light up the sandy bottom. Stingrays move in to feed here.

Big tarpon may also startle you as you move along. Quiet and stealthy, they sometimes follow a diver around to see if anything worth eating scares up. Lobsters also roam the channel at night. Some smaller creatures to look out for include hermit crabs, arrow crabs, banded shrimp, spiny lobster and slipper lobsters. There are also beautiful giant anemones, which harbor Pederson shrimp.

Shallow and close to the main town, it's a nice way to bring on the evening and it's just far enough away from town to see the star-filled sky of Belize as you ascend and ride back from the dive.



squadrons of up to 10 rays. When not looking up into the blue, inspect the various pillar corals and other coral heads for cleaning stations and the fish attracted to them. A dive here is often combined with other reserve dives like **Hol Chan Cut** or **Eagle Ray Alley**, so the \$5 fee goes a long way.

Spotted eagle ray



11 EAGLE RAY ALLEY

Location: 4 nautical miles (6.4km) south of San Pedro
Depth: 50-90ft (12-23m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The marine life here is outstanding as tidal currents coming from the nearby **Hol Chan Cut** feed the area. But what most divers remark about are the large, beautiful sponges found here, obviously benefiting from the ample flow of water along this reef section. Big barrel sponges have become fish magnets as

cleaning stations; all kinds of cleaners and tiny chromis, basslets and other schooling fish make this an active spot. The corals also benefit from the nutrient flow here and are generally healthy and full of life.

Sponges are also a favorite turtle food and this is one of the best places along the reserve to see green sea and hawksbill turtle resting and grazing. Loggerhead turtles have also been reported in this outer reef area.

For bigger marine life, look for eagle rays which may go back and forth or in and out of the nearby cut in small schools or individually. Large groupers move along the spurs and grooves of the upper reefs. Yellowtail snapper here are also very numerous and curious.

12 HOL CHAN CUT

Location: 4 nautical miles (6.4km) south of San Pedro

Depth: 10-30ft (3-9m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



If you go to San Pedro, this is one of the must-do dives due to the prolific sea life to be seen in this cut. It is a photographer's dream due to its shallow depth and mild to somewhat strong currents that attract a lot of sea life on a consistent basis. Bring a good fish lens as there are shoaling schools of fish and opportunities to see eagle rays (up to 30 times). There are usually a few swimming in the water column or grousing near the sand hunting for food. Watch out for scatter as there is a lot of fine sand in the water due to the moderate currents that feed this exciting site.

Stingrays can also be seen here frequently, sometimes moving in single file feeding and moving up the channel.

Start the dive inside the lagoon in shallow water and make your way to the channel's edge. Stay low and keep an eye out for boat traffic above. Visibility is usually at least 30ft and can be over 100ft on days of high incoming tides and not much outer reef wave action.

Once over the sandy edge and into the channel itself, large coral and coral heads line the channel's edges. If the current isn't too strong, one can sashay back and forth and see what the corals hold. If the current is going out strongly, use the corals as current breaks. Hide right along with the abundant black snapper schools, chubs, schoolmasters and mutton snapper and watch them and other creatures like moray eels and channel crabs. They don't move much so can be approached slowly for good photos.

Heading toward the channel mouth, the sandy channel widens to a maximum of about 30ft. Keep an eye out for what moves in and out here. Big groupers, rays and large snapper all come in or ride out. Don't do a drift out unless you have pre-arranged this with your boat captain and guide as kicking back in through the cut in the reef can be tiring, use up a lot of air and force you to surface away from the boat.

Watch the action as tarpon may also wander in along with the ubiquitous yellowtails. Then head back, perhaps swimming up the other side of the channel to see what's happening.

The south side of the channel tends to have the larger coral formations but there are lots of juveniles along the low growing corals at the north side. There are beautiful fish here such as yellow coney, which likes shallow habitat – one reason why you may not have seen them on the outer reef. Look for them here along with other small reef fish like lizardfish and tobaccofish.

In the sea grasses under the boat, look for tiny creatures and watch porkfish and stunning queen triggerfish search for a meal in the sandy and grassy flats. An occasional southern stingray may also show up in the shallows here.



Snorkelers at Hol Chan

Black margates school in the channel



13 SHARK RAY ALLEY

Location: 4.5 nautical miles (7.2km)

south of San Pedro

Depth: 6-10ft (2-3m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This is one of the most popular snorkel trips and only snorkeling is allowed here. For divers it is usually done in conjunction with a dive at **Hol Chan Cut** or one of the outer reef reserve dives for those who have done Hol Chan. Shark Ray Alley was a place for local fishermen to clean fish and the creatures attracted to the fish guts and heads soon became a tourist attraction. Thus, this site is kind of Grand Cayman Sting Ray City West with a few modifications. Even though this isn't an actual dive, there are fantastic photographic opportunities and it shouldn't be missed by anyone, especially diving photographers. Even the topside beauty here is worth a few shots as the water is that amazing blue that you only see due to the reflection of the fine white Caribbean sand.

The site is a maximum of about 10ft deep and snorkeling photographers can easily wear a weight and stay down long enough to get good shots.

This area is known for the big southern stingrays and mooching nurse sharks, which will come right up to the boat when it first pulls up in response to the sound of the engine. But they will quickly lose interest if no food scraps are being offered. Those snorkeling with guides who bring food, which they aren't really supposed to but normally do, will see rather aggressive nurse sharks arriving for a morsel and stingrays also vying for a handout and sometimes leaving a black and blue hickey, even through the wetsuit. And there will normally be quite a few of them.

Sideshow aside, the huge schools of snapper and healthy elkhorn coral found closer to the reef make this a great place for photos and a chance to see the healthy fish populations. Jack Sobel, one of the folks who started The Ocean Conservancy program in 1987, has reported that progress has been made here over the past 20 years. The corals are healthy, the fish population greatly increased from the days when it was first established, and good guidelines are in place for the future.

Look for large congregations of schoolmasters under the spreading staghorn coral forest, lots of French grunts, blue tangs, sergeant majors, black margates and plenty of marauding parrotfish. French angelfish also like to weave in and out of the corals. You'll also see yellowtail snappers or bar jacks trailing some of the stingrays looking for some food to be scared up by the rays.

There are also some good dive sites south of the **Hol Chan Cut** outside the barrier reef and Shark Ray Alley. **Sand Bar** is known for its eagle rays. There is also a small wreck called the Amigos, a good fish magnet but rapidly disappearing.



Roaming nurse shark

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