

The HangLine

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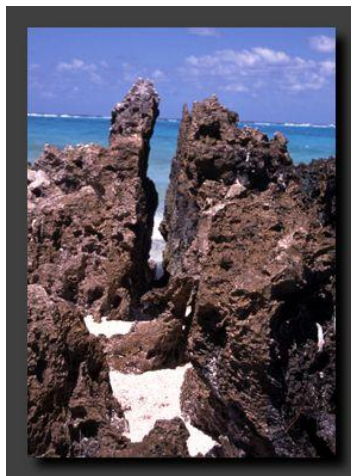


Passageways Through Time

By Bill Nadeau

Between two very deep ocean canyons is a limestone ridge that barely rises above the sea. Upon this crest lie the Cayman Islands. Much of its shoreline is marked with petrified coral that have eroded into sharp hellish looking landscapes. Like blackened fire wisps frozen in time these fossilized features are part of the geomorphology that extends from the underground water beds inland to the living reef encircling each of the islands. The tunnels in between are what many have come to know as the caves and caverns of Cayman.

Their existence marks a thumbprint from which we can see history. They tell tales of how this place came to be – and likely what it will eventually become. They are literally passageways through time.



Underwater caves create an arena for scuba divers offering fantasy and time travel. Their environment introduces an unknown element that perpetuates challenge and human endeavor, an intrinsic reaction in human behavior (to explore). For many the bowels of these caves and tunnels are foreboding places that conjure feelings of claustrophobia, darkness and pernicious fates. The ancient Maya of Central America believed them to be a watery window, which the dead used to reach the underworld. For others they provide a secret duct into a world of intrigue, a nirvana where dreams become reality.

It is difficult to explain the feeling of weightlessness and wonder that the warm Caribbean Sea offers a diver – especially to a non-diver. It is even more difficult to describe the experience of diving through a tunnel filled with brightly coloured soft and hard corals.

Some caves are fresh water filled and serve as a basin for the rain that falls and settles on these low-level islands. Many of these systems actually lead out into the ocean where they drain through a myriad of





limestone and coral formations. In one particular system on Grand Cayman known as the "Green Hole" the cooler fresh water

of year the Silversides (a fish which, in the juvenile stage, school together in the tens of thousands) are abundant in overhead



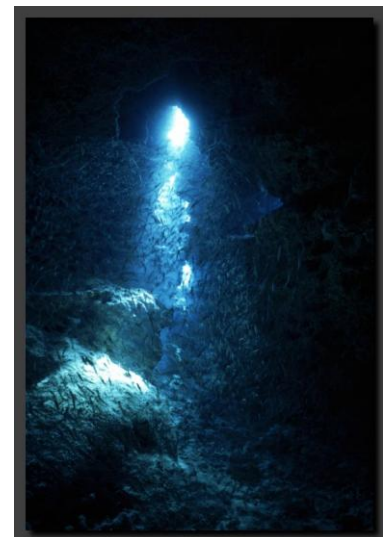
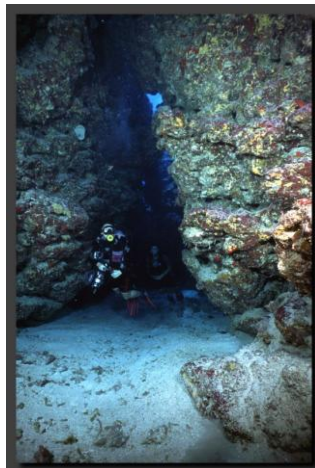
The Green Hole – where fresh mangrove tainted waters meet the warm salted sea water.

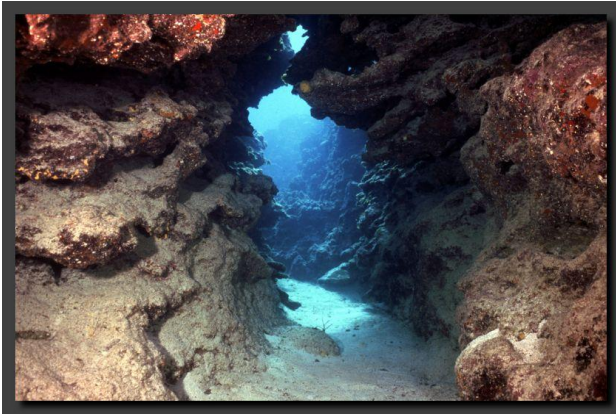
spills out into the salty ocean from a small crack in a collapsed part of the reef, which is more than 300 meters from shore. The different densities of these colliding waters create a green and blue boil with a very definite halocline. This anomaly provides an interesting contrast to the typical cobalt blue that saturates the shallow reef areas making it irresistible for the adventurous divers.

environments. As I explored one tunnel I was amazed at how the thick coral walls rose up high above me, meeting to create an arching ceiling. I followed the sandy sinuous trail which finally spilled out over into the Cayman Trench. It was literally the light at the end of the tunnel. I swam out of the opening and hovered on the wall looking back at the hole from which I had just emerged, it was now a small shadow hidden in the enormous coral cliff face. Reveling in the sensation of

There are many shallow caverns and tunnels created by shore erosion and wave action such as the grotto area just south of George Town. Others are quite intricate and formed as a result of a unique and dynamic coral evolution like the 'Maze' on the east end.

One afternoon I decided to cruise along a portion of the wall on the southeast side to see how many 'passageways and caverns' I could find. It was perfect timing as this time





floating in space with the ocean floor so far and distant beneath me, I began searching the wall for another hole, another door to these tunnels. It did not take long before I found a second entrance and again I was exploring beyond what felt like any sense of time, just space.

The maze of tunnels cutting through the massive reef seemed to acknowledge my presence and amplify the beating of my heart. It was like diving in the middle of a giant kaleidoscope and Mother Nature was turning the focus ring of a very bizarre spyglass. The distortion of light from my dive light and from the outside sun penetrating in provided me with a spectacular laser show. Light beams fractured everywhere and bounced off a group of large shiny Tarpon. They lethargically moved into the next chamber where a mass of Silversides inhabited. They split the cloud of small fish as they shifted to the far end of the tunnel. The school of shimmering minnows spread and encompassed the intruders maintaining a proximity that perfectly mirrored the shape of their larger predators. Following the big fish I was in awe to see the minnows surround me as well mimicking my body

position regardless how sudden or subtle a move I made.

I approached the final restriction where the passageway cut sharply to the right only to discover that the floor of the tunnel suddenly stopped and a skylight opened up. It popped me out on top of the reef in about 40 feet of water and it took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the sudden increase in ambient light. Diving through the coral tunnels of Grand Cayman is an exhilarating experience and made me think that this was very much like an imaginary world. But as I swam away from the reef the cavern entrances disappeared in the camouflage of the complex reef structure and along with it the sense of timelessness and fantasy.

~ Safe Diving

