



Text and photos by Farhat Jah

A long sandy track runs beside the sea, backed by small houses. A row of dirty pangas, local fibreglass skiffs, sit along the beach. A dog wanders sedately past an old but functional shipping beacon. A few children ride by on their tiny cycles and a military truck grumbles down the sand with a barrel of fuel in it. This is the village of Xcalak, the last settlement before the start of what was once British Honduras, now called the nation of Belize, which lies six miles to the south. Fishing has been the life of the community of Xcalak for over a century. In the first half of the 20th century, Xcalak was a prosperous town. A thriving coconut and fishing business created wealth and attracted traders. Shops, a cinema, an ice factory an electric generation plant and numerous other facilities helped the place to thrive. But in 1955, Hurricane Janet devastated the town. Many people lost their lives, and many of the business owning families who had inhabited the town, moved inland away from the risk.

Divers enter a cenote in the barrier reef and run into a school of silversides

The Mesoamerican Barrier Reef

— *Xcalak, Mexico*





Xcalak

Divers (above) explore the barrier reef tunnels and swim-throughs; Diver with school of Atlantic spadefish (top right)

Xcalak means *twins* in Mayan. This was the name given to the two cuts (passages) that lie in front of the village. These passages gave the villagers access to the sea.

The Bacalar Chico River provides access to the giant Chetumal Bay. This bay, which lies behind the town, makes Xcalak a peninsula, with a swamp to the north, Belize seven miles to the south, the Caribbean Sea on one side, and the bay on the other.

Two hundred fifty people live in Xcalak, and it is today what it was before the early 20th century boom—a sleepy fishing village with a few local shops, a small concrete jetty, a harbour master and a park office. The Mexican Marines have a small base a mile north of the Belize border, and a tiny post within the town.

A lighthouse stands on the sand to the south of town blinking a warning to passing ships. The Chinchorro Bank sits 20 miles off shore, part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System—a salutary home to many a ship whose master failed to read his charts.

Since my youth, I was told about the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Twenty years ago, I was lucky enough to learn to dive on it. Now, a generation later, I find myself on its shorter cousin. The Mesoamerican Barrier Reef stretches 600 miles from the coast of Honduras up to Mexico.

Diving

As our panga (an open fishing boat) sped out through the reef cut, I felt a certain affinity with this barrier reef. It reminded me of my

first diving experiences. And yet, the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef was so different.

Seconds after Captain Moi opened the throttle to full, he backed off the power, and we arrived at our dive site. Bobbing around 500 metres from land, we were on the barrier reef. Sea grass waved visibly on one side of the reef. We had stopped over 60 feet of clear blue water and finger-like reef formations. We were about to dive, and yet I could clearly see mangroves. Compare this to the Australian Great Barrier Reef where mangroves are located 20 miles away.

A Spanish architect on permanent sabbatical was our guide. Named Jesus, he tolerated my diving habits. I fell back into the water, making a large splash.



work. After a bit of fiddling, I shot again. The boat came back overhead, and the last diver, Jesus, dropped into the water. I looked above me and saw dive buddies, Cisca and i-Mike Alt, descending with a delightful retired American scientist called Cathy.

Some spadefish circled me in a mesmerising manner. I wandered off to look at them. The 40ft deep water did not cause me any stress. The others took to looking at their own piece of reef and staring at a school of hubbs. Jesus rounded us up like sheep and gave me a direction to head toward. A pipefish popped his head out of the sand, and I snapped his photo. He ducked back inside his hole.

We rounded the corner of one of the fingers, and I stared at the green plants that covered the rock. At first, they seemed colourless, but upon further inspection, the plants played home to gobies, lobsters and small yellow snapper.

Jesus motioned us forward excitedly and pointed. I looked through the blue into the white sand between the reef fingers. A large black stingray shuffled sand from under itself. As I approached, it saw me and swam lazily away. My camera just captured its movement, and then the ray settled nicely in the rock "alley" next door. Its stinger was gone. "Eaten," gestured Jesus using underwater sign language. I wondered what would be big enough and immune enough to bite off a stinger that size—"Only a shark," I muttered through my regulator.

The barrier reef

At first glance, the reef was not an eye stopping, red coral affair. It was made up of walls, coral heads, cuts and spits that resembled fingers. The water was clear, and the scenery pretty, but the reef seemed brown. I wondered if there was any coral at all. But when I got closer, I saw the soft whips and hard brain coral, which shone in the light of my torch—red and green—surrounded by sponges and hundreds of soft waving fan corals. Each

I grabbed my camera and finned down to 40 feet. The water was warm at 27°C, and I had exactly enough weight to

keep my aluminium cylinder down. I did not need to add air to my BCD, but I did need to kick down. A school of spadefish

sat in the slight current and waited. I swam gently up to them, flashing my camera. I was using an old Patima

G11 housing that had seen better days. Thanks to some thieves, it now housed a G12, which while not ideal, seemed to

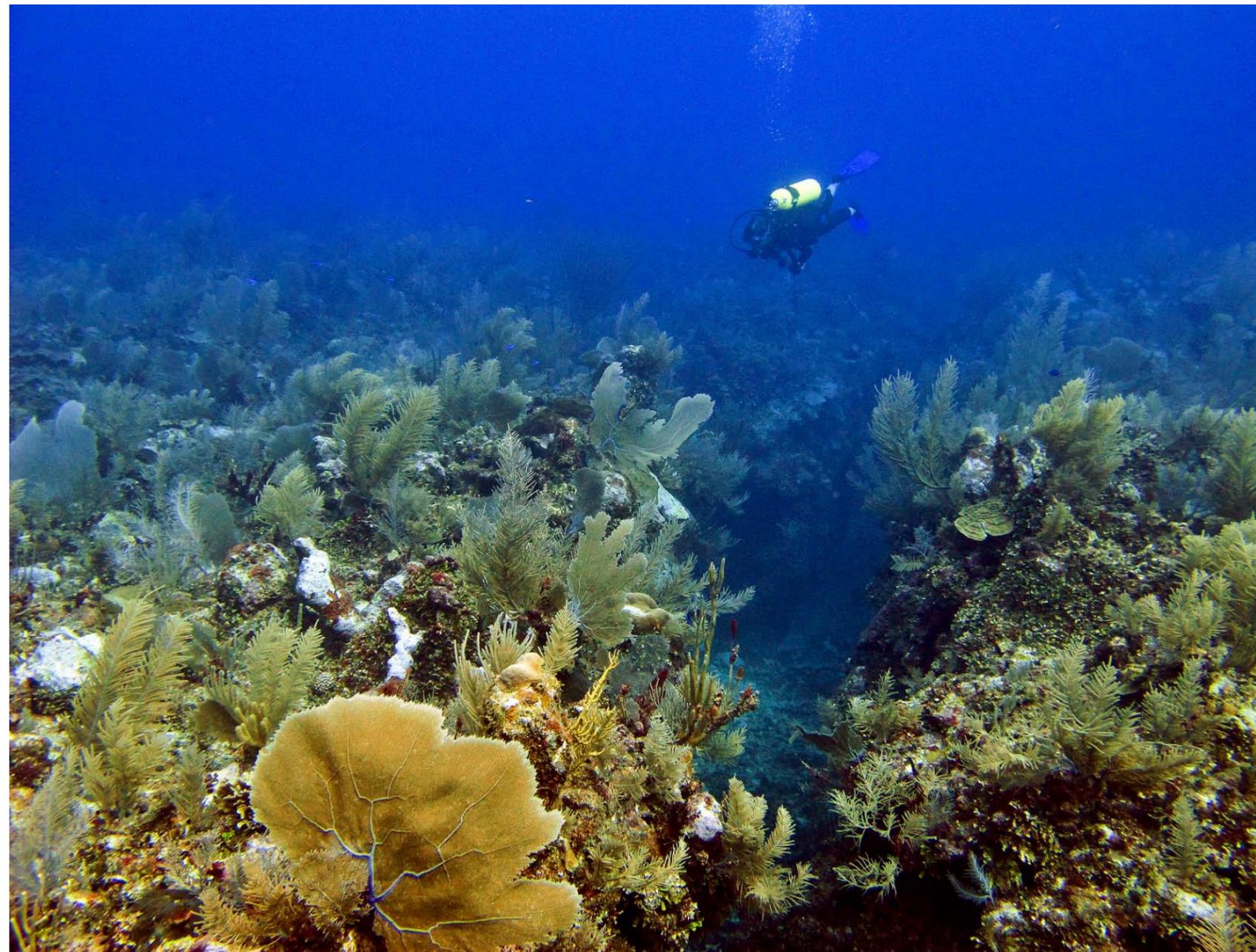


CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:
Moray eel on reef; Blenny hiding in
hole; Diver hovers over waving fan
corals; Tiny goby on brain coral

bother the other divers on their exit. When we exited, we did so through another thin chimney that was full of silversides. Dive buddy, Mike, kicked up the dust, but still the view was clear.

We returned to do our safety stop with a few minutes before decompression. We climbed on board, and Jesus gave a command to the captain. He powered off along the reef itself and then entered a cut, or passage, in the reef. The Mexicans call this an *entrada*. Our boat sailed between the coral heads and then swung to the left and continued inside the reef at a sedate pace.

Entering the mangroves, we slowed to a crawl.



had a beautiful red base. And then, while admiring these corals, a large school of porkfish slid by, circling me for a few minutes until they decided to move on.

Beyond the reef, small turtles scuttled by. A lone barracuda sat in the water staring at me. My flash fired, and the barracuda did not move. Slowly, ever so slowly, it turned sideways toward me, only three feet away, and eyeballed me. Then, without a care in the world, it wandered off.

The Mesoamerican Barrier Reef is very different from the Indian Ocean, which is near where I live. There were few nudibranchs. There was an infestation of lionfish, and table coral, or *Acropora*, was thin on the ground. And yet we saw dugongs, huge schools of snapper and silversides.

At La Chimenea, we dived a cenote within the barrier reef itself. Entering from the outside of the wall at 91 feet, we swam through a large tunnel. The top of the cenote had fallen through, making for an eerie cave with a pile



of rubble in the centre. But the hole in the top lit the centre of the cavern with a delightful blue haze. The clear water revealed a fat barracuda sitting close to the ceiling and a school of bigeye jacks, which approached and swirled around me before choosing to



Steep walls line eerie swim-throughs and tunnels in the barrier reef

School of jacks on reef

The captain dropped us in a small bay 20 yards wide. A passage within the mangroves led to the left and right.

"This is where we see dugongs," said Jesus. "Oh and this," he pointed to the southern trees inches from his fingers, "is Belize, and this," he pointed five yards to the north, "is Mexico."

"This is the border," Jesus said. "Sure, dive boats from both sides come here for tea and water between dives."

Properly degassed, we entered the tunnels of Alexandros playground. It was a series of long swim-throughs nearby the collapsed cenote. It was famous for its large schools of tarpon that swirl around minding their own business. This time, though, the large menacing fish came at us in the restricted space of the tunnel—my heart fluttered slightly as the four-foot-long fish bared their teeth—and then they were over us. Gone.

We swam through a final tunnel and popped out onto the reef wall. Strangely, this was the most vibrant section. The outside and the top of the wall contained some of the most intricate gobies—orange and yellow—along with the now obligatory barracuda and yellow snapper. I dropped down to 70 feet and swam along the lines of soft waving whip corals.

Fellow diver Cisca spotted a green moray eel. It was huge and sat at 50 feet. Fully outside its hole, the serpent-like creature looked menacing, as a cleaner shrimp took the muck from its mouth. I kept my distance and let the camera flash. The moray looked at me, and I waited a few seconds before firing again. Then my gas was low, and time was short.

We ascended as a trio,



Xcalak

and I twisted the bezel on my Momentum dive watch to set the first stop. The deco chamber was a long drive away, so I did a long double depth safety stop. On the stop, I noticed the hard coral formations, which sat on top of the reef at 15-20 feet.

As we surfaced, Moi, the captain, was waiting. He manoeuvred the panga expertly and hauled our equipment over the side. A current was running, but he was not fazed. Soon, we were all in the boat and speeding back to base for coffee and a shower. ■

Farhat Jah is an underwater photographer based in Pemba, Tanzania. He leads specialist bush walking safaris and operates a dive resort on the island of Pemba. See: www.swahilidivers.com



Location of Xcalak, Mexico, on satellite map of Yucatan Peninsula

Location of Meso-American Barrier Reef System on global map