DEEP BLUE

YVETTE CARDOZO PLUNGES INTO THE WORLD'S MOST SPECTACULAR UNDERWATER CAVERNS AT AKUMAL, IN MEXICO'S YUCATAN PENINSULA

Scuba diving at Chac Mool, which is one of the 60 'cave systems' at Akumal and has a spectacular sunlight shaft

This is not really a dive destination, the reefs are better elsewhere," says a local as we gear up for a dive at Akumal on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Are you kidding? Who cares about the reefs? What we want is not in the ocean. You don't come to Akumal for the reefs or the fish. Those are, well, like reefs all over the Bahamas and Caribbean. You come here for the caves. And this is the only place where you can legally dive without a cave or cavern certification because you can get guided trips inside.

What catches your attention first is the intense blue of the water at the cave entrance and the deep black of the silhouetted divers and tree logs. We are at Chac Mool, a cave with two entrances leading into tunnels in opposite directions. From the entrance, we enter the main room and immediately sink into the murk of a halocline (which is the transition layer between the light fresh water on top to the denser salt water below). On a previous dive at Naharon, the layer was so thin, it gleamed like a mirror. No such luck today, though.

The halocline fills the entire tunnel. They call it wormy water–a perfect name because not only does it blur everything, the water fractures into a writhing mess of sparkles in the beam of your dive light. At one point in Chac Mool, it is so blurry that all we can see of our dive buddies is a series of dim, smoky spots of light. I can barely count my own fingers.

But then we break through into crystal clarity. We are at a secondary opening silhouetted by branches, roots and rocks. Above the hole, a tangle of tropical trees rise into the sky. The water is so clear, you can count the fronds on the palm trees from 25 feet below. We play

Rappelling down into the dark caverns is definitely not for the faint-hearted

FACT FILE

- While the temperature in the ocean averages in the mid-80s, the spring-fed water in the caverns is about 77 degrees.
- For cavern diving, you need standard open water scuba gear, along with two battery powered lights and no snorkel. You are limited to a maximum depth of 70 feet, no decompression and have to stay within sight of natural sunlight. The tours are limited to four divers plus guide.
- Because the springs are fragile, it is important to not bump or even touch the formations while diving. All suntan lotions used must be biodegradable.
- We stayed at Hotel Akumal Caribe (www.hotelakumalcaribe.com) with garden bungalows just a few yards from the dive.
- Akumal Bay is calm and protected, with dozens of resident turtles during summer, and stingrays and fish the year round in shallow water.

on the branches, pose for photos and poke around, shining our lights under ledges and into small holes. Small fish flit about, glittering like silver foil in the sunlight. The rays of light are spectacular, the beams broken up into waving curtains that turned the entire scene into something unreal.

Sixty-five million years ago, the Yucatan Peninsula was a coral reef. Then the water level dropped and the reef turned into limestone bedrock. Rain turned this into carbonic acid, eating holes into the rock and eventually flowing horizontally towards the ocean, forming parallel tunnels at varying depths. Over time, the water dropped even further and the tunnels became dry caves, with a difference. The continuous dripping of mineral laden water formed stalactites, stalagmites and fragile deposits called speleothems in fantastic shape And then, the water level rose again, re-flooding the tunnels.

In the 1980s, divers began examining the caves, and found an immense system in place. Today, there are more than 60 known cave systems with 60 named cenotes and the world's three longest underwater tunnels (with one travelling as far as 60 miles). What makes the area extra special from a diver's viewpoint is the unique combination of rock formations and diversity along with the ease of access that few, if any other cave or cavern, offer.

For our second dive, we again follow our guide Mauro Bordignon in a single file. While the entrance to the first dive led to a large open pool, lined with vines and leaves, the second is much smaller. It's just a dark hole, really, but the dive is better.

We enter a wide tunnel and thread our way through shallow canyons. Imagine being able to fly, like Superman, over the landscape. It truly is like that. Then we come into a room lined with stalactites. Needle-sharp spears hang from the ceiling and ledges. The water is crystal clear with visibility up to 200 feet.

Soon after, Mauro has us come to the surface. We find ourselves in an enclosed cave with about four feet of

Fragile stalactites hang from the cavern ceiling; a turtle swims with remora clinging to its back (below)

air above us. The ceiling is covered with a spider web of tree roots with a large double cone of matted roots to one side, stretching from the ceiling into the water. Do the roots get their nutrients from the air or the the water? We never do find out. But there's more. "Look here," Mauro says, pointing upward, where fossilised shells poke out of the rock. There are ribbed clams, bits of other bivalves and a four-inch cone. The entire ceiling is sprinkled with them. We turn and retrace our steps, this time flying along the top of the tunnel where trapped exhaled air forms puddles resembling liquid silver.

We can't go diving on our last morning because of flight schedules so most of our group goes snorkeling off the beach of our hotel at Akumal Bay. To do this right, you have to get up just after dawn while the sea is still calm and the hordes of thrashing tourists are yet to hit the water.

At 7 am, the water is glass smooth and it is a zoo out here, of a good kind. First we see a couple of hawksbill turtles on the bottom, pulling up chunks of grass to eat. Then stingrays flap by and a lobster pokes out of a hole. Two yellow and silver striped grunt fish have a face-off, mouth to mouth.

But best of all is a turtle, the size of a coffee table, which comes by with two remoras (small scavenger fish) on its back. They are large, iridescent green and lie upside down on its shell. Every few minutes, the turtle angles up and swims to the surface for air. The remoras fall off but quickly scurry back to the turtle, this time staying beneath it till it resettles on the bottom ...whereupon they slide back on to the shell and the cycle starts over.

Eventually, it's time for us to go. We see more rays, another turtle with remoras attached to its shell and a cloud of tiny minnows...all this in hardly five feet of water.

It's icing on the cake. More than enough reason to come back.