



SOUTH WATER CAYE

This is yet another idyllic little caye that has been set aside as a marine reserve, along with nearby Tobacco Caye and much of the area south of Pelican Caye.



Tube sponge colony

Diving and snorkeling here is excellent with a great variety of sea life. The reef has a series of deep cuts or passes and the sites are located around them, providing plenty of interesting undersea topography to observe, including part of the unique double reef system that forms sand flats and stepped coral gardens at some sites.

Many of the dives done from resorts in Hopkins are located here as it takes roughly 30 minutes to travel the nine or so miles out. Water clarity can be very good here and each site varies in depth from 35ft to 70ft at reeftop. These sites are typically wall swim/drift dives adorned with multicolored sponges and gorgonian corals and interspersed with sand channels.

Boutique activity hotels like Hamanasi offer a real switch from busy San Pedro. Hamanasi has the pristine Southern Barrier Reef in its front yard and is equipped to access all three atolls by day trips. Dives on this section of reef typically produce sightings of spotted eagle rays, turtles, moray eels, southern stingrays, large grouper, barracuda, king mackerel, dolphins and several shark species, as well as almost every kind of smaller tropical reef fish in regular profusion.

<i>South Water Caye</i>		GOOD SNORKELING			
		NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
53	PARROT WALL			•	
54	JASON WALL		•		
55	TRICK RIDGE			•	
56	CURLEW			•	
57	DISCOVERY (THIRD CUT)			•	
58	LONG REEF			•	
59	ABYSS			•	
60	FOURTH CUT			•	
61	ELSIE'S AQUARIUM		•		
62	ALPINE (SIXTH CUT)			•	
63	GRAND CHANNEL			•	

53 PARROT WALL

Location: 0.5 nautical miles (1km) north of South Water Caye

Depth: 50-100ft (15-32m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This site sits up the reef from South Water Caye and is full of small critters along with the occasional large green moray eel. Be sure to check various crevices for hidden life here.

As a first dive, Parrot Wall can take divers down 100ft to a sandy shelf along

the outer reef wall. The area is adorned in prolific sponge life, particularly red rope sponges and some captivating sea fans.

If done on a second dive, the reef top falling into the blue is at 50ft. When swimming along the top of the reef wall, look out for nocturnal fish hiding in the crevices. Red colored fish, such as the squirrelfish found here, generally hunt nocturnally and can be seen by day in the recesses.

The parrotfish family is also well represented, with big blue parrotfish, stoplight juveniles and colorful adults, and even an occasional queen parrotfish. A deco stop in open water at 15ft is the norm before a boat pickup.

Divers swim along the wall



A hiding and resting nurse shark

54 JASON WALL

Location: 0.2 nautical miles (0.4km) east of South Water Caye

Depth: 40-60ft (12-18m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This site sits just a minute away from the front of South Water Caye from the inner lagoon and makes a great second dive. Take this one slowly as there is plenty to see. The unique double-reef system is quite apparent here and creates some very interesting habitat, increasing the reef life count considerably. Figure on diving between the two reef structures and the sandy basin in between at depths ranging from 60ft to 45ft.

This double wall divided by a sandy strip gets shallower toward the south and has several small coral outcrops

where resting nurse sharks tend to sleep beneath the overhangs. These are also good places to look for smaller creatures such as lettuce slug nudibranchs. The sand here can be the real treasure and it hosts Southern stingrays, marauding conchs and some curious tiger groupers. There are also large Nassau groupers, yellowtails, which sometimes follow the rays and the occasional lobster.

If taking photos, remember that the sand can be quite reflective, so adjust your lighting accordingly so as not to over-expose your subjects.

A deco stop is again done in open water above the reef. Look down and watch the fish activity as they move across the sandy plain while you off-gas.

55 TRICK RIDGE

Location: In Front of Carrie Bow Caye

Depth: 40-130ft (12-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Almost directly in front of the scenic little Carrie Bow Caye, this dive site has plenty to offer if you take it slow and easy. A ridge of coral drops down toward the east. Moving north the reef gets shallower with a white sand area to the west. Around the elbow you will see plenty of lovely coral and fans.

Rolling terrain here can go deep and then shallower, so watch your depth. The ridge itself has some big barrel sponges with cleaning fish like blue-head wrasse and banded coral shrimp in residence.

This site also has large yellow tube sponges. Down in the cracks look for both juvenile and full-grown spotted drums. The blue water usually produces black snapper, Atlantic spadefish and small shoals of horse-eye jacks.

56 CURLEW

Location: 1 nautical mile (4km) south of South Water Caye

Depth: 38-130ft (11-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This site is named after a caye that actually disappeared during 1961 Hurricane Hattie. The reef starts at 40ft before dropping into the blue.

This is an excellent site for a second dive and a busy place for fish, so keep an eye on both the drop-off and sand for activity. There is a white sandy area at about 60ft that can be seen at the southern end. Take time to admire the pristine corals, which create numerous cleaning stations with juvenile blue head wrasse and cleaner gobies. Along the outer reeftop, barrel sponge cleaning stations may have a big snapper sitting inside. Many vivid translucent



A damsel hides under a plume worm

purple vase sponges in varying degrees of growth dot the top of the reef. Expect spotted drums galore, including tiny, feathery juveniles that sway as they hide in the crevices. Lobsters can also be found here, sometimes moving over the reef in search of a new cranny. The crannies also hold nurse sharks which can sometimes be seen swimming over the sand.

This site is ideal for divers keen to see big schools of marauding Creole wrasse, along with Black durgions and eagle rays in the upper water column here.

Do your deco stop after ascending from 35ft in open water before the boat pickup.

57 DISCOVERY (THIRD CUT)

Location: 1.2 nautical miles (4km) south of South Water Caye

Depth: 40-80ft (12-25m)

Access: Boat

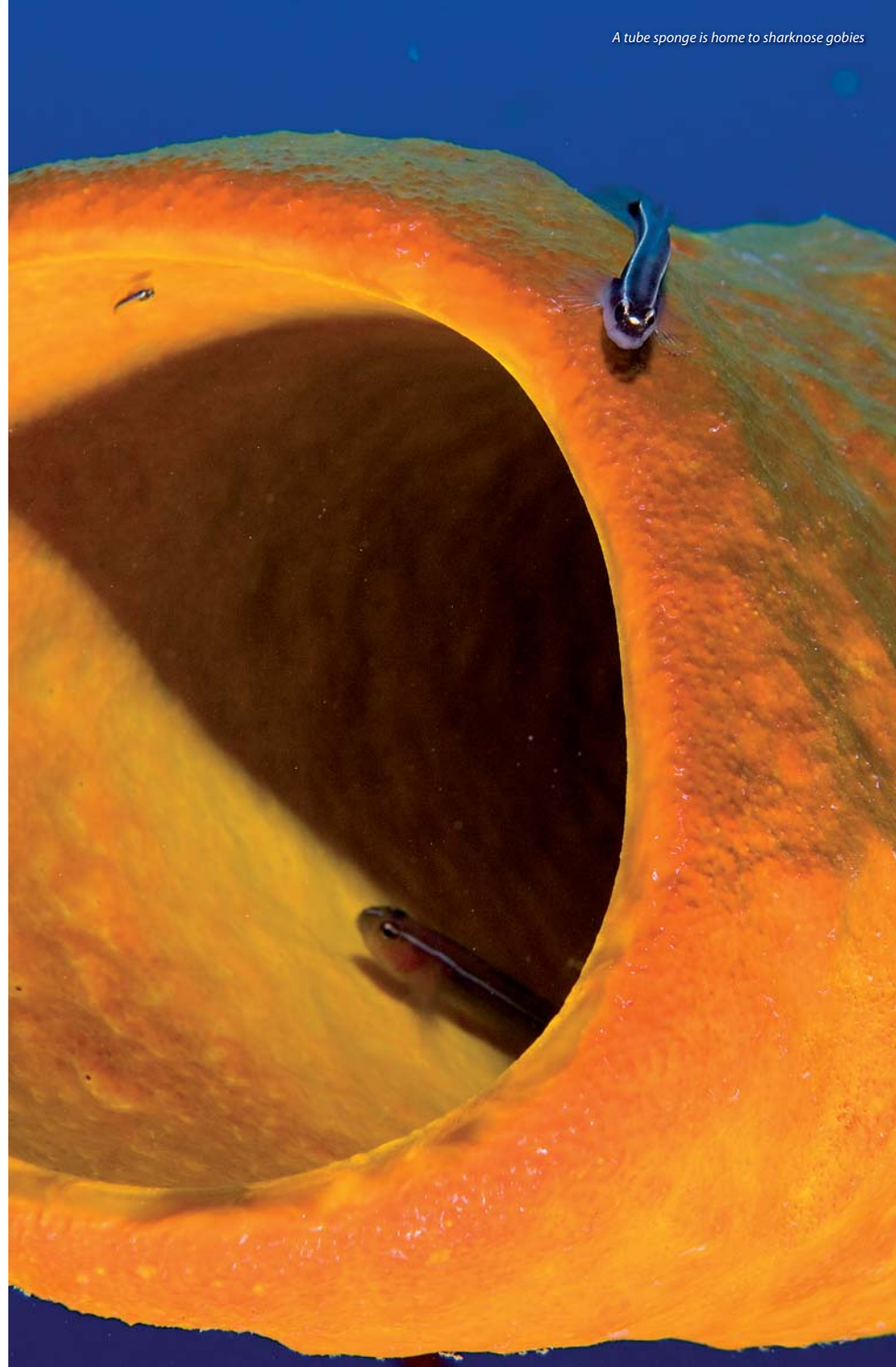
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



While this site doesn't have a big, thick ridge like some of the other wall sites in the area, the narrow upper reef is active with marine life and the sheer, vertical drop-off into the blue is adorned with overhangs. You may see Mr Big here in the form of eagle rays, hawksbills or perhaps even a loggerhead sea turtle, big snappers and horse-eye jacks. Keep an eye out for other shoals of fish as well.

The reef has many moray eels, along with southern sting rays, often being trailed by opportunistic jacks in the sandy upper reef areas. An open water deco stop is the norm here.

Snorkeling is also done inside this site in the shallow lagoon channel. Depths of 5ft to 15ft over white sand and scattered coral heads produce sightings of small rays, spiny pufferfish and colorful tropicals.



58 LONG REEF

Location: 2 nautical miles (4km) south of South Water Caye

Depth: 40-120ft (12-35m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The wall starts at roughly 45ft and drops down to a good 120ft, although most diving is done in the 60ft range where there's an appealing topography to follow. Watch your depth gauge as the water here can be clear and the rolling terrain deceptive. At one point the wall cuts back and forms a sheer drop.

There is a large curve in the wall with small coral outcrops. On top there are large rope sponges and many small anemones. Look inside for Pederson cleaning shrimp and perhaps even a small snapping shrimp.

The site is like a spiny lobster paradise, while big, reclusive crabs, spotted eagle rays and spotted eels can also be seen.



A gray angelfish bites at the diver's bubbles

Schoolmasters



59 ABYSS

Location: 2.5 nautical miles (4km) south of South Water Caye

Depth: 40-130ft (12-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



As the name implies, divers will find a great wall with a supremely vertical drop-off into the blue abyss. The wall itself is best dived in the 70ft range to see the many well-adorned overhangs covered with black corals. This is special to see anywhere in the world nowadays as it's heavily harvested, often illegally, for jewelry and trinkets.

The wall eventually breaks up into a series of coral outcrops, each with its own community of reef fish. Watch your profile when swimming from one outcrop to the next, as the dips between can be deeper than they appear.

The reef also provides a nice home for moray eels, while southern stingrays frequent the upper reef area at about 40ft.



The eyes of a conch

60 FOURTH CUT

Location: 2.8 nautical miles (5.2km) south of South Water Caye

Depth: 40-130ft (12-40m)

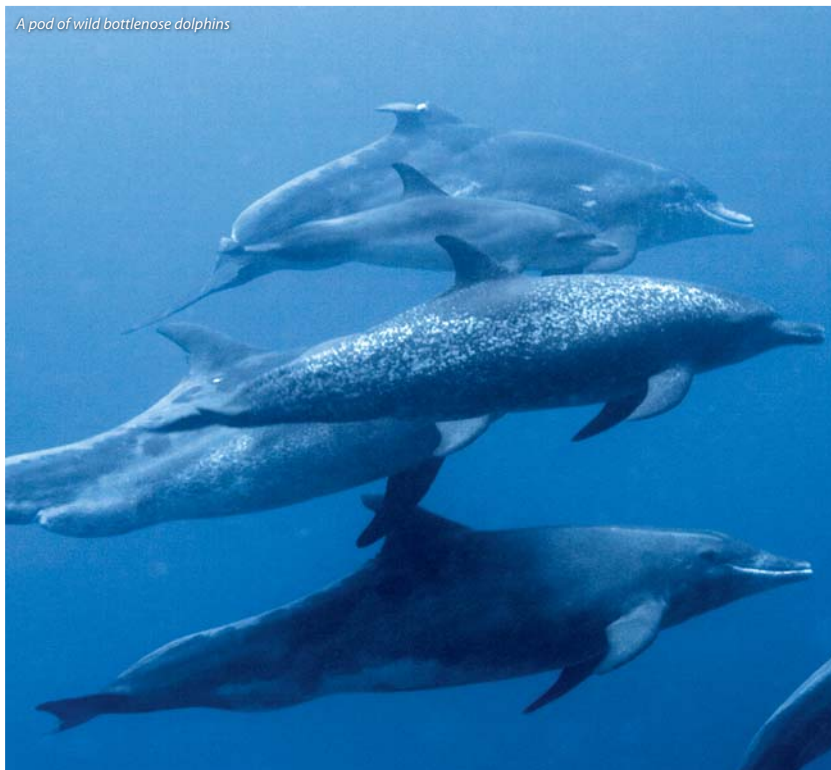
Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This is the fourth cut in the southern barrier reef traveling down from South Water Caye. The descent here is pretty, and divers can see from above how at 40ft the reef drops down to the blue. There is usually not much current and you can swim south of where the reef splits with a large sand patch in the middle, forming the unique double reef

A pod of wild bottlenose dolphins



structure that gives much habitat to marine life.

Nurse sharks like this kind of shelter, resting with noses into the reef and their tails sticking out. If you come upon a sleeping one, study the amazing color in its sandpaper skin. Appearing muddy brown from a distance, up close their skin shines with iridescent hues.

Off the wall there are several giant barrel sponges as well as big yellow tube sponges and iridescent blue, pink and purple vase sponges. Look also for fat angelfish; with a taste for sponges they have grown quite large as a result of the plentiful food supply. The wall also supports sea turtles, and eagle rays frequent this entire barrier reef but prefer the cuts. In shallower water there are some decent sized smooth trunkfish.

61 ELSIE'S AQUARIUM

Location: 3 nautical miles (4km) south of South Water Caye
Depth: 40-60ft (12-18m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



A shallower dive with lots going on in the 40ft to 60ft range, this site has sandy patches, which are the habitat of the yellowhead jawfish. They're often found hovering over its sandy home or just sticking their heads out of the sand. Look for males with mouths full incubating eggs that they constantly protect and aerate until hatching time.

There are plenty of cleaning stations and this is also a great site for macro photography, with small shrimps, spiral anemones and some nudibranchs found in the coral cover near the sandy floor. A 60mm macro lens is also handy for shooting ghost shrimp, juvenile spotted drums, camouflaged trumpetfish and Christmas tree worms living on the brain corals. Creole wrasses swarm the reef in their hundreds and large groupers often accompany them.

This is also a feeding area for yellow tail snapper, and nurse sharks love sleeping on the sandy patches with their heads tucked in under the coral. Sea turtles can also be found, and on rare occasions lucky divers see bottlenose dolphins.

62 ALPINE (SIXTH CUT)

Location: 3.2 nautical miles (4km) south of South Water Caye
Depth: 45-130ft (13-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This reef is a favorite of some Hamanasi guides as it is a regular haunt of nurse sharks and hawksbill turtles. The site's terrain consists of two walls which meet towards the southern part of the site. The dive is often started here, then divers swim north across the deep channel of the Sixth Cut at about 80ft.

Part of the reef forms an elbow with large coral, tube sponges and fans. Divers drop down past a flourishing reeftop, containing infinite nooks and crannies with places for sleeping nurse sharks and toadfish to hide. You can often hear toadfish seemingly taunting you from within these deep crevices to try and find them.

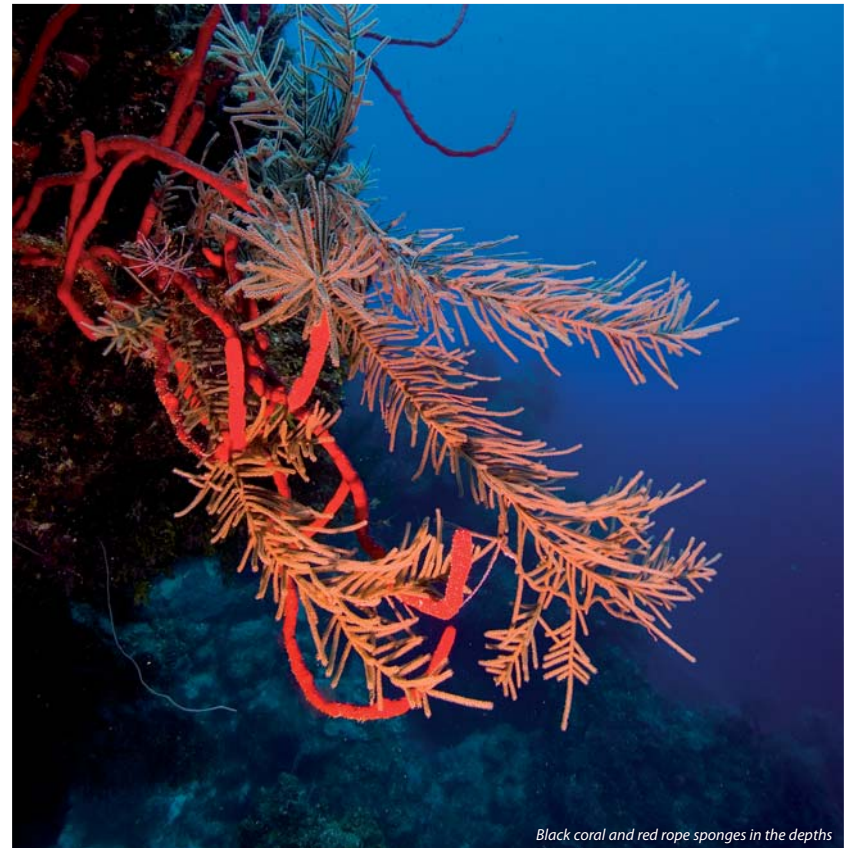
The reef top dips to 80ft and a slight current feeds the area. Sandy and deep

inside with yet more reef in the distance, divers should look out for large hawksbills and roaming nurse sharks in the area. On the eastern side of this reef, lobsters and large green moray eels are to be found. Toward the south is a good spot those wanting to see flowing juvenile spotted drums or big barracuda hanging motionless.

There are also yellow tube sponges, swaying purple gorgonian sea fans, nice barrel sponges and the chance of seeing more than one spotted eagle ray. Swim up from the cut to the 40ft range to finish one of the best dives in the area.



A scribbled filefish hides from a diver



Black coral and red rope sponges in the depths

63 GRAND CHANNEL

Location: 4 nautical miles (4km) south of Tobacco Caye

Depth: 40-120ft (12-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Sandy patches with small coral heads gradually slope down toward the ocean floor and then into the drop-off. There are some decent growths of yellow and brown tube sponges along with more robust barrel sponges.

The heads are topped with flowing soft corals, so be careful not to damage this delicate marine growth with your fins. Some of it looks as though an undersea artist had purposely landscaped it.

Many of the usual suspects live here, including yellow tail jacks, indigo hamlets, an occasional scrawled filefish, barracuda and also Creole wrasse in cleaning aggregations and spotted moray eels.

Ascend from 40ft and do a safety stop at 15ft while watching the mid-water action, with big Creole wrasse schools pecking at particles in the blue water column.

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