

STARGATE

Andros Island's Window into the Abyss

CURT BOWEN

Editor's Note: The Bahamian Blue Holes have intrigued divers since they first explored the Bahamas with scuba in the 1950s. The late Rob Palmer, a top cave explorer, further popularized these Blue Holes with his many articles and his last book, Deep Into the Blue Holes, which was published shortly before his death. Issue 9 of DeepTech illustrated Palmer's incredible diving life with a special feature article. As a follow up, DeepTech's Associate Publisher, Curt Bowen, traveled to Andros and met with one of Rob's closest diving buddies, Captain Dan Malone, who owns the technical diving vessel, Ocean Explorer. Following is a report from their recent Blue Holes exploration.

Meeting Nick Caruso and Ted Masotti, owners of Sea Dwellers of New Jersey, in Nassau's airport to dive the pristine Blue Holes on Andros Island seemed kind of strange. But Sea Dwellers, New Jersey's technical scuba facility, specializes in setting up technical dive trips throughout the world including the Bahamas, Truk, Mexico, and the North Atlantic, especially

the famous passenger liner, the *Andrea Doria*. We board the 55-foot vessel *Ocean Explorer* for the four-hour trip to South Andros. Owner of the *Ocean Explorer*, Dan Malone, along with his polite and professional crew provide all the comforts of home with a maid thrown in.

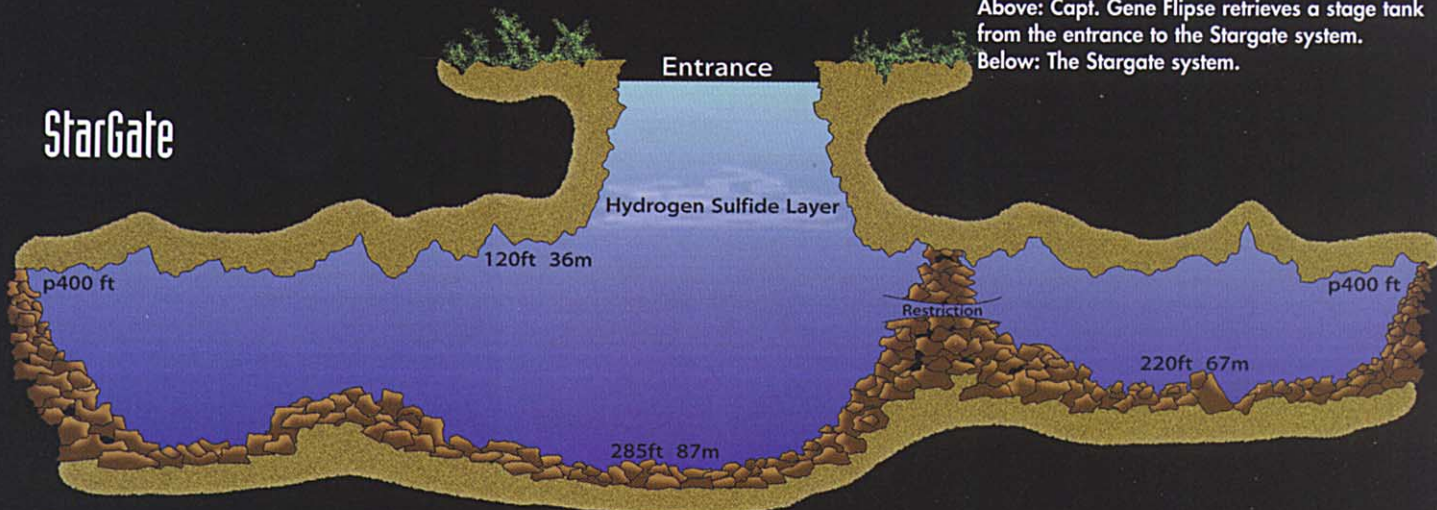
Andros Island is located in the south west Bahamas chain. It is one of the largest islands but has remained somewhat desolate compared to some of its more resort-laden sisters. South Bight is a natural channel that runs through the southern point of the island. A series of cave systems, also known as Blue Holes, surface in the bottom of this channel. Many Blue Holes also dot the landscape, one of the most astounding would be the Stargate system. The beauty of this system easily ranks within the top 10 percent of all cave dives in the world.

Diving Stargate:

As we work our way back through the thick vegetation, stumbling over the rocky terrain with doubles on our backs and stage cylinders in our hands, sweat drips in my eyes and I wonder to myself, "Who



Above: Capt. Gene Flipse retrieves a stage tank from the entrance to the Stargate system. Below: The Stargate system.



in the hell found this desolate place?" After a few more smacks in the face from branches I turn the last corner. A pit drops 15 feet into the ground to a pool of blue water, my first thought was, "Awesome!" followed by, "Get this crap off of me so I can jump in and cool off." The crew quickly start hanging ropes with block and tackle to help lower but more importantly retrieve our equipment after the dive. Finding a small chunk of rock that is somewhat level and that I can call my own, I prepare my equipment. Fully rigged, I stand knees shaking on a small rocky ledge which overhangs the pit. Just what I wanted to do — a 15-foot giant stride entry in full tech gear. Tip for the men — keep your legs together for this entry. Bobbing around the surface, I get the pleasure of watching each team member fling their body into the pit. After we have all recovered and readjusted our gear it's time to descend. One at a time the diver's lights turn on as we drop into the abyss below. At a depth of around 60 feet we sink through floating white clouds of hydrogen sulfide gas creating the appearance of gasoline vapors in the water. At 100 feet we clear the last hydrogen cloud, the water turns from a light green tint to crystal blue. The walls drop into the darkness below and monster tunnels head in opposite directions. The walls are covered with thou-

sands of flow stone formations creating a view more majestic than a cathedral. Taking the south tunnel, it's a short 400-foot swim to a breakdown rock pile that blocks further penetration. Returning below the entrance, we recalculate thirds, and proceed down the north tunnel which continues for 150 feet to the first breakdown. This obstacle can be negotiated through a small opening at 150 feet. Beyond, the monster tunnel continues north for another 250 feet to the next breakdown. This tunnel exhibits extraordinary flowstone formations and white walls which help illuminate this monstrous passage. The second breakdown has been passed with side mounts and an enormous tunnel is reported to continue towards the north. Returning towards the surface we get the pleasure of conducting the required decompression, a small payment for this excellent dive. Surfacing, we strip our gear off and Gene and the crew members hoist all the equipment back out of the pit. Now all that is left is a little rock climbing, the trek back through the vegetation and the drive back to the boat.

Pulling the vessel back into the protected channel of South Bight we come upon a series of five small Blue Holes. These systems seem to be connected to each other because they run in a north/south line. All are tidal affected, which means they suck

in water during incoming tide and flush out water during outgoing tide. Diving these systems must be planned according to the tide changes because of the vast amount of water they move in and out. I find something eerie about watching millions of gallons of water being sucked into a black hole in the ground, so we chose to dive the outgoing tide cycle.

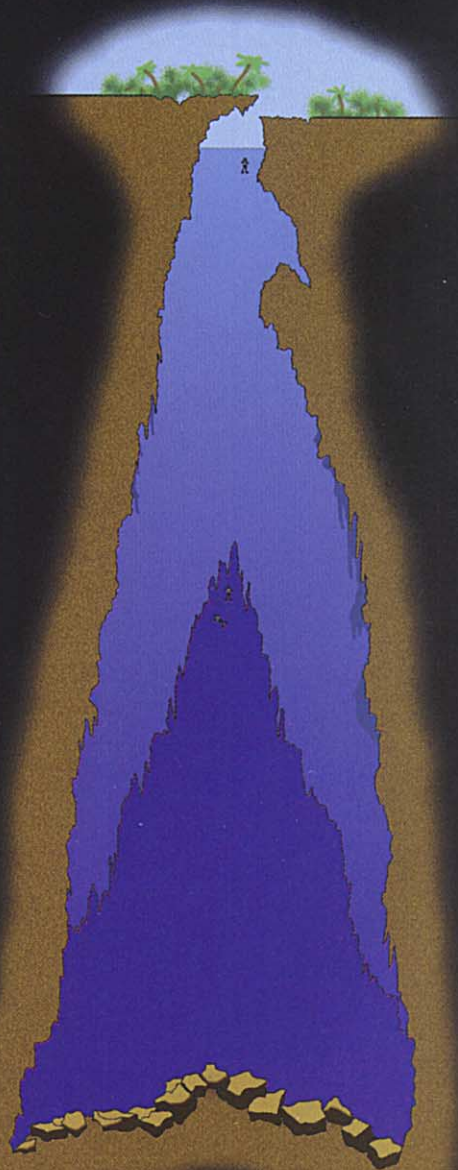
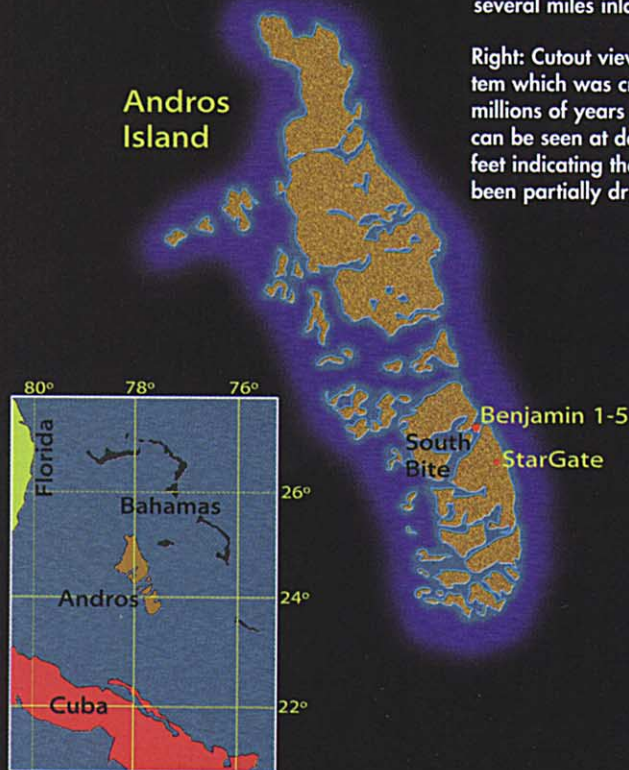
Diving Benjamin #4

Because the water on the outer edge of number four is somewhat shallow the *Ocean Explorer* must stay back at a safe distance. The divers get fully dressed on the main boat then ride in a small inflatable to the hole. There, we roll off the sides like some Keystone SEAL team and the crew hands each diver his/her stage tanks and cameras. The entrance of the cave measures 40-feet wide and 15-feet tall. It continues down at a 45-degree angle from

Left: Andros Island is located in the south west Bahamas chain. Benjamin cave systems are located in the South Bight channel and Stargate is located several miles inland towards the south.

Right: Cutout view of the Stargate cave system which was created by an earthquake millions of years ago. Flowstone formations can be seen at depths of more than 200 feet indicating that this system must have been partially dry for thousands of years.

Andros Island



Entrance

Benjamin Blue Hole #4



Benjamin Blue Hole #4: Abundant flowstone formations can be seen in the Grotto area 500 feet to the south from the entrance. A 15-foot gap reel is needed to continue to the deep pit.

20 to 65 feet. The cavern is inhabited by thousands of fish, invertebrates, sponges and corals making it pristine for photography. At the rear of the cavern a vertical crack 100 feet long but only three feet wide drops into the ground below. The crack descends to 135 feet where it opens into the ceiling of an enormous tunnel. We tie our reel into the permanent line and head down the south tunnel. The walls are covered with rough marine growth and an occasional lost lobster can be seen clinging to the walls. After a 500-foot penetration we enter a place called the Grotto. This room is clustered with large stalactites and stalagmites making it a favorite location to visit. Just past the Grotto a small tunnel continues a short distance to the pit area. Here the bottom falls out of the cave and plummets into the darkness. It was last recorded to descend to a tight spiral restriction at 300 feet. One of the first explorers of this system back in the '70s passed this restriction but failed to return, his body has never been recovered. Returning to the exit and the decompression obligations we sit entertaining ourselves by watching

the variety of marine life going about its daily business.


Diving Benjamin #2

Benjamin number two is located to the south, just a few hundred yards from number four. Swimming up to the entrance, a large round hole punches from 10 feet down into the sea floor to about 70 feet. Here a rocky break down separates the north and south tunnel. Locating the permanent line to the south tunnel we drop through the rock pile and into a small restrictive passage.

Single file, we traverse the first 100 feet. Here, at a depth of 147 feet, the tunnel enlarges to about 20 feet by 20 feet. Large breakdown rocks and flowstones decorate the passageway as we weave our way back through the winding tunnel. At a penetration of about 400 feet from the entrance the tunnel again tightens.

Squeezing through the passageway you can only go about another 100 feet before the tunnel becomes too tight for back mounted doubles. After returning to the entrance we recalculate thirds and enter

the north tunnel. This passageway is about 20 feet tall but only four feet wide. No flowstone formations cover the walls as it twists its way towards the north. At a penetration distance of no more than 300 feet it too comes to an abrupt restriction too tight to pass through with doubles. Returning, we complete the required decompression.

Andros is truly an extraordinary geological location with thousands of discoveries awaiting in the darkness. Palmer's book on many of these systems is the definitive guide. His wife continues his work with the Blue Holes Foundation which can be contacted by calling (242) 373-4483. To charter an expedition to Andros contact Sea Dwellers at 800-861-0009. 

Curt Bowen is a founder and Associate Publisher of DeepTech, TDI Mixed Gas Instructor, Underwater Cartography Specialist, Explorer, Firefighter/EMT, and Computer Graphics Artist.



Swimmer hovers over the entrance to Benjamin Blue Hole #4. Decompressing divers can entertain themselves with the abundant marine life inhabiting the Blue Hole.

photo: Ted Masoli; illustration: C.Bowen