

An underwater photograph of a cave system. Two divers are visible; one is in the center, illuminated by a bright light, and another is further back on the left. A yellow rope runs diagonally across the scene. The water is dark blue, and the rock formations are rugged and textured.

BY TRAVIS MARSHALL PHOTOS BY HILARIO ITRIAGO

BENEATH THE JUNGLE

- ● Journey to the depths of the Mayan underworld, through the caverns of Cenote Dos Ojos in Mexico's Riviera Maya

Following the advanced Bat Cave Line through the dark passageways of Dos Ojos leads to some of the most surreal limestone formations in the cavern.

● ● BELTED INTO THE PASSENGER SEAT OF A

four-door pickup — the bed full of dive gear — I'm rolling down a narrow stretch of paved road that cuts through a buzzing swath of Yucatan jungle listening to my dive guide, Nat Wilson, explain the mythology behind the freshwater-filled caverns we've been diving for the past couple of days. He's just finished the part about how the ancient Maya believed the openings of these cenotes served as portals to Xibalba, the Mayan underworld, when he hits the brakes and swerves to the shoulder. "You see that?" he asks, his outstretched finger pointing out my side window. "What?" I ask. "The jungle?"

"Through this hole in the trees. See its tail?" I look harder — fairly impressed that he could spot anything through the dense underbrush — and I see it, a blue bird about the size of a pigeon with a twitchy tail. "That's the motmot," he says, adding that the Maya considered motmots to be the guardians of the cenotes. "In reality, they hang around the caverns because it's the only access to fresh water out here," Wilson says. "And these days, us cave divers watch for the birds to help us find the entrances."

Of course Wilson — the training director and in-house cave guru for Dresel Divers — doesn't need a motmot to help him find the cenote we plan to dive. Though there are dozens of cenotes open to divers, one of the most popular is the Dos Ojos system — the name means "two eyes" and refers to the two primary cavern openings, called the "East" and "West" Eyes, which when seen from afar look like two eyes protruding from the jungle floor. And while this area is increasingly subjected to throngs of swimmers who splash around the entrances, Wilson assures me that deep inside the caverns it's a whole different world.

In order to get underwater before the tour buses crowd us out, Wilson rolled up to my resort bright and early. Luckily I'm staying about midway between Playa del Carmen and Tulum — in the heart of cenote country — and when we show up, we have the place to ourselves.

We park next to the trailhead that leads to the main entrance at the East Eye, strap on our gear and head down. I notice smoke billowing up from brush fires around the opening, and when I ask,

Wilson explains that the locals, modern-day Maya who own the land around the cenote, build the fires as offerings to the gods. "Really?" I ask hesitantly. "Of course not," he answers with a laugh. "They're for the bugs." I slap a handful of mosquitoes slurping from my ankle.

Despite the bonfires, the mosquitoes are drinking their fill from our exposed feet and hands, so we make quick work of a back flop from the dive platform into the crystalline water, do one final gear check and descend to the floor of the pool, where two guidelines are tied off at the mouth of the cavern. The right guideline, called the Barbie Line, follows an easy, well-lit path. On the left, the Bat Cave Line extends 65 feet into the opening of the submerged cavern before hanging a left into a darkened side passage. We take the latter.

TOP LEFT: CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR; OPPOSITE: BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY IKELITE



Bright blue motmots guard the entrances to the area's caverns.



Divers weave through a maze of stalactites and stalagmites.



The dive platform at Dos Ojos offers easy access to both the Bat Cave and the Barbie lines.

5 Tips for Better Cenote Shots

1 Excellent buoyancy control is essential. The crystal-clear water and delicate limestone formations are what make this site a pleasure to photograph. Stay off the bottom or sediment will compromise visibility, and therefore your shots.

2 Go wide. Shoot the widest lens you have to capture the essence of cenote diving. It will allow you to capture most of the main chamber. If using a fisheye or superwide lens with distortion, place your main subject more toward the center so it is in the "sweet spot" and distortion free.

3 Sun rays and silhouettes. To capture dramatic sunbeams, crank up the shutter speed and meter for ambient light. Don't be afraid to bump the ISO up to 800 to hold a high shutter speed and ample depth-of-field. The newer cameras can handle it without generating too much noise.

4 Power up. You'll need strobes to illuminate the deeper regions inside Dos Ojos. An aperture of F8 should provide all the depth-of-field you'll need. Dial down your strobe power if needed to prevent blowing out highlights and detail.

5 Don't forget the over-under. With a superwide-angle lens or fisheye, most prosumer DSLRs in housings and a dome port can pull off an impressive over-under composition without the use of a diopter.

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WANT THE COMPLETE PACKAGE? Consider shooting the Nikon D700 or D300 in an Ikelite underwater housing. Combined with a pair of Ikelite's new digital Substrobes DS160s, you'll enjoy fast recycle times, a superbright modeling light and 10 power settings for precise exposure control. Ikelite's Super-Eye magnifier makes composition easy and the 8-inch dome port accommodates most wide-angle zooms.





Resident bats make regular appearances inside the cave.



Divers surface as they enter the open-air chamber of the Bat Cave deep inside Dos Ojos.

Wilson assumes the lead, hovering skillfully a couple of feet above the line to avoid stirring up the bottom, and I frog-kick gently to keep pace as we slip into the dark passageway, flashlight beams bouncing off the stark-white limestone formations — thick floor-to-ceiling columns and hanging stalactites that formed eons ago before these tunnels filled with water.

After swimming a few minutes, we make another left turn into a large chamber, where a narrow beam of light coming through a small hole in the distance provides dim illumination while we follow the contours of the wall. From here, we follow the guideline as it slopes upward, leading us into the dive's eponymous feature: the bat cave — another large, circular chamber, this one only partially filled with water, leaving an open-air space in the top of the room.

Bearing left, we circumnavigate a jumbled pile of rock slabs, which had fallen from the ceiling to create a mesalike mound in the center of the room. Along the circumference, we explore a fissure beneath the limestone that constitutes the jungle floor 40 feet or so above our heads. And meandering through the tight maze of stalactites and stalagmites, we pass underneath some of the most delicate formations I've seen in any of my dives through these cenotes. The ceiling bristles with soda-straw stalactites — pencil-thin protrusions that blanket the surface en masse like a bed of nails.

At the far end of the chamber, Wilson stops and motions me to the surface of the water, tinged green by sunlight from a small opening in the roof. Popping up into the air pocket, I remove my regulator and take a breath of the cool, damp air. True to its name, the ceiling of the cavern boasts clusters of small bats; occasionally one swan dives from its upside-down perch and — wings spread — glides over the electric-green pool only to arc upward and alight once again.

Eventually we drop back down and continue around the other side of the room, following the line back the way we came and emerging along the edge of the West Eye. Here, our line runs into itself at the passageway back to our starting point. We hold our lights to our chests; from this vantage point, the sunlight filtering through the main entrance puts the cavern in silhouette, and “laser beams” of light stream in along the edges.

After we climb up to the dive platform, Wilson starts back up the trail, but just as I'm about to turn and leave, I see it again: the small blue bird, tail bouncing disjointedly, perched on the lip of the cavern as if overseeing our departure.

Need to Know

Getting There The majority of Riviera Maya's divable cenotes are off the main highway between Playa del Carmen and Tulum. Most U.S. airlines fly to Cancun. From the airport you can drive, take a taxi or hop a *colectivo* (shared van) for the 60- to 80-minute drive down the coast.

When to Go Water temps (75-77°F) and calm dive conditions are constant year-round. The Yucatan's high season runs from December through April with cooler air temperatures and less rain. The rainy

(low) season runs from May to November, but many resorts offer reduced off-season rates, so it's worth considering.

Operator/Accommodations The Barcelo Maya Palace (barcelomayapalace.com) is part of the Barcelo Maya complex, which sports five amenity-rich all-inclusive resorts of varying price points stretched along nearly a mile of white-sand beach. Arrange your dives at the on-site PADI IDC center, Dressel Divers (dresseldivers.com), which has a multilingual staff and certified cave/cavern guides.

Price Tag Rooms at the luxe Barcelo Maya Palace start at \$170 per person, per night, all-inclusive. Dressel Divers' excursion to the cenotes is \$70 and includes lunch. Tanks are about \$40, but you'll get discounts for buying multiple fills.

Can't-Miss Topside Adventures Tulum is one of the best-preserved coastal Mayan archeological sites and has some of the region's nicest beaches. (Tip: Go early to beat the crowds.) You can also explore tropical jungles and coastal mangroves at the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

THE BAT CAVE LINE

Take on one of the Riviera Maya's most challenging cavern dives and enter the mysterious Mayan underworld of Xibalba

While this route is technically still a “cavern” dive that passes potential exit points in the course of the dive, the Bat Cave Line is one of the more advanced cenotes in the area. The dive traverses narrow, dark tunnels and circumnavigates a pair of feature-rich chambers, the second of which has an open-air space in which divers can surface in a dimly lit room where bats hang from the ceiling.

If you're traveling with a less experienced diver, he or she can still join you on the dive. The Barbie Line runs from the same main entrance at the East Eye down a wide passage, exploring the long, open space beneath the West Eye. The line stays near the entrances for most of the dive, making it perfect for those who aren't comfortable in more traditional overhead environments.

WHAT IT TAKES:

Cenote dives in Riviera Maya stay within the “cavern” designated sections of the cave systems, meaning divers are never more than 200 linear feet from the surface; and Riviera Maya dive authorities allow recreational divers to enter the cavern-designated parts of the cenotes as long as they are with a cave-certified guide and follow cavern-diving procedures.

No specific certifications are prerequisite, but dive centers do require a checkout dive in the ocean to evaluate your buoyancy and skill before diving the caverns. All divers get a lesson in cavern-diving procedures, including the rule of thirds, flashlight communication and out-of-air procedures for overhead environments. Consider taking a cavern-diver specialty course before arriving in Riviera Maya or, better yet, take the class on location and do your training dives in the cenotes. **SD**

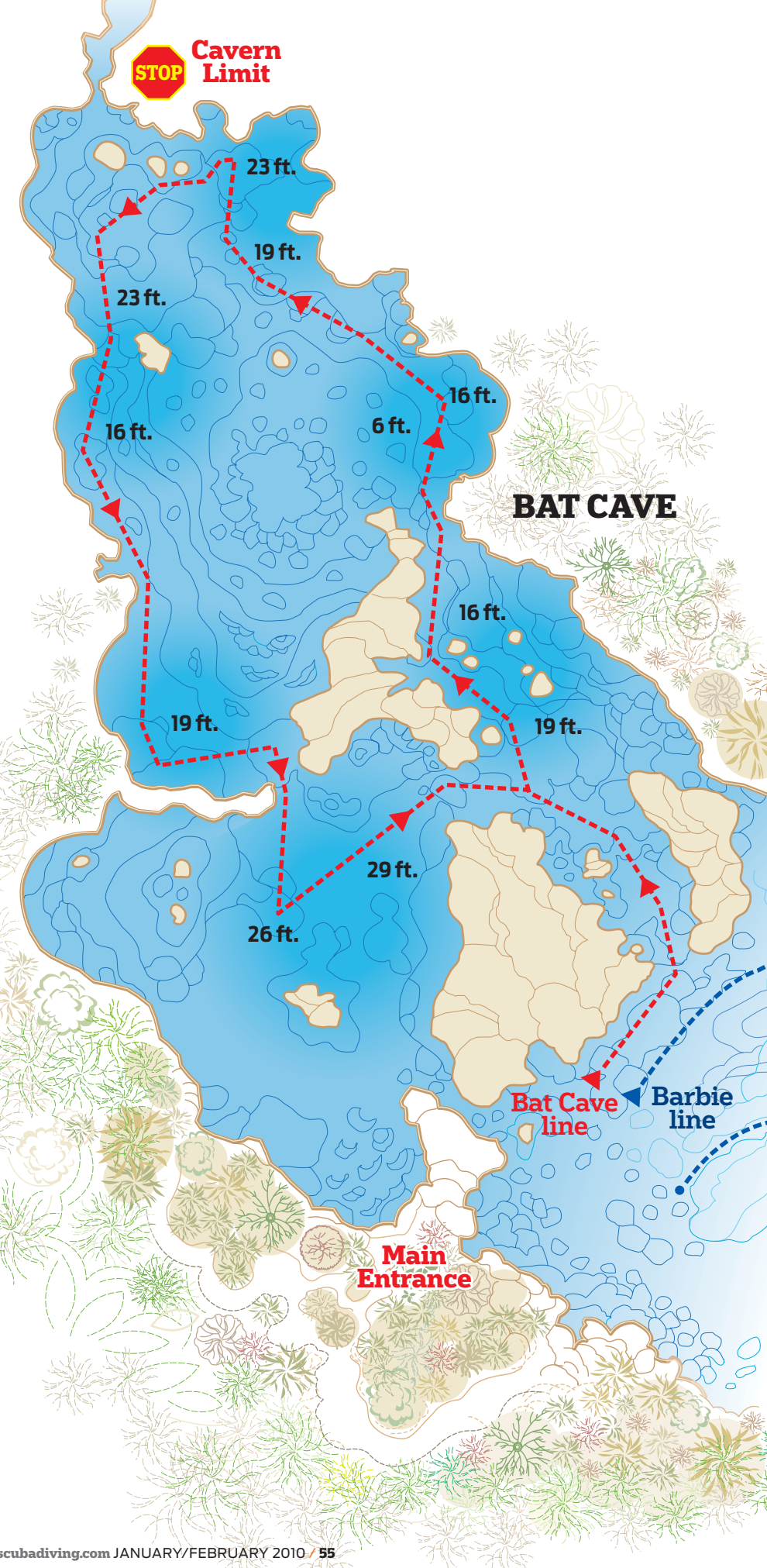


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