

SECRETS OF THE BLUE HOLES

DARING SCIENTISTS SEARCH FOR CLUES LURKING IN UNDERSEA CAVES...

 Hidden under the sparkling Atlantic Ocean, off the islands of the Bahamas, there lies a beautiful yet bizarre world. It's a place few have seen. Here, a system of super-deep underwater caves, called blue holes, contain odd-looking creatures, six-storey-high rock formations and even ancient human remains.

Scuba-diving scientists must dodge whirlpools and squeeze through narrow tunnels to study these spectacular blue holes — but their risky expeditions are uncovering sensational secrets...

HOW BLUE HOLES FORMED

During past ice ages — the most recent one was about 18,000 years ago — water levels dropped and new land was exposed. A mixture of rain and soil ate away at the land, forming holes that became deep caves. These caves filled with water after sea levels rose again. The deepest known blue hole is about 200m deep — twice the height of Big Ben's clock tower in London!

WEIRD WATER

Dive about ten metres into a blue hole called Sawmill Sink and the water turns pink (right). It may look nice, but it's poisonous. Because of the weak current, rainwater and salt water mix in a way that traps a layer of toxic gas where pink bacteria thrive. To avoid getting ill, divers never linger here.

In other blue holes, ocean tides can whip up the water into dangerous whirlpools. Scientists must circle carefully — or risk being sucked in!

NEON-PINK CAVE WATER!



SPOOKY CREATURES

Plunging farther down, the caves become dark and twisty. Anthropologist and National Geographic Explorer Kenny Broad and his team have found many unusual species here — including a tiny, transparent crustacean, called a remiped, which is venomous (right).

Blue holes also contain fossils of animals and birds. During the last ice age, these areas were dry and made perfect perches for the fliers. In one watery cave, a 12,000-year-old owl's nest was found surrounded by lizard bones — leftovers from the owl's last meal!

FANGED CRUSTACEAN



BONE-CHILLING DISCOVERIES

But what has been the most amazing thing found in these incredible blue holes? Human skeletons! Scientists were able to trace the remains back 1,400 years to the time of the Lucayans — the first people believed to have lived in the Bahamas. No one is sure how the bones ended up in these submerged caves. But the team thinks the Lucayans might have used these areas as burial sites for their dead.

One thing is sure — many other secrets are waiting to be uncovered in this underwater realm. "There are hundreds of caves that have still not been explored," says Kenny. "It's a whole other world of discovery."

A BLUE HOLE OFF BELIZE



Main image: pink water and crustacean © Wes C. Skiles / National Geographic
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