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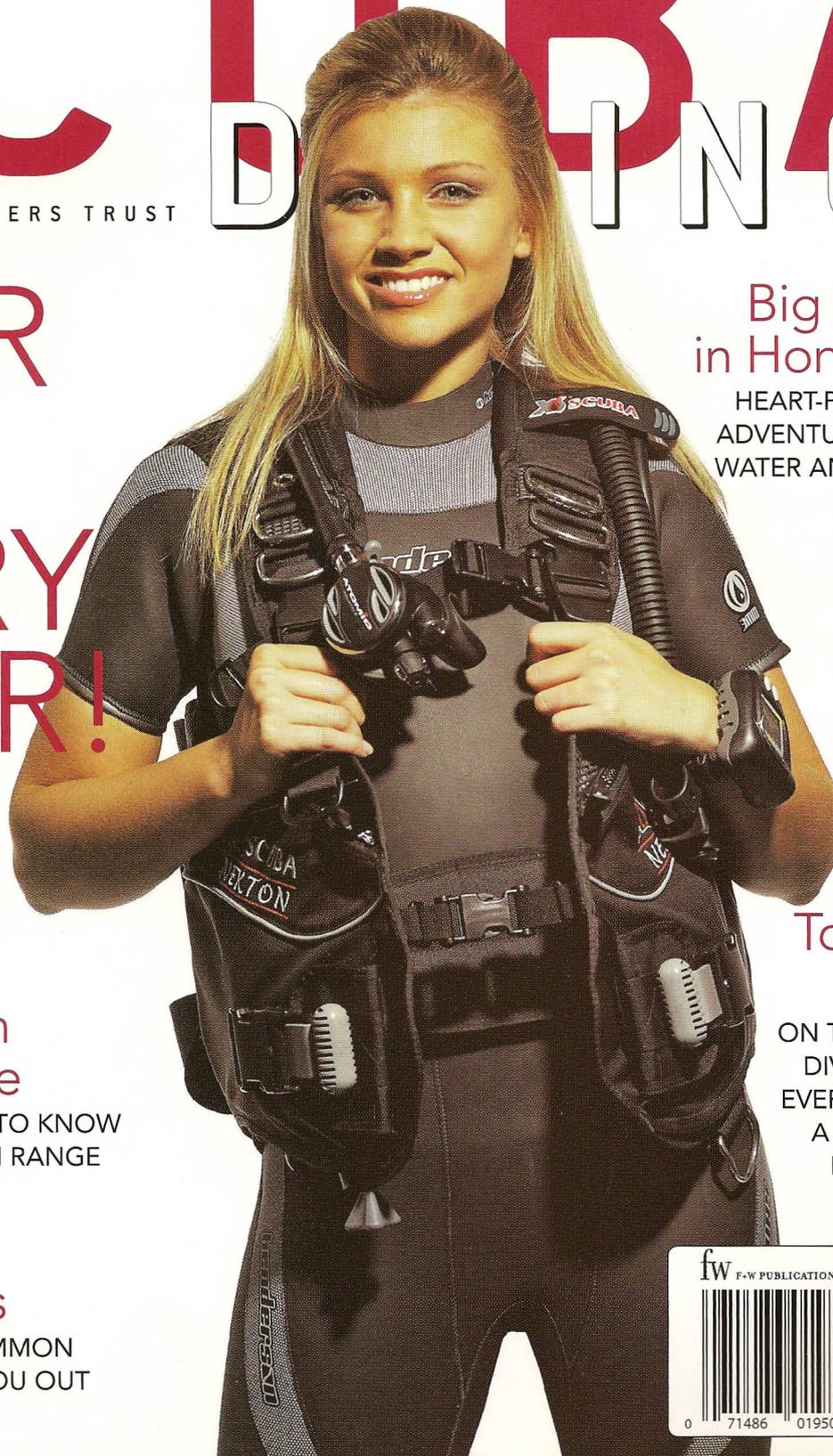
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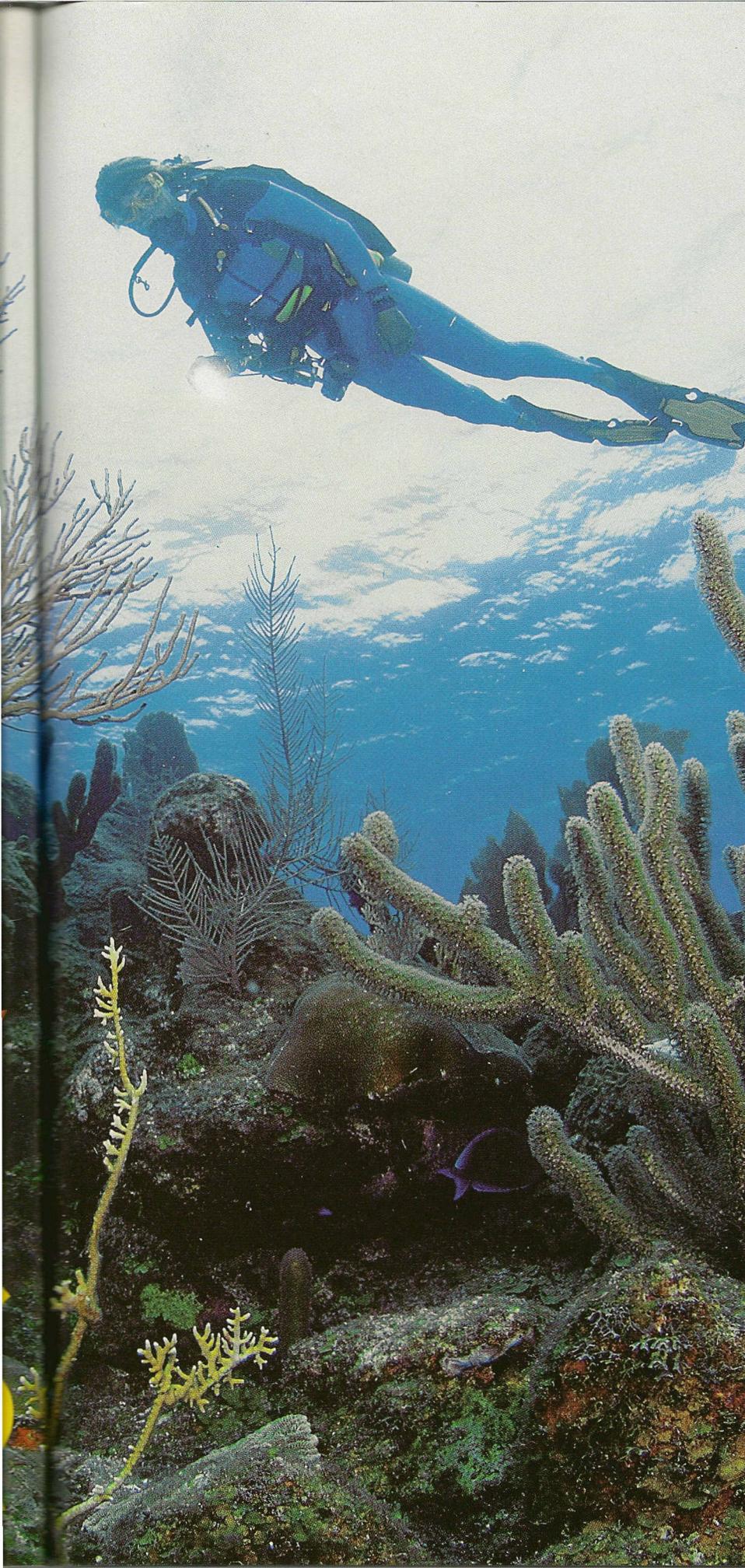
HEART-POUNGING ADVENTURE ABOVE WATER AND BELOW

The Tobago Twist

ON THIS LITTLE DIVE ISLAND, EVERYTHING IS A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT

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WE HIT 800 FEET and keep descending, which is about the time Karl Stanley turns off the lights, turns on the

Pink Floyd and revolutionizes my impression of the underwater world forever. We're plunging headlong into the 12,000-foot Cayman Trench off Roatan in Stanley's three-person yellow submarine, *Idabel*, and bioluminescent life forms are swooshing past the viewing portal, thousands of them, a cascading array of fiery objects. It's like riding Halley's Comet through outer space. "Woooooow," is all I can think to say. "Once you get deep enough, 90 percent of everything is bioluminescent," says Stanley, who's been deeper than 2,000 feet in this thing.

"Woooooow," I repeat, psychedelically.

The adrenaline rush actually started early this morning, before I'd even stepped inside Stanley's magic sub. I'd signed on for a series of activities that included a 110-foot wreck dive, two fabulous wall dives and, during my surface interval, a zip-line canopy tour through the jungle 70 feet off the ground. Now it's nighttime, and I'm 1,650 feet beneath the ocean surface, with Stanley using a green laser to point out chimera sharks, isopods, fish-eating tunicates and other freaky creatures that never break 1,000 feet.

"Woooooow."

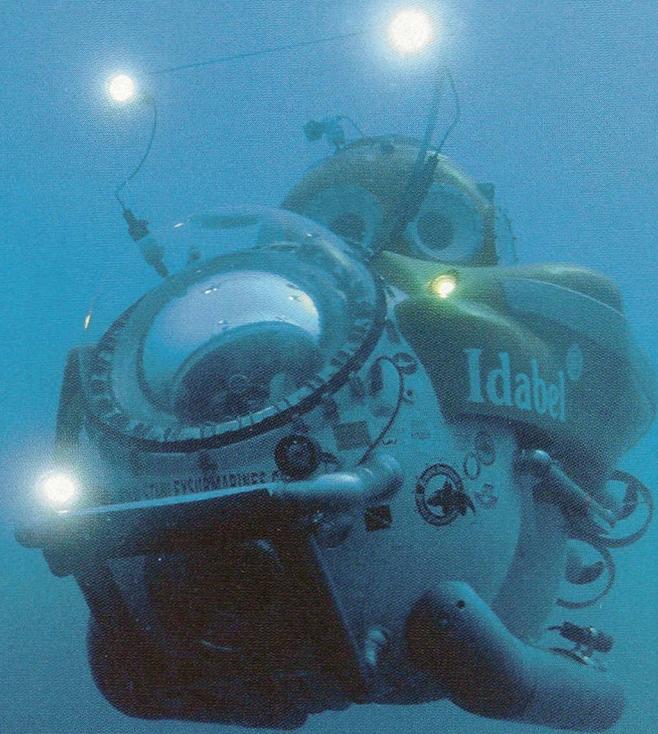
I hadn't expected all this. It's not like I'm in Costa Rica or Belize, where the multi-sport adventure ethic dictates that an outfitter has you summiting a volcano before breakfast, rafting class-four whitewater by lunch and horseback riding along the beach at sunset. The Bay Islands of Honduras have always been about one thing: diving. Perched on the rim of the Cayman Trench, Roatan, Utila and Guanaja feature fringing reefs that plunge dramatically into the abyss just offshore, forming some of the most dramatic walls anywhere. Diving here, more than anything, fuels the Honduran tourist economy, and it's the singular reason for direct flights into Roatan's teeny airport from metropolises like Miami, Houston, Atlanta and New Orleans.

But that mono-focus is changing. With increasing numbers of visitors, improved tourism infrastructure and resorts offering everything from whitewater paddling to deep-sea exploration, dive trips can be spiced up any number of ways. The following is a Bay Islands adventure sampler, from which to pick and choose.

»»YELLOW SUBMARINE

THE PRIMARY GOAL of Karl Stanley's forays into the deep is to spot the elusive six-gill shark, a creature that dwells between 1,000 and 5,000 feet. If you choose to boldly go where few divers have gone before, prepare yourself. The VW-sized submersible, which Stanley docks at Half Moon Bay in Roatan's West End, has no bathroom, the temperature at depth drops into the 40s, and you'll be sharing a four-foot-diameter sphere with one other paying customer. Still, the show is well worth it. Glowing hatchet fish and ink-shooting squid appear at about 700 feet. At 1,500 you'll experience visibility like never before. "Only still cave systems have water that's clearer," says Stanley. At 1,650 feet our captain motors about the moonscape and finally parks it on a sandy patch, pointing out a rare, corkscrew-shaped yellow coral growing on the black basalt. "Unlike coral on the reef, it doesn't require photosynthesis," he says. A cat shark swims by, then a pink spotted anglerfish, then a translucent white swimming cucumber. What I notice most is the unique peacefulness here, and Stanley concurs it's born from the knowledge that we'll never run into another human being at this particular dive site.

Whether the six-gill will sniff out the pig guts we have tied to an arm jutting before the viewing portal remains to be seen. Stanley admits we might have to wait *three hours*. We promptly fall asleep. When we awake, the entrails are being devoured by red-eyed shrimp and a kind of swimming fossil called an isopod. Half an hour later our boy shows up, a graceful 12-footer with a big thresher tail and glowing eyes. Yep, six gills on him. We could wait for the shark to actually take the bait, but Stanley says that could take hours more. No dice. We bid farewell and begin our slow ascent.



ERHAN SIDDIQI

COURTESY OF RICO BONITO LODGE (TOP); COURTESY OF OMEGA TOURS (BOTTOM RIGHT)

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Lush marine life decorates Fish Den Reef, off Roatan's north shore.

FROM WHALE SHARK ENCOUNTERS TO DEEP-SEA SUB RIDES, HONDURAS OFFERS BIG-TIME UNDERWATER THRILLS. PLUS: ACTION-PACKED SURFACE INTERVALS.

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THE BAY ISLANDS

BY PAUL KVINTA