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# THE BAHAMAS UNDERWORLD

Shaw McCutcheon goes deep to explore the blue holes that pepper the Bahama Banks.

Mention the Bahamas and most people will picture sun-filled, sandy-beach-lined islands amid azure-toned water. But there's another way to view the archipelago: think Swiss cheese. For geologically speaking, that's exactly what the Bahamas looks like.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, the Bahamas was a huge plain made up mostly of sand dunes and swamps. The sea level rose and fell hundreds of feet at least four times since then, and over the eons the sand hardened into porous limestone. Rainwater dissolved the rock, forming a multitude of deep, bell-shaped holes and huge caverns throughout the Bahamas, some extending thousands of feet horizontally underground.

During the last Ice Age more than 10,000 years ago, the sea level dropped some 400 feet from its current position. The caverns drained and became home to animals and plants until the sea returned to its present level and flooded the caves again.

To the Taino, the first humans to occupy the region 1,000 years ago, these mysterious holes had spiritual qualities and they sank their dead into them. Today, blue holes, as they are called, are one of the Bahamas' most unusual and distinguishing features and make for an intriguing dive or snorkel.

How to get there? Many charter boats don't offer scuba diving, largely due to liability concerns, but *Usher's* Captain Nicole Fawcett and First Mate Jesse Fawcett are

both expert divers who have made the sport an integral part of this 154-foot Delta's charter experience.

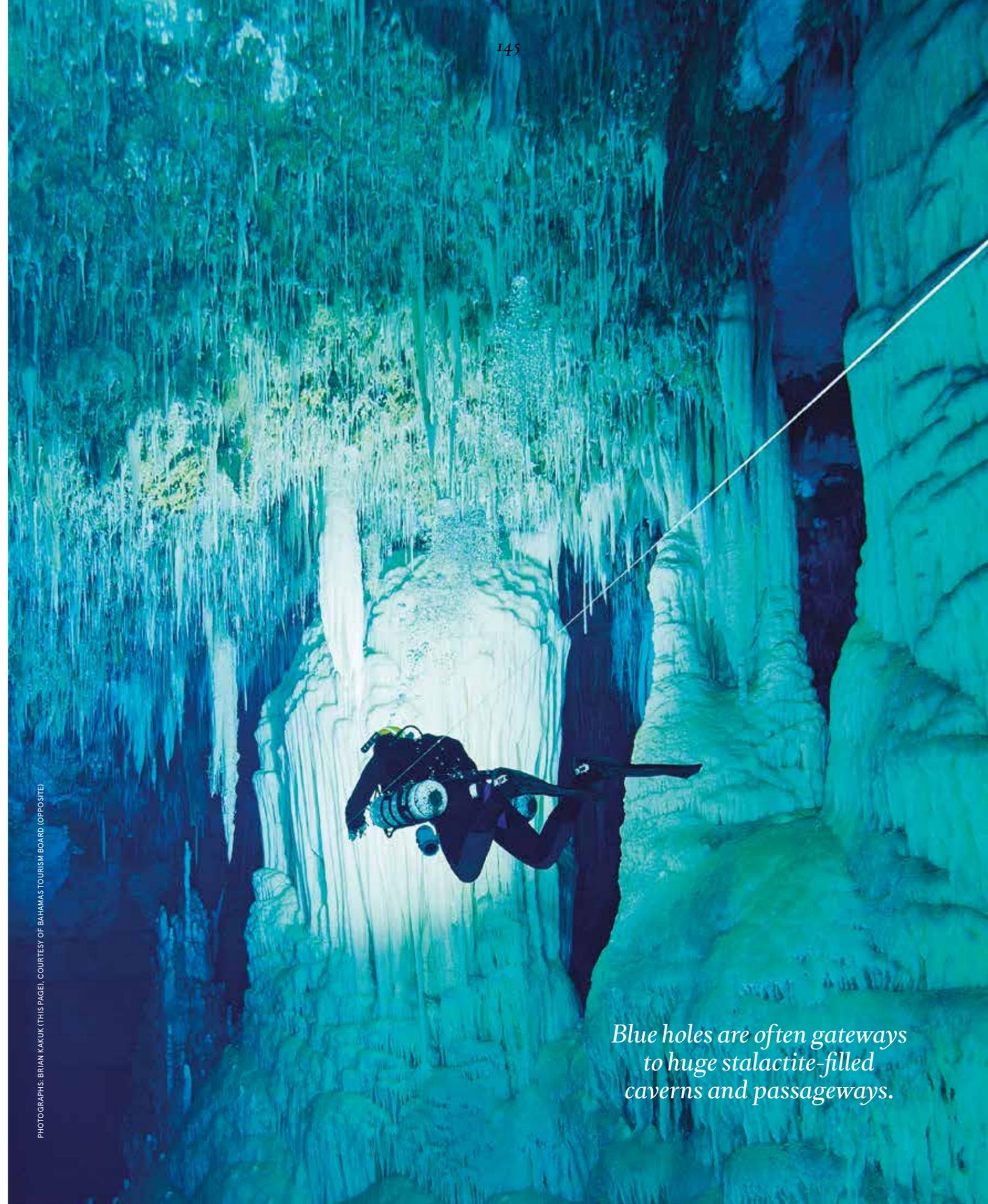
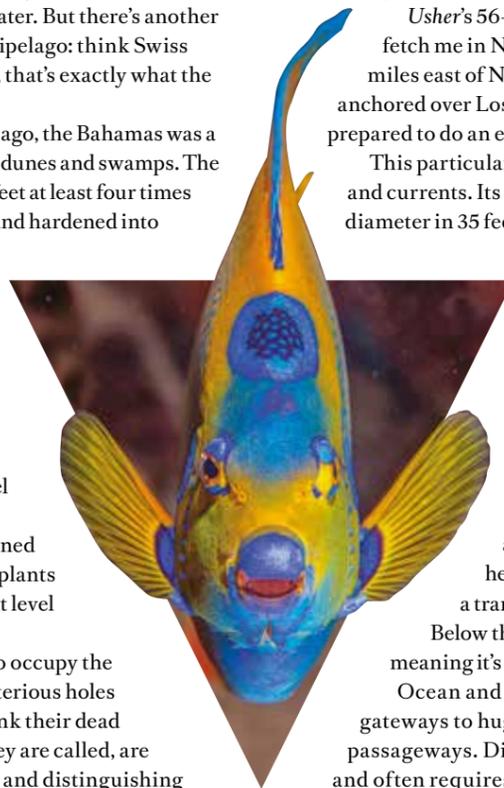
*Usher's* 56-foot Hampton chase boat came to fetch me in Nassau recently and took me a few miles east of New Providence to meet the yacht anchored over Lost Blue Hole. Once aboard, we prepared to do an exhilarating night dive.

This particular hole is open to the ocean waves and currents. Its entrance is a huge circle 100 feet in diameter in 35 feet of water with a center extending more than 200 feet deep and widening like a bell as one descends into it.

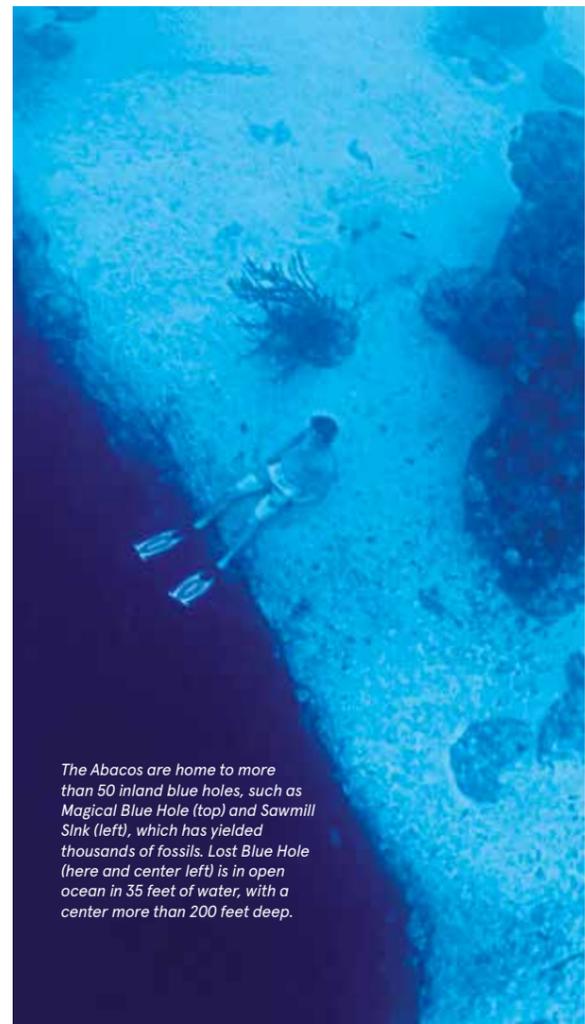
Unlike this one, many of the Bahamian blue holes are inland, hidden in pine forests and the thick tropical foliage found on the Abacos, Andros Island and elsewhere on the archipelago. Most of them look like small ponds and feature freshwater on top with heavier saltwater below, separated by a transitional layer called a halocline.

Below the halocline the water is anoxic, meaning it's completely devoid of oxygen.

Ocean and inland holes alike are often gateways to huge stalactite-filled caverns and passageways. Diving these holes can be dangerous and often requires specialized training and equipment. But that isn't the case with the popular Lost Blue Hole we are about to drop into, which is safe for the average certified diver. Flashlights in hand, we jumped off *Usher's* stern and sank to the sharp edge of the



*Blue holes are often gateways to huge stalactite-filled caverns and passageways.*



The Abacos are home to more than 50 inland blue holes, such as Magical Blue Hole (top) and Sawmill Sink (left), which has yielded thousands of fossils. Lost Blue Hole (here and center left) is in open ocean in 35 feet of water, with a center more than 200 feet deep.

hole. In contrast to inland blue holes, ocean blue holes tend to be quiet environments lacking strong tidal currents that bring nutrients to hungry fish and reefs. But at certain times during the year, the pit becomes home to dozens of spinner, nurse and reef sharks. Divers have returned awestruck with stories of swimming through hordes of these harmless sharks. On this dive, however, they were absent. Instead, we encountered somnambulant fish that ignored our pokes and huge sleeping loggerhead turtles wedged into wide cracks in the wall. Several remoras had attached themselves to the backside of one turtle. The walls were largely bare of reef flora, and the black void around and below us was broken only by the waving flashlights of the other divers nearby.

A few weeks after this dive, I had the opportunity to visit a couple of inland blue holes on Great Abaco, which are among at least 50 documented holes in the Abacos. I arranged to dive with Nancy Albury, a cave diver and paleontologist with the National Museum of the Bahamas, and her colleague, veteran cave diver Brian Kakuk.

To scientists such as Albury, these deep geological pits are unique time capsules. They contain ancient clues as to how animal and plant life existed many millennia ago and what effects climate change and human activity have had on them. One such inland hole, Sawmill Sink on Great Abaco, has yielded thousands of bones of well-preserved fossils of extinct reptiles, mammals and birds, including several new species, helping scientists rewrite the story of the Bahamas' prehistoric past.

The first site we visited was Crossing Rocks Blue Hole, located in a large inland saltwater mangrove creek. The

hole itself was hidden under a ledge about 20 feet deep, and a strong, cool current spewed out of the entrance rising into a boiling cauldron at the pond's surface, evidence of powerful tidal forces pushing water up and down through it. This particular hole extends down about 100 feet and horizontally along five submarine passages, one almost 2,000 feet long. We snorkeled around the hole's entrance, which was camouflaged under a rocky ledge, and at times fought against waves spouting from under the ledge. Unlike the Lost Blue Hole, this inland blue hole harbors few large fish. It is typical of these environments to host only smaller marine life capable of handling the change in salinity that occurs when freshwater above mixes with saltwater below, such as cavefish, cave shrimp and remipedes.

The second hole was more remote. Bouncing in Kakuk's van along a barely recognizable trail through thick stands of bushes, we arrived at Magical Blue Hole, another vertical cave with large cavernous spokes extending out horizontally. Donning scuba gear, we descended 90 feet through algae-rich yellow-green water down into the black pit, where we swam among huge stalactites hanging from sloping walls. On the way, we passed through the halocline, and my vision briefly seemed to warp as if I was looking through a rippled window.

Kakuk motioned me over, and he pointed to a small, flat, sediment-covered spot, where a group of bones – which he later told me were at least a millennia old – lay in a small cluster, possibly the remnants of an owl's meal. We left the bones where they were and continued exploring around the circumference where sunlight from the orb of the entrance above gently pierced the gathering gloom of the deep.



PHOTOGRAPHS: SHAW MCCUTCHEON (OPPOSITE TOP, BOTTOM LEFT, AND CENTER LEFT), BOTTOM RIGHT AND CENTER LEFT), COURTESY OF BAHAMAS TOURISM BOARD (OPPOSITE CENTER, THIS PAGE)



It was on a similar dive in Sawmill Sink that Kakuk made his most startling find in 2005. On the bottom, about 50 feet down, he stirred some sediment and uncovered an almost perfect shell of a 2,500-year-old extinct species of tortoise. Since then, Sawmill Sink has yielded more than 5,000 fossils from 95 different species, including crocodiles, owls and extinct vertebrates. The well-preserved quality of the fossils – some still have DNA in them – is largely due to the anoxic quality of the water at that depth. Some of the plant debris found in the sediment is even green with the remains of chlorophyll.

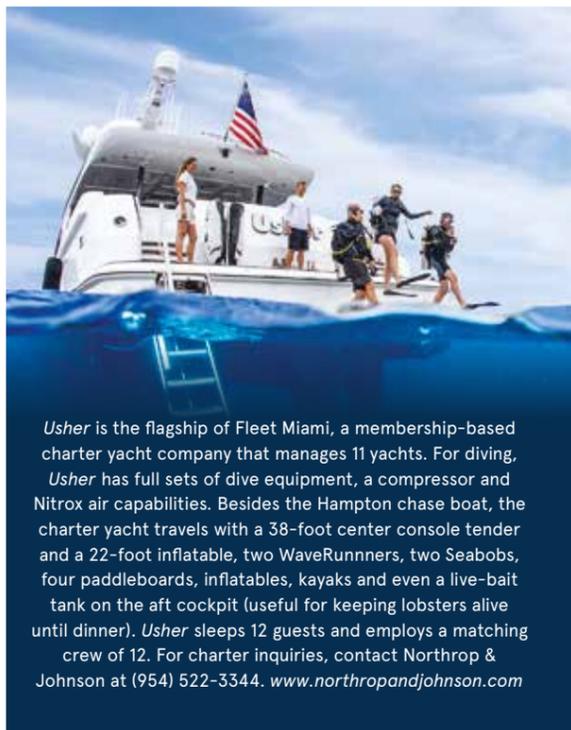
Most of these fossils range from 1,000 to 4,200 years old, and how they disappeared has implications for future changes

in our climate. Albury and other paleontologists who have studied the fossils have concluded that as the climate became warmer and wetter over the past 10,000 to 15,000 years, 17 species of birds disappeared in the Bahamas. Another 22 species of reptiles, birds and mammals that survived those environmental changes disappeared when humans arrived 1,000 years ago.

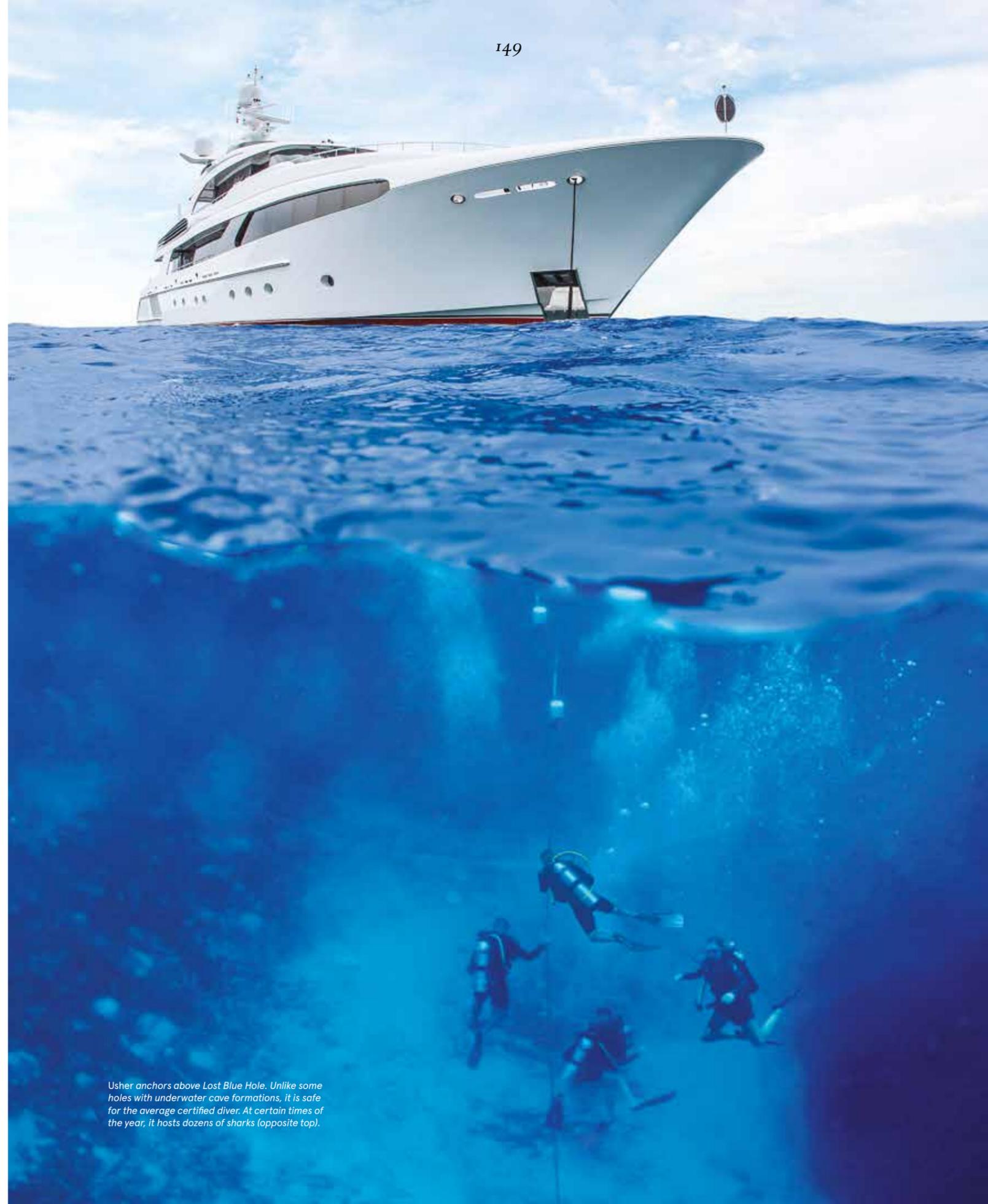
Then there's the crocodile. More than 50 Cuban freshwater crocodiles have been uncovered in Sawmill Sink, but this species hasn't been seen in the Bahamas for thousands of years, although a few Cuban freshwater crocodiles still inhabit some swamps of Cuba itself. (Fossilized pieces of this species have been found in the Cayman Islands and the Dominican Republic, too, raising the question of how they managed to swim those great distances.) Albury also wondered how these crocs got to Abaco. It turns out this particular variety of crocodile was largely terrestrial and a real adventurer. Back in the last Ice Age, when the sea level was several hundred feet lower, the Bahamas consisted of two very large islands – the Little Bahama Bank (Great Abaco and Grand Bahama Island) and the Great Bahama Bank (Andros Island, Cat Island, the Exumas, New Providence and Eleuthera, among others).

The Cuban species must have swam the 12 miles then separating Cuba from the Great Bahama Bank, and then swam the 30-mile stretch between the Great and Little Bahama Banks north of New Providence. The swim probably took several days, and the result was the dispersal of the species throughout the region. The area was a benign habitat for the Cuban crocodiles, until humans came on the scene and hunted them to local extinction.

To the average diver, of course, the experience of plunging into these mysterious formations and seeing what's down there is the big attraction. The ocean holes are easier to access and dive into, but the inland holes, which require an experienced cave diver as a guide, may be more interesting. If you're really lucky, you might even come up with the remains of a prehistoric meal from many thousands of years ago. ■



*Usher* is the flagship of Fleet Miami, a membership-based charter yacht company that manages 11 yachts. For diving, *Usher* has full sets of dive equipment, a compressor and Nitrox air capabilities. Besides the Hampton chase boat, the charter yacht travels with a 38-foot center console tender and a 22-foot inflatable, two WaveRunners, two Seabobs, four paddleboards, inflatables, kayaks and even a live-bait tank on the aft cockpit (useful for keeping lobsters alive until dinner). *Usher* sleeps 12 guests and employs a matching crew of 12. For charter inquiries, contact Northrop & Johnson at (954) 522-3344. [www.northropandjohnson.com](http://www.northropandjohnson.com)



*Usher* anchors above Lost Blue Hole. Unlike some holes with underwater cave formations, it is safe for the average certified diver. At certain times of the year, it hosts dozens of sharks (opposite top).

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF BAHAMAS TOURISM BOARD (TOP), SHAW MCCUTCHEON (BOTTOM, OPPOSITE)