

The Caribbean Sea¹

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On the southeast coast of Mexico, surrounded by exuberant, indescribably green vegetation, is the Caribbean Sea, where the majesty and beauty of nature meet. With its unlimited shades of blue, this sea was witness to the birth of one of the most powerful and enigmatic civilizations the world has ever known, the Mayans, who had a profound respect and admiration for it.

Flourishing cities like Mujil, Tulum, Cobá and Ixhil demonstrate the intense relationship between these people and the sea. Food such as octopus, lobster, fish and crab and the manufacture of utensils with materials taken from the sea show the deep influence the Caribbean had in the Mayans' daily lives. Sea snails were considered sacred and only nobles

could wear their shells and pearls, as can be seen in the frescoes found in Cozumel, Kabah, Xel-há and Tulum. The Caribbean is also the graveyard for hundreds of pirate ships and buccanniers who came to conquer the New World.

The Caribbean Sea is located on a calcareous substratum formed by the millions of years of erosion and destruction of reefs. The bounty of its waters is due to a combination of factors such as temperature, salinity, incidence of light, transparency and winds, which along with the nutrients by the currents from Brazil and the Gulf of Mexico, have allowed an infinite variety of species of invertebrates and fishes to develop.

The Mexican Caribbean is located at the eastern end of the Yucatan peninsula, from Celustúm in the state of Campeche to the border of Belize, delimited by the Chinchorro Bank. Xcalac is the last lighthouse before Belize, and indicates the entrance to the shallow waters of the channel of

Chetumal, the state capital of Quintana Roo.

Along the Caribbean shore there are three ecological reserves: Río Lagartos, Isla Contoy and Sian Ka'an to protect and preserve terrestrial and marine life.

There are three islands in the area: Contoy, which shelters hundreds of migratory birds; Isla Mujeres, so-called because when the conquistadors arrived there, they found hundreds of little clay figures representing women,² and Cozumel, or the Island of the Swallows. These islands are surrounded by mangrove swamps (*Rizophora sp.*). Toward the westernmost part and south of the Mexican Caribbean is the Chinchorro Bank where the remains of many ships lie, sunk by hurricanes and storms or wrecked on the reefs. This

² Isla Mujeres was sacred to the Mayans, and they built many temples there dedicated to *Ixchel*, the goddess of fertility and health. [Editor's Note.]

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¹ Translated by Andrew B. Martín H., Jr.



Photos by José Remus Araco

School of fish (*Lutjanus* sp.).

is a place visited by many divers dreaming of vast treasures scattered among their remains.

The greatest tourist attraction along the coast is the modern city of Cancún, with its white sandy beaches and transparent water. Near this recreational center is Puerto Morelos, where the research station of the UNAM Institute of Marine Sciences and Lymnology is located. Further south are: Akumal, with small reef formations near the beach; Tulum, with its beautiful ruins above the cliffs, and the pyramids of Cobá; Xel-há, where there is a wildlife sanctuary for marine life, and shortly before you get to Chetumal there is the Lagoon of Bacalar with its myriad colors.

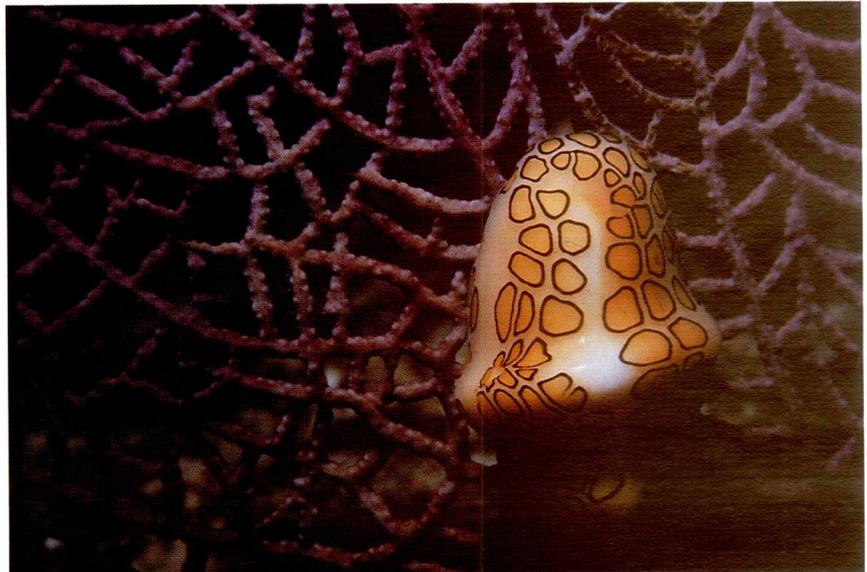
The great variety of species that inhabit this region make the Mexican Caribbean a virtual paradise for divers. In places lacking coral, we can see large belts of seaweed (*Thalassia sp.*, *Siringodium sp.*, *Halodule wrightii*), on which giant sea snails lie (*Strombus gigas*). Buried in the sand we can find mantarays (*rajidae*) and among the hollows formed by dead coral, we can find lobsters (*Panulirus argus*).

Among the corals that form reefs there is a large variety of species, like star coral (*Monastrea cavernosa*), deer's horn (*Acrophora palmata*), fan coral (*Plexaura homomala*) and finger-like coral (*Porites sp.*); all very attractive for their different forms and colors, which range from light yellow shades to purple and red.

The corals function as a substratum for other marine species, among which we have red sponges (*Tedania*

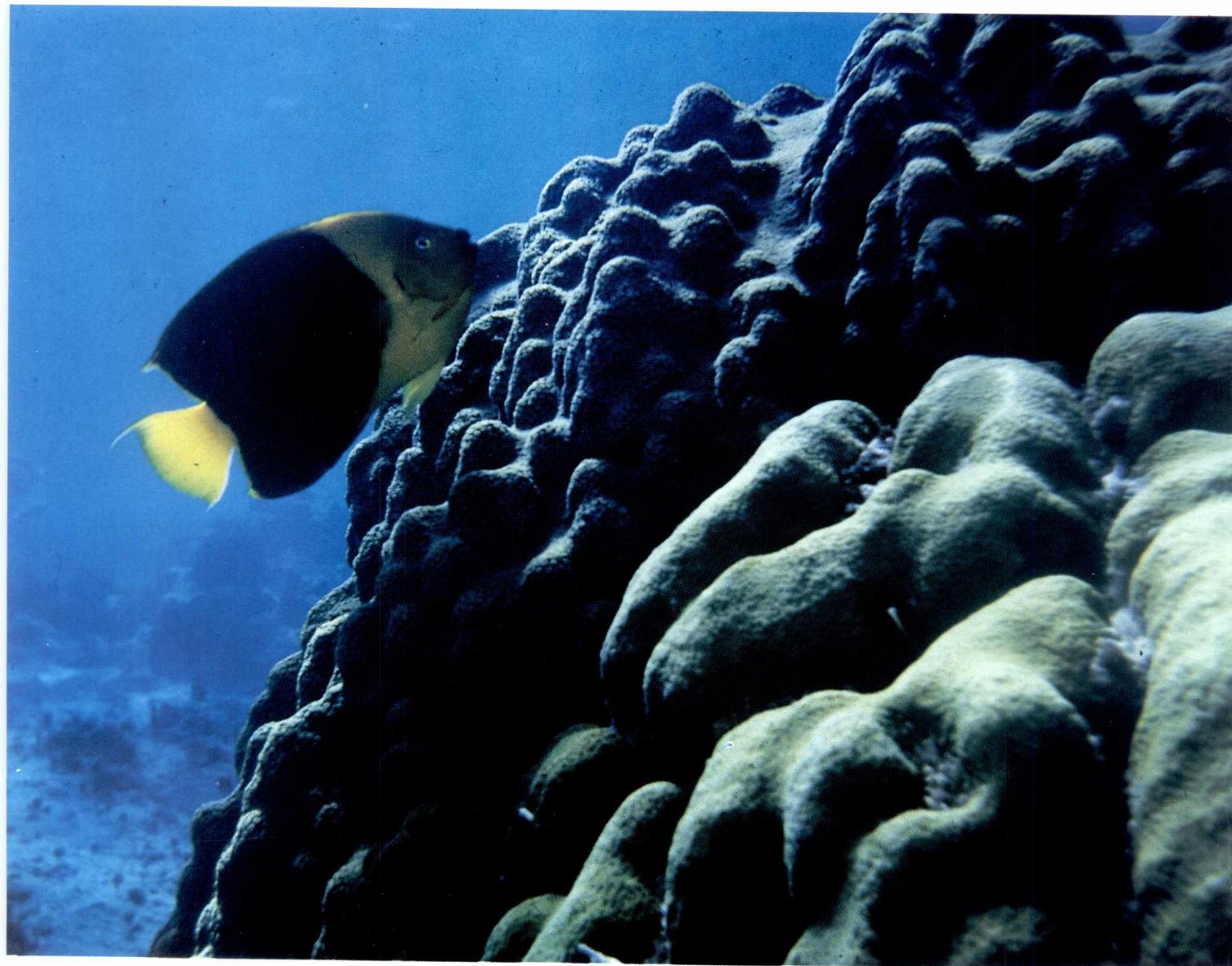


Penachos (*Sabellidae*).



Flamingo tongue (*Cyphoma gibbosum*) on fan coral (*Plexaura homomala*).

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“Black Beauty” or “Sweet Lips” angel fish (*Holacanthus tricolor*) swimming over a coral reef (*Porites sp.*).

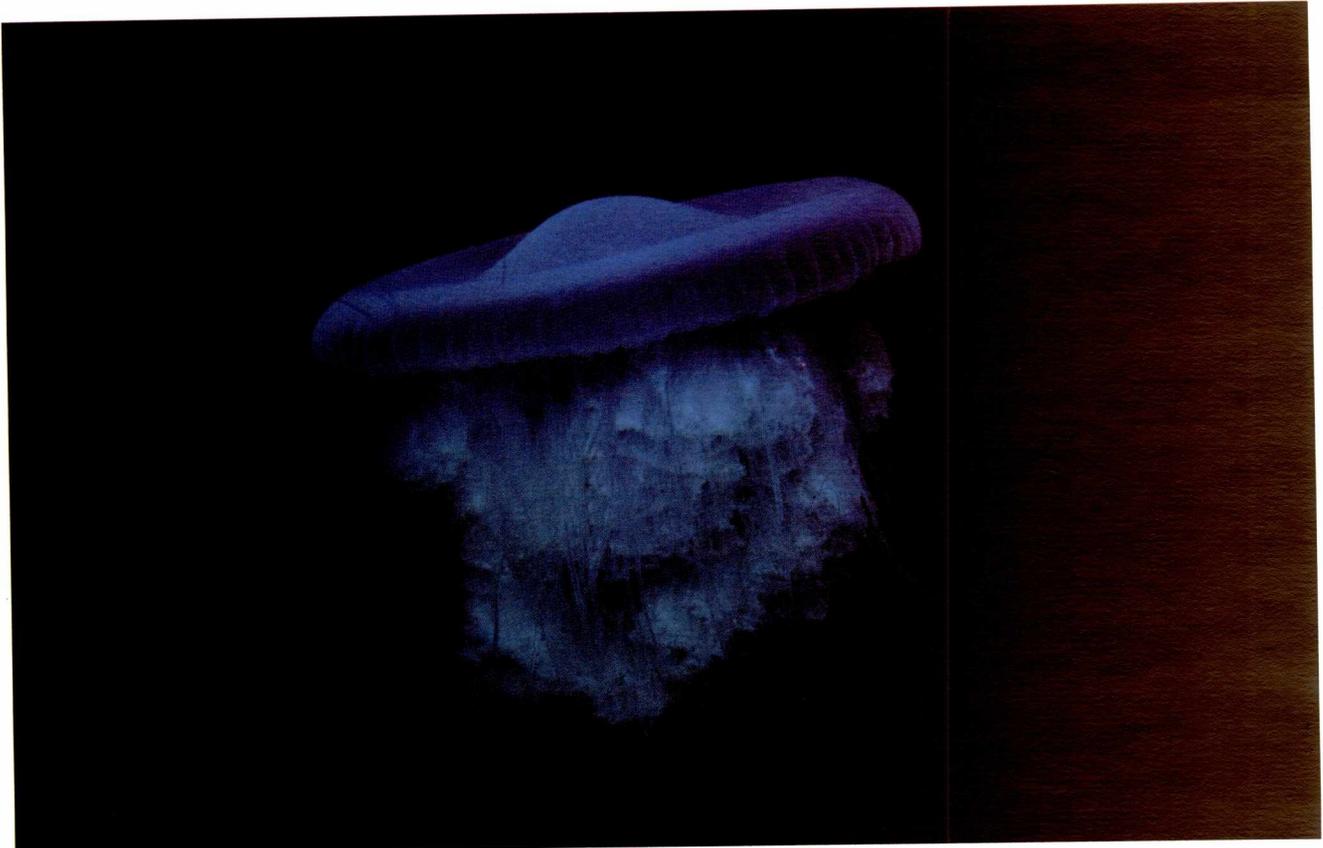


Starfish (*Ophithorix orstedii*) on coral reef (*Oxyphora sp.*).

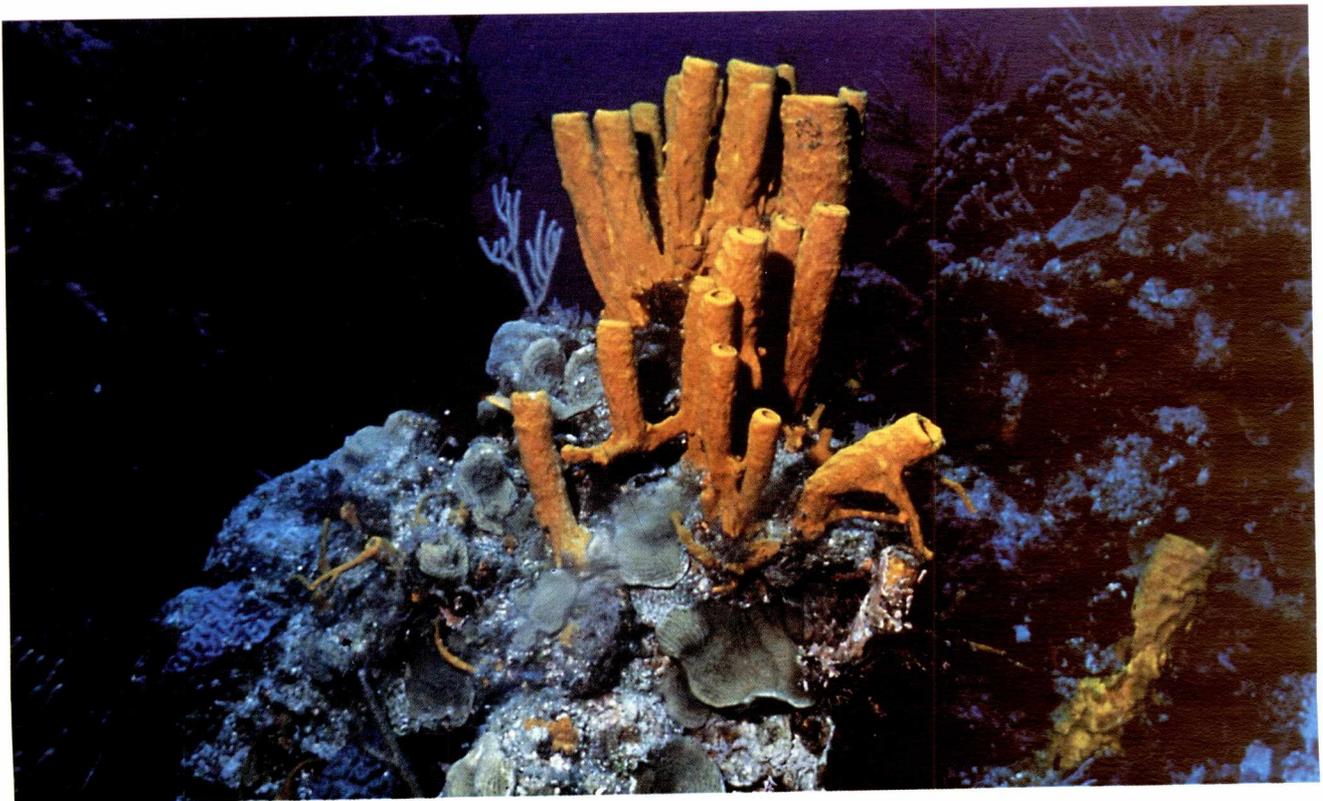
ignis), calyx sponges (*Aplisina sp.*) with their orange and black tones, red and black sea urchins, starfish (*Ophiuridos*), as well as a wide variety of spider and hermit crabs (*Majidos* and *Paguridos* respectively), and shrimp (*Carideos*) that live in the hollow spaces left by the coral. Some of the smaller shrimp live associated with white anemones (*Candylactis*

gigantea). Reef fish can be found in schools or swimming alone, as the case of the surgeon fish (*Naso sp.*) parrot fish and angel fish (*Pomacanthus arcuatus*), and it’s not unusual to see moray eels (*Murenidos*).

The combination of shapes and colors can only be seen in these waters where you can really enjoy moments of peace and tranquility. ❧



Jellyfish (*Scyphozoa sp.*)



"Organ pipe" Orange sponge (*Demospongiae*) on a piece of coral (*Acrophora sp.*)