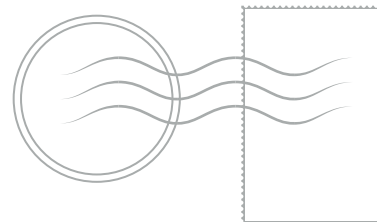


POSTCARD

Belize



The best way to get to the Unesco-listed Great Blue Hole is on a windjammer with luxury line Sea Cloud Cruises, finds **Laura French**

Everything is blue – above me, an opal sky glimmers through the surface of the water, while below me, the sea plunges into a void of deep, crystalline indigo. A parrotfish glides past, its scales shimmering in a turquoise rainbow. Then an angelfish joins the fray, adding a pop of yellow to this otherworldly scene.

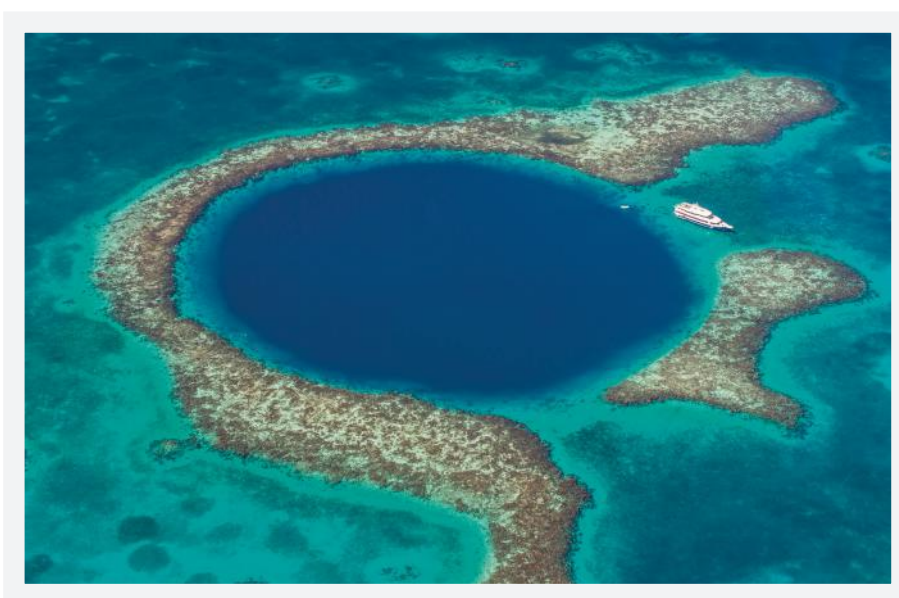
I'm snorkelling at the Great Blue Hole – a sinkhole off the coast of Belize. In effect, it's a huge circle of glowing cobalt. I'm here as part of a 16-day windjammer cruise sailing Central America with luxury line Sea Cloud Cruises, which puts nature and sustainability at its heart.

At more than 300m wide and 125m deep, this Unesco-listed phenomenon formed as a limestone cave during the last ice age. When sea levels rose, the system was flooded and collapsed into a vertical cave.

Now it's part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef – the second largest of its kind after the Great Barrier Reef – and it's a hotspot for diving and snorkelling, with stalagmites still visible to those who descend far enough. In 1971, oceanographer Jacques Cousteau named it one of the world's top-10 dive spots, and it's not hard to see why, with mustard-yellow corals and violet-veined formations glowing like UV lamps forming the backdrop to a universe of tropical fish.

We glide peacefully around the fringe of the reef, as our guide stops to point out various species, then get back on the boat for a second snorkel stop in another part of the hole. This one is more impressive, with sandy-hued starfish, giant octopuses and glossy conches our companions as we seek out hammerhead sharks and stingrays – we don't find the last two, but when we return to the boat and approach the shore, we're met by a friendly looking nurse shark gracing the cerulean waters.

Afterwards, our naturalist guide and onboard lecturer tells us more about the marine life in this part of Belize, before we get back on the ship and head towards Mexico. It's a memorable experience – a highlight on a cruise that's all about exploring the nature of this lush area of the world – and after just a few days, I'm already under its spell. **TW**



BOOK IT

Snorkelling at the Great Blue Hole is offered as an excursion on Sea Cloud Cruises' Magic of Central America cruise for €255. The 16-night voyage on *Sea Cloud Spirit* starts at €9,235, including all meals with sommelier-picked wines and beers, a five-course gala dinner, gratuities, use of watersports facilities and a welcome bottle of champagne. seacloud.com



FROM TOP: The Great Blue Hole; a diver with a sea urchin

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