

What's round, midnight blue, 1,000 feet / 308.4 meters wide, and over 400 feet / 123.4 meters deep? The Great Blue Hole of Belize, one of the world's foremost dive destinations. It's a spectacular underwater cavern where I got "narked," ran out of air and broke my watch 130 feet / 40.1 meters below the warm Caribbean waters.

When I went to Belize in 1986, I was a relatively new diver. With only about 20 shallow dives of depths of 30 to 60 feet / 9 to 18 meters under my weight belt, I'd never before experienced nitrogen narcosis.

Then I got narked two days in a row.

The first day was the one before the GBH dive. Our liveboard's divemaster tested our group's depth readiness with a trial dive to 140 feet / 43.2 meters. We were that deep for only about five minutes, so I didn't get the full effect.

To illustrate nitrogen narcosis, my dive certification textbook shows a cartoon of a male diver trying to kiss a fish with the regulator in his hand. I didn't do that, but I did feel fuzzy mentally, like I'd just awakened from a deep sleep or had quaffed a few beers.

The second day was the most perilous.

The next day the narcosis wasn't just more pronounced; I felt fear for the first time in my underwater experience. In rapid succession, I felt anxiety about the depth we were attempting, the uncertainty of what being narked would bring and, finally, true danger when I eventually ran low on air.

### Going to Depth

My plunge into the GBH began by snorkeling out about 300 feet / 92.5 meters over a shallow shelf to conserve air. Once over the middle of the Hole, I descended. At 50 feet / 15.4 meters, I experienced a thermocline, where 80 F / 26 C degree water was above an invisible

horizontal line and far cooler 65 F / 18 C degree water lay below.

Inside the cavern, everything seemed fine at first.

At about 130 feet, I gazed up at spectacular 20-foot / 6.2-meter tall stalactites and, looking to my left, saw the awe in my dive buddy's eyes. I peered down past my fins into the black void that's over 400 feet deep. Because I knew I could stay at this depth for only eight minutes (because of the rapid air consumption from increased water pressure), I constantly checked my bottom time and tank level. We sank past 150 feet / 46.2 meters, then ascended to about 120 feet / 37 meters.

My breathing was regular. My eyesight was fine. My ears were clear. My equipment was problem-free.

But I wasn't.

On three occasions, I raised my wrist toward my face to read my watch's minute hand. It first read 10 minutes past the hour, then five minutes before the hour, then 20 past. My watch was broken, but I didn't realize it. I was experiencing nitrogen narcosis.

Being "narked" gave me a slightly wobbly feeling — mentally. I felt physically good, but my thinking processes were hazy. If I were shallower — and not narked — I could have shaken my wrist and noticed the minute hand on my watch had broken because of the depth (it was warranted to 150 feet). But I couldn't apply this logical thinking until I surfaced.

What else could go wrong? I was also low on air.

It was time to return to the boat. By then, we only had 10 minutes of bottom time, but I noticed I was dangerously low on air — for the first time ever in my dive life. At an average depth of 135 feet / 41.6 meters below the surface, I'd used my air five times faster because of the increased pressure.

As we took our five-minute safety stop at 10 feet / 3.1 meters, I gave my dive buddy the "low on air" hand signal, and he loaned me his second stage for those five minutes and during the additional five minutes of ascent.

Once we broke through the waves, I quickly switched to my snorkel to conserve my buddy's air. We climbed back on the boat. As I wrote notes into my dive log, I began to feel lucky that I'd escaped a possibly perilous situation.

What did I learn?

Getting narked can be hazardous to your health — it impairs your judgment and masks any potential problems you may be experiencing. It taught me to respect the ocean, to conserve my air more on descents, to pay stricter attention to my air supply rather than my bottom time, and to be more aware of the side effects of fuzzy logic. Plus, in the 14 years of diving since then, I've never again run out of air.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A DAN Member since 1988, Gil Zelmer of San Rafael, California, still loves the Blue Hole of Belize and dives more carefully these days.

### What does the Great Blue Hole look like?

From the air, this dive site looks like a dark blue spot amid a shallow aquamarine sea. Located 50 miles / 80 kilometers east of Belize City and a few miles west of Lighthouse Reef, it's amid one of the three major atolls along a 185-mile / 296 km barrier reef, the Western Hemisphere's largest. Ever since a Jacques Cousteau television special years ago, the GBH cavern has become a tourist magnet that's become Belize's most famous dive site.

Originally a cave, the roof fell in some 10,000 years ago as the land receded into the sea. This almost perfectly circular hole is over three football fields wide and over 400-plus feet deep.