



The pool at the Kimpton Grand Roatán Resort & Spa, in Honduras.

## Out of the Blue

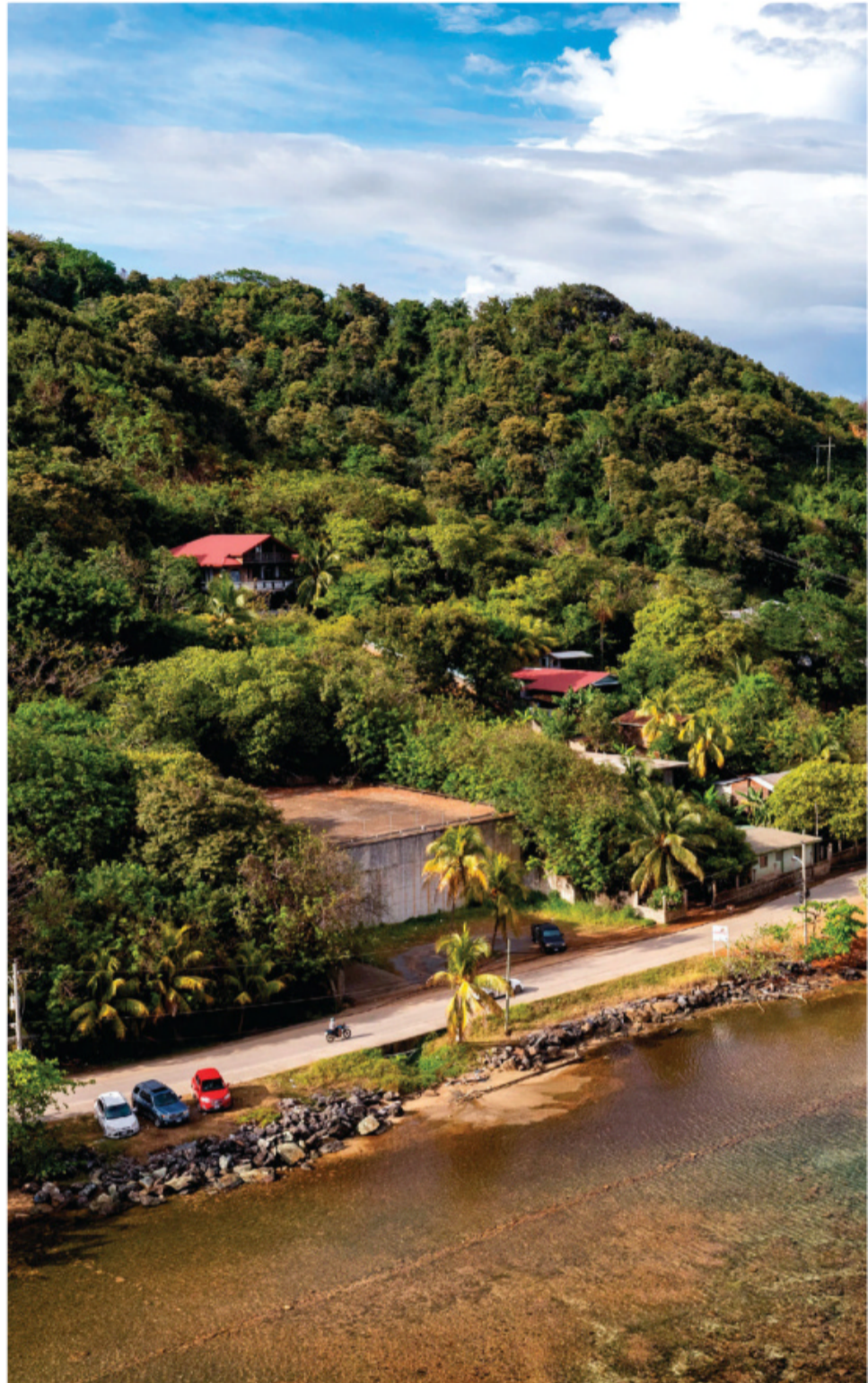
Honduras beckons scuba divers, waterfall rappellers, and other thrill seekers. **Nora Walsh** takes the plunge.

**A**FTER CHECKING MY scuba gear, I backrolled into the turquoise water and found myself in a wonderland of candy-colored corals, giant barrel sponges, lacy sea fans, and neon fish. I drifted along in silent awe as schools of indigo-colored creole wrasses darted through shafts of sunlight and a colony of garden eels poked up through the seabed like miniature periscopes.

For years, fellow divers had been telling me that the coral reefs of Honduras rivaled those of neighboring Belize, renowned as a divers' paradise. After six days, I was

convinced. I also came to understand why this part of the country has emerged as an ecotourism destination, thanks to fewer crowds, lower prices, and virgin keys.

My adventure began at the airport on Roatán, a string-bean-shaped island off the coast of northern Honduras. The customs line was packed with middle-aged Americans sharing tips about the island's best dive sites and where to spot six-foot manta rays, hawksbill turtles, and seahorses. Roatán lies at the southern end of the six-mile-long Mesoamerican Reef (second only to the Great Barrier Reef in size) and promotes scuba and snorkeling to encourage tourism. I couldn't wait to get into the water.



FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF KIMPTON GRAND ROATÁN RESORT & SPA; BILL GOZANSKY/ALAMY



▲  
The biodiverse waters  
around Roatán.

A half-hour taxi ride took me to the **Kimpton Grand Roatán Resort & Spa** (*doubles from \$500*), the island's first big-brand hotel, which opened last year on a strip of golden sand at the southern tip. It's an idyllic place to watch the sunset, perhaps from a driftwood swing chair at the waterside bar. I stayed in a Wellness suite with an sea-facing terrace above the Kao Kamasa Spa, which has four therapeutic plunge pools, a glass-bottom infinity pool, and treatment rooms within earshot of the surf.

The hotel is a quick hop to the West End, a village filled with restaurants and bars, and even closer to some dive sites. After I'd settled in, I was pointed to **West Bay Divers**,



▲  
Divers exploring the  
protected reefs.

which operates trips to more than 80 sites inside Roatan Marine Park, a nature reserve protected by a nonprofit of the same name.

Divemaster Karim Godoy gave me a quick refresher (it had been a few years since my last dive) before whisking me to Black Rock, a popular spot just offshore from the Kimpton. The 40-foot descent felt like traveling through a portal into an alternate universe. After reaching the reef, Godoy and I swam side-by-side for 45 minutes as he pointed out a chartreuse sea anemone, crawling sea cucumbers, spiky lionfish hiding in the folds of staghorn coral, and other creatures I had never seen.

At about 40 miles long and five miles across, Roatán is small, but there is no shortage of aquatic adventures. Free divers (those who dive without a breathing apparatus) can get certified by Esteban Darhanpé at his **Roatan Freediving School & Training Center**. Nature lovers paddle through the protected mangroves around Jonesville, a town founded by Welsh settlers more than a century ago. Snorkelers swim out from points like West Bay Beach, Starfish Alley, and Newman's Wall.



▲ Kayakers on the Cangrejal River, in northern Honduras.

▼ A cabin at the Lodge & Spa at Pico Bonito, which is set in a cloud forest.

My favorite dive was around Big French Key, a private island nearby, where I explored *Mr. Bud*, a cargo ship that was sunk in 1995 and has become a coral garden that attracts grouper, silversides, nudibranch, and other aquatic life.

After three days splashing around Roatán, I took a 70-minute ferry to La Ceiba, a party town on the mainland. It's a jumping-off point for the so-called Bay Islands (which include Roatán), but the surrounding region has become an eco-destination in its own right, known for its biodiverse subtropical forest and lush waterfalls.

I checked in to the **Lodge & Spa at Pico Bonito** (*doubles from \$186*), a rustic-chic resort set in the Pico Bonito cloud forest, which teems with more than 500 bird species, including toucans and motmots, and exotic animals, such as kinkajous, peccaries, and coatis. My large cabin had rosewood floors and pine ceilings, plus a deck screened by cacao trees. It felt refreshingly tech-free, without a USB port or flat-screen TV in sight. ►





▶ El Bejuco Waterfall, one of the many cascades in Pico Bonito park.

▼ A beach bar at the Kimpton Grand Roatán.



## My heart pounded as I leaned into the harness and prepared to descend the waterfall.

▶ For entertainment, the lodge offers outdoor diversions, including whitewater rafting down the Cangrejal River, bird-watching in the Aguan Valley, and hiking to crystalline swimming holes. There is also a reptile and butterfly garden and a soothing sweat lodge.

After breakfast, I jumped into a 4 x 4 pickup and traveled along dirt roads to **Las Cascadas Lodge** (*doubles from \$500*) to go rappelling down a waterfall with a spunky guide, Olbin Lobo. Hiking through the dense forest, Lobo pointed out a camera trap that photographs wild jaguars, which are once again flourishing in Honduras. Midway through our 40-minute trek, rain started lashing the canopy of tamboril, mahogany, and ceiba trees. By the time we reached the 85-foot-high falls, the water seemed to have doubled in force. My heart pounded as I leaned into the harness and prepared to descend, a torrent of water pummeling my face, chest, and legs.

“Hurry, hurry,” Lobo howled from the whitewater below as adrenaline coursed through my veins. Gripping the rope tightly, I found my footing step by precarious step. “Slow and steady,” I told myself. “Don’t panic.” Every tread down felt like a gamble. I strained to hear Lobo through the storm as he coached me to jump, zigzag, and sidestep down the slick rockface. After 15 minutes, which seemed like an eternity, I finally felt solid ground beneath my soaking-wet feet. “Welcome to the jungle,” Lobo said with a high-five. 🌐