Exploring Billinghurst Cave

Location: Reqqa Point, Gozo

Type of Dive: Cavern / Cave Dive

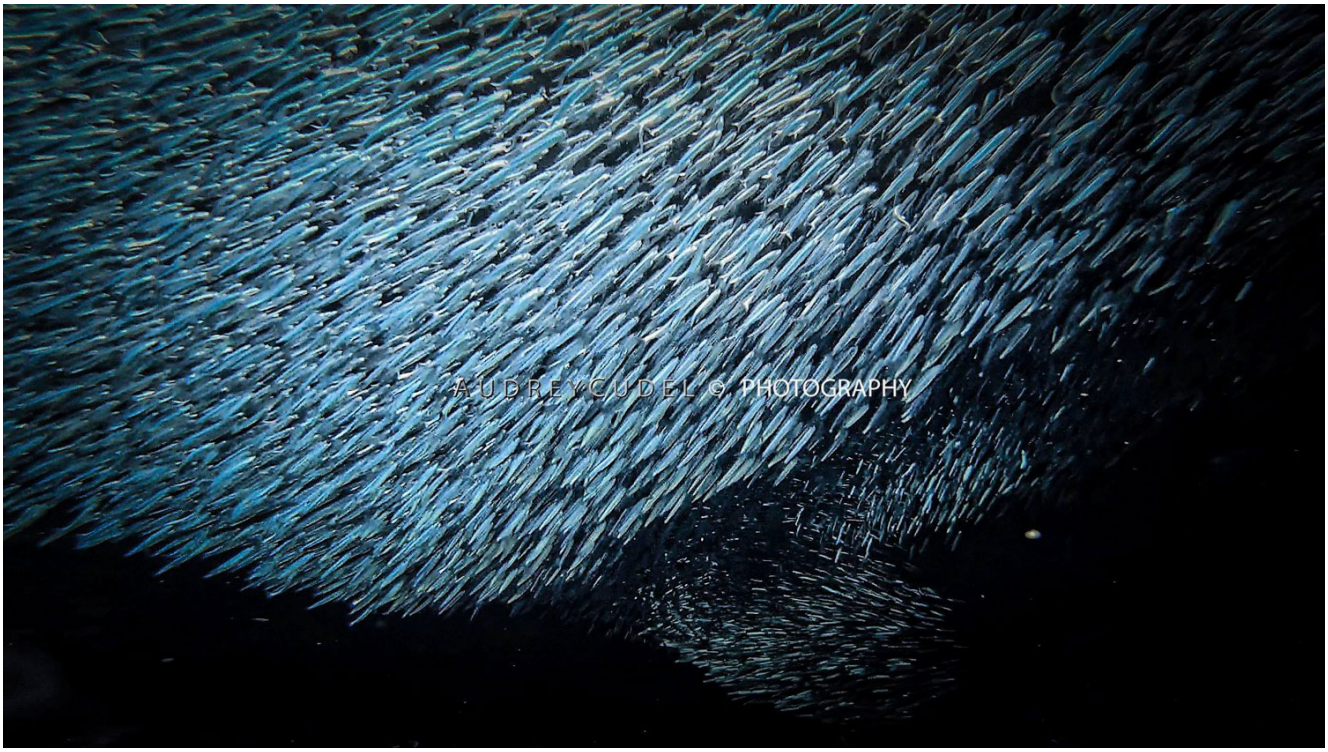
Level: Experienced Divers, preferably Cavern/Cave certified

Maximum Depth: 27 meters



While Malta tends to be famous worldwide as a prime wreck diving destination, its sister island Gozo offers a different, wide range of unique topography: cracks, tunnels, caverns and caves. At this time, Billinghurst cave remains one of the few large and rare caves identified, explored and accessible to skilled divers on the islands.





This gem was discovered in the late 80's by the Billinghurst branch of the BSAC (British Scuba Aqua Club), hence its popular name nowadays. It is also referred to as the 'Booming Cave' for the sounds of the waves crashing into its outer openings in wintertime, while the meaning of its original local name, Ghar Ix-Xih is 'Old Man's Cave'.

BRIEFING

Located on the Northern cliffs of Gozo, the geology of the dive site, both on the surface and underwater, offers a clear view of Globigerina Limestone, Blue Clay, Lower and Upper Coralline Limestone formations, which are characteristic of the Maltese islands.



The parking area stands basically above the Billinghurst dive site. This massive cave remains accessible from the shore for part of the year—as long the 5-meter high ladder overhanging its 30 meters large entrance has not been smashed by the waves generated by the frequent North-West winds on Gozo.

The cave entrance is approximately 30m wide and 20m high, with a maximum depth of 27m. It opens on 100m long penetration through the 'Railway Tunnel' formed of lower coralline limestone formation, covered with fine and fragile coral at the entrance.





Gradually, the daylight zone vanishes as the sandy and shingle bottom turns into a collapse of massive boulders at the Southern end. If venturing shallower on the Westside, the tunnel leads to a gigantic cave, a

pitch-dark dome divided in two major plateaux, one at seven meters and another at three meters depth. The dome opens to a 20m diameter, non-breathable gas chamber where one can surface breathing from his regulator.

A cave line starting at 25m in the cavern zone leads to the shallower plateaux. The cave circuit is built for one to enjoy the carved walls surrounding the dome at different levels. Some ‘arrows’ indicate all along the way the direction to the exit and shall not be removed as such.

SAFETY CHECK

This dive requires both a good level of fitness and underwater overhead environment awareness.

The 20m walk holding up to a handrail down the steep way leading to the ladder entrance may be challenging when carrying one or two cylinders. Make sure to keep hydrated before and after the dive, as there's no shaded area on the dive site nor any facility.





Weather conditions can also change rapidly on the island, making the exit sometimes impossible up the ladder. Check the weather forecast or seek advice at any of the local dive shops, they will be glad to help. Shall conditions be too challenging to exit on the North-West side, a 25-minute swim around Reqqa Point might give a backup exit option on the North-East side provided that the 10m high ladder is still in place!

Even though Billinghurst offers a wide cavern zone (daylight zone), as one penetrates deeper into the cave area, the loss of natural light might be disorientating, and the distance to the exit of the cave can be challenging if diving only with one cylinder. If planning to venture into the cave area, it is definitely recommended to dive with two cylinders (twinset/sidemount) and apply proper gas rule management in order to insure sufficient gas and backup options, in case of any equipment failure. Buoyancy and trim management are a ‘must’ in cave diving. Stowing properly all equipment also helps avoiding silt-out situations and degradation of this preserved environment.



Considering the depth of the cave entrance, no decompression limit (NDL) monitoring is also recommended. Appropriate enriched air nitrox for divers planning to stay longer in the deeper section is a wise choice.

Even though the cave line was installed for safety and training purpose, its condition and routing are not guaranteed. Make sure to keep it in sight without getting entangled into it. As for any overhead environment:

SEEK FOR PROPER TRAINING AND STOP GOING ANY FURTHER IF NOT CAVE TRAINED.

Last but not least, make sure to carry on site an oxygen kit and a cell phone in case of emergency. The nearest hyperbaric chamber is at the General Hospital of Gozo in Victoria, and you can contact DAN (which is a Maltese-based organisation, by the way) in case of emergency.

PHOTOGRAPHY ADVICE

Billinghurst cave is a fantastic playground both for wide-angle and macro lovers. As always while taking photographs, regularly monitor your gear, gas, NDL, and orientation towards the exit.

Once inside, turn back to enjoy the stunning contrasts of the blue open water area at the exit and the sunlight cutting out through the walls of the cavern zone, an ideal setting for silhouette photography.





The beautiful and fragile coral entrance is very colorful and populated with macro marine life. Groups of shrimps can also be spotted deeper into the cave zone, depending on the time of year. Check for the conger eel who has been inhabiting various spots of the cave for years. For those of you carrying proper strobes and light equipment, the cave area offers a fantastic opportunity to play with reflections of light on the surface of the gas chamber, illuminating the surrounding walls.

About the Author

Audrey is a technical diving instructor who specializes in sidemount essentials and cave diving training in Europe and Mexico. She is also renowned in the diving industry for her underwater photography, portraying deep technical divers and cave divers.

Her work has appeared in magazines and articles from Wetnotes, Octopus, Plongeurs International, Perfect Diver, Times of Malta and SDI/TDI.