

Diving in Belize



Sun Dancer live aboard at Half Moon Caye

Belize is a superb place to get to know the ocean and its creatures. The barrier reefs, atolls and mangrove marine habitats are said to house 70 coral types, 400 fish species and numerous invertebrates. Most fish, crabs and other marine creatures have specific habitats. Understanding where a certain subject likes to live, when it likes to feed, when and where it mates and all of the other routines of life under the sea will enable the diver to find the subject with greater ease. This enhances observation and also photography.

Colorful fish are perhaps the most sought in the Belize waters. Beautiful angelfish, parrotfish, basslets and triggerfish all catch a diver or snorkeler's eye. But there are more mundane fish also worth watching for their unique coloration or ability to camouflage, like seahorses or frogfish.

The invertebrate world around Belize can't be dismissed. The amazing sponge formations on virtually every dive site



give the reef form and color. Belize's corals are healthy and very competitive, sometimes growing into or on top of one another. And the crustaceans – like shrimp, crabs and lobsters – all have unique homes, and many have symbiotic relationships with other marine creatures.

A great majority of dives in Belize are Point A to Point A. That means you usually come back to the same mooring you started your dive with. Most of the barrier reef dives have a buoy set back from the outer wall on top of one of the spurs that leads out to the drop-off.

Then you swim along a coral-covered spur or down a sandy groove and out to the wall, look around at the growth on the wall and then swim back in. The growth on the outer wall is usually fed by some current and is normally lush and healthy. But the protective habitat areas of the spurs hold a lot of marine life as well. And the upper reef leading to the spurs may shelter fish and fish schools. The reef usually slopes down a bit so the exit to the wall is deeper than at the mooring pin base on the reef. The grooves are also deeper and can even be canyon-like or form swim-throughs when totally overgrown with marine life. So its go down, head to the wall, check it out and come back for a great majority of diving activity outside the reef. In some places you may do a

drift dive from one mooring to another where you head down to the wall and then drift with the current along the wall and come up at another mooring. Some sites have extremely interesting formations in the mooring areas. Divers make their second, third or fourth or night dives around the mooring as a shallower dive experience.

From the uninitiated snorkeler to the expert scuba enthusiast, Belize is the ideal destination for the ocean lover. It has seven Marine World Heritage sites within the barrier reef and offshore cayes. Certified guides and instructors are on hand and are generally trained well in divemaster and safety procedures. Many divers make return trips to explore the different environments and regions off the country.

The Best Dives

Atoll Dive

The Aquarium is one of the finest dives Lighthouse Reef has to offer, with shoals of yellowtails and lots of nice wall life.



Lighthouse Reef

Shark Dive

The best chance to see a reef shark, other than a nurse shark, may be at **The Elbow**. The currents that meet here attract lots of fish.

Barrier Reef Dive

Alpine (Sixth Cut) off South Water Caye is home to a deep double reef that attracts big turtles, nurse sharks, rays and even mantas.

Park Dive

Hol Chan Cut is a great little channel dive with plenty of fish schools and marauding eagle rays.

Critter Dive

Long Caye Ridge has many coral heads and cuts, and lots of small stuff in the sand as well. Look for shrimps, crabs and blennies.



Arrow blenny

WHAT TO BRING

The climate in Belize is tropical. You may want a light jacket or sweater at night, especially in the late fall and early winter months when a Northerly can blow in. Long-sleeved T-shirts or cotton shirts or blouses are also helpful as it can be cool at water's edge in the evenings. Many divers like to night dive, so a fleece jacket or something warm to put on after the dive is recommended. Evening clothes are casual.

For everything else in the dive areas, bring light clothing. No one wears a suit for anything – day or night. Shorts, T-shirts, swimwear and sandals or flip-flops get you by most anywhere, caye or city. Bring a hat, sunglasses and good sunscreen..

At dusk and at night, you'll want mosquito repellent with plenty of DEET. No-see-ums and mosquitoes can be a bother and are a fact of life, especially during the rainy months. Also, you will probably get bitten so bring a good anti-itch cream. It can be irritating to be scratching your ankles all through dinner.

Topless sunbathing and nudity is prohibited on the beaches.



Prepping dive gear at Hamanasi

WHAT TO BRING DIVING

Belize is a good dive trip destination because if you do forget something, there are many fully equipped dive shops that offer rental and sales, as well as repairs. If you're not picky and don't want to carry dive gear, full rental of all kit is also available.

The water is tropical and generally clear. Temperatures generally range from 78°F to 84°F (25.6°C to 28.9°C), so all that is needed is a 1.5mm to 3mm wetsuit to remain very comfortable. Heartier folks just wear skins or T-shirts. Those acclimated, like divemasters, wear 5mm to 7mm, but tourists should be fine in the 1.5mm to 3mm range.

Do NOT bring a speargun. Most diving is done in or near one of the nation's many protected areas. Fines will be imposed. Bring a camera instead.

You can also leave your gloves at home. Like many Caribbean destinations, dive shops discourage or don't allow the use of gloves, and this is becoming the norm in the entire country in order to protect delicate coral colonies.

Don't forget your 'C' card and dive log to show your host dive shop. Nitrox is offered more and more, so bring your mixed gas card if you are going to use it. Rebreather diving, rental and training is also available on Belize.

DIVE TRAINING & CERTIFICATION

Belize offers all levels of training from snorkeling and basic scuba to full instructor courses. PADI is the main agency represented on the island. TDI technical diving courses are also offered. Check with your dive shop for information on the courses you can take. Belize is perfect for Nitrox, advanced courses, marine life courses and many other specialties.

Most costs for diving are pretty much the same across the country. Remem-

ber, the cheapest package may or may not be the best and safest training. Ask questions and shop for the best situation for your needs.

DIVE OPERATORS

Most of Belize's hotels have an affiliated dive shop. In Belize, most dive shops belong to an organization for operators and guide services.

If you are going boating or diving, ensure that your company is licensed and has enough safety equipment (ie, vests) for all passengers.

LIVE ABOARDS

There are currently three live aboards operating around Belize: Peter Hughes Dancer Fleet; The Aggressor Fleet; and Nekton live aboard. These all normally visit Turneffe and Lighthouse atolls on seven-day trips.

Some do special trips to Glover's Reef or try whale shark charters in season at Gladden Spit. Check with the company website for their itineraries.

Live aboards provide a very convenient way to see the faraway sites and are highly recommended for the hard-core diver who wants to see a lot of Belize's undersea world.

SNORKELING

Snorkeling is a popular pastime as the water here is very clear, shore access is easy and the currents are normally mild. Many people come to Belize for the snorkeling alone. Experienced snorkelers love to night snorkel on Belize.

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Underwater photography is a favored activity for many divers traveling to Belize. Acceptable facilities are generally available for camera care, but it is best to bring everything you may need



for photography, charging and maintenance, including back-up chargers.

Though the country isn't well equipped to handle major photography needs, there are disposable and re-usable cameras for sale for snorkelers and shallow divers. Print film is sold at some stores and electronics shops, which may also have some low-capacity memory cards for digital cameras. Divers with higher-end cameras or professional equipment and DSLR housings should bring everything they need, including appropriate back-ups (like spare chargers).

Larger dive centers often have cameras for hire and usually have a staff pro that can provide instruction, or shoot stills or a personal video of your dive. E-6 processing is now pretty much non-existent, so ask if your dive center offers it before you leave home if you want on-the-spot results.

Companies like Aqualand Photography in San Pedro also provide a gamut of services.

The better boats have large, white Igloo style coolers that can hold many point-and-shoots, a couple of DSLR systems or some video housings. These are excellent for rinsing between dives. Ensure your shop has something similar that is full of fresh water – nothing like opening up the rinse cooler and finding it is empty.

The live aboards and a few resorts also have dedicated camera rinse and maintenance areas with blowers and charging cubicles.

Conservation



Coastal mangroves

CONSERVATION & THE ENVIRONMENT

Belize is to ecotourism what scales are to fish. They go hand-in-hand and the eco scene is actually growing. To date, 22 regions have been declared by the Department of Fisheries and the Coastal Zone Management Unit as worthy of some level of protected area status. The myriad combinations of conditions throughout the country have created different land characteristics, vegetation types and fauna. The protected coastal regions speak for themselves for all have outstanding features that are worthy of protection.

The public and private sector are in cahoots here and this has developed into a good partnership for the country. More than one-fifth of Belize's total land mass resides in a dedicated nature reserve formed to protect Belize's unique natural and cultural resources.

A fascinating population of birds, beasts and marine life – some in danger of extinction – reside in the nature reserves.

BELIZE'S NATURE RESERVES

Belize Zoo & Tropical Education Center

The Belize Zoo was founded in 1983 to provide a home for 17 animals that had been displaced in the making of a documentary film. Since then, its population has grown to 125 mammals, birds and reptiles indigenous to Belize – many of which are endangered. In fact, visitors may glimpse animals they never knew existed – from the crested guam to the collared peccary – protected in their natural habitat and secured within 29 acres of tropical savanna. The zoo is located 29 miles west of Belize City on the Western Highway.

Don't act like you know how to take photos here or you'll be deemed photography 'professional' and charged anywhere from \$100 to \$500 – even more for video. If you have a camera with a fancy lens, keep a low profile and/or voice your displeasure over this discriminatory policy. You're already paying a zoo entry fee and a lot for a tour guide.

Birding & the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary

Can birding become a habit? Belize has 540 bird species and with over 40% of its area – from hardwood forest to coastal savannas – designated protected, it offers some of the best birding anywhere.

Thousands of birds congregate in the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary's network of inland lagoons, swamps, and waterways. Its inhabitants include boat-billed herons; the black-bellied whistling duck; snail kites; and Jabiru storks, the largest birds in the western hemisphere. The sanctuary is 30 miles northwest of Belize City.

Rudi Burgos (rudibird@gmail.com) is an Audubon-level birdwatcher and spotter who guides out of Belize City and can show you 200 bird species in the city area alone. Contact him for tours.

The Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary

Known as 'The Jaguar Preserve', Cockscomb Basin is the only habitat of its kind in the world and those visiting do see jaguar tracks and even wild cats. Situated in the shadows of the Maya Mountains, the sanctuary encompasses some 100,000 acres of moist forest that reaches the summit of Victoria Peak, Belize's highest point. In addition to the elusive jaguar, the Cockscomb Basin is home to 290 species of birds and some of the most beautiful flora and fauna in the world. The entrance is along the Southern Highway in the Stann Creek District.

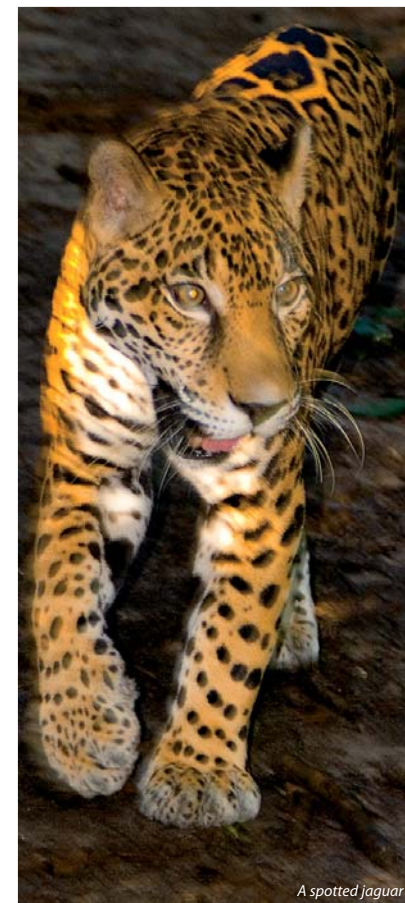
The Community Baboon Sanctuary

This unique habitat is a privately owned cooperative created in association with the World Wildlife Fund. The sanctuary embodies the Belizean spirit of coexistence with nature. Through a grassroots effort, the villagers and landowners have committed to preserving the habitat necessary to ensure a healthy popu-

lation of black howler monkeys. It is on the banks of the Belize River, 30 miles west of Belize City.

Belize Butterfly Centers

Belize boasts four butterfly breeding farms: Chaa Creek Butterfly Center, San Ignacio, Shipstern Butterfly Breeding Center, Orange Walk; Tropical Wings Nature Center, Cayo; and Fallen Stones Butterfly Ranch, in Toledo. Belize's colorful butterfly population is sustained, increased, and bred for export. Tours showcasing the four stages of the butterfly's life are available.



A spotted jaguar

Health & Safety



The chamber in San Pedro is right at the airport

Overall, Belize is a healthy place to visit. For the treatment of minor problems, there are local clinics, such as San Carlos Medical Clinic (Pharmacy and Pathology Lab; ☎ 226-2918; Pescador Drive, San Pedro, Ambergris Caye), and also on-call doctors through hotels, and the Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital (☎ 223-1548, www.khmf.org; Princess Margaret Drive, Belize City).

For serious problems, it is best to get a Medivac to Houston, Miami or New Orleans.

PRE-TRIP PREPARATION

Shops in Belize offer equipment for sale and rental, and also equipment repair. If you are using your own gear, get your regulator tuned up before leaving home if you haven't used it for over six months. You may also want to do some local check-out dives, even if just in a pool.

It's worth exercising prior to the trip in order to face the challenges of boat diving and the ins and outs and walks as-

sociated with shore diving. Swimming, hiking with a backpack and jogging will help increase fitness and stamina.

Make sure your passport is not about to expire or hasn't already expired. You can't get into Belize without one and you can't get back home even if you do manage to get into Belize.

PRE-DIVE SAFETY GUIDELINES

Regardless of skill level, you should be in good physical condition and know your limitations. If you are uncertain as to which category you fit, ask the advice of a local dive instructor. He or she is best qualified to assess your abilities based on the prevailing dive conditions at any given site. Ultimately, you must decide if you are capable of making a particular dive, depending on your level of training, recent experience and physical condition, as well as water conditions at the site. Remember that water conditions can change at any time, even during a dive.

MEDICAL & RECOMPRESSION FACILITIES

A hyperbaric Recompression Chamber (emergency ☎ 226-3195; sssbelize@aol.com; Subaquatics of Belize, San Pedro) is located adjacent to the airport on Ambergris Caye. This facility is run by highly trained staff and is aided by a number of dive professionals working on the island. Divers are sometimes encouraged to contribute toward this facility.

Your DAN affiliate should also be consulted in the event of a diving accident or diving illness symptoms, as should your your dive shop manager so they can react to the emergency and set things in motion for necessary treatment.

DAN

Divers Alert Network (DAN) is an international membership association of individuals and organizations sharing a common interest in diving and safety. DAN operates a 24-hour diving emergency hotline in the US at ☎ 919-684-8111 or ☎ 919-684-4DAN (which accepts collect calls in a dive emergency). DAN does not directly provide medical care; however, it does provide advice on early treatment, evacuation, and hyperbaric treatment of diving-related injuries.

All divers should have DAN or some similar insurance. Some dive companies and live aboards actually require it, so take care of your diving insurance before you head to Belize.

Rating System for Dives and Divers

The dive sites in this book are rated according to divers at a particular time, diving at a particular place. These are not absolute ratings. For instance, someone unfamiliar with prevailing conditions might be considered a novice diver at one dive area but an intermediate diver at another, more familiar location.

Novice:

A novice diver generally fits the following profile:

- basic scuba certification from an internationally recognized certifying agency
- dives infrequently (less than one trip a year)
- logged fewer than 25 total dives
- little or no experience diving in similar waters and conditions
- dives no deeper than 60ft (18).

*An instructor or divemaster should accompany a novice diver on all dives.

Intermediate:

An intermediate diver generally fits the following profile:

- may have participated in some form of continuing diver education
- logged between 25 and 100 dives
- no deeper than 130ft (40m)
- has been diving within the past six months in similar waters and conditions.

Advanced:

An advanced diver generally fits the following profile:

- advanced certification
- has been diving for more than 2 years; logged more than 100 dives
- dived within the past six months in similar waters and conditions.

Marine Life



HAZARDOUS MARINE LIFE

The diversity of marine life extends to dangerous marine animals. Most of these are quite small and not ferocious, but highly venomous. There are cone shells, stonefish, scorpionfish, stingrays, hydroids, fire corals, urchins and many other creatures that can adversely affect a diver.

Divers should read or ask about which creatures will be commonly seen and should know first aid procedures in the rare event a person is wounded by a marine animal. Be especially careful on night dives. Carrying proper antiseptic ointments greatly helps.

Sharks

Sharks are encountered on few dives in Belize. Attacks are rare and usually only occur in some misguided feeding attempt, or on fishermen spearing fish. In the event a shark does become aggressive, it is sometimes wise to rise to

a shallower depth, if possible, to get out of its territory. If a shark comes too close, stop and face the animal and watch it closely and quietly. Be prepared to push it away with a camera, knife, spear or tank. Treatment for bites is to stop any bleeding, reassure the patient, treat for shock and seek immediate medical treatment.

Bristle Worms

While they may seem soft and fluffy, they can deliver a painful sting. Each of the bristle worm's body segments has a pair of small parapodia, or paddle-shaped appendages. These have embedded tiny hairs or bristle-like pieces. They have well-developed sense organs with a kind of head with eyes, antennae and sensory palps. Pick out the hairs using tweezers or duct tape and submerge the sting in very hot water for 30 to 60 minutes. If the victim has a history of venom allergies, seek immediate medical treatment.

Fire Coral

It looks pretty with its caramel color, but it is like putting your hand on a cigarette. It actually has tiny 'hairs' that burn like crazy and can swell up afterward. This mechanism is to defend against munching parrotfish but divers sometimes get tagged as well. If stung by their powerful nematocysts, the skin will burn and itch. Rinse with seawater or water and apply vinegar or methylated alcohol on the sting. In a severe case antihistamines can help and seek immediate medical treatment.

Jellyfish

The stings of a jelly are released by nematocysts contained in the trailing tentacles. The rule of thumb is the longer the tentacles, the more painful the sting. Keep an eye out for jellyfish in the Lac while snorkeling in the open ocean. On the outer reefs, man-o-war and sea wasps are found. Most stings can be treated with vinegar. Some people do react adversely to jellyfish stings, similar to those who are allergic to bee stings. Be prepared to administer CPR and seek medical aid.



Barracuda

Barracuda bites are also quite rare. The fish tend to be attracted to shiny objects and have been known to attack in murky water. Like sharks, this is normally a case of mistaken identity and invariably an accident.

On Belize's reefs, small schools and individual blackbar barracuda will frequently be encountered. There are also



many of the larger great barracuda. These fish should not be teased. Their bites can be damaging. Stop any bleeding, reassure the patient, treat for shock and seek immediate medical treatment.

Stonefish/Scorpionfish

These fish will be seen commonly in sandy and rubble areas in Belize's waters and on night dives. They inject their venom with spines on their back. The wound can also be quite painful with a lot of swelling. To treat, wash the wound, immerse in water as hot as the victim can stand for 60 to 90 minutes and seek medical aid.

Sea Urchins

These spiny critters can be a real problem. The stings from the spines can range from irritating to highly intense. Spines can also break off inside the skin. Avoid contact with urchins and remain vigilant in the areas they frequent, especially at night. Treat by administering CPR until the pain subsides. Seek medical advice and use antibiotics where advised. Spines may have to be surgically removed.

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