

BELIZE

Inside the world's second-largest barrier reef, English-speaking Belize sports three major atolls. Good diving is reachable from live-aboards or from resorts on the offshore cayes. The deeply-cut, spur-and-groove coral reefs of the rapidly developing Ambergris Caye are interesting but disappointing to many experienced divers. Outer cayes have better diving. Take a couple days to visit Mayan ruins, the Jaguar Preserve, or take river tours. Belize is about a two-hour flight from Houston. Belize lies in the hurricane belt and takes frequent hits. Belize lies in the hurricane belt and takes frequent hits. In October 2001, Hurricane Iris capsized the Wave Dancer, killing seventeen divers from the Richmond, VA dive club and three Belizean crewmembers.

Ambergris Caye

Ambergris Divers, Xanadu Resort, January 2005 Jack & Paula Harris (jack@harrishobbies.com), Richardson, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 79 F., calm, choppy, surge. Pro Tech's big boat however was in the shop so they had to hook us up with Ambergris Divers for the trip to the Blue Hole and also Turneffe. What a hose job. These bozos limited our dives to 30 minutes and we were coming up with 1500 psi. I asked why and they said it was to get back before dark. Why that had anything to do with it is my guess. We left to go there an hour before sunrise. Not a good deal to travel two hours in the boat only

to use half your tank. I told the guy to look at my gauge that I had 1500 psi left and he just shrugged his shoulders. I mentioned this to Peter at Pro Tech and he said he would talk with them. We weren't charged for our night dive so maybe that was his way of taking care of our complaint.

Amigos del Mar, Captain Morgan's, August 2004, Keri Hendry (deadheadiver@earthlink.net), Ft.

Myers Beach, FL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, choppy. We actually left Captain Morgan's and stayed in San Pedro because we liked the town so much. Real laid back and everyone was friendly. Dove with Ambergris Caye Divers but switched to Amigos del Mar due to too many people on the boats with my father and I the only ones with experience. On Amigos del Mars' boats we only had 8 divers and the two divemasters would separate the newbies so the rest of us didn't get bored. They were attentive and made sure we saw everything. The Blue Hole was worth the experience (deep, dark and cold) and the two wall sites we dove afterwards were mind blowing in vis and abundance of life. Dad and I, being old Florida crackers, just dove in our T-shirts. While we looked silly, other than at the Blue Hole site we were comfortable. I thought the food was great everywhere. I like things spicy and they had no trouble accommodating that. One negative thing — why are the flights so expensive? UW Photography Comments: Boats only had one wash tank and though there was a camera shop in San Pedro, they couldn't help us when our digital died @140 feet in the Blue Hole.

Amigos Del Mar, Seven Seas Resort, February 2005, Rory L. Cox (rosuzq@quik.com), Chehalis, WA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 75 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F., choppy. Ambergris Caye was a wonderful adventure. Diving was great, with close sites. Pick-up at our dock at 9:00 a.m., short run [5 to 10 min] to dive site, back roll off boat, 80 to 100 ft dive for 45 to 50 minutes led. After dive, a quick run to shop for surface interval, fresh fruit, coconut, coffee, water provided. Second dive also short run, 50 to 65 ft for 45 to 50 minutes. After dive, delivery to our dock. Amigos del Mar handled all the gear, returning it to the shop after each day and cleaning. Most diving was spur and groove canyon, coral and fish life was comparable to Cozumel, without the current. We also dove the Blue Hole, deep dive, lots of sharks, the other two wall dives on lighthouse reef and "booby bird sanctuary" at lunch were outstanding. Seven Seas Resort a laid back 6 room hotel. One bedroom with kitchens, close to town and shopping. San Pedro was a delight to explore with plenty of restaurants and sites. No paved roads, golf carts and bicycles for transportation. We arrived on the night of "Carnival" watched and joined in the local tradition of face painting. A worthy day trip is to "Caye Caulker", short boat ride to island, more of a "backpackers byway," notable lunch at "Don Corleone's," great food at Fido's, Elvi's kitchen, Rico's and el Divino. Also, visit the sausage factory and buy a smoked chicken and the outside rotisserie for a fresh cooked one at the Indian restaurant. We loved the dive shop, the resort, the food, the weather but most of all

the friendliness and generosity of the people. UW Photography Comments: Separate rinse bucket for cameras Plenty of fresh water at shop (dive sites were close, return to shop with fresh fruit and coconut during surface interval).

Amigos del Mar, Perla Escondida Condominium, March 2005, Greg Yarnik (gregyarnik@comcast.net),

Palatine, IL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 79 F., choppy, surge, currents. Friendly, dusty, laid-back island. Secure a reservation prior to your trip on either Mayan or Tropic Air (the two carriers that fly from Belize City airport to Ambergris) to bypass long, sweaty lines for their tickets in Belize City. We stayed at 2-year old Perla Escondida Condos south of the San Pedro Town airstrip and it was a good choice (2 BR, 2 Bath, AC, full kitchen, ocean-side patio and groomed beach, washer/dryer), just far enough outside town for peace and quiet and only a 10-minute golf cart or bike ride into town (no paved roads and no rental cars, but plenty of taxis. Restaurants are mostly good to excellent with varieties of cuisine to please any palate, although local fresh catches are your best bet. After consulting Undercurrent and other sources, we chose Amigos del Mar and were happy we did. Other than forgetting to pick us up at Woody's dock (2 doors north of our condo) on our first dive day (one has to expect a minor glitch here and there), our dive week with Amigos was exceptional and problem-free. They picked us up daily at Woody's dock at 9:00 a.m. for a 2-tank local dive just east of the barrier reef only .5 miles offshore. Accessing the dive sites was dicey at times due to

severe winds and chop/surge. Seasick-prone divers (I count myself in this group) should prepare for the worst, but the good part of the ride out is that it's only 15 minutes long and Amigos staff makes it easy for those with queasy stomachs to quickly gear up and backward roll. Healthy spur and groove coral-dominated dive sites. Several sites require a \$5 fee to the government for conservation purposes, but once one observes the reef quality, it will be money well-spent. Particularly interesting are the more distant sites Turneffe Elbow, Lighthouse Reef, and those off Half Moon Caye (an uninhabited island sanctuary for protected Booby and Frigate birds that is well worth the visit during a surface interval). The famous Blue Hole is worth one visit as the cave-like geology is interesting, but you will not likely get to see much in the way of marine life on the dive. All the above sites, must be accessed on day-long trips aboard a fully-appointed 48' cruiser that handles the crossings with ease and comfort. A tasty and filling buffet lunch, as well as drinks and snacks, are included on day trips. Amigos will stow and rinse your regs/BCs/fins each day of your dive week and has your unit set up, correctly weighted, and ready to don each morning. All dives are low-impact drift dives, and on choppy days, it can be hazardous exiting the water, but Amigos staff does a great job safely getting everyone (during our week, no more than 8-10 divers) aboard. Separate rinse bucket on boats for cameras; no dry storage on boats.

**Aquadives, Aquamarina Suites,
December 2004, Richard Kollodge
(rck1960@cs.com), New York, NY.**

Experience: 51-100 dives. Water: 78 to 79 F., choppy, surge. Bedroom with two comfortable beds, kitchen/dining area and living room equipped with a sofa bed and TV that carries about 50 cable channels from the US and other countries. A balcony overlooked the hotel's courtyard, small pool and the sea. A small restaurant adjacent to the pool area served solid meals at competitive prices, and the pool side bar served weak cocktails from 8 a.m. through about 11 p.m. A little beach fronts the hotel. The water at the shoreline is full of weeds, so wading really isn't possible. Swimming is possible from the hotel's dock. Staff was extremely helpful, courteous and friendly. Because the property doubles as a time-share condominium, I had to endure a brief, low-key, low-pressure sales pitch one evening. Limited hot water. Each unit appears to have its own small (five-gallon?) water heater, which empties after the shower runs for a minute or two. Aquadives frustrated and disappointed. I told the man working the desk that day that we were interested in doing the 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. dives each day. The response was, "It doesn't matter." We asked him to explain what that meant, but we were repeatedly met with the same response. When we informed the desk person that we both needed to rent some equipment, we were again told, "It doesn't matter." I ignored his reply and said I needed a BC and regulator. He went to the racks and returned with obviously worn-out equipment. My travel partner needed similar equipment as well as a wet suit. When he asked for a full-length suit, the desk person again responded, "It doesn't matter." Eventu-

ally, someone else came to the desk to finish outfitting us and to finalize our paperwork. The new desk person brought my travel partner the only full-length suit they had, with a gaping hole in the back. So my travel partner had to settle for a shortie, which was inadequate for the 78-degree water. The next day, an Aquadives boat collected us from the dock at our hotel and brought us to their own dock in front of the Sun Breeze Hotel, where others came on board. We traveled outside the reef, only five minutes away to our first dive site. When my travel partner assembled his equipment, his second-stage started free-flowing, which could not be controlled by holding a finger over the mouthpiece. The divemaster told him not to worry and to use the equipment anyway. When we entered the water, it was apparent that my travel partner's first stage was also leaking air. The low-pressure hose to my BC had a leak, and the air-dump valves in the back were broken. I, too, had a leak in my regulator. My travel partner's leaks were so bad that he ran out of air long when I still had 1,600 PSI in my tank. Other equipment problems plagued us on every dive: blown o-rings, leaks, broken pressure gauges, and so on. Dive masters seemed competent, but their laissez-faire approach concerned me. On our final dive, the dive master apparently became bored and returned to the boat 20 minutes before the divers and didn't bother to alert anyone. Once, the dive master got into a heated argument with one of the office staff. On another occasion, the office staff were fighting with each other. Four of our six dives were disappointing because of

extensive reef damage and an absence of marine life. Two dives were much better (Hol Chan Cut and Tacklebox Canyon), with healthier coral and more fish. Visibility was about 60 feet.

Bottom Time, The Villas at Banyan Bay, August 2004, Nunzio Calce (Nunzioc@imsi.com), Bronx, NY.

Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 90 to 120 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. Nurse sharks and tiny cleaner shrimp and tarpon somersaulting and feeding at night and huge moray eels and giant hermit crabs and stingrays and jacks and huge groupers and snappers — all during a two-three hour outing to Hol Chan and Shark Ray Alley! The divemasters/captains (Eddie on one boat, Ramon on another, and Albert on a specialty dive) take care of all of your gear, set it up and haul it up while you hang in the water holding the ladder. They are relaxed, knowledgeable, pleasant. We had great times just chatting away with them. Great for snorkelers and all water sports enthusiasts. Many incredible topside excursions and wildlife. Mangroves, Mayan Ruins, cave river tubing, a jungle spa, a zoo and horseback riding are one-day excursions, two trips to see all that. We used SeaDuced and they were knowledgeable and friendly, ask for Sylvan. We ate at many places, and every meal was delicious! None, however, topped the beach seafood barbeque arranged by the dive shop and prepared by Albert — shirts and sandals are all you need. There is a small casino, one or two dance clubs and several bars. Heavy mosquito activity and sporadic rain, usually 15-20 minutes. A can of Off and a light rain

jacket will be appreciated. The water by the shore can be silty, due to the sea grass that is protected for the benefit of the sealife, but a three-minute boat ride and you're atop crystalline blue water reefs. The Villas at Banyan Bay were comfortable, convenient and relaxed, great for families and couples. They had the best beachfront of the resorts we saw, a nice three level pool, beautiful rooms, friendly staff, a great restaurant, a dive shop a 30 second walk from most rooms, internet access in the lobby, and golf cart rental. San Pedro is only a 5 minute drive. We found prices to be reasonable, and often cheap. English is the official language, and we were never hassled to purchase crafts by the locals. They were marvelous, friendly people. See our video at: <http://media.putfile.com/Belize-Movie-for-Friends-Small>

Bottom Time, Banyan Bay Resort, September 2005, William Walton (billwalton1648@msn.com), Beaumont, TX. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, choppy. Banyan Bay Resort is one mile south of San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. A 1,000 sq. ft. two bedroom, two bath condo (pool view) goes for about \$185 per night in the low season and around \$240 per night in the high season. Plenty of room for a medium size family, or two couples. A fold-out couch in the living room could make it workable for even three couples. Bottom Time is 50 yards away at the adjacent pier, and is the best operation. Eddy or Rudy — personnel attention and great guides, each one different and emphasized whatever you requested, within the limits of safety and logistics. My son and I were the only ones on the boat

for a week (pre-Hurricane Rita), but we received service that you would expect with a full boat. We rented a golf cart that widened our post-diving activities around San Pedro. \$135 per week, low season price. Call in advance in the high season. Best restaurants were Papi's Diner and Caramba. Elvi's Kitchen was also excellent, but the serving's were small and the prices seem to be going up. Friendly locals; remote (yet close) location; beautiful reef that is only 500 yards offshore (short boat rides with one hour stop in town); nurse sharks, turtles, sting rays; many things to do for nondivers. Because we live in Beaumont, Texas, our lives were threatened by Hurricane Rita (we came out OK). We made numerous calls to the mainland each day...over 200 during the week. Though we used "ATT Direct," the resort's policy was/is to charge \$2.50 per call. This made our phone bill during our visit over \$400! When the management of Banyan Bay realized that we were hurricane "victims," they waived the charge for the phones.

Casa Playa Blanca, June 2005, Linda Briggs (2lbriggs@verizon.net), Carrollton, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, choppy, surge. I don't think owner Gaz Cooper knows how rude and unaccommodating his staff is. All my dealings with Gaz prior to the trip were great. His office person is service oriented. However, once on the boat, it's a different story. Boat captain drove the boat recklessly including going way too fast at night in choppy seas. We had to tell him more than once to slow down. He made rude comments about the weight of some of our female divers. On dives

there were few attempts to show us any critters. The divemaster was obviously embarrassed by the actions of the boat captain. He was new as resort staff but was the most friendly and helpful of anyone. The so-so food at the resort was \$20 and no menu. You ate what was there. However, you could take a \$10 water taxi into San Pedro and buy food at the grocers or just eat in town. No cooking as the only air conditioning was in the bedrooms. A/C in my room didn't cool much. We asked to set up our own equipment but boat captain didn't like this as it cut into his off time. Crew lacked care when crew moved equipment around the boat. I took a group of 14 people and not one was satisfied with the service. We had 2 divers who only got to make 1 dive due to ear problems. They asked if they could be charged for only the dives they made but they had to pay the full diver package for the week. Cameras were not handled with care by boat staff. No camera table on boat. Rinse bucket was 5 gallon bucket in which some cameras didn't fit all the way into.

Gaz Coopers, Playa Blanca Beach Resort, April 2005, Bruce Wallace (laos61@excite.com), Indianapolis, IN. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, choppy. Playa Blanca Resort is 5.5K from San Pedro — water taxi is only way to town. Buy groceries when you arrive with resort pickup (Andy or Oscar). All rooms are suites with full kitchen. Resort has kitchen and 3 meals each day (inclusive available, but expensive). Several great restaurants within 5 minute walk. The barrier reef just offshore is a 5 minute boat ride. Sharks are all over the place.

Southern stingrays everywhere. Friendly groupers. Reef fish abound in every imaginable color and size. Special photos and video of juvenile spotted drums were worth the trip. Wife made friends with a tame nurse shark who “played” with her for over 30 minutes — shark loved having her tummy rubbed with handfuls of sand. Gaz Cooper runs the best small dive operation. Andy, Oscar and the staff are excellent, professional and caring. Typical separate tub for “Cameras Only.” No shore facilities for film or digital.

Gaz Coopers, Playa Blanca Dive Resort, June 2005, Bruce Wallace (laos61@excite.com), Indianapolis, IN. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 79 to 83 F., choppy, surge. Second time with Playa Blanca/Gaz Cooper. Great DMs (especially Andy, Oscar and Elijah). Gaz is with guests and willing to make arrangements for whatever is necessary for comfort. Food at resort is great and there are three excellent (\$\$\$) restaurants within 5 minutes walk along beach. Rooms are huge with full kitchen, hot water showers and air conditioning. Dive operation is basic with small groups (no more than 6 total on boat). Mooring buoys always used. Dive briefing after one monitored checkout dive — “You know da rules — no lotta talkin — suit up once — let's dive!” The dive sites are pristine. You name the fish, it's there. Chummed for nurse sharks and groupers — 50 minutes of “hands on” fun and frolic! The “alley” had 3kt current. Not fun — lotsa work. On three out of six days, our surface interval was in town (San Pedro) for lunch and a little shopping than back

out for another deep dive (90+) and a third dive along the reef on the way back to the resort. Night dive at Hol Chan — outstanding (Sharks, groupers, rays, octos, turtles, lobsters, etc, etc, etc.) All dives were acceptable for beginners (pushing edge) all the way to advanced. Many swim throughs (some tight) and accompanied by nurse sharks (a little unnerving for my wife). Most dives are multi-level with max at 110' at bottom of reef cuts up reef walls to 70'. Reef dwellers abound and there are always several barracuda and morays hanging around to make your day exciting. UW Photography Comments: Excellent handling of camera equipment by staff. Fresh water tub in shade. No film processing.

Patojo's Scuba Center, Seven Seas, July 2005, Gerry McAtavey, Roanoke, VA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, choppy. San Pedro is suffering growing pains but still holds its small island town charm. Seven Seas Resort is small clean and convenient. Staff is exceptional and knowledgeable, from restaurant recommendations, to having beer delivered to your unit at distributor not store price. They offer the "Key to the City" card for discounts at restaurants, shops, dive operators and more. Nominal charge for water end electricity for the week. Patojo's is a small dive operation, well run and fun.

Pro Tech, Xanadu Resort, December 2004, Jack & Paula Harris (jack@harrishobbies.com), Richardson, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 79 F., calm, choppy, surge. The resort was

excellent. Very friendly folks and the rooms were great. The maid not only cleaned the room but if we had dishes washed them daily. The food on the island was great but way expensive. A two liter diet Pepsi at the store was \$4.50. A typical good meal for two was \$40 to \$50 including tip. Take plenty of money if you want to eat well. Pro Tech careful handling the cameras and did keep a rinse tank for such.

Pro Tech Dive Centre, January 2005, Michael N. Hofman (mhofman@jmo yerlandscaping.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F., choppy. Located at the Belize Yacht Club. This provide Nitrox, specialize in smaller boats and will allow you to dive your computer and your air consumption. When I completed my dive at 70 minutes (still with air but cold), the dive master asked if I was "experienced". Go over the details with the manager or before you leave the dock. Once I did discuss my desire to dive longer, the dive master was fine and we had a nice dive. They took just the two of us (my snorkeling mate and myself) out for the dive! By the way, if the management at your resort tries to steer you to another dive operation, resist — they may be getting a commission from the bigger dive operations.

Sun Breeze Hotel, January 2005, Karen Spruill, Oriental, NC. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 80 to 90 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, choppy, no currents. Our hotel was okay, nothing extravagant, but nice. We had a small number of divers each day. The town was okay, not a lot going on. Islanders get around by bicycles and

golf carts, not many cars. Nice people. Food was okay, some really good. The fresh fruit was the best! Groceries were expensive because it is all imported. Diving was nice. Good reefs, not as good as Bonaire. We had to go outside the reef system to dive and at times it was choppy getting out. Still nice. We went to mainland Belize by boat and went to the zoo and a cave tubing trip. That was fun.

Sun Breeze Hotel, May 2005, Vicki Jes-sup, Wichita, KS. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, choppy, surge, no currents. The reefs off Ambergris Caye are in terrible shape; little color, a lot of debris (probably left over from the last hurricane), lots of dead coral and sponges. The only place I've seen less fish life is in our local sand pit! We were disappointed in the diving, and don't understand why we hadn't read anything about the health (or lack thereof) of this highly touted diving destination. The Sun Breeze Hotel is fine, and the service and staff are topnotch. The local people are friendly and local food good and inexpensive. We loved the island and the atmosphere, but we're serious divers and will not return.

Belize City

Hugh Parkey's Belize Dive Connection, November 2004, Paul and Donna Lima (plintn@hotmail.com), Christiana, TN. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to F, choppy. We were participating in the Norwegian Cruise Line's Dive-In program and had the good fortune to draw Roscoe as our divemaster. We were picked up at our

ship, which enabled us to avoid lines for the tenders to shore. Cruise ships in Belize City anchor well offshore due to shallow water. We had a long, scenic ride to Turneffe Atoll, with a thorough briefing about the country, the area and the dive sites. The boat was roomy, clean and comfortable and there was plenty of setup room, dry storage, as well as choices of seating. We set up our own equipment for the first dive and the crew then transferred BCs and regs to new tanks for the second dive. Members of the crew were always available to help with doffing and donning equipment. You put on your equipment and then walked to the stern of the boat where the crew helped with your fins before taking a giant stride into the water. The dive sites were at the edge of walls with little to no current and we spent the first part of each dive on the wall, then moving to spur and groove formations on the shallower areas of the reef. Many sponges and soft corals but fewer fish that we are used to in Kona where every puka (hole) is full of life. The surface interval was spent researching the fish we saw in several reference books on board. Refreshments included soft drinks in returnable glass bottles, fresh pineapple, chips and salsa and delicious bread. The crew was laid back, fun and professional. We never felt any time pressure either under the water or on the surface (unlike the day before in Roatan) and were delivered back to the ship in plenty of time before departure.

Blackbird Caye

Blackbird Caye Resort, November 2004, Mark Schacht

(email@markschacht.com), Albany, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, calm. The week began with an approximately 90 minute boat trip to the Turneffe island site of Blackbird Caye Resort, which leaves 3:30- 4:00pm Wednesdays and Saturdays from Belize City. If your plane is scheduled to arrive later than 2 p.m. (and you'd be prudent to assume delays if you're cutting it close), then come in the day before. Blackbird will pick you up for free from major Belize City hotels (we recommend the Radisson Ft. George). Our week stay coincided with the last week of the 'shoulder season' so we get cheaper rates, and there were fewer divers (only 2 other divers + 2 snorkelers). Schedule is for 3 daily dives, usually 10-15 minutes from resort, with surface intervals back at the resort (usually spent dozing in our hammock on the porch of our the beachfront cabana). Our four experienced, computer divers (I am a PADI/SDI Divemaster) all were also photographers (SLRs and video), so we managed to "push" the usual 50 minute dives to 60 minutes or more. Divemasters Nadia and Glen were competent and 'hands off' once they determined our skill level, and would let us 'go off' just a bit get pix and film of the occasional stingray or hawksbill turtle, knowing we could be relied upon to know where the group was (slowly headed) and to responsibly rejoin it. When we returned, Nadia or Glen always in sight, and our drift dive continued. The mid-week trip to Blue Hole (lots of sharks, including one large bull, in addition to the stalagmites in the caves at 130 ft.) and Half Moon

Caye (a fabulous, pristine wall dive) were a nice change of pace. The end-of-the-week trip down to the "Elbow" (the southern-most point of the Turneffe Atoll and a major fish aggregation point because of converging currents) got a bit spoiled by iffy weather, but kudos to Captain Junior, Divemaster Nadia and Resort Manager Glen for at least initially green lighting our trip (with us understanding that either the Captain or the divemaster could call it off if weather deteriorated further). As it turned out, there was no rain, little current, and few fish aggregating, but there was a huge school of horse eye jacks which came up through us...Lots of great video there! No TV, no telephone (other than the staff's emergency satellite phone), but comfortable private cabanas with A/C. Bring strong DEET-based bug spray (which you'll need only when the trades die), and stay in Belize afterwards to visit Mayan Ruins (in Tikal, Guatemala; Lamanai); the Hummingbird Highway National Parks (Blue Hole—yes, another one — and 5 Blues Lake); and Placencia to the south. UW Photography Comments: Fresh water tubs on board; careful handling of camera housings by crew; each photographer handed his or her camera housing upon entering water.

Blackbird Resort, April 2005, Carmen Thomas Morse (isink@cableone.net, Boise, ID. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. The diving is better than it was in 1999 following the hurricane that produced mud slides in Guatemala and Belize. The sponges and corals in places are incredible. Saw 1-2 mantas/day, and some adult/juvenile combinations.

Many nurse sharks and many sea turtles (some huge!). The weather was windy, making for some choppy surface conditions and challenging boat entrances and exits. Only 3 other couples. The staff took great care of us. The dive-master, Elias, was superb. The acting manager, Ken, was fantastic. When we arrived, we were assigned to a cabana with older furnishings, thatch roof, and a not cooperative bathroom and sparking air conditioner. When we told Ken about our concern, he switched us to a room that had more modern appliances. Blackbird charges additional to visit the Blue Hole (\$70/person), which was not represented to us before our arrival. They attempt to size the boat according to the number of divers making the trip. They almost had us and 2 other couples make the trip in their regular, uncovered dive boats. When we explained that we had paid the fee and did not want to roast in the sun without a canopy for protection, they changed their mind and we took the larger covered boat to the Blue Hole. Visibility at the Blue Hole was only 20-40 feet. There were many boats and divers, which detracted from the experience. We encountered at least 1 bull shark along with the usual black tipped, which made for an edgier dive. Currents were strong at the Elbow, and we dove that site the morning after an intense rain. The flush of fresh water resulted in a pool of opaque water slowly moving through the saltier sea water. Reduced visibility, but we still saw 2 bottlenose dolphins and some good pelagic fish. The resort has added an airstrip. They had to clear a fair amount of vegetation and the strip is not much

above sea level. It will be interesting to see how long it lasts and whether it disrupts the movements of the crocodiles in the lagoon (if anyone monitors this). It also appears to have been built with insufficient sediment capture devices, and looks like it will 'bleed' sediment into the adjacent lagoon and shoreline. I hope I am wrong. Regardless, I hope the resort will monitor this and fix any problems that may impair diving. Their staff is friendly and capable, and the dive sites look to be in good shape. Food quality has decreased since we were last there — its was more bland and with fewer offerings.

Caye Caulker

Belize Diving Services, Seaside Cabanas, June 2005, Rich Ellmer, Austin, TX. Experience: 570 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 feet. Water: 84 to 87 F, calm and flat, choppy, surge. Seaside cabanas at water taxi dock were nice. We bought our own drinking water at grocery store 100 feet away — \$2.00 US/gallon. Hotel located at the center of activity. Sandbox restaurant (50 feet away) opened at 7:00 AM for breakfast; good food, affordable. We could walk to each end of island in 15 minutes. Easy 50-minute boat ride from Belize City. www.go-cayecaulker.com. Belize Diving Services looked good online and by phone, even on initial visit. However, everything our group of 10 had agreed to was disregarded. 1. Their rates included all gear; our discount for providing all gear except weights, belts and tanks was 5% on a 2-tank dive — we got a 10% discount and T-shirt if we dived 3 days; 5% off a \$60 or \$70 2-tank dive is not realistic for dive rental. 2. They wanted us to fol-

low their guide — a real problem. 3. On a “drift dive” demanding a guide (no current at all), we were told to go east for awhile, then go south, the last 10 minutes of the dive, we went west — a new type of “Drift Dive.” 4. We agreed to be picked up at 8:30, not 9:30, at our dock, and have the boat to ourselves. We never had the boat to ourselves and the only time they arranged for an early departure was when we were told the boat would leave at 8:00 AM (no explanation). As we left the dock, Captain said they needed to be back early for other reasons; therefore, our surface time would be only 40 minutes. This made for 2 short dives — a bad deal. 5. Two people on the last day went with another dive shop, “Big Fish,” and gave them good reviews.

Glover’s Reef

Manta Resort, May 2005, Mark Smith (marktammi33@hotmail.com), Port Saint Lucie, FL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F., calm. The whale shark diving was awesome. The rest of the diving was superb. This area is untouched. We did not see another diver during these dives. All the staff was incredible. We did not touch our gear after the first day. It was cleaned for us when we were ready to leave. Take bug spray.

Southern Belize

Hamanasi, April 2005, Ernie Plourde (seec6611@aol.com), Wolcott, CT. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F., calm, choppy. The reef was relatively healthy, dive operation was run by Karon from South

Africa, who trained all dive guides and Divemasters. I did 4 whale shark dives (an \$85 upgrade); didn’t see anything until the last dive, then we saw 7! You have to get the last slot at 3:30, that’s when they feed. It’s a 1.5 hour boat ride. On a reef dives we saw 2 spotted eagle rays, 10 ft. across! Most of the good dives are upgrades. Food was good, but skip the fish, needed Cipro, Pepto and Imodium! We did not have a bug-free air-conditioned dining area. You must spray a DEET solution after showering, don’t even think of going outside until you do, and any area you don’t spray will be bit. Had to use a rental pressure gauge and was told I would be charged for the reg. as well, but by week end, the charge was 0. One owner, Dana, seemed to always be available, with a gorgeous smile and intelligent conversation. There were many activities for non-divers as well. Staff always at your service. UW Photography Comments: rinse tank was a cooler, which couldn’t fit my video camera, had to keep it on my lap or the seat next to me. No UWP facility on shore other than your room.

Second Nature, Jaguar Reef Lodge, November 2004, Doug Strommen (doug.scuba@strommen-in.com), Marietta, GA. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, choppy, no currents. This well-groomed oceanfront mini lodge, located near Hopkins Village, south of Dangriga, had pleasant accommodations for our nine day stay and first experience in Central America. Despite seasonal rains, we dove six of eight days, using a down day to tour the jungle. (Malaria preventative recommended.) Jaguar Reef shuttles divers a short distance

on unpaved roads to docks located slightly inland. Their dive operators are "Second Nature", a husband and wife team, helpful and knowledgeable PADI divers originally from England. The lodge boat is adequate for the max of eight divers, and dive staff. They kept our gear overnight and changed out our tanks each dive. Additional dive staff trainees attended to the needs of recreational divers of varying abilities. One issue for us was the forced use of a small personal boat when the diver count wasn't profitable. Nitrox is unavailable with this outfit, but a competing lodge a short walk north on the beach, Hamanasi, has Nitrox, and a larger boat on property. Two tank morning dives on reefs about 15 miles off the mainland were the norm, diving walls and reef cuts with no current. The boat followed on the surface. In the 86F waters, skins provided protection from the sun and abundant corals. No afternoon or night dives were offered. Request the three tank dive to Glover Reef when eight or more divers are staying at the lodge. Underwater sightings were nurse and bull sharks, large hawksbill turtles, lobsters, flounder, balloon and puffer fish, butterflies, angels, trunk fish, grouper, hog fish, goat fish, barracuda, and tarpon. Highlights included a flock of eight spotted eagle and a barrel sponge measuring at least 12 feet tall and 6 feet wide. We enjoyed searching out little creatures like cleaner shrimp, watching jaw fish do their thing, and trying to photograph sea horses we found near piers while snorkeling between dives. Above the water, we observed frigates, pelicans, boobies, osprey, and hummingbirds on the cays.

Belize is on the migratory path of many birds, and we met several ornithologists taking advantage of this. Although we had hoped for a lodge with more divers around, this was a pleasant and relaxing experience. Be careful when reading the advertisements in dive magazines about lodges on the cays, many of which are extremely remote and some are run down. Bring your DEET or natural alternatives for the sand fleas and mosquitoes.

Turtle Inn, April 2005, C. Vernon Hartline, Jr. (hartline@flash.net), Dallas, TX. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 70 Feet. Water: 76 to 78 F., choppy. 20+ miles to the wall from the shop — long boat rides. Shop takes care of divers and snorkelers on same trip. Drop the snorkelers off at a caye and divers proceed (once 9 miles further) to a dive site. Profiles enforced. Bertram, Quentin and Edlyn are local dive-masters and they try hard. Julie is the knowledgeable dive shop manager and is the PADI instructor. We dove Laughing Bird, Silk and Raniguana Cayes. Viz sucked most dives. I took a new video camera and housing and never got them wet. Saw a huge Loggerhead turtle on one dive at Silk Caye. Too early for the whale sharks (3 weeks). I had scheduled 4 days of diving and only did 3. Roll off the back of the boat — drift dive. Full fills — well equipped dive shop. Once when we surfaced, the boat was a long way away and it took several minutes to get the attention of the driver. This is a secondary dive activity place — not a dive destination. Turtle Inn is Francis Ford Coppola's resort. Very Bali-ish. No phones — no AC — no TV — Internet available for a fee.

Pricy but well done. [Bill Gates' wife and kids were there one day for a romp on the beach and a massage — should have seen their yacht.] UW Photography Comments: Put in the boat a fresh water box for my camera.

St. George's Caye

St. George's Lodge, December 2004, Carl P. Bock (cpbockwork@yahoo.com), Westlake, OH. Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, choppy, surge. I brought a dive companion who was new to diving, Fred continuously and gently took her beyond her comfort zone making the dive experience enjoyable and overall greatly increased both of our confidence in the water. Fred got us on Nitrox the second day and we were Nitrox certified effortlessly by the end of our trip. While dive conditions were not as good as we hoped, Fred was accommodating in making the dives as good as possible, such as going deeper to find clearer water and larger fish and return trips to dive with dolphin. Book a trip here soon. Fred has his sights on leaving his paradise within the next year and a half. We stayed in an over the water cabana, dined in the room, got couples massages and had a trip that was made truly romantic as a result of the personalized service provided by Kim and her staff.

Turneffe Island

Turneffe Island Lodge, August 2004, Ken Metz (Kenneth.metz@uc.edu), Cincinnati, OH. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Turneffe Island Lodge is on

a 10-acre island near the southern tip of the Turneffe Atoll. They are self-sufficient, generating their own power and collecting or making their own water. There is nothing on the island but the Lodge. You dive, fish, snorkel, swim, sun bathe, kayak and make your own night life in the lounge bar. They accommodate about 40 guests tops. The diving was excellent — not quite as good as Cayman Brac, but much better than Honduras. The dive operation and dive personal are some of the best I have encountered. I am particular about my gear, but I could trust them to handle it properly. The accommodations were awesome. Staying in a cabana on the beach is worth the extra cost. The interior is finished in hardwoods. The food is family style and delicious and fresh with a lot of local dishes. The staff and management are helpful and friendly. If you leave something on the dining room table it turns up on your front porch before you miss it. They also run an excellent fishing operation. There was a large rinse tank dedicated to cameras on the dock. The dive masters and captains were careful handling the cameras. The lounge had a monitor available for viewing digital.

Turneffe Island Lodge, November 2004, David Richardson, Portland, OR. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 110 Feet. Water: 82 to F, calm. The buildings were upgraded recently and are quite lovely and the service is impeccable. The staff made sure we enjoyed ourselves in every aspect of the trip. The diving was high quality and the day trip to the Lighthouse atoll was the highlight of the trip along with the couple of dives at the elbow. The dive

sites are no longer than 10 minutes away so you spend your surface interval relaxing in the hammock or checking your digital photos. The food was excellent and plentiful and unfortunately we actually gained weight whereas we usually lose weight on dive trips. Before dinner there are tasty hors d'oeuvres at happy hour and it is a great place to chat with other guests and swap stories. Even if a person is not a diver this would be a great place to vacation. Very accommodating for photographers.

Turneffe Island Lodge, December 2004, Tom Hayes (tomhayes@cox.net), Pensacola, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. We were met at the airport and from that point everything we asked for was provided. The transport boat was a 47', and we were provided rum punch to pass the 1-1/2 hour ride to Turneffe. The cabana rooms were nice — well appointed and spacious, and everything worked as it should. We set up our equipment prior to the first dive, and never had to touch it again until it was returned at weeks end washed and rinsed. (8-10 divers max) Underwater, the divemaster quickly picked up each diver's preference for large or small critters and made sure to point them out. Most dives were drift dives in the 50' to 80' range, except for the blue hole where we went to 130'. A nice touch was a spreadsheet at week's end summarizing our dives, e.g., depth, time, critters, divemaster, boat name and date. The coral and sponges were comparable to any place we have been in the Caribbean. Lots of sharks, turtles and rays, and tons of little critters. No shore diving, but three boat dives a

day. The food was marvelous, and all we could eat. Every meal was different, and many recipes were unique to us (they had a cookbook for sale in the gift shop). Sherman the bartender knew everyone by name and quickly learned their favorite drinks. He entertained every night with card tricks and puzzles while we waited dinner. The staff was always attentive, and mingled with our group. The managers- Lars, Rona and Assaf made sure everyone was comfortable. The kitchen staff baked fresh cookies every day for our post dive refreshment, and delivered hot coffee to our front porch each day at 6:30. The bar stayed open until no one was left (I was told). The lodge provided free kayaks and a Hobie Cat. Those who went fishing caught bonefish, tarpon and permit- the "Grand Slam". We spent a little time in Belize City, and were fortunate to have a local to guide us around. Pretty rough neighborhoods.

Turneffe Island Lodge, February 2005, Scott George (scottgeo@earthlink.net), Hermosa Beach, CA. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 73 to 78 F., calm, choppy. The resort and diving staff were fantastic. The accommodations were clean and nice. The dive operators were knowledgeable, well-trained, and courteous. The food was wonderful also. Diving was excellent. Particularly windy the week we were there. We did see schools of hammerheads, lots of turtles and rays. Lots of green and spotted morays. The smaller fish life is spectacular also. We saw blennies, drumfish, cowfish, dogfish, etc. TACA gave up our seats (on two different legs), lost our luggage for two days (including half our dive gear),

broke one piece of luggage. The staff allowed us free use of their rental equipment and made constant inquiries with TACA until our situation was resolved.

Turneffe Island Lodge, July 2005, David Funderburk (rcrus@what-wire.com), Greeley, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, choppy. The accommodations and the food were the best. Lodge staff friendly. The dive operation was top notch. Never had to touch any of my equipment after arriving. Was washed and dried at the end of the week. Reef healthy and a short boat ride from the resort. Blue Hole a let down. Take bug spray. Bugs present but not too bad. Take cash. Everyone is so friendly and professional you will want to tip. Boat rides were less than 5-10 minutes.

Turneffe Island Lodge, August 2005, Rich Priesing, Idyllwild, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Turneffe Island Lodge (www.turneffelodge.com) is a 30 mile, 1.5 hour boat ride from Belize City. The resort is well run and organized. country club Diving! You set your gear up at the beginning of the trip and the divemaster and boat captain take care of the gear until you leave. Bo is a DM with over 5000 dives and really knows his stuff, and Captain John kept the boat at a discreet distance but was always there at the end of every dive, and pulled BC's and gear out of the water. Three dives per day were generally drift dives in gentle current along the barrier reef. With the exception of the Blue Hole day (the BH, Light House Reef and another dive) the sites were 5-10 minutes from the dock. Aside from the BH at 130' (79F), water

temps were usually 84-86 F. Entries were back roll from the open boat, all surface intervals were at the resort where drinks, fruit and cookies were available. No shore diving although you can snorkel in front of the resort. Sea life was pretty good. At the Blue Hole where there was a dozen or so reef and bull sharks hanging out at the safety stop. Groupers, tarpon, turtles, schools of smaller fish on almost every dive. The Elbow was the best site for larger fish. The coloration and variety of sponges was the best I have seen. Corals were healthy but not as colorful. Food and accommodations were outstanding. Meals were family style, and with the small number of guests everyone gets to know one another. It was like Summer Camp for Divers and Fisherman except the food and accommodations were 4-star. The bar was open every afternoon and Sherman is an outstanding barman and pretty good artist. Staff was outstanding. Grounds were immaculate. Belize City is poor, and not entirely safe, particularly at night. The nicest hotels were 2 star at best, not for the unadventurous.

Turneffe Island Lodge, August 2005, Robin Katz, Chesapeake, VA. Experience: 400 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 85 F, calm and flat. The dive boats are small with attentive yet laid-back divemaster. 6-8 divers per boat. Resort was clean; no television, telephone or radio. Coffee delivered each morning at 6:30, turndown service at night, hot chocolate served on dive boat after the night dive. The full day trip to the Blue Hole including a picnic on Half Moon Key was enjoyable. When the winds aren't blowing on Turneffe, make sure you

have bug spray w/DEET; the mosquitoes swarm!

BONAIRE

To many visitors, Bonaire's attraction is shore diving in front of the hotels. Many divers rent an auto to reach scores of marked sites — but keep nothing in your car as many get broken into while divers are underwater. Still, Bonaire is a diver's island par excellence, with diving that's especially well-suited to easy divers and those who want to concentrate on photography.

Bas, July 2005, Pam Cote, Olathe, KS.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 F. We have been to Bonaire 5 times. This time we dived with Bas, who was with Photo Tours. He took us shore diving on the east side which is hard to do on your own since the conditions vary. We saw large stuff. e.g. turtles, eagle rays, tarpon and had two great dives. My husband and sons went with him later in the week and had two really neat dives on other sites. There is current on the east side and the shore entries/exits can be complicated. Bas mostly dives the east side and knows his stuff. He likes to do 1.5 hour dives. Phone 717-8830 home and 786-4917 cell. loonybin@bonairelive.com. On a previous trip we dove with Larry's Wildside and had went to the North side to a spot we could have shore dove ourselves and had to cut a dive short because of current and visibility. He promotes the east side but mainly does one or two dive spots there. He does have a new boat and an assistant but

dives are limited to 45 minutes and cost \$100 for two dives.

Bon Bini Divers, January 2005, Mort Rolleston, Arlington, VA.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, no currents. Can basically roll out your condo door into the ocean and swim 30 yards to great diving or drive a truck within 15 minutes and swim 100 yards out or take a dive boat and get to numerous great sites (including Klein Bonaire) within 15 minutes. Very easy to get 4-5 dives a day in. The coral and macro life is really top notch. Swimming over the thick and healthy layers of corals (with endless holes and gaps and compartments), you can watch countless critters living their lives under the cover of the coral (like a whole new dimension you cannot see above the coral). The hard coral on Klein Bonaire looked like something out of Tolkien. Tarpons at night right off the dive resort (a group of three tarpon use your diving lights to hunt — they'll lurk behind you and then will unexpectedly fly past you literally inches from your head and go chasing after something just beyond your light range and then circle back behind you to wait for the next opportunity. Having 3 to 5 foot tarpon flying by your head like that out of the darkness is really cool...) Very little to nothing in the way of pelagics or large schooling fish (or much life of any kind) above the corals in the open water (in nearly 20 dives the entire week, I think all I saw other than the tarpons at night, was a handful of barracuda over the wreck, an eagle ray, and a turtle). That was disappointing. The only partial exception was the Salt Pier and piers right off the