

undercurrent

The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers

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Jaguar Reef Lodge, Belize

Nice place to visit, but diving is a distance

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Dear Fellow Diver,

Here we are in Belize City, early May, behind the wheel of a \$75/day four-wheel-drive filled with dive gear and hiking boots, a lousy map, resort reservations three, maybe four hours to the south, mostly over a notorious dirt road, a bottle of water and a banana, and nightfall coming in an hour.

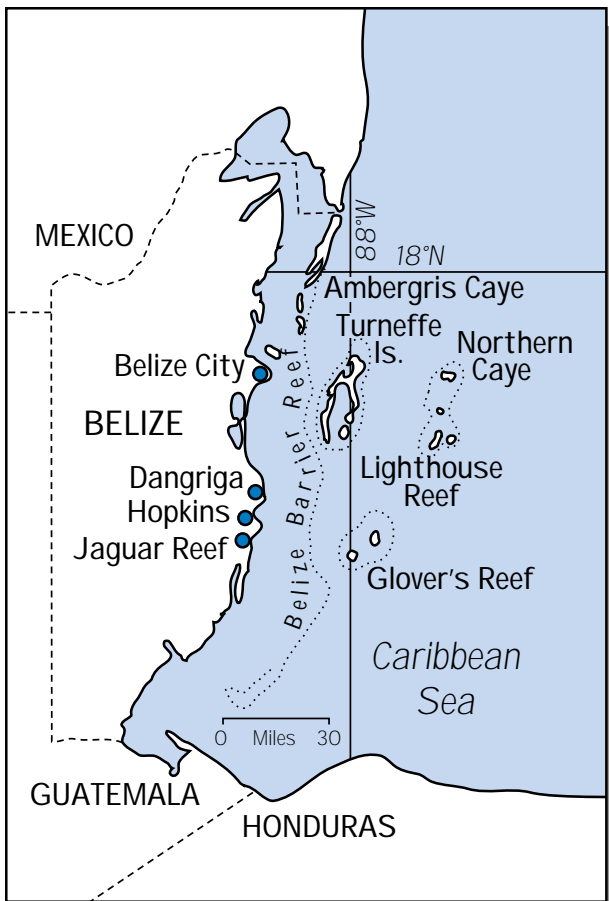
Shall we stay here? No, let's get out of here. Do you know how to get there? He: Yes. She: Like hell you do. It's a friendly country. What if we get stuck at night? Everyone speaks English. Did you ask for directions from the hotel? No. Just like a guy. Yup. Shall we? Sure, why not, we're not tourists, we're travelers. Well, I did go to Kathmandu by myself, so this should be a snap.

We buckled up, asked directions along the way, missed a few signs enveloped in clouds of red dust from passing trucks, then arrived in the pitch black after an otherwise uneventful, three-hour-plus drive over at least 40 miles of bad road and that much more good road. Naturally, Jaguar Reef Lodge's kitchen was closed, but they gave us cold beers and made sandwiches -- good BLTs, at that.

Of course, you can get there far easier by 25-minute flight from Belize City to Dangriga, where (for \$50) the Lodge people will meet and transport you 30 minutes to their door. I drove because, well, diving is generally so easy in Belize waters that I hoped to find adventure elsewhere.

Eco-Tourism Central

Jaguar Reef Lodge, a lovely little three-year-old resort, is located on a sandy beach a couple of miles south of Hopkins, a village of perhaps 500 people living mainly in makeshift houses on wooden stilts (the better to survive the occasional hurricane). Jaguar Reef, more solidly build,



Belize

doing the same anyhow.

Maybe not. You see, Jaguar Reef is an "eco-tourism resort," offering not only laid-back scuba diving but unguided or modestly priced guided trips to the Jaguar preserve, to Mayan excavations, or up the lazy Sittee River by boat or kayak. I drove less than an hour to the heart of the Jaguar Preserve, to hike along lovely trails, bug-free and cooler than the beach.

And the diving? Well, it's similar to any along Belize's Barrier Reef -- by Caribbean standards, that's quite good -- and I saw eagle rays on every dive, including 11 on one dive alone.

Friendly, Conservative Diving

Our leader for the dives was Ian Alimilla, an enthusiastic, confident, guest-pleasing young Belizean. He gave an excellent briefing with a strong conservationist bent: "Be careful with your fins and don't touch the coral -- it's hundreds of years old and you don't

sports a nice, open main lodge with a high-ceiling, tiled dining area, small bar, and office. Lapping waves, sea breezes, and soft music -- sometimes classical, sometimes reggae, sometimes new age -- provided the background for excellent meals, served on white-clothed tables, inside or out, by the sweet and friendly local staff.

I was tipped off to the Lodge by Houston reader Jim Juneau, who sent his report for the *Chapbook*. When I called the Lodge to ask about diving, manager Bradley Rinehart told me that the dive shop was no more, so they ferry divers 30 minutes to the barrier reef and Southwater Caye to dive with Living Reef Divers. I asked him to call to verify they would be running, and he called back that night to confirm.

Two dives a day takes a day: from 9:30 to 4 p.m., to be exact. Get to the caye at 10, get going maybe at 10:30, get back at 12:15 (eat lunch brought over via boat -- once an excellent lasagna salad, with fish and shrimp, fruit, cookies, lemonade), take a nap on a picnic table, snorkel with the schools of bait fish and bonefish, read a book, walk over to Blue Marlin Lodge (a dive/fishing resort on the caye), dive again at 2 p.m., leave the caye at 3:30. No problem, mon. If I spent the full day at Jaguar Reef, I'd be

Meters, Anyone?

If you're on the waiting list for the return of Sekonic's defunct Marine Meter II, you should by now have received a questionnaire asking how much you'd be willing to pay if the meter went back into production. Mamiya, the corporation that now owns the rights, estimates that it will sell the underwater light meter at about double its original \$250 price and predicts it could be available by late fall if its survey reveals enough interest at the new price. If you're not on the list and want to be, e-mail sekonic@mamiya.com or write to Sekonic/Mamiya, 8 Westchester Place, New York, NY 10523.

want to be responsible for killing it, do you?" He and "Podner," the boatman, helped us with our gear. My "podner's" three-month-old fin strap snapped. No problem: Ian gave her his fins, dived with her single fin, and between dives I located a spare strap.

The first two forays were similar; we dived along a dramatic wall, no deeper than 70 feet (Ian's limit for the first dive was 70, the second 60) for 48 and 52 minutes, exiting when Ian requested (with more than 1,000 psi). We gently drifted on all dives, with Podner drifting above; when we surfaced, he'd motor over, lift up our gear, and we'd climb the ladder he flipped over the side.

With the sun brightly shining, golden crinoids and yellow sponges punctuated the typical sepia and olive colors of Belize's prolific hard and soft corals. At times the fish population would dwindle to blueheads, hamlets, and parrotfish, then explode with numbers of swarming bogia, chromis, pairs of queen angels, grey triggers, and the like. Occasional orange-spotted filefish allowed me to reach out and touch them. On the first dive, a large green moray and a lobster shared a hole; on the second, a couple of large, gnarly barracuda hovered among the soft coral. I saw a pair of eagle rays on the first dive; on the second, three came up from the deep. I held my breath, so as to not bubble, and they glided a body length away

On another day at the Abyss, I dropped to 90 feet in unusually blue 79-80 water with visibility near 100 feet. This dive I saw 11 eagle rays, schools of tang foraging the reef, and a couple of barracuda, again among lovely coral. I grabbed a piece of dead coral to steady myself to watch a fluttering pea-sized juvenile spotted drum, then got a finger waving from Ian after I grabbed a live piece to stop myself from drifting into the reef; a moment later my buddy's fin grazed soft coral and Ian gave her the evil eye.

The second dive, which culminated at the beautiful Little Blue Hole, a cut into the wall, was disappointing because Ian cruised us over ordinary shallows to view lettuce coral and maintain a 50-foot limit. Afterwards, I said I would have preferred to spend

the entire dive along the wall and Ian, who said he hadn't thought about doing the dive that way, quickly agreed. He's a fine guide, a young man with a divemaster certification who showed us plenty of critters, but he's no doubt been instructed to lead conservative profiles -- in my view, far too conservative for experienced computer divers. Novices will be comfortable, indeed, but those who prove their skills deserve more leeway.

High Dry Times

But Jaguar Reef is not about serious diving. It's about nature, relaxation, and good living. Begin the day with a plate of mango and papaya and banana, fresh bread, eggs (like an omelet with tomatoes and cheese), maybe a waffle; a

Jaguar Reef Lodge

Diving (advanced)	★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★★
Beach snorkeling	★
Boat snorkeling	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★½
Food	★★★★½
Healthy food	★★★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor
(Caribbean scale)

★★★★★ = excellent

Fly UPS to Mexico

United Parcel Service (UPS), known for delivering parcels, has added a new service. It's converted some of its air cargo space to airline seats — seats that UPS is touting as having more leg room than most passenger planes. These seats are being sold to tour operators, who are selling the flights 20 to 40 percent cheaper than normal airline tickets.

This season, flights are running only up to August 8, but the program is expected to fly again next year. Try your travel agent to see if flights are available from your departure city. Vacation Express (800-848-8047) is selling seats to Cancun (a short ferry ride to Cozumel) from several key cities.

light lunch of tuna sandwiches and fruit and salad. Then take a nap in your nice, high-ceilinged, duplex bungalow; all have fans, a couple are air conditioned. Take a bath, sit on your porch with a cool drink, think about dinner. About 4 p.m., a staff person will come to take your dinner order: like fish with pineapple salsa, carrots, grilled thyme potatoes, and fresh rolls, or coconut grouper (there's always a meat or chicken choice) with stuffed coo coo, fresh carrots, finished with a rich coconut ice cream. The cooks from the nearby village could find work in San Francisco, so skilled are they in preparing light and tasty meals

Or, for excitement, take a mountain bike and pedal 15 minutes to Hopkins, for a Belikin beer at the Swinging Armadillo Hammock Lounge, where Michael, the proprietor, can tell you why, after years in Chicago, he returned to Belize to build this funky, over-the-water, relaxing joint, with more hammocks than tables. You'll probably be the only customer. Not to worry if you pedal home tipsy, since there's hardly a passing vehicle.

Of course, that won't last forever. Hopkins got electricity in 1992, and Jaguar Reef is the first development to follow. Owner Bruce Forester expects to develop a second within a year. Bruce, an affable chap who splits his time between his Vancouver, B.C., home and Jaguar, started his career as a commercial diver before earning his bucks in investment management. Alongside Jaguar are several front tracts beginning at \$35K, and a building next to the Lodge Forester says he will provide to someone who puts in a dive operation. Interested?

Men Not Seeking Women

In your April issue, one of your readers wrote about his surprise that he had to share a room in the Palau Pacific Hotel with someone else after having been on the *Sun Dancer* for a week. At least he probably had to share the room with somebody of the same gender [true].

Imagine my surprise when I (being a male) was told while signing up for a live-aboard in Fiji that I would have to share the cabin with a female companion. When I talked to See & Sea [now defunct] about this I was told: "We do not sell the cabins, we just sell the spaces regardless of gender and have found this to be very acceptable with divers."

I would very much like to see the comments of your readers about this.

Dr. Hans Menco
Pittsford, New York

Women Not Seeking Men

Men are simply gorgeous. But I certainly do not wish to share a cabin with a man. When I boarded the *Telita* in Papua New Guinea, I was asked to share a cabin with "one of the guys." I refused, and other arrangements were made. Upon my return, I tried to book another trip back to PNG next year aboard Mike Ball's *Paradise Sport*. I expressed the desire that I would like to share a cabin only with another lady. I was told that they could not assure me that would be the case. Do personal privacy and dignity not matter in the diving world? Am I the only person not adequately modern?

Ms. B. Viswanathan
Cairns, Australia

Reasons to Go

All in all, Jaguar Reef Lodge is great for two-tank-a-day explorers or hammock hangers. Families can arrange baby sitters, take their kids snorkeling on the boat (one family played with a manatee on a snorkeling trip). Accommodations and food are easily four stars plus, diving a Belize-solid four, and money's worth -- especially in the summer -- is surely a five. And you might as well fly; at the Lodge I learned they'll rent you a four-wheel drive for \$95 a day, and that's about all you'll need.

Ben Davison

Diver's Compass: Until November 1, a room for two is \$75; then \$150 until May 14; kids under 12 are free. Breakfast is \$7, lunch \$9, dinner \$19. Most tours run \$48/person, minimum three people in the off season, but you can usually find someone else at the hotel to share expenses. Diving: \$70 for two tanks. Phone or fax 011-501-21-2041, information help line 1-800-289-5756, e-mail jaguarreef@btl.net, or any travel agent. . . . Round-trip airfare from Belize International Airport to Dangriga is \$81. . . .