

undercurrent

The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers

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Diving the Turneffe Islands of Belize

Ecotouring at Blackbird Caye Resort

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Dear Fellow Diver,

When the notion of "ecotourism" got coined, scores of new ecoresorts sprang from the jungles, while others simply rechristened themselves as "ecotourism" resorts. Blackbird Caye, on Turneffe Atoll in Belize, is one of the latter, and there I headed, in search of diving and ecotouring.

Getting there means landing in Belize City, where until the 1980s open sewers ran through the streets -- not an ecotourist kind of thing. Nor is its centuries-old reputation as a pirate lair, sustained today by statistics such as these: of the 45 tourist muggings in Belize in 1996, all but one occurred in Belize City. Nonetheless, in many American cities more tourists are mugged in a single day. So here I was, crossing the decrepit swing bridge over the E. coli-laden Haulover Creek, when a Creole hustler named Johnny offered to show me and my distaff around town. He won me over when he chatted me up by speculating we were Canadians (we were "too mellow to be Americans").

Our new pal introduced us to the splendors of carved zericote, a Belizean hardwood with beautiful variegated grain, and even led us to the home of local carvers who proudly showed off their work. Johnny cajoled me out of \$20 for his tour, but it provided an experience and souvenirs I'd never have otherwise. While I never encountered suspicious characters lurking in the doorways, nightfall may be another story.

Getting There and Getting Acquainted

A Blackbird Caye driver had met us at noon at the airport. After a brief stop at his home to pick up his son, he drove us to the Fiesta Inn for a four-hour wait for the resort boat. It transports guests only on Wednesdays and Saturdays, but ecotourism requires a little flexibility.



Belize

BCR, which houses 28 guests, is the only resort on the Caye (though another facility is being built down the beach), so one looks forward to the same thing each day: three meals and three dives. Days begin with full American breakfast, and about 8:30 the boat leaves the dock for the first dive. Ecotourism in Belize doesn't mean diving from a canoe operated by a toothless boatman. BCR uses a 36-foot launch powered by twin 150-hp V-6 Yamaha outboards, with a canvas awning over half the deck. Fall off the side of the boat, and on returning, hand up as much gear as you want to captain or boatman and climb up the ladder. After each dive, the crew rinses your gear and sets it up on fresh aluminum 80s.

Getting Our Feet Wet

As is the usual resort drill, the first trip was a shallow-water orientation within sight of BCR's dock. Our young Belizean divemaster Charles -- the blond-haired Rasta man -- dropped anchor on a patch of sand and, when it landed on the bottom, freed it to be weighed without dragging on the coral. We were joined by BCR's manager, a U.S. expat and self-described "dive bum" named Larry, whose enthusiasm was definitely contagious. Charles herded us competently, setting the dive plan and looking after everyone's comfort, while pointing out critters. The 50-foot visibility was disappointing, but the water was a constant 80 and the variety and color of corals, sponges, blue parrotfish, and Nassau groupers kept my interest The boatman followed our bubbles, picking up each team as it surfaced, a practice followed on subsequent dives. While my inexperienced partner appreciated this easy start, I might have resisted it had I been alone.

We were back on the dock before we dried off, took a 90-minute surface interval, then headed for Blackbird's Cut: a leisurely, down-current drift starting along the top of an enjoyable coral wall, then dipping over the edge into blue water.

After my stroll with Johnny, 12 of us waited for a late-arriving staff member, a yellow-haired, braided Rasta man sporting a yellow boom box, before departing on the resort's 52-foot dive boat for the 75-minute, 32-mile ride through protected waters. As we approached Turneffe Atoll, two dolphins jumped in unison as if to point to the passage through the mangrove islands and cayes. We arrived at Blackbird just as darkness descended.

We -- five 30- to 40ish couples and a single guy and gal -- gathered for a welcome drink and a quick orientation in the resort's palapa. It is a nicely appointed round house lodge with hardwood tables and chairs for dining, a comfortable area for reading or watching the VCR (tape selections range from Jackie Chan to Woody Allen), with photos and maps displayed on the wood-paneled walls. We headed for our rooms, washed up, had dinner (grouper with broccoli so overdone only Barbara Bush could love it), took a brief walk, made a sacrifice to the No-See-Um gods, and tumbled into bed by 9:15 p.m., a pattern that was to repeat itself each evening.

Computer divers set their own depths and times For those without computers, Charles provided very conservative profiles. An eagle ray and nurse shark made brief appearances, along with angelfish, groupers, and the usual reef fish. Visibility ran to 75 feet.

After a buffet lunch (pizza, salad, fish chowder, and sugar cookies) and a nap, we headed to Little Calabash, another wall dropping to 60 feet. Here a lone barracuda came in for a look, stone crabs and a lobster hid in holes, black and gold brittle stars hid in tube sponges, and trumpetfish, graceful drums, and brilliant yellow-and-blue Spanish hogfish meandered about the prolific and colorful corals and sponges. (Just a few months ago I was in Nassau; this sure was an improvement, similar to Roatan, but with larger critters.)

Not-So-Memorable Dining

With no more diving for the day, I looked forward to what I read on the Island Dreams web site: BCR is "renowned for its excellent cuisine." Not so this trip. There were always two choices -- e.g., mystery fish Parmesan or chicken curry -- but everything was overcooked to the point of tastelessness (so were the veggies), saved only by Caribbean-style sauces. The portions were hearty, and Angie the server, a Hong Kong expat, did all she could to accommodate us.

After dinner I joined guests for a nightcap at the open-air beach bar -- three kinds of local beer and lots of flavored rums -- where Larry, who had been the manager for only a couple of months, told tales about actors he served while working for Lucas Films. His biggest yarn was one foreign even to my editor. Larry claimed a Nazi U-boat was scuttled in Belizean waters and the skipper, Captain Bob, still lives in Belize; though Bob knows where it is, he won't tell anyone. A fisherman once hooked it and a free diver once saw it, but neither marked its location. Do you believe? I doubted. So my partner and I wandered to the dock to stargaze. In the distance, I could see the glowing eyes of a couple of crocodiles near the mangroves -- or were they eyes of dead Nazi submariners?

Beyond diving, diversions are few. An "eco-trail" leads past the resort's dump, traversing what may be Belize's first known mosquito preserve. Along the beach, trees are labeled for us ecotourists: coconut palms, zericote (looking a little like manzanita), sea grape, almond, palmetto, and gumbo-limbo. We made sure to be inside at dusk -- that's when the BCR staff fogs the nearby foliage with malathion to drive off mosquitoes for the convenience of us ecotourists.

There are a few resorty things: a motley collection of kayaks, windsurfers, and a Sunfish sailboat; flats fishing; and deep-sea fishing (\$100/person/day -- bring your own tackle). No shore diving, but the staff occasionally night snorkels on the nearby reef, always kayaking out to avoid the crocodiles that prowl the shallows along the shore at night.

Diving Between the Live-Aboards

Now, while the diving off BCR is good, solid Belize diving -- on a par with Bonaire, for example -- it's best for beginning and intermediate divers. It gets better on Tuesdays, when they make the 50-minute run to Lighthouse Reef and the Blue Hole. That day, the live-aboards are supposed to be elsewhere, but there sat the Belize Aggressor and the Wave Dancer, forced to change their schedule due to weather. We waited turns to enter the coral ring circling the 1,000-foot-diameter depression.

Because of an ear problem, I opted out of the Blue Hole dive: a quick descent to the fishless cavern at 120 feet for a look at the 20-foot stalactites, and a fast return to the surface so waiting boats could disgorge their divers (yes, ecotourism

means crowds). My buddy and I stayed at the lip of the hole, where fish and coral were sparse. It was like diving in a bubble bath, as exhalations from the deep divers cascaded up, seeping through the fissures in the reef. For some reason, another diver who had agreed to stay at the top took off unannounced down the hole; he was later told that if he failed to heed instructions again, his diving was over. I wonder whether he should have begun -- when he got home, he said, he faced surgery to replace his faulty pacemaker.

The next two sites were the highlights, which is why live-aboards take a couple of days here. At Half Moon Wall we swam upcurrent (shoulda drifted this one, I think), where we explored the spur-and-groove coral formations, marveling at queentriggerfish, small schools of barracuda, and a range of groupers. A small eagle ray tracked

me as I drifted back to the boat. Trips here usually have an obligatory island stop on Half Moon Caye for lunch and a look at frigate birds and rare red-footed boobies (which had taken the week off).

After lunch-meat sandwiches and cold chicken, we hit Manta Wall, a gentle slope that looked like a coral landslide from 20 feet beneath the surface down to the blue infinity. Visibility exceeded 80 feet, and I marveled at the incredible jumble of corals and sponges of all sizes, colors, and varieties. On the way back to the boat, Charles took off his BC and swam with it and the tank under his arm. Afterwards, I remarked to my inexperienced buddy that it was a "hot dog" act, but she promptly disagreed. To her, it showed his great skill underwater and gave her confidence in his leadership. Hmm.

After diving I always enjoyed returning to BCR, where the thatch-roofed beachfront cabañas ooze rustic charm covered porches with hammocks, sitting areas with wicker chairs and love seats, locally woven throw rugs on hardwood floors, oil paintings by indigenous artists on the walls -- and beds, two double or a queen. Constant but gentle easterly trade winds blowing through louvered windows and dual ceiling fans keep the rooms comfortable and the insects at bay -- with a spray can of OFF for insurance. The tiny bathroom, with a small sink wedged between wall and toilet, was a one-person operation. Bathroom lighting was too dim for delicate repairs, and adjusting the water temperature was an acquired skill; one guest took three days to realize she had hot water. But American appliances plugged right in. All cabañas are private, except a triplex and a two-bedroom. Avoid Cabaña 6, near the

Live-Aboard vs. Land-Based

A live-aboard dive boat has two distinct advantages over a land-based operation, albeit big ones: (1) you can get to remote sites and (2) you can do more diving. You get more tanks and burn more air by being able to dive on your own schedule once the boat is anchored. Sure, there are peripherals, such as no insects, easier diving, and less gear schlepping, but on land there's a better opportunity to get away from your diving mates, take walks, explore towns or villages, sit quietly in the sun — and you can arrive any day you want and stay longer or shorter than a prescribed week.

What did our reviewer miss by staying at the land-based Blackbird Caye instead of booking a live-aboard to see Belize's reefs? He got in three dives a day at a single package price (no premium for the Blue Hole, for example). Most boat rides were 10 minutes or less; even the Blue Hole was less than an hour away, over calm waters. He had spacious, comfortable quarters, lots of lovely beach, no engine noise, and solid land beneath his feet at the end of the day. Plus staff that went out of their way to make his visit comfortable and convenient.

So, while both Peter Hughes and the Aggressor fleet have magnificent craft in Belize, for this trip our reviewer was satisfied with his choice of three tanks a day and a sample of mainland attractions in and around the Mayan jungle, especially because Blackbird Caye let him stay less than seven days to suit his own schedule.

Most of the dive resorts on the outer cayes, such as Manta, Lighthouse, and Turneffe, can give the live-aboards a run for their money, as they are diving essentially the same sites and doing almost as many dives.

Not all choices in Belize would offer such comparabile diving fare. Diving at any of the resorts on Ambergris Caye would not compare with the wilder reefs further to the south.

staff quarters, unless you like constant rap, reggae, and Belizean punta music from the island's one radio station -- everyone tunes it in at once.

But diving is the reason to visit, so a bit more about those nearby dives. The Oasis is a huge coral head thick with immature and adult stoplight parrotfish. At Turtle Ridge I got face to face with a 4-foot cuda dancing with a school of silversides in 50-foot visibility. On the regularly scheduled Monday-night dive, Turtle Ridge displayed vivid red and violet sponges, hot tones that wash out under natural sunlight 60 feet down. I awakened a 4-foot green turtle, who took several sleepy laps before surfacing for a gulp of air. Lobsters and shrimps glared back at our lights with bright orange eyes.

Getting Away from It All

I like Belize diving, with plentiful and healthy coral and sponges, interesting topography, and lots of fish. You're bound to see eagle rays, large barracuda, and grouper. However, with the whole country an ecotourism destination, I imagined I'd be fighting wild water, encountering huge fish, and maybe even discovering unknown shipwrecks -- like that submarine. Rather, most diving is easy, and BCR, for sure, is diver friendly. The boats from Lighthouse Reef Resort and Turneffe Island get to the better sites with more frequency, but BCR does visit better-known sites -- Elbow, the Front Porch, Myrtle's Turtles, and West Side Story. You won't see them all during a short stay, which is the way to take in this resort -- three or four nights, in combination with jungle ecoresorts or a live-aboard. Still, beginning divers will be thrilled with the sites, intermediate divers kept well interested. And, for my money, there's nothing like a resort with no cars, no TVs, no room phones, no nothin'. When I've got diving, that's ecotourism enough.

Ben Davison

Diver's Compass: Belize can be reached directly from Miami, Houston, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. . . . Diving packages from \$725 for three off-season nights (June 13–November 14) to \$1,350 for seven nights during high season. Nondivers/snorkelers are about \$30 less per day. Children under 12 are half price (free, if 3 or under); babysitting for a fee with advance notice. . . . Reservations 888-271-3483. E-mail: dive@blackbirdresort.com. Web page: <http://dive.blackbirdresort.com>. . . . English is the official language. Belizean banks impose a 3.5 percent surcharge on credit-card charges. A 6 percent tax is imposed on hotel rooms, meals, and drinks. . . . You need a passport, but no visa or special shots. . . . Temperatures (80s above and below the surface during October) are highest in April, lowest in February. Hurricane season runs from July to November. Best visibility and lightest crowds occur in March and April. . . . BCR offers certifications plus resort and referral checkouts from various certifying agencies. . . . Bring everything you need, including backups like batteries; they had some rental gear and a modest repair capability; when I tried to buy a hose keeper for my BC, Larry found one and gave it to me, a hospitable gesture. . . . Not a photographer-friendly resort -- no E-6, no photographers among ou 12 people. All guests at the resort were coming or going to jungle lodges and were therefore real ecotourists.

Blackbird Caye Resort

Diving (experienced):

near BCR	★★★
specialty dives	★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★★
Boat snorkeling	★★
Service and attitude	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Island food	★★ ^{1/2}

Money's worth:

for 3–4 nights	★★★★
for a week	★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)