
Rum Point Inn, Placencia, Belize

Jaguars, monkeys, ruins, and a sidewalk

Dear Fellow Diver:

Small, skinny, and odd, the dog furiously dug sand at my feet as I lay back in a brightly colored wooden chair to soak up sun and surf sound. For a country not known for its beaches, this was one of its finest. I had dubbed the dog "Almost a Dog," taken from the guidebook that referred to Rum Point Inn as "almost a luxury resort."

Even though I knew the best diving in Belize was on the numerous offshore cays close to the barrier reef, I had chosen this mainland resort in southern Belize because I was looking for a compromise destination, one that would satisfy both diver and nondiver.

It was the diving that I was unsure about. Rum Point is not a new resort; it has been catering to Smithsonian-type adventurers for a long time but has only recently decided to become a dive resort. With neither the *Belize Aggressor* nor the *Wave Dancer* cruising this far south, I figured the reefs would be virtually untouched and unexplored by divers.

On the other hand, the country around Rum Point was just what I had in mind. Nearby were the natural jungle beauty of the Cockscomb Jaguar Reserve, the Monkey River with its population of howler monkeys, several little-visited but excellent Mayan ruins, and the small Creole fishing village of Placencia where the main attraction was its 20-inch-wide sidewalk that took the place of a main street.

Igloos in the Tropics

Earlier in the day, after a quick hop from Belize City, I had been dropped off at the dinky dirt airstrip by the typical small, beat-up prop plane and its typical pilot with plastic milk jug of drinking water. I was met by Lori, a barefoot, sun-bleached expat in her twenties from Rum Point, who gave me the four-minute ride down the dirt road to the resort.

It was an odd sight at first. Eight white ferroconcrete domes, looking a lot like igloos, spread out along the palm-lined beach. This was not your typical tropical resort. The two-story, weather-beaten main house with its large, open room

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lined with books and videos, its wooden verandas, its hammocks, bar, and traditional tropical construction was more familiar.

After checking in, I was assigned one of the nearby cabañas. Once I was inside, the igloo image faded. With tile floors, two double beds covered with colorful Guatemalan spreads, inside planters with live plants, and dark tropical hardwood furniture, the spacious room had a comfortable, tropical ambiance. The bathroom was large, as was the tile shower. After I asked, someone came to fix the small, in-room water heater, which provided mostly hot showers for the rest of my stay

The dome was pierced like cookie dough with geometric and fish-shaped cutouts. Those in the "wall" (in an igloo, where does the wall end and the ceiling begin?) were screened to

let in the sea breeze; those overhead were glazed. I could lie in bed at night and look at the moon and stars through the glass shapes, but somehow the breeze never seemed to penetrate the screened wall slits. All and all, I was more than content to have this tropical igloo for a base to explore the jungle and the reefs.

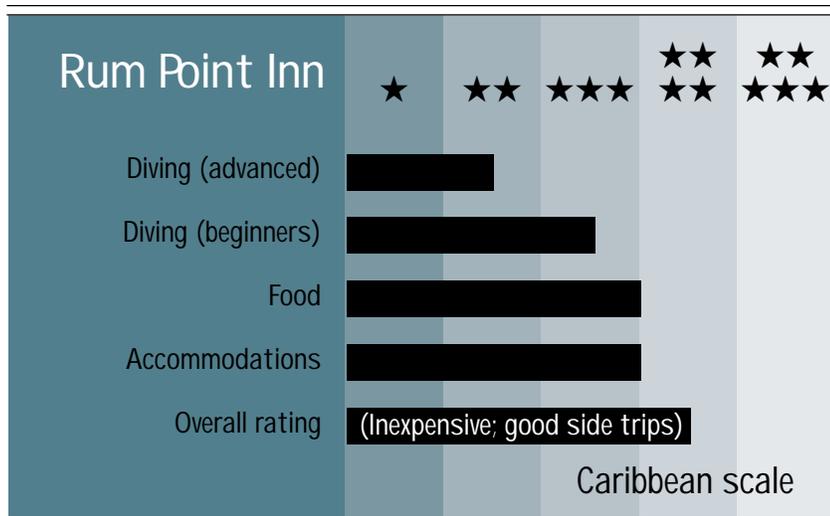
The eerie sound of a conch-shell horn filled the evening breeze; it was the call to dinner. Meals were served in a dining room attached to the main lodge. The guidebook had touted Rum Point as having "possibly the

best food in Belize." I wouldn't go that far, but evening meals, which usually included a soup (pea, squash, onion) followed by entrees of fish, chicken, or pork chops, rounded off by desserts of chocolate cake, coconut ice cream, or the like, were always pleasant. Each night of the week brought out a different Guatemalan tablecloth and place settings. For most of my stay, there were only one or two other couples at the resort, so everyone sat at the same long table for meals served family style. As at most small resorts, the evening's entertainment was conversation over dinner.

Now that I had been housed, fed, and introduced to the other guests, I sat on the beach with Almost a Dog digging in the sand at my feet. I begin to wonder again about the diving.

With Only a Sneaky Nurse for Excitement

Rum Point is on a narrow peninsula – walk across the road behind the resort, and there's the lagoon. This is where to board the new Pro 42, the boat that makes Rum Point a dive resort. We would not be going out to the reef; this was a ride of nearly an hour and a half, even with only three divers in



I'm sure the Belizian and Honduran fisherman have cleaned out many of the big ones here, but I'd still like to find out if Brian has his secret spots out on the barrier reef.

J. Q.

this 42-footer set up to handle 20 divers. Instead, we would dive around one of the cays inside the reef -- which one depended on the weather.

Promptly at 9 o'clock, the dive boat left the dock and slipped through the quiet waters of the lagoon, rounded the village of Placencia on the tip of the peninsula, and headed out among the cays. Brian, the hard-working, serious-minded Belizian in charge of the diving at Rum Point, eyed the cays carefully for visual coordinates and picked his spot. As we suited up, Brian pointed to a nearby small cay with a glistening white cruiser sitting at its dock. The island and the boat were for sale for a mere three million dollars. In addition to the down payment, another problem, according to Brian, was that the wealthy owner had not liked the mangrove trees on his beach and had had them all pulled up. Now the island was dwindling away, eaten up by the wave action on its unprotected shore.

A stride off of the stern into the 81' water led to a disappointing dive. Visibility was poor, only 15-20 feet. Fish of any size were few and far in between. The only things that kept me awake on the dive were a few pinkish-orange fluorescent corallimorphs half-hidden in the cracks of the coral, a large starfish, and occasional clumps of bluebell tunicates. I didn't even mind the 40-minute bottom time that Brian had set for the dive.

Back on board, we quickly moved to a nearby location and ate our lunch of mystery meat, potato salad, cole slaw, and papaya. Our packed lunches for dives and excursions for the rest of the week were repeats of this same culinary theme, with little variation. After lunches, the routine was to snorkel to kill time on our two-hour lunch break.

Dive number two had the same poor visibility and scarcity of fish as the first, but with a little added excitement. I had swum away from our group of four divers to look at a dinner-plate-sized upsidedown jelly. It was a picture of undulating serenity -- except for its upside-down appearance. As I returned to the group through the gloomy, 20-foot visibility, I counted five divers instead of the four I had left. As I drew nearer, the fifth diver became noticeably larger than the others. Cruising unnoticed in formation along with the divers was a nine-foot nurse shark. Although the shark seemed quite comfortable to be part of their group, my return spooked it, causing a lightning exit that let the rest of the group know they had not been alone.

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Laughing Bird and a Long Way to the Real Reef

I wasn't too disappointed. First dives are seldom great, and dives inside the barrier reef are not expected to match those on the outside. However, the next day the new Pro 42 was found to need some warranty work; a mechanic had flown down from Miami. Rather than dive another inside location from the small, open skiff that was the replacement, I opted for a trip to the Jaguar Reserve and signed up for diving the reef on the following day.

Side Trips

Several side trips are easily arranged through Rum Point Inn. Prices are based on four people, so lack of other willing participants can make some trips expensive.

COCKSCOMB JAGUAR RESERVE. If you want to see the jungle, this is the place. Along the hour-and-a-half drive from Rum Point, we stopped at a water hole for a glimpse of a crocodile while a swarm of killer bees filled the sky across the road. At the entrance of the mud road that leads down to the reserve is a Mayan art co-op. Local artists bring their woven baskets, yarn weavings, and reliefs carved in gray slate to sell. It's one of the few places to pick up gifts or offerings for those who stayed home. Once in the reserve, we had it to ourselves. Our guides led us down hot, steamy jungle trails, pointing out toucans, monkeys, and harvester ant highways worn several inches deep into the jungle floor by the stamping of a billion tiny feet. The dense jungle was a birdwatcher's delight during the morning hours. As the day grew hotter and bird calls dwindled, our trail led to a cool, clear jungle pool with a life-saving waterfall massage (bring your suit). Night trips can be arranged for serious attempts at spotting a jaguar, but the trip I really wanted to make was the 17-hour hike back into the basin to reach the old-growth forest. The cost for the trip I took was \$140.

PLACENCIA AND SEINE BIGHT. A bicycle ride down to Placencia is a trip in itself. It's funky and charming; everyone thinks this will be the next Ambergris Cay (touristy). Land prices are already on the rise (\$5,000 for a 100- by 50-foot beachfront lot) and small guest houses are sprouting. Seine Bight, north of Rum Point, is a Garifuna village with its own language; it's also worth a stroll. The Garifuna people are a mixture of Amerindian, African, Arawak, and Carib.

MONKEY RIVER. The ride in the open boat through the mangrove swamp was long and hot. When the boat had gone as far up the river as it was going, we stopped for lunch on a sand bar and got some relief from the heat by swimming in the tea-colored water. I could never quite get the crocodile I had seen two days earlier off my mind. We had gotten a late start, and most of the bird life and the monkeys were hiding from the midday sun as we coasted back down the river to the sea. Just when I had become resigned to not seeing the howlers, our boat driver cut the engine. From the shore, the whooping and howling rang out over the river. We never actually saw the monkeys, but I did capture the wild howling on tape. Start early, bring a hat and sun block. Cost for the trip is \$150.

LUBAANTAN AND NIM LI PUNIT MAYAN RUINS. I found these small ruins to be just as interesting as the immense sites of Chichen Itzá or Copán. A boat ride across the lagoon behind Rum Point knocks an hour off the trip — much appreciated once the jarring van ride is over. At Lubaantan we got a personal description and history of the site from one of the excavators. Ask him about the crystal skull that Lubaantan is noted for — his explanation, involving a small child finding it on her birthday, is fascinating. Nim Li Punit and its large carved-stone slabs and nearby Mayan village are also impressive if you're a ruins buff. Neither site has had extensive excavation, lending them a more mystical atmosphere than most ruins. Cost for the trip (both ruins included) is \$180.

That night at the dinner table, I had stories of toucans, monkeys, and crocodiles to swap with the two divers who had gone diving that day; but they didn't keep up their end, only shrugging and saying that the diving had been "OK."

The next day, the Pro 42 was still not ready for service. The new plan was to take the small skiff and head for the outer reef anyway. When I inquired about the time to the reef in such a small boat, I was told simply, "No problem." However, no problem became a problem when after an hour of pounding spray we were only a third of the way to the reef.

Brian aborted our attempt, and we turned in towards Laughing Bird Cay. We did our first dive half a mile out from this cay where the visibility was 30 to 40 feet, but once again the dive was almost devoid of fish. I was entertained by a finger-sized lamprey that attached itself to my fin.

After 40 minutes in the water, we were back out and headed to Laughing Bird Cay for a high-ambience lunch on white sand beaches with palm trees, conch shells, and skittering hermit crabs. The apres-lunch snorkel in this national park was more interesting than any of the dives on my trip, although the site was still not up to most Belizian standards. Schools

of silversides were everywhere, with brown pelicans swooping into the water for their fill. Beds of healthy elkhorn coral provided shelter for a full range of juvenile tropicals. Barracudas patrolled the water just a few inches below the surface.

Brian introduced our next dive, again off Laughing Bird Cay, as the site with the most fish. As we cruised along the low-profile reef at 60 feet, I did see a Nassau grouper, larger than would fit on my barbecue grill, dart into a hole. Toward the end of the dive, as the reef ran out, a school of circling horse-eye jacks materialized and faded in and out of the 40-foot visibility. A few more upsidedown jellies floated on the sand bottom, and black coral bushes added some interest to the dive, but by now I was more than ready to get to the real reef.

The Year of Diving Dangerously

The next day the big boat still was not ready. The plan was to take the small boat to the outer reef anyway. This plan sounded too familiar to me. Not wanting to make another \$65 dive inside the reef, I opted for a boat trip up the Monkey River to see the howler monkeys. With fewer people in the small craft, maybe they would actually make it to the real reef this time. On board was another diver whose opinions I had grown to trust after talking over several evening meals. If they made it to the reef, he would report on the diving.

When I quizzed the divers over dinner, they spoke more about the ride out than the diving. They told me that after more than two hours of grueling sun and spine-stunning pounding in the open skiff, they did make it to the outer reef. Once there, they made only one dive on the reef, then returned to the inside for the second dive. The visibility on the barrier reef had jumped up to a clear 100 feet. The big excitement of the dive was a massive jewfish, but other fish were still scarce. Was it worth the long haul? "No."

The customary hosts of Rum Point are founders George and Carol Bevier; however, they were absent during my stay, and our host was their son Wade. Wade seemed something of a misanthrope and not well suited for the gregarious role of a resort host. He was, however, an interesting character who could speak at length, if cornered, on a wide range of subjects.

My supper-table conversation with the two divers who had made it to the barrier reef prompted me to ask Wade at the dinner table just what segment of the dive market he was trying

"It's not safe" is the kind of stuff you'll hear from plenty of two-tank-a-day operations, their rationale for not doing more diving. Cayman operators are notorious for this kind of baloney. I was surprised to see it here on the frontier.

J. Q.

Booking is through Toucan Travel, 800-747-1381 or 504-465-0769, fax 504-464-0325. A seven-night package that includes round trip air from Miami, Houston, or New Orleans via Belize City to Placencia, plus accommodations and three meals a day, runs \$930 during the low season. Service charges and hotel tax added another \$323 to my double-occupancy room. Flights are on Taca Airlines, which lived up to its reputation by losing two of the other guests' luggage for more than three days. Dives are \$65 for a two-tank trip. The dive shop, at ground level under the main house, is well stocked with new rental equipment. E-6 processing is available. . . . Brian is a NAUI instructor offering certification. The library in the main house is excellent, with an extensive selection of reference works covering Mayans and local flora and fauna. . . . Funky bicycles, Sun Fish for sailing, and two kayaks are included in the rates. One of the kayak paddles was broken while I was there, making it a solo event, but both the lagoon behind and the ocean in front are good spots for kayaking. Bring snacks, it's a long time between a 12:30 lunch and 7:30 dinner. One time I asked for a snack, and all they could find was a can of sardines and some hot sauce.

Ditty Bag

Before I hooked up with Ben Davison, he had already visited Rum Point. When I saw his name on the guest list at Rum Point I was cursing — the @#%&*@ had beat me here by a month. He did get to take the fast boat to the barrier reef on his trip and reports it's worth the ride, with the coral especially virgin and beautiful, rating it up there with many of the dives further north in Belize.

J. Q.

And, J. Q., when I beat you again to the next "undiscovered spot," I promise that you, not the other newsletter guys, will get the story.

Ben Davison

to attract to Rum Point. "The experienced diver," he replied. When I mentioned that most experienced divers like to make more than two dives a day, his reply was that multiple dives of more than two were dangerous. Most of the world's live-aboards that cater to American divers allow four or more dives a day, I pointed out. "Then they're diving dangerously, aren't they?" he retorted.

In Essence

The diving inside the reef was not good enough to keep me a happy diver for a week. The Pro 42 was not available for most of my visit, which altered the usual diving pattern, but even that boat takes more than an hour to get out to the barrier reef. If the Pro 42 is not running while you're there, consider it a problem.

Brian runs a by-the-book, safety-oriented dive operation. Beginning divers should appreciate this, but experienced divers will find his procedures restrictive. For one reason or another, we never made a dive longer than 40 minutes and I never surfaced with less than 1,300 psi left over in an aluminum 80.

Having made this trip as a compromise destination, I found the land activities excellent and Placencia an off-the-beaten-path (for now) destination that was a pleasure to explore. Rum Point Inn is comfortable; it has a good staff, and its art-colony-looking cabañas add a new twist to tropical resorts. All in all, an excellent resort that is Almost a Dive Resort. J.Q.

Accidents and Incidents

How divers get into trouble underwater

Last year, the Aussies released studies of several deaths occurring a couple of years before. Below are some cases that deserve our attention.

A Small, Dirty Room

The following tragedy illustrates that training and knowledge are not enough — one needs experience to apply them correctly.

Having taken a wreck-diving course and made several subsequent dives there, two divemasters failed to surface at the expected

time from a 160-foot wreck dive. The other divers assumed nothing was wrong. Rather, they figured that two divers of their experience must have surfaced without being observed and drifted out to sea.

None of the other divers had seen them on the wreck. Police and other divers found no trace of them, but ignored the silty water coming from the opening in the floor of the deck cabin, which led to the crew quarters, a space made dangerous by loose-hanging cables.

Friends of the missing divers, refusing to believe that both would die without ditching their weights and inflating their BCs, surmised that the bodies must be trapped within the wreck. They prepared carefully: the search diver was on a line and breathed from an air hose attached to a tank placed close to the hatchway. He found the bodies.

The victims presumably had entered the compartment with satisfactory visibility, but had become disorientated after stirring up the silt. They had failed to tie off the lines they carried, and their lights were useless in the murk. Unfamiliar with the compartment, they were unable to find their way back to the hatchway. At that depth,