

BARBADOS

Barbados is busy and crowded, with lots of fast traffic, big splashy resorts, and restaurants galore. . . . There's ordinary Caribbean diving with tropical fish, although big ones are rare, but it's fine for beginners or for a dive or two on a golf holiday. . . . You still can find century-old bottles in the harbor with the Dive Shop. . . . The wreck of the *Stavronikita* is interesting, but jammed with tourist divers. . . . The average daily temperature is in the mid-80s year-round; there's considerable rain from June to January, and it's important to watch for hurricanes. . . .

Coral Isle Divers, Settlers Beach, January 2000, Jeremy Butler, Friday Harbor, WA. Vis: 20 to 80 feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy. Dive restrictions: Follow DM, time; depth profile was announced but not really enforced. 500 psi. Settlers Beach in Holetown. Nice "villas" on beach, with kitchen so you can make your own breakfast and lunch. Great restaurants all around. Dived ten dives with Coral Isle Divers because they are the only shop with Nitrox. Their 40 ft. boat is good, with safety gear, head and cold drinks. Divemasters are personable and competent, and give adequate briefings, do not set up your gear for you, but did check that air was turned on. Did an adequate job of pointing out the few underwater sights there are in Barbados. There are good wreck dives especially the

Stravronikita which I dived twice: once with no current, and once with a strong current. On the Stav, I saw the largest barracuda I have seen in 100 dives. They get a lot of cruise ship divers which reduces the enjoyment of the dives due to the "lowest common denominator" factor. On the dives where there were only a few, experienced, divers everyone had a better time. Kip — the owner — told me he had given up his cruise ship concession, so perhaps there will be fewer tourist divers in future. The shop's rental gear seemed to have some problems (with regulators): in ten dives I noticed at least three regs or gauges that were not working right. Your note on Barbados in the Chapbook could mention that there is lots to do in Barbados, compared to many Caribbean islands. Museums, old sugar mills, plantation houses, great beaches on the east side. A friendly island. Not the place one would go if diving were ones top priority. Good wrecks, healthy corals, but most of the fish end up in the country's excellent restaurants! (800-513-5840, 246-434-8377; 246-431-9068)

BELIZE

Inside the world's second-largest barrier reef, English-speaking Belize sports three major atolls—but not much in the way of beaches. . . . Most of the good diving is reachable from live-aboards or from resorts on the offshore cayes. . . . The deeply-cut, spur-and-groove coral reefs of Ambergris Caye, the largest and

most developed of the Belize's cayes, are interesting, but not as adrenaline-producing as the rugged underwater scenery of the outer cayes, where the walls are among the more spectacular in the Caribbean. There's a chance to see large schools of fish, a big one here and there, and plenty of large nurse sharks. . . . When comparing package prices, find out if they include the cost of transfers to and from the caye and what taxes are included. . . . There's good diving off Placencia, a funky fishing village in southern Belize, and, since it's on the mainland, you can visit Mayan ruins, the Jaguar Preserve, or take river tours. The trade-off? It's an hour's boat ride to the pristine barrier reef. . . . Flying to Belize is easy (only two hours from Houston) and it's simple to fly to Honduras for a second week. . . . Avoid Belize City at night—it has a reputation for serious crime. . . . Belize lies at the edge of the hurricane belt, and Ambergris Caye took a hard hit from Keith in October 2000.

Ambergris Caye

Amigos Del Mar, Mayan Princess, November 1999, Brian O'Reilly, Avon, CO. Ambergris is not a good base for diving. Local dives are poor, closest good dives are at Northern Turneffe — 1-1/2 boat ride each way, costs \$135, Blue Hole and Southern Turneffe two hours each way and costs \$185. If you go, stay in a dedicated dive resort. Better diving

and cheaper. (Ph: 011-501-26-2706, Fax: 011-501-26-2648)

Amigos del Mar, Belize Yacht Club, December 1999, Jim Parkhill (scuba7056@aol.com) McAllen, TX. Vis: 50 to 75 feet. Water: 75 to 78 degrees, choppy. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: time. Accommodations and service at Belize Yacht Club excellent. Amigos del Mar efficient. Good dm's and boats. Good day trips to Blue Hole/Lighthouse Reef and Turneffe Reef. The quantity of tame nurse sharks and rays at Shark/ray alley, Hol Chan channel and Amigos Wreck made for a special experience. Otherwise, diving at Ambergris is pretty mediocre. The diving is better on the outer atolls at Lighthouse or Turneffe but more expensive. Blue Hole is worth doing only to say you've done it. Short dive and not much to see other than sharks cruising below 140 fsw. Main reason for this trip was to ring in 2000 with a midnight dive with Journey's End. They canceled without prior notice and left our group waiting at the Yacht Club Dock at midnight while the rest of the world celebrated the new year. Very inconsiderate and unprofessional.

Amigos Del Mar, House Rental, April 2000, Anne and Fred Straus, Wyoming, OH. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 78 to 81 degrees calm and flat, choppy. Dive restrictions: 110 feet. They feed fish in Belize. When I questioned, I was advised "we feed only fish; we have stopped using hot dogs, cheese whiz, etc." Big groupers, eagle rays, nurse sharks come right up

to you on every dive. They set up and rinsed equipment, returned on time each morn with equipment.

Amigos Del Mar, Mayan Princess, July 2000, Bill Ganis, Dallas, TX.

Vis: 50-75 ft. Water: 82-85 degrees. Ambergris Caye is not cheap. Food, items at a store are almost twice American price. Beautiful place, no paved roads. Mayan Princess was comfortable and the ac worked Diving with Amigos Del Mar was no problem. Friendly, plenty of drinks on board, very fast boats. They take care of your gear from beginning to end. No lugging it around. Dives were from 100-60 ft.

Aquarius Divers, Tropicana Beach Resort, February 2000, Phil and Nancy Hamilton, Sandwich, MA.

Vis: 50-60 ft. Water: 72-76 degrees. Dive restrictions: not to exceed 120 feet. Resort is small, offers basic accommodations but is comfortable with a good restaurant and helpful staff. Aquarius Divers is a new operation. Patrick, the owner, is a good guide and diver. The boats, like many in Ambergris Caye, are fast but basic — bring sun screen and hat. Owing to hazards of going through channels in rough weather, boats will not go out if seas are over 3-4 ft. Windy conditions cut vis. to 50-60 ft. Ambergris wall sites were good but not as impressive as Grand Cayman. Turneffe Reef sites were much better: lots of rays, several turtles. “Shadowed” by a pod of dolphins on our last dive. Night diving at Ambergris was chaotic with several boats grouped in the same area.

Blue Hole Dive Center, Paradise Resort Hotel, August 1999, Trey Reagan (wfr3@hotmail.com), Dallas, TX. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet.

Water: 82 to 85 F. Stayed the whole month of August. Height of off-season so good for peace and quiet and small dive groups. Stayed at the Paradise Resort Hotel in a rustic cabana on the beach. I also got a good rate for the month (\$30 or so a night). Dive boats left from a dock right in front of my cabana. They took good care of my gear and always had it ready and on the boat for me. Divemasters (Robbie and Russell) were excellent. A perfect combination of fun and professional. They took the well being of the reef seriously and made that clear (saw them make 2 divers remove their gloves before a dive). Reefs were not colorful but had a good amount of larger life. Large eagle rays, lots of green morays, several turtles. Structure of the reefs is interesting with nice canyons. Hol Chan is nice despite the crowds. Lots of life. Lots of groupers, tarpon and a cool swim through with a school of silversides so dense that it was disorienting. Very nice night dives at the Hol Chan reserve (depending on the tide). A 6-foot barracuda tends to follow night divers to use the light for hunting. Got a surprise when he shot over my shoulder and devoured a jack. Several octopus on the night dives. Blue Hole Dive Center treated me right. Everyone was really friendly and helpful; they also arrange side trips to ruins and dive trips to the Blue Hole. The overnight trip to the Blue hole and Half Moon Caye is

excellent. (501 26-2982; Fax 501 26-2981)

Journey's End, April 2000, Anne Warburton, Yorba Linda, CA. Vis: 30-40 ft. Water: 78-82 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 70-80 ft. Wish we'd known about the winds of late March, April. Prevented us from diving half the dives as couldn't get out of the reefs. Went 1.5 hrs. to Turneffe to dive three dives on the leeward side of that island. Dives were late every day, said we'd go at 9:00 and usually left at 9:30-9:45. Some all day. Had only one dive alone without the divemaster. Was really controlling though we were on computers. Not a large variety of fish. Rooms had cockroaches first two days and on last day one dead frog. Food was ok. Fairly good variety.

Larry Parker's Reef Divers, Mayan Princess, September 2000, Kurt Schurenberg, Roswell, GA. Vis: 30-60 ft. Water: 80-84 degrees. Dive restrictions: 130 ft. Calm waters, however, visibility wasn't as clear as it could be. Small dive groups, no more than eight per boat. Prolific reef life, lots of nurse sharks, rays, eels, spotted drums, crustaceans, etc. Dive shop competent and very helpful. Mayan Princess Hotel very clean and well-run. Local restaurants good, and for most part inexpensive. Had to follow dive masters. Better if I could dive more shallow dives and have more to photograph. (501 26-2965; 501 305-220-1441; 501 800-327-1215; Fax 501 26-2943)

Ramon's Village, October 1999, Ken Hopkins (hopangus@aol.com) Star, ID. Vis: 60 to 80 ft. Water: 80 to 83 degrees, choppy, no currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: none. Not as many fish as other places in Caribbean. Coral is deteriorating some in places. Divemaster Tureano let us set our own pace. The guy left on the boat went to sleep on one dive and we couldn't wake him so we had a long surface swim back to the boat. Excellent night dive, lots of nurse sharks, sting rays, and large fish. Also lots of large sleeping parrot fish. (Ph: 601-646-1990, Fax: 601-649-1996, e-mail: ramons@c-gate.net)

Ramon's Village, February 2000, James M. Boone Sr., Alexandria, VA. Vis: 60-75 ft. Water: 75-78 degrees. Dive restrictions: Stay near guide. Room small. No tub only shower. Grounds beautiful. Restaurant ok but repetitive. Town a short walk. Dive operation good. Gear changed for you after first dive. Divemasters very attentive and pleasant. Trip to Blue Hole and Half Moon Caye worth the money. Largest assortment of big groupers I have seen. Hol-Chan Park excellent but lots of current. Lots of good restaurants in town. Plenty to do for non-diving spouse. Once divemaster saw that you knew what you were doing, you were free to break off from the group, as long as you stayed in general vicinity and surfaced when group surfaced.

Glover's Atoll

Manta Resort, March 2000, Henry Campbell, Tacoma, WA. Vis: 30 to

100 ft. Water: 79 to 81 degrees, choppy, surge. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 130 ft. w/ computer. I didn't realize I would not be able to dive The Blue Hole while at this resort. Surface intervals are done on the island, not in the boat. After you set up your gear the first time it is assembled and changed for you before each dive. The water was rough and everyone should probably take sea sick medicine before each dive. The divemaster had no problems with divers doing their own profile as long as they had a computer. (Ph: 800-326-1724, Fax: 310-937-6473)

Manta Resort, April 2000, Joel Mork, Glendale, AZ. Vis: 80 to 150 ft. Water: 78 to 79 degrees, choppy. Dive crews and boat captains know the best dive sites. They take good care of your equipment. They switch out your tanks for you. Our Dive master, Carlos, was great; he knew where to take us and what to see. His profiles were easy to follow while giving everyone a great 3 tank diving day. Make sure if you go to Manta you make a point of having at least one diving day with Carlos; he is fun. Manta is remote and the staff is great; so is the diving.

Manta Resort, June 2000, Tom Rain, Irving, TX. Vis: 50 to 70 ft. Water: 78 to 82 degrees, choppy, no currents. Dive restrictions: depth, time (80 for 30) follow divemaster. Nice resort. 2-1/2 hour bumpy boat ride from Belize City to resort on Glovers' Reef. Not for those prone to mal de mer. Cottages on palm tree-

covered island. A/C good; good food. Some no-see-ums. Dive boat a little crowded, but quick trip from resort to dive sites. Nice divemaster, Alonzo; time/depth for each dive. Experienced divers might be a little bored.

Manta Resort, September 2000, John Sweeney, (jtsweene@bechtel.com), Crosby, TX. Vis: 50-75 ft. Water: 82-84 degrees. Dive restrictions: 100' Unique and relaxing dive trip. Manta is only resort on this small white sand island with tall coconut palms, 12 cabanas with porch and hammock, bar/restaurant over protected lagoon. Island is paradise, romantic settings for stargazing at night. Entire staff is friendly, efficient and accommodating. Food was very good. Cabanas are clean and cozy. No see-ums/sand flies a minor nuisance, especially when the wind was still. They sprayed entire island that kept them under control. Bring bug spray. Dive op. small, personal and good! 3 dives a day, 2 night dives a week. Time limit 50 min. after some prodding, they extended them for us. Divemaster Alfonso (Fonzie) and Captain Frances worked to get us better vis. Both did a great job. Nice walls, the usual tropicals, many lobsters, groupers, deep sea fans. Hundreds old Creole wrasse at "the Aquarium." Several eagle rays, nurse sharks, turtles and dolphin. Let Katie Valk (mayatravel@btl.net) arrange a Night in the Jungle at Jaguar Paw Resort, rainforest hike with river cave tubing and possibly a guided rainforest night hike. Visit the zoo on the way back to the airport.

Lighthouse Reef

Lighthouse Reef Resort, July 2000, Aurora Pan, (farpoint@lanminds.com), Castro Valley, CA. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm. Dive your own profile Requested to dive at 100' except the Blue Hole, which was guided dive to 130'. The good: Everyone was friendly and ensured that we had a good time. Being met in Belize City we no longer had to worry about anything until we were back in Belize City. The diving was surprisingly humdrum. The visibility was mediocre and pelagics and large fish were practically nonexistent. The close in diving to Lighthouse Reef itself is pretty bad. Half Moon Cay and Long Cay were the highlights and the Blue Hole was the unique experience. Wish we'd known about the no see'ums — nothing deters them. We experienced a lightning strike while on the atoll and with the shut down of the air conditioner the no see'ums were unbearable. Nothing deterred them. For some, nothing alleviated the resultant itching. Unfortunately the dining room at Lighthouse Reef is open to the elements and on those days when the wind doesn't blow, it's open season for the bugs. It is truly unfortunate that Lighthouse is not able to contain the bugs better. Even with the relatively skimpy close in diving, Half Moon Cay and Long Cay are definitely worth returning to. (Ph: 941-687-4593, Fax: 941-687-9428, e-mail: wwalt@aol.com)

Lighthouse Reef Resort, July 2000, Emily and Gar MacRae, Culver

City, CA. Water 82. Vis 60+. Mostly sunny with sporadic showers. Very little current. No pelagics on dives, but saw three nurse sharks swimming in shallows off Half Moon Cay. Half Moon Cay had best sites and visibility. Reef in excellent condition, lots of swim thrus. Huge 6 foot green moray free swam with us twice. Saw grouper, sting rays, barracuda, lobster. Unless you can extend your bottom time with Nitrox, we thought Blue Hole was overrated. Divemaster let us dive our own profile. No follow the leader. Food and staff and accommodations at resort were excellent. Lots of no-see-ums so bring DEET. A nice little side trip on non-dive day is to take one of their kayaks into the interior lagoon, where are upside down jellyfish feeding in the eel grass.

St. George's Caye

St. George's Lodge, February 2000, Mickey Rosenberg, Providence, RI. Vis: 30-50 ft. Water: 78-84 degrees. Dive restrictions: Pressured to dive deep (125 ft.). We were the only guests in peak season — why? Food fabulous, but seated with owners every meal. That would be a push even with close friends, a strain in this situation. No sensitivity to the possibility that a couple might enjoy dining alone. Diving: dark silted reef, occasional great stuff: mating octopi, large groupers, big nurse shark. Pressure to take Nitrox course and go deep. No beach or close snorkeling. (Ph: 800-678-6871 or 011-501-24-4190, Fax: 011-501-23-0461)

St. George's Lodge, April 2000, Marcia Barnes (marciabarnes@yahoo.com), Satellite Beach, FL. Vis: 25 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: No limits, they treated us as adults. Fred wanted us back to the boat when we were out of air. I'd read about Fred's place in the Chapbook for years and wasn't disappointed. He runs the tightest dive resort I've ever seen. Service was topnotch. After the morning dive and breakfast, we would return to the boat to find the "tank-fairy" had been there, with all our gear set up just as we liked it, on fresh tanks. Ditto for the afternoon dive. We never touched our gear all week. When we arrived, we were the only 2 divers at the resort, and had the place to ourselves for 3 days. Then one other couple showed up. We all dove Nitrox, which allowed bottom times to average 55-60 mins — basically determined by how long your air held out. Our typical profile was 120' for 20 min, followed by "forever at 50" which meant be back under the boat with a couple of hundred pounds of air in your steel tanks. Fred was always happy to dive with us and point little stuff. Or when we wanted to go by ourselves, he gave us the reef layout and we guided ourselves! Fred found cherub fish, pipe fish, turtles, the biggest barracuda I've seen in 14 years of diving, sharks, and most everything in between. Fran, who was shooting with the same camera type as I buddied with me for a few dives to give me a few pointers at no charge. When my rental failed, she traded out some of her equipment so I could

continue to take photos! My buddy took the advanced course while we were there, including the Nitrox certification, and it was great. Fred's classes were so clear, especially his multilevel dive planning, that I would recommend them to anyone. My only complaint was not knowing about the extra fee for Nitrox in advance. It wasn't mentioned when I booked, though I told the booking agent in advance we wanted to dive Nitrox, and that I liked to pay for everything ahead of time. Fred was a character, who genuinely cares about the reefs and teaching everyone to be better divers. He was an excellent host. With his partner Fran overseeing the Lodge kitchens, food was excellent and plentiful. Neither my buddy nor I broke into our "stashes" of snacks. One afternoon dive I was the only diver of the 4 who wanted to go, and Fred was willing to take me out solo. On the last day of diving, we entered the water and were soon joined by a pod of wild dolphins, who stayed and played for awhile. No rinse tank on the boat, but that wasn't a problem as we headed in after each dive. No developing on the island, but next-day developing of 35 mm available in Belize City, for a price. No slide developing available at all. Camera rental equipment available.

St. George's Lodge, April 2000. No name. My husband and I and our 19-year-old daughter had a wonderful trip. We have all been diving less than a year but my husband and daughter are much more confident divers than I am. St. George's was the perfect place

for us with our different skill levels. Fred Good and Fran Chan, owners and dive instructors, were patient, informative, calming, and charming. I left a better and more relaxed diver than I was when I got there. The diving itself was spectacular despite visibility that wasn't as good as we had experienced before in Belize. All of us enjoyed the relaxed family style meals and conversation in the living room to talk about—what else—diving. The food was wonderful—especially the homemade soups and bread daily. It was especially nice to be at a resort so totally devoted to diving. There are no town and only a few guests at a time.

St. George's Lodge, May 2000, Carolyn deRoos, Friday Harbor, WA. Vis: 75-100 ft. Water: 70+ degrees. Dive restrictions: Buddy system, Nitrox encouraged. Very easy to get here compared to Bonaire. Week was overcast due to heavy rain. Not as much fish life of any size as in Bonaire, similar corals to San Pedro — staff exceptional: ditto food. Not crowded and encouraged interaction, sharing after dinner. Dive sites relatively close, unspoiled, but not many fish. Many lobsters and others invertebrates in shallow coral areas. Really gourmet meals, even breakfast! Staff really worked hard with beginners to make them comfortable in the water.

St. George's Lodge, May 2000, Charlie and Judy Choate. Washoe Valley, NV. Water: 82 to 85 Fahrenheit, choppy. Third enjoyable trip to St. George's Lodge. The quality

of the services are still at the high standards enjoyed on past visits, thanks to the diligence and hard work of Fred Good, Fran Chang, and their staff. We enjoyed staying in one of the six thatched cabanas with their private dock. The reef is stepped, so our normal dive profile (using Nitrox) was 120' for 20 minutes; 60'-30' for the remainder of the dive. The sea life ranged from the turtles, Southern stingrays, nurse sharks, eels (even one manatee seen by Fran and her students) to the two male Sailfin Blennies doing their dance, and all the sea life in between. Large spotted moray swimming along the reef, not being allowed into crevices crowded with 2-3 lobsters using their antennae to keep him out. Because of Fred's skill, we were able to get within a foot of a large barracuda at a cleaning station and could observe the parasites around his mouth. Since Fred has been diving on the reef for more than 25 years, he can find almost any type of critter you are interested in. His Nitrox course is easy and understandable. St. George's would be a great place to learn to dive and for most divers to improve their skills. Fred, Fran and the staff work hard to ensure their guests are enjoying their dive experience, no matter how many dives the guests have logged. Number of divers on the boat ranged from 2 to 7, plus Fred, Fran and staff. The dining continues to be excellent and varied; too much food at times, but too delicious to refuse. Homemade breads and soups with all lunches and dinners, plus the main entrees. Lots of fruits and vegetables and the nightly dessert, of course.

St. George's Lodge, July 2000, Bob Leonard (rel4@psu.edu), State College, PA. Vis: 10 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm. Dive your own profile: no. Dive restrictions: Was getting certified. I was determined to become certified and when a friend suggested Belize the first web site that popped up under "dive-Belize" was <gooddiving.com>, home page of St. George's Lodge run by Fred Good and Fran Chang. What luck! You can read the many *Undercurrent* testimonials about the hospitality, the laid back atmosphere, the beauty of St. George's Caye, the creature comforts of Fred's hand-built resort/lodge, the gourmet menu expertly designed by Fran and prepared by a master cook, the personalized attention and expert dive instruction, the nearby easy-to-reach dive sites, and the spectacular beauty and excitement of diving the barrier reef. All true! A week with Fred and Fran is like a week with old friends with all the privacy of a luxury resort and all the fellowship of family. Our week on the caye included just three guests plus Fred and Fran and a quiet, efficient, indigenous staff. Most of the talk was about diving—how to, how not to, what to expect, what to look for, what we did and saw, plans for the next dive, philosophy/art/science of diving, ideas for our future as divers. Always comfortable, non-pressured and positive. Fred's and Fran's obvious love of diving is infectious. You feel as if there is no place on earth they'd rather be than right there teaching, encouraging and enlightening you about this unique underwater

adventure. When we returned from our one day trip to the mainland, we learned that Fred had spent the afternoon — you guessed it—diving. This is a guy who has logged more than 20,000 dives! We came home certified in air and Nitrox.

St. George's Lodge, August 2000, Vladimir Didenko, Houston, TX. Vis: 30-100 ft. Water: 85 degrees. Dive restrictions: depth limits. I found it through "*Undercurrent*," your information is correct. Excellent place to dive for both beginners and advanced. Was certified as rescue and Nitrox diver. Good accommodations, no A/C but you don't feel it, as there are 2 ventilators/room. Was prepared to deal with no-see-ums, but there were none. Very small individual groups (3-4) divers. Boat has protection from sun. Fred Good, the owner, is an excellent host, thorough but not restrictive. Dives were long and interesting (Nitrox allowed longer times under water). No shore diving, no beach, but you can swim from the pier. Food prepared under Fran's supervision is healthy and tasty. Very relaxing and friendly.

Southern Belize

Hamanas, Jaguar Reef, July 2000. Robert Jansen M.D., Marietta, GA. Jaguar Reef is an adequate resort. The accommodations were good, the food was good and the staff was friendly and helpful. The dive operation is not recommended. The boat was out of commission forcing us to use a single engine "snorkel" boat for our dives.

The sites are too far for this boat that was not equipped to accommodate tanks and dive equipment. The engine broke down on the return trip leaving us adrift for an hour and a half until we were towed to shore. They house the dive operation in a small room next to the resort and appear to be a half-hearted attempt at providing a dive operation. After one day, we walked down the beach to a new dive operation, Hamanasi. The operators, Peter and his wife, run a good shop. The boat is new, powered by large, twin engines, and equipped to accommodate divers and their equipment, but no facilities for cameras. Hamanasi is still learning the sites and the staff tends to be overly conservative for experienced divers, however that will probably improve with time. They are friendly, helpful and do everything to make the diving pleasant and trouble free.

(Jaguar Reef Lodge, General Delivery, Hopkins, Belize, C.A.; Ph./Fx.: 1-800-289-5756; e-mail: jaguarreef@btl.net; website: <http://www.jaguarreef.com>)

Jaguar Reef Resort, May 2000, Bonnie Winsbro and Victor Cain, Oak Ridge, TN. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 78 to 80 degrees, choppy. Lots of eagle rays and large turtles (loggerheads) at the reefs off Jaguar Reef. Food, service and accommodations excellent. Dive operation as part of the resort. We only did two days diving but were impressed with the divemaster (James) and boat captain (Cardinal) who were prompt, conscientious, and very friendly.

Rum Point Inn, June 1999, Dave Benson, Colorado Springs, CO.

Overall weather was part sun part rain. Water 82 F, I use a polartec suit, Vis 40-80'. In week saw: 10 whale sharks, 12 mackerel sharks, 2 bull sharks, Dolphins, 2 eaglerays, 1 turtle. Third trip to Rum Point. Have seen whale sharks every trip, dolphins on two, sharks on all three. They have accommodations for all tastes from the "Beach Cabana" to the air conditioned "four plex." Twin engine jet boat that moves but the dives are some distance out. Meals are family style with the Beviers hosting the dinners. An excellent trip. (Ph: 800-747-1381 or 504-465-0769 or 011-501-623240, e-mail: rupel@BTL.com)

Rum Point Divers, Kitty's Place, March 2000, Ellen Moran, Hancock, NH.

Vis: 50-80 ft. Water: 77 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 80 ft. maximum. From Belize City we flew Tropic Air to Placencia just \$120 US round trip. Kitty's Place one mile from the airport in Placencia. Rooms are basic and clean. No air conditioning but a good breeze and ceiling fan kept room cool enough to sleep well. Room had small refrigerator and coffee maker. We had daily maid service. Water quality from tap is fine both in Placencia and Belize City. Room was \$388 US for seven nights including breakfast. All rooms have front porch with chairs and hammocks. The staff was friendly and helpful. Booked trips at the front desk to the Mayan Ruins, Cockscomb Jaguar Reserve or a paddle in the Monkey River. The beach in front of Kitty's is nice for

walking but water is turbid and there is a lot of sea grass, lot of washed up garbage, plastic soda bottles, old sandals, baby diapers. Saw many billboards and posters around town about protecting the environment. Bring plenty of bug repellent for any trip into the forest or out to the cayes. Diving. Through Kitty's Place I booked a dive trip with Rum Point Divers. The trip to the Barrier Reef takes 1.5 hours one way so a two-tank dive is an all day event. We left at 9:00 am and returned at 5:00 pm. Rum Point Divers has a nice, big fast boat (42 ft.). Both divers and snorkelers share the boat. They drop off the snorkelers at one caye while the divers do the first tank. Our first dive was 80 feet for 45 minutes on Pompon Wall. We did not receive any pre-dive briefing except "80 ft. for 45 min. We did a free descent to 40 ft. and swam over to the wall. Visibility was around 70 ft. with 77 degree water. (A shorty wet suit was definitely a good idea). The wall was dramatic, dropping vertically into a cobalt blue abyss. Huge lobsters and crabs could be found hiding in the crevices. There were a good variety of healthy corals and sponges. We also encountered large schools of Bermuda chub and the usually cruisers like Black Durgeons, Tangs and Grey Angels. For surface interval we went back to the caye where the staff set up a lunch of juice, tuna salad, rice and beans and fruit. (Surface interval two hours). Our second dive was also off Pompian Point. We went to 50 ft. for 45 minutes over spur and groove reef. Some damage to the coral, bleaching

and some rubble. We found green morays, southern stingrays, a scorpion fish and one large nurse shark. Schools of Bermuda chub and the ever present schoolmasters, yellowtail snapper and blue stripped grunts. I took a second trip with Rum Point Divers. This time we had 10 divers on board. I was traveling solo and was never officially paired up with a buddy. Our pre dive briefing was "Pompian Wall 80 ft. for 45 minutes." Seven of us went with one divemaster. The other three were finishing their certification and dove to 50 ft. with their instructor. Staff on board was friendly, but if you expect to be waited on hand this will not happen. Placencia village is a combination of a traditional Belizean fishing village and current eco-tourism enterprise. A few small restaurants, bars and shops. Any "adventure activity" requires at least a one hour ride in a launch to snorkel or dive or a bumpy ride overland to check out the forest and Mayan Ruins. All the trips are worth the effort just bring snacks, water, bug repellent and the right attitude.

Rum Point Inn, March 2000, Ross Guderian, Milton, WA. Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 79-80 degrees. Dive restrictions: 80 ft. 40 minutes. Nice resort but lacking in "tourist niceties" like the locals aren't used to dealing with tourists yet. One two-dive boat per day. Long (1-2 hours) boat ride to sites. Very nice wall dives. Big lobsters and moray eels. 8 ft. nurse shark. Big picnic lunch spread during surface interval but meals at resort were "killed twice," a little over

cooked. When it rains, dive and tour boats don't go out. Price quoted in U.S. dollars but final bill was in Belize which was dramatically higher. Despite written dispute with resort we were forced to eat the difference.

Sea Horse Dive Shop, Trade Winds Cottages, April 2000, K. Reeser (Rees43@aol.com), Bloomington, IL. Vis: 65 to 85 Feet. Water: 78 to 83 F, calm choppy. Dive your own profile. Stay with the group on Whale Shark dives. Don't touch the reef or the fish (particularly the big ones!) Placencia is a nice remote out of the way place. Many inexpensive accommodations. Tradewind Cottages on the beach, simple and cheap with screened windows, fridge, fan, and hot and cold water. Breeze at night kept most of the sand fleas and mosquitoes down but not all. Lot's of nice quaint outdoor places to eat. Most meals less than \$10 US. Sea Horse Dive Shop dependable and had 3 boats (that I saw). One 33 footer with 2 150 Yamahas, one 25 footer, and another smaller one. They can and will pack you on the 33 with up to 14 divers (about 6 too many). The 25-footer was nice for our group of 6. Coolers filled with water for cameras and video housings. Two tables. Limited space. We saw black tip reef sharks under schooling snapper and some large nurse sharks. One whale shark (up close and personal) on our first day and 4 our last. Best time is around the 3rd week of April. They will take you out in the morning, we learned you have better luck in the late afternoon. Encourage them to take you out in the afternoon!

Reefs are OK but not great. Boat rides are 30-45 minutes. Lunch on board, usually fish and very good. Whale shark dives about \$100 for 2 tank dive. Well worth the trip but had we not seen the big fella it would not have been worth it. Being in Placencia for Easter was very festive! Cold beer, Rum and Cokes and some good new friends from across the world.

Turneffe Atoll

Blackbird Caye Resort, March 2000, Jeffrey R. Johnson (jrj72113@aol.com), Maumelle, AR. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: to 79 Fahrenheit, choppy currents. Dive restrictions: Depth and Time. Remote location — which we loved — on east side, hence some rough seas. About 1 hour boat ride from Belize City, traveling on BCR's boat. Jennifer and Drew, BCR's new managers, were on the boat with us — they had yet to see the resort. Resort can accommodate 30+ people, mostly in large air-conditioned cabanas. We were happy with our room, the food, and the service. Staff exceptionally nice. Had new Restaurant Mgr, Oscar. Buffet breakfast at 7 am, Dive #1 at 8:15 am, #2 at 11:30 am, buffet lunch at 1 pm, Dive #3 at 3 pm, "formal" Dinner at 7 pm. Exceptions were 6 pm night dive Monday (instead of 3 pm dive, all day three tank outing Tuesday to the Blue Hole, two tank outing to the Elbow Friday. Also, had Sunset Cruise Friday. Snorkeling, fishing, kayaking, and sailing (sunfish) were available. Doctor flies were a nuisance, not even 100% DEET would deter them.

Diving was very good. Saw lots of spotted eagle rays, southern stingrays, and small skates or Spanish stingrays. Also, loggerhead turtles — one came close to check me out — permit, horse-eyed jacks, huge rainbow and midnight parrotfish, all the normal little stuff, lots of coral types. On one dive, two bottlenose dolphins joined us and swam in our group for some time. Bill, our divemaster, was on top of things and enjoyable. Winston, the dive boat captain, was exceptional. 40' open boat with outboards, also have smaller boats when lodge is full. While we were there, no more than twelve divers, usually eight or less. Since only one boat, could get slowed by inexperienced divers. Except for Blue Hole— that is a unique experience - virtually all dives were drift dives. On particularly rough sea days, they would go to west side of Turneffe. Those trips, Blue Hole, and Elbow require boat trips of 40 minutes to one hour, otherwise most of your dives are 5 to 10 minutes away. You rig your BC and regulator for the first dive, the staff handles changes and rinsing. Dive shop had basics to rent, but no cameras or photo shop, and not equipped to do repairs. Several guests split their trips between BCR and Royal Mayan, BCR's sister resort in the jungle. That way they also got a taste of Belize jungle, Mayan ruins. Heard positive comments about Royal Mayan and jungle experience. (888-271-3483, 310-937-6470; Fax 310-937-6473)

Blackbird Caye Resort, April 2000,
John Stuart, St. Joseph, MO. Vis:
40-100 ft. Water: 75-80 degrees. Dive

restrictions: Back on the boat in 45 minutes or 500 psi. The operators of Blackbird Caye Resort are polite and professional but I would not describe the experience as awesome. The diving was enjoyable but not spectacular. The Blue Hole is something to be experienced but somewhat over rated.

Blackbird Caye Resort, June 2000,
Cullen Walker, Midlothian, VA. Vis:
60-80 ft. Water: 82 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 45 min./60 ft. without computer. A great laid back place. Three dives a day, Blue Hole included (Tuesday). Doctor flies were bad at various times during the day. Resort holds 30 guests. We had from 12 to 24 during our stay. No T.V. No phones, no hassles. Boat back and forth to Belize city on Sat. and Wed. Also spent three days at the Royal Mayan near the Guatemala border (both resorts owned by the same person).

Blackbird Caye Resort, June 2000,
Walt and Angie Redmond, Austin, TX. Vis: 50 to 90 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, calm choppy. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: Time, depth limits. We really enjoy diving in Belize. Always lots of fish, coral in good condition and great drift diving. We spent one day at Lighthouse Atoll and dove Blue Hole [been there, done that]. Good resort — air-conditioned cabanas, good food. Dive staff helpful and friendly. Bring the DEET — when wind stops blowing, the sand fleas, horseflies and mosquitoes are extremely active! Highest concentration of DEET you can find works best.

**Turneffe Island Lodge, December 1999,
Michael N. Hofman, San Francisco, CA.**

We stayed for 3 nights at Chan Chich Lodge (www.chanchich.com) in a beautiful setting in the rain forest and in a Mayan ruin. Then on to Turneffe Island Resort (www.turneffelodge.com). We took the Turneffe Lodge boat with staff and visitors and about an hour later came to the island. The setting is in the midst of mangrove islands, near the southern tip of the Turneffe atoll. The only lights at night are those from the resort and stars. There are twelve rooms and most of them were filled. Everyone does an excellent job of making you feel right at home; and the food is good. The dive operation is very well managed. Dive masters and captains take care of your diving gear after you set it up. 5-10 minute ride to the dive site, shore intervals, Third dive at 3pm. Two great days of diving: nurse sharks, many eels, rays, parrots, etc. The coral was very healthy and lots of large fan, brain, barrel and other varieties to see. Visibility was from 50 to 80 feet, but northerlies prevented us from going to some dive sites early in the week. Tuesday after the second dive (and lunch) I started experiencing some pain in my stomach and hips. I had had the same pain before on Sun and Mon., and in Palau and on other dives, but this time it was bad. Manager of the dive program, Andy, put me on oxygen and called DAN who recommended that I go to the Hyperbaric chamber in Ambergris Caye. I didn't think it was a big deal, but realized that I had to take care of this problem. Andy drove me to Belize City in the Lodge boat.

We drove to the municipal airport where a local ambulance service was ready to fly over to San Pedro. I spent 4 3/4 hours in the chamber, about 4' in diameter, and watched videos through a window. Going into the chamber is daunting: it's small and as soon as they start it gets hot and noisy. Also, I had to breathe oxygen through a mask and drink a gallon of water. There was no change in my condition! Dr. Rodriguez suggested we see what happened overnight, so Janet and I went back to a hotel across the street and "slept." After several discussions and calls with DAN, we decided to do a shorter treatment and if nothing changed then we could assume the problem wasn't decompressions sickness. Well, nothing changed. So, we went back to Turneffe. The rest of the week, while it didn't include diving, was wonderful. My neurologist concluded (as did Dr., Rodriguez) that the weight belt pinched a nerve causing the symptoms. His recommendation is a weight integrated BC. (Ph: 800-874-0118; Fax 713-313-4671; e-mail info@turneffelodge.com; website www.turneffelodge.com)

**Turneffe Island Lodge, February
2000, Dr. Paul Lipton, Baldwin, WI.**

Vis: 80-100 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. Dive restrictions: 130 ft. within computer limits. Turneffe Lodge runs a first class operation. They overlooked no details. Excellent meals, caring staff, top notch dive boats. I cannot think of another location that has both world class diving and fishing. I'll go back in a few years after some remodeling projects are complete.