

dives. The boat is small, so the dive group is limited to a maximum of six. This makes for great diving as the group is small. And there was plenty of space on the boat for the group size. The dive sites were varied, and we did a few drift dives with mild current. The dive that most people like best is the wreck of the freighter *Stavronika*, which at its deepest point is in about 120 to 130 feet of water. John lead the group through some remarkably small swim-throughs that I wouldn't have tried on my own, but with John's leadership and knowledge of the freighter were perfectly safe and fun. There are other wreck sites, and we dove another one, which was shallower with lots of fish life. I found the reefs to be in good health with hard and soft coral with gorgonians and sponges. At most dive sites there were plenty of smaller fish, but larger fish were in shorter supply. Barbados had more turtles than I've ever seen on any other island. I did 10 dives and saw large hawksbill turtles on nine of them. On one dive I saw five of them. Many of the turtles in Bajan waters are tagged. I usually saw at least one spotted eel, and there were quite a few multiple sightings. There was even one huge green moray at the *Stavronika* who rivals Chester at the Habitat Curacao house reef in size. John was good at striking up conversations. He took a real interest in the people with whom he was diving. Both John and Mary are amiable, easy going, and good-natured. Although the diving on Barbados isn't rip-snorting, it's fine. There are a lot of things to do topside, including a tour of rum distilleries and a brewery. A visit to the wild

and less populated east side of the island was at the top of my friend's favorite activities. The island is loaded with pretty beaches and activities. The people were friendly and easy going and helpful in getting us to and from our destinations. Barbados has a good and cheap transportation system (although some of the small van rides can be hairy), so we didn't bother with a car and driving on the left side of the road.

**High Tide Water Sports, Coral Reef Club, February 2003, Sarah Plummer (scubado84@hotmail.com), Boothbay, ME.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. Great wreck dive! Nice reefs. Mild current. The *Stavronikita* wreck is a 365-foot Greek freighter. The Stav. was gutted for divers then sunk in 1979 and has a good growth. The Stav landed "bolt" upright with the stern in 130 feet and the bow in 60 feet. You can go into and thru different levels of the wheelhouse. There are many different fish and turtles. The reefs are healthy with many different fish. I saw big trumpet fish, drum fish, spotted moray eels, and sting rays. High Tide Water Sports' boat is well maintained, and the crew is helpful. Juice between dives. No fresh water for cameras. There were a bit of "floaties," shoot down to avoid backscatter. (800-513-5763)

## BELIZE

Inside the world's second-largest barrier reef, English-speaking Belize sports three major atolls —

but not much in the way of beaches. ... 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 most developed of Belize's cayes, are interesting but disappointing to many experienced divers. Outer cayes have better diving and a chance to see large schools of fish, a big one here and there, and large nurse sharks. ... On mainland, you can visit Mayan ruins, the Jaguar Preserve, or take river tours. ... Belize is only two hours from Houston. ... Belize lies at the edge of the hurricane belt, and Ambergris Caye took a hard hit from Keith in October 2000 while southern Belize got blasted in October 2001, when Iris took down the Wave Dancer, with 20 souls.

### Ambergris Caye

**Amigos Del Mar, Mayan Princess Hotel, 2003, JoAnn Doino-Ingersoll, N.J.** Dives logged: 75. Vis: 100+ ft.

Water: 83 F. I wish I had been prepared for how underdeveloped Ambergris Caye is. Took a little getting used to. However, the food was excellent in most restaurants. The divemasters went out of their way to show us a good time. On one dive, he trailed an open container filled with fish, which guaranteed we got lots of attention from nurse sharks, large grouper, and other fish. The Blue Hole at Lighthouse Reef was worth the long boat trip. It was

awesome. Shark Ray Alley was a hoot. Not just rays, but nurse sharks too — lot's of them! (<http://amigosdive.com>, [www.mayanprincesshotel.com](http://www.mayanprincesshotel.com))

**Aqua Dives, Aqua Marina, February 2003, Nikki Mahan, Bellevue, WA.** Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy, no currents. The Blue Hole is a waste of time — one of those been-there-done-that dives. The boat rides to the best sites were long and uncomfortable. The dive shop was able to accommodate our rebreathers, but the expense was substantial. Our dive guides were good; let us do our own thing once they saw we were capable divers. We had some outstanding encounters with eagle rays and nurse sharks. The resort was nice, new, and comfortable. There is a double bed in the bedroom and a pull out couch in the living room. The kitchenettes are great with a microwave, coffee pot, and all the other expected things. I brought my own peanut butter, coffee, and English muffins. There are some good restaurants on the cayes. ([www.ambergrisdivers.com](http://www.ambergrisdivers.com))

**Royal Palms, March 2003, Eugene (Gino) Dubay, Pigeon Forge, TN.**

The place was one year away from major repair due to no maintenance for some time. The new onsite manager is an ex-pat Brit named Marty Thomas — a delightful, ex-Royal Marine. We could easily see improvements every day. We went from no water pressure to U.S. style pressure. The beach was day after day cleaned and brought back to what we all expect. The restaurant is

closed, but no loss. Next door at Banana Beach is a new great restaurant. Also, BB is a gift shop. Monkey-Business does a wonderful job of setting up tours, etc. Royal Palms has above average rooms with good A/C and an excellent cleaning staff. (Tip these ladies at least \$1.00+US per day as the average wage is low — prices are equal to our costs.) RP is quiet with the biggest pool in San Pedro, I'm told. I did not dive this year as there are no large fish to see unless you go way off shore. Shark-Ray Alley has no nurse sharks. The guides implied "if we don't feed 'em, you won't see 'em." A resort area cannot support diving and sport fishing as the diving will suffer badly (in my opinion). The best snorkel trip was with Ricky Carlos of Sea-rious Diving to see the manatees. They fed us well, and twice put us (eight people) in the water as long as we could stand it. ([www.ambergriscaye.com/royalpalms/index.html](http://www.ambergriscaye.com/royalpalms/index.html))

**Bottom Time, Villas at Banyan Bay, July 2003, William Walton ([billwalton1648@msn.com](mailto:billwalton1648@msn.com)), Beaumont, TX.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. Bring as much food from home as you can. The grocery store is really expensive. Ambergris Caye has the most hospitable people I have met in the Caribbean. The Villa at Banyan Bay was only \$175 per night (low season special rate, normally \$275), with impeccable amenities: two bedroom condo, with all the extras (Jacuzzi, cable TV, tile floor, everything new and well kept). We looked all over, from Banyan Bay (one mile south of town) through San Pedro and nothing

compared. Don't worry about trying to get an ocean front room. The pool side rooms are fine. We ate at four great restaurants: Elvi's; Blue Water Café; Ricos (at Banyan Bay), and Caliente. San Pedro is a really interesting town. Went to a local night time soccer game (\$1.00 Belize admission) and the stands were packed, with the announcer speaking both English and Spanish. Dive off the reef with Rudy Duran of Bottom Time. He's the best divemaster that I've been with. He'll take you to the greatest spots with nurse sharks, turtles, caves (if you want), will point out everything that you would have otherwise missed. Ambergris Caye's reef is not the best diving that I've had, (that's Bonaire, for me) but the overall experience was. ([www.sanpedroholiday.com/dive.html](http://www.sanpedroholiday.com/dive.html))

**Patojo's Scuba Center, Seven Seas Resort, July 2003, Gerry, Roanoke, VA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. Seven Seas was a time share swap for us. They charge for water and electricity for the week. Nominal charge. Great staff at the resort. Just north of town, good local restaurant around the corner for breakfast and a small store across from it and a wonderful bakery up the road. Dining is a treat, just walk down the beach and pick a place. Belize is hard not to like. San Pedro has growing pains and there is a lot more motorized traffic than our last visit 3 yrs. ago. The locals claim that they are trying to address this and retain the charm of bicycles and golf carts. Heck, you can pretty much walk the whole island in 15 minutes or at least get where you want to be in a short time. Patojo's is a

small well run operation, reasonable, they rinse and store your gear for you and have it set up the next day for diving. Patojo is a native and has great tales to tell as well as knowing the best dive sites. Small groups and quick boat rides to and from the dive sites. This is a wonderful place to dive. The locals are great, the weather was great. If you're looking for nightlife, some exist but if you want to party hardy go someplace else. ([www.ambergris caye.com/tides/dive.html](http://www.ambergris caye.com/tides/dive.html), [www.ambergris caye.com/sevenseas](http://www.ambergris caye.com/sevenseas))

**Patojo's Dive Center, Cpt. Morgan's, September 2003, John Hluboky**  
([john@hluboky.com](mailto:john@hluboky.com)), San Jose, CA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm, choppy, surge. Cpt. Morgan's retreat was a nice, friendly place, but greatly overpriced. The online booking agency in the States takes a huge percentage, so if you are planning to head down there, call the resorts directly. You can save \$50-60 per night. Bring lots of Deep Woods OFF or your favorite repellent. Patojo was one of the best dive masters I have met. He and his staff had excellent dive briefings, were attentive both above and below water, and always had time between dives for a story or three. I highly recommend Patojo as your dive operator regardless of where you stay on Ambergris Caye. Blue Hole was worth a visit. You head out for about 1-1.5 hours from Ambergris to get to the site. It was a deep dive with lots of sharks, and there were two wall dives afterwards on the trip back.

**Ramon's Village, February 2003,**

**Dennis Miller, Indiana.** We had 36 people. No buffet as promised in advertisements. Do not rent a sea view room. You cannot see the ocean. When questioned we were told that PADI Travel knew of the view so it's PADI Travel's problem, and they refused to discuss the rip off. The food service was unbelievably slow. The trip to the Blue Hole was 2.5 hours long. Not worth the time. Diving inside the coral reef was crowded with too many boats. Hard to find your boat on return. Night diving outside the reef is not allowed and too many boats makes this a dangerous dive. There are nondisclosed "park charges" for all dives outside the coral reef and at the Blue Hole. All areas are considered parks and require an entrance fee. Diving inside the reef is in 20 feet of water, crowded, and tremendous current. A fight to and from the dive boat with nothing to see. The dive boats are small, and the divers are required to get suited up and into the water one at a time. If you are in the water first you have a 15-minute wait to descend. The big 48-foot boat in the advertisement is only used for the trip to the Blue Hole. If you want a beach towel as advertised you are put on a waiting list at 8 a.m. If two guys or two girls or a mother and son get the same room you will be sleeping in a queen bed. No U.S. dollars to buy Belize money back at check out as promised. One-week rentals of golf carts are reclaimed in six days. Airport transportation is not needed. You are less than 100 feet from the terminal and less than 20 yards away from the runway. You hear the planes taking off from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. Sleeping

through the noise is not an option. This place is way over priced for the service and accommodations.

([www.ramons.com](http://www.ramons.com))

## Glover's Reef

**Off the Wall, Slickrock Adventures, January 2003, Tom Snyder,**

**Shelbyville, TN.** Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 feet.

Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Long Caye wall is spectacular with huge coral heads, deep canyons, a 3,000-foot wall, and above average large and small sea life. It's a 1.5 to 2 hour boat ride across open water; for the few who have learned about the Caye itself it's paradise. Slickrock Adventures Inc.

([www.slickrock.com](http://www.slickrock.com)) operates the Long Caye Island resort as well as "Adventure Week" tours. Owner Cully Erdman has been in business for many years. Slickrock owns half of the 13-acre caye, providing a tropical getaway with basic cabanas or tent palapas, solar power, excellent Belizean meals, and unlimited access to every type of water sport equipment. The Off The Wall dive operation is excellently managed, providing spectacular, personalized reef and wall diving with a boat ride never exceeding five minutes. Jim and Kendra Schofield run the operation (e-mail to [offthewall@btl.net](mailto:offthewall@btl.net)), which is affiliated with PADI and offers Discover Scuba and refresher courses, as well as basic and advanced classes. Dives are usually led by divemaster Carlos, who has the sharpest eyes — he showed us a white-lined toad fish, found only in Belize and then only rarely. Carlos is accommodating. He's

ready to dive any time you are, and as many times as you want. He challenged us to wear him out. All dives were drift dives, with Junior, our boat captain, following bubbles. Groups were small (two to three people), and the diving the best ever. We usually started with a deep descent on the wall, and worked our way back up with the final 10 minutes frequently spent above 20 feet over gorgeous reefs and an aquarium of reef fish and critters. Lobsters are huge, and turtles and nurse sharks, frequent visitors here to Glover's Reef. All diving is done from skiffs without camera facilities, but the ride back to shore and a freshwater rinse is only five minutes.

([www.belizeadventure.com/scuba.htm](http://www.belizeadventure.com/scuba.htm))

## Lighthouse Reef

**Lighthouse Reef Resort, November 2002, Don Acheson (Don.Acheson@verizon.net), Silver Spring, MD.**

Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm.

Lighthouse Reef Resort is at the northern end of Lighthouse Reef. Local dive sites are good, but the dive sites around the two southern cays, Long Cay and Half Moon Cay, are outstanding. The latter offers wall tops with lots of structure (sand channels, crevasses, swim-throughs, etc.) and lots of reef fish including large snappers, groupers, morays, lobsters, and triggerfish. Blue Hole, about midway between the resort and the southern cays, is remarkable but not worth more than the one dive we did there. The resort staff were uniformly cheerful, helpful, and compe-

tent. Food ranged from quite good to excellent. Rooms were spacious and air-conditioned. The location features a beautiful white sand beach running along its entire frontage. **(800-423-3114 , [wwalt@aol.com](mailto:wwalt@aol.com) or [larci@att.net](mailto:larci@att.net))**

### **Lighthouse Reef Resort, May 2003, Steve Giles, Camarillo, CA.**

Experience: More than 1,000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, choppy, no currents. Dive crew was accommodating and attentive to all levels of divers. The more experienced were allowed the freedom to explore the reefs on their own. The less experienced could tag along with the dive-master. Diving overall was good; reefs in great shape. Accommodations were good; meals were excellent. Package included three boat dives per day; shore diving was not available.

## Placencia

### **Sea Horse, Rum Point Inn, May 2003, Mary Jane Foster ([warer109@comcast.net](mailto:warer109@comcast.net)), Evans, GA.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Rum Point, for over a year through e-mails, confirmed you could dive the trips for the whale sharks as often as possible as well as plenty of reef dives on other days. We found out upon arrival they had no boats going out to do any dives because of 7-foot seas where the sharks are. Also there were only 7 to 10 people scheduled at the resort over ten days. We were sent to Sea Horse, who also seemed put out that they had to take four of us diving.

Even though Rum Point could have taken us to reefs inside the "big water" they chose not to because there were only four of us. When Rum Point finally went out to the sharks, for the remainder of the ten day trip, there was no other diving available (at any resort on Placencia). You either battled the 7' to 13' seas (which all dive masters said was normal) in hopes to see the whale sharks or you remained at the resort. Expensive trip to have only gotten one dive in!!!! Rum Point food Americanized. Same items every night! There was no set up for cameras and we were there to dive with whale sharks. ([www.belizescuba.com](http://www.belizescuba.com))

### **Sea Horse Dive, Placencia Village, May 2003, Rodger Christopher ([rchristopher@gt.rr.com](mailto:rchristopher@gt.rr.com)),**

**Beaumont, TX.** Dives logged: more than 2,500. Vis: 80-100 ft. Water: 82-85 F. Rude staff, disorganized crew, late departures, short air fills and that is the good stuff! Disregard for passenger safety and poorly maintained and incorrectly installed equipment led to one diver being injured and one diver being thrown overboard in rough seas. To add insult to injury (no pun intended) the injured diver was forced to pay for the dive he missed the next day under a physician's order not to dive! This guy has obviously never heard of a plaintiff lawyer. Further investigation revealed that Mr. Young and his Sea Horse Dive Shop has a unique policy of a 15% service charge even if the dives can't be made due to mechanical or weather issues! This is amazing! In my thirty plus years of diving I have never heard of this type of customer

abuse. This is my third and last dive trip to Sea Horse Dive Shop and Mr. Young's dog and pony show. He may think and act like he is the only dive operator in Placencia, but he is not. I have also included some comments from other passengers that were on our boat. Enjoy. On the other side of this, we stayed at Dianni's Guest House which is located in Placencia Village and it was quite a delightful experience. Dianni's is owner operated, two story structure. All six rooms on second floor have one full and one twin bed, shower, coffee maker, refrigerator and clean and comfortable. Rooms are cleaned daily and large balcony makes for relaxing evening spot. Several good restaurants. Room rates are reasonable. I would recommend this one. I have been to Belize many times. More than 30 and always had a great time! Will go back to Belize but not Sea Horse.

### Southern Belize

**Hamanasi, September 2002, Jim Watkins (jrwatkinstw@cs.com), Berwyn, PA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Dive restrictions enforced: as all were drift dives, all divers in at same time, out at same time. Tables governed length of dives. Resort is beautiful: rooms spacious, with A/C, ceiling fans, and clean. Food is the best I have had at a dive resort. Topside attractions are numerous: jungle tours, kayaking, hiking, caving, Mayan ruins. Diving the barrier reef was only "good." Glover's Atoll was great. One dive boat was out of com-

mission. The one we used could accommodate eight to 10 comfortably, 12 in a pinch. One dive we had 14. Bottom time is limited by tables (even if you have a computer) because every dive was a drift dive. Sand flies were horrible! Twice as bad as in Roatan. Overall I really enjoyed Hamanasi and would highly recommend it. ([www.hamanasi.com](http://www.hamanasi.com))

### **Hamanasi, May 2003, Edwin L. Granite, Chadds Ford, PA.**

Vis: 100+ feet. Water: 80 to 83 F. Experience: Too many dives to count (since 1968). Dive restrictions enforced: depth and time. One whale shark, too deep to video under a massive school of spawning snapper in blue water, no bottom in site. Went for whale sharks, but disappointed. Supposedly this was best time of year and month. Saw solitary dolphin at this site. Otherwise, beautiful reefs and good diving! Dive operation and hotel wonderful, as well as service generally.

### St. George's Caye

**St. George's Lodge, October 2002, H. C. Wood (wood1028@comcast.net), Sarasota, FL.** Experience: Over 1,000 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, choppy. Fred will show you things you will find nowhere else. He is the best critter finder I have encountered in 1,500+ dives, and his partner Fran is not far behind. ([www.gooddiving.com](http://www.gooddiving.com))

**St. George's Lodge, October 2002, J. W. Duncan.** We've never ventured forth to our favorite hideaway during

hurricane season, but we dodged Isadora, Lily, and Kyle for 10 days. St. George's Lodge is our favorite dive destination over the last 20 years. Fred Good is the best host and diver we've known, the reef remains unspoiled, the diving is relaxed and interesting, and the Lodge still generates delicious fare. Fred has moved his diving to the south reef, because closer sites north are recovering from the silt dumped by Hurricane Keith in 1999. The pumice-like silt is a half-inch deep instead of the three inches of 2000. Fred has found at least 30 sites on the south reef (N. Drown Islands), which in many ways are more interesting than the northern sites. There is a significant wall, and although the vertical drop is not as sheer as Black Coral Wall, it is lots of fun. Other sites feature dramatic cuts, sheltered sand canyons, and an extensive well-populated reef at 80 feet. Numerous blue tang, small grouper, mahogany snapper, gray snapper, huge schools of French grunt, Spanish grunt, cottonwicks, schools of bar jack and horse-eye jack, chromis, wrasse, butterfly, hogfish, blenny, lobster, large drum, ocean triggerfish, black durgon, trumpetfish; gray, queen, and French angel; all the parrotfish; and small remora on medium-size fish. At depth, we saw large (5 to 6 feet in diameter) hawksbill and loggerhead turtles; large nurse sharks, a few terminal parrotfish, permit, queen triggerfish, large black and Nassau grouper, barracuda (a school of 10 four-footers); green, spotted, and Belize hybrid moray eels; filefish, cowfish, scrawled filefish, black margate, gray snapper schools, and several big eagle rays. The

most unusual sighting was a school of 14- to 16-inch gray angels at 115 feet. Sixty were swimming south along the reef with a cluster of six French angels in their midst. Fred has seen this about 10 times over the past 30 years, also in October. Also at depth, 5-foot barrel sponge, bright yellow and iridescent purple sponge, and large Gorgonian fans. Because of Nitrox, we were able to stay on deep sandy bottoms for extended periods, where Fred and my wife, Judy, tickled small creatures out of hiding places with chopsticks. All sorts of macro delights amused us: peppermint shrimp, cherubfish, a snow bass, a mustached jawfish, banded clinging crab, sun anemone shrimp, brittle stars, splendid urchin, Pederson cleaning shrimp, banded coral shrimp, a shy hamlet, decorator crabs, and arrow and golden coral shrimp. At 100 feet, Judy found a flaming reef lobster and banded clinging crab; a friendly red grouper protected a whole microcosm of coral and small creatures. Fred took us for a double dive and yummy picnic at Turneffe, where we had excellent visibility and saw several of the shy Sargassum triggerfish. Visibility at St. George's Caye was 80 feet+ at depth and on a few occasions better than 100 feet. The 25- to 40-foot range had a few days of 30-foot visibility. Water was 84 to 85 degrees. Seven days of glorious sun with temps in the 80s and two days of rain — the sound of rain at 120 feet was much like the hiss of air or sand blowing against a windshield. In between hands of bridge with Fred, we reminisced about our more than 15 visits to St. George's. We plan to take our 10-year-old grandson



and his parents back in June for his junior certification.

**St. George's Lodge, December 2002, Sherman Samalin (samalins@aol.com), New York, NY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30-70 feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy. The only dive resort among more than 10-15 to which we have been that turned out to have both poor diving conditions, irresponsible management, and lousy accommodations. It was very expensive for a depressingly unattractive room that was poorly maintained. Five old thatched-roof bungalows over water were located about 3" from one another away from the ocean on the bay side. If one wanted to be eaten alive by mosquitoes and no-see-ums this was a perfect setting. Between the walls and the roof were large open spaces, so that at night as soon as a light went on the bugs invited themselves in. The shower was a hose like the one for washing veggies in the kitchen sink and the minimal water that came out was either scalding or cold. There was no door separating the bathroom from the bedroom — just an open wood partition. Fred's dive boat was old, half the steel tanks on the deck were rusty. The area within 30 minutes of the resort was pretty much fished out, so that we dove only once a day, not twice, even though we had paid for two dives. After several days my computer stopped working and my regulator started to free-flow. When we returned home to have our equipment checked (it had been in perfect condition upon our arrival), the dive shop found that our equipment had

malfunctioned because it was clogged with charcoal and rust. We were the only guests during the entire 10 day stay, and had we not paid in advance, we would have left instead of trying to make the best of it. On the plus side, the owner, Fred Good, is a charming, very experienced diver who is excellent company and a good teacher. The food was plentiful and good home-type cooking. The few people who worked at the resort were also very pleasant. Unfortunately, this didn't make up for the many problems that spoiled the vacation.

**St. George's Lodge, March 2003, Dave & Joanne Farrel (djfarrell@bfm.org), Pelican Lake, WI.**

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, choppy, surge. We like small, relaxed off-the-beaten-path resorts and were happy with our two recent choices — St. George's Lodge for our dive resort and Ek Tun for our "jungle lodge" experience. A driver and mini-van were waiting to take us from the airport to the boat dock. Carlos picked up the groceries and us for the boat ride out to St. George's Caye. The resort is one of the few properties on the island. It has frontage on both sides of the island with the cabanas on the calm leeward side and the lodge and dive boat pier on the windward side. Lodging is mostly in over-water cabanas which were roomy and comfortable. Each one has a shady front porch where juice and tea/coffee are delivered every morning. The cabanas are on a circular boardwalk, which provides an interesting place to find and watch small crit-

ters. The main lodge has an open, informal lounge/bar area for visiting and enjoying the great appetizers before dinner. Meals, served family style at long tables, consist of several choices and more good food than you can eat. Fred and Fran are wonderful, accommodating hosts who do everything they can to make everyone feel welcome. Dive sites were chosen to meet the divers' wishes. The dive boat was uncrowded and unhurried, with crew taking care of your dive gear and bringing your BC to you when you were ready to jump in. The divers were divided into smaller groups of two to five people with each group led by either Fred, Fran, or Jose. Although we had never had a guide before, it relieved us of having to find the boat on our own and also made it possible to see things we would have missed. This would be a great place for younger or beginning divers, as Fred is a patient instructor and spends a lot of individual time with them. He also is interested in helping everyone become a better diver and is always available to answer and discuss dive questions. The water was fairly rough while we were there, so visibility was somewhat affected. Sea fans were especially abundant and colorful, and dolphins often accompanied us on boat trips. One day, when many of us chose not to dive because of the weather, Fran arranged and led a trip into Belize City for sight-seeing, shopping, and visiting the zoo. After a too-short time on St. George's, we went to Ek Tun near the western border. Phyllis is the owner of this beautiful property. Remo picked us up at the boat dock and provided us

with lots of information about what we were seeing on the Land Rover ride to San Ignacio and beyond. The last stage is a boat ride across the Macal River. Ek Tun has stunning grounds which are well-kept but in a natural way, not manicured-looking. There is a natural mineral pool where you can swim in surroundings that can rival any tropical movie scene. The whole place had a great feeling of privacy with only two thatched-roof cabanas and the sound of the river always in the background. Meals were wonderful, served in the open-air dining room at Phyllis's home overlooking the river. There are several choices of activities, including hiking up to and through a Mayan cave and kayaking/canoeing down the river. When we kayaked, we stopped at the home of Remo's in-laws, where his wife Louisa gave us a tour of their farm and served us lunch. It was a rare opportunity to visit with local people and learn more about the area. Phyllis arranged activities for us, and we really enjoyed our time with her, whether she was leading us through the jungle or shopping in Guatemala. We were happy that we brought everything on her suggested list. For hiking and for the caves, you really do need hiking boots with gripping soles, good flashlights with extra bulbs and batteries, water bottles, and long pants and sleeves. There were absolutely no mosquitoes when we were there. We had brought DEET but didn't think we needed it, until we got home and found out that we had gotten chigger bites, which made for several itchy days.

**St. George's Lodge, May 2003, Jill**

**Ward, Beaverton, OR.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. First time at a resort that included the meals and the diving as part of a package. It's an expensive way to go, but St. George's worth it! Fred and Fran make this a special place, with attentive dive guiding (we had a guide to ourselves on every dive), fabulous food (thanks to Fran's delicious, inventive menus and her wonderful staff), beautiful surroundings, and great company. Fred takes diving to a new plane. Having had this resort for about 30 years, he has learned some things that other dive operations either don't know or won't tell you. Diving is a richer experience at St. George's Lodge. Their techniques helped us to extend our dives (translation: use air more slowly) and enjoy them more, too. Fred and Fran are great at finding interesting life underwater, and you can really see their love of their environment when you're down there with them. Both regular air and Nitrox are available at the lodge, but Fred is a big fan of Nitrox. Plan to at least give it a try, and you will be able to enjoy the longer dive all the other guests who use Nitrox enjoy. If you aren't already Nitrox certified, Fred can help you to try it out. The weather was far from perfect and visibility was sometimes low, especially near the boat. However, it was still one of the best vacations and some of the best diving we have ever done. Fred and Fran were concerned that we have the best time possible and made it happen. We saw lots of eels, rays, angels, grouper, arrow crabs, squirrelfish, coronet fish, lobster, cowfish, sand divers, blennies, snap-

pers, and more. Coming into the dock from our last dive, we even saw three large manatees! We think Fred called them in as a going-away present. St. George's Lodge has room for about 32 guests in its main lodge and in the six wonderful, over-the-water cabanas. Stay in the cabanas. It's worth the little extra they cost. And don't worry about overcrowding — Fred and Fran prefer to keep that intimate, uncrowded feel. That's why they don't advertise a lot. When we were there, the highest number of guests, including us, was six. For a night or two, it was just us. Dining at St. George's is family style, but Fran will accommodate any request or special diet. Fred and Fran are both at virtually every meal, and the conversation is always lively, over the fabulous, plentiful food. In between meals and diving, Fred is usually around to give a dive-related lesson or just chat about anything. When we left, we left people who had become dear friends.

**St. George's Lodge, September 2003, Scott Fairgrieve, San Francisco, CA.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 84 to 87 F, choppy. The first dive resort in Belize is still the best! First-class operation and fantastic diving on the barrier reef. Fred Good persuaded us to try Nitrox and we're hooked.

## Turneffe Island

**Blackbird Caye Resort, September 2002, Chuck and Nancy Anson (nanson@owl.csusm.edu), Oceanside, CA.** Vis: 50-100 feet. Water: 84 F. Dives logged: 400. Calm,

flat, some chop, mild surge, no strong currents. Dive restrictions enforced: Depth limits 130 feet, 500 psi, 50-minute dive limit. Can dive your own profile. Large boats had separate rinse for cameras; small boats did not unless you asked. Crew handled equipment professionally. No separate camera tables. Film was available but no spare parts for cameras. Blackbird Caye offers value for the diving dollar that is hard to match in Belize. The hour and a half boat ride out to Turneffe Atoll from Belize City (drinks included) was scenic and enjoyable. The sand spit called Blackbird is just big enough to house cabanas and a dining area for 25 guests and the staff. The food was delicious. We stayed for two weeks and never ate the same meal twice, unless we wanted to. Fresh fish, conch, shrimp, and lobster were prepared daily in a variety of ways. Pork and chicken dishes were also offered at each meal. The accommodations were comfortable, spacious, single cabanas that were cleaned daily. Each cabana had air conditioning, hard wood floors, and a large closet with more than adequate drawer space. There was a good-sized bathroom with a large tiled shower and plenty of hot water. There was also a CD player in each cabana. There are bugs. Mangroves are the natural habitat for a variety of insects, but a good healthy breeze and assiduous use of bug spray provided adequate protection even for this sweet-blooded diver. The dive boats are large, spacious, and well maintained. They leave on time, three times a day, and surface intervals are spent on shore. This leaves plenty of time to off gas before the second

dive and allows for two deep dives (50 feet+ for 50 minutes) each morning. The dive staff is helpful. They set up your gear for each dive unless you prefer to do that. The reefs close to the resort remain healthy for the most part. We enjoyed Chinaman's Reef the best, a 10-minute boat ride south. Although we saw only two sharks, we saw large turtles, stingrays, and eagle rays on many of our dives. What really adds value to your diving dollar are the Tuesday all-day trips to Lighthouse Reef and Half Moon Caye and the Friday half-day trips to The Elbow. These reefs offer world class diving and are included in the price of your package. There is no shore diving, but daily snorkeling trips can be arranged. We enjoyed sharing meals with the resort manager, Mr. David. He will do everything he can to make sure his guests are well taken care of. All you have to do is ask, if you can get a word in edgewise! Contact Rebecca toll free at 888-271-3483 or via e-mail at [blkbrd@bellsouth.net](mailto:blkbrd@bellsouth.net), or visit their website at [www.blackbirdresort.com](http://www.blackbirdresort.com). UW photography comments: Large boats had separate rinse for cameras; small boats did not unless you asked. Crew handled equipment professionally. No separate camera tables. Film was available but no camera shop and no spare parts for cameras. (**[www.blackbirdresort.com](http://www.blackbirdresort.com)**)

### **Turneffe Island Lodge, March 2003, Carlie, Santa Fe, NM.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Water: choppy. Turneffe Island Lodge is a great getaway. Loved the accommodations (book a cabin) and low key

atmosphere of the resort. The dive setup was fabulous — everything is taken care of for you. Even though we delayed our trip until the end of March to avoid potential weather, we got it anyway. And it pretty much lasted all week. We weren't able to dive the Elbow for a few days due to visibility. None of the dives had good viz. Nonetheless we saw lots of turtles (huge) and all kinds of rays (except manta). And the tiniest drums. Despite the weather, it was a wonderful place to spend a week and amazingly enough we still really enjoyed the diving. ([www.turneffelodge.com](http://www.turneffelodge.com))

**Turneffe Island Lodge, March 2003, Roger, Donna & Kate Soape** ([ras@rasoape.com](mailto:ras@rasoape.com)), **Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. The only place we regularly revisit, Turneffe Island Lodge provides some of the best service, best food and nicest accommodations we have found anywhere in the Caribbean — all on a remote island with no air service. Not as many sharks and eagle rays on this trip but still plenty. Lots of large schooling jacks, snapper and permit and turtles at The Elbow — a thrilling drift dive just a 10-minute boat ride from the resort. Three drift dives a day with surface intervals back at the lodge, except for the day trip to dive the Blue Hole and Half Moon Reef. One operator is feeding the sharks at the Blue Hole, apparently to satisfy his guaranteed shark-sighting. We didn't appreciate the 8 ft bull shark that jetted through the shallows where we were off-gassing to collect the morsel tossed

overboard. Half Moon Reef has beautiful corals. If you have time, combine a week at Turneffe Island Lodge with a couple of days eco-adventuring inland. Most dives are done from small boats — a short ride from the resort, so no camera facilities are provided on the skiffs. The boat captain and divemaster took good care of my video camera, placing it in a secure spot on the boat and in fresh water upon each return to the dock.

**Turneffe Island Lodge, March 2003, Ron & Sherry Smith, Levittown, PA.** Vis: 80-100 ft. Water: 76-80 F. Experience: 204. This was our third year at this relaxed island resort. Accommodations are nice (on the beach), food is fantastic, and staff is eager to please. Sherman, the bartender, is entertaining and friendly and makes great island potions. Dive operation is great. We had excellent dives with Ricky and Bo. Bo pointed out tons of critters and Ricky took time to check for good visibility at dive sites; if not good, we went elsewhere. Lots of fish life (large and small). Had best dive at the end of the week with a pod of 30+ dolphins that joined us on our safety stop. They hung around and played with us spinning, jumping, and chirping.

## BONAIRE

In 1999, hurricane-driven waves damaged, even destroyed, many of Bonaire's beautiful shallow coral gardens, ruining snorkeling in many places. Still, Bonaire is a diver's island par excellence, with