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TRAVEL

travel@newsday.com

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A 19-Day
Journey
Through
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Newsday Photo / Bryn Nelson

Turf and Surf in BELIZE

There's a staggering sense of discovery and surprise in a country filled with ruins, nature reserves and exotic wildlife

Turf and Surf in BELIZE



Newsday Photos / Bryn Nelson

At top, April, a Baird's tapir, at the Belize Zoo, considered the best in Central America. Left, the mouth of the Mayan cave, Actun Tunichal Muknal. Above, The Split, a hurricane-formed breach that divides Caye Caulker and created a swimming hole.

ON THE COVER: Palm trees and colorful guesthouses on Caye Caulker.

By Bryn Nelson
STAFF WRITER

Like so much else in the jungle, the rain betrayed its presence with an abundance of noise. With a distant whispering, a rustling of leaves, and then a growing ruffle, it swept across the forest canopy and descended upon us with a whoosh.

One voice among many in the heart of Belize. My travel companion and I had come to this Central American country for an eight-day jungle-to-coast adventure trip the travel guides like to call "turf and surf." Roughly the size of Massachusetts, Belize features a wealth of Mayan ruins, nature reserves and exotic wildlife — all within reach of the magnificent Mayan city at Tikal to the west and the longest barrier reef in the Americas to the east. The torrent of sights and sounds greeting us in little more than a week left a lasting impression that most overdeveloped destinations could never hope to offer: a staggering sense of discovery and surprise.

small but impressive Belize Zoo, situated along the Western Highway leading to the Cayo District of Belize. Widely considered the best in Central America, the Belize Zoo puts a decidedly Caribbean spin on the idea of nature preserves, with cheeky hand-lettered wooden signs gently urging visitors ("Yes mon") to conserve the country's native fauna.

A beautiful spotted jaguar affectionately licked its black mate in one of the clever jungle enclosures. A Morelet's crocodile lazed in another, while spider monkeys and howler monkeys tumbled amid enclosed tree-tops. But perhaps the most interesting animal was the Baird's tapir, an ungainly looking creature somewhere between an undersized elephant and an overgrown anteater. The largest animal in the neotropics, it is also among the most endangered.

Despite our early orientation, the foreign language of the jungle nearly overwhelmed us, both at Tikal in neighboring Guatemala and on a later expedition through the crocodile-infested New River to Belize's Mayan ruins at Lamanai. With every blur of color in the canopy, with every unfamiliar call, we fumbled for our binoculars and wildlife book, struggling to keep up with the kaleidoscope of color and sound. Emerald toucanettes. Red-lore parrots.



Newsday / Philip Dionisio

Purple gallinules. And keel-billed toucans. Our tour guides delighted in pointing out the rare and beautiful creatures all around us. On our boat trip to Lamanai, our guide Vincent and his young sons revealed a camouflaged Northern potoo bird and a small colony of greater white-lined bats hidden in a bullet tree. And Ruben, our guide at Tikal, proudly informed us that the Guatemalan park harbors 385 bird species in all.

At Tikal, we sought shelter from a brief downpour under a thatched roof, where Ruben pointed out the huge carved face of the god Chac — the Mayan god of rain. A silent idol surrounded by a flood of corresponding sound seemed appropriate for a city whose name means "Place of the Voices."

The name proved particularly apt. Along a jungle path, we heard an otherworldly roar that began like a rusty gate and ended like an angry seal. After scrambling up a hillside after Ruben, we were rewarded by the sight of a small band of howler monkeys in the crook of a tree, baby in tow.

Godfather Of the Jungle

By Bryn Nelson
STAFF WRITER

In 1981, Francis Ford Coppola was searching for a tropical paradise to remind him of the Filipino setting for his film "Apocalypse Now." What he found was a neglected lodge in the beautiful but remote pine-studded hills of western Belize — a place he intended to transform into a private writing retreat.

Fortunately for travelers to Belize, Coppola instead transformed the property into one of that country's most luxurious resorts. For three nights, we reveled in our own thatched-roof bungalow at his Blancaneaux Lodge, a lushly landscaped property that straddles the Privassion River in the western district of Cayo, about a 45-minute drive from San Ignacio.

Beautifully maintained gardens surround 10 bungalows and seven two-bedroom villas strung along the river, the latter designed by Mexican architect Manolo Mestre to provide an open-air connection to the jungle and river beyond (daily dual-occupancy rates range from \$120 to \$330 in the summer and from \$200 to \$425 during the peak season, Dec. 20-Jan. 3 and April 8-12, without food).

The interior of our bungalow featured handiwork by local artisans and combined Asian and Central American touches, with an open Japanese bath and fabrics and antiques from Guatemala and Mexico.

The extensively renovated main lodge features the inviting Jaguar Bar, where we indulged in Belize's famous rum punch and a Belikin, the national beer of choice. The highlight, though, was the well-appointed dining room, where we savored Coppola's Italian recipes infused with a Central American flair. My favorites were the shrimp ceviche, plantain soup with cumin and cilantro, and margherita pizza made in one of only two wood-burning pizza



Newsday Photos / Bryn Nelson

A larger guest villa, top, at Blancaneaux Lodge; bottom, a thatch-roofed guest bungalow features local artisans' work.

ovens in the entire country (Coppola owns the other one as well).

The lodge has opted for self-sufficiency while trying to maintain an environmentally friendly approach. A three-acre organic garden supplies all of the fruits and vegetables for the restaurant, while a small hydroelectric plant harnesses the Privassion River for all of the electricity while supplying heated water as a by-product for the newly opened outdoor hot tub.

The lodge even has its own airstrip for visitors wishing to bypass the notoriously bumpy secondary road leading to the lodge from Belize's Western Highway, though we enjoyed the freedom of having a rental car.

Although we set out on our own, the lodge offers a bounty of tour packages, horseback riding, mountain biking, canoeing and caving. The final morning of our stay, we hiked an hour along a sunny, lizard-populated trail leading from the lodge to Big Rock Falls, where we picked our way down the rocks and swam in the warm pools below the falls, reminded again that we were someplace extraordinary. ●

An Environmental Eyeful of Belize

BELIZE from E8

known building in pre-Columbian America. From our breathtaking vantage at its apex, we surveyed the stone-gray ruins jutting from the lush jungle canopy of orange-berried ramon trees, pink-blossomed matilisque trees and enormous mahoganies.

And of course, the towering ceibas, with their limbs strung with bromeliads and stretched out before us like fanciful umbrellas. The Maya venerated the sacred ceiba as a world-tree that linked the 13 heavens, the earth, and the nine levels of the underworld with its canopy and roots.

If the ceiba canopies reached the heavens by the Mayan pyramids, we would find their mythic roots to the underworld in a remarkable cave.

The morning after our side-trip to Tikal, we sleepily left the comforts of our resort, Blancaneaux Lodge, and met four other travelers and a guide in the town of San Ignacio. By lunchtime, we had crisscrossed a swollen creek and wound our way through Belize's remote Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve with our barefoot, machete-wielding guide, Carlos.

And then we saw our real destination: the mouth of a cave known as Actun Tunichal Muknal.

Few guidebooks talk about the place whose name means "Cave of the Crystal Sepulchre," and only a few tour operators are permitted to take small groups there due to conservation concerns. Nor is it easy to reach, and entering it requires you to wear a headlamp while swimming across a small pool at the cave's mouth. But the day I spent in the cave ranks as one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

It was in caves like this where the meeting of the crystalline stalactites and stalagmites completed the connection of the ceiba tree roots to the Mayan gods of the underworld. As we sloshed along the river flowing through the cave, Carlos told us about how the Maya hiked the same route with their flickering torches for ancient rituals and offerings. We turned off our headlamps to look back at the cave entrance, where the sunlit rock wall to the left had taken on the appearance of a Mayan woman.



Newsday Photo / Bryn Nelson

Shacks share the beach with newer accommodations in Belize's laid-back and quirky island retreat of Caye Caulker.

We stopped again and listened in wonderment as we heard the distant murmur of what seemed like human voices. Carlos said the Maya likely heard the same sounds of water gurgling in the distance and imagined them to be the whispering of the gods.

We filed through a narrow keyhole in the rock, past cathedral-sized rooms of pure white flowstone and sparkling stalactites, past cave crickets and bats and scorpion spiders perched on the damp walls. Carlos coaxed us over a ledge covered in a waterfall of flow-

stone, and then told us to remove our shoes.

We were walking on holy ground. He led us on a narrow trail with so many broken pots on either side that we had to follow his footsteps to avoid stepping on them. Most had contained food for ritual offerings, and most remained where they had been left by the Maya between AD 700 and 900.

We turned off our lamps again, and clicked them back on to reveal a human skull, one of 14 known sacrificial victims left in the cave to appease the gods. Some had flattened foreheads and filed teeth filled with jade plugs — Mayan signs of beauty. A metal ladder provided access to a small chamber and another lasting image: the completely calcified skeleton of a young sacrificial victim known as the princess.

I felt humbled to be in this living museum, this storehouse of Mayan history, and we hiked back a bit quieter than before.

The next day, we embarked on the "surf" portion of our trip by driving to the coast and catching a water taxi from Belize City to the island of Caye Caulker. The best-known Belizean island is arguably Ambergris Caye and its town of San Pedro, sometimes referred to interchangeably. San Pedro has a reputation as a miniature Cancun, however, so we opted for Caye Caulker, a favorite destination of backpackers with its laid-back, friendly Caribbean feel.

Caye Caulker isn't for everyone, but we instantly felt like we had made the right choice. Our cottage at Shirley's Guest House opened onto the beach, and from the porch we shared with some lizards, we had a perfect view of little blue and tricolor herons posing against the aquamarine of the Caribbean Sea, two of about 90 bird species we would spot on the trip.

The ocean beckoned, and after a day of relaxing we found the perfect guide, a lifelong island resident named Juni, who leads environmentally friendly sailing and snorkeling trips to the marine reserve and barrier reef near the island.

Once in the water, I felt like a weightless observer in some giant aquarium, snorkeling above a sea of beautiful green brain coral with its mazelike patterns, of elkhorn coral and delicate purple sea fans. With so many different kinds of tropical fish, I soon lost track and simply let the colors swim by me.

A nurse shark whose family had "adopted" Juni, a group of Southern stingrays, and even a green moray eel swam around our guide like an old friend. For an afternoon, we too were part of the circle.

As we set sail for the return trip to Caye Caulker, our minds reeling and the wind tousling our hair, I found myself at a loss for words to describe all that I had heard and seen, and simply let the view around me speak for itself. •

INFORMATION, PLEASE

THE BASICS. High season in Belize is between November and April, during which time the weather is typically hot and humid. You will need a valid passport for both Belize and Guatemala. With the exception of petty theft, Belize is generally considered safe outside of Belize City, though extra caution is warranted in Guatemala due to recent problems; organized tours to Tikal may be the best option for some travelers. Belize harbors an eclectic ethnic diversity, with Creole, Latin, Maya, Garifuna (Black Caribbean), and Mennonite influences. English is the official language and widely spoken, although a basic understanding of Spanish will come in handy in San Ignacio and at the border crossing in Guatemala if you're not traveling with a group. The Belizen dollar is fixed at 50 cents U.S., and prices are higher than in Guatemala and other Central American countries. Banks will gladly change money during business hours, but most ATMS do not accept American debit or credit cards for cash advances. Belize's Tourism Board maintains a good informational site at www.travelbelize.org

GETTING THERE. Philip Goldson International Airport outside of Belize City is reachable from Newark and LaGuardia airports by American Airlines connecting through Miami, by Continental Airlines connecting through Houston, or by US Airways connecting through Charlotte, N.C.

GETTING AROUND. Belize has a surprisingly dependable bus system that connects all of the major towns, especially in the northern part of the country, and taxis will take you to and from the airport. The best way to access the preserves, parks, and more remote towns, however, is by rental car. It's good to reserve a car ahead of time, and a vehicle with four-wheel drive is highly recommended since few of the secondary roads are paved and are notoriously bumpy. Check with rental compa-

nies on insurance restrictions for driving to Tikal in Guatemala. On the coast, water taxis run on a regular schedule from Belize City to Caye Caulker and San Pedro. A faster boat called the Thunderbolt will shave off some time, but will cost you more.

ACCOMMODATIONS. Guide books are the best source here. "The Rough Guide to Belize" and "Lonely Planet's Belize" are helpful. Prices below are per night, double:

Blancaneaux Lodge in the Cayo District: \$120-\$425; www.blancaneaux.com; 800-PINE-RIDGE.

Shirley's Guest House on Caye Caulker: \$40-\$80, www.shirleysguesthouse.com; 011-501-226-0145.

St. Christopher's Hotel in Orange Walk: \$30-\$45, 011-501-322-2420.

Colton House in Belize City: \$65-\$75, www.coltonhouse.com; 011-501-203-4666.

TOUR GUIDES. Most large resorts will offer tour packages to nearby ruins and parks, but independent travelers can readily find good tour guides in places like Cayo, Orange Walk, and Caye Caulker, though you will still pay a fair amount (For two of us, four day tours cost about \$340 U.S. in all). Guides at Tikal can be arranged by the vendor's stalls near the visitors' center. The mammoth park can't possibly be covered in a day, so tell your guide what interests you the most, especially if your time is limited.

WHAT TO BRING. Good walking shoes and light clothes. Binoculars and wildlife books if you enjoy observing nature, as it is bountiful in Belize. "The Ecotravellers' Wildlife Guide: Belize and Northern Guatemala" was a helpful basic introduction, though far from complete. Bug spray, since Belize has plenty of biting insects.

— Bryn Nelson