



Belize: Best for Diving

Patti Morrow, July 29, 2011



The graceful beauty of stingrays, multi-colored tropical fish, swaying sea grass and coral, dawdling giant sea turtles, and yes, even the sand-papery skin of nurse sharks are part of the dive experience of Belize. Whether you do it once a day, once a year, or once in a lifetime... just do it!

Belize dive instructor? Hardly! I'm a novice – what is commonly known as a "resort diver." No certification here, but after taking a short 45-minute course I'm good to go. For me, this is the best-case scenario. My PADI dive master takes care of all the technical/safety aspects so I'm carefree to explore ocean life at depths of 20 to 40 feet – which incidentally is where most of the tropic fish hang out. I love diving in Belize and you will, too!

Belize's 185-mile meandering, untainted barrier reef is the longest in the Western Hemisphere and second largest in the world. It's ranked as one of the top three diving sites in the Caribbean, but because Belize has been slower to develop than other Caribbean "hot spots," their piece of the underworld is not crowded. It's the perfect place to experience your first dive. My guide and my companion diver were the only other humans encountered during the entire dive. I can tell you, that's not the case in other Caribbean dive sites such as St. Thomas or the Cayman Islands where you're part of a large group with other competing dive groups nearby.

In the 82-degree Fahrenheit crystal blue waters of the Hol Chan Cut, just a short boat jaunt from the palm-lined beaches of Ambergris Caye, you can see up to 100 feet in all directions, which you won't get in sites like Puerto Rico where depending on the current, the visibility can be less than 20 feet. Eyes wide open, nothing can prepare you for the stillness and peace of the Belize underworld. Ethereal in its tranquility, the ocean forces you to slow down the frenetic pace of life and take in the mesmerizing panorama of flora and fauna in every size, shape and color: marine life, shellfish, coral, sea sponges, and fans flourish in the protected waters. The contrast in texture is as attention-grabbing as the colors.

Emerging from the water, Ambergris Caye's land-lubber charisma rivals the drama of the sea. Packed dirt roads navigated by golf carts, slow-paced and friendly, the postcard-perfect town of San Pedro entices with its small, colorfully painted houses and shops. Shorts and flip-flops are the fashion du jour and an extra tall palm tree is the only high-rise you'll see. It's the idyllic Caribbean of 40 years ago – laid-back, yet things to do if that's what you're looking for. English-speaking restaurateurs, bartenders, and shop owners love to be engaged in conversation. Don't be at all surprised when they ask your name. . .or that they will remember it when you return!

Fast approaching is the day my youngest is off to college, and my dream of ditching the long snowy winters of New England for a sun-drenched Caribbean island with tropical trade winds, crystal turquoise waters, sandy palm-lined beaches, friendly English-speaking locals, fresh seafood, and first-class diving will become a reality. Belize tops that list!

Hol Chan Marine Reserve, 4 mi./6.4 km. south of San Pedro, Ambergris Caye, <http://www.holchanbelize.org/>