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The Beasts and Beats of Belize



David Ponton/Design Pics, via Newscom

The Cockscomb Basin Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve in Belize.

By CLAUDIA DREIFUS

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WE were hiking through the woods of the Cockscomb Basin Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve in Belize, the more-than-150-square-mile verdant reserve that is a no-hunting haven for many species of this hemisphere's wild cats — the puma, ocelot, jaguarundi, margay and jaguar. As we moved along well-tended trails, there were signs of activity — muddy paw prints by a riverbank, bits of jaguar scat — but we were unlikely to actually see any of these magnificent creatures.

Multimedia



Map

Belize

“They don't like to get too close to humans,” said our guide, Dr. Rebecca Foster, a staff scientist with the conservation group [Panthera](#). “I hope you're not disappointed.”

How could we be? Even without a jaguar sighting, the sanctuary was a gorgeous Eden, full of natural wonders. Giant ferns lined the trails. Above us, howler monkeys scampered through the trees, and parrots and toucans glided through the air. Moving quietly, one might catch a glimpse of a deer or pig-like peccary — the jaguar's preferred prey. After a few hours at Cockscomb, it felt as if we had stepped, full body, into a Henri Rousseau painting.

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A Garifuna drummer.

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A jaguar in the Cockscomb Basin.

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Hamanasi Resort

The pool at the Hamanasi Resort.

Given this richness of nature and wildlife, it's no surprise that the sanctuary is driving an eco-tourism boom in the Stann Creek District, the south-central coastal area of Belize that it abuts. And Stann Creek's appeal extends beyond the sanctuary. For birders, there are some 300 species roosting in the district's marshes and forests. At the shore, only a few minutes from Cockscomb, are miles of white sand beaches, facing out onto one of the [largest coral reefs](#) in the world. A marine reserve district at the reef ensures first-class skin diving. Stann Creek also has a good supply of lodging at all prices and opportunities to interact with the interesting local cultures.

Right outside the entrance to Cockscomb, for instance, in the village of Maya Center, visitors can stay with indigenous families and learn something of their way of life. The town's former mayor, Ernesto Saqui, offers plain though spotless rooms with private bath for 60 Belizean dollars, plus tax (about \$30; the Belizean dollar is approximately two-to-one to the American dollar) a night at his Nu'uk Che'il Cottages. Backpackers can bunk there for 20 Belizean dollars per night. His wife, Aurora Saqui, a traditional Mayan healer, sells homegrown botanicals and gives seminars in herbalism. (Reservations by e-mail at nuukcheilcottages@yahoo.com.)

Maya Center is also a base for excursions into Cockscomb, though it's possible to stay within the sanctuary itself at extremely basic accommodations that range from 40 to 300 Belizean dollars a night (belizeaudubon.org/parks/cbws.htm). (Admission to the preserve is 10 dollars, which supports the work of the Belize Audubon Society.)

Ten miles away, the seaside village of Hopkins is home to the [Garifuna](#), descendants of indigenous Caribbean people and escaped African slaves who enjoy sharing their vibrant culture with visitors. At the Lebeha Drumming Center on the north side of town, one can hear or take lessons in traditional percussion. To try especially tasty Garifuna cooking, head to Innies', where a lunch of cassava, mashed fish and plantains comes to about 14 dollars.

Things get far more upscale at Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort (877-552-3483; hamanasi.com), not far from downtown Hopkins and possibly the greenest of eco-lodges in Belize. The resort has won certification from [Green Globe](#), an international sustainability monitoring service.

How can a hotel provide hard-to-please tourists with the types of high-end amenities they demand and yet stay true to an environmental mission? The answer involves paring down on wasteful extras and emphasizing nature. Though the rooms and grounds have an informal beauty, it's the Belizean countryside that is the resort's true featured attraction. Instead of playing golf and tennis, guests head out and encounter the tropical wilderness. Hamanasi offers a summertime weeklong package that begins at \$1,731 U.S. a person, including three daily meals, air and land transfers from Belize City and five

guided tours into the woods or water. (The resort's owners said that winter rates are likely to be about \$2,300 U.S. per person.)

On the day my partner and I checked in, an exhausting list of possibilities was posted on the activities board: night walks through Cockscomb, waterfall climbing, rain-forest trekking, snorkeling, scuba, kayaking.

The next day we rose early to meet up with our guide, Hartsdale Dryden, who took us to a remote part of the rain forest near the Guatemalan border, where we hiked around a 3,000-year-old Mayan pyramid. As monkeys screeched in nearby fig trees, Mr. Dryden, a Garifuna raised in a Mayan village, offered rough translations of the hieroglyphics.

On another morning, we went snorkeling. The coral in the area often looked distressed and bleached out — “hurricane damage,” our guide, Eric Miranda, explained. Nonetheless, Mr. Miranda, a son of a Garifuna fishing family, led us to spots rich with parrotfish, grouper, barracuda and sea turtles.

Another day, the hotel's ace birder, Pedro Ical, took us to a nearby marsh in search of toucans with multicolored beaks. He knew a place where they regularly roosted. Sadly, they were no-shows that morning, but our consolation prize included snowy egret, blue heron and woodpecker sightings.

Hamanasi finds ways, large and small, to conserve. The hotel's cars and boats have fuel-sparing motors. Kitchen leftovers are composted for the garden. Staff members sort through and recycle garbage. Soaps, shampoo and mouthwash are offered from refillable bathroom dispensers rather than plastic bottles.

“We do have air-conditioning,” said Dana Krauskopf, a Virginian, who with her husband, David, owns and manages the hotel. “It's not sustainable, though we've developed systems to minimize its use. And we try to incorporate sustainable practices in other ways. For instance, we built the hotel without clear-cutting trees, which keeps the property cooler and attracts wildlife.”

Hamanasi is committed to helping guests connect with its surrounding culture. Once a week, after the dinner dishes are cleared, teenagers from the Lebaha Drumming Center arrive to perform traditional Garifuna music — rhythms and chants that are spirited New World reflections of the Africa their ancestors were taken from.

“Come, join our dance,” one of the drummers beckoned during the performance we attended. Soon, a doctor from Montana, a banker from North Carolina and a journalist from New York City were all up and moving.

Hopkins has nearly two dozen other hotels with varying prices and sustainability practices. Up the beach from Hamanasi, Jungle Jeanie's (501-533-7047; junglebythesea.com) offers very basic rooms for 50 to 110 Belizean dollars a night. More costly is the Belizean Dreams resort (800-456-7150; belizeandreams.com), where we stayed after our reserved time at Hamanasi ended. For 414 Belizean dollars, we were upgraded to a palace of a two-bedroom suite, with multiple bathrooms and many appliances, not all of which functioned. (The winter-season rate for the same-size suite starts at 1,150 dollars. Though the resort now offers packages similar in price to Hamanasi, drinks, food and tours were all extra.)

In many ways, Belizean Dreams was the anti-Hamanasi. Our suite was pretty, but smelled heavily of chemicals. The property had been clear-cut, paved over and replanted during development. Sprinklers irrigated manicured grounds, while loudspeakers in the public areas blasted Bob Marley, night and day — seemingly aimed at giving disoriented guests some (invented) geographic positioning.

The only respite from the noise was a series of suggested tours: a visitor might take a cruise up the nearby Monkey River, or could head to Cockscomb, where parrots provide the soundtrack and, somewhere in the bush, a jaguar might be lurking.

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