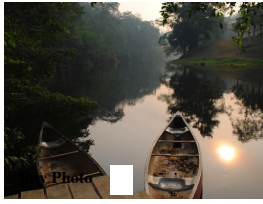


Finding big adventure in tiny Belize

Vicki Stout, For The Tennessean 11:02 p.m. CST January 10, 2015



(Photo: Vicki Stout / For The Tennessean)

Belize, a slip of a country in Central America, is a cornucopia of natural beauty. Its eastern border hugs the mint-green waters of the Caribbean. Its barrier reef is the longest in the northern or western hemisphere.

To the west and south, it nudges against Guatemala and is rife with lush emerald rainforests, jungles, rivers, caves and mountains. Formerly British Honduras, this place of wonder has more species of flowers, birds, trees and butterflies than all of the U.S. and Canada combined.

It's the heartland of the ancient Mayan civilization, filled with ruins, mystery and magic.

Many tourists head east to the beaches — renowned for their diving and snorkeling — and stay put, with an occasional day excursion to see ruins and/or the jungle terrain.

Since I'm not a diver, I chose to go both inland and coastal on an all-too-short eight-day trip. The recommended mode of transportation from the airport in Belize City — in any direction — is by resort-provided transfer or small planes that fly within the country. Neither was going to provide the opportunity to come and go as I pleased or see as much as I'd like.

Everyone I consulted advised against a rental car. There are only three or four main roads in the entire country. Some are paved; others are dirt or worse. Ever the intrepid traveler, despite said advice, I opted for the rental car. Thankfully, it was an SUV, well suited for the roads or lack thereof.

Once behind the wheel, the Belize adventure began in earnest. Between the airport and our first destination, the Lodge at Chaa Creek on the western side, we saw not a single stoplight. Nor speed limit sign. Nor police officer of any kind.

The locals drive like they're on the Autobahn.

The only thing that slows traffic: speed bumps — many unmarked. They are so high and so sudden that we were nearly airborne many times over. All schools are fronted by a speed bump or bumps — and for good reason. The need for speed seems to come with the territory.

The landscape in this area is flat, dotted by ramshackle houses, Mennonites plodding alongside the road with horse and wagon, and trees bursting with glorious bright yellow blooms.

Beauty in the rainforest

Our first destination, Chaa Creek, a top-rated jungle lodge in the Cayo District, is nestled above the Macal River on 340 acres. The grounds are dotted with picturesque whitewashed stone cottages beneath thatched roofs, and an infinity pool offers emerald vistas of rolling hills. Three meals are offered daily, and breakfast is included in the price of the room.

Also on-site is the much less expensive Macal River Camp, with lesser digs than the well-appointed upscale-priced cottages.

The Cayo is more rainforest than jungle, but beautiful nonetheless. A walking trail, canoes to navigate the gentle river and horseback riding are all on property at Chaa Creek.

The one detail I hadn't found in my research was that Chaa Creek has no air conditioning. Anywhere. It's hot there year-round. We arrived at our cottage, quite spacious with a great-looking bathroom, to find only a ceiling and a standing fan. It took some adapting — and an additional fan or two.

Our next stay in Cayo — Ka'ana, a small resort with contemporary design and furnishings — was thankfully air conditioned. It also offers fabulous high-thread-count linens, comfy mattresses and thick, luxurious towels.

Its location is superb for sightseeing — from Mayan ruins to the quaint town of San Ignacio, just minutes away. The colorful and culturally interesting Saturday market nearby offered handcrafted items, fresh fruits, vegetables, freshly squeezed juices and superb local food.

While Mayan ruins are numerous, the best game in Belize is Caracol. And the best of the best, the lost city of Tikal, is just a couple hours across the border in Guatemala. The ruins within Belize are reason enough to visit. Magical. Mysterious. Captivating.

Culture and charm

The drive from west to east to the coast was a treat in itself — gorgeous, voluptuous mountains and vegetation.

The paved road led to a pothole-filled dirt road — resembling the red clay of Georgia — which in turn led to our destination, the Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort. The resort, which certainly offers a myriad of diving and snorkeling opportunities, also emphasizes the adventure part of its name above water — from day trips for hikes to the exploration of Mayan ruins.

Now if you're a high-rise and night-life kind of beach bum, this is not your cup of tea. The resort is gorgeous and a bit remote. The closest "town" (and I use that term in its broadest definition) is Hopkins Village. Even "village" is a bit of an overstatement.

With ramshackle houses, a midwife's office (again, using "office" in its very broadest definition), locals walking or riding bikes, one makeshift grocery and streets that dead-end at the beach — Hopkins has its own particular charm.

One of the most popular spots is the Lebeha Drumming Center. With laundry on a clothesline and a few picnic tables scattered here and there, the center has achieved a certain amount of fame. The "school" teaches Garfuna (the local culture) drumming to natives as well as tourists, and also hosts "shows" and competitions.

Drums are made mostly of wood — native mahogany or mayflower — with deerskin on the drumhead. One of the star drummers we met had crafted his from PVC pipe.

The experience is the essence of "the beat of a different drummer." These locals (we saw only males) have established their own brand of Music City. The drumming is fast and furious, resounding with the beat of the local Caribbean culture.

Most visitors we met at Hamanasi were there for 10 days, and understandably so. The digs are fabulous and there's as much — or as little — to do as you want. We stayed in an aptly named tree house; the view from our hammock on the deck was pretty much eye-to-eye with birds. The floors were wide local hardwoods stained dark. The furnishings were handmade in Belize; the linens were high thread count and pristine alabaster.

It was paradise.

The beach is lovely, dotted by chairs and hammocks and the pool perches at the Caribbean's edge. Dive boats are master equipped and captained. Snorkeling is great fun.

Village by the water

Our last stay of the trip was in Placencia, a village of much larger proportions, with restaurants, shops, fishing boats and two or three grocery stores. Not by any means is it large. The paved road runs through this narrow peninsula and dead-ends at the water. Fishing is big.

The "main street" is actually a narrow sidewalk that meanders through backyards, clotheslines and folding tables of handmade crafts — from jewelry to wood to pottery — and the obligatory shells and T-shirts.

Placencia is a cornucopia of color, with housing and shops in bright Caribbean shades. While the place is hardly sprawling, choosing a resort with a convenient location is key, especially for the tourists who don't have rental cars.

We stayed at Chabil Mar. It's within walking, biking or golf-carting distance (they do offer both of the latter) of the village itself. Actually, it can be reached by way of the beach, which is pretty cool — or by the paved road, populated mostly by bicycles.

The resort is akin to a condo development in that all units are privately owned. The grounds are gorgeous, totally awash in bright blooms.

Belize is indeed fetching, both inland and coastal. It was a surprisingly fabulous destination, one to which I want to return. Were I to choose just one place to spend a week to 10 days, the nod goes distinctly to Hamanasi. It's authentically wonderful.

If you go

Belize Tourism: www.travelbelize.com (<http://www.travelbelize.com/>)

Hamanasi Dive and Adventure Resort: www.hamanasi.com (<http://www.hamanasi.com/>)

Chabil Mar: www.chabilmarvillas.com (<http://www.chabilmarvillas.com/>)

Euphrates Auto Rental: www.ears.bz (<http://www.ears.bz/>)

Ka'ana Resort: www.kaanabelize.com (<http://www.kaanabelize.com/>)

Lodge at Chaa Creek: www.chaacreek.com (<http://www.chaacreek.com/>)

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