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ESCAPES

Natural solitude, reefs a draw in Placencia, Belize

Sleepy village attracts divers, anglers and Oscar-winning director.

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A cottage on the Placencia Lagoon offers easy access to boating and kayaking. Photo courtesy of the Turtle Inn

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Placencia's uncrowded beaches offer solitude and great views of the Caribbean. Photo by Cheryl Blackerby

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A shop in Placencia is housed in a traditional Belizean stilt house. Photo by Cheryl Blackerby

By CHERYL BLACKERBY

Special to the Daily News

PLACENCIA, Belize — It's obvious why filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola built the Turtle Inn resort here: White sand, a blue Caribbean Sea and, some 20 miles offshore, the second-largest coral reef in the world after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.

To the west, the sun sets behind the mangrove-fringed Placencia Lagoon and the distant smoky-blue Maya Mountains and Victoria Peak.

There's one more compelling reason to come here: Solitude. On a glorious afternoon, I found a beach to myself. An Englishman told me he went bonefishing for a half-day and didn't see another boat. A kayaking trip turned up lots of birds, a few manatees and no people.

Let everyone else go 100 miles north to Ambergris Caye, the largest island in Belize and its No. 1 tourist destination. The island's population has swelled to 12,000, not including all the American ex-pats and retirees who have built multi-million-dollar homes along the island's beaches and have bought up new beach-side condos.

Placencia, however, a village at the tip of the 16-mile long Placencia Peninsula, still retains the character of a sleepy fishing village with a population of barely 1,000, many of whom live in colorful stilt cottages, earn their livings from fishing or diving and have family histories that go back to colonial days.

While San Pedro, the largest town on Ambergris, is Chardonnay and champagne, golf carts and designer clothes, Placencia is Belikin beer and Caribbean rum, fly rods and snorkel fins. Big, dusty trucks and SUVs are the vehicles of choice.

Fishing, reef top draws

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A chapel by the sea is popular for weddings. Photo by Cheryl Blackerby

Actors and CEOs come to Placencia, but the real stars are some of the world's most highly regarded fishing guides, who are attractions in themselves for the stories they tell at local thatched-roof watering holes.

Placencia is a haven for every level of fly fisherman. Experts aim for salt-water fly fishing's grand slam: permit, bonefish, tarpon and snook.

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Filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola built Bali-inspired thatched-roof cottages on the beach at Turtle Inn. Photo courtesy of the Turtle Inn

Placencia, called the "Permit Capital of the World," attracts anglers who travel thousands of miles just to stalk this prized game fish. There also are plenty of wahoo, sailfish, marlin and kingfish. It's a favorite spot for fly fishermen who go after the elusive bonefish, the "gray ghosts of the sea."

Divers are drawn here just for the chance of swimming alongside a 50-foot, 50,000-pound whale shark, the world's biggest fish. Each March, the village celebrates the gentle giant with Whale Shark Day.

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Cottages at Turtle Inn have furnishings from Bali. Photo courtesy of the Turtle Inn

But the main attraction is the Belize Barrier Reef, part of the Mesoamerican Reef system stretching nearly 700 miles from the northern tip of Mexico and along the coasts of Belize, Guatemala and Honduras.

The reef is close to shore, from 50 feet to 25 miles, making it easy for divers and snorkelers, who can see 70 varieties of coral including branching fire, rose lace and blushing star. The reef provides homes and food to more than 500 species of fish.

Charles Darwin called it "the most remarkable reef in the West Indies" when he visited nearly 170 years ago, and the more that scientists have learned about it over the decades, the more remarkable it seems.

Each year, 200,000 divers and snorkelers take to the Belizean waters to see firsthand what Darwin was talking about.

Quiet getaway

Celebrities drift into Coppola Resort's luxurious Bali-style Turtle Inn, a collection of thatched-roof cottages right on a white-sand beach. They relax in the spa and dine at the resort's three restaurants. Guests often stay here and then take a helicopter to Coppola's other Belize resort, Blancaneaux Lodge, in the Maya Mountains.

For such a small place, there are a dozen other excellent beachfront resorts including the friendly Robert's Grove Beach Resort, the elegant Chabil Mar, and Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort, a favorite of divers, fishermen and hikers.

The Turtle Inn's guests want to enjoy nature away from the crowds. Coppola, the Oscar-winning director of films such as *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*, often stays in the resort's Family Pavilion, a three-bedroom, seaside Balinese-style cottage with a thatched roof. His nephew, Nicolas Cage, brings his family and friends.

During my visit, an English rock band — pale, skinny and wearing tiny European-style swimwear — spent an afternoon by one of the pools. I never found out the name of the band, but I hoped they put on a few pounds at Coppola's Mare restaurant, which has a Neapolitan brick oven for making pizzas. Of course, the food has to be washed down with wine from Coppola's California vineyards.

Coppola and his wife, Eleanor, first came to Belize in the early 1980s and bought Blancaneaux Lodge in the Maya Mountains. He opened the 20-room Blancaneaux Lodge resort in 1993. He built the 25-room Turtle Inn, a complex of one-bedroom and two-bedroom thatched-roof cottages with Balinese carved wood doors, elaborate woodwork and furniture, in 2003.

Coppola's inn, and the town, were known only by a few. But not for long.

A rutted teeth-rattling dirt road helped keep Placencia isolated from the rest of the country. Many people found it easier and faster just to travel by boat. But that's changed since the main road was paved two years ago.

It's only a matter of time before the condos go up. It's probably a good idea to visit sooner rather than later.

DETAILS

The Turtle Inn cottage rates per night in winter peak season range from \$478 for a garden view cottage to \$2,625 for the Family Pavilion. 800-746-3743; coppolaresorts.com

Other resorts owned by Francis Ford Coppola are the Blancaneaux Lodge in Belize; La Lancha in Guatemala; Jardin Escondido in Argentina; and Palazzo Margherita in Italy.

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