

Dive into your love affair with Belize

THE ROMANCE never ends — and nobody gets old — in this paradisaic retreat

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

As soon as the leaves begin to fall and the air turns from crisp to damp and dreary, I start planning my winter escape. Sunshine, pampering and relaxation are the three things that my husband and I look for in a romantic getaway.

After some research, I soon discovered that Belize, the Central American country famous for its phenomenal diving, Mayan ruins and abundance of eco-activities, is also a tranquil haven for couples and honeymooners.

We divided our time between four unique regions of the country; however, if you crave a more leisurely trip, try to limit yourself to two areas:

PLACENCIA

Barefoot-perfect describes the brown-sugar sand beaches that fringe the colourful village of Placencia, on the southern peninsula of Belize's Staan Creek district. This once quiet fishing community has transformed itself into a burgeoning destination that still retains its traditional charm.

We spent our time lounging on the beach, strolling through the village and enjoying treatments at the Secret Garden day spa. Owned by the U.S.-born, Japanese-trained masseuse Lee Nyhus, Secret Garden is a welcome oasis in the heart of Placencia.

Hot stone, deep tissue, Swedish, Thai and shiatsu massages are only \$50 for 60 minutes, as is the all-natural facial, which includes a nourishing mask and hand-and-foot massage.

Off the coast of Placencia, at the Gladden Spitt, is one of the few places in the world where you can snorkel and dive with whale sharks. Each spring, more than 25 species of fish gather to spawn in Gladden, and the days following the full moon in March through June offer the best chance to experience swimming with these gentle giants.

We were also surprised and delighted by the variety and quality of restaurants in Placencia.

Rumfish Y Vino, a Central American-style gastro pub owned by an American husband and wife, stole our hearts and we're still dreaming about the crispy conch fritters, beer-battered fish tacos and fresh fruit muddled drinks. Another favourite find was the handcrafted gelato at Tutti Frutti, which is made daily and rivals the many scoops we've sampled in Italy.

To immerse ourselves in the vibrant local culture we chose to bypass the large-scale luxury resorts flanking Placencia and stayed at the immaculate seafront Nirvana Beach Suites.

HOPKINS

North of Placencia on the Caribbean coast is Hopkins Village, an ideal location for anyone looking to experience the pristine natural wonders of Belize. Voted the "Friendliest Village in Belize" by Belize First Magazine, this small traditional fishing village inhabited by the Garifuna (descendants of African slave-ship surviv-



The sand at the Hamanasi Resort in the village of Placencia, on the southern peninsula of Belize's Staan Creek district, is barefoot-perfect soft.



The upscale pool at La Terrazas Resort on Ambergris Caye, Belize's largest island.

ors) is rich in both history and culture.

Hopkins is also home to the Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort, which is ranked by TripAdvisor's Travellers Choice 2012 as top hotel for service in Central America and No. 2 in the world.

After spending time at this boutique, eco-luxury, beach property, with its tree house suites and ocean views, we immediately understood why guests return year after year. Beyond the extensive selection of reef and rain forest activities and incredible dining (care of executive chef Sheridan Polanco, who cooked for Prince Harry on his March 2012 trip to Belize), the Hamanasi offers something that is extremely rare — a truly genuine appreciation and caring for its guests.

Throughout our stay, we felt as if each member of the resort staff were part of our extended family, from Golden, who toured us through Hopkins Village, to the ever-smiling waitress, Pauline, who has worked at the resort since it opened more than 11 years ago. In addition to world-renowned all-inclusive diving and adventure pack-

ages, the Hamanasi offers a fabulous romance package.

The seven-night luxe retreat in the resort's seaside honeymoon or tree house suites includes your choice of five adventures per person, such as a Great Barrier Reef dive and Magical Mayan History Tour; daily meals, bottle of sparkling wine upon arrival, romantic couples massage and an intimate dinner for two on the beach or in the privacy of your room.

SAN IGNACIO

The lively town of San Ignacio is in the heart of the lush Cayo district, which boasts over 880,000 acres of protected land. Towering mountains, rushing rivers, waterfalls, jungle forests and ancient Maya temples and ceremonial caves draw visitors to Cayo.

The San Ignacio Resort, overlooking its namesake town, is situated on a 17-acre estate along the Macal River. The family-run hotel, committed to the conservation of the threatened green iguana, created the Iguana Project 15 years ago to educate Belizeans and visitors on the importance of protecting the

ecological balance of the river habitat.

The lush jungle backdrop is also a haven for birds, and more than 175 species, including toucans, parrots, cuckoos and tanagers, have been spotted from the hotel's dining balcony.

Book a three-night romance package and stay in the resort's penthouse master suite overlooking the Macal River Valley.

In addition to your premier suite, you'll receive champagne upon arrival, breakfast and dinner daily, a couple's aromatherapy massage and one full and one half-day tour.

AMBERGRIS CAYE

The country's largest island, Ambergris Caye, located south of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, is considered to be the dive and water sports capital of Central America.

Less than one kilometre offshore, running the entire length of Ambergris is the world's second-largest coral reef system, after Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

The postcard pretty town of San Pedro is a vibrant mix of restaurants, shops and bars offering freshly caught

IF YOU GO

Belize, an English-speaking country best visited during the dry season (December through May), has a simple 2-1 currency conversion from Belizean to U.S. dollars. With no language barrier and multiple daily commuter flights within the country, travel throughout Belize is extremely easy. For additional destination information, visit www.arrivalstravel.com

stone of this exclusive four-acre island resort, which is a mere eight minutes from the San Pedro airport yet feels a lifetime away.

As experts in catering to high-profile clients, including Leonardo DiCaprio (a business partner of the resort owner), Catherine Zeta-Jones and Robert De Niro, the team at Cayo Espanto works tirelessly to create a custom experience for all its guests.

With only six villas, and no more than 16 guests permitted on the island at one time, a private and intimate escape with your loved one is guaranteed.

Upon arriving at our two-storey open-air waterfront villa with personal plunge pool and 180-degree view of the Caribbean, we were treated to the first of many personalized gourmet meals served by our houseman, Eddie. The thought that a need or want might go unmet in this island paradise is unfathomable.

Each morning, we awoke to a three-course breakfast on the veranda, and for the remainder of the day freshly prepared snacks and beverages magically appeared at our villa.

Before dinner, Chef Richard would visit to review the evening's menu, which we then devoured al fresco under a blanket of stars and flickering lanterns.

A deserted beach picnic, bird watching or private snorkelling tour can be arranged before your arrival, or as an impromptu excursion during your stay; however our favourite activity was the spa.

No need to travel far for your pampering, as Ms. Brenda, the island's masseuse and esthetician, will bring her treatment table and homemade lotions, scrubs and massage oils to your villa.

Cayo Espanto's five- or seven-night all-inclusive packages will create a peaceful memory to revisit until your next trip to paradise.

seafood, rum punch, ice-cold Belizean Belikin beer and locally made tchotchkes. The bustling 10 streets that make up the town are filled with golf carts, bicycles and the occasional taxi, all of which are the primary mode of transportation for the 4,000 locals and multitude of visiting tourists.

Looking for a quiet escape, we stayed at Las Terrazas, a luxury all-suite resort with full-service restaurant and spa just 10 minutes by boat from the town centre.

We were delighted to book into the resort's sail and snorkel tour; a relaxing Catamaran trip to the Hol Chan Reserve to swim in the reef's water wonderland of colourful fish, followed by lunch and a stroll through the quaint village on Cay Caulker.

The Las Terrazas Romance on the Caye Package, which includes a couple's massage and romantic dinner for two at O Restaurant, completed our stay on Ambergris Caye.

CAYO ESPANTO

Recipient of more than 28 prestigious awards, including the Andrew Harper Hideaway of the Year and Travel and Leisure Editors Pick, Cayo Espanto offers its guests the ultimate luxury of a private island.

Romance is the corner-



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