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Babymoon in Belize

Pre-parenthood holiday in paradise thrills expecting couple. Page E2



MHAIRRI WOODHALL/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

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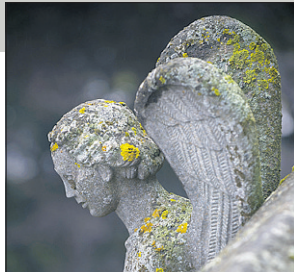
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INSIDE | E4-5

A pilgrim's path

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INSIDE | E3

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BABYMOON IN BELIZE | FROM E1

Six months pregnant in paradise

Beautiful Belize provides distraction and luxurious leisure for expectant parents

BY MHAIRRI WOODHALL

In the midst of all the doctor appointments, purchases and planning involved with welcoming our first child into the world, my husband and I set aside some time for our last pre-parenthood holiday. Given that I was six months pregnant, travel time, comfort, safety and access to modern medicine were as important to us as sunshine, pampering and relaxation. Belize, the Central-American country famous for its phenomenal diving, Mayan ruins and incredible selection of eco-activities, might have seemed an unlikely choice for a Babymoon, but its great beauty, diverse landscape, warm people and five-star amenities won us over in an instant. Wanting variety, we spent our time exploring four unique areas, but for a more leisurely trip limit yourself to one or two regions. Wanting variety, we spent our time exploring four unique areas, but for a more leisurely trip limit yourself to one or two regions.



PHOTOS BY MHAIRRI WOODHALL/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

The Cayo Espanto is one of the region's most elite and private resorts, catering to only 16 guests at a time. Right: the toucan is native to Belize.

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 thankfully retains its traditional charm. To immerse ourselves in the vibrant local culture, we bypassed the large-scale luxury resorts flanking Placencia to stay at the Nirvana Beach Suites in the heart of the village. Owners Evan and Barbara Hall, Belizean-Americans who vacationed in Placencia as children, were lured back by the friendly village lifestyle and opened this beach-front property in 2011.

The couple's pride of ownership shines in every aspect of Nirvana, from the spotless suites with gleaming wood floors and stunning Caribbean Sea views to the immaculate beach, which is meticulously groomed each morning. While Placencia offers an array of adventure activities, including snorkelling among whale sharks and manatees, we opted to lounge on the beach, pamper ourselves at the Secret Garden Spa and indulge in local cuisine.

We fell in love with Rumfish Y Vino, a Central American-style gastro pub owned by the American husband-and-wife team John and Pamela, and we're still dreaming about the crispy conch fritters and beer-battered fish tacos.

Another favourite find was the hand-crafted gelato at Tutti-frutti, which rivals the scoops we sampled in Italy.

Hopkins

North of Placencia, on the Caribbean coast, is Hopkins Village, an ideal location for anyone looking to experience



Belize is renowned for its stunning views of the Caribbean Sea.


the pristine natural wonders of Belize. Voted as the 'Friendliest Village in Belize' by *Belize First Magazine*, this small traditional fishing village inhabited by the Garifuna (descendants of African slave-ship survivors) 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 the 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.

and rainforest activities and incredible dining (care of executive chef Sheridan Polanco who recently had the honour of cooking for Prince Harry on his March 2012 trip to Belize), the Hamanasi offers something that is extremely rare – 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 own 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.

CONTINUED ON PAGE E7



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BABYMOON IN BELIZE | CONTINUED FROM E2



Belize offers beachside tranquillity as well as adventure.

Although the Hamanasi is renowned for its diving and adventure packages, which at six months pregnant I couldn't participate in, we happily spent our time walking the beach, exploring Hopkins, sunning ourselves poolside and visiting the neighbouring Butterflies Spa for couples massages and relaxation treatments.

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. Organized birding walks, visits to the iguana sanctuary, and tours to the nearby Cahal Pech temple are available through the resort's concierge desk.

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 seafood, rum punch, ice-cold Belizean Belikin beer and locally made tchotchkes. The bustling ten streets that make up the town are filled with golf carts, bicycles and the occasional taxi, 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

Towering mountains, rushing rivers, waterfalls, jungle forests and ancient Maya temples and ceremonial caves draw visitors to Cayo ... The lush jungle backdrop is also a haven for birds.

delighted to book into the resort's Sail & 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 (with prenatal option for expectant mums) and dinner for two at O Restaurant, completed our break on Ambergris Caye.

Cayo Espanto

Recipient of more than 28 prestigious awards including the Andrew Harper 'Hideaway of the Year,' Cayo Espanto offers its guests the ultimate luxury of a private island. Romance is the cornerstone of this exclusive four-acre island resort, which is only 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), and Robert De Niro, the team at Cayo Espanto work tirelessly to create a custom experience for all their 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 180-degree view of the Caribbean, we were treated to the first of many personalized gourmet meals served by our Houseman Eddie. 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. A deserted beach

picnic, birdwatching or private snorkeling 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 Babymoon package will create a peaceful memory to revisit during subsequent midnight feedings.

Special to The Vancouver Sun

If you go

Belize, an English speaking country best visited during the dry season (December through May) has a simple 2-to-1-currency conversion from Belizean dollars to U.S. With no language barrier, and multiple daily commuter flights within the country, travel throughout Belize is extremely easy. Flights back to Canada tend to arrive around midnight, so we extended our Babymoon by overnighting at the Fairmont Vancouver airport Hotel. After a long flight the five-minute commute to our plush room for a restful sleep, followed by a delicious breakfast buffet was the perfect ending to the last romantic trip we may experience for a while. For more information, visit www.arrivalstravel.com

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