

TRAVEL

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D1



Belize is a haven not only for divers but also for sun seekers and culture vultures



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

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 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 survivors) is rich in history and culture.

Hopkins is also home to the Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort, which TripAdvisor's Travellers Choice 2012 ranks 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.

Beyond the extensive selection of reef and rainforest 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 extremely rare — truly genuine appreciation and caring for its guests.

Throughout our stay, we felt as if each member of the resort staff was 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.

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.

Continued
Please see BELIZE D9

Pregnant in paradise

Belize babymoon a luxurious getaway

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-parent-hood holiday.

Given 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.



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

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Liz has worked in the travel industry for the past 12 years and brings with her a wealth of travel knowledge. She has travelled throughout Europe, the East coast of Australia, numerous visits to the Caribbean and Mexico, several cruises and is a Disney specialist. Liz looks forward to helping you plan your next holiday.

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Belize
Continued from D1

San Ignacio

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

The San Ignacio Resort, overlooking its namesake town, is situated on a nine-hectare 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 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 10 streets that make up the town are filled with golf carts, bicycles and the occasional taxi, which are the primary modes of transportation for the 4,000 locals and a multitude of tourists.

Looking for a quiet escape, we stayed at Las Terrazas, a luxury all-suite resort with a 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 couples massage (with a prenatal option for expectant moms) and dinner for two at O Restaurant, completed our break on Ambergris Caye.

Belize is a birdwatcher's dream with sightings that included the magnificent frigatebird.



IF YOU GO

Belize, an English-speaking country best visited during the dry season (December through May), has a simple two-to-one 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.

Cayo Espanto

Recipient of more than 28 prestigious awards, including being named 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 1.6-hectare 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 works 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 a 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 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 babymoon package will create a peaceful memory to revisit during subsequent midnight feedings.

— Postmedia News

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