

Snorkel and Dive

AMERICA'S LONGEST CORAL REEF SPAWNS UNDERWATER ADVENTURE

The extravagant submarine scenery of Belize, more colorful than any Hollywood film, really gets a diver's mojo flowing. Dazzling neon creatures, subterranean gardens, and coral jungles put on a show that no one should miss.

Featuring the largest, most prolific barrier reef in the West, plus three rare atolls, 500 species of fish, 65 stony corals, 350 molluscs, assorted sponges and crustaceans, and one celebrated Blue Hole, Belize makes divers and snorkelers wet. Go down to witness a world both mysterious and beautiful, wild and peaceful, complex and primeval.

The Belize Barrier Reef parallels the coast, 12 to 25 miles offshore, 185 miles north to south. Like a parade of tropical icebergs, little tips of dry land peek above the surface of the sea. Below the surface lies the true abundance of this craggy range, with every type of coral known to nature.

The main reef hugs Ambergris Caye and the islands off Belize City, then snakes its way down through open water past Dangriga, Hopkins, Placencia, and Punta Gorda, winding up near the coast of Guatemala. In terms of size and diversity, the entire Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System so exceeds all other Caribbean dive destinations that UNESCO inscribed it as a World Heritage Site in 1996.

Lighthouse Reef Atoll surrounds the celebrated Blue Hole, a thousand-foot circular sinkhole 410 feet deep. Explorer Jacques Cousteau called it "one of the four must-dive locations on this blue planet." All three Belizean atolls — Turneffe Islands, Lighthouse Reef, and Glover's Reef — harbor more than 100 great dive and snorkeling sites.

The pristine waters open a window to brilliant visuals. Exotic marine life seen through a dive mask appears in vibrant colors with high visibility. One

respected dive operator says, "If you take the length of the barrier reef, the circumference of the three atolls, and the available dive areas inside, Belize has more diving than Cozumel, the Cayman Islands, and Bonaire combined."

In the shallows between mainland and main reef, boats reach hundreds of dive sites comfortably in minutes, including tiny islands wrapped in fringing reefs. Coral striations and patches decorate the sand like gardens in a yard. Outside the ridge, the reef slopes gently to 35 feet, revealing shallow corals and gorgonians.

Sponges crown the walls and mid-reefs a little deeper. Crevices split the shelf. Suddenly, walls plummet a thousand feet. To explore here, descend into a crevice and float toward the wall. Ethereal morning sun barely penetrates these canyons, making sea fans glow mystically.

In deep water, coral turrets and spires struggle toward the surface. Walls festooned with sea fans and feathery whips plunge deep into the blue. In great profusion and size, yellow and purple tube sponges stand guard like castles in an English countryside, making homes for angelfish. Chromis glide gracefully around coral heads and gorgonians. Pink and violet vase sponges appear bioluminescent. Black groupers peer curiously from their lairs. Below 80 feet, huge black coral trees host colonies of invertebrate bryozoans.

Divers face denizens of all shapes and sizes, especially neon tropical fish. Common encounters include spawning rituals, friendly dolphins, transparent invertebrates, green morays, and gliding turtles. Lucky visitors get to pet graceful eagle rays. Beyond the walls, larger fish can surprise and delight. For a real adrenaline rush, swim with migrating whale sharks off the coast of Placencia.

Water temperature may dip to the 70s in winter, and climb to 85°F in summer. Visibility averages 100 feet; up to 150 feet on a clear day. Enjoy the best diving weather, with light winds, from April to June. Disposable underwater cameras can capture priceless trophies.

Made even more appealing by comfortable resorts, Belize awaits just 2-3 hours from US airline hubs. For family members, topside activities rival the underwater spectacle, from jungles to ancient Maya sites.

Scuba divers need certification, but no such requirement applies to snorkelers, who can jump right in to witness the spectacle. Hol Chan Marine Reserve, between Ambergris and Caye Caulker, makes a popular spot both

for snorkeling and for learning how to dive. Beginners enjoy South Water Caye and Glover's Reef Atoll because they offer beautiful sea life with minimal currents.

To get certified, ask about PADI, world's largest organization of dive instructors. In three or four days, its course teaches dive safety, equipment, and techniques. Healthy students over 14 complete some class time, five pool dives, and four open water dives. PADI offers junior programs for kids 10 to 14. NAUI is the other leading dive association.

Scout as many dive and snorkel sites as possible, because no two are alike.

Belize City. All adventure begins in Belize City, including great diving. Take advantage of reliable operators and central access to the hottest dive sites.

A day trip to Lighthouse Reef and the Blue Hole actually takes less time from Belize City than from Ambergris Caye. The Belize Barrier Reef lies within 30 minutes, including popular dive and snorkel sites at Gallows Point, Goff's Caye, and English Caye. On nearby Spanish Lookout Caye, the country's first dolphin encounter just opened at Hugh Parkey's Belize Adventure Lodge.

Basing in Belize City also means convenient inland touring without changing hotels. Mix and match packages to make sure each member of the entourage has fun.

Ambergris Caye. Northeast of Belize City, the main reef waits just 10 minutes offshore of this most popular island. From any beach, look for the white line of cresting waves a half mile out. From the air, see where clear turquoise shallows meet royal blue depths.

First stop: Hol Chan Marine Reserve, where rays glide under the boat, and visitors commune with purple and yellow royal fairy basslets, parrotfish, grouper, snapper, even moray eels. Swimmers admire delicate sea fans, iridescent sponges, and brain, staghorn, and star corals. At Shark Ray Alley, even experienced snorkelers feel a thrill by reaching out and touching nurse sharks and stingrays.

Mexico Rocks, with excellent visibility for snorkeling, displays horse-eye jacks, Nassau grouper, lobster, barracuda, sand sharks, and some tiny blue fish that glow like neon as they dart between the corals. At Tres Cocos, bright orange elkhorn corals vibrate near the surface as polyps grow the colonies. For divers, Victoria Tunnels feature clouds of blue tang and 30 types of coral in swim-throughs.

Caye Caulker. A short water-taxi ride from Ambergris or Belize City, this charming island thrives on diving, launching dive and snorkel adventures with excellent facilities and plenty of sites. Reach Hol Chan Marine Reserve and Shark Ray Alley easily from Caye Caulker.

Other sites include North Cut, with coral canyons, turtles, spotted eagle rays, even dolphins; Pyramid Flats, with excellent visibility, southern stingrays, and turtles; and the Wreck, featuring coral canyons and a 50-foot shipwreck. Ask about Swash and Rock Beauty too.

Atolls and outer cayes. In open waters east of the main reef, three large atolls offer both shallow gardens and plunging walls.

Turneffe Islands Atoll, 25 miles from Belize City, supports upscale dive resorts Turneffe Islands Lodge, Turneffe Flats, and Blackbird Caye Resort, plus research facilities and an airstrip. It contains numerous cayes, mangrove forests, and a shallow lagoon with a maze of channels. While best known for wall diving — 70 named sites — the shallows provide excellent snorkeling. Grassy flats attract lumbering manatees, those 1,500-pound marine mammals that resemble big wet puppies.

The exciting Elbow dive site has strong currents to pull in schools of grunt, grouper, permit, snapper, and jack. Drifting among pinnacles and sand shoots, divers encounter hawksbill and loggerhead turtles, eagle rays, and hammerhead sharks. At Triple Anchors, on the lee side of the atoll, spotted drum and other tropical fish swarm around three anchors wedged into coral ridges.

On Lighthouse Reef Atoll, home to Lighthouse Reef Resort, Belize established its first protected area in 1982, the 45-acre Half Moon Caye Natural Monument. Created to protect four thousand endangered red-footed boobies, it also supports another 98 species of birds. Belize Audubon Society maintains a visitor center.

Spectacular diving reveals southern stingrays and majestic eagle rays, in fighter-squadron formations. Divers even come face to face with wing-tipped manta rays in flight. Fishing restrictions mean divers may encounter large grouper and other fish not usually seen.

Plunging 410 feet, the famous Blue Hole at Lighthouse Reef became an icon of Belize after renowned researcher Jacques Cousteau explored it in 1970 for a documentary. At the crest of its thousand-foot circular reef, snorkelers in clear waters delight to exquisite corals, energetic fish, colorful sponges, and

graceful sea fans. Around 120 feet, mammoth caverns perforate the walls, and 40-foot stalactites pose eerily in the blue glow from beyond. The Blue Hole does not sparkle with light or teem with fish. Rather it looms like a dark netherworld, complete with prehistoric sharks prowling at depth.

Along Half Moon Caye Wall, huge nuggets of coral lie on a sandy bottom. Eels sway in the currents until a diver approaches, then retreat shyly into their holes. Tunnels and caverns pierce the wall. Visibility sometimes exceeds 200 feet. At the amazing Aquarium, by Long Caye, exposed holes and grottos house marine life usually hidden at other sites. Que Brada, west of the atoll, sports a fine ridge of coral and a crescent-shaped wall, for seasoned divers.

Glover's Reef Atoll surrounds a shallow lagoon that harbors 750 coral patches. Camouflaged batfish lie in wait for unsuspecting prey. Green razorfish hover until danger approaches, then retreat into the sand.

Outside the atoll, 50 miles of drop-offs from 40 to 2,600 feet, plus numerous shipwrecks, wait to entertain divers. From the beach, the sand gently slopes down for a hundred yards, then ends abruptly at a great ridge of coral, pierced by canyons and tunnels.

Boaters, anglers, kayakers, and campers enjoy Glover's Reef, a marine reserve managed by the Wildlife Conservation Society. On Northeast Caye, one resort has thatched cabins perched right over the water. Middle Caye sits at the heart of the reserve, with a research center. On Southwest Cayes, two great dive resorts occupy their own islands.

Dangriga and Hopkins. World-class dive and snorkel adventures set out from intriguing Dangriga and Hopkins, with a Garifuna vibe, 40 miles from Belize City. The towns host divers who want to explore inland, and inland explorers who want to dive. Jaguars prowl the interior as whale sharks migrate offshore. In forested foothills and jungly lowlands, visitors stalk big cats and other wildlife.

The beautiful stretch of beach from Hopkins to Sittee River lures more divers each year, who choose lodges here for quick access to the pretty cayes that speckle the shallows.

Dive resorts like Pelican Beach shuttle guests between the reefs, coral gardens, grottos, and caves. Just 30 minutes east, the barrier reef and offshore cayes offer easy access. Idyllic South Water Caye, site of diving and fishing resort Blue Marlin Lodge, perches right atop the main reef. A nearby

underwater cave called Hell Hole has a mouth 10 to 15 feet wide and a bottom 150 feet deep. In the center, an unusual cone formed from sand falling through a crevice over time. Walls and ledges display stalactites and stalagmites.

Tobacco Caye and Tobacco Range, a few miles north, host the elusive nocturnal squirrelfish and other exotic marine life. Good dive resorts operate on the caye, including Reef's End Lodge.

Placencia. Luxurious beach resorts put together exciting dives from easily accessible Placencia, a fun place to visit even without diving. The barrier reef wanders farther out from the mainland, resulting in a diverse topography of beautiful coral patches, fringing reefs, small cayes, and deep channels, some to 100 feet, with calm waters for snorkelers.

Inside Gladden Spit, an elbow of the barrier reef, soft and hard corals slope gently from 35 to 70 feet. Fissures cut the reef, leading to open water. Schools of divers and snorkelers come to swim with 40-foot whale sharks, the world's largest fish. They migrate during full moons from April to June, feeding on fish eggs, not people. Sometimes six or eight of the magnificent creatures appear together, a sight never forgotten.

Another 80 species of fish inhabit local waters. Around Tarpum Caye, divers see schools of tarpon. At Laughing Bird Caye, they find spectacular walls and corals. Silk Cayes, Ranguana Caye, Moho Caye, and the Sapodilla Cayes all provide their own unique thrills.

Do not leave Belize before exploring its underwater world. To find professional dive operators and resorts, contact the Belize Tourism Board at 1-800-624-0686 or www.travelbelize.org.

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