Beautiful Belize

LAID-BACK LIVING ON BELIZE’S AMBERGRIS CAYE

BY LOLA AUGUSTINE BROWN

FISH TALES
Anglers delight in trolling the rich waters off the coast of Ambergris Caye
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Captain Alberto Bradley makes the declaration as he clips a rod to the harness strapped to my chest. I try to slowly reel it in. But the nice big fishie—possibly an amberjack or mackerel, according to Captain Bradley—snatches both my bait and hook before swimming to freedom.

I've chosen the perfect spot for my first foray into deep-sea fishing: just past the protected reef system of the Hol Chan Marine Reserve near the coast of Ambergris Caye, Belize. The Caribbean island is perfectly situated on the southern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula, and boasts laid-back beaches along with eco experiences and adventurous pursuits.

The choppy boat ride out to Captain Bradley’s favourite fishing hole had been thrilling. With the wind in my hair, flashes of silver danced on the water as ballyhoos, a common Belizean fish species with sword-like beaks, jumped out of the glittering water to chase our boat.

After my first failed attempt at landing a big one, I eventually do manage to snag a mackerel that’s as long as my arm. The captain swiftly cleans and fillets the fish, and I take it to the kitchen at Victoria House, my home away from home on Ambergris Caye. Later that night, I savour every delicious bite of my catch, which has been pleasingly prepared as a ceviche.

**THE SWIM OF THINGS**

Sandwiched between mainland Belize and the Caribbean Sea, Ambergris Caye was first settled by the Maya around 250 BC. Known as “La Isla Bonita,” the island lives up to its moniker with turquoise waters, white-sand beaches and the world’s second largest coral reef.

Victoria House is an intimate beachfront resort on the southern end of the caye, not far from buzzy San Pedro, the island’s largest town. I pass a pleasant afternoon at the resort’s spa, indulging in a coconut oil body scrub and massage. During my glorious outdoor shower, I realize I’m not alone as a huge iguana perches on the wall above the showerhead. It seems everyone wants to relax on Ambergris Caye!

Most visitors head to the island for Hol Chan Marine Reserve, which forms part of the Northern Hemisphere’s largest reef system. Unlike other reefs, this ecosystem is healthy with plenty of bright coral and marine life, from barracuda to bright green moray eels to rainbow-hued parrotfish.

The reserve is easily accessed by boat or even kayak from some beaches. On an excursion to Shark Ray Alley—an aptly named area where gentle nurse sharks congregate—I snorkel with stingrays and dozens of sharks, some up to three metres long. “They’re gentle as puppies,” a smiling guide reassures me.

**LIKE A LOCAL**

“Belize is such a wonderful destination for Canadians,” says Derek Angele, Saskatchewan native and owner of Big SUP Belize, a stand-up paddleboard shop in San Pedro. “It’s a small English-speaking Commonwealth country.”

“**That feels like a big one; a real nice fishie.**”

“Here's the reef?
Snorkelling in Hol Chan Marine Reserve offers up-close encounters with abundant sealife, like nurse sharks (left); dive shops and snorkel tours are plentiful (opposite)
“There aren’t many roads on Ambergris Caye, so it’s very hard to get lost”
“Belize is way more authentic than many other built-up destinations.” Angele loves that Ambergris Caye is paradise for water sports enthusiasts: “The reef acts as a natural barrier, protecting the island and providing underwater adventures just minutes from shore.”

Another island advantage? There aren’t many roads, so it’s very hard to get lost on Ambergris Caye. I cycle the flat route to town one day and stumble upon several beachfront bars and restaurants—before I end up sipping a chocolate milkshake at Belize Chocolate Company, a bean-to-bar store that uses locally grown cacao and cane sugar. They also host chocolate-making workshops for the culinary curious.

Seeking more thirst-quenching libations later that evening, I ask hotel receptionist Abi Moh Najarro for her beach bar recommendations. In the true island fashion, she offers to take me to her favourite. Accompanied by her husband Greg, we make our way by golf cart to Rojo Lounge, a chilled-out bar on a perfect stretch of beach. A massive red parrot greets us with a screechy “Hullo!” Thus welcomed, we proceed to enjoy massive piña coladas until the sun starts to set.

Heading back to the resort, we pop into the Truck Stop, a shipping container food park with a bar that hosts quiz nights and family movies. The park also houses a gelato shop and containers selling Malaysian and Latin American snacks. On hot days, there’s a pool overlooking the ocean, free for anyone eating or hanging at the park. Before calling it a night, Abi and Greg share a few other must-sees on the island: Black and White Garifuna Restaurant for traditional island cooking is top of their list.

LA ISLA BONITA

On my last night on Ambergris Caye, I grab a table at Black and White to experience Garifuna cuisine. Descended from West African slaves and native Carib and Arawak peoples, the Garifuna have happily coexisted with other Belizean cultures for centuries.

“There’s no division here,” says Julia Martinez, a retired teacher who opened the restaurant to share the foods of her people. She serves me a lick-the-bowl-delicious lobster stew simmered in coconut milk broth with shredded coconut and boiled green plantain. It’s culture in edible form.

Before my airport transfer to catch my flight home, I take a leisurely bike ride around town. On my way back to the hotel, I cycle past a mural emblazoned with “La Isla Bonita.” The Madonna lyrics quickly fill my head and I start to sing aloud: “I fell in love with San Pedro.” Truer words have never been written. I fell in love with Ambergris Caye and I can’t wait to return. “This is where I long to be.”

LOCAL FLAVOUR

Get hands-on at Belize Chocolate Company with DIY cocoa treats (above left); order a tropical cocktail at the Truck Stop (above right)