

TRAVEL

Belize is alive with jungles, beaches and caves

BY SHARON BEAR
SPECIAL WRITER

The shark suddenly turned direction. It was swimming straight toward me. It closed in. Face to face our eyes locked. Now only about two feet of warm seawater separated us. A few inches closer and abruptly the predator veered left. Roaching out my hand, I caressed the passing rough gray skin. It hadn't wanted the piece of lobster meat I had proffered. Oh, well.

Nurse sharks probably prefer fish. So down I dove and fed the lobster morsel into the gentle lips of a manta ray. This magnificent being undulated its thanks in silent ballet below. Never before had snorkeling been this much fun.

But then this was Belize. Home of the world's second largest barrier reef. Poster child of unmarred ecology and gentle adventure. Mother to the '90s travel mantra: Eco-cultural tourism. En route from Belize Airport to the jungle lies the world famous Belize Zoo. This is not your ordinary zoo. It's a "must see" if you wish to actually see most of Belize's jungle animals (who normally hide), like the jaguar. These serene, elegant cats lazed comfortably in natural habitats. Surprisingly an "albino" jaguar, which lacked orange coloring, was therefore black. Mounding the zoo's forested pathways, natives of the Belize wilderness (kinkajou, jaguarundi and tayra) studied this home sojourn as I studied them. I

would later recall these mysterious faces when I visited their natural home, the jungle.

The jungle is an paradox. Still, immobile, yet alive with a harmonious cacophony. My eyes saw nothing move, yet hundreds of unseen eyes saw my every move. Telltale footprints of taper, cat-inund and jaguar informed me I was walking in the steps of the hunted and the hunter.

It was late night... a "jungle walk" with only my headlamp and a young guide named Pedro. (He also carried a machete and a gun). In our cautious search for a glimpse of the shy, big animals the powerful pungent smell of pig-like peccaries announced our proximity to marsh.

My jungle base was a quasi primitive camp at Ian Anderson's Caves Branch Jungle Lodge. Here one can pitch a tent by the Caves Branch River or rent a thatched roof cabana complemented with kerosene lamps, ceiling fans and lots of screening. (Bugs and critters are free).

Using available resources, the latrines were mahogany-constructed and grass hut showers utilized overhead holey buckets. At night tiki torches romantically lit the camp pathways. And a sight that would make my great-grandmother proud - camp staff scrubbed laundry on a large washing stone in the river.

All meals were served "family style," meaning everyone had a plate at the table... including the cook, two dogs and a highly mischievous spider monkey named Julius. Julius pranks are legendary - especially a \$5,000

roof rethatching. (Words to the wise: visitors always keep cabana doors tightly latched.) Rates accommodate everyone: \$5 tent, \$50 cabana per night.

More upscale is Pook's Hill Lodge, carved in the heart of the jungle. This exotic destination provides mountain bikes, horses and foot paths for exploring 7,000 acres of lush rain forest and rushing rivers. It is the nature lover and birders' idyllic retreat. With a tropical view to die-for, the private, clean cabanas sport electricity and hot showers.

Caribbean/European cuisine served on an intimate dining porch helps create a tropical oasis for an easy price (\$90 double and meals \$5-\$15). Hosts Ray and Vicki Snaddon also nurture an iguana project and rescue orphaned parrots.

Among Mayan ruins overgrown with towering hardwoods and wild grapevines, we "budding birders" spotted a mangrove swallow, cormorant and the brilliant yellow kiskadee flycatcher. They chirped along with the plentiful parrots and colorful toucans.

One of Ian Anderson's popular adventure tours was a day tubing and exploring Footprint Cave. After we eight "norteamericanos" donned life jackets, head lamps and inner tubes, our knowledgeable guide Carlos led out little flotilla far into the ancient cave.

In these dens the Maya believed their gods actually lived and the cave was the entrance to the netherworld. (For this reason caves were entered only by Mayan priests for the highest ceremonial rituals).

Discovery Expeditions is a top-rated, dependable tour operator that we used for several excursions. A trip down the New River to Lamana Outpost Lodge was one of my favorites. At this remote compound I discovered exquisite lodgings, spectacular surroundings and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities doing jungle research. A complete eco-adventure in one spot.

There are 200 cays (pronounced keys) off the Belize coast. Each cay possesses a unique flavor. Each its own mini-paradise. The 185-mile-long barrier reef blesses the cays with tranquil water rich in marine life. The reef also affords dream vacationing for snorkelers, divers, kayakers and pretty



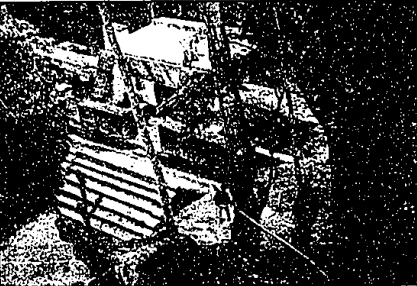
Cave dweller: Writer Sharon Bear explores the Footprint Cave.

much anyone who just wants a quietly lapped beach with clean lazy water to solve city-stressed nerves.

With our first step onto Caye Caulker, my traveling companion, Lucy, and I shucked shoes and chorused, "Let's never leave." Streets are sand. Bars and beach restaurants are sand. Golf carts, bicycles and feet rule the three main sandy byways.

Accommodations at the Vega Inn were on the beach, two beds, clean share-a-bath and \$12.50 a day. At Daisy's Hotel the rate was only \$10 per night - but "bring your own towels and soap."

Ambrygys Caye is a more cosmopolitan version of Caye Caulker and launch site for most diving expeditions of the barrier reef. To the north of San Pedro Town, which has the award-winning Elvia restaurant, lies a little "find" worthy of its own story, the Esane Way. Opened in October of last year, this is a jewel. A non-denominational Christian retreat with no preaching, unless you BYOP, bring your own preacher. At an all-inclusive rate of \$100 to \$150 a day per family, the resort



Ancient ruins: This was once the private residence of a Mayan family from the Pre-Columbian era in what is now Belize.

boasts 18 family chalets, a swimming pool, recording studio and instruments, restaurant and fitness programs.

Each year more conventioners find Belize City the best location for taking off for water sports, the interior and cultural experiences.

If you should someday find yourself on a plane to Belize City, there is an adage, let me warn you, "Be careful about drinking the water - for if you do, you will come back to Belize."

Sharon Bear is a Birmingham free-lance writer.



Tropical resort: The Pook's Hill resort, named for Rudyard Kipling's stories, features jungle inspired villas.

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, assistant managing editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 591-7279.

TELL US YOUR STORY

We want to hear from you! Have you been someplace interesting this past year? Have you had a special adventure? Is there a quiet island you'd like to recommend or a highly promoted place you'd like to warn against? Do you have special tips for other travelers to make their journeys easier? Have you met some interesting people in other countries that you'd like others to know about? We want to share your stories and your color pictures on our travel page. Call Hugh Gallagher at 734-953-2118, or fax him at 734-591-7279.

WINTER CYCLING

REI (Recreational Equipment Incorporated), 17659 Haggerty Road in Northville, is presenting Todd Scott to discuss "Winter Cycling: Staying Warm and Upright." This instructional clinic will feature the fundamentals of winter cycling - clothing, nutrition, bike maintenance,

lighting - at the various levels of participation, what to expect and how to stay safe and have fun. The program is Thursday, Feb. 5. For times and more information, call REI (248)347-2100.

WINTERFEST

Grand Haven holds its annual Winterfest Jan. 30 to Feb. 7. The 20th annual event kicks off with a Winterfest Parade noon, Saturday, Jan. 31 in downtown Grand Haven in western Michigan. The festival also features art competition and exhibition, musical performances including a tribute to Stephen Foster, skiing and skating, a rquestball competition, tobogganing and a Mardi Gras Weekend, Feb. 6-7. For more information, call (800)968-0898.

WORLD OFFERS HOLIDAYS

British Airways Holidays is offering special low prices for holidays to London, Paris, Dublin, Nice and Hong Kong to name a few.

World Offers Holidays in Europe features round-trip midweek transportation in British Airways World Traveller economy class and three nights accommodation including continental breakfast daily at a choice of hotels. Per person price is based on double occupancy. Low prices

for each city include: London, \$479; Paris, Lisbon or Madrid, \$489; Amsterdam, \$529; Dublin, \$639; Nice, \$679 and Berlin, \$559.

Asian tours feature round-trip midweek transportation in British Airways World Traveller economy class including round-trip airport transfers in Asia and six nights hotel accommodation at a choice of hotels. Prices are per person, based on midweek occupancy. Examples of low prices are Hong Kong, \$1499 and Singapore, \$1279.

World Offers Holidays are valid for midweek travel Jan. 30 through March 30, 1998. Travel on Friday, Saturday or Sunday in either direction will be subject to a \$25 surcharge. Higher rates are available for six night stays in Europe and for travel in April and May. Further information on World Offers Holidays is available from travel agents, local British Airways sales offices or by calling the toll-free 1-800-6-FLY-VPBA.

WORLD CUP TRAVEL

Unique Tours and Travel are offering World Cup Soccer travel to France for June 10 to July 12. Packages begin at \$899 and include tickets and transportation

to and from stadiums, final and semi-final matches, accommodations. Packages range from five days, four nights, 2 games to 16 days, 17 nights, 10 games. For more information, call 1-800-328-6201.

MUSEUM EXHIBIT

COSI Toledo, the city's hands-on science museum is presenting

a special exhibit, "Turbulent Landscapes: The Natural Forces that Shape Our World," Jan. 30 through May 10.

The exhibit is comprised of 21 interactive, kinetic art works that illuminate the beauty and order of nature's apparently chaotic systems. Turbulent

Landscapes will enable visitors to experience phenomena such as the creation of sand dunes or the patterns of wind and water first hand.

COSI is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon to 5:30 p.m. Sunday. For more information, call (419)244-COSI (2674).

HEY, SKIERS!

Snow guns are blasting. Real stuff is falling.

THERE'S SNOW UP NORTH.

There might not be much snow in your backyard, but we've got tons of it. Boyne Mountain, Boyne Highlands and Nub's Nob have up to a 65" base. Wow! Be sure to check the latest conditions for all three ski areas on our web site: www.boynecountry.com (where you can also view Boyne USA's live video ski-cam). For lodging assistance, give us a call: **1-800-845-2828**

Petskey-Harbor Springs-Boyne Country Visitors Bureau, Petskey, Michigan. www.boynecountry.com

1998 SPRING HOME & GARDEN SHOW

NOVI EXPO CENTER

Thur. January 29, 2pm-10pm
Fri. January 30, 2pm-10pm
Sat. January 31, 10am-10pm
Sun. February 1, 10am-7pm

1998 Spring Home & Garden Show. It's the first home and garden show of the year, and the Novi Expo Center will be transformed into an exciting world of ideas and information. Kitchens, baths, appliances, floors, heating, lighting, furniture, spas, landscaping, arts & crafts, remodeling, everything for the home and garden. With the knowledgeable people necessary to help you plan your projects for the coming year.

OVER 300 EXHIBITS...PLUS:

- "Garlic Guns" Tom Reed as seen on Good Morning America
- Live broadcasts of WTR's Joe Gagnon and WXYT's Glenn Hase, Rick Bloom and Mike Wendland
- Landscaped flowering gardens
- Demonstrations on decorating, home repair and remodeling
- Treasure Chest contest with daily prizes.

Admission:
Adults - \$6; Seniors - \$4;
Children 6-12 - \$3;
Children under 6 admitted FREE

Family tickets for two adults and accompanying children available at Farmer Jack - \$9