

Belize It or Not

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Never had a trip started with so many difficulties: Family health concerns, cancelled plane tickets, weight restrictions on luggage, and poor weather. Perseverance held our course and our group of four flew to Houston, overnights, then connected to Belize City. We looked with envy at travellers with small carry-ons as we each pushed or hauled two seventy pound bags plus large day bags around airports. Moving with collapsible kayaks can be a nightmare.

A quick check through customs allowed us to load the small prop plane headed down the coast to our destination of Dangriga. Our final landing is on a small asphalt runway carved out of the jungle where two men with wooden wheelbarrows and eight dogs greet us. We follow them down the runway, through mud puddles to the beach and to our booked resort.

The next day we purchase white gas, buy fruit, fill bags with 48 gallons of water, collect the remaining luggage on the noon flight, and arrange for a skiff to take us out to the barrier reef. After almost three days of travel we arrive at palm covered Tobacco Caye (pronounced 'key'). It was the night before Christmas and we had our tents set up under palm trees with decorations and battery lights for a festive atmosphere. No snow or cold, just sun and warmth: truly a Christmas wish come true.

From Tobacco Caye we headed southeast through the cayes for 10 days. Many of the cayes were totally mangrove, meaning there is no solid land. The few houses we encountered were on stilts. Campsites were difficult to locate but our guidebook gave us detailed and accurate information. What surprised all of us were the long crossings of two to five miles between small islands. This was certainly not shoreline paddling. Each day included hours of snorkeling. The abundance of life was outstanding. Sponges, corals, lobsters, octopus, rays, barracudas and sharks, plus the multitudes of colorful reef fish. Pelicans, osprey, frigate birds, and herons put on aerial displays as we rocked gently in the hammocks.

Sound idyllic? There were hardships: It was actually too warm to sleep some nights. Sand flies made two campsites a nightmare experience. And the sun at times was too intense. But we don't expect sympathy or compassion from you readers.

Fresh lobster dinners, Gatorade whiskey sours, warm starry nights, shorts and tank tops, miles of aquamarine water dotted with islands covered with coconut palm trees, good companionship: These are the lasting memories.

At the end of the trip we chartered a skiff to take us up the Monkey River. As we cruised along we saw iguanas perched on branches, crocodiles and turtles basking along the shore, and howler monkeys hanging in the branches. We saw a manatee as well as countless tropical birds. The rain forest was a real contrast to the life on the barrier reef.

Only near the end of our trip did we hear the horror stories of the weather at home. Blizzards, floods, winds: These were not troubles to be dealt with while we ate shrimp creole under the stars listening to Jimmy Buffet. We would deal with that reality later, after we finished with the Caribbean.

You had to be there to Belize it!!

