



Above: The staff at Blancaneaux Lodge will customize any experience for you, including a romantic dinner for two (they do some fancy decorating with flowers) under the stars overlooking Privassion Creek.

Right: The Honeymoon Cabaña at Blancaneaux Lodge is covered in beautiful local textiles (tip: bring home some pillow covers from their gift shop as gifts).



You better Belize it

The nascent tourism industry in this Central American country presents adventures around every corner

STORY: Karina Timmel Antenucci

Coincidentally, my first two visits to Belize were two weeks apart. The first time solo for work; the second for vacation with my hubby. Both times, I was completely giddy upon arrival after the three-hour direct flight from Atlanta. It may have had something to do with the in-air mimosas, but it also most certainly had everything to do with the adventures that were in store. With tourism just starting to pick up steam here, the experiences—from driving on unpaved roads to scaling steep Mayan ruins without safety barriers—are still authentically raw.

Although development is said to be in the works to open a second international airport in Placencia, currently all international flights land in Belize City. From here, you'll want to carry on to your final destinations via domestic flight, rental car or water taxi (read: Skip the "big" city). All domestics are approximately 12-seater propeller planes, where there are no seat assignments and the first passenger on board gets to sit next to the pilot in the cockpit—really. I had enjoyed the scenery from these low-flying aircrafts on my first trip, so we opted to go the rental car route to explore the inland nooks and crannies for the next six days.

Our final destination on this day was Blancaneaux Lodge on the Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve in the Cayo district. But first, some adventure: a stop at the inland Blue Hole National Park and St. Herman's Cave, one of a plethora of underground caves that

run for miles throughout the country. Our private tour guide from Belize Inland Tours led us through a jungle hike (during which my husband ate a termite—on purpose; he says it tasted like wood, by the way) and into the depths of a pitch-black cave. Here, we donned headlamps and floated single file on inner tubes on few-feet-deep water, and prayed that both the bats and ancient Mayan spirits would leave us to enjoy the stunning stalactites and stalagmites (rock formations that grow down from the ceiling or up from the bottom of a cave, produced by the precipitation of minerals from dripping water). Wet, muddy and sweaty (and alive), we were rewarded with a simple, scrumptious Belizean lunch of rice and beans, stewed curry chicken and green salad upon return to the hut where we had started. It is also where we were introduced (and became addicted) to locally made Marie Sharp's hot sauce—proceed with caution; this stuff is spicy!

The drive to the 78-acre Blancaneaux, which was film director Francis Ford Coppola's private family retreat before he opened it to the public in the 1990s, included about an hour of bouncing on dirt roads with potholes the size of ravines (an SUV with four-wheel drive is a must here). The Honeymoon Cabaña, one of 20 thatched "houses" of varying sizes and configurations on the lush and well-manicured property, embraced us with its rustic-chic vibe, complete with a four-poster, mosquito-netted bed, bright lo-

cal textiles and carved-wood furnishings. We fell head over heels for the scene and sound: this cabaña sits right on Privassion Creek and rushing water lulled us to sleep each night ... at about 9 p.m. That's what happens after days of activities, such as hiking the massive structures at Belize's largest Mayan site, Caracol, deep in the Chiquibul Forest Reserve; topnotch cuisine (both restaurants—Montagna for Italian, Guatemalteca for Guatemalan fare—utilize organic herbs and veggies from the resort's own extensive garden) and the best piña colodas on the planet (made with fresh coconut and coconut water); Thai massages at the tiny open-air spa; and not having a television. The constellations, which we attempted to study via a provided telescope, were the only entertainment. Cue Snoozefest 2015. The rejuvenating kind.

Ready for some sun, sand and sailing, after three days we departed for Placencia. The three-hour scenic drive provided a landscape that varied from sparse pine forest to small and ramshackle third-world towns to dense jungle to miles of citrus groves to crystal-blue ocean and seaweed-strung beaches. Wow! (Tip: When driving, watch out for what the locals call "sleeping policemen"—speed bumps galore, some unmarked.)

Placencia sits at the end of a narrow, 26-mile sandy peninsula, with one side a beach and the other side a lagoon and boat slips. We chose to stay at Chabil Mar Villas, 20 individually designed condos on the beach,



Above: Situated deep in the Chiquibul Forest Reserve, Caracol is the most extensive Mayan site in Belize and was only re-discovered in 1936. Blancaneaux Lodge can arrange a day trip with one of their knowledgeable guides.



Above: After a jungle hike, the final descent down a rocky staircase into St. Herman's Cave for some tubing (and bats).



Above: Catching my breath after climbing a massive pyramid, one of 30,000 Mayan structures at Caracol.



with amenities like two pools and a private pier with lounge area. Its proximity (only a 10-minute beach walk or 3-minute drive) from Placencia Village made it a cinch to explore this beach town's little tourist shops, eateries (don't miss Ms. Brenda's roadside jerk chicken or Rumfish y Vino's Caribbean Fish Stew—I had it two nights in a row!) and to soak in the vibe.

There is one big must-do when in Placencia: Charter a boat and head out for a day on the sea. Explore the gorgeous little isles, such as Laughing Bird Caye, which are scattered all around and snorkel or scuba dive whenever possible to swim with whale sharks (don't worry, they don't bite), manta rays, sea turtles, parrot fish and more.

Though we were fully rested and ready to re-enter the "real world" with quality Internet service by our last day, we weren't quite willing to say a final adieu to this Central American gem. For about five minutes, we seriously contemplated a beachfront property investment. Instead, we bought a lot of Marie Sharp's hot sauce. And now I feel the warmth of Belize every time I pile it onto my eggs. ■

Above: The dock at Chabli Mar Villas, which is conveniently set up with lounge chairs, is a great spot for lunching, too.

IF YOU GO:

Belize Inland Tours
belizeinlandtours.com

Blancaneaux Lodge
 Rates starting at \$279
coppolaresorts.com

Chabli Mar Villas
 Rates starting at \$275
chablimarvillas.com

**AWARD-WINNING
 CUISINE.
 MEMORABLE
 DINING.**



ATLANTA FISH MARKET®

Seafood

BISTRO NIKO®

Neighborhood French Bistro



BUCKHEAD DINER®

New American

CHOPS® LOBSTER BAR®

Prime Steaks & Seafood

CORNER CAFÉ®

European Style Café & Bakery

KYMA™

Mediterranean Seafood



PRICCI®

Contemporary Italian

VENI VIDI VICI®

Classic Italian

103 WEST®

Private Events



BOCA RATON

CHOPS® LOBSTER BAR®

Prime Steaks & Seafood

CITY FISH MARKET

Seafood



FORT LAUDERDALE

LOBSTER BAR® SEA GRILLE

Pristine Whole Fish, Live Lobsters & Prime Steaks

BUCKHEADLife
 RestaurantGroup

404.237.2060
buckheadrestaurants.com