



Looking Back: Belize and Guatemala

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I was probably around seven years old when I first noticed the tiny country of Belize just south of Mexico on a map. Unlike most kids staring at maps was a literal past time for me and my interest in that little country was piqued in that moment.

I could only imagine that it was some tropical paradise tucked into a corner of Central America. Back then, without the internet, there was no easy way to actually see what this little country was like without a trip to the library where you *might* find a few good books. At the time most people had never even heard of the country of Belize.

Decades later (2002) as I was surveying my options for how to spend a week's worth of time off while living on my own, I remembered that little country that was now becoming a popular travel destination. After toying with the idea of Australia (which I decided to leave for another day when I had more time off and more money available â?? I still haven't made it there), I booked a roundtrip flight to Belize.

I had no hotel reservations, but goals in mind of snorkeling on the barrier reef and venturing into neighboring Guatemala and see the Mayan ruins of Tikal.

I packed lightly (a backpack with swim clothes, t-shirts, shorts, my SLR camera without the zoom lens), having learned from my Europe trip two years before that extra baggage just meant being slowed down

and suffering from a tired back and limbs. I drove to the San Francisco airport from my home in San Luis Obispo, California and boarded a red-eye flight on TACA airlines with a connection in El Salvador.

The next morning I awoke as the plane was descending over the volcanoes of El Salvador. It was a very cool view to take in as the plane landed in the city of San Salvador. An hour later the connecting flight was ready to depart for the short flight to Belize City and I made my way onboard.

The Pacific and Caribbean coasts of North America just look very different. Where the Pacific Ocean, particularly in California, is cold, deep, and dark, the Caribbean coast is shallow, teeming with reefs, and ranges from light deal to sky blue.



View of Belize from the air

As the plane made itâ??s way over the palm tree-covered coastal plane of Belize, I and the other passengers took in the view of the inviting seawater below, and words of excitement filled the cabin. Everyone onboard it seemed was a tourist ready to enjoy days of snorkeling and swimming in the Caribbean sea.

Day 1: Belize City

Once the plane had landed and I had completed the simple immigration process, I made my way to find a taxi. I asked the driver to take me to a hotel in Belize City. I asked his recommendation for a good one. â??The Radissonâ?•, he suggested.

Off we went toward Belize City and the Radisson. For the first time I was able t take in the country from the ground, and a bit of disappointment began to take hold. Belize City seemed very poor and rundown. I exited the cab, tipped the driver and entered the hotel.

I didnâ??t even know if the hotel had and vacancies, but the Radisson itself was very nice, even if the city around it was rundown. Sweating from the heat and humidity I got a room with pleasant air

conditioning and a television. But that wasn't why I was here. I needed to figure out my plans.

I threw my backpack on the bed and pulled out the one guidebook I had brought with me. The book had mentioned that Belize City had a relatively high crime rate for a city its size. But I was interested in finding things to do and a place to eat. There was a marker nearby on the wharf to commemorate war dead..and not much else.

Since I had already paid for a night at the hotel I wasn't going to be leaving for the recommended destinations of the offshore Cayes until the next day. Instead I would take a needed dip in the pool and get myself mercifully cooled down.

The pool was refreshing and I was the only one in it. Tourists just didn't stay in Belize City. They came and quickly hopped aboard a water taxi for Ambergris Caye or Caye Caulker. When I went to dinner that afternoon along the waterfront, I saw crowded water taxis departing and knew what I needed to do first thing the next day. Get out of Dodge and t the action. At dinner I did have my first Belikin beer of the trip (not my last).

I was also getting immersed in who the Belizean people really were. Along the coast they were 90% creole descendants of slaves that looked and spoke much like Jamaicans. The food was delicious creole food. I even tested out the tap water which I read was largely gathered in rooftop cisterns. Tasted a bit off but went down alright.

The streets of Belize City were full of locals pestering tourists to buy useless things and pay for various services in their shops and alleyways. I laughed and walked on, not falling for the scams and BS that sucker in many of the foolish gringos from the US, Canada, and Europe.

Once back at the hotel for the night I decided to crash early, having gotten little sleep the night before and needing a good rest to really start off the trip right.

That night the hotel grounds were a rollicking party that woke me in the middle of the night. While I never left the room (I should have) I could hear the music and knew this area of Belize enjoyed nightlife. Still, having spent the better part of the previous day trying to stay safe amid many unsavory street loiterers, I wasn't eager to be too adventurous yet.

Day 2: Caye Caulker



The next morning I checked out and made a quick walk along the waterfront. I found the monument to commemorate the Belizeans that fought in the First World War, then ambled over to the crowded water taxi depot. I bought my ticket and waited until it was time to board the boat for fun on the isles.

I decided to go to tiny Caye Caulker first. And I'm glad I did. Caye Caulker was just about a mile long and half that wide. It was nothing but sand set in the Caribbean with a reef offshore to break the waves. Houses and small hotels lined a sandy street, alongside tour operators for snorkeling and diving and bars and restaurants. This place was low-key and fun.

If you wore more than a bathing suit and sandals you were overdressed. Girls strolled by in bikinis and bare feet and straight into beach bars. Most were from the US, or Canada, or England, or Australia, and a smattering from other places. It was an independent-minded crowd as well, most traveling alone it seemed. This tiny of land with cheap accommodations drew in a young, free-spirited set of people.

Unlike the annoying, thumping music and douchey frat crowds that ruined resort areas in the US and Mexico, the only real sounds were waves, wind, and chatter amongst the tourists and locals. This was perfect.

With no reservations it still took little time to find a simple, inexpensive hotel along the beachfront. Actually, everything was beachfront, and the hotels were simple 8-10 room structures with spartan rooms, but clean sheets. All I needed was a place to sleep, shower, and stow my stuff. I got that.

I had seen a half-dozen snorkel tour businesses as I departed the room anxious to finally start doing something. I walked down and reserved a spot on the next tour to the reef right offshore.

I had never actually snorkeled before but there was no time like now to learn. Once on the boat, cruising over the ocean waters amid a group of five or so others, I felt no real trepidation. Sure I wouldn't be able to touch the bottom like a pool, but it would make sense once I entered the water.

My first jump into the water was easy enough. The flippers were buoyant and with them I could propel myself. And though the mask took some getting used to (and a lot of blowing to clear water) I found that it was really easy to spend thirty minutes following schools of fish amid the coral in the warm ocean water.

The next stop was one that was really memorable. "Do you guys want to see sharks?", the guide asked. "Heck yes!", we all responded. And minutes later we were parked above a sea teeming with sharks in the clear water below.

A few people onboard grew nervous at the site and size of the sharks. I didn't. I jumped in with the guide and several others and swam amid the sharks. Not only that, this spot seemed to have more fish, sting rays, and even lobsters. It was like being in a great aquarium. To this day I regret having no underwater camera to capture it all. But like most of the trip, I dropped the ball on the photography side.

Once back at the pier, I walked the half block of sand to the room, changed out of my wet swimsuit and put on some shorts. I walked to a beach bar restaurant a little ways down for dinner.

Caye Caulker is probably the most laid-back place I've ever been. It was a novel thing to see barefoot people eating in sand-filled bars. I sat at a bar, ate some creole food, chatted with some locals and Aussies, and downed a couple Belikins. Chill.

Day 3: Ambergris Caye



The next morning I bought a water taxi ticket to go onward to Ambergris Caye. I had heard a lot more about Ambergris Caye and knew it was the more developed island, so I decided it was worth visiting for more snorkeling.

Ambergris is much bigger and has schools, resorts, and a real town (as opposed to a row of simple houses and inns along the waterfront. But it also felt busier and less relaxed. I felt more like I was back in the States compared to the seemingly isolated world of Caye Caulker.

I found a hotel (which really was a hotel compared to the simpler lodgings in Caye Caulker) and decided to have lunch and then go snorkeling on a nearby stretch of the barrier reef. The reef offshore of Belize is the second longest in the world after the Great Barrier Reef.

I would say that the snorkeling was as good overall compared to Caye Caulker but didn't include the shark encounter. Also the boat had more participants (like 10 instead of 6) and they were a bit older

and wealthier than the backpacker group from Caye Caulker.

The fish were amazing in their diversity and the coral was spectacularly beautiful. I had no underwater camera (doh!), otherwise I could show you. In the years since I've snorkeled in Hawaii, the Cayman Islands, Cozumel, the Florida Keys, and Roatan, and Belize was hands down the most impressive. I had no idea my first time snorkeling would be the very best of my life thus far.

After an afternoon of snorkeling I wen out in search of another beach bar for dinner and drinks. There were plenty of sand-filled establishments. I found a decent one and ate and drank. One big difference, again, with Ambergris was that the crowd was a bit older and wealthier and not as relaxed. A couple of age 40ish expatriates from I think England were actually annoying the few girls that entered and I ended up leaving before long.

I sauntered on the beach a bit since I had no other entertainment and enjoyed the nice, humid breeze, and finally entered another bar. A couple drinks later I called it a night.

Day 4: Ambergris to San Ignacio

The next morning I woke up with a busy day of travel planned. I would be taking the water taxi back to Belize City, and from there I would be boarding a bus to San Ignacio in the rain forests of western Belize.

I wasn't quite ready to leave the Cayes and their ocean atmosphere just yet and decided to have a good breakfast at a restaurant on the waterfront. I talked a bit to the waiter and explained where I was from at the time in California (halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco). I also looked on as some American women burned themselves to a crisp nearby (not healthy and not attractive).

Finally, satiated for a long day, I took my belongings and made my way to the taxi port. It took about an hour to arrive back in Belize City. What a difference. Back to the swindler, hustler filled streets of the largest city in Belize.

I went to the bus depot and after a long line in a relatively dirty building bought tickets to San Ignacio.

The bus ride was aboard a typical school bus you'd find in the States and it was mostly full of locals who were commuting to their homes. The bus ride was interesting because it really gave me a good idea of who the people of Belize really were. There were obviously four groups 1) The Creoles I mentioned earlier that lived along the coast 2) Spanish speaking Mestizos that were the majority of the population inland (such as around San Ignacio) 3) Expatriate Europeans, Americans, and Canadians and the 4th and most surprising group 4) German Mennonites that were dressed similarly to Amish in America.

This unique assortment of people were present on the bus (along with tourists), and all seemed to get along just fine. The live and let live attitude was obvious.

Another thing that also stood out to me was the lack of concern people had toward littering. People lowered their windows and shamelessly threw whatever trash they had out. The amount of litter along the roadways was at time galling. Hopefully this has changed in the time since.

When the bus arrived in San Ignacio I found a taxi driver rather quickly at the station. I didn't know where to find a hotel and asked the driver. He suggested the expensive place. The place the Queen of England had stayed at when she came to Belize.

While at the time I was not exactly rolling in cash to spend, I decided to give it a look. If it was too expensive I would look for a ride to somewhere else.

The hotel was about \$65 American dollars a night which was not very expensive by my standards and cheaper than most Motels in America. It was certainly nicer than the last two places I stayed and was surrounded by rain forest, with the accompanying sounds of insects and birds which I enjoyed.

I didn't remember the name of the hotel but having looked it up while writing this I know now it was the San Ignacio Resort Hotel. It looks like it has been renovated and improved since I last was there. It also looks like San Ignacio now has many high-end resort hotels. Times have changed.

Coming in as a backpack-toting young man fresh off the bus and the boat, I was met by one nice older lady that checked me in, and one rather stuck up younger concierge that seemed to think I was in the wrong place and didn't want to help me when I asked about tours. I got the info I wanted on a caving tour from the older lady, who seemed annoyed with your younger coworker for her attitude.

With the long bus and boat trips over and having now found a comfortable place to sleep I set off on foot to find 1) food for the night and 2) an internet cafe. I had been out of touch with the wider world for several days now and decided it was worth checking and sending some emails. I found both within a mile of the hotel in the town.

After eating and finding that there wasn't much of interest in my email or in the news, I walked back to the hotel for the night. I had a big day planned for tomorrow as I would cross the border in Guatemala and make my way to Tikal.

Day 5: Guatemala and Tikal

The next morning I got a cab from the hotel to the border crossing into Guatemala. The driver seemed intent on helping me every way possible, including finding a private guide to drive me to Tikal and exchanging money at the border for Guatemalan Quetzals. I found out later he ripped me off with the exchange rate and the tour was more expensive when I went to pay than I negotiated with the taxi driver.

But anyway, I got to the border without issue and got through the weakly secured border. Once into Guatemala things were noticeably less developed. I got connected with the tour guide and he told me he would take me to Tikal and back. I assumed it was \$40 for the whole trip but it was \$80 when I returned. I don't know. It wasn't really a big deal to me. I just wanted to get there and back without issue. Actually, considering it was a private ride and he waited for me at Tikal it was an incredible bargain.

The drive was pretty fascinating. The rainforest of Guatemala was denser and the humidity seemed higher. Homes were truly huts with chickens and dogs running around. Unlike Belize, few people spoke

English (the driver barely spoke any words of English but I could manage in Spanish), and when I arrived in Tikal I saw and heard native Mayan people that didn't even speak Spanish.

Once I arrived at the entrance to Tikal I hopped out of the tour bus and elected to walk to grounds without a guide although one was offered.







The Ruins of Tikal

I spent the next couple hours at Tikal roaming the grounds, ascending the pyramids, and walking through the museum. It was an incredibly cool experience. The ruins dated back over 2000 years and were continuously inhabited until some time in the mid 900s when the Mayan civilization began to decline. The Mayans still sparsely inhabited the area of the city up until the 1500s, when the arrival of the Spaniards and smallpox finally depopulated the city.

There are thousands of structures in Tikal and in its rainforest setting it is an amazing sight. Coatimundis, ocellated wild turkeys, and quetzals were present when I was there (but using the film camera without a zoom lens I only have a photo of a turkey). I heard others talking of encountering monkeys as we sat atop the great pyramid.

After finishing a good day exploring Tikal I was driven back to the border. I paid the driver the requested \$80 (fortunately I had the cash because I doubt I could have paid with a credit card, but who knows), and returned across the border.

Once on the other side I was minorly relieved to be on the safer side (I did see groups of thuggish teens roaming around by the border and the police didn't look like they cared if anyone got mugged). Being 6 foot 1 inches and physically larger than the typical Guatemalan I wasn't in much danger, but I did read about women in particular that were victims of crime in Guatemala. Always be careful.

I took a cab back to San Ignacio town and sought out a meal for the evening. I was already looking forward to the caving tour the next day. It would be the last big thing I would have time to do on the trip so I was hoping for a great experience.

Day 6: Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave

The next morning I walked down to the rainforest setting of the tour operator. I saw the signs that read "If you are looking for adventure, this is it" and felt good about my decision. I paid my admission and got ready for the coolest tour I have ever done in my life thus far.

There were a group of us on the tour together. We were all about the same ages (mid twenties) and from the US, Canada, England, and Australia. We all got along great and I only wished I could have hung out with this group later that evening after the fun we had that day.

The guides drove us into the rainforest in a tour van where we would start off on a 2-mile hike through the forest to the cave entrance. Once we were off the bus we stripped down to swimwear and sandals, put our cameras in dry bags, and made our way down the trail.

We quickly put aside any hesitation, eating termites, wading through three rivers and finally staring at a partially submerged cave entrance. "You'll need to swim your way in and we'll meet up inside"











Once inside we had about 2 miles of climbing in swimming through an impressive limestone cave as we made our way to Xibalba, or the Mayan Underworld. It was here that the Mayans sacrificed victims to the gods of the underworld who might otherwise unleash terror on the living.

In the light of flashlights we saw skulls and skeletons and the stone tools used to kill the victims. The guide, also around the same age as us, was cool as well and we fearlessly and willingly crept and crawled onward with eagerness in the darkness. This was not a tour for the meek or the weak, but one for people like us that craved adventure.

When we were done we went back to the tour operator's headquarters for lunch. We had become friends over the course of the tour. Some were returning to the coast that day (and I heard that Placencia was great for snorkeling), and the others where would they be that evening?

I was staying in the wrong hotel. It was a great hotel. Beautiful really. Perfect for families, for the Queen of England. But it wasn't where the young, fun people were. Where the backpackers were that I had explored the cave with and ate lunch with.

I went back to the hotel and for the first time really felt like I didn't want to travel alone any more. It would turn out to be the last time I would. In some ways traveling alone is an experience and one that the backpacker crowd thrives on. But it also brings with it a sense of missing out. Or even a feeling of loneliness. I didn't have anyone to share the experience with now.

Day 7: Placencia



I checked out of the San Ignacio Resort Hotel I had really only one full day left before my departure flight the following evening. I considered staying in San Ignacio another night, but decided I wanted to seek out the ocean one more time and find an oasis of calm by the sea. Placencia, from what I read, sounded like the place.

I took a bus back as far as Belmopan where I transferred to a bus bound for Dangriga. When I arrived in Dangriga I found it to be the slightly smaller sister-city of Belize City. Not much of a place to stay a while. I got a ticket for a bus ride down the coast to Placencia, knowing I'd have to retrace these steps the next day to get back to Belize City and onward toward home.

As the bus traveled south I noticed that a lot of the houses and other structures appeared to have weathered some severe weather and many were being rebuilt. Since I had no internet at the time and no smartphone I would have to wait to find out what had befallen the area. Upon my return I learned

about Hurricane Iris, which had struck as a category 4 storm in October of 2001, when the world was still transfixed by the 9/11 attacks.

By the time I did arrive in the sleepy village of Placencia it was already mid-afternoon and I wouldn't have time to snorkel with whale sharks, as it was suggested the day before. I found some beachfront cabins and checked in for the night. They were about \$30 but were what I generally needed.

Following the advice of a Lonely Planet guidebook I sought out a family restaurant and had a pretty good late lunch (it wasn't great though). I began to suspect that those books were written by people that weren't as knowledgeable about the places they wrote about as they claimed.

I decided to just walk the sand a while until storm clouds gathered and turned into a pretty powerful thunderstorm. Living in California at the time, where thunderstorms were almost non-existent, it was quite an experience. I had been through many growing up in Iowa, but had gone many months without seeing thunder and lightning.

That evening, once the rain subsided I found a beachfront restaurant and enjoyed a last evening in Belize under the swaying palms. I knew getting back to Belize City would be a bit of a slog on the slow buses. But of course, there was another option. One that until that moment I really didn't consider. A hopper flight.

Day 8: Placencia to San Francisco

I woke up the next day knowing I would need to make my way to the tiny airport in Placencia and hopefully, be able to book a hopper flight to Belize City.

I walked out on the beach and a little boy was selling hand-carved wooden souvenirs. I bought a wooden canoe.



The canoe I bought in Belize

There was about a 2-mile hike in the blazing heat and humidity to the airport, but I was willing. I started down a hot, dry, dusty road in the heat carrying my backpack before a kindly Creole woman stopped

and insisted I let her drive me. "It's too hot", she said with a smile.

I jumped in and she drove me the rest of the way to the airport. I thanked her and offered her some cash which she declined.

Once at the airport, I honestly still didn't know if there was even a flight available. There was, straight to Belize City on a tiny prop plane that would get me in with a few hours to spare. Much better than the buses. Sounds good to me.

I bought a ticket and a few hours later I was airborne flying low over the coastal plains of Belize.



When the plane landed I felt relieved. To be back in Belize City and already at the airport. Nothing to do now but relax, take stock of my souvenirs and rolls of spent film, and wait for the departure flight to San Francisco.

The flight back was long and crowded. Customs in San Francisco was a pain. Then remembering where I parked in the parking garage was an even bigger pain. When I finally found it after searching several levels, I was truly exhausted.

I drove back late at night to San Luis Obispo and went straight to sleep. It had been a long day.

Lasting Thoughts

For me, this was the end of an era. When I traveled I had no phone with me and there would have been no purpose in bringing one. My phone at the time was not a smartphone. It had no camera and there were no big social networks. When I wanted to go online it was at internet cafes.

I couldn't look anything up online and just reserved rooms as I went. Everything was just done in the moment. That's something that was risky, but at the same time exciting and adds a level of

spontaneity.

The world today doesn't know what it was like to really "go away for a while". To escape. The social networks and smartphones have ruined that.

Date Created

June 28, 2022

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