

Good Grit

The Character Of The South



WANDERLUST

JULY - AUGUST

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An aerial photograph of a coral reef in Belize. The water transitions from a shallow, light turquoise near the reef to a deep, dark blue further out. A white boat with a flag is visible on the right side of the image. The word 'BEL' is printed in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the top of the image.

BEL

THE CURE FOR THE
SUMMERTIME

blues

WORDS BY BUDDY ROBERTS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF OLIVERA RUSU PHOTOGRAPHY.

CAYO ESPANTO - APRIVATEISLAND.COM,

BELIZE TOURISM BOARD, AND BY SHELLY BROWN

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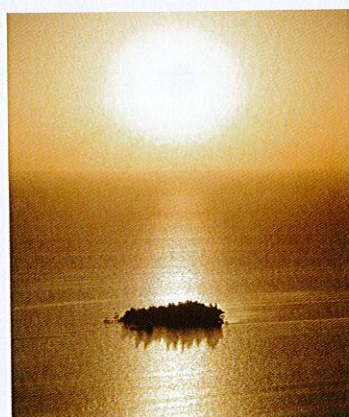
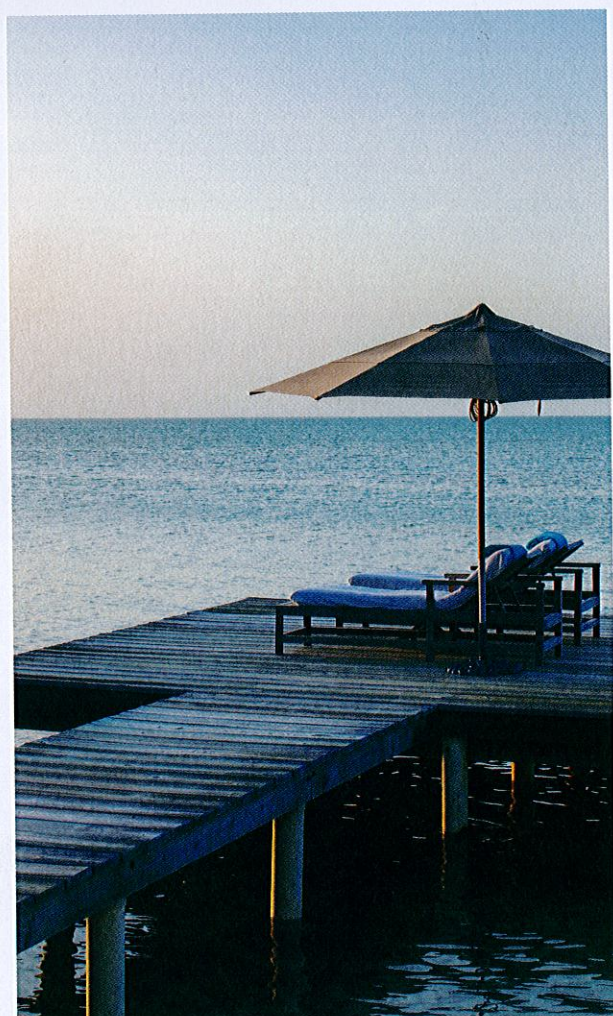
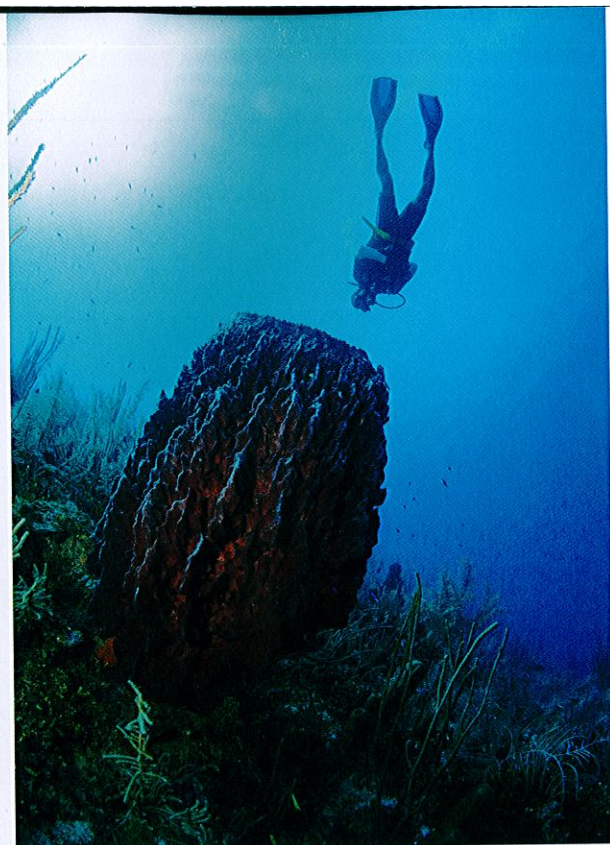
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y first trip to Belize, I went with Jerry Jeff Walker and The Gonzo Compadres.

It was a vicarious visit, via the CD of Walker's 1997 Belize-inspired album *Cowboy Boots & Bathin' Suits* that I'd picked up at a secondhand bookstore in Chattanooga. Hearing his story songs about laid-back life in San Pedro, its colorful and friendly locals, and the natural beauty of a Caribbean nation in which time is a vague concept, I couldn't wait to pack my bags and head south for Ambergris Caye.

I suspected everyone else who heard the album would be similarly inclined. Two decades later, though, Belize happily remains one of a dwindling number of destinations that still offers travelers a genuine sense of discovery.

Although it draws increasing numbers of adventure seekers, ecotourists, couples, and families looking for a relaxing tropical getaway, the former British Honduras hasn't surrendered its native identity to tourism. It retains characteristics of an undiscovered place, full of sights that maintain their authenticity, and where adventure might still be waiting in the towns and jungles outside the family-friendly resorts that line the eastern coast.



*Breathtaking blue waters await every traveler
that touches down in Belize.*

Belize is an easy tropical getaway, possessing much of the allure of the South Pacific for considerably less time and money. Daily flights—some less than 3 hours for southern travelers—depart for Belize City and San Pedro from most major airports, conveying passengers to some of the most intriguing places on Earth.

The Great Blue Hole would certainly qualify as one of those intriguing places. A spectacular cobalt circle almost 1,000 feet wide on a canvas of azure water, whose depths were charted by Jacques Cousteau during the early 1970s, it is believed to offer some of the world's best diving. Many scuba enthusiasts are hard-pressed to disagree, and day-trip dive tours can be booked through most hotels and resorts.

The Great Blue Hole is situated in the Belize Barrier Reef, the longest barrier reef in the Western hemisphere and the second longest in the world, exceeded in size only by the Great Barrier Reef near Australia. A half-mile off the coast of Ambergris Caye, Belize's reef system is home to sea turtles, manatees, and more than 500 species of tropical fish and marine life, making it one of the planet's most dazzling and diverse ecosystems. Its warm shallow water is ideal for swimming, snorkeling, and diving.

While its Caribbean beaches and island resorts may account for much of Belize's appeal, it is in the festive inland towns, with their open air markets and restaurants, that the character of its hospitable people shines, and it is in the jungles to the west that its mysterious history can be explored.

Until about 1,800 years ago, Belize was the heartland of the Maya, once the most prominent civilization in Central America. More than 24 significant Mayan ruins remain available for tourists to visit. Noteworthy among them is Lamanai. Translated into English as "submerged crocodile," Lamanai is considered to be Belize's most fascinating Mayan ruin, boast-

ing awe-inspiring architecture in a picturesque jungle setting overlooking New River Lagoon. Day trips to the site and its 125-foot-high pyramid are easily scheduled and best experienced by water taxi on the New River, which is a great way to see the variety of indigenous birds and other wildlife that roam the riverbanks.

It is, however, somewhere between the beach and the jungle that a first-time visitor truly discovers Belize, arriving at the realization that it is something more than just nice a place for a tropical couple's getaway or a family vacation or a line to check off on a wanderluster bucket list.

Above all else, Belize is a state of mind.

However you first discover it—whether it's ziplining across a jungle canopy, climbing ancient pyramids, snorkeling along the reef, diving the Great Blue Hole, horseback riding on the beach, repelling down waterfalls, spelunking through Belize's extensive cave system, shopping in San Pedro, or simply getting to the bottom of a bottle of locally-produced Beliken beer—Belize is a sensory experience that lingers like a souvenir long after you return home, even as a part of you may remain walking barefoot along the Placencia Peninsula under a Caribbean moon.

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