



## BAREBOAT CHARTERING

A catamaran charter through the reefs and atolls of this western Caribbean country reveals a land of plenty, both past and present and above and below the surface of the sea



BY ELAINE LEMBO

*Purrfect*, a Fontaine Pajot Bahia 46 catamaran, was indeed perfect for a weeklong charter with friends among the outer reefs and atolls of Belize. The open-air markets of San Pedro (inset, top) carried an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables for last-minute provisioning. The High Temple (center) was one of three Mayan ruins at Lamanai the charterers visited. Logger George (bottom) is snorkeling over stands of coral instead of felling stands of trees.



# Bountiful Belize

RICK MARTELL (INSET, BOTTOM), JENNIFER BALCH

**Y**OU GOTTA LOVE A country whose nefarious past—pirates, shipwrecks, and stolen gold doubloons—mimics your present, even if it's in a backward sort of way. For me, the country with the shady past is Belize, and the present includes a boyfriend who thinks he's a pirate. Thanks to its locale on the western border of the Caribbean Sea, its distance from the seat of European sovereignty, and its nearly 200-mile-long barrier reef, the former British Honduras enjoys a freewheeling history. In the 1600s, British pirates who'd wrecked on the reef camped out on the coast and the cays, plundered Spanish galleons, and started cutting wood. While Spain

was preoccupied with other happenings on the Spanish Main, the Brits dug in. It all culminated with the Battle of St. George's Cay in 1798: The Spaniards thought they'd investigate what the Brits were up to, but the woodcutters, called Baymen, drove them out once and for all. Today, every September 10, Belizeans celebrate the Battle of St. George's Cay as a national holiday.

That the buccaneers became loggers is a bit of trivia that made an impression on me a dozen years ago when I moved in with Rick, a sailor who loved wooden boats, made his living in the logging business, and regularly reminded his happy-hour friends that he was bailing out of Vermont and running off to Belize. It made little difference to him that the indiscriminate and destructive chopping of logwood and mahogany

long ago gave way to a national philosophy of conservation, with more than 40 percent of Belize's land preserved to protect the rain forest and wildlife. My pirate got his captain's license, together we got a schooner, and then we ran off, all right—not to Belize but to the British Virgin Islands, where we worked and played the charter game.

These memories and more rushed in as our Tropic Air puddle jumper droned toward Ambergris Cay, where we'd meet



our French-built catamaran at the Tortola Marine Management (TMM) base in San Pedro for a weeklong charter. I wondered how Belize, easily reached via air from Miami, Houston, and Dallas, would stack up as a chartering destination against the Virgins and the rest of the eastern Caribbean.

With us on this trip were those happy-hour friends from the north country—George, a logging pal of Rick's, and his wife, Kara, who runs an accounting firm. Life's been good to the buddy woodsmen, and they've abandoned plans to live like outlaws and chop down the rain forest. Their new, more eco-friendly scheme, hatched on the charter, is to start a venture called Belize Knees, which would let them wander the forest and search for unions of limb and trunk that yield perfect angles—natural knees—for boat-building. Whether this was a concrete plan or whimsy was difficult to decipher.

Our merry band also included Jennifer, a photographer, and Pat, the handsome captain of a Bill Tripp-designed raceboat out of Stamford, Connecticut. We were a captain-heavy crew (Rick also skippers a racing vessel), yet none of us had ever sailed a cat.

On the ground in San Pedro, the sandy lane leading to TMM felt pillowy-soft to our flight-swollen feet. When the TMM facility opened in 1997, it was the only charter operation in Belize. We met some of the staff, oohed and ahed over *Purrfect*, our Fontaine Pajot Bahia 46, claimed cabins, dumped gear, peeled off winter



wear, and walked shoeless to BC's Beach Bar. This open-air tiki hut was the type of casual, laid-back place in which any escapee from city life could take comfort.

Thanks to the advice of a charter-base staff of Belizeans and foreigners who've long lived there, we settled on a plan. It included room for a leisurely sail to the outer atolls and to dive and snorkel the Blue Hole, inside Lighthouse Reef, visit the Half Moon Cay Natural Monument Reservation, enjoy effortless broad-reaching while sunbathing on the tramp, buy dinner from the local fishermen, and swim with the sharks and the stingrays.

### The Barrier-Reef Border

You're either in or you're out, but we're not talking fashion, social trends, or politics. In Belize, the size of New Hampshire, the only time anyone cares whether you're in or you're out is when you're talking about the barrier reef, a jagged mass of coral about 15 miles off the coast that runs south from the north tip of Ambergris Cay to the Gulf of Honduras.

The entire reef, which runs from the

northeast tip of the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico to Sapodilla Cay, in southern Belize, is more than 350 nautical miles long; the Belizean portion, more than 180 miles, is the longest unbroken living reef in the world. To the west of the reef, on a limestone shelf, sit shallows that range from three to 70 feet deep, but it's 15 feet in enough areas to accommodate cruising sailboats. Prevailing winds clock primarily from northeast to southeast, yet boats are protected from the wave action of the open Caribbean. To the east, starting eight miles out, are three coral atolls—Turneffe, Lighthouse, and Glover; these rarities in the Western Hemisphere have base formations tied to the tectonic-plate movements that created the reef.

Alas, the hulks of old shipwrecks littering the reef tell a sobering tale. Thus, bareboaters with TMM (and with The Moorings, which opened a base in Placentia Village in 2001) aren't allowed to sail beyond the barrier reef. Most TMM charterers follow the route outlined in purple marker on charts from Freya Rauscher's *Cruising Guide to Belize and*



**Purrfect's crew dinghies ashore for a mid-day picnic at stunning Rendezvous Cay after a screaming trade-wind reach from the Tobacco Cay fleshpots.**

*Mexico's Caribbean Coast*, copies of which are on each boat. The bareboat-cruising area, which extends to the southernmost cays outside Placentia Village (where TMM plans to expand), is about 140 square nautical miles—more than enough chop-free, easterlies-swept area to keep diehards content. As we wanted to sail to the outer atolls for half of our trip, we hired a local skipper named Horace, who's also a Belize tourism board-licensed guide and a dive master. We planned to part company with him once we re-entered the reef.

The afternoon sail to our first overnight stop, teeny Sergeant's Cay, about 34 miles to the south, gave us a chance, with Horace's guidance, to get used to the cat and navigate the waters. With easterlies pumping us along at eight and a half knots under main and genny, we passed Cay Caulker while taking in the island's vegetation, still brittle, gray, and leafless with salt damage from Hurricane Keith in 2000.

The sevens and 10s on the depth sounder were a bit nerve-racking until I got used to them—we used to work aboard a monohull with a nine-foot draft—and I also had to get comfortable with the branches that regularly stuck up out of the water, some indicating lobster traps, others, makeshift channel markers.

And as we sailed among the mangrove cays and past historic St. George's Cay, we gained renewed appreciation for using all the tools—GPS, charts, compass, and, of course, local knowledge—to figure out where the heck we were when all the landmasses looked flat and low.

After dinner that first night at Sergeant's, while the waxing moon fought with the cloud cover for stage time, the surf crashed against the nearby barrier reef, which excited me, as it also reminded me of being a kid in the western Pennsylvania hills, holding a conch shell up to my ear, and straining to hear the ocean. Only now, this sound was for real, and while lying in my berth as *Purrfect* swayed at anchor, I felt this might be a prelude to something big—the atolls, perhaps.

Next morning, out came pareus and Hawaiian shirts as the crew, having fallen asleep right after dinner and arisen early, began easing into tropical-escape mode. We weighed anchor, and *Purrfect* motored through a cut in the reef. Now we were off soundings, in a blue sea whose floor in places lay more than 1,000 feet below. In the vicinity of the atolls, areas more than 10,000 feet deep have been

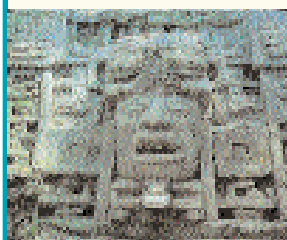
recorded. Yet none of these abysses lie far from the green shallows we'd just left.

Herein lies a major difference between the western and eastern Caribbean. The Leewards and Windwards, with few exceptions, form a visible chain of volcanic points of reference. Here in the west, most of the interesting topography lies beneath the surface—an uninterrupted vastness. From *Purrfect's* deck, we mainly saw low mangrove vegetation and the flat, palm-studded cay, though the most tantalizing clues were white slivers of surf breaking amid the blue, hinting at a limestone forest beneath and reminding me that nothing ever is as it appears.

Turneffe Islands, about seven miles east from Sergeant's, is the largest of the three atolls, running roughly north-south for 30 miles, then east-west for about nine. We entered through Grand Bogue Creek, one of half a dozen veins that course

## THE MAYAN CONNECTION

Belize lays claim to Central America's earliest Mayan settlements (dating from 2000 B.C.), including Altun Ha, Xunantunich, and Lamanai. The last of these is considered the most important site in the northern part of the country because the Mayans occupied it continuously



**Lamanai's Mask Temple**

from 1500 B.C. until the 16th century. The Lamanai excursion, which leaves the TMM dock in San Pedro at 7 a.m., gave us a full day of sightseeing, including a nature and bird-watching tour by motorboat up the New River, where we had the chance sighting of the rare giant jabiru "turk" stork in its nest.

Consult TMM for cost and details about visiting Belize's ruins as well as those at Tikal, in Guatemala. Per-person cost for Lamanai, excluding tips, was \$125 and included a delicious homemade lunch served on china.

If, aside from sailing, your interests tend more toward birds, hiking trails, and wildlife, check with TMM and *Destination Belize*, the publication of the Belize Tourism Industry Association (800-624-0686, e-mail [btb@travelbelize.org](mailto:btb@travelbelize.org) or write Ulrich Communications Corp., 1995 N.E. 150th St., Suite 107, N. Miami, FL 33181, fax 305-947-6410, e-mail [dbz@ulrichcom.net](mailto:dbz@ulrichcom.net)). **E.L.**



through the mangroves into Southern Lagoon. With Horace at the helm, we traversed the shallow lagoon, emerging at Harry Jones Point, slowing in the eerie quiet whenever Horace found life among the underwater shadows. “Look, spotted eagle ray!” he said, throwing the twin engines into neutral, then pointing, directing us in little more than a whisper. “There’s a lot of lobster in here,” he added, “but you won’t see sailboats in this area, only fishermen. Just turn around and tell me where we came in.” I looked astern and had no idea.

Moving forward, I jumped onto the cat’s massive trampoline. The loggers, George and Rick, were sunning themselves on the bow seats at the stem of each hull, and I swear I detected them glancing covetously at the curvaceous wood and mangrove vegetation along the shore.

A Caribbean Sea without the steep chop of Sir Francis Drake Channel was ahead. Brilliant sun had burned off the

early-morning cloud cover. It was time to set sail for Long Cay, at the southwest corner of Lighthouse Reef, and pick up a mooring. The reefs and walls off the western side of Long Cay and off Hat Cay, farther south, offer some of the best diving visibility in all of Belize, starting from 25 to 30 feet beneath the water surface. To prepare his certified divers for the splendors of the Blue Hole, Horace took Rick and Pat on a dive at a wall. Kara and I snorkeled, and Jennifer snapped pictures.

Simply by skimming over the crest of an underwater wall, we’d seen jacks, parrot fish, barracuda, purple wrasses, blue tangs, cowfish, sergeant majors, and yellowtail snappers.

While I snorkeled, I traced the divers’ bubbles until I could see Horace, Rick, and Pat hovering over some stingrays. They’d also seen puffer fish, black coral, and purple sea fans, which made me wonder how the Blue Hole, the world-famous sinkhole—1,000 feet across and

early-morning cloud cover. It was time to set sail for Long Cay, at the southwest corner of Lighthouse Reef, and pick up a mooring. The reefs and walls off the western side of Long Cay and off Hat Cay, farther south, offer some of the best diving visibility in all of Belize, starting from 25 to 30 feet beneath the water surface. To prepare his certified divers for the splendors of the Blue Hole, Horace took Rick and Pat on a dive at a wall. Kara and I snorkeled, and Jennifer snapped pictures.

**We’d go ashore to picnic and explore on remote cays where, four centuries earlier, British pirates whose ships had wrecked on the reef camped out and plundered Spanish galleons.**

nearly 500 feet deep—could top this.

Intent on having fresh fish for dinner, we motored the short distance through Long Cay Pass and anchored off Half Moon Cay with a view of the eastern side of Lighthouse Reef, the white breakers, and the wreck of the cargo ship *Elksund*. We were 70 miles from Belize City, the farthest east in the Caribbean we’d ventured so far, and it was all fine by me.

Ever the hunter-gatherer, Horace donned fins and mask and grabbed a gaff hook, and I deployed the kayak. While I kayaked, he swam, every once in a while pointing out a blacktip shark or puffer fish. When he struck pay dirt, he’d signal, I’d paddle over, and he’d plop a spiny lobster or shiny conch in the bow. I paddled his booty back to *Purrfect*, and he cleaned the seven lobsters and seven conch off the starboard transom. (See “Captain Cook’s Secret Ingredient,” page 33.)

### A Natural Monument

*Purrfect* was the only boat at Half Moon, so we stayed overnight at its sole dock and readied fenders and lines. We watched as the tiny island—its two lighthouses at the east end, a miniature rain forest at the west—came into full view, glowing in the setting sun. “Oh—my—God,” an awestruck Kara exclaimed.

Once docked, Horace shooed us off the boat: “Hurry, hurry, you need to see the boobies before sundown!” We headed for the trail lined with conch shells. Half Moon Cay Natural Monument—Belize’s first National Park, protected in 1982—is also a World Heritage Site. Its 45 acres include the cay, four miles of Lighthouse Reef, part of the inner-reef lagoon, and deep water beyond the reef. Endangered loggerhead and hawksbill turtles lay eggs on the cay beaches. Of the 98 resident bird species, the red-footed booby is among the most valued. This is because the colony’s more than 4,000 adult birds are characterized by white plumage instead of the more common dull brown.

As we walked to the observation tower, a swollen moon began its climb into the sky, the breeze picked up, palm fronds slapped against tree trunks, and the forest was consumed by flapping wings, whoops, shrieks, screeches, and the crackling of hermit crabs on the move.

For 360 degrees, thousands of nesting



**For George and Kara, it doesn’t get any better than winding down on the tramp of a catamaran, on flat seas with a steady breeze, bound for yet another tropical isle.**

boobies and their fuzzy young plus their interloping neighbors, the magnificent frigate birds, greeted us dispassionately. I could have touched any bird with my hand. Red pouches beneath the bills of the frigate birds swelled in a courtship display, followed by the confused fluttering and flapping of wings (ah, love). The sun was nearly down; the moon and romance were on the rise.

### Back Inside

Cruising the atolls, I liked the feeling of having a whole ocean to ourselves, and so I was surprised when the crew started making noises about finding a place to get a good, cheap drink. So the next day, with the winds from the south on the nose, we motorsailed southwest, toward Tobacco Cay, where the Reef’s End Lodge had just the year before built a new bar and restaurant on stilts near the cay’s tip. We let the mainsail flake into its lazy jacks, slowed the engines, pattered in along the bottom of hook-shaped Columbus Reef, and anchored. Tobacco Cay, with its plentiful groves of 80-foot palm trees, assortment of lodges, and guests strolling the shore, was the closest thing to civilization we’d seen in days.

After the fishermen and lighthouse keepers we’d met at the atolls, finding folks just like us was a bit of a letdown. A honeymooning couple from Texas had taken over the bar and were measuring out the jigger-sized glasses; vacationing members of a teachers association were

chatting to one another farther down the deck. Jennifer and I strolled barefoot in the soft sand past the lodges. We found another bar, which served cheaper, yet bigger and better, drinks and—eureka!—had candy bars behind the counter. “For emergencies,” said the bartender.

There are things I still miss about the B.V.I., like sailing for hours with relentlessly consistent, perfectly positioned trades in sparkling waters—navigation mostly line of sight, air so clean the oxygen makes you giddy. I wanted this feeling before I left Belize. So, the next morning, we took advantage of 25 knots of southeast trades and headed north from Tobacco Cay, inside the reef, on a starboard reach along TMM’s purple route. Instead of poking along and stopping, I wanted to zip past anchorages and keep on going. In no time, we were parallel with Dangriga, on the mainland, and could see the mountains off to the west.

An occasional local fishing sailboat, powerboat, or bareboat popped onto the horizon, yet each was gone as quickly as it appeared. Secure in the main channel and waters 50 to 60 feet deep, we skittered along, with Rick and Pat at the helm pretending to race with each boat they spotted and George, Kara, and me lounging on the foredeck and trampoline. As the mangrove vegetation of Bluefield Range, 20 miles north of Tobacco Cay, came into view, talk turned to a late lunch stop

### Charter Resources

To contact TMM for details about chartering throughout the Caribbean, turn to page 53. For *Cruising World* Adventure Charters, see page 62 and the inside back cover.

at Rendezvous Cay, then more sailing.

Before we’d relieved Horace of his duties at Tobacco Cay, he’d urged us to make an overnight stop just north of Water Cay to visit his relatives at Spanish Lookout Cay, known in these parts as Victor Forman’s Cay, 10 miles north of Bluefield. Victor Forman wasn’t just the namesake of the island, Horace explained. Victor Forman had made the island. Huh?

“You take a dredge and you dump some money into it,” said Victor’s son, also named Victor. In the early 1980s, they transported equipment and built up the spit, which had been leveled by hurricanes, with sand, gravel, and cement. It cost \$15,000 to \$20,000 Belizean (about half that in U.S. currency) to finish the project. The Formans built cottages for themselves and vacationers. Today, they fish for a cooperative and also sell their catch to visiting sailors. The government would soon issue to the family the title to this lovely, palm-treed patch.

Later, Victor, some friends, and a few family members visited with us aboard *Purrfect*, and the evening was as full and relaxing as the day had been. I sat on the foredeck, staring at the white, full moon and the silver shimmer it cast on the water. Ahead of us lay half a day of sailing, a swim with the sharks and rays at Shark-Ray Alley in the Hol Chan Marine Reserve, and an inland tour of the Mayan ruins. And, of course, some serious side-long glances at the graceful mahoganies of the rain forest. As I took in the mellow mood aboard, I knew this had been a trip whose good vibes would linger long after it ended.

Elaine Lembo is *CW*’s managing editor.