

Belize: More than beautiful beaches

Sheryl Nance-Nash | 2/20/2020, 12:38 p.m.

When you think of Belize, images of beautiful beaches likely come to mind. And rightly so. For sure, Placencia, Hopkins Bay, Ambergris Caye fulfill the dreams of beach lovers. But there's more to this nation on the northeastern coast of Central America.

Take for example San Ignacio, a bit more than 100 miles west of Belize City and in the Cayo District. It's ideally located for plenty of fun that has nothing to do with the beach. Make your home base the San Ignacio Resort Hotel. Not only is this stylish, boutique hotel ideally located to restaurants and shopping, it's a gem with jungle views, excellent cuisine, a pool, and friendly staff.

One of your first stops should be the Mayan ruins. You might feel like you're in the middle of a movie set, your own version of "Indiana Jones," when you enter Xunantunich. Climb to the top of El Castillo a 130-foot tall temple. The reward is huge--unbelievable views of Belize and Guatemala. Do go with a guide so you get all the history. Xunantunich was the epicenter for everything: from ceremonies and rituals to everyday living in ancient Maya civilization. Try to make sense of all the symbols and drawings in the stones. There is no wrong answer. It's otherworldly, you have to wonder how all those humongous boulders were moved around without modern technology. Don't stop with the intrigue. Continue on to Cahal Pech. Here you'll get a glimpse of the high life. Cahal Pech was the royal palace for an elite Mayan ruling family. Cahal Pech which was established in 1000 BC was thriving for a time but there is a mystery as to why it was abandoned by 800 AD. If you get lucky you might stumble upon Jaime Awe, a renowned archaeologist from Belize, who along with his students continue to excavate on the site. It's pretty cool to see first-hand, especially if there's a discovery while you're standing there. Is that human bones a researcher picks up? It's quite likely.

If you want to add more adventure to your trip to Xunantunich, The San Ignacio Resort Hotel offers a guided horseback riding tour. You'll start at the Hannah Stables and traipse through Cayo via the Western Highway and hit the jungle trail with all its majesty of greenery. When you get to San Jose Succotz, you'll cross the hand-cranked ferry and make your way to the ruins. The tour ends with a stop at the popular Benny's restaurant for some of the best local fare.

Keep the mystery going with a canoe ride through Barton Creek Cave. Don't want to spoil it for you, but your imagination will be on high alert as you wind your way through this giant crack in a mountain. You'll be fascinated and likely creeped out at the same time. There are all sorts of natural formations that tell a story about burial grounds, human sacrifices, ancient Mayan life. This is one boat ride you won't forget.

If you're interested in canoeing without the cave, one place to do that is the Macal River with the magic of the Maya Mountains. Take your time winding your way through San Ignacio's tropical river. The exotic birds and iguanas you'll see on the riverbanks are a bonus.

Thrill seekers will find their sweet spot at Calico Jack's Ziplining. Get your heart pumping gliding through jungle rainforest. There are nine runs, 15 platforms, a jungle lift, and 2,700 feet of ziplining.

If you dare, there's also the canopy at Actun Loch Tunich. Hike the Maya Mountains to what locals call, "the monster of all caves." The aerial views of the rainforests are worth the trip and your boldness will be rewarded when you leap off the ledge of a cliff for a 300-foot high repelling ride.

Another benefit of staying at the San Ignacio Resort Hotel is the attractions right on the property. The Green Iguana Conservation Project is an interactive exhibit that might change your view of iguanas. Up close and personal you realize they are as nervous about you as you may be about them. You'll be encouraged to hold one. Go ahead, give it a try. It's an IG moment for sure. You'll also learn about the lifecycle and importance of the iguana to the ecosystem.

The hotel's 17-acre private estate is home to all sorts of medicinal plants and herbs which you can hear about on the Medicinal Trails tour. There's a remedy for what ails you, as well as herbs that just may keep the doctor away in the first place.

Birding fans will enjoy the 6 a.m. birdwatching tour. Wake up with some coffee, then off you go with a guide to explore the abundance of birds in the resort's backyard. There are dozens of species, including the national bird, the Keel-Billed Toucan, Woodpeckers, and Blue Tanager among others.

There's plenty of other nature in Belize. See some of the best of it at the Belize Botanical Gardens and the Green Hill Butterfly Farm. Green Hill is home to the largest butterfly display in the country. It's 3,300 square feet of fluttering color.

Your trip won't be complete if you don't spend time at the San Antonio Maya Community. Spend several hours hearing stories from folks in this second-generation Maya village. You'll get a chance to make corn tortillas, enjoy a lunch and to try your hand at making ceramic pottery. Hint, it's not as easy as you might think. It is truly an art and big fun too. The stories you'll hear will stick with you.

And yes, of course, while the beach may not be the centerpiece of this trip, if you find it too hard to resist, go ahead, take a dip. No one will hold it against you.

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