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DISPLAY UNTIL TEEKAY XX, 2022

BEAUTIFUL, BOUNTIFUL

THIS CENTRAL AMERICAN OASIS

BECKONS WITH RAINFOREST CACAO

FARMS AND THE LARGEST BARRIER REEF

IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE.

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STORY BY JEANNE O'BRIEN COFFEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID ENGELHARDT



The vibrant water around tiny Silk Caye teems with parrotfish, blue tang, and many varieties of healthy coral.



IT'S BEEN A LITTLE MORE THAN A DECADE

since the road to Placencia Village in southern Belize was paved. Before that, getting there required a 21-mile, pothole-pitted journey over what locals refer to as the “red mud road.”

That’s how I traveled the peninsula on my first trip 15 years ago—in a four-wheel-drive Jeep weaving through deep muck. This time, I skipped the road entirely, opting for a puddle-jumper that operates more like a bus than a jet, occasionally making stops at tiny airstrips to pick up or discharge passengers during the spectacular 45-minute flight from Belize City.

Beyond the paved road, not a lot has changed. While a few McMansions have sprouted, Placencia retains a casual sleepy vibe, mixing a fishing community with low-key tourist offerings and spectacular unpopulated beaches.

Boats unload fresh grouper, snapper, and conch daily. But, before I eat fish, I’m boarding a boat to the Belize Barrier Reef to swim with them. Belize native Moses Terry—a guide and certified dive instructor with local outfitter Captain Jak’s—points out islands, birds, and fish along the way as we cruise choppy water to the vast 185-mile-long reef.

After about an hour, three palm trees rise in the middle of the azure water like a mirage, marking a spit



The writer’s accommodations at Sirenian Bay Resort. Like all the bungalows, this one overlooks the beach.

of sand called Silk Caye that I could cross in a dozen or so strides. A sign tacked on one of the trees, offering the coronavirus safety suggestion of maintaining six feet of distance, is almost laughable.

The tiny island seems like an inviting place to stretch out with a book and a drink, but what lurks below the surface is the real draw. Just a few strokes offshore, bright blue tang fish and neon green and pink parrotfish



zip between branches of staghorn and elkhorn coral. During a gentle circuit around the caye, Terry points out more species than I can count, including waving tube sponges, queen triggerfish, and the beautiful (and invasive) lionfish. I just missed an octopus. By the time Terry pointed it out, the wily creature had disappeared into the coral. In shallow water nearby, dozens of harmless nurse sharks collect under and around our boat, looking for scraps of conch that fishermen leave behind when cleaning their catch. A massive loggerhead turtle glides close to my face, with a dozen remora fish sheltering underneath.

The diversity of life in the reef is due in no small part to efforts by the Belizean government. It was the first country in the world to declare a moratorium on offshore oil exploration and enact restrictions to protect coastal mangrove forests and support coral nurseries. The work is paying off—the reef was removed from the UNESCO endangered list in 2019.



Sirenian's Turtle Villa offers private hammocks for relaxing by the sea.



Above: Ixcacao Maya Belizean Chocolate grows cacao in the rainforest. Left: The organic gardens at Sirenian Bay Resort provide a bountiful harvest year-round. Below: The beach beckons.



DAY TWO

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After a day on the water, it's time to explore town. The heart of Placencia Village is "The Sidewalk," a cement and crushed conch shell walkway along the beach. Built before the main road was paved, it was at one time named the world's "Narrowest Main Street" by the Guinness Book of World Records. Passing colorful private residences, restaurants, and shops selling tourist bric-a-brac, I chat with artisans making jewelry and carving bowls from local wood. I purchase a beautiful two-toned ziricote wood bowl after gently bargaining (cash comes in handy if you are looking for a deal).



Handcrafted specialties, clockwise from top left: Traditional tools grind chocolate; Sirenian Bay's skilled woodworkers carve furniture onsite; Pork Pibil Salbutes is a traditional Belizean dish; fresh fruit and local rum.



With my souvenir tucked into my tote bag, I hit Barefoot Beach Bar for a toes-in-the-sand sundowner. For just \$2, I sip Belizean Bittas—the potent mix of overproof rum and medicinal rainforest herbs is said to ward off the flu. Everyone needs an immune system boost these days, right?

For dinner, I want to eat one particular species I swam with yesterday—lionfish. These frilly brown-and-white-striped creatures dotted with poisonous spines are decimating reef fish in the Atlantic and Caribbean, where hungry humans are among their only predators. Rumfish y Vino, just off the sidewalk, is a Central American style gastropub that serves lionfish prepared a few different ways. Despite a nasty reputation, lionfish is pretty mild to eat. In ceviche, it has a toothsome texture. Grilled, it is firm and buttery, a bit like halibut.

DAY THREE

The next morning, I am up bright and early for a two-hour drive deep into the jungle toward the Guatemalan border—and to Ixcacao Maya Belizean Chocolate. Owners Juan Cho and his wife, Abelina, draw upon their Mayan heritage and five generations of experience farming the surrounding rainforest to teach visitors about the origins of chocolate, while also producing some of the most delicious treats I've ever had in my life. Everything they use, from cacao to sugar cane, is grown organically on the Cho's plot of land. I purchase fistfuls of chocolate bars, flavored with their own coffee, mace spice, ginger and cardamom, before heading back to my hotel, Sirenian Bay Resort & Villas, to sink deeper into a chocolate haze.

Not only did ancient civilizations consume chocolate, they also slathered it on as a beauty treatment, a practice that has been adopted at Sirenian Bay. For the Rejuvenate Scrub

& Wrap, therapists grind organic Belizean cacao bean in-house to a consistency perfect for nourishing and rejuvenating weary skin. Therapist Vivet Palacio started by using crushed cacao beans shells for an exfoliating scrub before spreading warm chocolate over my whole body, then wrapping me in banana leaves to lock in moisturizing and antioxidant properties. I left the spa with a healthy glow, trailing a slight chocolate aroma for the rest of the evening.

While they don't currently grow cacao, Sirenian Bay's organic garden provides a lot of the raw ingredients for executive chef Enrique Awe's mix of international favorites and Belizean specialties. For my last evening, I reserved a spot at Inky's, the

hotel's casual open-air bistro on the lagoon side of the resort. Highlights included an outrageously delicious chowder known as Fish Sere, made with coconut broth, root vegetables, and Pork Pibil Salbutes, a puffy corn tortilla reminiscent of a mix between frybread and a taco topped with pulled pork.

Dinner was accompanied by a performance by a Garifuna group from the nearby town of Saint Bight. Ethnic descendants of enslaved West Africans, Garifuna are known for their colorful costumes and rhythmic drum-based music and dance. The energetic beats offer a perfect soundtrack to the grand finale of my trip: The sun setting over the distant Maya Mountains.

Barefoot Basics

> Fast Facts

English is the official language of Belize. U.S. currency is accepted nearly everywhere at the fixed exchange rate of two BZ dollars to one US dollar.

> Entry Requirements

At press time, a negative COVID test was required for entry. Without one, you will be tested at the airport for \$50 USD. International tourists must book at a "Gold Standard" hotel, which has met enhanced government protocols for cleanliness and safety, and provide proof of that booking upon arrival. For up-to-date information, visit www.travelbelize.org/health-safety

> Getting Around

Skip the rental car. With few directional signs and many dirt roads, you're better off relying on tour outfitters, hotels, and local taxis. Uber and other rideshare apps have not yet arrived in Belize.

> Where to Stay

Sirenian Bay Resort & Villas in Placencia is one of the only all-inclusive luxury properties in Belize, providing breakfast, lunch, and dinner at one of their open-air restaurants or in your bungalow. By the end of the year, the property expects to open a medi-spa complex to complement onsite activities including water sports, mini golf, pickleball, tennis, and a dive pool.