

Life

Take me to San Pedro

Winnipeggers enjoy their own little piece of tropical paradise

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AMBERGRIS CAYE, BELIZE -- We've all been there. We're on vacation and we drink too many pina coladas, eat too much fried food, push and shove alongside other tourists and return home carrying an extra five pounds, feeling frazzled and in need of another holiday.

Not anymore. Welcome to the newest trend in luxury travel: holistic

vacationing.

It's 8 a.m. and I wake up at Brahma Blue Holistic Oasis, a resort on a 2,300-acre remote island five minutes west of San Pedro, Belize, and my first decision is whether to start the day with yoga or head out on one of the many land and sea excursions Belize has to offer.

The remote location itself invites calm and tranquility, so I decide on yoga. Each morning there is on-site Ayurveda yoga at the resort, as well as a full therapeutic spa with acupressure, massage therapy and other services to get the day started.

CANADIAN CONTINGENT

"We can customize your entire holiday with health options to meet your body type," says Andy Bibik, a Winnipegger who is one of the resort developers and part of a growing contingent of Canadians setting up shop in Belize. "There's complimentary yoga as well as private classes can be arranged on the sandy beach in front of the resort, on the pier, or even on your own balcony."

One thing that sets Brahma Blue apart is its own in-house doctor from India who specializes in Eastern healing and medicine, says Bibik. "Guests can truly relax and indulge in their vacation while exploring new realms of healthy living," he adds.

Yoga not your thing? An on-site dive shop offers all aquatic water excursions like scuba diving, fishing and snorkeling, and you can also arrange to get an open water certification or go the distance to become PADI certified.

The next day my traveling companion -- my 15-year-old son -- and I get ready for a trip to the Belize Barrier Reef, a magnificent 300-kilometre coral reef that straddles the coast of Belize. We're fitted with flippers and snorkel masks and meet up with a tour guide who pushes aside a five-gallon pail of fish guts to make room for us on his boat. Later we will learn the purpose for the dead fish, but for now we hop on board and take our seats as far away as possible from the stench. Twenty minutes later we are surrounded by the stunning Caribbean waters that paint the horizon aqua as far as the eye can see.

With more than 500 species of fish and 70 different coral species, snorkeling in the crystal clear waters of Hol Chan Marine Reserve means swimming alongside hundreds of multi-coloured, multi-shaped fish, turtles and coral. There were even a few swimming companions I preferred to keep a health distance from, such as a school of barracudas that nervously eyed us as they swam past and a nurse shark that only stayed around long enough for a quick snapshot.

After watching our tour guide use a large seashell to coax an eel out of its hiding spot within the coral, I realize I've set the bar pretty high for my son's first snorkeling adventure. In comparison to the grayish coral off the coast of Jamaica and even the same reef a few hundred kilometers north off the coast of the Mayan Riviera, Hol Chan was undoubtedly the best I'd ever experienced.

After 40 minutes at the reserve, we're back in the boat for a short ride to Shark Ray Alley, one of the world's most popular dive locations. We are told to get ready for our close-up with some stingrays and sharks.

"Are you sure this is safe?" I ask while standing on the edge of the boat, contemplating whether to jump into the shark-infested waters with my son right behind.

"Don't worry, they're not interested in you," the tour guide says with confidence as he pulls a handful of dead fish from the pail and stuffs it into a white cylinder. He tosses the bait into the water and a murky flurry of activity can be seen beneath the surface. "Jump in," he says.

Seconds later, we're in the shallow ocean water, hovering on the surface as we watch half a dozen stingrays beneath us feasting on an easy meal. After the last handful of raw fish is offered and three more stingrays join in looking for a bite, our tour operator returns to the boat to get more fish and returns with a full cylinder. I forget my unease and am enthralled by the rays gliding around us, at times no more than an arms' length away. Even though the waters are murkier than at Hol Chan, we are close enough to see the underwater creatures in all their glory. I watch my son and feel certain he is experiencing a moment that will be forever etched in his memory.

Back on dry land I have coffee with the mayor of San Pedro, Elsa Paz, and she tells me exploring the Belize Barrier Reef is a must for any tourist looking to experience one of the most diverse coral systems in the world.

"The barrier reef off the coast of San Pedro is the No. 1 tourist destination in Belize," says Paz, who has the monumental task of helping to ensure the tourism footprint is minimized and preserving the lush Caribbean environment. "We believe in tourism and development, but at the same time our main concern is protecting the reef."

Local and federal governments have recently put in many regulations for developers and tour guides to ensure the reef, the ruins and the rainforests of Belize are preserved, even as the country turns into a tourist hotbed, she adds.

To be sure, tourism is fast becoming a mainstay in Belize, especially the Ambergris Caye, and the government is committing substantial resources to attracting tourists.

"San Pedro is the paradise of Belize and 50% of all tourists to Belize come to the island," said Manuel Heredia, Belize's minister of tourism and aviation, noting tourism employs 22% of the country's workforce and brings in about \$600 million per year. "To show how important tourism is for us, we're committing US \$13.4 million this year to the Belize Tourism Board."

While tourism is serious business in San Pedro, it hasn't diminished the laid-back atmosphere of island life where children play baseball in a makeshift diamond-shaped park, people walk the cobblestone streets in bare feet (even the minister of tourism arrived for our interview without shoes) and the main method of land transportation is by golf cart.

Mike Singh, the CEO of the ministry of tourism for Belize, says it's a hard balance between bringing in the tourists -- about 350,000 per year -- while preserving the environment

"Belize has always been green, even before it was in style," said Singh. "And we need to continue to focus on being an eco-friendly destination. We can't start blasting whales in the reef just to let the big yachts in."

SWATH OF PARADISE

After an action-packed day of snorkeling and walking on the bustling beaches at San Pedro, returning to the peaceful atmosphere of Brahma Blue is welcomed. We enjoy a relaxing meal at the water-top Blue Lotus restaurant and there is no struggle to see why so many Canadians -- especially Winnipeggers -- are attracted to this wonderful swath of paradise. I count about six new homes and buildings being built near the holistic oasis and learn Winnipeggers are developing them all.

Apart from being a tropical oasis and home to some of the Caribbean's most spectacular sunsets, Belize is attractive to Canadians for other reasons too.

As an English-speaking country there are no language barriers and it has a similar banking industry to Canada, making it a great place to invest in residential or commercial properties, says Bibik.

BOTTOMLINE

HOW TO GET THERE

The best way to get to Belize is to fly Northwest, from Winnipeg to Minneapolis to Houston, and then transfer to a Continental flight from Houston into Belize City. You can leave Winnipeg at 6:10 a.m. on most mornings, and arrive in Belize City at 3:45 p.m.

Once you're in Belize City, after going through customs, you need to catch a Maya Island Air flight to the island of San Pedro. The ticket will set you back for about \$250 Belize (\$125 US) and you'll fly to the island in either a BN2A Islander or a Cessna Caravan 675.

WHERE TO STAY

Brahma Blue Holistic Oasis is the newest luxury resort in the Ambergris Caye and is located on a private 2,300-acre island a five-minute boat ride west of San Pedro.

The resort offers complimentary water taxi service to San Pedro and has two- and three-bedroom vacation condos.

Watch for a golf course to be built in 2009 and enjoy dining at the Blue Lotus, a water-top restaurant and martini bar that serves authentic Asian fusion cuisine and a host of Caribbean beverages, including Belikin, the Belizean beer brand. Visit www.brahmablue.com.

WHO TO LOOK FOR

Leonardo DiCaprio bought a small Belizean island, the Blackadore Caye just west of Ambergris Caye, and is rumoured to be partnering with the Four Seasons Hotel group to build a luxury eco-hotel on his 104-acre island.

Director Francis Ford Coppola also owns a resort on the mainland in Belize and an exclusive resort in the Ambergris Caye about 10 minutes south of San Pedro includes Robert De Niro as its latest guests.

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