



Al Campbell Photo

To the south of Mexico lies a tiny country full of nature and wildlife. The interior is comprised of mountains covered with rainforests reaching to the sky. The coast, protected by the largest barrier reef in the western hemisphere, is home to numerous species of tropical and game fish.

This is Belize!

Approximately the size of the state of New Hampshire, Belize has a wide variety of landscapes ranging from the coastal mangroves to the jungle and rainforests in the mountains.

In the interior, wildlife is abundant throughout the region. Colorful birds such as Macaws and Parrots share the forests with a variety of monkeys, panthers, tarantulas, and a host of other species.

Just a few miles from San Ignacio in western Belize is the Chaa Creek nature reserve. A 330 acre reserve along the Macal River that offers an extensive trail system for hiking, bird watching, horseback riding, mountain biking and canoeing.

No matter which mode of transportation is chosen, a quiet trip through the jungle will fill the ears with the songs of numerous birds, and the breeze through trees. There is a good chance of seeing some of the most beautiful birds in the world, and of course there is always the chance of sighting a panther or jaguar.

Canoeing the rivers of Belize will take you through caves, past cascading waterfalls, and scenery more



Xunantunich "Stone Woman"

beautiful and pristine than anything the mind can imagine. The rich nature found in this Central American jewel of a country will keep even the casual observer in a state of amazement. Reptiles are plentiful and can be seen frolicking on the banks of the rivers.

At the Chaa Creek Natural History Center are explanations



San Pedro Town

of how the barrier reef and Maya Mountains were formed, how the differing terrains support different vegetation and wildlife.

In the reserve is a butterfly farm that is home to the Belizean Blue, a gorgeous butterfly. The entire life cycle of the Belizean Blue can be observed at the farm.

Xunantunich, perched atop a mountain, rises majestically above the rivers and streams that meander through the valleys below.

Xunantunich, "Stone Woman", is part of a chain of Myan Ruins that stretches through Central America. Located along the Mopan River about eight miles west of San Ignacio Town. Xunantunich, a major ceremonial center during the Classic Period, is composed of six major plazas surrounded by about twenty-five temples and palaces. "El Castillo", the pyramid at the south end of the site, rises 130 feet above the plaza.

Crossing the mountains on the Hummingbird Highway, the "Sleeping Giant" awaits visitors. The skyline of this

mountain range creates a remarkable resemblance to a giant laying down.

Forty percent of the country has been protected as parks and preserves, including the only Jaguar Preserve in the world. Belize is truly "Mother Natures Best Kept Secret".

White sand beaches and palm trees line the coast.

Ranging anywhere from a stone's throw in the north, to over twenty miles off the mainland in the south, the barrier reef protects the coast from the damaging waves of storms from the Caribbean Sea.

Whether birding, hiking, camping, or fishing is your thing, Belize has a lot to offer. If city life is your cup of tea, Belize City, the only truly urban area sports a population of some 250,000. A very colorful city rich in culture, Belize City is the heartbeat of Belize. Nearly all of Belize's attractions, architecture, rain forest, reefs, jungle, and wildlife can be experienced on day trips from Belize City.

On the southern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula is Ambergris Caye, separated from Mexico by a channel cut by the Myans. San Pedro, the largest village on Ambergris Caye has sand streets, where bare feet are more common than shoes. The streets are lined with shops and boutiques, the beaches are white sand and coconut palms, the water is crystal clear and the barrier reef is in plain view. A popular

spot for vacationers of all walks, Ambergris Caye is truly one of the world's paradises. Again, if its hiking, fishing, swimming, snorkeling or diving. This is one of Belize's crown jewels.

Another of Belize's peninsulas, toward the southern end of the country, is

Placencia. One of the country's fastest growing (and that's not very fast) resort areas. Here too, you will find long white sand beaches and coconut palms, fabulous fishing, diving and swimming. The barrier reef is about 20 miles offshore at Placencia, but the water remains crystal clear and there are some of the most beautiful little islands just a stone's throw away.

This country, Belize, has a world of pleasure just waiting

to be experienced by anyone who is ready to put the brakes on and slow down to relax and enjoy.

For information about tour packages and accommodations, contact the Belize Tourism Board at www.travelbelize.org or write to Level 2, Central Bank Building Gabourel Lane, PO Box 325, Belize City, Belize. US phone number: (800) 624-0686.

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Sunrise at El Pescador, Ambergris Caye

FISHING THE FLATS

For a novice fly fisherman like myself, or seasoned veterans like the ones I fished Belize with, there can't be a much more beautiful experience on salt water.

Having spent most of my life fishing with bait casters, spinning gear, and trolling, fly fishing was extremely challenging.

Fishing with Phil Monahan, editor of *American Angler*, and a whiz with a fly rod from North Carolina, Al Campbell, another natural with a fly rod and a freelance writer and photographer from Rapid City, SD, Jason Wood, an editor with *Saltwater Sportsman* from Boston, Kathryn Fox, publisher of *American Angler*, *Saltwater Fly Fishing*, and *Fly Tyer* from Vermont, and Harry Canterbury, publisher of *Outdoor Adventure Sports*, Peoria, IL, the pressure was on.

With the rising sun, we left El Pescador Lodge on Ambergris Caye, two anglers per boat, 23 foot skiffs, each with a guide, in search of bonefish. I was paired up with Phil the first day with Jorge as a guide. It was a beautiful day on the water, blue sky, mild breeze, and crystal clear water. It wasn't long before we were on a school of mudding bonefish. I had the deck first and with the breeze blowing, I was having difficulty placing my fly where it needed to be. After a few frustrating casts, I relinquished the deck to Phil. Immediately, I knew I was out of my league with this guy. Phil fished the school for quite a while, artfully placing his fly exactly where Jorge suggested. The bonefish weren't cooperating. Phil then turned the deck back over to me with some instruction on casting and proceeded to eat his lunch. Jorge, a skilled guide, worked hard to position the boat per my ability. On about my fifth cast, I had a bonefish and a new nickname that started with a B, and ended with a d. I have always subscribed to the theory that in fishing and golf, it is better to be lucky than good.

The thrill of bonefishing becomes evident immediately

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when you set the hook. These 2-5 lb fish waste no time getting into the backing on your reel. Of course, now I had to learn to fight a fish on a fly rod, and luckily I landed my first fish.



Ranger Station at Sapodilla Caye Marine Reserve near the reef off Placencia

Having broken the ice, it was my turn to eat and Phil proceeded to catch one bigger than mine. I was still a B.

We were on schools of bonefish nearly all day. My casting was

improving slowly, and we each caught our share of bonefish.

When we returned to El Pescador, we found some shade and a breeze and relaxed with the others in our group until dinner. Dinner at El Pescador is a fabulous offering every night. All of the guests at the lodge eat at the same time and share stories of their day. I have never been in a more relaxed atmosphere among total strangers in my life. Everyone at El Pescador is treated like family.

The next morning, I was paired with Harry, who wanted to shoot some video for his TV show. This gave me a lot of deck time and enabled our guide, Erlindo,

to help me with my technique. With nearly all of the deck time, I had to make Harry fish so I could rest a little. I was having a very productive day with the bones. Al had given me some flies he had tied and named "Shrimp", which



Phil Monahan and Kathryn Fox on Robert's Grove Skiff with guide Ewart.

turned out to be a little more productive on the bonefish than the “crazy charlies” I had been using. (Al’s patterns are available at www.flyangleronline.com with step by step instruction for tying.)

Harry caught a couple fish and I was able to figure out how to work his video camera to get him some proof. He also commented that these fish fought like a “bluegill on steroids,” I don’t know if they make steroids that good, these bones were pretty strong.

After three wonderful nights at El Pescador, we were spirited off to see the Belize zoo, Myan ruins at Xunantunich and the jungles of Belize. There is so much to see! We spent a night at Chaa Creek, a nature reserve in western Belize before traveling by van over the mountains to Dangriga where we caught a flight to Placencia to commence fishing again. We checked into The Inn at Robert’s Grove. This is a nice resort with more of a family appeal, yet still mainly a fishing resort. Again we were guided by some very capable and knowledgeable guides. As with our previous guides, these guys knew where the fish were.

The first day we decided to go after the ever elusive permit. Fishing with Jason and guide “Scully”, we headed down past Monkey River to an area called Punta Ycacos Lagoon where we immediately found a couple schools of tailing permit with some really large fish (30 - 40 lb’ers), but we could only muster some rude refusals.

Jason opened the cooler for a drink and found a bag of fruit, in the bag, you guessed it, BANANAS! How were we supposed to catch fish with bananas on the boat? Dilemma, can’t throw them overboard, this would taint the waters. Can’t eat ‘em, this will not shake the curse. We must have seen a thousand tailing permit that day and could only accept refusals. I haven’t seen that many refusals since my days of nightclubbing trying to find a dance. Must have been the Bananas. Three boats with bananas six anglers reporting their guides had them on permit and not one strike. Now I wasn’t feeling so bad or taking the refusals so personally.

We returned to Robert’s Grove at dusk, had dinner (another wonderful meal), placed a direct order for NO

BANANAS, and prepared for our sun-up trip back out to the flats.

We had decided to fish for bonefish, as none of us wanted another day of permit laughing at our offerings. I was paired with Harry again and Scully, only to find out that a former Mexican ruler had paid Harry a visit overnight and he was opting to stay at Robert’s Grove for the day. This meant total deck time. We headed to Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve and I was having a great day casting and catching. Scully

questioned what happened, I didn’t cast like that yesterday.

Scully could spot a bonefish from a mile away, wouldn’t work a school too hard before resting it, and always knew where there was another school. Periodically, we would move from school to school, catching a fish and resting the school.

By lunch time, I was in need of resting the arm. We, as planned, met up with one of the other boats in our group, and I offered some deck time to Phil. Phil and I switched boats and I joined Al on the boat with Wayne as the guide. Wayne had eyes like Scully, spotting fish long

before we did. This was my first opportunity to fish with Al, and he is another pro caster. I was, by now, holding my own. We were tormented by a school of bonefish that had learned the permit’s art of refusal, so we moved north to Laughing Bird Caye. When we arrived here, we noticed bonefish feeding right on the shoreline. We beached the boat and started walking the shore, keeping up with the school. Here we found some willing participants.

Crystal clear water, beautiful weather, beautiful scenery, plenty of fish, excellent meals, friendly people, knowledgeable guides, this must be Belize, “Natures Best Kept Secret!”

Bring plenty of flies, 7 and 10-12 weight rods, patience and high expectations to Belize and you will not be disappointed. Although the lodges have fly shops, it would be wise to anticipate your needs and be prepared.

Fly fishing is not the only way to fish Belize, there are many offshore opportunities, and you can fish the flats with conventional tackle. Although I took some light tackle with me, and could have fished it, I was so wrapped up with the challenge of improving my fly game I never rigged the other lines, and never shook the my new nickname.

