

Northern Cayes



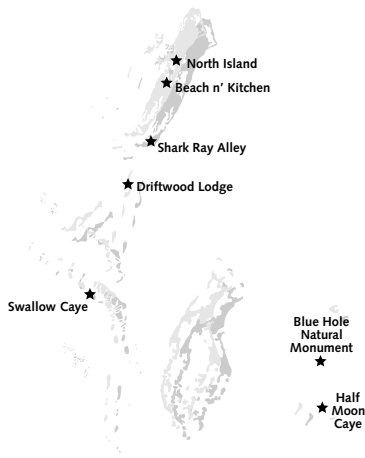
Daydream a little. Conjure up an image of your ultimate tropical island fantasy – the postcard ‘paradise’ that you always dreamed about. With over a hundred enticing isles and two amazing atolls, chances are that one of the northern cayes can bring your fantasy to life. If you imagined stringing up a hammock on an otherwise deserted beach, there is an outer atoll with your name on it. Pining to be pampered? You have your choice of an ever-growing glut of ritzy resorts on Ambergris Caye. San Pedro is prime for sipping cocktails and dancing the night away to a reggae beat; Caye Caulker moves at a slower pace, exuding a friendly village vibe.

But this is only the beginning. The richest resource of the northern cayes lies below the surface of the sea. Only a few miles offshore, the barrier reef runs for 80 miles, nearly uninterrupted. For snorkelers and divers, Belize offers unparalleled opportunities to explore caves, canyons and coral gardens, to come face to face with nurse sharks and stingrays in their natural habitat, and to swim with schools of fish, painted every color of the palette. Much of the reef is protected by various marine sanctuaries, ensuring the continued vibrancy of this underwater world.

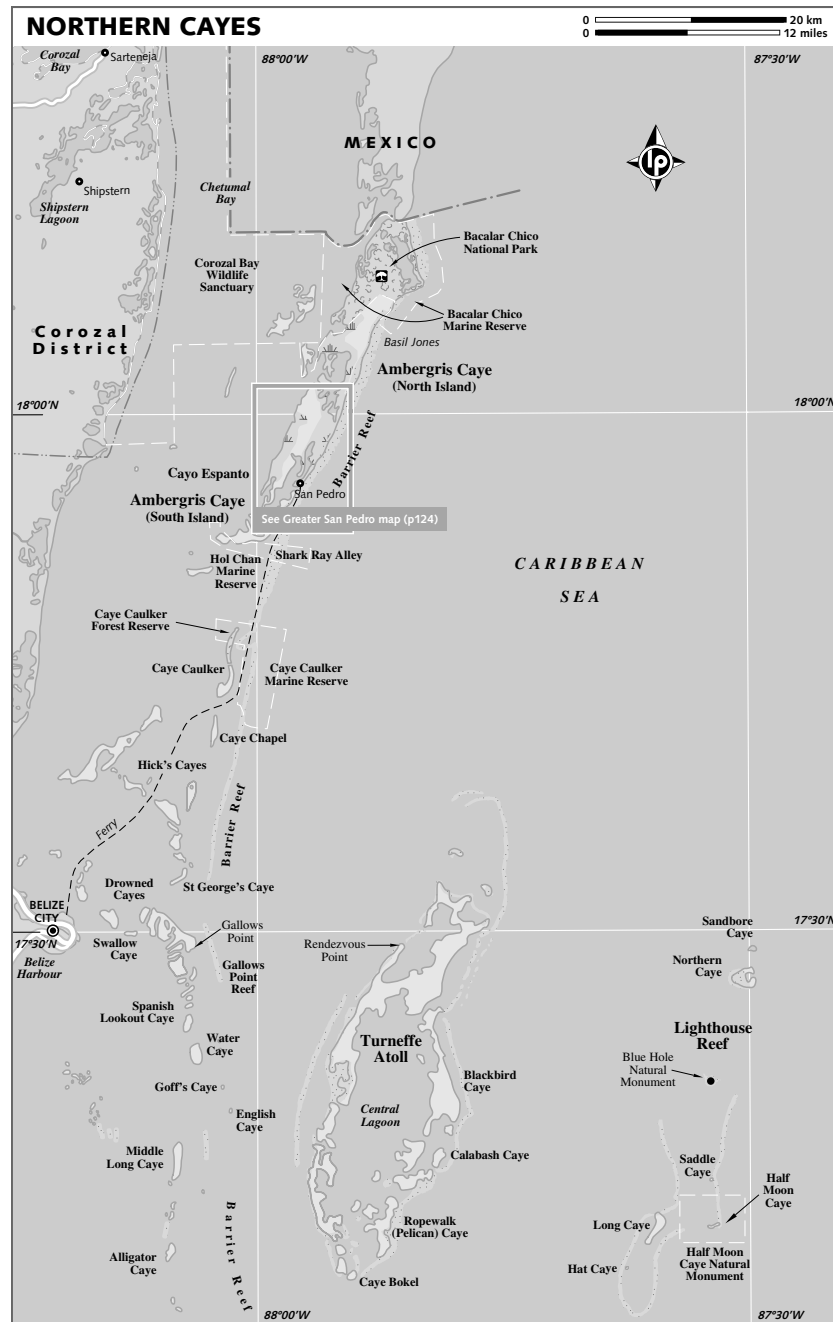
You might be shocked by prices in the northern cayes (especially Ambergris), which are noticeably higher than the rest of Belize. But it’s not outrageously expensive compared with other destinations in the Caribbean. Anyway, that’s the price you pay for paradise.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cycling up the sandy coast of the **North Island** (p129) on Ambergris Caye and stopping for a refreshing smoothie at **Beach n’ Kitchen** (p138)
- Being surrounded by nurse sharks and stingrays at **Shark Ray Alley** (p131)
- Watching the sun set while relaxing on the upper deck of the **Driftwood Lodge** (p152) on Caye Caulker
- Catching sight of a West Indian manatee frolicking in the shallow waters off **Swallow Caye** (p144)
- Cruising out to Lighthouse Reef to descend into the darkness of the **Blue Hole Natural Monument** (p157) and spying on the rare red-footed booby at **Half Moon Caye** (p158)



■ POPULATION: 12,000	■ MONTHLY RAINFALL: Jan 4in, Jun 8in (San Pedro)	■ HIGHEST ELEVATION: 50ft
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NORTHERN CAYES

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Two Days

With only two days, spend them on Caye Caulker, where you can get the most tranquil experience for your time. Start day one with breakfast at **Amor Y Café** (p153), then spend the day snorkeling or diving at **Hol Chan Marine Reserve** (p126). In the evening, catch the shuttle boat up to the restaurant at **Driftwood Lodge** (p152) for sunset drinks and a seafood dinner.

On your second day you can settle in for some serious relaxation. Rent a bike and pedal to the **public dock** (p147) south of town to soak up some sun and sea. Have lunch at the **Bamboo Grill** (p153) and retreat to a hammock for the afternoon. As the sun sets, ride around the airstrip in search of birds. Dine at **Habaneros** (p154), then wind down with reggae and rum at the **I&I Reggae Bar** (p154).

Four Days

With four days to spare, you may want to start in San Pedro, beginning with a big breakfast at **Celi's Deli** (p137) or **Estel's Dine by the Sea** (p137). Snorkel at **Hol Chan Marine Reserve** (p126) and **Shark Ray Alley** (p131). Enjoy a leisurely lunch at any one of the beachfront bars, then hang out on the beach and stroll back to town with the sunset. Head to **Fido's** (p139) bar for the rest of the evening.

Start day two with a take-out breakfast from **Ruby's Café** (p137) then cycle north, stopping for a drink and a swim wherever you fancy. Lunch at **Capricorn Restaurant** (p139). Cycle on as far as you wish then dine at **Mambo Restaurant** (p139). Finally, put your bicycle on a boat back to town.

Spend days three and four on Caye Caulker, with a snorkeling or diving trip to one of the outer atolls, either **Turneffe Atoll** (p156) or **Lighthouse Reef** (p157).

One Week

Spend a few extra days on each island, engaging in your favorite water sports. On Caye Caulker, you'll have time to kayak up to the **Caye Caulker Forest Reserve** (p144) and look for birds. On Ambergis, you can learn to **windsurf** (p129) or enjoy a **sunset sail** (p129). Don't miss the chance to take a manatee tour to **Swallow Caye** (p144) and watch these gentle giants feasting on sea grass.

History

The history of the northern cayes is essentially that of Ambergis Caye (p123), the main population center since Maya times. The northern part of the island, with its position at the mouth of Chetumal Bay, was a hub in the Maya trade network, and a port of call for traders coming down from the Yucatán Peninsula.

The Maya evaporated during the era of the whalers and the British buccaneers. Small treasure troves have been discovered on the island, and gold coins and old bottles have been washed ashore, evidence of pirates using the island for its fresh water, abundant resources and hidden coves. These swashbucklers turned into mainland loggers who partly depended on manatees and turtles from the northern cayes for their survival.

Following on from the buccaneers came the ancestors of today's residents, who were

fisherfolk and worked on the coconut plantations. The 20th century was dominated by the lobster industry and the arrival of tourism. Today the northern cayes are fast catching up on technology. Tourism, high-speed internet and satellite telephones have increased contact with the outside world. While life goes slow on the cayes, the population is acquiring the accoutrements of the Western world in the 21st century.

Getting There & Around

Scheduled flights and regular passenger boats go from Belize City to San Pedro (on Ambergis Caye) and Caye Caulker, and from Corozal to San Pedro. Caye Chapel and Northern Caye (Lighthouse Reef) also have airstrips. No scheduled boats run to/from the outer islands, but most of the lodges located there provide transportation for their guests.

AMBERGRIS CAYE

pop 11,308

When Madonna sang about dreaming of San Pedro, she was referring to the captivating capital of Ambergis Caye, which has since adopted the inevitable nickname La Isla Bonita. Of course, it was more than 20 years ago when Madonna crooned about all the nature being wild and free. She might not recognize the place today, with condos being constructed on every corner and golf carts whizzing through the streets.

Nonetheless, Ambergis (am-ber-griss) Caye exudes the atmosphere of a tropical island paradise, where sun-drenched days are filled with fruity drinks and water sports. The island is long and thin, measuring 25 miles long and five miles across at its widest point, though much of it is less than half a mile across. Although resorts are being erected up and down the coast, its outer reaches are still uninhabited. The remote northern extremity abuts Mexican territory, and the Hispanic influence is evident in language, customs, food and fiestas.

Though the entire island is often called **San Pedro**, technically that is the name of the town at the southern tip. Once a laid-back little village dotted with colorful Caribbean houses, San Pedro is starting to resemble a typical tourist town, lined with souvenir shops and beach bars. The sandy streets were recently replaced with concrete, rapidly increasing the number of cars and golf carts on the roads (not to mention the speeds at which they drive). The beach is built up, though thankfully no buildings are higher than three stories.

Despite the over-development complaints, San Pedro has protected its most valuable asset, the barrier reef, which is only a half-mile offshore. If you are passionate about water sports, San Pedro will seduce you: dive operators lead tours to more than 35 sites, both local and beyond. And if you don't want to look at the fish, surely you'll want to eat them, as San Pedro is home to the country's most imaginative and appetizing dining scene.

History

Once the southern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula, Ambergis Caye was an important Maya trading post. Around 1500 years ago, in order to open up a better trade route

between the Yucatán coast and mainland Belize, the Maya dug the narrow channel at Bacalar Chico that now separates Ambergis from Mexico.

As with the Maya on the mainland, the inhabitants gradually retreated to the bush as contact with the Europeans became more frequent. Whalers in the 17th century probably gave the island its current name, which derives from the waxy gray substance used in perfume production that comes from the intestines of sperm whales. According to folklore, British, French and Dutch pirates used the island's many coves as hideouts when ambushing Spanish ships, so they may also be responsible for the title.

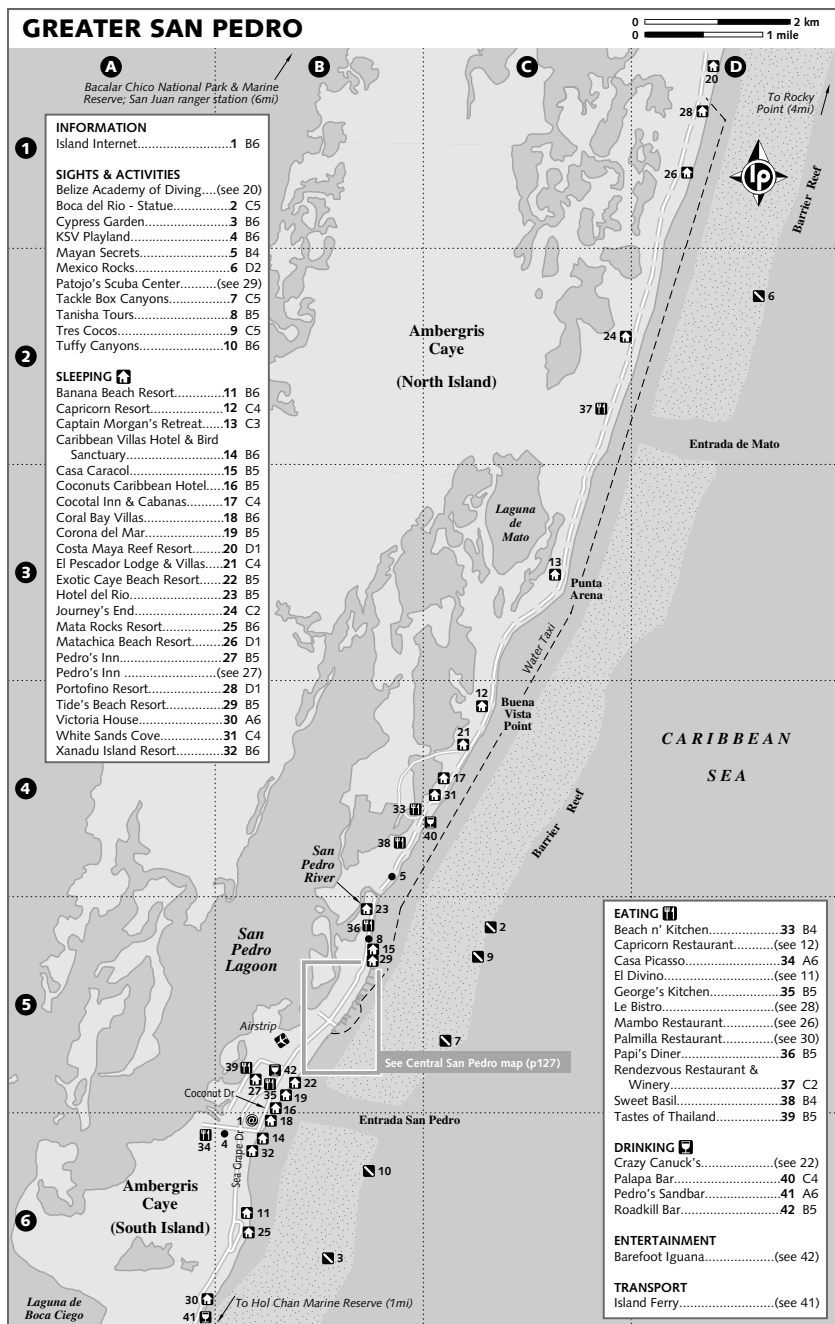
Ambergis Caye was not significantly populated until the War of the Castes (see *In Living Color: British Honduras*, p34), when the war in the Yucatán first forced Mestizos, and then Maya, across Bacalar Chico and onto the island. The town of San Pedro (named for Peter, the patron saint of fishermen) was founded in 1848.

Ownership of the island was bandied about between a group of wealthy British mainlanders. Finally, in 1869, James Hume Blake purchased the land for US\$625 with the gold of his wife, Antonia Andrade, a rich Spanish refugee widow from the Yucatán. The Blake family converted much of the island to a coconut plantation, conscripting many of the islanders to work the land.

The coconut business thrived for less than a century. By the 1950s it had been all but destroyed by a series of hurricanes. In the 1960s, the Belize government forced a purchase of Ambergis Caye and redistributed the land to the islanders.

While the coconut industry declined, the island's lobster industry began to develop. The market for these crustaceans skyrocketed once refrigerated ships came to the island. San Pedro lobster catchers formed cooperatives and built a freezer plant on their island.

Inevitably, the waters close to Ambergis Caye were over-fished. Fisherfolk looked to supplement their income by acting as tour, fishing and dive guides for the smattering of travelers who visited the island. Today lobster stocks have partly recovered with the aid of size limits and an annual closed season, but tourism and real estate are the booming businesses on Ambergis.



Orientation

A narrow channel splits Ambergris Caye in two segments, known as South Island and North Island. The northernmost section of the North Island constitutes Bacalar Chico National Park, and the surrounding waters form Bacalar Chico Marine Reserve (see p126). The western shore has mangroves and wildlife along much of its length.

Most services and many hotels, as well as the airstrip, are within walking distance of each other in San Pedro's town center, on the South Island. Water taxis from Belize City and Caye Caulker dock on the reef side of the island right in San Pedro's center. The Thunderbolt boat service from Corozal and Belize City docks on the lagoon side.

San Pedro has three main north-south streets: Barrier Reef Dr (formerly Front St, to the east); Pescador Dr (formerly Middle St); and Angel Coral Dr (formerly Back St, to the west). South of the airstrip, Coconut Dr goes to Victoria House and beyond (with Sea Grape Dr running parallel for a short distance).

North of town at Pescador Dr, the hand-crank ferry across the channel has been replaced by a toll bridge (BZ\$2). From here, a dirt road, suitable for 4WDs, golf carts and bicycles, runs north for at least 8.5 miles. Rumor has it that it won't be long before this road is paved and runs all the way to the southern edge of Bacalar Chico National Park (13 miles).

Many hotels and resorts are strung out along the coast both north and south of town. Cycling is a very convenient way to get around. Otherwise, a water shuttle runs between Fido's Dock and the North Island resorts.

Information

- EMERGENCY**
Medical, fire & police (☎ 911)
Police (Map p127; ☎ 226-2022; Barrier Reef Dr)

INTERNET ACCESS

- Caribbean Connection** (Map p127; ☎ 226-4664; cnr Barrier Reef Dr & Black Coral St; per hr BZ\$20; ☎ 7am-10pm; 📶) High-speed connections, CD burning, international phone calls, excellent coffee, unique jewelry.
Island Internet (Map p124; ☎ 226-3777; Coconut Dr; per hr BZ\$20; ☎ 7:30am-10pm) Convenient for the southern end of town.
Mousepad (Map p127; ☎ 226-3690; 29 Barrier Reef Dr; per hr BZ\$10; ☎ 10am-7pm) Cheap internet access, as well as printing and burning CDs.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- Ambergris Caye** (www.ambergriscaye.com) Excellent island information and a lively message board.
GoAmbergriscaye.com (www.goambergriscaye.com) Detailed information including comprehensive accommodations listings.

LAUNDRY

- Candace's Laundromat** (Map p127; ☎ 226-2052; Barrier Reef Dr; DIY wash & dry per load BZ\$15; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sun) Also offers a full service wash and dry, per load BZ\$20.
Nellie's Laundromat (Map p127; ☎ 226-2454; Pescador Dr; full service per lb BZ\$2; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat)

MEDIA

- Two rival weekly newspapers keep readers informed about news and events. Both are printed on Thursday.
Ambergris Today (www.ambergristoday.com)
San Pedro Sun (www.sanpedrosun.net) Includes a weekly column on the birds of Ambergris Caye.

MEDICAL SERVICES

- Hyperbaric Chamber** (Map p127; ☎ 226-2851, 684-8111; Lion St; ☎ 24hr) Center for diving accidents, next door to the Lion's Club.
Lion's Club Medical Clinic (Map p127; ☎ 226-4052, 600-9071; Lion St) Across the street from the Maya Island Air terminal at the airport.
San Carlos Medical Clinic, Pharmacy & Pathology Lab (Map p127; ☎ 226-2918, emergencies 614-9251; Pescador Dr) Treats ailments and does blood tests.

MONEY

- You can exchange money easily in San Pedro, and US dollars cash and traveler's checks are widely accepted.
Atlantic Bank (Map p127; ☎ 226-2195; Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) Near Buccaneer St; cash advances cost BZ\$10 per transaction.
Belize Bank (Map p127; ☎ 226-2450; Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, to 4:30pm Fri) At the north end of San Pedro; one of two ATMs that are plugged into international networks.

POST

- Post office** (Map p127; ☎ 226-2250; Alijua Bldg, Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri)

TOURIST INFORMATION

- San Pedro Tourist Information Center** (Map p127; ☎ 226-2198; Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Sat) Next to the town hall, this tourist information center has plentiful giveaway information.

Sights

HOL CHAN MARINE RESERVE

At the southern tip of Ambergis, the 6.5-sq-mile **Hol Chan Marine Reserve** (off Map p124; park admission BZ\$20) is probably Belize's most oft-visited site. Its spectacular coral formations and abundance and diversity of marine life, not to mention its proximity to the cayes, make it the country's number one spot for diving and snorkeling.

Hol Chan is Mayan for 'Little Channel,' which refers to a natural break in the reef, also known as **Hol Chan Cut**. The channel walls are covered with colorful corals, which in turn harbor an amazing variety of fish life including moray eels and black groupers.

Although the reef is the primary attraction of Hol Chan, the marine reserve also includes sea-grass beds and mangroves. The sea grass provides a habitat for nurse sharks and southern stingrays, which lend their name to **Shark Ray Alley** (see p131). Snorkelers are guaranteed the chance to get up close and personal with both species, due mainly to the fact that the animals are used to getting fed by tour boats.

All dive operators and nautical tours offer trips to Hol Chan; see right and p129. For information and displays on marine life, visit the **Hol Chan Visitor Center** (Map p127; ☎ 226-2247; Caribena St.).

BACALAR CHICO NATIONAL PARK & MARINE RESERVE

At the northern tip of Ambergis Caye, **Bacalar Chico** (☎ 226-2247; tours BZ\$180, park admission BZ\$10) is part of the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System World Heritage site, declared in 1996. At the time of research, the park was only accessible by a 90-minute boat ride from San Pedro.

On the way up north, boats might stop at **Cayo Iguanu**, better known as 'bird island,' as it is the nesting ground for the roseate spoonbill and the reddish-brown egret. The next stop is the **San Juan ranger station**, at the northern tip of the island, where there is a nature trail and some small Maya ruins to explore. From here, the boat motors through the **ancient channel** that was dug by sea-faring Maya about 1500 years ago. Now the narrow channel separates Ambergis Caye from the Mexican mainland.

Boat trips to Bacalar Chico usually make several snorkel stops along the way. The coral is extra colorful around here, as there is sig-

nificantly less damage from boats and tourists. Besides the bountiful fish and bird life, you have the chance of seeing crocodiles and manatees, as well as green and loggerhead turtles.

If the waters are calm, boats go to **Rocky Point**, notable as one of the only places in the world where land meets reef.

In theory, the return trip is on the east side of the island, but this requires a quick detour outside the reef, so in rough seas the boats travel up and down the western side of the island.

Not all tour operators run trips to Bacalar Chico, due to the long travel distance, so plan ahead and inquire in advance about trips. Companies that are likely to run this tour include the following:

Searious Adventures (Map p127; ☎ 226-4202, 662-8818; www.ambergiscaye.com/searious)

Tanisha Tours (Map p124; ☎ 226-2314; www.tanishatours.com)

Activities

If you're into water sports, you'll be in ecstasy on Ambergis. The town is awash with tour companies and individuals organizing scuba diving, snorkeling, windsurfing, sailing, swimming and fishing trips.

DIVING

Many hotels have their own dive shops that rent equipment, provide instruction and organize diving excursions. Numerous dive sites are within a 10- to 15-minute boat trip from town. Most popular (and affordable) is undoubtedly Hol Chan Marine Reserve (see opposite), south of the island.

Following is a list of some reputable independent dive operators; a few also run a full range of nondiving tours.

Ambergis Divers (Map p127; ☎ 226-2634; www.ambergisdivers.com) Offers half-day trips including one tank at Hol Chan and a snorkeling stop at Shark Ray Alley (BZ\$130). Also offers night dives (BZ\$110) and full-day trips to north Ambergis (BZ\$200 to BZ\$260) and the offshore atolls (from BZ\$370).

Amigos del Mar Dive Shop (Map p127; ☎ 226-2706; www.amigosdive.com) Runs two local trips each day, one departing at 9am and another at 2pm. Also specializes in day trips to Turneffe and Blue Hole.

Belize Academy of Diving (Map p124; ☎ 226-2873; www.belize-academy-of-diving.com) Specializing in lesser-visited dive sites; 7 miles north of San Pedro.

Belize Diving Adventures (Map p127; ☎ 226-3082; www.belizedivingadventures.net) Highlights include the

CENTRAL SAN PEDRO

Scale: 0 to 200 m / 0 to 0.1 miles

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NORTHERN CAYES

NORTHERN CAYES

Blue Hole (BZ\$500) and the Turneffe Elbow (BZ\$270). Single-/double-/triple-tank dives run BZ\$80/130/180, while a night dive is BZ\$90.

Bottom Time Dive Shop (Map p127; ☎ 226-2014; www.sanpedroholiday.com) On the dock in front of San Pedro Holiday Hotel.

Ecologic Divers & Training Center (Map p127; ☎ 226-4118; www.ecologicdivers.com) Divers receive a free CD with photos from their dive.

Patojo's Scuba Center (Map p124; ☎ 226-2283; www.ambergriscaye.com/tides) Connected with Tide's Beach Resort; a small, family-run operation offering knowledgeable and personal service. Dive packages available.

Protech Dive Center (Map p127; ☎ 226-3008; www.protechdive.com; Belize Yacht Club) With three boats ranging from 28ft to 38ft, this is the only technical dive outfit in Belize. Offers courses in recreational and technical diving at all levels.

Prices do not include admission to the marine reserves, which is BZ\$20 for Hol Chan and BZ\$80 for Blue Hole.

A one-tank local dive, without equipment, costs BZ\$80 to BZ\$100; with two tanks it's BZ\$130 to BZ\$150. Night dives are BZ\$90 to BZ\$110, including a headlamp. Four-day full-certification courses cost about BZ\$700, including equipment. A one-day Discover Scuba Diving course costs BZ\$300 to BZ\$320.

Day trips further afield to the Blue Hole and Lighthouse Reef (three dives) or Turneffe Elbow (three dives) cost from BZ\$370 to BZ\$400.

SNORKELING

The most popular destinations for snorkeling excursions include Hol Chan Marine Reserve and Shark Ray Alley (BZ\$90 including park fee) or Mexico Rocks and Tres Cocos (BZ\$50 to BZ\$80). Snorkeling operators usually offer two daily half-day trips (three hours, two snorkel stops), departing at 9am and 2pm.

Full-day trips go to the northern tip of Ambergris (six hours, three stops) for BZ\$150 to BZ\$170. Trips to Bacalar Chico (p126) also make several snorkel stops. Most of the dive operators (p126) and all of the tour companies (opposite) offer various versions of these snorkeling trips.

Most dive boats take snorkelers along if they have room on their boats, but snorkelers sometimes get lost in the shuffle on dive boats, so you are better off joining a dedicated snorkel tour whenever possible. Unfortunately, snorkel tours do not often run to Blue Hole

(p157), so if you have your heart set on snorkeling around the edge of this World Heritage site, you'll have to tag along with the divers.

If you don't want to opt for a tour, you can snorkel under the dock at Ramon's Village (p134). It does not support the extensive life that the reef does, but it is free.

MANATEE-WATCHING

The best offshore manatee-watching (day trip US\$90) is off Swallow Caye near Belize City (see p144). Tanisha Tours (p126) and Seaduced by Belize (p130) offer these trips for BZ\$105 to BZ\$115, including park fees and a snorkel stop. This trip is slightly cheaper (and travel times are less) from Caye Caulker, where folk are also working on manatee conservation.

SWIMMING

While sandy beaches are plentiful, seagrass at the water line makes entry from the shore unpleasant, so you'll mostly be swimming from piers in waters protected by the reef. When you do this, watch carefully for boats: while there's plenty to see down under if you snorkel, you often can't see or hear if a boat is coming your way. Have someone look out for you. Ramon's Village Pier (Map p127), distinguished by its four *palapas* (thatched-roof open-sided huts), is good for swimming and snorkeling.

All beaches are public and most waterside hotels are generous with their deck chairs, but a proprietorial air is developing about the piers, which are also supposed to be public. The beach in front of the Banana Beach Resort is clear of seagrass and the nearby pier is good for swimming. Of course, the further north or south you go on the island, the fewer people there are on the piers.

FISHING

San Pedro draws fishing enthusiasts who are anxious to take a crack at Belize's classic tarpon flats, which cover over 200 sq miles. The ultimate angling accomplishment is the Grand Slam: catching bonefish, permit (best from March to May) and tarpon (best from May to September) all in one day. In the reef, fishers get bites from barracuda, snapper, jacks and grouper.

Deep-sea fishing is less of a drawcard; most people are here for the reef. There are, however, stories of giant marlin caught out in the deep beyond. In December there is a deep-

sea fishing tournament hosted by the Belikin beer company.

Fishing is mostly on a catch-and-release basis, but your fishing guide might clean and cut your catch if you intend to eat it. Companies offering fishing outings include the following:

Ambergris Divers (Map p127; ☎ 226-2634; www.ambergrisdivers.com) Charter a boat for up to four people for a half-/full day of reef fishing for BZ\$420/620, or a half-/full day of deep-sea fishing for BZ\$850/1320.

Amigos del Mar Dive Shop (Map p127; ☎ 226-2706; www.amigosdive.com) A half-/full day of fishing on the reef or flats for BZ\$410/600.

The Rock Fishing Team (☎ 601-3865; www.belizefishfinder.com) Specializing in deep-sea fishing. Half-/full-day outings start at BZ\$900/1800, while an all-day fishing excursion in Turneffe Atoll is BZ\$2400.

SAILING, WINDSURFING & KITESURFING

Ambergris is ideal for wind-powered sports: the offshore reef means the waters are always flat, but there is no shortage of breeze to power your craft. The windiest time of year is between January and June, when the wind speed is usually between 12 and 20 knots.

Right in front of San Pedro Holiday Hotel, you'll find the seaside 'office' of **Sailsports Belize** (Map p127; ☎ 226-4488; www.sailsportsbelize.com). This is the place that will put the breeze in your sail. You can sign up for sailing lessons for BZ\$122 per hour, or if you're already your own captain, rent a Laser Pico (BZ\$44 per hour) or a Hobie (BZ\$76 to BZ\$98 per hour) and set sail. Windsurfers cost BZ\$44 per hour, or you can get a lesson for BZ\$98 per hour. More comprehensive instruction packages are also available.

Kitesurfing is the new craze, where the sail floats high up in the sky and pulls the surfer across the waves at alarming speeds. Two instructional courses are required before you can do it on your own: kite control skills (BZ\$330, 2½ hours) and board control skills (BZ\$330, 2½ hours). After that you can rent equipment (BZ\$30 per half day) and fly with the wind.

If you want somebody else to man the rig, see Tours, right.

PARASAILING

This is the sign that San Pedro is going the way of Daytona Beach. Feel the wind in your face as you soar high above the island, powered by a motor boat below. Look for the parachutes or stop by **Fido's** (Map p127; ☎ 226-3513; www.para-

sailingbelize.com; s/d/tr BZ\$140/240/330). The flight lasts for about 10 or 15 minutes.

BIKING

The North Island is a wonderful place for a cycle. With the breeze off the ocean and the palms shading your path, you can ride all the way up to Matachica Beach Resort and beyond. Just follow the sandy path that runs along the beach from Reef Village. You have a few places to stop for a fruit smoothie or an ice-cold Belikin beer along the way. Rent bikes at the following places:

Calvio's Bike Rental (Map p127; ☎ 661-7143; www.belizeextremeadventure.com; Pescador Dr)

Joe's Bicycle Rentals (Map p127; ☎ 226-5371; cnr Pescador Dr & Caribeña St; 3hr/24hr/week US\$6/9/40; ☎ 8am-6pm)

SPAS

If you have come to Ambergris Caye for a bit of rest and relaxation, you may want to schedule a day at the spa.

Asian Garden Day Spa (Map p127; ☎ 226-4072; www.asiangardendayspa.com; Coconut Dr) Specializing in Thai Massage (per hour BZ\$160), this lovely garden spot also offers reflexology, facials and body wraps. Evenings are reserved for couples' massage (per hour BZ\$340) at 5pm with a view of the setting sun or at 6:30pm under a starlit sky.

Mayan Secrets (Map p124; ☎ 226-3584; www.mayansecrets.com; Casa Tropicana, North Island; treatments BZ\$90-220) All treatments include a tropical drink and a soak in the garden mineral bath.

Sol Spa (Map p127; ☎ 226-2410; www.solspa.com; Vilma Linda Plaza, Tarpon St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Sol Spa offers the whole range of body work and facial treatments, but the speciality is the Maya abdominal massage (BZ\$190), a noninvasive technique inspired by Ix Chel, the goddess of medicine and fertility.

Tropical Touch (Map p127; ☎ 226-4666, 600-1031; www.tropicaltouchspaworks.com) With a prime waterfront location, this thatched-roof cabana is the perfect place to indulge in a Bomba mud massage or a seaweed sugar scrub. Therapists are also trained to give Maya abdominal massage treatments.

Tours

NAUTICAL TOURS

Most nautical tours include snorkeling, swimming and sunning at various destinations; full-day trips also include lunch, and often a beach barbecue.

El Gato (☎ 226-2264, 602-8552; www.ambergriscaye.com/elgato; half-/full-day cruise BZ\$60/100) Sail to Caye

AROUND AMBERGRIS: WHERE TO DIVE & SNORKEL

You may not have too much choice about where to drop anchor, as dive masters usually choose the best sites based on weather conditions. Depending where you end up, here is what you'll find.

Mexico Rocks

This site (Map p124) 4.5 miles north of San Pedro is a unique patch reef at the northern end of the island. Snorkelers will find an incredible array of corals, including the *Montastrea annularis* corals, which are unique to the Northern Shelf Lagoon. Many small creatures inhabit the turtle grass and coral heads, including flounders, walking hermit crabs, conch, stingrays and hogfish. Schooling fish take refuge in the larger corals, while banded shrimp and Pederson shrimp have cleaning stations.

Boca del Rio (Statue)

The underwater terrain at Boca del Rio (Map p124), 2 miles northeast of San Pedro, is a spur-and-groove system, featuring rolling coral hills and sandy channels. This is one of the few sites with healthy staghorn coral, as well as plate corals. Around 90ft, there are big coral heads, barrels and tubes, and turtles are often spotted here. Near the mooring (in the shallows at 60ft) is a statue of Christ, which gives this site its alternative name of 'Statue.'

Tres Cocos

Tres Cocos (Map p124) is a bit deeper than most, with coral heads rising up to 50ft and a wall with spurs that spill out from 90ft to 120ft. The marine life here is wonderful, with thick growths of star corals, big plating corals, red rope sponges and soft sea whips, and gorgonians on the upper reaches of the spurs. The place is renowned for shoals of schooling fish, including snapper, horse-eye jack and spotted eagle rays.

Tackle Box Canyons

One mile offshore from the Tackle Box pier is this great site (Map p124) with big, steep coral grooves. There are swim-throughs in many places along the drop-off on the way to the outer reef. Gray angels, redband and stoplight parrotfish, and blue chromis hang out along the outer wall.

of tours, including snorkeling, watching the manatees and inland trips.

MAINLAND TOURS

Many visitors to Belize use San Pedro as their base and make excursions by plane or boat to other parts of the country. Mainland trips are operated by many of the dive and boat-tour firms.

Altun Ha (p106), the closest Maya ruin to the cayes, is one of the most popular day trips. If you have just one day and wish to see a sample of mainland attractions, you can pair Altun Ha with one or two other stops (BZ\$150 to BZ\$225). Trips go by boat across the San Pedro Lagoon, up the Northern River to Bomba village and then by bus to Altun Ha. One trip pairs Altun Ha with a stop at the exotic Maruba Resort Jungle Spa (p107). The pause at Maruba can be filled with lunch

Caulker aboard the *El Gato*, stopping to snorkel if you like. Also offers sunset cruises (BZ\$90).

Reef Runner Glass Bottom Boat (Map p127; ☎ 226-2172; www.ambergriscaye.com/reefrunner; Barrier Reef Dr) Here's a way to get a look at the reef without getting wet (if you don't want to). Visit Hol Chan and Shark Ray Alley (adult/child BZ\$80/35) or Tuffy and San Pedro Cut (BZ\$50/30). Snorkeling is optional.

Seaduced by Belize (Map p127; ☎ 226-2254; www.seaducedbybelize.com; Vilma Linda Plaza, Tarpon St) Offers family discounts, a range of sailing trips, including a sunset and full-moon cruise, and manatee tours; child-friendly. Don't miss the full-day trip to Mexico Rocks and Robles Beach, complete with snorkel stops and beach barbecue (BZ\$140).

Serious Adventures (Map p127; ☎ 226-4202; www.ambergriscaye.com/serious) On the beach in front of Ruby's Beachfront hotel.

Tanisha Tours (Map p124; ☎ 226-2314; www.tanishatours.com) On the beach, near the cut. Offers a wide range

Tuffy Canyons

Tuffy Canyons (Map p124), about 1.6 miles south of San Pedro, is marked by deep grooves and a long narrow tunnel. This high-walled passage leads to an opening at 80ft to 90ft onto the reef drop-off. Look for some attractive sponges in the deeper reaches, and the occasional eagle ray passing by. Marauding nurse sharks hang around the entire dive. *Tuffy* was the name of a shrimp boat that met its demise here, and you may see some pieces at around 20ft.

Cypress Garden

Within the Hol Chan Marine Reserve, Cypress Garden (Map p121) is home to resting nurse sharks, turtles, black grouper and tiger grouper. The pronounced undercuts provide habitat for arrow crabs and various shrimps, as well as drums of all sizes. The coral growth here includes flower corals, thin leaf lettuce corals and some nice stands of the rare pillar corals.

Hol Chan Cut

Four miles south of San Pedro, this site (Map p121) is famous for its ample sea life, including eagle rays, stingrays and shoaling schools of fish. The channel is lined with large corals, which hide black snapper, chubs, schoolmasters and mutton snappers, as well as moray eels and channel crabs. At the channel mouth, groupers, rays and sapper ride the current. Yellowtails are ubiquitous, but you might also spot tarpon.

Shark Ray Alley

Only snorkeling is allowed at this perennially popular spot, which is part of the Hol Chan Marine Reserve. Shark Ray Alley (Map p121) was a place for local fishers to clean fish and the creatures attracted to the fish guts soon became a tourist attraction. As the name implies, the area is known for the big southern stingrays and mooching nurse sharks, which come right up to the boat when it first arrives. See the boxed text, p132 for more information.

Amigos Wreck

The one and only wreck on the reef is in Hol Chan Marine Reserve. Amigos Wreck (Map p121) is a 60ft barge, intentionally sunk to provide a marine habitat, now home to nurse sharks and large, green moray eels.

(BZ\$30), then swimming, horseback riding or a spa (at extra cost).

If you're interested in seeing more wildlife, you might combine Altun Ha with a trip to the Community Baboon Sanctuary (p108), Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (p110) or Belize Zoo (p113).

Altun Ha is lovely, but it doesn't have the importance or architectural variety of Lamanai (p167). If you want a closer look at Maya history and ruins, consider the Lamanai River Trip (BZ\$310), which takes you up the Lamanai River (lots of bird and croc spotting) to the spectacular ruins. This is a great tour, but it makes for a long day trip in a variety of vehicles – ocean boat, van, river boat and then back again.

Another option is a cave-tubing adventure (BZ\$350 to BZ\$460) at Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve (p186). Tours

combine a river-tube float and a tour of a cave, where you'll see stalagmites and stalactites and possibly pottery shards and other evidence of the ancient Maya. At some point during the tour, the group spends a few spooky moments in total darkness. This tour is often packaged with a trip to the Belize Zoo or the Zip-line Canopy Tour (p187).

Tours going all the way west to San Ignacio, Xunantunich and Mountain Pine Ridge are available from San Pedro, but you'll spend most of the day getting to/from these sites. It's better to spend a few days in the west instead of trying to visit from the cayes.

Festivals & Events

Costa Maya Festival (☎ 226-3462; www.ambergriscaye/festival) Formerly known as the Sea & Air Festival, this celebration is a highlight of Ambergris festivities. During the first weekend in August, participants from El

FEEDING THE FISH

To feed or not to feed? That seems like it is always the question.

Feeding is common at Shark Ray Alley (p131) and other sites, as guides want to be able to guarantee a good time for their guests. Fish feeds usually mean close-up views, more interaction and – sometimes – incredible photographs.

Purists argue that feeding changes a fish's natural behavior; it may be harmful to their natural abilities to forage for food if they become dependent on humans. It certainly makes them more vulnerable to the hand that feeds them. For example, the wrong kind of food can be harmful.

For some people, fish feeds have a tinge of falseness, lessening the thrill of interacting with the creatures in their natural habitat.

This is one controversy that will undoubtedly continue as long as there are snorkel guides and dive masters who want to entertain their clients. One thing that is certain is that feeding should be left to the professionals: lurking barracuda can shred a hand in seconds; poor-sighted moray eels can leave an awful tear to the skin; aggressive stingrays can give you a mean hickey. And we all remember what happened to that Crocodile Hunter.

These (and other) fish are inherently dangerous and frequently present at fish-feeding sites. Professional guides know how to look out for fish that could pose a threat – and they know how to respond when somebody scary shows up. If there is going to be fish feeding on your snorkel or dive outing, leave it to the guide so you can come home with all of your digits working!

Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Costa Rica and Nicaragua join Belize in celebrating their shared heritage. The streets are filled with music, parades, dancing and drinking, culminating in a bodybuilding contest and the crowning of a festival queen.

San Pedro Lobster Festival (☎ 226-3115; www.sanpedrolobsterfest.com) As of 2007, the third week in June is dedicated to the spiny tail. San Pedro re-opens lobster season with a block party, featuring live music, delicious seafood and the crowning of the Lobsterfest king and queen.

San Pedro for Kids

Whether swimming, snorkeling or building sand castles, there's no end to the fun in the sun for your kids in San Pedro. On cloudy days, take them to **KSV Playland** (Map p124; ☎ 206-2061; Blake St), a kids' fantasyland. From kiddie rides and minitrains all the way up to trampolines and ATVs, there is an adventure for every age. Pool, foosball, air hockey and other table games cater for competitive spirits.

Sleeping

Reservations are recommended for the winter season, between December and May. Almost all hotels accept major credit cards, though you may pay a steep surcharge. For more apartments, suites and condominiums, check www.ambergriscaye.com.

SAN PEDRO

While it's fun to be in the middle of the action, some of the places right in the center can be

noisy. If you are on a tight budget you may have no other choice.

Budget

Ruby's Beachfront (Map p127; ☎ 226-2063; www.ambergriscaye.com/rubys; Barrier Reef Dr; s BZ\$36-50, d without/with air-con BZ\$80/100; ☺) This white-with-red-trim hotel near the water taxi dock is a local landmark. The most attractive feature of the long-standing backpacker fave is the large terraces, giving guests plenty of opportunity to enjoy the beachfront location. Unfortunately the rooms themselves are pretty tired, with shabby decor and shoddy mattresses. Thin walls do little to block out the revelries of your neighbors, so you might as well join the party.

Martha's Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 206-2053; www.ambergriscaye.com/marthas; Pescador Dr; s/d/tr/q BZ\$47/70/94/114) Apart from needing a lick of paint, this ramshackle wooden house has a great vibe. All rooms have private bathrooms and there's hot water most of the time – a budget hotel rarity, as is the daily cleaner service that keeps the place spotless. Tempting as the sea-view rooms are, you might want to reconsider – the hotel backs onto one of the hotter discos in town, and these rooms can get noisy.

If these budget options are booked, there are a couple more affordable choices right next door to each other on Barrier Reef Dr: **Thomas Hotel** (Map p127; ☎ 226-2061; Barrier Reef Dr; s/d with fan BZ\$35/70, d with air-con BZ\$93; ☺) Rooms are equipped with TV and minifridge. The comfy

little balcony out back sports a wonderful view of the building next door.

Hotel San Pedrano (Map p127; ☎ 226-2054; sanpedrano@btl.net; Barrier Reef Dr; s/d/tr BZ\$76/87/87, with air-con BZ\$96/107/107; ☺) There are no views from this 2nd-story, streetside hostelry, but you might catch the breeze from the balcony. Relatively spacious rooms have two or three beds.

Midrange

Sands Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 226-2510; www.ambergriscaye.com/sands; Barrier Reef Dr; d from BZ\$100; ☺) Set on a busy stretch of Barrier Reef Dr, Sands Hotel is set back from the road, protected by lush gardens. Friendly and functional, the family-run place offers six affordable rooms with mismatched furniture and tile floors, a wide shady porch and panoramic views from the rooftop. Note the location next door to an all-night party spot.

ourpick **Hotel del Rio** (Map p124; ☎ 226-2286; www.ambergriscaye.com/hoteldelrio; d without/with air-con BZ\$90/130, cabana BZ\$140-180; ☺) Just south of the cut, this little lodge has a perfect spot on a quiet stretch of beach, which still provides easy access into town. Three categories of rooms vary in size and layout. Most enticing, the thatched-roof cabanas (sleeping two to four people) are clustered around the sandy grounds, with a central *palapa* that's ideal for socializing or swinging in a hammock. In the background, the two-storey Casa Azul houses the cheapest rooms, but even these have access to a shared balcony with cooling sea breezes and captivating sea views.

Coral Beach Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 226-2013; www.coralbeachhotel.com; cnr Barrier Reef Dr & Black Coral St; s/d with fan BZ\$96/114, with air-con BZ\$114/138; ☺) If you want to be in the middle of the action, consider the Coral Beach Hotel. It doesn't get more central than this location, upstairs from the popular Jambel Jerk Pit (p137) and one block from the water taxi dock. A communal balcony provides an excellent vantage point to watch the goings-on. Stylish, spacious rooms are trimmed in dark polished wood and equipped with flat-screen TVs.

Spindrift Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 226-2018, 601-8977; www.ambergriscaye.com/spindrift; cnr Barrier Reef Dr & Buccaneer St; d BZ\$107, d with patio/sea view BZ\$170/220, beachfront apt BZ\$350; ☺) This is a big concrete block in the middle of town – not the most attractive place, but the service is efficient and staff are warm and welcoming. Rooms are clustered around a central patio, decked

with potted plants; pay more for the ones with sea views. On the ground floor, the Mexican restaurant Caliente is a popular spot.

Lily's Caribbean Lodge (Map p127; ☎ 226-2059; www.ambergriscaye.com/lilys; cnr Barrier Reef Dr & Caribeña St; s BZ\$110-130, d BZ\$130-150; ☺) A long-standing favorite, Lily's has a prime beach location and a long wooden balcony offering views of it all. Rooms are spacious and simple, with a modicum of style; if you get one facing the sea, the big, breeze-inducing windows are all you need. Downstairs, guests tend to congregate in the highly recommended beachfront restaurant. The slow-moving, sweet-talking Felipe Paz is your knowledgeable friendly host.

Changes in Latitude (Map p127; ☎ 226-2986; www.ambergriscaye.com/latitudes; Coconut Dr; d BZ\$250; ☺) Unique in San Pedro for its intimate atmosphere, this B&B is a short block from the beach. The six rooms are small but stylish, with wood and bamboo adding Belizean flair. All rooms overlook a well-tended garden with an exotic flower-covered pagoda – a perfect place for guests to sip fruity cocktails and swap snorkeling tales. Other perks include a common kitchen and use of the pool and dock at the Belize Yacht Club next door.

Tide's Beach Resort (Map p124; ☎ 226-2283; www.ambergriscaye.com/tides; s/d incl breakfast BZ\$234/272, r with kitchenette BZ\$314-370; ☺ ☺ ☺) Set in a classic, colonial-style wooden building, Tides is an ultrafriendly place that caters to divers, due to its affiliation with Patojo's Scuba Center (p128). But everyone will appreciate the classy rooms with high ceilings, polished wood floors and king-sized beds with funky, hand-painted headboards. A wooden balcony runs the width of the building, giving everyone access to ocean views. Out front, a palm-shaded deck surrounds the swimming pool and the bartender serves up drinks to guests and locals alike.

San Pedro Holiday Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 226-2014; www.sanpedroholiday.com; Barrier Reef Dr; r BZ\$252-288, apt BZ\$400; ☺) The central location is both a bonus and a shortcoming. Sure, there's great people-watching and easy access to everything, but this is a busy stretch of beachfront. So even though a painted picket fence surrounds a patch of sand that's only for guests, they still don't get much privacy. Nonetheless, it's a pretty little place, with intricate wooden trim adorning the porches and decks. Light-filled rooms are simple but spacious, and there is an excellent restaurant on site.

Top End

Ourpick Blue Tang Inn (Map p127; ☎ 226-2326, in USA 866-337-8203; www.bluetanginn.com; Sandpiper St; ste with garden/ocean view BZ\$327/392, deluxe ste BZ\$458; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Named for one of the brightest and most beautiful fish on the reef, the Blue Tang lives up to this enticing image. Each of the suites at this beachside retreat includes kitchen facilities, dining furniture and living space. Big windows and vaulted ceilings make the rooms seem even bigger than they are. Many rooms have good sea views, but for the best of all, make your way upstairs to the rooftop – one of the highest vantage points on the island – for the true 360-degree panorama.

Becky & Steve's Cute Little Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 226-2071; www.ramons.com/stevebecky.html; Coconut Dr; d BZ\$338; 🍷 🍷) However unfortunate the name, it does indeed describe this hidden gem. Tucked into a tiny, tree-filled courtyard, the resort has quaint, colorful colonial-style cabins. It's away from the beach, which means less foot traffic and more peace and quiet. This place is owned and operated by Ramon's Village, so guests have access to all of the facilities of its big brother across the street.

Ramon's Village (Map p127; ☎ 226-2071; www.ramons.com; Coconut Dr; cabanas garden-view/seaside/beachfront BZ\$392/425/490, ste from BZ\$556; 🍷 🍷) Guests love the exotic, faux-jungle setting at this luxurious beach resort, with a giant Maya mask known as 'Rey Ramon' overlooking the grounds. Thatched-roof cabanas are surrounded by lush greenery and flowering hibiscus and bougainvillea, allowing for plenty of privacy. Beachfront cabanas are front and center, on the beach, with uninhibited Caribbean vistas; seaside cabanas are set back a bit, with a partially blocked view of the water. Ramon's also boasts one of the best beachfronts on the island, with a dock for swimming and lounge chairs for sunning.

Casa Caracol (Map p124; ☎ 602-6370, 226-2370; www.casacaracol.com; d/q BZ\$407/470; 🍷 🍷) Ideal for families and groups, this beachfront house has two apartments, each with two or three bedrooms and bathrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, a private verandah and a comfy living area. Everything is clean and contemporary, with a tropical vista of a quiet stretch of beach on the north side of town. The place offers all the services of a regular hotel, including laundry, housekeeping and local information.

SOUTH OF TOWN

If you need a vacation from your vacation, get out of San Pedro. South of town, you can enjoy more peace and privacy, although you still have easy access to the restaurants and facilities in town. If you don't feel like making the trek (more than a mile in some cases), a few restaurants and bars cater to the southerners.

Pedro's Inn (Map p124; ☎ 226-3825, 206-2198; www.backpackersbelize.com; Sea Grape Dr; s/d with shared bathroom BZ\$20/40, r with private bathroom & air-con BZ\$70; 🍷 🍷) Pedro is a saint for opening the cheapest and friendliest budget option on the island. Sleep in clean, plain rooms with fresh paint jobs, take cold showers, play poker and eat pizza at the sports bar on site, use the internet for free and save your money for drinking and diving (and other important things).

Ourpick Caribbean Villas Hotel & Bird Sanctuary (Map p124; ☎ 226-2715; www.caribbeanvillashotel.com; Sea Grape Dr; r BZ\$170-214, ste from BZ\$376; 🍷) These simple, sophisticated studios and suites are the best bargains on the island. Brightly painted walls, tile floors and wood trims adorn the oceanfront accommodations, all of which are equipped with kitchenettes. The suites range in size, so this is an ideal spot for families or groups. The jungly grounds of the Caribbean Villas are home to a bevy of birds, which you can observe from the 'people perch' (also ideal for sunrises). Best of all, the pier protects some algae-covered equipment and local sedimentary rock, forming a sort of artificial reef that attracts a flurry of fish – a great snorkel spot just off your doorstep!

Corona del Mar (Map p124; ☎ 226-2055; www.ambergriscaye.com/coronadelmar; Coconut Dr; s/d from BZ\$214/284, ste BZ\$358, additional person BZ\$46; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Friendly and efficient, this 12-room hotel is removed from San Pedro's hustle and bustle. Tile floors, wicker furniture and cool white hues give the rooms an appealing tropical atmosphere (also aided – in some cases – by beautiful ocean views). Woody's Wharf stretches out from the white sandy beach into the sea, offering a perfect place to swim, sunbathe or swing in a hammock.

Coconuts Caribbean Hotel (Map p124; ☎ 226-3500; www.coconutshotel.com; Coconut Dr; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast BZ\$231/283/304/325, ste BZ\$347-546; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Coconuts scores low on the subtlety scale (as you might expect, with a name like Coconuts), but it's not a bad place for a beach holiday. The true-blue concrete building forms a

horseshoe around a central patio, giving all 30 rooms easy access to the pool (with swim-up bar) and the sea beyond. Rooms are rather nondescript, but are equipped with TVs, telephones, fridges and coffee makers.

Mata Rocks Resort (Map p124; ☎ 226-2336; www.matarocks.com; Sea Grape Dr; s/d/tr/q from BZ\$261/282/303/324, ste from BZ\$355/366/387/408; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Modern and minimalist, this intimate 17-room hotel is a little oasis on a pretty stretch of beach. The contemporary design gives every room a bit of an ocean view, plus hardwood or tile floors, stucco walls and high ceilings.

Banana Beach Resort (Map p124; ☎ 226-3890; www.bananabeach.com; Sea Grape Dr; r BZ\$284, ste poolside/oceanfront BZ\$313/460, oceanfront apt from BZ\$730; 🍷 🍷) This place may be too Daytona Beach for some tastes, but nobody can deny the excellent value it offers. It's a big, three-story concrete building with rooms set around two swimming pools or facing a clean stretch of beach. Attractive rooms have rattan furniture, ceramic artwork and woven tapestries; suites have fully-equipped kitchens that are ideal for long-term stays. Indeed, the place offers excellent week-long package deals.

Coral Bay Villas (Map p124; ☎ 226-3003; www.coralbaybelize.com; Coconut Dr; r BZ\$314; 🍷 🍷) This attractive colonial-style hotel is set back from the ocean, which means that a wide, sandy swathe is free for sunbathing, sandcastle building and hammock swinging. What's better, the beach gets very little foot traffic this far south, so it feels like you have the whole place to yourself. Six deluxe condos are equipped with full kitchens, wireless internet access, cable TV and – lest you forget where you are – private verandahs with sea views. Bikes and kayaks are available for guest use.

Exotic Caye Beach Resort (Map p124; ☎ 226-2870; www.belizeisfun.com; Coconut Dr; 1-bedroom condos BZ\$344-450, 2-bedroom condos BZ\$490-720; 🍷 🍷) By 'exotic,' the owners mean beachfront thatched-roof cabanas, freshwater swimming pool and friendly beach bar. The condos are nothing fancy (certainly not exotic), but the guaranteed views of the Caribbean's sparkling waters more than make up for this. Divers, note the resort's on-site dive shop offers both technical and recreational diving.

Victoria House (Map p124; ☎ 226-2067, in USA 800-247-5159; www.victoria-house.com; Sea Grape Dr; state r BZ\$372, casitas BZ\$616, plantation r/ste BZ\$638/773; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Two miles south of the airport, this elegant beach resort is one of the oldest

on the island. A beautiful beach and grassy grounds are shaded by a healthy stand of palm trees. Rooms are in thatched-roof casitas, with colorful Caribbean themes, or colonial-style 'plantation' houses, with a sophisticated white-on-white scheme that oozes luxury.

Xanadu Island Resort (Map p124; ☎ 226-2814; www.xanaduresort-belize.com; Sea Grape Dr; ste BZ\$408-452, loft BZ\$538-580, 2-bedroom apt BZ\$580-860; 🍷 🍷 🍷) When the Travel Channel's Samantha Brown came to San Pedro, she stayed at Xanadu, so you know this place has something going for it. Ms Brown stayed in the oceanfront deluxe apartment, but you might opt for a slightly simpler studio or loft apartment. It doesn't really matter, as they are all fitted with every amenity and an atmosphere of rustic luxury. The thatched-roof cabanas are clustered around an enticing freshwater swimming pool, shaded by palm trees. Bicycles, kayaks and snorkel gear are complimentary.

NORTH ISLAND

The North Island is where you want to go if you really want to get away from it all. These resorts are all top end and mainly accessible by boat; you can travel in and out by golf cart to at least as far north as the Portofino Resort, but the island ferry is probably a more pleasant way to go (see p125).

Cocotal Inn & Cabanas (Map p124; ☎ 226-3077; www.cocotalbelize.com; d BZ\$262-314, ste BZ\$523; 🍷 🍷) A wonderful new addition to the North Island, the Cocotal has four rental units, each with a kitchenette. Look for a cool colonial atmosphere, with fans hanging from high mahogany ceilings, potted plants, tile floors and wicker furniture. The most charming unit is the cupola-topped casita, with sunlight pouring through the skylights. It's all very secluded and sophisticated and good value to boot.

Costa Maya Reef Resort (Map p124; ☎ in USA 877-451-1240; www.costamayareef.com; 1-/2-bedroom condos BZ\$390/540; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Big rotunda-style buildings house 30 contemporary condos (which sleep four to six people). The place is pretty innocuous, but all of the activities and amenities are here, including snorkeling and scuba, beachfront bar, free bikes and kayaks, and loads of activities for kids. Costa Maya is 6.5 miles north of San Pedro, accessible only by the island ferry (see p141).

Captain Morgan's Retreat (Map p124; ☎ 226-2567; captmorgan@btl.net; casitas/villas BZ\$435/545; 🍷 🍷 🍷) All you need to know is that Captain Morgan's

Retreat was the filming location for the first season of the reality TV show *Temptation Island* (if you're not familiar with this show, be grateful). Enjoy thatch cabins with private porches, two swimming pools and lots of reggae music. Beware the timeshare sales pitch!

Journey's End (Map p124; ☎ in USA 800-460-5665; www.journeysendresort.com; lagoon-view/garden-view/beachfront r BZ\$440/528/583, meal plan per person BZ\$132; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Whether you want a view of the crystal-blue Caribbean or the emerald-green garden, your lodging at Journey's End is spacious and sophisticated, with big windows, high ceilings and romantic four-poster mahogany beds. A dive shop, spa, restaurant and bar are at your doorstep. Add on BZ\$270 per person for a private transfer from Belize City. Besides pampering its guests, Journey's End makes a point of caring for its environs. Guests appreciate the biodegradable shampoos and soaps in the bathroom, and the homegrown, organic ingredients in the kitchen. Other efforts go unseen, such as the water conservation policy that includes collecting rainwater and reusing graywater.

White Sands Cove (Map p124; ☎ 226-3528; www.whitesandscove.com; 1-bedroom condos BZ\$470-512, 2-bedroom condos BZ\$637-721; 🍷 🍷 🍷) If you want to get away from it all without giving up any of the comforts of home, White Sands Cove – about 2.5 miles north of San Pedro – is for you. Condos are furnished with fully equipped kitchens, gas grills, spacious living areas (where you can watch one of 60 channels on your big TV) and high-speed internet. The beach bar, freshwater pool and tropical spa ensure optimal relaxation, while active types can take advantage of the on-site dive shop or the complimentary bikes and kayaks. Receives rave reviews for above-and-beyond service.

El Pescador Lodge & Villas (Map p124; ☎ 226-2398; www.elpescador.com; standard r BZ\$492, 1-/2-/3-bedroom villas BZ\$784/1150/1515; 🍷 🍷 🍷) With the atmosphere of a charming old-time fishing lodge and the amenities of a luxury hotel, this 21-acre property is a sweet retreat for anglers and adventurers. Set in an intimate, colonial-style building, the sea-facing standard rooms have polished hardwood floors and colorful handwoven tapestries. The villas are nothing short of vast – perfect if you have family or friends in tow. Located 2.6 miles north of the cut.

our pick Capricorn Resort (Map p124; ☎ 226-2809; www.capricornresort.net; d BZ\$537; 🍷 closed mid-Sep–mid-Oct; 🍷) Unexpectedly luxurious, Capricorn

has three sweet but sumptuous cabanas. Decorated in rich jewel tones and handmade artisan crafts, they feature romantic details such as private porches and showers built for two. Capricorn heats up for a few hours each evening, when people from town boat up to dine at the outstanding restaurant. The grounds are a botanical wonderland, bursting with blooms of Belize's native plant species. The small size means that the local habitat was barely disturbed by the construction of the cabanas, which are made from hardwoods and thatch.

Matachica Beach Resort (Map p124; ☎ 220-5010; www.matachica.com; sea-breeze bungalows BZ\$580, sea-view ste BZ\$710, beachfront casitas \$865, luxury villas for 4 BZ\$1515, all incl breakfast; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Vying for the title of 'swankiest resort,' Matachica is extravagant, exotic and eclectic. This place is serious about the idea of tropical luxury, so down duvets and Frette linens cover the mosquito-netted beds, and each thatched-roof cottage has a private patio, hung with hammocks, of course. Other highlights include the award-winning Mambo Restaurant and the indulgent Jade Spa. It's 5 miles north of San Pedro.

Portofino Resort (Map p124; ☎ 220-5096; www.portofinobelize.com; beachfront cabanas BZ\$635, treetop ste from BZ\$735, meal plan per person BZ\$132; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Who knew a thatched-roof cabin could be so chic? With high ceilings, huge picture windows, Mexican tiles and Guatemalan rugs, these lodgings are at once primitive and plush. The resort's total capacity is 32, making it wonderfully intimate. Gourmands come up from San Pedro by the boatload to dine at the world-class restaurant Le Bistro (p138).

Eating

Although there are plenty of options for cheap street food, pizza and sandwiches, it's hard to sit down at a San Pedro restaurant without paying as much as BZ\$50 per person. Dining on Ambergis is startlingly expensive, especially in comparison with the rest of Belize. That said, diners usually get their money's worth, as Ambergis is home to the country's freshest seafood and most innovative chefs.

SAN PEDRO

For the budget-conscious traveler, several small cafés in the town center serve cheap, simple meals. Try the food stands in front of the park, where a plate of chicken with rice

and beans, barbecue meat or fish and other delicacies is under BZ\$10.

Budget

Papi's Diner (Map p124; ☎ 226-2047; Pescador Dr; breakfast & lunch BZ\$2-10, mains BZ\$20-40; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) At the far north end of town, this small, friendly place is an excellent budget option. For breakfast, choose from burritos, *huevos rancheros*, omelettes or bacon with hash browns. For lunch and dinner, it offers elaborate main courses but the bargains are in the burgers, chicken, pork chops and fish fillets.

our pick Ruby's Café (Map p127; ☎ 226-2063; Barrier Reef Dr; pastries BZ\$3-5; 🍷 6am-6pm) This tiny place is packed with locals during the morning hours. Nobody can resist the sweet and sticky cinnamon rolls, chicken-filled Johnny cakes, homemade banana cake, hot tortillas filled with ham, cheese and beans, and more. There is no place to sit so grab your breakfast to go and find a shady spot on the beach.

Celi's Deli (Map p127; ☎ 226-2014; Barrier Reef Dr; deli items BZ\$3-10, restaurant mains BZ\$16-30; 🍷 deli 6am-6pm, restaurant lunch & dinner) A fantastic find for breakfast or lunch, Celi's Deli serves food to go – sandwiches, meat pies, tacos, tamales and homemade cakes. You can take your snack across the street and eat on the deck in front of the San Pedro Holiday Hotel. This is where you will find Celi's Restaurant, which is also recommended (especially for the Wednesday night beach barbecue).

Tabu (Map p127; ☎ 226-2254; Vilma Linda Plaza, Tarpon St; meals BZ\$10-20; 🍷 7am-5pm; 🍷) When you can't take the heat, retreat to this friendly café and sandwich shop. At breakfast, you can indulge in pancakes, waffles or French toast, topped with fresh fruit and doused in syrup. For lunch, choose from the selection of interesting sandwiches and burgers, as well as fresh salads and other vegetarian options. There is also a good menu of espresso drinks, making this an inviting place to relax and do the coffee shop thing, tropical style.

Estel's Dine by the Sea (Map p127; ☎ 226-2019; Pelican St; meals BZ\$10-30; 🍷 6am-5pm) This long-standing breakfast favorite is basically an extension of the beach – complete with sandy floors and ocean breezes. Stop by for a breakfast burrito, fruit-filled jacks or an eye-opening coffee.

Midrange & Top End

Caramba Restaurant (Map p127; ☎ 226-4321; www.ambergiscaye.com/caramba; Pescador Dr; burgers BZ\$9-12,

mains BZ\$20-40; 🍷 lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Caramba is the busiest place in town due to its excellent food, fun atmosphere and attentive service. Mexican and Creole dishes focus on fresh fish and seafood cooked in at least 10 tasty ways. There are a few tables on the street, but the tropical decor inside only enhances your seafood feast.

El Patio Restaurant & Grill (Map p127; ☎ 226-3898; Black Coral St; lunch mains BZ\$10-20, dinner mains BZ\$30-50; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Potted plants, flowing fountain and a candlelit interior make this sand-floored *palapa* an inviting setting for a romantic dinner. Grilled meats and seafood are the specialty, accompanied by fresh-squeezed, thirst-quenching fruit juices or ice cold Belikin beers.

Blue Water Grill (Map p127; ☎ 226-3347; www.bluewatergrillbelize.com; Sun Breeze Beach Hotel, Coconut Dr; starters & salads BZ\$10-30, mains BZ\$20-50; 🍷 7am-9:30pm) It's hard to resist the huge open-air restaurant on this beachfront property, and almost everybody who comes to San Pedro ends up eating here at some point. Few are disappointed. The menu is wide-ranging, including some safe options such as pizza and pasta, as well as more adventurous Asian-influenced seafood dishes. The place is always busy, but it's big so you probably won't have to wait for a table, however, service can be slow once you are seated.

Jambel Jerk Pit (Map p127; ☎ 226-3515; Coral Beach Hotel, Barrier Reef Dr; mains BZ\$16-30; 🍷 10am-10pm) Spice it up at the Jambel Jerk Pit, specializing in Jamaican jerk with Belizean flare. Whether you want fish, chicken or pork – or the famous Jamaica Mi Crazy Shrimp – your order will be as spicy as you like it. Wednesday nights feature an all-you-can-eat buffet that will satiate the hungriest Rasta Mon.

Elvi's Kitchen (Map p127; ☎ 226-2176; Pescador Dr; mains BZ\$20-50; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This San Pedro institution has been around since the early days, serving up local specialties such as shrimp creole, fried chicken and conch ceviche. The funky tropical decor, loud marimba music and expensive T-shirts for sale (not to mention the overpriced entrées) give it a Disney-like atmosphere. But it's a good place to sample some authentic and filling local cuisine.

our pick Wild Mango's (Map p127; ☎ 226-2859; Barrier Reef Dr; mains BZ\$30-50; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Exuding a carefree, casual ambience (as a beachfront restaurant should), this open-air restaurant manages to serve up some of the

island's most consistent and creative cuisine. With a hint of the Caribbean and a hint of Mexico, the dishes showcase fresh seafood, Cajun spices and local fruits and vegetables. The place is always packed – come early or make a reservation.

SOUTH OF TOWN

George's Kitchen (Map p124; ☎ 226-2974; Coconut Dr; meals BZ\$6-12; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Opposite the entrance to Corona del Mar, this little seafood and sandwich shack is one of San Pedro's hidden food gems. An excellent option for breakfast, with big omelettes and other hearty egg dishes.

El Divino (Map p124; ☎ 226-2444; www.bananabeach.com; Banana Beach Resort, Coconut Dr; breakfast BZ\$10-16, mains BZ\$20-40; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This street-side eatery gets heaps of praise, especially for its filling breakfasts, steaks and wood-fired pizzas. The beach-themed decor is not exactly subtle, as you will notice as soon as you catch a glimpse of the reef mural on the wall (or, even better, the sunset vista in the martini lounge). Staff members dressed in brightly colored tropical uniforms ensure a fun and friendly ambience.

Casa Picasso (Map p124; ☎ 226-4507; tapas BZ\$10-30; ☺ dinner Mon-Sat) Combining the flavors of the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, Casa Picasso is a semi-swanky place for tapas and pasta (taking full advantage of local seafood, of course). If that's not hip enough for you, add some jazzy music or a fruit-flavored martini. This place is slightly off the beaten track – head south on Coconut Dr and turn right at the intersection near Island Internet – but it's worth the extra effort. Reservations recommended.

Tastes of Thailand (Map p124; ☎ 226-2601; Sea Grape Dr; mains BZ\$20-50; ☺ dinner Mon-Sat) In an appealing, traditional house, this is a tiny place with only six tables and arguably tacky decor. But vegetarians and meat-eaters alike will rejoice at the menu of authentic Thai favorites, including tofu or cashew dishes, satays and *tom yum* (spicy soup with lemongrass, prawns etc).

Palmilla Restaurant (Map p124; ☎ 226-2067; www.victoria-house.com; Sea Grape Dr; mains BZ\$30-60; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The classy, candlelit restaurant at Victoria House is overseen by New York-trained chef José Luis Ortega, who ensures high-quality cuisine for his discriminating guests. At lunchtime, you might prefer Admiral Nelson's Beach Bar, the hotel's casual, open-air café on the beachfront.

NORTH ISLAND

Some visitors take the dirt road only as far as the Sweet Basil restaurant for lunch or the Palapa Bar for drinks, before heading back to San Pedro. Others travel up the coast by launch for an exotic starlit evening at one of the North Island's excellent restaurants. You can expect unusual menus featuring excellent seafood dishes. See p141 for the schedule and prices for the island ferry.

our pick Beach n' Kitchen (Map p124; ☎ 226-4456; fruit smoothies BZ\$4, mains BZ\$10-20; ☺ breakfast & lunch) If you are cycling up the coast, this sweet spot is a perfect pit stop; place your order and take a seat on the breezy deck. Look for fresh squeezed fruit juices, homemade cookies, cold soups and hearty sandwiches. On Saturday and Sunday, an all-day brunch menu includes eggs Benedict, cinnamon bread, French toast with fruit topping and – of course – a Bloody Mary or mimosa to start the day right.

Sweet Basil (Map p124; ☎ 326-2113; mains BZ\$15-30; ☺ 11am-9pm) A quarter of a mile north of the cut, this high-end gourmet deli has an attractive but unlikely location overlooking the lagoon. The open-air restaurant is set in a wooden, Victorian-style home amid a flower-filled tropical garden. It prepares light meals of sandwiches made with home-baked bread, pâtés, platters of imported cheeses and meats, and pasta dishes. International wines are available.

Le Bistro (Map p124; ☎ 220-5096; Portofino Resort; mains BZ\$20-40; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With a chef trained in French and Italian cuisine and a brilliant Belizean setting, the European-Caribbean fusion cuisine at Le Bistro makes perfect sense. The all-sauté menu features freshly caught snapper, lobster and other seafood prepared with diverse (and divine) sauces. A new vegetarian menu caters for animal-free eaters. If you're feeling really romantic, inquire about private dining on the pier. A complimentary shuttle boat leaves Fido's Dock at 6:30pm; reservations recommended.

Rendezvous Restaurant & Winery (Map p124; ☎ 226-3426; www.ambergiscaye.com/rendezvous; mains BZ\$40-60; ☺ lunch & dinner) Four miles north of town, Rendezvous is unique in San Pedro – if not Belize. Set in a ramshackle house on the beach, this colonial-style place artfully blends the flavors of French and Thai cuisine, with exquisite results. Try Thai pepper pork with roasted garlic chips or fresh fish with coconut cream sauce with saffron and

cilantro. House wines are made at the winery on the grounds.

Mambo Restaurant (Map p124; ☎ 220-5011; Matachica Beach Resort; mains BZ\$40-80; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Matachica Beach Resort's award-winning restaurant is as eclectic and exotic as the resort itself. Specializing in Mediterranean fare such as pasta and paella, the menu does not skimp on fresh seafood and local seasonal produce. While you are here, be sure to stroll around the grounds to thoroughly appreciate this tropical fantasy. Reservations required.

our pick Capricorn Restaurant (Map p124; ☎ 226-2809; Capricorn Resort; mains BZ\$50-70; ☺ Thu-Tue) This restaurant's nouvelle cuisine has long been considered among the best in Belize. By day you can chill out under the *palapa* at the beach bar; at night the open-air restaurant is lit by festive twinkling lights. Dinner specials change daily, but they might include stone-crab claws with a garlic and herb dip, filet mignon with portobello mushroom sauce or grilled lobster tail painted with garlic butter. The most requested item is a sensational appetizer: sun-dried tomato pesto drizzled over cream cheese and basil leaves, served with homemade bread. Reservations are essential; book a table and it's yours for the night.

Drinking

Most hotels have comfortable bars, often with sand floors, thatched roofs and reggae music. The following bars open from late morning till late at night (unless otherwise noted).

BC's Beach Bar (Map p127; ☎ 226-3289; ☺ 9am-midnight) This little shack on the beach is one of the hottest spots on the island for cool breezes and cold drinks. There's not much of a menu, but Sunday afternoon sees a hoppin' beach barbecue and jam session. Local bands also play on Thursday nights.

Tackle Box (Map p127; ☎ 226-3235; Water Taxi Pier) Right next to the water taxi dock, the Tackle Box extends a warm welcome (usually with a reggae beat) to everyone arriving in San Pedro. It is a popular first stop, allowing patrons to have a drink, unwind and get into the island frame of mind.

Palapa Bar (Map p124; ☎ 226-3111; North Island) This over-the-water *palapa* is about a half-mile north of the San Pedro River. If you're hungry you can nosh on pulled-pork sandwiches and fresh fish tacos. Otherwise, it's a fantastic place for tropical drinks and cold beers any time of day. Happy hour is from 4pm to 6pm daily.

Pier Lounge (Map p127; ☎ 226-2002; Spindrift Hotel, cnr Barrier Reef Dr & Buccaneer St; ☺ 10am-midnight Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) This otherwise innocuous sports bar has made a name for itself by hosting the weekly World Famous Chicken Drop (6pm Wednesday), giving new insight to the origin of the term 'chicken shit.' (Sort of like bingo with chickens, the floor is divided into numbered squares and a chicken is put in the middle of it; participants place bets on where it will drop a turd.) Give people enough alcohol and they are amused by anything. This place also has a giant plasma TV, bingo and karaoke.

Other recommended drinking spots south of town include the following:

Crazy Canuck's (Map p124) Open to cooling sea breezes. Staff are friendly and regular patrons welcoming.

Pedro's Inn (Map p124; ☎ 206-2198; Sea Grape Dr) Come to eat pizza, play pool and watch sports on the big screen.

Roadkill Bar (Map p124) Live music at 7pm Monday; Roadkill BBQ Monday eve and Saturday morning.

Entertainment

Fido's (Map p127; ☎ 226-2056; www.fidosbelize.com; 18 Barrier Reef Dr; ☺ 11am-midnight) This enormous *palapa* – decorated with seafaring memorabilia – attracts crowds for drinking, dancing and hooking up. There's plenty of seating, an extensive food menu and an ample-sized dance floor. Live music is on every night at 8pm – classic and acoustic rock, reggae and the occasional record spin. For those staying at the southern end of the island, **Fido's Sandbar** (☎ 226-4220; 1 Seagrape St) is on the grounds of the Royal Caribbean Resort. The *palapa* bar offers good vibes, cold beers and beach bowling!

Jaguar's Temple Club (Map p127; ☎ 226-4077; Barrier Reef Dr; ☺ 9:30pm-3am Thu-Sat) You can't miss this surreal Maya temple, complete with jaguar face, across from the central beachside park. The place does its very best to create a 'wild' atmosphere, with jungle dioramas setting the stage and lighting effects keeping it spooky. Hip-hop and breakbeat music keeps dancers on their feet. When you need to take a breaker, check out the streetside Rehab Lounge (open 3pm to midnight Tuesday to Sunday).

Barefoot Iguana (Map p124; ☎ 226 2927; Coconut Dr; ☺ from 10pm Wed & Sat) This high-energy club evokes the more whimsical side of the rainforest, with an indoor waterfall and plenty of faux greenery. Loud music with heavy bass, dark dance floors with funky lighting effects

and an endless flow of alcohol guarantee a good time for those with fancy feet.

Shopping

Plenty of gift shops in the hotels and on and around Barrier Reef Dr sell T-shirts, beachwear, hammocks, jewelry and ceramics. But there are also interesting boutiques, fancy gift stores, art galleries and woodwork shops. Prices are high but you might find unique and artistic souvenirs. Sometimes artisans sell their woodwork and handicrafts from stalls on the street near the central park or on the beach.

Ambar (Map p127; ☎ 226-3101; Fido's, 18 Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) Beautiful handmade jewelry in interesting and diverse styles, including plenty of options out of the namesake stone.

Ambergis Jade (Map p127; ☎ 226-3311; 45 Barrier Reef Dr) The Maya valued jadeite for its iridescent beauty and perceived powers. Different varieties were believed to enhance creativity, stimulate positive energy and offer protection from evil spirits. This so-called 'Jade & Maya History Museum' carries a wide variety of beautiful Guatemalan jade in the form of jewelry and other carved objects. Also offers appraisal services.

Barefoot Books (Map p127; ☎ 226-3563; www.barefootbooks-belize.com; Pescador Dr; ☎ 9am-9pm) The biggest and best bookstore in Belize, with an excellent selection of travel books and reference books about Belize history and culture. This is also the place to trade in your used paperbacks and pick up a new novel to peruse on the beach.

Belizean Arts Gallery (Map p127; ☎ 226-3019; www.belizeanarts.com; Fido's, 18 Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) This is one of the country's best shops for local art and handicrafts, selling ceramics, woodcarvings, Garifuna drums and antiques alongside affordable and tasteful knick knacks. You'll also find a decent selection of paintings by local and national artists. Rainforest-flora beauty products, including soaps, are on sale.

Caribe Creations (Map p127; ☎ 226-2803; Barrier Reef Dr) Take a bit of Belizean style home with you; here you'll find custom-made clothes with Caribbean flare, ranging from beach cover-ups and do-rags to silky sarongs and wedding gowns, all in free-flowing fabrics with a distinctive 'island' design.

C's Furniture World (Map p127; ☎ 226-4037; Pescador Dr; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) If you are heading further into Belize, you are better off buying

your wood products and furniture in Cayo, where prices are lower and the selection is more diverse. But otherwise, stop by C's to see the handiwork with mahogany, rosewood and teak.

Rum, Cigar & Coffee House (Map p127; ☎ 226-2020; Pescador Dr; ☎ 9am-9pm) Catering to all of your vices, with a good selection of fresh roasted coffee beans, local rums and cigars from all over the Caribbean. Stop by for a taste test, which will give you the chance to sample several coffee and fruit-flavored liqueurs.

Getting There & Away

Tropic Air (☎ 226-2338; www.tropicair.com) offers hourly flights to/from the Belize International Airport (BZ\$126, 20 minutes) and the Belize City municipal airstrip, 12 miles closer to town (BZ\$70, 20 minutes). About half the flights stop at Caye Caulker (BZ\$70, five minutes, six daily). Additional flights depart for Corozal (BZ\$95, 20 minutes, five daily). All flights depart between 7am and 5pm daily.

Maya Island Air (☎ 226-2435; www.mayaairways.com) has a similar schedule, with hourly flights to Belize International Airport (BZ\$126, 15 minutes) and the Belize City municipal airstrip (adult/child BZ\$70/52, 25 minutes). Six flights a day stop at Caye Caulker (adult/child BZ\$70/52, 10 minutes), while four go to Corozal (adult/child BZ\$95/69, 25 minutes).

Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association (☎ 226-0992; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com; Shark's Dock) runs boats between San Pedro, Caye Caulker and Belize City, with stops at Caye Chapel (BZ\$20) upon request. Boats to Belize City (adult/child BZ\$20/10, 1½ hours) via Caye Caulker (BZ\$15/10, 45 minutes) leave San Pedro at 8am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 1pm, 2:30pm and 3:30pm (also 4:30pm Friday through Sunday and holidays). An express boat goes direct to Belize City at 7am.

The **Thunderbolt** (☎ 422-0026; www.ambergis.caye.com/thunderbolt; Thunderbolt Dock) departs San Pedro's lagoon-side dock at 7am and 3pm for Corozal (one-way/round-trip BZ\$45/85, two hours), stopping at Sarteneja upon request.

Getting Around

You can walk into town from the airport in 10 minutes or less, and the walk from the boat docks is even shorter. **San Pedro Taxi Association** (☎ 206-2076) drives minivans. From the airport one or two people pay BZ\$6 to any place in

town, or BZ\$8 to BZ\$10 to the hotels south of town. Taxis are prohibited from crossing the toll bridge (BZ\$2) to the North Island, but bicycles and golf carts are allowed.

BICYCLE

Many hotels and resorts provide bikes for their guests for a small fee or for free. Otherwise, you can rent a bike at **Joe's Bicycle Rentals** (Map p127; ☎ 226-5371; cnr Pescador Dr & Caribeña St; 3hr/24hr/week US\$6/9/40; ☎ 8am-6pm) or **Calvio's Bike Rental** (Map p127; ☎ 661-7143; www.belizeextremeadventure.com; Pescador Dr).

BOAT

The **Island Ferry** (☎ 226-3231) operates an Ambergis-only water-taxi service north and south from Fido's Dock. In the high season, boats depart every two hours from 7am to 5pm and hourly from 6pm to 10pm, stopping at the north-end resorts. There are midnight and 2am runs on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights. The return trip is 45 minutes later (7:45am, 9:45am etc). The ferry also runs south to Fido's Sandbar (just south of Victoria House) four times a day.

The cost is BZ\$15/10 per adult/child one way to Journey's End, BZ\$25/15 to resorts north of Journey's End. Southbound, passengers pay BZ\$7 each way to/from Fido's Sandbar. Special runs out of hours cost BZ\$40 from Fido's Dock to Journey's End for one to three people and BZ\$60 to resorts beyond Journey's End. North Island resorts also frequently run their own shuttle services for guests to/from San Pedro.

GOLF CART

These days, traffic jams are not unusual in San Pedro due to the glut of golf carts cruising the streets. Note that some golf carts are battery-powered and others run on gas; the former being more ecologically sound and the latter having greater endurance. If you are addicted to motorized transport, you can get yours at any of the following rental agencies:

Castle Cars (Map p127; ☎ 226-2421; www.castlecars.belize.com; 1 Barrier Reef Dr) Gas-powered carts are BZ\$115 for a half-day (eight hours), BZ\$131 for a full day (24 hours) or BZ\$540 for one week (seven days). One tank of gas is included, plus a free refill on long-term rentals. **Island Adventures** (Map p127; ☎ 226-4343; www.islandgolfcarts.com; Coconut Dr) Rent a four-seater for BZ\$132/550 per day/week or a six-seater for BZ\$192/696. **Moncho's Island Auto** (Map p127; ☎ 226-3262; www.monchorentals.com; Coconut Dr) Rents out battery-

powered carts for a half-/full day for BZ\$88/129 or gas-powered carts for BZ\$108/143 (including gas). **Moncho's** will deliver your vehicle to your hotel for your convenience. **Polo's EZ-Go Rentals** (Map p127; ☎ 226-5542; Barrier Reef Dr) Rents out four-seaters for one/eight/24 hours for BZ\$50/90/120.

CAYE CAULKER

pop 1300

'No Shirt, No Shoes...No Problem.' You'll see this sign everywhere in Belize, but no place is it more apt than Caye Caulker. Indeed nothing seems to be a problem on this tiny island, where many dogs nap in the middle of the dirt road and suntanned cyclists pedal around them. The only traffic sign on the island instructs golf carts and bicycles to 'go slow,' a directive that is taken seriously.

The one thousand or so residents have traditionally made their living from the sea, specifically from the spiny lobsters and red snapper that inhabit its warm waters. It has also long been a budget travelers' mecca, part of a classic backpacker route from Tulum, Mexico to Tikal and Antigua, Guatemala. In recent years, the economy has been shifting, as tourists of all ages and incomes are beginning to appreciate the island's unique atmosphere. On Caye Caulker, there are no cars, no fumes and no hassles, just white sandy beaches, balmy breezes, fresh seafood, azure waters and a fantastic barrier reef at its doorstep.

Caye Caulker offers fewer amenities than Ambergis, but that is part of the charm of this place. All the residents know each other and it won't take long before they know you, too.

The easygoing attitude is due in part to the thriving Rastafarian culture on the Caye, which pulses to a reggae beat. If it's not Bob Marley blaring from a boom box on the beach, it's the latest in punta rock. Drumming groups gather on the beach and at local bars to get their Afro-Caribbean groove on. They play for themselves, but anybody is welcome to gather around and soak up the good vibes.

The island is an ideal base for snorkeling and diving adventures at the nearby reef. The northern part of the island – a tempting destination for kayakers – is mostly mangroves, which are home to an amazing variety of birdlife. Other than that, all visitors should be sure to schedule in plenty of time for swinging on a hammock and enjoying the breeze (which is indeed a legitimate activity on Caye Caulker).

History

Caye Caulker was originally a fishing settlement. It became popular with 17th-century British buccaneers as a place to stop for water and to work on their boats. Like Ambergris Caye, it grew in population with the War of the Castes (see *In Living Color: British Honduras*, p34), and is known mainly as a Mestizo island. It was purchased in 1870 by Luciano Reyes, whose descendants still live on the island. Reyes parceled the land out to a handful of families, and to this day descendants of those first landowners still live in the general vicinities of those original parcels. These islanders were self sufficient and exported turtle meat until the turtle population was decimated.

During much of the 20th century, coconut processing, fishing, lobster trapping and boat building formed the backbone of the island's economy. Caulker was one of the first islands to establish a fisherfolk cooperative in the 1960s, allowing members to receive fair prices for the lobster and other sea life pulled from their waters.

Caye Caulker remains a fishing village, and boat design and construction continue, but tourism is taking over the economy. Tourism began in the late 1960s and 1970s when small numbers of hippies found their way to the island. Today, international visitors come in steady numbers, however, although many islanders operate tourism-related businesses, there are no plans for large-scale development. Caulker residents enjoy the slow rhythm of life as much as visitors do.

Orientation

Caulker village has three main north-south streets: from east to west these are the Front, Middle and Back Sts. The streets are now officially called Avenidas Hicaco, Langosta and Mangle, though you're unlikely to hear the new names used. The main dock street runs east-west through the center of the village. There are another 15 or so east-west streets; some of them might have names but they are not used.

In 1961 Hurricane Hattie carved 'the Split' through the island just north of the village. (Some locals contend that this waterway is actually man-made; indeed, some villagers maintain that they were involved in the dredging!) North of the Split is mostly undeveloped (although not for much longer, as the land has

been subdivided for housing and a path cuts through here). A few folk live on the North Island just over the Split. The most northerly part of Caulker is the Caye Caulker Forest Reserve (p144).

From the dock street north to the Split is around half a mile. The village stretches another half-mile or so south from the dock street to the airstrip and there are a few houses south of the airstrip. Though most of the tourist facilities are on the east side of the village, there are a couple of places to stay and a restaurant or two 'to the back.' Here you get lovely sunsets and seclusion, but you pay with a longer walk into civilization and extra bugs.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 911, 226-0179; Front St)

INTERNET ACCESS

Caye Caulker Cyber Café (Front St; per hr BZ\$14;

☎ 7am-10pm) Air-conditioned; has a bar with happy hour from 3pm to 6pm.

Cayeboard Connection (Front St; per hr BZ\$15;

☎ 8am-9pm) In an air-conditioned prefab building; also has a book exchange.

Taj Internet (☎ 226-0034; Front St; per hr BZ\$10) The computers are not equipped with timers, so you are better off keeping track of your own usage. This place also acts as an agent for Linea Dorada and San Juan Express bus services to Guatemala and Mexico.

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.cayecaulker.org Includes links to an active message board, travel hints and loads of info.

www.cayecaulkerbelize.net The village council's site, which has news of upcoming events.

www.cybercayecaulker.com Besides the typical information about tours and accommodations, also hosts links to local artists, galleries and other souvenir specialists.

www.gocayecaulker.com The official site of the Caye Caulker branch of the Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA).

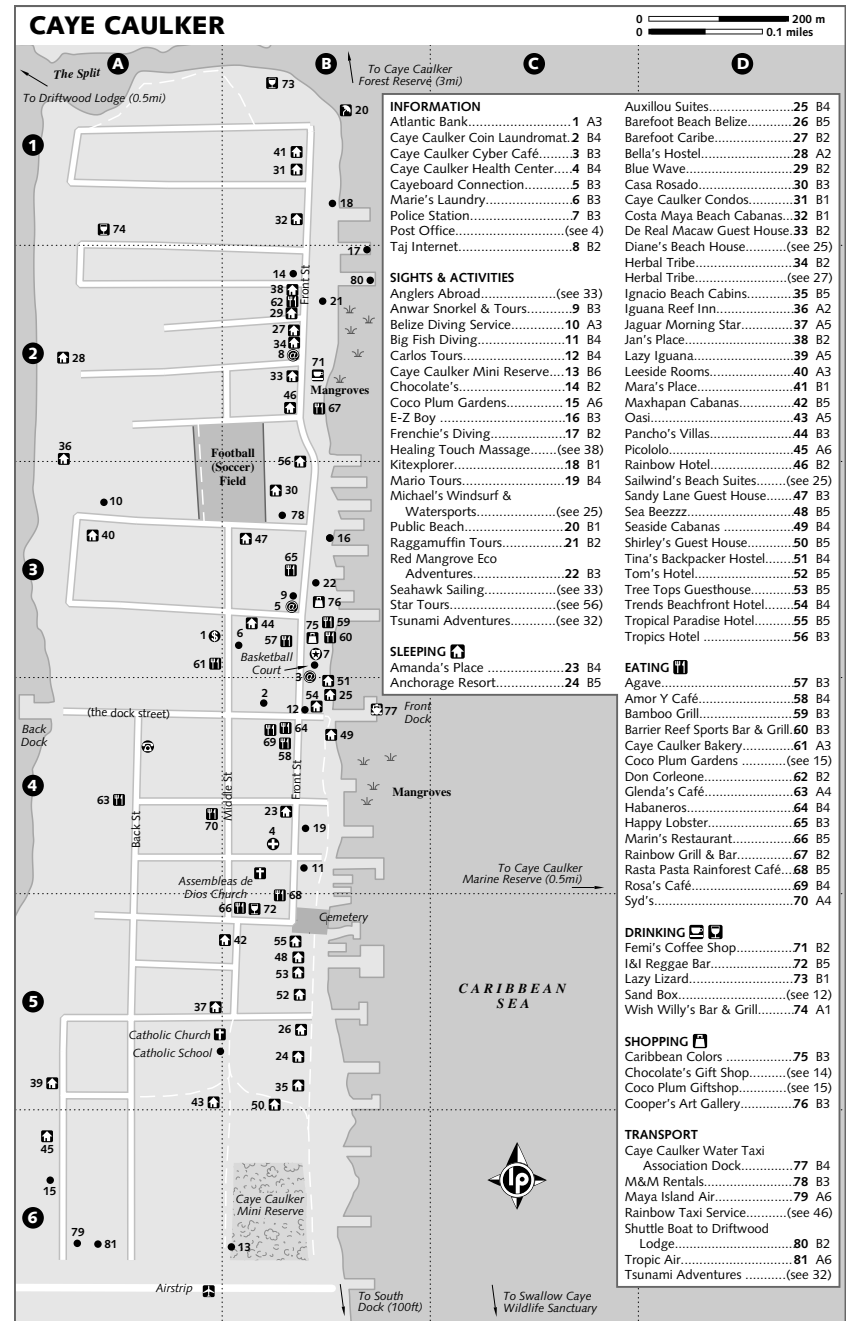
LAUNDRY

Caye Caulker Coin Laundromat (the dock st; wash, dry & soap per load BZ\$20; ☎ 7am-9pm)

Marie's Laundry (Middle St; per 8lb BZ\$10)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Caye Caulker Health Center (☎ 226-0166) Just off Front St, two blocks south of the dock street. Operates on a donation basis.



MONEY

Atlantic Bank (☎ 226-0207; Middle St; 🕒 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) Offer cash advances, as well as an ATM that functions on Cirrus and other international networks.

POST

Post office (Caye Caulker Health Center Bldg; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri)

Sights**CAYE CAULKER MARINE RESERVE**

Declared a marine reserve in 1998, the 61-sq-mile Caye Caulker Marine Reserve includes the portion of the barrier reef that runs parallel to the island, as well as the turtle grass lagoon adjacent to the Caye Caulker Forest Reserve. Although the reef is regenerating after patchy hurricane damage, it is rich with sea life, including colorful sponges, blue-and-yellow queen angel fish, Christmas tree worms, star coral, redband parrotfish, yellow gorgonians and more. Between April and September, snorkelers and divers might even spot a turtle or a manatee.

All local snorkel and dive operators lead tours to the Caye Caulker Marine Reserve; see opposite.

CAYE CAULKER FOREST RESERVE

The northernmost 100 acres of the island constitute the Caye Caulker Forest Reserve, also declared in 1998. The littoral forest on Caye Caulker is mostly red, white and black mangrove, which grows in the shallow water. The mangroves' root systems support an intricate ecosystem, including sponges, gorgonians, anemones and a wide variety of fish. Besides the mangroves, the forest contains buttonwood, gumbo-limbo (the 'tourist tree'), poisonwood, madre de cacao, ficus and zircote. Coconut palms and Australian pines are not native to this region, but there is no shortage of them.

Birdlife is prolific in the mangrove swamp, especially wading birds such as the tricolored

heron and songbirds including the mangrove warbler. Somewhat rare species that can be spotted include the white-crowned pigeon, rufous-necked rail and black catbird. Inland lagoons provide habitat for crocodiles and turtles, all five species of crabs, boa constrictors, scaly tailed iguanas (locally called 'wish willies'), geckos and lizards.

The forest reserve is only accessible by boat, but it's an excellent (if ambitious) destination for a kayaker. Many places to stay have kayaks available for their guests; otherwise, you can rent one from Chocolate's (p146). You may prefer to paddle up the calmer, west side of the island to avoid strong winds and rough seas. There is a visitors/research center and picnic area, and a platform trail through the mangrove forest.

SWALLOW CAYE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Southwest of Caye Caulker, the vast **Swallow Caye Wildlife Sanctuary** (☎ 226-0151; www.swallowcayemanatees.org; adult/child BZ\$10/5) spans nearly 9000 acres, including Swallow Caye and some parts of nearby Drowned Caye. Here, the ocean floor is covered with turtle grass beds, which support a small population of **West Indian manatees**.

For years, guides have been bringing tourists to this spot, in the hope of catching a glimpse of these gentle creatures as they chow down on the turtle grass. But the constant traffic put stress on the habitat, having the unintended effect of harming the manatees. After tireless efforts on the part of conservationists and guides, a wildlife sanctuary was finally established in 2002.

Now, strict guidelines are in place to protect the manatee and to encourage them to stay in the area. Swimming with manatees is now forbidden by the Belizean authorities and signs have been posted to dissuade boat operators from using their motors near the manatees and from speeding through the area. (Propeller injuries are one of the chief causes of manatee deaths.) There is a permanent caretaker in these waters, although some complain that this is not enough to adequately enforce regulations.

Nonetheless, those who monitor the manatees are encouraged by the increase in numbers at Swallow Caye. Patient visitors are usually rewarded with several sightings of breaching and feeding manatees, often including a mother and calf swimming together.

SEA ELEPHANTS

Belonging to a unique group of sea mammals comprising only four species worldwide, manatees are thought to be distantly related to elephants. However, with at least 55 million years separating the two, their kinship is only apparent in a few fairly obscure anatomical similarities and a broadly similar diet. Like elephants, manatees are herbivores and require huge amounts of vegetation each day. Grazing on a wide variety of aquatic plants, a large adult can process as much as 50kg every 24 hours, producing a prodigious amount of waste in the process – fresh floating droppings (similar to a horse's) and almost continuous, bubbling streams of flatulence are useful ways to find them. (Not too appetizing, but it does make them easier to spot.) The best places for a chance to observe manatees are around 'blowing holes' or *sopladeros* (deep hollows where manatees congregate to wait for the high tide).

Manatees are reputed to have excellent hearing, but they're most sensitive to fairly high frequency sounds, such as their squeaking vocalizations. Apparently, the engine of a motorboat is not a high-frequency sound, which means that quiet approaches are often rewarded with good viewing, although sadly it also makes them vulnerable to collisions with motorboats.

Chocolate Heredia was one of the first Caye Caulker fishermen who began ferrying backpackers out to Swallow Caye on his fishing boat. He has also played a crucial role in the establishment of the wildlife sanctuary and continued protection of the sea mammals. **Chocolate's** (☎ 226-0151; chocolate@bt.net; Front St) still leads excellent and informative tours, however sporadically. Other tour operators that take groups to Swallow Caye include **Red Mangrove Eco Adventures** (☎ 226-0069; www.mangrovebelize.com; Front St) and **E-Z Boy** (☎ 226-0349; e-zboytours@yahoo.ca).

Activities

Activity on the island focuses on water sports and sea life.

DIVING

Common dives made from Caye Caulker include two-tank dives to the local reef (BZ\$120); two-tank dives in the Hol Chan Marine Reserve area (BZ\$160, plus a BZ\$20 marine park fee); three dives off Turneffe Atoll (BZ\$230 to BZ\$300); and three-dive trips to the Blue Hole Natural Monument and Half Moon Caye (BZ\$250, plus BZ\$80 for park fees). For more information about Turneffe Atoll, Blue Hole and Half Moon Caye, see p156, p157 and p158 respectively.

Recommended dive companies include the following:

Belize Diving Service (☎ 226-0143; www.belizedivingservice.com) Professional and highly recommended dive shop that runs PADI certification courses and Advanced Open Water courses. It specializes in excellent trips to Turneffe Elbow, but doesn't go to the Blue Hole.

Big Fish Diving (☎ 226-0450; www.bigfishdivebelize.com; Front St) Caulker's largest dive outfit, offering daily trips to the Blue Hole, as well as outings to Turneffe and other local dives.

Frenchie's Diving (☎ 226-0234; www.frenchiesdivingbelize.com) Offers full-day trips (three dives) to Blue Hole and Turneffe and half-day trips (two dives) to Hol Chan, Caye Chapel or Spanish Bay. Night dives at Caye Caulker Marine Reserve cost BZ\$100. Promises groups of 10 divers or fewer.

SNORKELING

It is possible to snorkel around the Split and off the pier near the airstrip (see Swimming, p147), but to really experience life under the sea it's necessary to sign up with a tour operator and go out to the reef. Even though it is only a short boat ride offshore, only licensed guides are permitted to take snorkelers out to the reef, which aids in protecting this fragile ecosystem. Most guides are knowledgeable about the reef and adept at spotting and identifying many hidden creatures.

The most popular destination for snorkeling trips is Hol Chan Marine Reserve and Shark Ray Alley (see p126). Half-day trips (BZ\$60) leave at 9:30am or 10:30am and 2pm. Full-day tours (BZ\$90) include a stop in San Pedro for lunch (not included in the price).

Other half-day snorkeling trips visit the Caye Caulker Marine Reserve (opposite; BZ\$50), leaving at 10:30am and 2pm. Destinations include Coral Gardens, the Swoosh (a stand of coral near an opening in the reef where the current and swells attract a good variety of marine life) and **Shark Ray Village**, Caulker's own shark and ray habitat.

THE CAYE TO THE STINK

An acrid smell may arise from your bathroom or your freshly laundered clothes. This is from desalinated seawater or ground water, which is used for everything other than bathing, drinking and cooking.

FISHING WITH YOUR EYES: CARLOS AYALA *Mara Vorhees*

Carlos Ayala knows that people come to Caye Caulker to see the reef, and he is more than willing to show them – and teach them. Once a fisherman, he is now a snorkel guide, underwater photographer and jewelry designer. His favorite fish are the nurse shark, queen triggerfish, scrawled filefish and queen parrotfish. And the octopus (but that's a mollusk).

‘Even though I am a city boy, I have always loved the sea. I am an earth sign – Taurus – so my opposite is a water sign (Scorpio). Opposites attract. So, I used to be a fisherman, but now I only fish with my eyes.

‘Caye Caulker is a small village, but it's growing. An influx of tourism can change the whole island. More hotels mean more people, more restaurants and more fishing, which depletes the reef. Most tourists come to see the reef, but if they eat all the fish, we won't have anything to show them!

‘Without proper management, it could be a disaster. Now there is little or no management of the marine reserves. Over-fishing is a real problem due to lack of oversight. For example, there is a new regulation that has increased the minimum size of a lobster tail caught in these waters. But it is the co-op that enforces the rule; the co-op will not accept any lobster tail smaller than 4oz. So what do you think fishers do if they cannot sell their lobster to the co-op? They turn around and sell it directly to a restaurant! There is nothing to stop them doing this, no patrol boats, no other enforcement.

‘Many people ask me if my job is dangerous, especially after the Crocodile Hunter, Steve Irwin, was killed by a stingray. I have been bitten by a moray eel. A couple of times I have been nipped by a shark in the midst of a feeding frenzy. But I am not afraid of the animals in the water. I always approach the animals with respect, but I am not afraid.’

Carlos is the owner of Carlos Tours (below), which gives him ample opportunity to photograph the fish.

Some tour operators also take snorkel groups to Turneffe Atoll (p156), a longer trip that promises a more pristine reef and an even greater variety of fish. Dedicated snorkel tours to Blue Hole (p157) and Lighthouse Reef (p157) are rare, although snorkelers are usually welcome to tag along with dive boats (see p145).

All of the tour operators (see p148) take groups snorkeling, as do the sailing companies (right). Specialized snorkel tour operators include the following:

Anwar Snorkel & Tours (☎ 226-0327; liznovelo@hotmail.com; Front St) Well recommended.

Carlos Tours (☎ 226-0458; carlosayala10@hotmail.com; Front St) Carlos is an accomplished underwater photographer and he offers all of his guests a CD featuring photographs from their snorkel outing. See also the boxed text, above.

Mario's Tours (☎ 226-0056, 602-1773; mariostours@yahoo.com; Front St)

MANATEE-WATCHING

Tours to monitor the manatees journey to Swallow Caye Wildlife Sanctuary (p144), followed by one or two snorkeling stops and a lunch break at Sergeant's Caye or Goff's Caye. If you didn't have luck spotting manatees in the morning, the boat might return

to Swallow Caye in the afternoon to give it another go. Most of Caulker's tour operators can organize this trip for BZ\$120 to BZ\$130, although the specialist is Lionel 'Chocolate' Heredia, of **Chocolate's** (☎ 226-0151; chocolate@btl.net; Front St), pioneer of manatee tours and champion of this creature's cause.

SAILING

Several companies organize sailing trips, most of which are organized in a similar fashion to the snorkel tours, visiting two or three different sites – usually Caye Caulker Marine Reserve and Hol Chan Marine Reserve – and stopping somewhere for lunch. The difference is that your journey will be wind powered. In general, the sailboats are large, meaning they can take larger groups than the little motorboats other tour operators might use.

In addition to the snorkeling trips, these companies might offer sunset cruises (BZ\$40) and moonlight sailing trips (BZ\$60). Island-hopping trips include overnight excursions to Lighthouse Reef or Turneffe Atoll (BZ\$556), as well as multiday trips to the southern cayes and Placencia. These tours usually involve one or two nights camping on the beach, as well as plenty of snorkel stops.

Recommended companies:

Raggamuffin Tours (☎ 226-0348; www.raggamuffin.tours.com; Front St) Three-day sailing trips to Placencia depart every Tuesday and Friday. Raggamuffin has a reputation as a party boat!

Seahawk Sailing (☎ 607-0323; www.seahawksailingbelize.com; Front St)

SWIMMING

Hurricanes Mitch and Keith in 1998 and 2000 left strips of sand on Caye Caulker where there once were sea shrubs, and local authorities have also built up sandy beaches. However, seagrass is under the water along much of the shore, which doesn't make for pleasant wading or swimming. The best swimming is off the end of the docks that line the east side of the island. The docks are supposed to be public, but hotel owners have become proprietorial, putting up gates to give privacy to their guests who use the sun lounges and deck chairs provided.

Caye Caulker's **public beach** is at the northern end of the village at the Split. It's a popular spot for both tourists and locals, who drink at the Lazy Lizard and do cannonballs from the new diving board. The beach is small and scattered with debris; sunbathers lounge on a broken seawall that is crumbling into the ocean. But the water is cool and clean, thanks to the currents passing through the Split. You can snorkel around here, but beware of boats cruising through deeper water on the north shore.

If you prefer to catch your rays without the clamor of crowds, there is a lesser-known **public dock** south of town, near the airstrip. The end of the dock looks like it was wiped out by one of the hurricanes that passed through, but there is still plenty of space for sunbathing and swimming. The water is clear of seagrass, but fish hover in the shade underneath the dock, making for decent snorkeling. That said, getting out of the water is a bit precarious. There is no ladder, so you must wade in through the foliage or try to climb out onto the dock.

The surf breaks off the shore on the barrier reef and is easily visible from the eastern shore of Caye Caulker. Don't attempt to swim out to it as powerful boats speed through these waters. Crocodiles live in the waters on the west side of the island.

WINDSURFING & KITESURFING

With an easterly wind blowing much of the time, and shallow waters protected by the

barrier reef, Caulker has superb conditions for these sports, especially between November and July. To rent equipment or sign up for lessons, try the following:

Kitexplorer (☎ 623-8403; www.kitexplorer.com; Front St) Offers a three-hour introductory course or a nine-hour basic course, as well as equipment rental. Located at the northern end of the island near the Split.

Michael's Windsurf & Watersports (☎ 226-0452; www.staycayecaulker.com/wind.html) Rents out long boards for windsurfing for BZ\$40/130/420 per hour/day/week, while lessons are BZ\$80 to BZ\$90 per hour. Kitesurfing equipment is BZ\$30/90/250 per hour/day/week, or take a five-hour introductory lesson for BZ\$300.

FISHING

Just about any skipper will take you fishing, and it's cheaper than from Ambergris Caye. Grand Slams are not unusual (catching permit, tarpon and bonefish all in one day); other fish often caught include snook, barracuda, snapper and shark, usually on a catch-and-release basis. If you venture out for deep-sea fishing, look for wahoo, sailfish, kingfish, snapper, grouper, jacks, shark and barracuda.

Half-/full-day fly-fishing or deep-sea fishing trips for two to three people run at BZ\$400/600. The following operators will take anglers out for fishing in the deep water, flats or reef:

Anglers Abroad (☎ 226-0303; www.anglersabroad.com; Front St)

Big Fish Diving (☎ 226-0450; www.bigfishdivebelize.com; Front St)

Raggamuffin Tours (☎ 226-0348; www.raggamuffin.tours.com; Front St)

Tsunami Adventures (☎ 226-0462; www.tsunami.adventures.com; Front St)

HIKING, BIKING & BIRDING

The Caye Caulker Forest Reserve (p144) at the northern end of the island has a short trail that leads through the mangrove forest. It is an excellent place to spot water birds, including rails, stilts and herons, as well as ospreys and mangrove warblers.

Houses are being built along the coastline south of the airstrip, but this southern part of the island is relatively undeveloped, especially in the interior. A rough trail suitable for hiking or biking follows the perimeter of the **southern tip**, beginning and ending at the airstrip. The airstrip itself is flanked on both sides by swampy marshland, making it a fantastic place to spot birds, including

GULLS, GULLS, GULLS

While the fish are the main attraction, the northern cayes are also prime real estate for birds. But unless you are a certifiable birder, it can be tricky to know what you are looking at. Here is a primer for the ornithologically challenged.

Level One: stationary, Belikin in hand, chair facing water

Don't get up – there are plenty of opportunities to observe nature from your seat. Check out the aerial acrobatics and fishy give-and-take of the pelicans, frigates, terns and gulls, gulls, gulls. The medium-sized one with the black head and black-tipped wings who won't shut up is the laughing gull.

Everyone knows the pelican (his beak can hold more than his belly can). What you see here are brown pelicans, the smallest and most abundant of the species. They can spot a small fish from 50ft up and their beaks have an elastic sac holding the 3 gallons of water that are gulped in a dive.

Higher up, cruising on the thermals are the magnificent frigate birds. They are more likely to steal a fish from a pelican than catch one themselves. The males are all dark colored, and you might see a red balloon-like growth on their necks – this means they're thinking about something other than fish.

Is that a white heron standing knee-deep in the shallows looking for lunch? If it is tall with a yellow beak and black legs, it's the great egret; if it's smaller with a black beak and black legs with yellow feet, then you're looking at the snowy egret.

Level Two: sea kayak rented, exploratory mission to mangroves

Just north of the Split, on the leeward side, lives a couple of osprey, big birds of prey with white heads and black bodies. They like to hang out on dead tree branches near the water's edge – very photogenic.

the killdeer, the black-neck stilt, the common black hawk and herons of all kinds. Be on the lookout for airplanes that fly in and out of here without paying much heed to who or what might be on the airstrip.

Just north of the airstrip, the **Caye Caulker Mini Reserve** is run by the Caye Caulker branch of the BTIA. The small **visitors center** (☎ 226-2251; 🕒 9am-noon) has information on the island's flora and fauna, while a short interpretative trail (always open) runs through the littoral forest.

SPAS

After swimming, snorkeling and sunning, you may be in need of a little hands-on healing. **Coco Plum Gardens** (☎ 226-0226; www.cocoplum.typepad.com; 🕒 8am-5pm) From chakra balancing and tarot readings to tropical fruit facials and body massages. The octagon-shaped day spa was built from indigenous hardwoods and is set amidst the lush garden of the Coco Plum.

Healing Touch Massage (☎ 206-0080; Front St; 🕒 9am-5pm) Ms Eva McFarlane can take care of all your beauty and body needs, including manicures and pedicures, Reiki, reflexology and aromatherapy.

Tours

Although most tour operators have their own specialties (see Diving, p145, Snorkeling, p145, and Sailing, p146), many offer similar versions of the same trips. Prices are also similar. Most tour operators work closely together, consolidating tours on slow days and juggling overflow at busier times. Snorkel gear, water and fruit are included in the price of most boat trips.

Aside from the boat tours, some companies also organize trips to the Belizean mainland, including zip-lining, cave-tubing and visiting Maya sites at Lamanai and Altun Ha. For more information on trips to the mainland, see p130.

The following recommended companies are generalists, offering a wide variety of tours by land and sea:

E-Z Boy (☎ 226-0349; e-zboytours@yahoo.ca; Front St)

Red Mangrove Eco Adventures (☎ 226-0069; www.mangrovebelize.com; Front St)

Star Tours (☎ 226-0374; www.startours.bz; Tropics Hotel, Front St)

Tsunami Adventures (☎ 226-0462; www.tsunamiadventures.com; Costa Maya Beach Cabanas, Front St)

Now quietly slip into one of the small creeks and study the mangrove edge for shy waders:

- Green heron – seems short for a heron; brown-and-green body with yellow legs. Won't wait for you to focus.
- Tricolored heron – lanky slate-bluish body with white belly, honks as it flies away from your lens.
- Boatbill heron – stouter than the others, with a broad boat-like bill, quietly chilling in the back shade of the undergrowth. You can get its photo but it won't come out very well.
- Yellow-crowned night heron – medium height; cool black-and-white striped head with lilty fringe on top. Not as shy as its feathered friends – you might just get its picture.
- Kingfisher – small bluish-green and white bird, dive-bombing into creeks. A cousin of the woodpecker. Don't even think about shooting.
- White ibis – find an opening in the mangroves that reveals a muddy flat and you might catch a glimpse of these guys hanging out in groups and honking. You might also get a photo of them flying overhead, but you will have to tell your friends what it is.
- Roseate spoonbill – like an ibis, except...it's self-explanatory. They are in there somewhere; good luck finding one.

That was a pretty good bird outing to the mangroves. God knows what those lovely little yellow warbling birds were. Don't you wish you remembered your insect repellent?

Level Three: binoculars around neck, 445-page *Birds of Belize* book in hand

Why are you wasting your time reading this box? Book a trip to Half Moon Caye to get up close to the fabulous red-footed, blue-beaked boobies in all their guano-splattered glory.

Festivals & Events

Caulker hosts the original northern cayes' **Lobsterfest**, which kicks off lobster fishing season in the first weekend in July. The streets are filled with punta drumming, Belikin beer and grilled lobster. Other activities include a fishing tournament, canoe races, dance performances and – of course – the Lobster Festival Pageant.

Sleeping

Golf-cart taxis meet boats and flights upon arrival; they will take you around to look at a few places to stay. It's best to book in advance if you're coming at Christmas and Easter.

IN TOWN

As you wander up Front St, you will see that there is an endless array of accommodation options (mostly budget), as local business owners rent out one or two rooms above or behind their shops.

Budget

Bella's Hostel (☎ 226-0360; monkeybite38@yahoo.com; dm/d BZ\$20/45; 📍) On the back side of the island,

Bella's is a hideaway for the backpacker set, who can camp on the shady grounds or snag a bunk bed in the basement dorm. You are likely to see travelers sharing a meal in the kitchen or playing cards on the balcony.

Tina's Backpacker Hostel (☎ 226-0351, 206-0019; www.auxilloubeachsuites.com/tinashome.html; Front St; dm/d BZ\$22/45) This fun and funky hostel is just a few steps from the water taxi dock, giving it a prime location in the center of town and at the water's edge. Tina takes full advantage of its beachfront property, reserving a dock for guests and stringing up hammocks in the leafy garden nearby. Rooms are clean and crowded; the vibe is low-key and laid-back. Shared facilities include a fully equipped kitchen and outdoor showers.

Sandy Lane Guest House (☎ 226-0117; www.toucantrail.com/sandy-lane-guest-house.html; r BZ\$40) It doesn't get more basic than this, but the concrete cottages are clean and comfortable, with fans and private bathrooms. The grill-covered windows don't do much for the atmosphere, but at least the place is safe. The rooms are pretty small, so you'll want to take advantage of the pleasant porches, complete with Adirondack chairs,

where you can sit back and admire the view of the sandy lane.

Tropics Hotel (☎ 226-0374; www.thetropicshotel.com; Front St; r BZ\$40-60, with air-con BZ\$100-110; 🏠) You can't miss this citrus-colored concrete block that occupies a prime location between the dock street and the Split. With a shady porch running the length of the building and a big sandy front yard, it's an unbeatable spot to watch the Caye Caulker commotion (or lack thereof). Unfortunately, the sand-colored rooms are bland by comparison, as is the lukewarm reception at the front desk.

Trends Beachfront Hotel (☎ 226-0094; www.trendsbe.com; cnr 'dock' & Front Sts; BZ\$76-87) Trimmed in pink and blue, Trends is the first place you'll see when you step off the water taxi. With wide porches and vast, shady grounds, it is a fantastic spot for watching the comings and goings on the island (and to the island, and from the island...). Rooms are simple and fresh. They are equipped with two double beds, ceiling fan and minifridge, but not much in the way of decoration. The idea – undoubtedly – is to get outside and enjoy the view!

Mara's Place (☎ 206-0056; www.toucantrail.com/maras-place.html; 27 Front St; d BZ\$85; 🏠) The eight guest rooms in this two-story wooden structure are simple but spotless, cramped but comfortable. Not exactly luxurious, they nonetheless include a few perks you would not expect, such as a private veranda, complete with hammock and reading material. The sandy beach is right across the street, where Mara's also has a private dock with lounge chairs and hammocks.

Midrange

Blue Wave (☎ 206-0114; www.toucantrail.com/blue-wave-guest-house.html; Front St; d with shared/private bathroom BZ\$40/150; 🏠 🏠) Look for the attractive log cabin-style house overlooking Front St, and you'll know you've arrived at the Blue Wave, an inviting guesthouse with several different accommodation options. 'Deluxe' rooms are spacious and stylish, with air-con, televisions, private bathrooms and breezy balconies overlooking Front St. Beneath the owners' clapboard house, there are three cheaper rooms with shared facilities.

our pick Leeside Rooms (☎ 226-0020; www.cayecaulkerrentals.com; r BZ\$77-88; 🏠 🏠) Boasting the island's most beautiful sunset view, these simple rooms have small verandas overlooking a private beach and dock. Located on the

back side of the island, there is less noise and less light than on Front St. The stylish interior design features high beds, tile floors and walls hung with old maps. Your welcoming committee includes the very talkative resident parrot, Polly-O.

De Real Macaw Guest House (☎ 226-0459; www.de.realmacaw.com; Front St; r BZ\$100-140, apt BZ\$260; 🏠 🏠) Whether the cabanas built from primienta sticks or the beachfront rooms with thatched-roof verandas, all of the rustic lodgings dotting the leafy grounds here are inspired by the jungle. The decor continues with swinging hammocks and woven tapestries, but these rooms are also equipped with modern conveniences such as TVs, fridges and coffee makers. The main property is in a great central spot opposite the beach; additional apartments are in a less appealing location on Back St.

Costa Maya Beach Cabanas (☎ 226-0432; www.tsunamiadventures.com; Front St; d BZ\$110, q with kitchenette BZ\$143-154; 🏠 🏠) Eight two-story hexagon-shaped cabanas are clustered around a sandy courtyard here. The wood-paneled interiors of the cheaper units are gloomy but each unit has a porch, perfect for catching sea breezes. The pricier beachfront units are kitted out with kitchenettes, cable TV and air-con. Guests enjoy complimentary bicycles, beach chairs and kayaks, as well as discounts on tours at Tsunami Adventures.

Casa Rosado (☎ 226-0029; www.cayecaulkerrentals.com; cabanas BZ\$142-164, cabanas with kitchenette BZ\$207; 🏠) Painted in pastels and trimmed with a seashell theme, these sweet cabins occupy a (usually) quiet spot overlooking the soccer field. Each is equipped with a shady porch and a comfy hammock, though they lack the ocean breezes.

Rainbow Hotel (☎ 226-0123; www.rainbowhotel-cayecaulker.com; Front St; d without/with air-con BZ\$142/208; 🏠) Bright blue paint, a couple of rainbows for decoration and upgraded rooms make this bunker-like concrete building relatively appealing, but the rooms are cell-sized. Bottom-floor rooms open right onto the street; some folks sit on a chair out front and enjoy the street life. For privacy, choose a room on the top floor or rent one of the cottages (BZ\$460 to BZ\$550 for up to four people) at the back.

Barefoot Caribe (☎ 226-0161; www.barefootcaribe.resort.com; Front St; r/st BZ\$145/186; 🏠) A big blue building trimmed in white, Barefoot Caribe is an attractive and affordable place to crash. Rooms are sparse but spotless, with white-

washed walls and cool tile floors. Handy features such as fridge and fan are appreciated, as is the open-air deck upstairs. Note that the 'sea view' rooms have their view partially blocked by buildings across the street.

Pancho's Villas (☎ 226-0304; www.panchovillasbelize.com; Pasero St; d BZ\$186; 🏠 🏠) Resembling a big square wedding cake with lemon-yellow frosting, Pancho's Villas is a little out of place on this quiet side street. The brand new building is decked out with all the modern amenities such as kitchenettes, cable TV and the rest. Big on comfort and convenience, but small on style and sophistication.

Amanda's Place (☎ 226-0029; www.cayecaulkerrentals.com; Front St; r from BZ\$198; 🏠 🏠) The owner is the energy behind Caye Caulker Rentals. Besides renting out other people's houses, Amanda offers two art-filled apartments with kitchenettes and a cozy casita of her own. Only a block back from the beach, the grounds are leafy and the attractive apartments each have a little porch from where you can watch street life and see the ocean.

Top End

Caye Caulker Condos (☎ 226-0072; www.cayecaulkercondos.com; Front St; ste BZ\$230-272; 🏠 🏠) While the concrete block is not the most attractive building on Front St, the eight swanky suites inside are sweet retreats. Each is equipped with a full kitchen, satellite TV, and fancy bathrooms with romantic, stone, two-person showers. Suites each have a private balcony, but the rooftop terrace trumps them all with its 360-degree views, taking in part of the North Island.

Seaside Cabanas (☎ 226-0498; www.seasidecabanas.com; r BZ\$230, cabanas BZ\$262; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Sun-yellow stucco buildings shaded by thatched-palm roofs exude a tropical atmosphere at this beachfront beauty. The interior decor features desert colors, rich fabrics and plenty of pillows. Most of the rooms occupy the main building facing the ocean; closer to the sea, concrete cabanas hold further high-quality lodgings with big comfy beds and cable TV.

Jan's Place (☎ 226-0273; www.jansplace.net; Front St; ste BZ\$250; 🏠 🏠) This charming yellow clapboard house has two self-contained apartments facing the sea (private porches with hammocks ensure maximum appreciation of this gorgeous view). They contain kitchenettes, dining area, two full-sized beds and wood furniture – not fancy but very functional.

our pick Iguana Reef Inn (☎ 226-0213; www.iguana.reefinn.com; standard r BZ\$260-270, deluxe r BZ\$300-320, all incl breakfast; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Set on sandy grounds fringed with palms, the Iguana Reef is both upscale and informal. It's the kind of place you can roam around barefoot by day, but you might dress up for dinner. Bamboo furniture, Mexican tapestries and local artwork adorn the jewel-toned rooms. Outside, you can lounge poolside or swing in a hammock; at the end of the day, take your pick from the extensive menu of tropical cocktails in the *palapa* bar and watch the sunset.

Auxillou Suites (☎ 226-0370; www.auxilloubeachsuites.com; ste BZ\$270; 🏠 🏠) Steps from the sea, Auxillou is one in a string of fluorescent-colored houses just north of the water taxi dock. These modern suites offer excellent value, with king-size beds, cable TV, kitchenettes and spacious decks.

You'll get a similar deal next door at **Diane's Beach House** or **Sailwind's Beach Suites** (☎ 226-0826; www.staycayecaulker.com), which are also owned by the Auxillou family.

SOUTH OF TOWN

South of the cemetery, Caye Caulker is noticeably quieter and the beach sees much less foot traffic. Almost all of the accommodations south of town are in the midrange price bracket.

our pick Ignacio Beach Cabins (☎ 226-0175; reyes.reubbenreyes@yahoo.com; d BZ\$27-45, ste BZ\$110) In the far south of town, Ignacio offers simple waterfront lodging in weathered cabins on stilts. There is little foot traffic this far south, so it feels private and pristine. The cabins all have easy access to the beach, but the pricier ones are at the water's edge, catching cool breezes and salty scents. If you like the location but not the rusticity, spring for the spacious suite, with stylish furnishings and a breezy balcony.

Tom's Hotel (☎ 226-0102; www.toucantrail.com/toms-hotel.html; d with shared bathroom BZ\$30, cabanas BZ\$60; 🏠) Owned by a local fisher family, this trim hotel south of the cemetery has long been a budget favorite, thanks to the private pier, rooftop deck and always affable management. The cheapest rooms are in the concrete building, with a wide shady verandah to meet your fellow travelers and enjoy the sea breeze. Otherwise, upgrade to the cozy cabanas with private facilities.

Tropical Paradise Hotel (☎ 226-0124; www.tropicalparadisehotel.com; Front St; r BZ\$90-113, cabins BZ\$130-155,

NORTH OF THE SPLIT

On Punta Arena Beach, surrounded by mangrove forests and a large lagoon, the **our pick** **Driftwood Lodge** (Map p121; ☎ 626-2925; www.driftwood.bz; d incl breakfast BZ\$250-355, mains BZ\$40, cocktails BZ\$15; 🍷 restaurant 11am-10pm Tue-Sun) is the only place to stay or eat north of the Split. There are three exquisite cabins, each named for the local hardwood used to construct it (machiche, bullet tree and chechem). Nature is highlighted throughout, with slate countertops, polished wood floors, plenty of sunlight and sea breezes. Cathedral ceilings and private porches facing the sea ensure a constant flow of cool air into the space. The best part is that the place is solar powered, while rainwater supplies the bathrooms and showers.

Even if you're not staying here, it's worth catching the boat shuttle (BZ\$10; departs from the pier opposite Chocolate's) or kayaking up for lunch or dinner. The gorgeous two-story restaurant has beautiful views of the ocean and lagoon, not to mention a constantly changing menu of seafood and other delicacies. Once a month, this lodge hosts a full-moon party, with Garifuna drummers and bonfires on its little beach.

ste BZ\$202-238; 🍷) With an ideal location just south of the cemetery, Tropical Paradise Hotel is Caulker's 'original beach resort.' It was one of the first places to clean out a stretch of sand, furnish it with painted lounge chairs and entice guests with fruity cocktails. These days there are plenty of more stylish places to stay, but these colorful clapboard cottages still offer decent value. The restaurant is a perennially popular place for guests to meet.

Jaguar Morning Star (☎ 226-0347; www.jaguar-morningstar.com; r BZ\$98-115; 🍷) From his perch inside the mural on the side of the building, a friendly jaguar overlooks the quiet garden and the schoolyard next door. Run by a gracious Belizean-Canadian couple, this little guesthouse has only three rooms in total, two on the top floor of the three-story house, and one cabana in the garden. Amenities are comfortable, and the position, a few blocks back from the beach and a few blocks south of the dock street, is improved by renting a bicycle.

Maxhapan Cabanas (☎ 226-0118; maxhapan04@hotmail.com; s/d incl breakfast BZ\$100/120; 🍷) In an unexpected location south of town, Maxhapan has sweet yellow cabanas clustered around a shady courtyard. At its center, a big *palapa* has hammocks and a bring-your-own bar, where guests can gather. Natural light floods the comfortable cabins, which are equipped with fridges, fans and televisions. The only drawback is that it's not on the water, which explains why it's such a bargain.

Tree Tops Guesthouse (☎ 226-0240; www.tree-topsbelize.com; r with shared/private bathroom from BZ\$102/131, ste BZ\$200; 🍷 🍷) Doris and Terry are hospitable and helpful, but they sure run a tight ship. Once you have the rules down,

you will enjoy cool, clean rooms decorated with international themes and original artistic touches. Set back from the beach, the three-story building is fronted by a pleasant palm-shaded garden. A roof terrace with panoramic vistas towers over the treetops, which gives the place its name.

Sea Beezzz (☎ 226-0176; www.seabeezzz.com; d BZ\$109; 🍷 Nov-Apr) Chuck and Bonnie Balfour are a fun-loving couple that rents out quaint clapboard cabins on stilts. Small and very simply furnished, the cabins are clustered around a sandy yard, the centerpiece of which is a flourishing orchid tree (come in December to see it in full bloom). Bonnie is your chef, Chuck is your bartender, and your job is to sit back and enjoy.

Shirley's Guest House (☎ 226-0145; www.shirleys-guesthouse.com; r with shared/private bathroom BZ\$109/142, cabins with private bathroom BZ\$188) At the far end of the island, just north of the airstrip, is this sweet and secluded spot for adults only. Five rooms are housed in the cottages that dot the sandy grounds, each with a sensational sunrise view. The dock out front would be ideal for swimming, but it was falling into the sea at the time of research. Otherwise, the grounds are lush and lovingly maintained. Be sure to make advance arrangements as the proprietor is not always on hand.

our pick **Barefoot Beach Belize** (☎ 226-0205; www.barefootbeachbelize.com; r BZ\$144-165, ste BZ\$270, cottages BZ\$303; 🍷 🍷) Painted in candy colors, this perky place is on a quiet stretch of beach at the southern end of the village. Suites and cottages have kitchens and living space, with direct access to beach breezes; rooms are smaller but still spacious, with fridges, fans and coffee

makers. The whole place has a tropical theme, with plenty of floral prints and sea-themed artwork. Hammocks hang under a thatched-roof *palapa* at the end of a long deck, offering a perfect place to while away an afternoon.

Anchorage Resort (☎ 206-0304; www.anchorage-resort.com; d BZ\$164; 🍷) This is not the place to come for style or swank, but if you're in search of a hammock strung from a coconut palm or a wooden pier stretching out to the sea for swimming, snorkeling or fishing, look no further. With floral bedspreads and dormitory furniture, the rooms are not going to win any design awards, but they are equipped with plenty of perks, such as king-size beds, cable TV and private balconies with glorious sea views. The resort boasts one of the most beautiful stretches of beach on the island (nonguests can rent a lounge chair for BZ\$10 per day).

Lazy Iguana (☎ 226-0350; www.lazyiguana.net; d BZ\$230; 🍷 🍷) On the island's southwest side, this place is off the beaten track and away from the beach. But you won't miss out on sea views: just head up to the rooftop patio for 360-degree panoramas. The four guest rooms – fitted with dark wood furniture and tile floors – are prettily decorated in tones of gold, sage and cream. Common space includes two cool and comfy lounges, as well as a leafy garden overflowing with orchids.

The back streets at the south end of town are known as 'Gringo Heights,' for this is where many expats have bought property and built houses. With names such as 'Hummingbird Hideaway' and 'Canuck Cottage,' many of them are available for longer-term rentals (three days or more) via **Caye Caulker Rentals** (www.cayecaulkerrentals.com).

The following properties offer apartments (bedroom, living space, kitchen) that are modern, clean and comfortable:

Oasi (☎ 623-9401; www.holidaybelize.com; Ave Mangle; apt BZ\$160; 🍷 🍷) Set around a tropical garden.

Picololo (☎ 226-0371, 662-5337; http://picololo.googlepages.com; apt BZ\$150; 🍷) Includes complimentary use of bike.

Eating

Indulge in the creatures of the sea, including spiny tail lobsters, shrimp, conch and all the fish of the reef. Seafood lovers take note: lobster season is closed from mid-February to mid-June, and conch season is closed from July to September.

BUDGET

Glenda's Café (☎ 226-0148; Back St; mains BZ\$4-8; 🍷 breakfast & lunch Mon-Fri) Glenda's serves traditional Belizean food in a clapboard house on the island's west side. It has the best cheap breakfasts in town, from cinnamon rolls and orange juice to full breakfasts of eggs, bacon or ham, bread and coffee. Burritos, tacos, sandwiches and chicken with rice and beans are offered for lunch. Get there early for breakfast.

our pick **Amor Y Café** (☎ 601-4458; Front St; mains BZ\$8-12; 🍷 breakfast Tue-Sun) There's no contest about the most popular breakfast spot on the island. It's always busy, but you won't have to wait long for a table on the shaded porch overlooking Front St. Take your pick from fresh-squeezed juices, scrambled eggs or homemade yogurt topped with fruit, but don't miss out on the fresh-brewed coffee. If you have to pack a lunch, sandwiches are available to go.

Rosa's Café (☎ 226-0407; dock st; mains BZ\$8-16; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly street-side café has an inviting *palapa* out the back, where you can feast on grilled lobster and other fruits of the sea.

Marin's Restaurant (☎ 226-0104; Middle St; mains BZ\$10-20; 🍷 breakfast & dinner, bar open all day) Dine in the open air at treetop level on hearty Belizean fare, seafood dishes and more at Marin's, one of the oldest restaurants on the island. There is nothing too creative about this cooking, but it is filling and cheap.

If you want a quick breakfast to go, stop by the **Caye Caulker Bakery** (Middle St; 🍷 7:30am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat) to pick up fresh bread, rolls and buns (baked goods cost under BZ\$2).

MIDRANGE

Rainbow Grill & Bar (☎ 226-0281; mains BZ\$8-30; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Perched on a deck over the turquoise waters, this local favorite is evidence of Caulker's agreeable temperatures. By day, nibble on vegetarian plates, burgers, quesadillas, burritos and sandwiches. At night fancier fare includes fish, shrimp, conch and lobster cooked how you like it, from simple lemon with butter to Jamaican jerk or oriental style.

our pick **Bamboo Grill** (☎ 607-1514; mains BZ\$15-25; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Arguably the best location on the island, this casually cool bar and grill sits right on the beach, with swings hanging from the rafters and tables set up in the sand. Besides the Cajun specialties, you can

feast on a huge seafood burrito or a delectable grilled fish sandwich, washed down with a fruit smoothie.

Syd's (☎ 206-0294; Middle St; mains BZ\$15-30; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Syd's is a longstanding favorite for its good-value meals and convivial atmosphere. Out back, there is a flower-filled patio, where you can dine to the soothing sounds of a gurgling fountain. Otherwise, the dining room is rather nondescript. No matter where you sit, you will be sated by the big plates of Belizean and Mexican food.

Happy Lobster (☎ 226-0064; Front St; mains BZ\$18-30; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Fri-Wed) The lobster at this Caulker institution is actually not that happy. But you will be after eating big plates of fresh fish, spiced up with Creole flavoring or sweetened with coconut. The place has plenty of vegetarian options, as well as a popular breakfast menu. The front porch is a pleasant place to catch the breeze off the ocean and watch the activity on Front St.

Barrier Reef Sports Bar & Grill (☎ 226-0077; www.belizeesportsbar.com; Front St; mains BZ\$18-30; ☎ 9am-midnight; 📺) This unlikely spot – Canadian run – has surprisingly delicious food and good prices. And not just pub grub (although that's good, too); you won't be disappointed by lasagna, burritos, seafood specials and salads. Service is nonchalant, at best. If you don't like the multiple TVs blaring sports interviews into the atmosphere, take a seat out front and enjoy the breeze off the ocean.

Rasta Pasta Rainforest Café (☎ 206-0356; Front St; mains BZ\$20-30; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) No longer located on the beach, Rasta Pasta is still serving up its extensive menu of seafood, veggie dishes, desserts and fruity cocktails. The always affable service is a highlight, as is the home-brewed ginger beer, a delectable concoction that cures all stomach woes. Note that – despite the name – there are not many pasta dishes on the menu.

Coco Plum Gardens (☎ 226-0226; mains BZ\$20-30; ☎ breakfast Mon-Sat) The highlight of the Coco Plum is the beautiful garden setting, overgrown with hibiscus, sea grape and coco plum (spot the ceiba tree at the entrance). Off Back St near the airstrip, Coco Plum is off the beaten track but worth the walk for home-baked breads and wholesome breakfasts. From 6pm to 9pm on Friday or Saturday nights, it sometimes hosts a tropical garden party (mains BZ\$25 to BZ\$40), with live acoustic music or drumming.

TOP END

Don Corleone (☎ 226-0025; Front St; breakfast dishes US\$7, mains BZ\$30-50; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of Caulker's unexpected gems, Don Corleone is Dutch owned and Italian flavored. Decor is sophisticated and the service impeccable. Whatever you order lives up to management's promise to make you a meal you can't refuse, be it one of the gorgeous salads, a pasta with an aromatic sauce or a more substantial fish or meat main. Finish off with an excellent strong espresso.

our pick Agave (☎ 226-0403; Front St; mains BZ\$25-40; ☎ lunch & dinner) This new super-suave place has a prime location on Front St, with a wide porch overlooking the traffic. The sophisticated menu has a selection of seafood dishes that blends Caribbean and Mediterranean influences, utilizing fresh fruits and local spices. Service can be a bit slow – all the more time to savor the flavors and enjoy the view.

Habaneros (☎ 226-0487; cr Front St & dock st; mains BZ\$25-50; ☎ dinner Fri-Wed) Caulker's 'hottest' restaurant, named for the *habanero* chili, is located in a brightly painted clapboard house in the center of town. Here chefs prepare gourmet international food, combining fresh seafood, meat and vegetables with insanely delicious sauces and flavors. Wash it down with a fine wine or a jug of sangria. Sit in the funky bar and sip a fruity cocktail or enjoy the buzz and eat by candlelight at the tables on the verandah. Reservations are recommended.

Drinking & Entertainment

Femi's Coffee Shop (Luciano Reyes St; ☎ 7am-late) Femi's is a coffee shop and so much more. By all means, come here for your morning dose of caffeine – perhaps in the form of fresh-brewed Belizean coffee or a frozen coffee mocha. Come in the afternoon for a fruit smoothie or an energy shake. And if you need a shot of something extra, take your pick from the vast menu of frozen fruity cocktails. Prime waterfront spot!

I&I Reggae Bar (☎ 625-0344; ☎ 6pm-midnight) I&I is the island's most hip-hop happening spot after dark, when its healthy sound system belts out a reggae beat. Its three levels each offer a different scene, with a dance floor on one and swings hanging from the rafters on another. The top floor is the 'chill-out zone,' complete with hammocks and panoramic views. Great place for a sunset drink.

Lazy Lizard (☎ 226-0280; the Split; ☎ 11am-11pm) The Lazy Lizard is described as a 'sunny place for shady people' – and there is no shortage of the latter hanging about. It mainly serves beer to swimmers and sunbathers, but has some food items as well.

Sand Box (☎ 226-0200; Front St; ☎ 8am-late) With outdoor seating facing the dock, and a happy hour from 3pm to 6pm, the Sand Box is an island institution. Locals and expats gather to socialize and catch up on gossip. If you can't check into your hotel straight away, make this your first stop coming off the water taxi.

Wish Willy's Bar & Grill (☎ 5pm-late) This funky place is named for a scaly tailed iguana. On the back side of the island, it's a great place to watch the sunset, whether you're sipping a Belikin beer or feasting on the day's BBQ special.

Herbal Tribe (Front St; ☎ 11am-late) A large open-air restaurant and hip reggae joint with great pizzas. Happy hour (6pm to 8pm) fills the place with merry folks drinking and chatting.

Shopping

Caulker has a few shops selling T-shirts, beach gear and souvenirs, but this is not the best place for shopping. Keep your eye out for colorful paintings and handmade jewelry by local artists.

Caribbean Colors (☎ 206-0208; www.caribbean-colors.com; Front St) This shop stocks a collection of silk-screened fabrics, jewelry and paintings by the owner Lee Vanderwalker and the artist Nelson Young. You'll also find a small selection of homemade soaps and body oils made from natural products, as well as a friendly coffee counter.

Chocolate's Gift Shop (☎ 226-0151; Front St) Chocolate's wife Annie has souvenirs with international flare: gorgeous hand-woven textiles from Mexico and Guatemala; sarongs and clothing from Indonesia and Malaysia; and jewelry made from precious and semiprecious stones.

Coco Plum Giftshop (☎ 226-0226; www.cocoplum.typepad.com) Sometimes a spa and sometimes a restaurant, the Coco Plum is also – sometimes – a gift shop. There is an eclectic assortment of tropical-themed paintings, unique jewelry, carved wood pieces and reference books on natural healing.

Cooper's Art Gallery (☎ 226-0330; Front St; ☎ noon-8pm Wed-Sun) Debbie Cooper's primitive paint-

ing style is a huge hit with tourists, who appreciate her colorful depictions of island life. The whimsical frames are designed and painted by her husband.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Both **Maya Island Air** (☎ 226-0012; www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 226-0040; www.tropicair.com) stop at Caye Caulker en route from San Pedro (adult/child BZ\$61/46) to Belize City International Airport (one-way BZ\$109). Each company has flights four or five times a day. The airline offices are at Caye Caulker's newly renovated airstrip. **Tsunami Adventures** (☎ 226-0462; www.tsunamiadventures.com; Front St) can also book tickets.

BOAT

Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association (☎ 226-0992; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com) runs boats from the main dock on Caulker to Belize City (one-way/round-trip BZ\$15/30, one hour) at 6:30am, 7:30am, 8:30am, 10am, noon, 1:30pm, 3pm and 4pm (and 5pm Saturday, Sunday and holidays). Boats to San Pedro (one-way/round-trip BZ\$15/30, 20 to 30 minutes) go at 7am, 8:45am, 9:50am, 11:20am, 12:50pm, 2:20pm and 3:50pm.

Water taxis also run to St George's Caye and Caye Chapel, but you must request these stops and arrange pick-up in advance.

Getting Around

Caulker is so small that most people walk everywhere. If need be, you can rent a bicycle or golf cart at **M&M Rentals** (☎ 226-0229; bicycles per hr/day/week BZ\$4/15/60, golf carts per hr/day BZ\$30/100). The golf-cart **Rainbow Taxi Service** (☎ 226-0123; Front St) costs BZ\$10 for a one-way trip anywhere on the island.

OTHER NORTHERN CAYES

Most visits to the other northern cayes are made by day trip from Caye Caulker or San Pedro, usually as part of a trip to snorkel or dive the Turneffe Elbow or the world-famous Blue Hole. But you can stay on a number of the smaller and outlying islands if you don't mind being stranded on an otherwise deserted island. Serious divers and fishers, nature lovers and honeymooners are the most common customers at the camps and resorts on these cayes, which are generally available as weekly (or partial-week) all-inclusive packages.

Transportation by charter boat or flight is usually provided by the lodge; inquire about transportation when you book.

Cayo Espanto

Billed as 'A Private Island,' the ultra sumptuous **Cayo Espanto** (☎ in USA 888-666-4282, 910-323-8355; www.aprivateisland.com; villas incl all delg from BZ\$2688; 🏠 📺 📺) resort has six delightful villas (total capacity 16), each designed for maximum privacy and panoramic views. Each casa is ridiculously decked out, with king-size beds dressed in high-thread-count designer sheets and draped in mosquito netting. Each one also has a private dock and a private plunge pool, and – in some cases – an alfresco shower. The most unusual option is Casa Ventanas, which is perched out at the end of a long dock, surrounded by 360 degrees of crystal blue loveliness.

One of the highlights of staying at Cayo Espanto is the exceedingly attentive service (all packages include the services of a personal house attendant). Prior to arrival, guests are invited to fill out a preferences survey, which is used to prepare for all aspects of the visit, including the menu. Chefs create artistic dishes according to your personal tastes and serve them in the privacy of your villa.

Cayo Espanto is three miles west of Ambergris Caye. It's not uncommon for celebrities to frequent this 'Private Island,' which has hosted the likes of Robert De Niro, Harrison Ford and Tiger Woods. Leonardo DiCaprio loved it so much that he bought neighboring **Blackadore Caye** to build his own environmentally friendly island resort. Stay tuned.

Caye Chapel

Just south of Caye Caulker, **Caye Chapel Island Resort** (☎ 226-8250, in USA 800-901-8938; www.cayechapel.com; casitas from BZ\$750, villas from BZ\$2500; 🏠 📺 📺) is a private 265-acre island with an 18-hole golf course and a super-deluxe corporate retreat center. Room rates include all meals and unlimited golfing. The golf course (☎ 226-8250) is open to the public by reservation. The cost is BZ\$300 for the day, which includes unlimited golf, golf carts, clubs, poolside Caribbean lunch and use of the resort's swimming pool complex, hot tub and private beach. Arrange boat transportation in advance with boats going to/from San Pedro or Caye Caulker with the Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association (p155).

Turneffe Atoll

Belize is home to three of the four coral atolls in the Western Hemisphere: Lighthouse Reef (opposite); Glover's Reef (p76); and Turneffe Atoll, the largest of the offshore trio and the closest to the Belize coastline. The Turneffe Islands Atoll is the largest of the offshore trio and the closest to the Belize coastline. At 30 miles long and 10 miles wide, Turneffe Atoll is alive with coral, fish and large rays, making it a prime destination for **diving, snorkeling and fishing**.

This area is dominated by mangrove islands. Mangroves are what make Belize diving special, as they are the nurseries on which almost all marine life depends to ensure juvenile protection and biological productivity.

Although the atoll is best known for its walls, there are also many shallow sea gardens and bright sand flats inside the reef that are excellent sites for novice divers and snorkelers.

Undoubtedly, the highlight of Turneffe Islands diving is a spot called the **Turneffe Elbow**, where the current attracts big hungry fish in large numbers and affords one of the only drift dives in Belize. Other sites include **Front Porch**, in front of the Turneffe Island Lodge; **Myrtle's Turtle**, named for the resident green turtle that appears annually; and **Triple Anchor**, marked by three anchors remaining from a wreck. See p74 for more on diving in this region. Fishing enthusiasts are attracted by the flats, which are ideal for saltwater fly-fishing.

Turneffe Atoll is usually visited by day trip, as it's within easy reach of Caulker, Ambergris and Belize City to the north, and Glover's Reef and Hopkins village to the south. Even Placencia dive boats occasionally make the trip to Turneffe Elbow, at the southern tip of the islands. On rough days it's favored by San Pedro dive operators (p126), because much of the trip can be made behind the barrier reef, protecting passengers from choppy open seas.

Incredibly, the Turneffe Islands have as yet no environmental protection. However, Belize University's Institute of Marine Studies monitors environmental impacts from a field station on Calabash Caye.

SLEEPING & EATING

The lodging available on the Turneffe Islands is at all-inclusive resorts, which usually

include diving, snorkeling and/or fishing tours for a minimum of one week.

Turneffe Flats Lodge (☎ 220-2046; www.tflats.com; Blackbird Caye; weekly diving/fishing packages BZ\$2696/7986; 🏠 📺) Although its principal fame is as a fishing retreat with expert guides, this lodge on Blackbird Caye also offers dive trips that are often far less crowded than those from other resorts (because most of the other guests are out fishing). Accommodations are in spacious, terracotta-tiled duplex apartments, each with balcony and dramatic views of the waves crashing on the nearby reef. As a bonus, guests can feel assured that at least some of their money is going to a good cause, as Turneffe Flats Lodge donates 1% of its revenues to organizations that are working to promote conservation.

Oceanic Society (☎ 220-4256; www.oceanic-society.org; Blackbird Caye; weekly research programs from BZ\$3780) The society has a field station about five minutes' walk from Blackbird Caye Resort. Accommodations here are in basic but comfortable white, wooden beachfront cabanas with private porches. Participants spend eight days helping with natural history research, collecting data and documenting the incredibly diverse wildlife (manatees, crocodiles, bottle-nosed dolphins and hawksbill sea turtles among others) that lives in the Turneffe Islands. Special family-education programs are worthwhile.

Blackbird Caye Resort (☎ 223-2772; www.blackbirdresort.com; Blackbird Caye; weekly diving/fishing/snorkeling packages BZ\$4230/5630/3830; 🏠 📺) Blackbird offers fishing and diving as well, but is popular with snorkelers as it has two dedicated snorkeling boat trips per day. Enthusiasts can kayak out to the reef for even more snorkeling. Accommodations are in separate roomy cabanas with stereo systems, and meals are eaten in a huge *palapa* restaurant near the main dock.

Turneffe Island Lodge (☎ 220-4142, in USA 800-874-0118; www.turneffelodge.com; Caye Bokel; weekly fishing/diving/beachcomber packages BZ\$10,340/5940/5060; 🏠 📺) At the southern tip of the atoll, the fanciest of the Turneffe resorts offers gorgeous cabanas with screened porches (where your morning coffee will be delivered), wooden floorboards, and indoor and outdoor showers, all set amid coconut palms just yards from the beach. Proximity to the famous Elbow dive site means trips go there frequently; some of the best tarpon fishing is a three-minute

boat ride away. What's more, you can fish at the Turneffe Island Lodge with a clear conscience, as the fishing schedule operates according to a rigorous flats conservation and management program.

Lighthouse Reef

At 50 miles out, Lighthouse Reef is the furthest of the three atolls from the coastline. But it is probably the most visited, thanks to the allure of the mysterious Blue Hole Natural Monument (below). While this icon of Belize diving makes the atoll a major attraction, it is the stunning walls, heavily adorned with swim-throughs and clear blue water that make it a favorite of both longtime divers and complete novices.

Besides the Blue Hole, there is no shortage of fantastic dive sites, as well as a spectacular stop for bird enthusiasts. In addition to what follows, other sites in Lighthouse Reef include **Painted Wall**, named for the plethora of painted tunicates found here; the **Aquarium**, often visited as a second stop after Blue Hole; and the **Cathedral**, known for its amazing variety of sponges. **Half Moon Caye Wall** is probably the best of the lot for its variety of coral formations along the wall, and within canyons and swim-throughs. Of particular interest is a field of garden eels found on the sand flats near the wall. Snorkelers don't despair: the shallows around these sites are interesting as well. For more on diving and snorkeling at Lighthouse Reef, see p75.

In addition to Half Moon Caye (p158) and Long Caye (p158), other islands in the atoll include Northern Caye, Sandbore Caye, Saddle Caye and Hat Caye. Northern Caye is a small but lovely island, home to **Lighthouse Reef Resort** (www.scubabelize.com), which was closed at the time of research, while the others are popular with mosquitoes and crocodiles.

BLUE HOLE

At the center of Lighthouse Reef is the world-famous **Blue Hole Natural Monument** (marine fee BZ\$80). The Blue Hole is an incomparable natural wonder and an unparalleled diving experience. It may not be the best dive in Belize, but it certainly ranks among the most popular. The image of the Blue Hole – a deep blue pupil with an aquamarine border surrounded by the lighter shades of the reef – has become a logo for tourist publicity and a symbol of Belize.

MAKING OF A BLUE HOLE

A Unesco World Heritage site and a Belizean Natural Monument, the celebrated sinkhole is around 400ft deep and 1000ft across. To dive it is to take a journey back into geological history. For millions of years the Blue Hole was a dry cave where huge stalactites and stalagmites slowly formed. When the last ice age ended, sea levels rose 350ft, flooding the cave. At the same time, its ceiling collapsed, leaving the hole you see today.

Inside a sheer-sided wall drops about 100ft to an undercut filled with stalactites. Deep blue in the center the hole forms a perfect 1000ft-diameter circle on the surface. Inside, it is said to be 430ft deep, but as much as 200ft of this may now be filled with silt and other natural debris.

You drop quickly to 130ft where you swim beneath an overhang, observing stalactites above you and, usually, a school of reef sharks below you. You might see four or five varieties of shark. Although the water is clear, light levels are low as you wend your way through the formations. A good dive light will enable you to appreciate the sponge and invertebrate life. Because of the depth, ascent begins after eight minutes; the brevity of the dive does disappoint some divers.

This trip is usually combined with other dives at Lighthouse Reef. Experienced divers will tell you that those other dives are the real highlight of the trip. But judging from its popularity – most dive shops make twice-weekly runs to the Blue Hole – plenty want to make the deep descent.

On day trips the Blue Hole will be your first dive, which can be nerve-racking if you're unfamiliar with the dive master and the other divers, or if you haven't been underwater lately. It may be worth doing some local dives with your dive masters before setting out cold on a Blue Hole trip. An alternative is to take an overnight trip to Lighthouse Reef. For dive outfits and tour details see p126 and p145.

Snorkelers can enjoy a trip to the Blue Hole, too, as there's plenty to see around the shallow inner perimeter of the circular reef. But it's an expensive trip and you'll probably have to tag along on a dive boat.

Note: this trip involves two hours each way by boat in possibly rough, open waters. Also, there's a BZ\$80 marine-park fee for diving or snorkeling at the Blue Hole, usually separate from the dive fees.

HALF MOON CAYE

Nesting ground of the rare red-footed booby, this island is the **Half Moon Caye Bird Sanctuary** (park fee BZ\$20). It is the most oft-visited of the Lighthouse Reef's cayes.

The caye has a **lighthouse**, excellent **beaches** and spectacular submerged walls teeming with marine flora and fauna. Underwater visibility can extend more than 200ft here.

Rising less than 10ft above sea level, the caye's 45 acres hold two distinct ecosystems. To the west is lush vegetation fertilized by the droppings of thousands of sea birds, including some 4000 red-footed boobies, the magnificent frigate bird and 98 other bird species. The east side has less vegetation but more palms. Loggerhead and hawksbill sea turtles, both endangered, lay their eggs on the southern beaches.

A **nature trail** weaves through the southern part of the island to an observation platform that brings viewers to eye level with nesting boobies and frigate birds. Along the path you'll see thousands of seashells, many inhabited by hermit crabs.

Organized boat trips, mainly from San Pedro and Caye Caulker, stop at Half Moon Caye on their way to/from the nearby Blue Hole. Camping is sometimes permitted and there is a picnic area and toilets, but you need to bring all your water. The Belize Audubon Society has a visitors center where you must register and pay a BZ\$20 park fee on arrival. This part of the island is also used as a base camp for kayaking, snorkeling and diving holidays by adventure-tour company Island Expeditions (see p78).

LONG CAYE

The contemporary version of a hippy commune, **Long Beach at Lighthouse Reef** (☎ 223-2077; www.belzeisland.com) is an idyllic private island, 2.5 miles long and 3.25 miles wide, with white sandy beaches and plentiful coconut palms. It has been earmarked as an ecovillage, with strict eco-guidelines for anyone who wants to purchase property. The idea is to build using materials that are collected on site; to utilize alternative sources of energy, such as solar

and hydro; to minimize waste by recycling and composting; to minimize the impact of human presence on the local ecosystem; and to demonstrate that development can be managed in a sustainable way.

This is a project in progress, but there are already a couple of places to stay, a medical center with a decompression chamber, some houses and a couple of docks. Boardwalks, many already built, are to be used around the island to protect the wildlife underneath. Package prices include transfer from Belize City; otherwise, make arrangements for boat transport with your lodge (BZ\$360).

The **Lighthouse Reef Cabins** (☎ in USA 703-297-1571; www.lighthousereef.net; 3-day diver/non-diver packages BZ\$2090/1100 Lucky Dog Cabin per week BZ\$4900, all incl meals; 📍) are simple beachfront cabins furnished with queen-size beds, as well as single bunks if you want to bring

the family. The kitchen is fully equipped, and a boat (and captain) is at your disposal. The latter includes a 26ft console boat and captain who acts as your guide. For groups (up to six), the Lucky Dog Cabin is an excellent affordable alternative that utilizes wind-powered electricity.

Calypto Beach Retreat (☎ in USA 303-523-8165; www.calyptobeachretreat.com; Long Caye; r incl breakfast BZ\$272, beachcomber/snorkel packages per week BZ\$1733/2823; 📍) is on the northeast corner of the island. This B&B is built from tropical hardwoods, housing four charming guest rooms with priceless Caribbean sea views. Sleep in four-poster beds and feel the breeze off the ocean. The packages include all meals, or you can pay by the night and utilize the shared kitchen facilities. Diving and fishing packages are also available (weekly diving/fishing package BZ\$3920/4350), as are other combinations.

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