



Tiny Caye Caulker from the air

CAYE CAULKER

Much smaller and more laid back than San Pedro, this little isle of 1300 people south of Ambergris Caye is known more for its party life than diving. It's little more than a mile across at its widest and five miles long, but it has barrier reef diving and is close to popular sites just to the north. The caye also hosts a lot of backpacking visitors who enjoy half and full day snorkel trips and intro dive experiences. Diving certification is also offered on a quickie four-day course.

Marine life lovers can also do manatee tours from here. While you can't snorkel with them, young, curious ones may approach quite close to the boat. There is an office for Friends of Swallow Caye Wildlife Sanctuary, where the manatees live most of the year. Built from donations by manatee lovers who go on well-known local manatee conservationist Chocolate's Manatee Tour, it is located on Front Street on the beach across from Chocolate's Gift Shop.

Caye Caulker Marine Reserve and nearby Hol Chan are also available to snorkel and dive, with the barrier reef only a mile from the island. Trips leave daily for big name dive sites including Lighthouse Reef, Turneffe and the **Blue Hole**. Regular flights don't stop here but Maya Air will do so if requested.

There aren't as many moored dive sites down here as there are at Ambergris Caye or off San Pedro, so 'drift' dives are frequently done. These aren't true drifts, they are rather more like swims with the boat following. An open ocean ascent is done, usually with the guide going up first to signal the boat.

<i>Caye Caulker</i>		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
14	CORAL CANYONS			•	
15	STINGRAY VILLAGE	•	•		
16	CAYE CHAPEL REEF			•	

14 CORAL CANYONS

Location: 2 nautical miles (3.2km) southeast of Caye Caulker
Depth: 40-100ft (12-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This is a shallow dive beginning in sand flats and featuring small corals with lots of macro life, including corkscrew anemones, snapping shrimp and small crabs. The reef slopes downward with coral growth getting heavier as depth increases.

A spur and groove area leads to the barrier reef at 100ft or so. Corals here are quite good – mostly hard corals on the outer reef with some sponge life.

Make your way back up the narrow grooves, checking under ledges for lobsters and other inverts that may live there. The dive can be ended back in shallower waters where small fish and various corals can be found.



A trumpetfish hides in swaying corals

It's a Croc



Quite a few saltwater crocodiles are found on Caye Caulker. An important inhabitant of the mangroves near the island, their nests and movements help aerate the sea floor and alter mangrove growth. They feed on fish and birds, and if you go down to the dump, (also a small lagoon) you may see them prey upon garbage scavengers. Crocodiles have been protected in Belize for three decades, but they were once hunted for their skins and the population was virtually decimated. They are rarely seen out on the coral reefs, however, preferring the protection of the mangroves. They pose no real threat to humans, and divers consider it a bit of luck to see one of these reclusive reptiles.

15 STINGRAY VILLAGE

Location: 2 nautical miles (3.2km) southeast of Caye Caulker
Depth: 3-6ft (1-2m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



More a snorkel than a dive, this site is Caye Caulker's answer to **Shark Ray Alley**. Many people actually prefer this site as it is much shallower (chest deep in some places) and full of rays and nurse sharks. Once a fisherman's fish cleaning spot, now it is visited daily by those wanting a Caye Caulker snorkeling experience.



The site was developed in part to take pressure off **Shark Ray Alley**, which gets cruise ship visitors as well as the usual day trippers staying in San Pedro or coming up from Belize City. A plus is that there is no coral for tourists to kick and break. The usual suspects are all here, including groupers, stingrays and sharks, with eagle rays sometimes seen out on the periphery.

This is a photogenic location with critters coming nice and close, but look out for the sand that kicks up easily and suspends in the water, along with bits of turtle grass that can also sometimes float by. It is shallow enough that some good shots can be had without using strobes, a Magic Filter works very well at this location for digital still photographers.

16 CAYE CHAPEL REEF

Location: 2 nautical miles (7.2km) east of Caye Chapel

Depth: 30-130ft (9-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Caye Chapel is a private island with a golf resort, posh hotel and its own little landing strip. A stark contrast to the hippie life in Caye Caulker, this was designed for those who want luxury villas and plenty of seclusion.

This nearby boat dive starts shallow and heads down a nice spur and groove system into the outer barrier reef depths. Explore the nice mini-wall that starts in just 70ft and falls off to 125ft. Keep an eye out for golf balls in the grooves from bad golfers at Caye Chapel – just kidding!

The mini-wall has appealing sponge life and some big fish further down. There are also plenty of sea fans, gorgonians and sea rods holding trumpetfish

and filefish within their cover. Lobsters and channel-clinging crabs and possibly toadfish can be found here in good numbers – look in the many crevices for them. Stingrays can also be seen at the sandy bottom near maximum sport diving depths.

Caye Caulker Marine Reserve

The Caye Caulker Marine Reserve is a haven for juveniles, colorful fish such as parrotfish and angelfish, healthy corals and numerous invertebrates. Including the turtle grass lagoon adjacent to the Caye Caulker Forest Reserve and the Belize Barrier Reef that runs parallel to the entire Caye, the actual reserve extends a mile beyond the reef. Manatees have been seen here and it's a haven for most of the creatures found at nearby Hol Chan. A big recreational area for diving, snorkeling diving and sport fishing, the reserves are co-managed by the Forest and Marine Reserves Association of Caye Caulker (FAMRACC). This NGO is composed of community representatives formed for reserve management, and the Belize Fisheries Department works with the local unit to keep it healthy.



A hiding reef channel crab



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