



SOUTHERN CAYES

This area is developing into the country's new hot spot. The sandy peninsula has some of the best beaches in Belize, and laid-back restaurants, colorful beach huts and even some five-star Hollywood-name hideaways have been erected among the tiny Garifuna villages. Placencia has some great restaurants and a vibe that's attractive to yachties and sunbathers. Divers will find the waters full of marine life and the reefs less crowded than the popular northern sites.

The big draw here is the 13 mile long Placencia Lagoon, an incubation area for virtually everything found on the outer reef. Manatees and bottlenose dolphins come here to mate, feed and raise their young in the protection of these waters. A myriad of other fish do likewise, and juveniles can be seen here in profusion. Located between the mainland and the Placencia peninsula, it is not yet designated as a protected area and there is some development going on along its inner banks. This, rather than the beaches, is the area's greatest asset.

Blue water action in the form of whale sharks, bull sharks, hammerheads, dolphins and other shoaling fish at Gladden Split, all there due to the seasonal spawning of cubera snapper, has got this area some attention. Looking for whale sharks in blue water is hard work, however, and not always fruitful. The

April through June spawning season off the barrier reef about 12 miles out is always exciting, with plenty of fish aggregations along with those keen to eat them – nurse sharks stack one atop the other in sandy channels and big groupers rise up from the depths.

Dives all year can produce sightings of spotted eagle rays, turtles, moray eels, southern stingrays, large grouper, barracuda, king mackerel, dolphins and several shark species, as well many smaller tropical reef fish and invertebrates. Visibility is wind dependent and can be low around the barrier reef – a north wind is good. Manta rays appear with more frequency during winter months when the water temperatures drop, starting December and January. Keep an eye on the blue water if diving then.

Southern Cayes		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
73	MOSQUITO CAYE SOUTH	•	•		
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73 MOSQUITO CAYE SOUTH

Location: 9 nautical miles (14km) east of Placencia

Depth: 6-30ft (2-9m)

Access: Boat or Shore

Expertise Rating: Novice



By Placencia standards, Mosquito Caye South is fairly close to the mainland and is a fine location for snorkeling and underwater photography. Known as a nesting and mating area for hawksbill and loggerhead turtles, it can be full of marine reptiles at times. According to one guide, male turtles are attracted to bright colors, so if you've got yellow fins or a hot-pink mask, keep a lookout

for any huge and amorous loggerhead males!

The site is known as a good place for clouds of baitfish, along with the creatures that accompany them, such as juvenile barracuda. Tarpon also like the readiness of this meal offering and may create havoc in a flash of silver before returning to lurk.

Staghorn corals and some copper elkhorns provide shade and shelter for schoolmasters and grunts. Look also for angelfish, grazing hogfish and coasting flounders.

This is a shallow dive; the only potential hazards being some sea urchins in the shallows or a submerged ray – take it slow and easy. At the time of writing a new, deeper site nearby was being explored, which has lots of nurse sharks, fish life and black coral.



Divers seek seasonal whale sharks

74 LAUGHING BIRD CAYE NORTH

Location: 0.5 nautical miles (0.8 km) northeast of Laughing Bird Caye

Depth: 25-80ft (8-2m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



The north and south of this area have basically the same marine life and terrain, but here it's possible to go a bit deeper. The caye appears to be all that remains of another submerged atoll, its approximately 2.5 acres of land seemingly diminishing with passing storms and wave action.

The caye got its name from the many laughing gulls that once nested here but have since moved away as their nesting areas were swallowed by the sea. Pelicans and osprey still use the island as nesting grounds, however, as do sea turtles.

The dive itself is along a slope running from around 25ft to 80ft and the upper reaches can be snorkeled. There are Casiopeia jellyfish in the sand (they're not sea anemones) that pulse and soak in the sun for algae they host. These can deliver a sting, so be careful.

Scattered corals on the top of the slope are rather dense in places, and fine white sand adorns the sea floor. The slope runs down to a sandy plain at about 80ft that eventually gets much deeper further out.

Impressive rope sponges at Laughing Bird Caye North make good habitat for both trumpetfish as well as seahorses. This is also a healthy habitat for frogfish, which camouflage themselves as encrusting sponges. Look for the web of their feet or perhaps the smile of their cavernous mouths as a giveaway to their presence. Blennies, gobies, shrimp and crabs can also be found in this shallow habitat.

75 LAUGHING BIRD CAYE

Location: 10.5 nautical miles (17km) east of Placencia

Depth: 3-20ft (1-6m)

Access: Boat & shore

Expertise Rating: Novice



The shallow areas in and around Laughing Bird Caye are good for a snorkel between dives. The site is a popular day excursion from Placencia and Seine Bight, just over 10 miles away, but shows some damage from the heavy use during high season. The rule of thumb here is the farther you snorkel out away from the beach, the healthier the coral life will probably be. Just look out for boat traffic.

You'll see some nice brain and star corals here, along with lizardfish, needlefish, large and small barracuda and lots of other juveniles.

The reef area around Laughing Bird Caye is a protected national park, part of the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve system and also a World Heritage Site. The entire island is on the eastern ridge of a shelving faro system, also known as micro atolls or shelf atolls. Within this faro are small patch reefs and coral shelves that are home to a high diversity of fish and invertebrate life. Many schooling silversides can be found here, starting the food chain for bigger fish.



Sea plumes





Rainbow wrasse move through the corals

76 LAUGHING BIRD CAYE SOUTH

Location: 0.5 nautical miles (0.8 km) southeast of Laughing Bird Caye
Depth: 25-115ft (8-20m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Featuring a shipwreck, vibrant shallows and a nice reef slope packed with photogenic invertebrate life, this is an interesting site to say the least.

In its 90ft area sits what's left of the *Miss Pamela*, a tugboat that has seen better days. This wreck has created a

micro-reef with good fish life, including one or two jewfish (giant grouper) that hide in its protective reaches, and are hard to find or see nowadays in the Caribbean or anywhere else. The sandy floor bottoms out at 115ft.

The visibility and divability of these reefs are generally wind dependent. Average visibility is about 60ft to 70ft but can range from 20ft up to 100ft depending on the wind-driven waves and surge. Expect to see lobsters, spotted morays, chain morays, plenty of brain, star and mushroom corals and plenty waving gorgonians.

The south elbow of this reef area catches a bit of current and is excellent habitat for fish life and coral growth.

77 NORTH WALL

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.6 km) east-northeast of Silk Cayes
Depth: 25-120ft (8-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



North Wall is a premier southern area dive and offers just about everything one can hope for when it comes to Belize barrier reef diving. When the swell is down and there is a bit of current, the visibility is good and big shoals of fish will appear, including Bermuda chub,

various snappers and horse-eye jacks, along with schoolmasters and beautiful spadefish schools.

There's no upper reef reference here as the barrier reef is mostly submerged. Drop down to 25ft to 30ft and work your way out to the blue water area at 50ft to 55ft. From the 25ft to 50ft area there are scattered corals with fans atop them.

This area is prone to currents, so go with the flow on a drift dive and have your divemaster point out fish of interest. You'll notice the invertebrates that benefit from this flow. Sponges here are huge and harbor all sorts of small marine life. Numerous gray and queen angelfish feed on the sponges and there's plenty of cleaning activity taking place at the big barrels. Quivering gorgonians may also harbor a decorator crab or two.

This dive can be a deep one with the sandy shelf below the wall starting at 120ft and makes an exciting first dive where you can enjoy the reef from top to bottom. Look into the water column on the way up. It's not unusual to see as many as 10 to 15 black groupers out in the blue. Other highlights include shark sightings, especially early in the morning, and possibly hawksbill and loggerhead turtles.



Gray angelfish



A tarpon appears on a night dive

78 SILK CAYES (QUEEN CAYES)

Location: 22 nautical miles (35km) east-southeast off Placencia
Depth: 0-20ft (0-6m)
Access: Boat & shore
Expertise Rating: Novice



The sandy and beautiful little spits of Silk Cayes have a nice inner lagoon filled with sandy shallows, turtle grass and scattered corals. Used as a surface interval or a snorkeling spot, this is also a good place for open water checkout dives and rusty divers.

Look for tiny silversides and cruising halfbeaks. It's an awesome place for macro photographers to shoot some juvenile fish in the protection of the small corals. Butterflyfish, stoplight and queen parrotfish and meandering gray angel pairs also like this spot.

79 SILK CAYES CANYONS

Location: 1.5 nautical miles (2.4km) east-southeast of Silk Cayes
Depth: 25-130ft (8-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This boat dive is also one of the better dive sites in this area, especially for big pelagic action. It can be done as deep as safe diving limits allow, and is best done as a first dive so the full spectrum of the reef and wall can be appreciated. For best visibility, dive when there is little wind or a north wind. The swell movement isn't so bad deeper and in the protection of the canyons.

The wall here really isn't as big an attraction as the deep gullies in the spur and groove that sometimes bottom out at 90ft before opening up to the wall.

The undercuts and plating corals attract much of the marine life at this site.

Blue water and reef cruisers include Spanish and king mackerel, large bar-

Gladden Spit Marine Reserve

The Gladden Spit Marine Reserve is located due south of Hopkins in the southern barrier reef. A shelf forms a steep slope that drops off at about 130ft to over 6,000ft. This is one of Belize's most active marine areas.

Gladden Spit hosts more than 25 species of reef fish that aggregate to spawn. During the full moon (the key to this is 'full moon') of April, May and June, whale sharks come to gorge on the spawn and eggs of other fish. Large aggregations of cubera snappers and jacks and schools of dolphins are often seen here.

The big attraction in recent years is trying to have a whale shark encounter off Gladden Split. Mantas, blacktips and even silky sharks can be seen in a whale shark's company here. However, this is open ocean and encounters are sporadic and usually coincide with an actual sighting of active spawning. Still, the shark life, dolphins, oceanic stingrays, manta rays, jewfish and other big fish – as well as some fish shoals – make these blue water entries and drifts exciting even if a whale shark doesn't show.

The dives can be challenging and aren't novices, as a bit of vertigo can occur in this bottomless surrounding. The seas can also be choppy. But the chance to have a pelagic encounter should be worth it for the experienced, hardcore divers who want to try something new and different.

Whale sharks are the largest in the shark family and the largest of all fishes. They can grow up to 60ft in length and weigh several tons. They reach sexual maturity at the age of 30 years.

racuda and Caribbean reef sharks. The ledges hold the real bonanzas, however, with lobster in groups of three and more at times. Nurse sharks sleep here during spawning season (May to June) and a rich variety of eels make their homes in cracks and crevices. Look also for turtles sleeping under shelves, cruising big black grouper and ocean triggerfish, which are more common up on Light-house Reef.

80 POMPION CAYE WALL

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.6km) east off Pompiion Caye

Depth: 25-100ft (8-30+m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Considered another of the best blue water dives in the region, Pompiion Caye Wall drops off... seriously drops off! A GPS reading showed the upper reef



Placencia's sandy beach.

Deep canyons and big coral spurs



sloping from 25ft to 45ft, then plunging to 1800ft. Don't drop your camera off this wall!

Swim down the slope from 25ft to 45ft and then just enjoy this wall. It's not as heavily overgrown as other walls in this area, though there are still plenty of attractive corals, sponges and cleaning stations to keep you busy. Keep a sharp eye into the blue as this is a known manta ray spot, especially in the winter months, and also a place to see schools of snapper, spadefish and jacks.

Big loggerhead turtles and hawksbills can also be seen along the wall and sometimes resting or munching away at hydroids along the upper reef. The upper reef is a good place for various eels, including big green morays, but the upper reef shallows can be surgy.

81 POMPION CAYE

Location: 20 nautical miles (32km) southeast of Placencia

Depth: 3-20ft (1-6m)

Access: Boat or shore

Expertise Rating: Novice



Pompiion Caye is a favorite day trip for some of the Placencia charter boats, and can be a shallow dive or a snorkel. The beautifully sandy, white-beach island with coconut palms and resident pelicans makes for a stunning location.

Morays, trunkfish and parrotfish forage and hide in the small coral heads and grasses. You can get some great half-half photos thick with schools of baitfish in some spots.

82 POMPION CANYONS

Location: 2 nautical miles (3.2km) southeast of Pompiion Caye

Depth: 25-130ft (8-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



South of the **Pompiion Caye Wall** Dive, this site has an appealing spur-and-groove system featuring deep sandy channels that spill over the wall in the 50ft to 70ft range.

Move in and out of the grooves to see what the coral spurs have to offer. Blue-striped grunts, horse-eye jacks, schoolmasters and other shoals bunch up and enjoy the current.

The gullies lead up to a shallower and sandier reef that can be surgy depending on the wind. But nurse sharks, conch and rays can all be seen here and it's a satisfying place for a deco stop at the end of the dive.

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