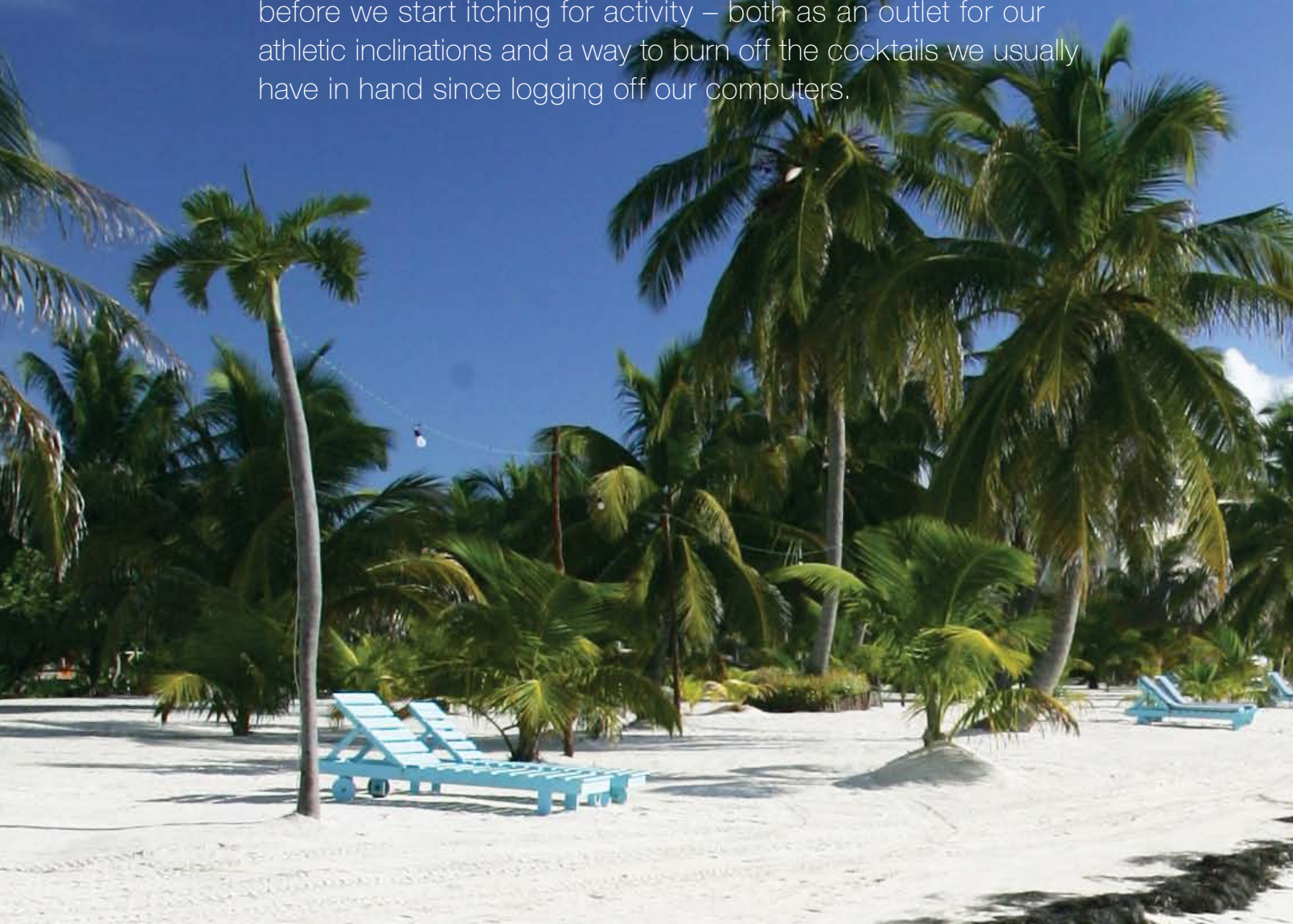


Belize

Breathtaking Beauty & Mystique *by Blane Bachelor*

When it comes to vacations, my boyfriend, Chris, and I -- both Florida natives -- love the beach just as much as anyone. But there's only so much lying on the sand we can take before we start itching for activity -- both as an outlet for our athletic inclinations and a way to burn off the cocktails we usually have in hand since logging off our computers.



So for a long weekend away, we knew we needed a place that could fulfill our fix for surf, sun and adrenaline. We'd heard snippets about the beauty of Belize -- a small country nestled between Mexico and Guatemala -- and I knew enough from three trips to Costa Rica that Central America delivers both on adventure and easy access to the ocean. Our \$398 round-trip tickets made the decision for us, and a week later, our bags packed with bathing suits, running gear and hiking shoes, we were off.

Like many visitors to this still-under-the-radar destination, I didn't know much about Belize prior to our trip besides the fact that its beaches looked breathtaking from a friend's honeymoon photos.

After some research, I learned it was once a British colony -- which means English is the main language -- and it boasts some of the most spectacular Mayan ruins in the world. In addition, many of Belize's adventure excursions blend its mystical Mayan history with a sweat-inducing element: hiking to remote ruins, for example, or paddling into ancient caves once used for rituals.

However, Chris and I know nothing beforehand of what would turn out to be the highlight activity of our trip: a four-hour exploration through a remote cave that's more like a living museum housing Mayan artifacts like pottery and human bones, including a complete, calcified skeleton known as "The Crystal Maiden."



Tall palms rustle in the breeze on the beach of the Victoria House on the tip of Ambergris Caye.

We learn of this expedition -- which is called Actun Tunichil Muknal, or ATM -- our first night in Belize over margaritas at Chaa Creek, a plush jungle resort just a few miles from the Guatemalan border. "We call it the Indiana Jones tour," says Mike Green, who's in charge of conservation at Chaa Creek.

Our collective interest is stoked, and after spending the following day in relative relaxation at Chaa Creek (our most strenuous activity is a canoe trip down the Macal River into the small town of San Ignacio, followed by sinful massages at the resort's spa), Chris and I are more than ready to burn off some energy.

Our guide, a convivial native named Juan Carlos, is one of the few guides licensed by the Belizean government to take visitors into ATM, and it's soon apparent he takes that responsibility seriously. As we tumble out of the van, sufficiently jarred from the treacherous dirt road, he announces: "No bug spray or insect repellent -- we don't want to pollute the cave water!" -- despite the fact that we have nearly an hour's hike through the rain forest to arrive at the mouth of the cave. Along the way, Juan Carlos points out the names of various flora and fauna and various survival tips -- like the fact that termites make a tangy, protein-rich snack in the wilderness, which he demonstrates by plucking several from a rotting tree and popping them into his mouth. He asks if anyone else would like to try them -- Chris does; I pass.

We finally reach the mouth of the cave, which is called "Xibalba" for "the underworld" in Mayan. Helmets and headlamps donned, we shuffle along, navigating rocky outcroppings, slippery footing and water levels from ankle- to chest-deep. Leading the way, Juan Carlos shares secrets of the cave: the carved stone steps Mayan rulers climbed to perform bloodletting rituals, how prisoners of war were used for human sacrifices. As

In the dry chamber of Actun Tunichil Muknal, visitors can pose for photos in the rock formations, but they must remove their shoes before entering in order to prevent damaging the fragile environment.



the lights from our headlamps cast eerie shadows from the spectacular stalactite formations, I realize I'm shivering as much from the grim history as the chilly water.

Finally, after scaling a large rock formation one-by-one, we arrive at the cave's dry chamber. It offers both relief from the river and a rare opportunity for up-close, unhindered looks at artifacts more than 1,000 years old.

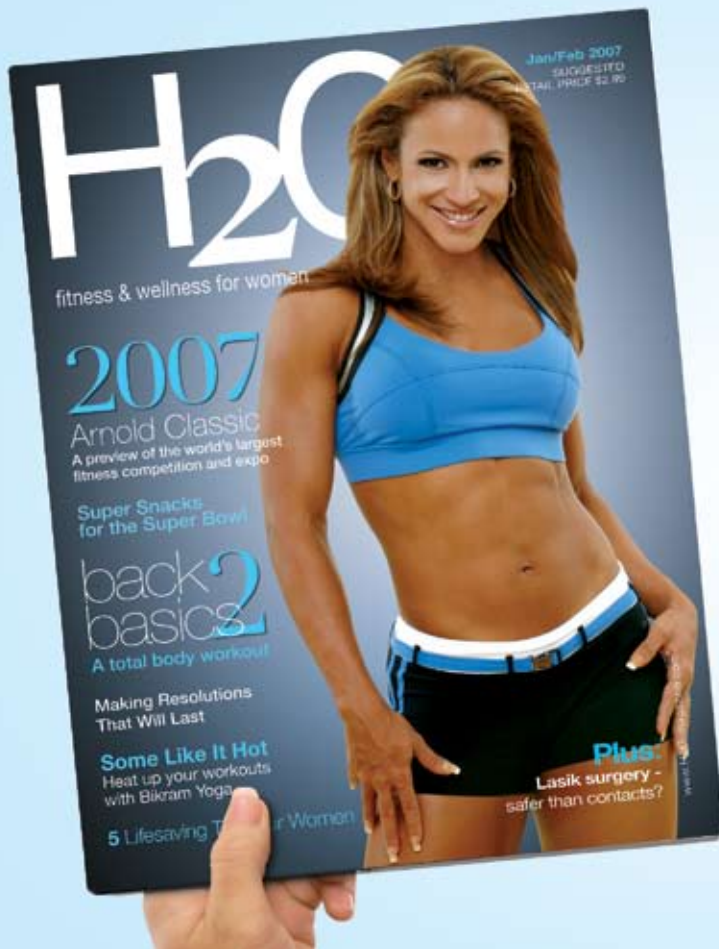
The chamber stretches into a vista scattered with perfectly preserved pots and ceramics, but what really grabs our attention is a human skull. Juan Carlos points out its flattened forehead and filed teeth, alterations that signify the Mayan elite. Peering over the skull, I'm amazed -- and grateful -- that no fences or partitions separate visitors from the artifacts; just our trusty guide pointing the way and asking us to walk carefully.

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The beautifully decorated cottages at Chaa Creek offer privacy and luxury, with some featuring large decks and Jacuzzis.



In fact, the only infrastructure of the entire excursion is a rickety ladder mounted on a sheer rock face, which leads up to another chamber housing the real treasure of the cave: The Crystal Maiden. We inch our way up the shaky rungs and tiptoe into the corner of the chamber. Archeologists estimate the skeleton stretched in front of us is that of a teenager; whether she was a willing sacrifice or not is still a mystery shrouding her calcified bones, which shimmer in the light of our headlamps like tiny jewels.

The trip out goes much quicker, but by the time we reach the cave mouth again, blinking in the welcome sunlight, it's been more than four hours since we entered. We leave feeling like privileged guests on a magnificent archeological site; writing about my experience for a national magazine almost feels like I'm giving up a coveted secret.

Still, with such a rich Mayan history and tourism not nearly as high as that of other Central American countries like Costa Rica, Belize teems with secrets waiting to

be discovered. The day following our ATM excursion, Chris and I set about exploring the terrain surrounding Blancaneaux Lodge, the exquisite resort of director Francis Ford Coppola. Tucked into the serene Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, this upscale property is as much known for its array of activities as its level of service. Our first day there, however, a tropical deluge rules out a morning horseback ride; we wait out the rain reading on our villa's open-air veranda. Finally, the clouds break and we head for the forest, navigating slippery rocks and mud on the way to a massive waterfall. Once there, we spread out on the shore with a tasty lunch packed by the resort, then shuck our sweaty clothes for a refreshing swim. We don't see another human until we get back to the lodge.

After spending three days in the humidity of the rain forest, Chris and I are grateful to be heading next to the sun-kissed shores of Ambergris Caye, a small island that boasts some of Belize's world-famous diving. We're scheduled instead for a private snorkeling trip that afternoon, but waiting for the puddle-jumper that will take us to the island, we read in the local newspaper about the recent death of Steve Irwin, the famed Crocodile Hunter who was fatally stung by a stingray while snorkeling. The news immediately ups the adrenaline ante of our formerly leisurely activity.

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Two hours later, Chris is perched over the side of a small boat near a popular snorkeling spot called Shark Ray Alley. Sure enough, five-foot nurse sharks and rays with wing spans just as long glide under his flippers, and I wonder if we should have opted for a shopping trip into town instead. But our guide shows no fear at all, and I finally slip into the water. The views are magnificent – a rainbow of brightly colored fish, vibrant coral – and our guide points out an octopus and an eel. He disappears for several minutes and returns with a nurse shark in his arms, which Chris and I both stroke gently before he releases it.

That afternoon, piña coladas in hand, we lounge on the sugary white sands behind the Victoria House, a gorgeous, newly renovated property on the tip of Ambergris Caye. Chris eventually goes off for a run, but I order another piña colada and stay parked on the beach. After all that activity, I figure I deserve it.

The best months to visit Belize

are the drier ones (December to May), but this is also the busy winter tourist season. The rainy summer season (June to November) is cheaper and isn't so wet that it limits your activities. Visiting the interior first, with its concentration of Mayan ruins, followed by a few days on the beach is an ideal way to structure an itinerary. Some hotel rates include transfer fees, and staff can schedule most off-site activities for you – such as a trip to Actun Tunichil Muknal or Mayan ruins – but such activities are priced separately.

Where to stay:

Blancaneaux Lodge. Built by director Francis Ford Coppola, this eco-sanctuary of rustic luxury offers an extensive array of activities, exquisite service, and delectable Italian cuisine complemented by – what else? – Coppola wines.

Phone: 800-746-3743

Web: blancaneauxlodge.com

Victoria House. Spectacular views of the Caribbean and light, inviting décor are among the highlights of this stunning beachfront property on the southern tip of Ambergris Caye.

Phone: 800-247-5159

Web: victoria-house.com

The Lodge at Chaa Creek.

This handsome lodge features beautifully landscaped grounds, suites with sweeping decks, and activities including horseback riding and canoe trips down the nearby Macal River. Relax with a massage at the best spa in the country.

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