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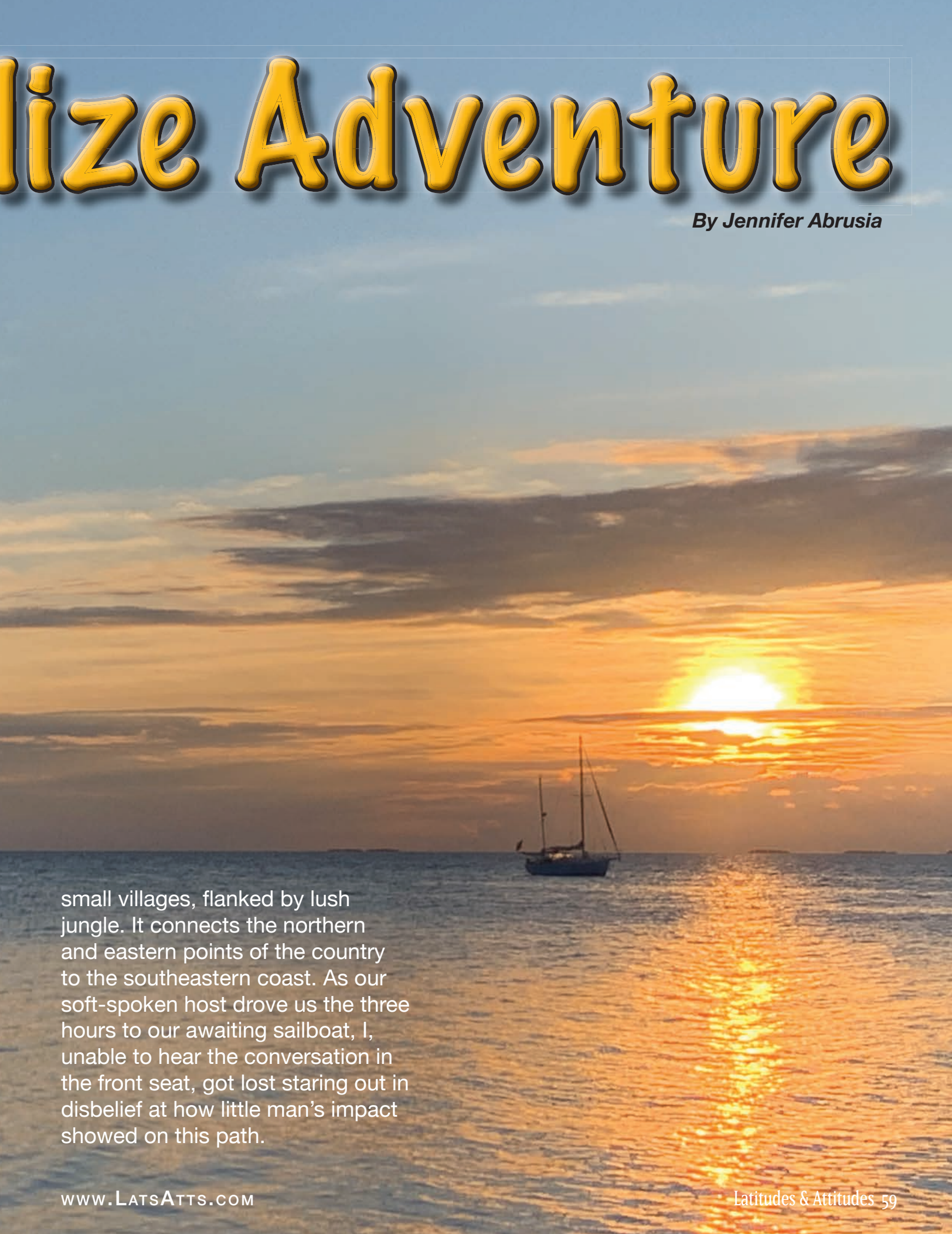
elize, where the jungle quite literally meets the sea; where, below the surface, a menagerie of coral presents itself in a magical display of dancing colors and shapes; where the variety of species both above and below the water are staggering and often hard to visually digest; where the vast jungles have swallowed the history of the Maya peoples that once

commanded the landscape; and yet again, travel has reminded me of what I do not know—and why I should not expect anything of a place and its people.

Our journey started on the Hummingbird Highway, a magical and newly constructed, relatively speaking, 53.7-mile-long road through citrus farms and past

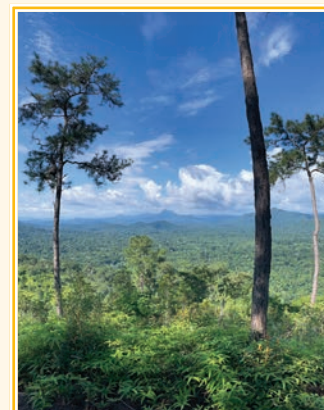
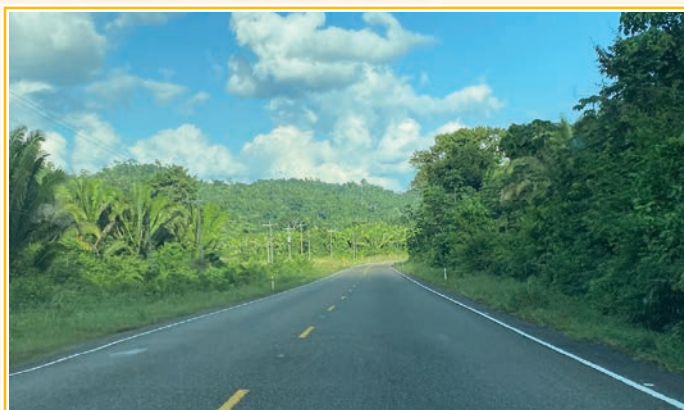
alize Adventure

By Jennifer Abrusia

A full-page background image showing a sunset over the ocean. The sun is a bright, glowing orb on the horizon, casting a long, shimmering path of light across the water. The sky is filled with soft, orange and yellow clouds. A small sailboat is visible on the horizon line, silhouetted against the bright light of the sun.

small villages, flanked by lush jungle. It connects the northern and eastern points of the country to the southeastern coast. As our soft-spoken host drove us the three hours to our awaiting sailboat, I, unable to hear the conversation in the front seat, got lost staring out in disbelief at how little man's impact showed on this path.

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I've since learned that the population of this small Central American country is only about 400,000 contained within square mileage equal to that of about the size of New Jersey, which holds 8.9 million residents. With that comparison in mind, you might be able to appreciate how undeveloped this view was.

As I settled into the ride, head against the window, I found myself almost in a daydream, reflecting on the movie I watched on the plane, "Roadrunner." It is a film about the life of my travel-writing idol, Anthony Bourdain, and one that I could spend hours pondering—when a flash of a bird caught my eye. I rudely yelled, assuming our host's ears worked the same as his voice, "Do you have Toucans here?" Indeed they do, and so began our journey into the beautifully unexpected.

We arrived at The Reserve near the village of Hopkins, an 11,000-acre development with a checkered financial past that you can read up on for yourself, road weary and provisioned. Our home, and escape pod from all things 2021 for the next nine days, would be a 1968 triangle called *Mira* that our captain and host meticulously restored. While we do have the credentials and skills as a couple to bareboat charter our own sailboat, the reef system here is a World UNESCO site and is rigorously protected. Should you run into the reef, the fines and potential jail time are no joke. I read one example of a cargo ship running aground and the website mentioned the Environmental Protection Act in the Laws of Belize. The laws apparently stipulate a fine up to

\$200,000 or 3 times the monetary value of the damaged area, whichever is greater. Not wanting to give our future sailboat kitty to the Belizean government, it more than made sense to find an alternative way to explore this area. Our kind and informed host, with his conveniently laid out ship offering a separated aft cabin, was ideal.

For the next few days, we explored the mainland by motorbike. We rented from Motorbike Rentals & Alternate Adventures in Hopkins, run by Emma who can only be described as one rad chick. She was incredibly knowledgeable about her well maintained bikes and very thorough in her advice and pointers. She even provided us a cell phone for emergencies, which, thankfully, we did not have to use. She gave the thumbs up on our plan to visit the Cockscomb Wildlife Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve, a twenty-minute ride from the entrance to The Reserve.

At the intersection for the preserve is the Maya Centre village where we bought our park tickets and could explore a few little shops and a chocolate factory, after which we headed eight miles, and yet another 20 minutes, up the dirt road, through the jungle, past a local healer's compound, and into the sanctuary. Once there, they were kind enough to let us store our helmets in the office and off we went on the shorter of two waterfall hikes, Ben's Bluff.

Now, it's at this point that I will choose to spare you my **full** excitement about the ants and their roads—no, superhighways!—that they built, traversing the jungle floor with nary a leaf or stick on them other than those being

carried by the thousands of busy ants. Every “road” we came upon appeared to be the exact same width with little retention walls bordering them. I did mention we were in a jungle, right? The fact that it rains there, I don’t know, all the time, and yet there were superhighways of ants, in pristine condition throughout, was astonishing to me. In my mind, the truth is one of two things: 1. They have tiny excavators they bring out under cover of darkness; or 2. They are aliens. Either way, I would gladly accept the risk of bot fly infestation for the opportunity and grant money to study these little guys... but, I digress.

The small waterfall was lovely with a chilly, swimmable pool. It was surrounded by all the epically oversized, green, leafy foliage only a jungle can boast. From there, we hiked the rest of the way to the top where the view really emphasized the lack of human impact on the land. Looking out, one could only wonder if some of the mountains in view were in fact ruins reclaimed by Mother Nature, as if to erase an entire moment in history. In fact, it is believed that this area was once part of the epicenter of the ancient Maya world with an estimated 400,000 inhabitants at its peak from about 250 A.D. to 1000.

On the way out of the park, we walked a 0.25-mile trail leading to the downed plane of Dr. Rabinowitz. He was a world-renowned zoologist and wild cat expert that helped establish this preserve and used the plane to track the jaguar movements and population. He and the two other occupants aboard during the crash only sustained minor injuries, but the mangled plane sits in its final resting place as a reminder of how difficult and dangerous the work of preservation can be.

Another twenty-minute ride, a friendly police checkpoint, and a few stops to rest our car seat accustomed butts landed us at the pristine Maya Beach Bistro. This little gem of a restaurant was highly recommended by Emma. The menu was full of local ingredients that the chef transformed into very creative dishes. Menu items like snapper and potato mousse, lobster bread pudding, and shrimp French toast did not disappoint this girl who spent the last 16 years in Charleston, SC—one of the culinary hubs of the US. The location, where I can only assume every Corona commercial was filmed, as well as the kindness of the staff added to this unexpected casual culinary



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experience—all whilst smelling of the post hike perfume, Eau de Deet and Sweat.

That evening back in the marina is difficult to capture in words. The boat was waiting just as we left her in this lonely marina. As far as we could tell, outside of the heavily armed and very kind security, we were the only ones there. The financial debacle I mentioned before has left this property a five-star ghost town. It is our vague understanding that the amenities were built before the homes and whatever transpired next resulted in few of the planned homes being completed. The handful that were completed are beautiful, however, we noticed some are being left unmaintained and are in disrepair. The marina is supposedly financially separate from the property, but to our surprise, the entirety of the reserve, including the pool and beach area we explored, are impeccably maintained... and yet completely void of humans. I truly hope they can sort this gem out as its proximity to the reef system and many unbelievable islands is truly ideal, as we were to learn in the following days.

After taking advantage of the well-appointed facilities, now clean and exhausted, we prepared for bed at 8pm. Our circadian rhythms were already re-established, a strange evolutionary system that is always unconsciously reawakened, if you will, by the second night we are on



a boat. Here, in the silent and beautiful surroundings, blanketed by the soft glow of moonlight, my man and his full bladder were coerced above deck. To his surprise, at the end of his stream, he discovered the most magical sight: bioluminescence. The still and undisturbed waters of this empty marina made for an incredibly dense display of their light. Running out of bladder reserve, he hollered for me to join him. As we scrambled to find things to disturb the surface, we remembered the resident catfish living below the dock. Excitedly, we began to coax them out with breadcrumbs and marveled as they became trails of blue light slithering through the blackness of night. Through and around, around and through, the dozen or so fish danced about creating a light show we will never forget, all because no man can miss the opportunity to pee off a boat.

Morning found us in Hopkins with a few hours to explore before returning the bike and reuniting with our host to provision properly and set sail. This village is home to the Garifuna peoples. These are the descendants of an Afro-indigenous population from the island of St. Vincent. Their combined cultures were that of fate; the survivors of a wrecked slave ship and a steady stream of escaped slaves were welcomed on St. Vincent. There, they intermarried and began new lives. Sadly, this is not the end of their displacement, but in the late 1930's, they made their way to

Belize. Here in Hopkins, and several other villages, they work to maintain their culture and way of life.

We enjoyed a lovely breakfast at the Rhum Bar before scouting out the Sittee River marina—as we are always on the lookout for future sailing stops. While there, we popped into the Curve Bar overlooking the river and enjoyed watching some local fishermen pass by. Before returning the bike, we made one last stop at the highly recommended Ceviche Bar. The combination of Covid's impact on tourism and our timing of the typically-slow shoulder season allowed for a private experience at this fun bar/pier. The cold, clever cocktails were amazing but hard to drink in the swings that slid from the bar out to the edge of the pier. We decided it best to find a more stable(ish) seating option and ordered the establishment's name's sake dish. Sailboat-like trampolines that flanked the bar area and reached out over the turquoise water were definitely the right call and allowed us to look out over our planned sailing grounds with anticipation.

Bike returned and reunited with our host, it was time to provision. An interesting fact about the grocery stores in Belize is that about 90% are Chinese-owned. The Chinese originally came as sugar cane workers in the 1860's, but most did not stay in the harsh working conditions. However, in the 1980's, Belize made it easier for foreigners to do business and slowly the immigrants that did remain worked their way up. I understand that the Chinese ran the lottery system there for many years, which aided in the funding of such ventures. Nonetheless, the stores are varied in their selection. We visited two in Hopkins. One was small and more market-like, and the other was far bigger with a more substantial selection, particularly frozen and refrigerated goods. Produce is sold in season and was more readily available in stands along the roadside as far as I could tell. Also noteworthy: along the roads, as we approached an area with some homes or businesses, there were speed humps in lieu of stop signs where we often found locals selling homemade goods and produce.

Back on our ship, we sorted out our gear, secured all loose items, and released the lines. We were to spend the next five days exploring the reef system and several of the little islands dotted throughout the area. Our first night was spent anchored alongside Lagoon Caye, a mangrove island that was quite the bird sanctuary. We awoke to sounds of

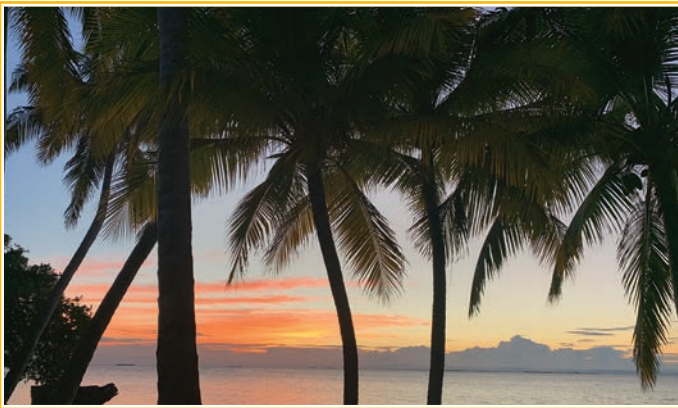


the pelicans diving on their breakfast combined with the chatter of seagulls and an eagle ray on the hunt.

From there, we motored—due to lack of wind—to Moho Caye. This is a private 12-acre island that charges BZD \$20.00 per person for visitors to hang for the day. The island has picnic tables and grills available, as well as kayak rentals. The reef around the island is full of life and it was here that we stumbled upon a nurse shark snuggled up under the coral on the seafloor, not at all bothered by our curiosity. A cuddle fish was conversely very uncomfortable with our proximity and quickly swam off. This tiny island is a great place to spend an afternoon enjoying time beneath the palms, listening to the sea lap against the shoreline. It is a calm, no frills spot where you can be one of very few—if you don't count the sea life. Oh, and rumor has it, there is a very old, very large, very stealthy iguana that calls this island home. Please send me a pic if you spot him!

Day two found us motor-sailing three hours north to South Water Caye. This island is home to a few small "resorts," a handful of caretaker locals, some cool dogs,

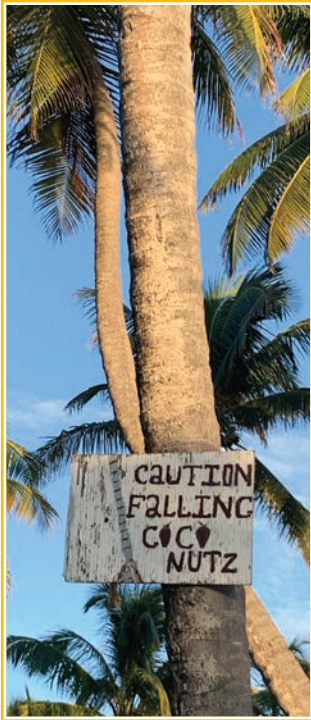
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and IZE, a study abroad facility. IZE has a bar that is open to the public stocked with cold beer and fun cocktails and complete with a view of the resident bonefish school that cruises about hoping for some snacks to be tossed their way. The little bar is buzzing with activity. Hang out long enough and you might see one of the local dive companies who utilize this spot to bring their guests for a lunch break. I'm not sure what the actual rules are, but no one seemed to mind us wandering around the island and exploring the three main resorts. I am hesitant to use 'resort' in this context, but they are all-inclusive, quaint, and beautiful. Here again, with that extraordinary combo of Covid and shoulder season, we found ourselves alone on the most pristine tropical beach. We spent the day snorkeling and lounging in hammocks strung from palm trees that appeared as relaxed as us in their casual reluctance to being upright, until the setting sun signaled our time at this little paradise was over and we needed to find an anchorage for the night.

A morning sail to Tobacco Caye, a little 3-acre island with a year-round population of around thirty people, quickly proved to be our personal favorite stop of the trip. While a few hurricanes have done their part to reshape the population and "infrastructure" of this caye, it was the puritan settlers in the 1600's who attempted to grow tobacco here that gave it its name. The approach to this small and colorful island is a rickety dock flanked by piles of discarded conch shells reaching out of the water. This leads you into the sparsely populated, residential area where we were greeted by a handful of locals lounging in hammocks or chairs. Shouts of "Welcome to Tobacco Caye!" embraced us as we began to take in the charm of this place. The island sits solidly in the South Water Caye Marine Reserve and a snorkel mask is not required to get a glimpse of the marine life surrounding you. The clarity made it impossible to not see all the brightly colored fish here. Rays are numerous and seem to congregate around the docks, where I can only assume they are more than happy to clean up scraps from the fisherman. The humble homes appeared destined to be victims of the next major storm, but, somehow, also as if they had successfully endured many a good storm already. The island was sectioned off into a small residential area in the middle surrounded by a few guest houses and all-inclusive lodges around the perimeter.

Wandering without any possibility of getting lost—as you can see one side of the island from the other—we found our way to the Reef's End Lodge where we were warmly greeted by Lily. She happily stepped away from her computer and took the time to tell us about the island as well as the lodge she and her husband run. Their main building, with a restaurant/bar and a common area for their



guests, was accessed by another more-hardy dock. It was built above the water in a lagoon at the south end of the island. The water below was teeming with brightly colored tropical fish and several of the local rays.

Lily told us she initially found her way here as a diver on multiple trips and that it was love that eventually shifted her life from New York City, where she had clearly honed her art of cocktail making. They have a few waterfront cottages and a main building with several rooms for travelers. This is an all-inclusive lodge and their guests must be tended to first, but Lily let us know that she was happy to accommodate us for meals with notice and that there was a

snack hour we were welcome to enjoy without reservation. Our sailing log is not extensive, but our experiences are typically less welcoming. It turns out Lily and her husband are sailors, so they are happy to welcome the stray salty if they can. Quick side note: she mentioned that they will sell provisions and even ICE if they have enough.

Lily generously suggested we stash our things in their common area while we explored—after tempting us with the snack menu to come later that day: conch ceviche and conch fritters. That was all I needed to hear. Excited to snorkel and ready to build up an appetite for all things conch, we donned our trusty masks, fins, and snorkels

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and spent the next few hours surrounded by the most beautiful reef we have ever seen. The variety of shape and color, combined with the sheer amount of sea life, was overwhelming. Weightless in the water, out of our natural element in this magical world where sound is different and light can change everything, it is easy to lose sense of time. I found myself hovering over sections of reef studying the symphony of movement. The sea fans swayed while small fish darted and large fish prowled. Rays of lights pierced the surface, illuminating reds, oranges, and greens in the coral head. The sound of parrot fish feeding on the reef was ever present while the distant boat motor sound was difficult to place.

Once back on dry land, we drifted in silence back to the dock at Reef's End, where Lily made us amazing cocktails and we sat, digesting what we had just seen. For the next several hours we stayed right there, enjoying the view, each other, and all things conch. Also, it turns out fish was now on the menu after a local fisherman had stopped by with fresh snapper while we were out on the reef.

Question: If Robinson Caruso had a child in Florida, named him Dustin, and Dustin married a Pennsylvania girl named Kim whom he sailed around the Caribbean with until they bought an island, built a treehouse on it, had an amazing kiddo named Ama—who is eight-years-old at the time of this publishing—and lived happily ever after, would you read their story? Or, at the very least, visit their island? Well obviously, this is not a story about the Caruso family, but it sure is a modern-day story worth telling.

Hideaway Caye is a tiny mangrove island in a small group of private islands situated around a cove in arguably the prettiest section of the reef. Dustin and Kim bought the place after sailing around the Caribbean for 13 years. They started the construction with help from the Mennonite community, who framed the original structure that houses an open-air kitchen, dining/bar area, and loft. They enlisted the

expertise of some local Maya workers to build the massive and meticulously-constructed thatch roof that covers this communal area. From there, they slowly added a main house, a guest house, and several other tucked-away nooks that are all connected by boardwalks. There, the family of three and a few dogs and chickens, live and run a small “restaurant” and a one-unit Airbnb.

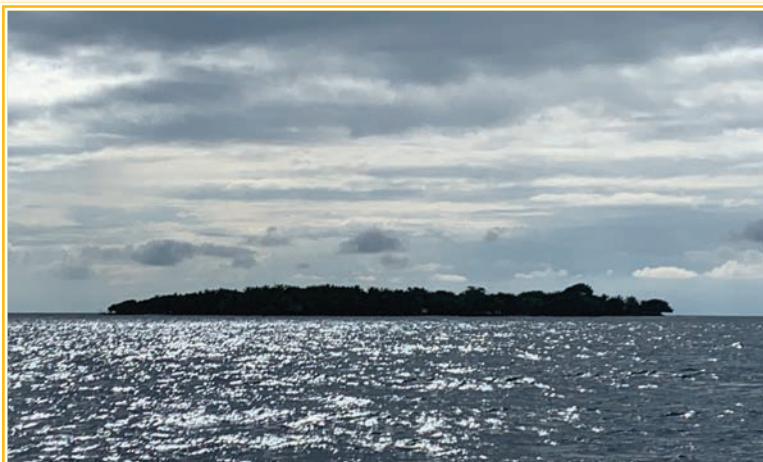
The experience is unique, to say the least, and will not be in your local guidebook. Catering to sailors, they have secured three mooring balls that are first come, first serve in the cove. If you are lucky enough to score a ball and radio in using the station number painted on the ball, you can bet someone, probably Dustin, will reply and let you know what is

on the menu for that night. The mooring is \$25 a night unless you join them for dinner; then it is included in the meal cost. We arrived in time to have our choice of mooring because this was not our host's first rodeo. In fact, their families had become close, and their girls even developed a friendship. After a quick introduction, we jumped in the dinghy to explore the reef. Winds prevented us from accessing what they described as “the best snorkeling on the reef,” so we settled for the leeward side which was not a disappointment

in the least. With good light and light winds, we were treated to yet another spectacular snorkel session.

Upon return to Hideaway, Dustin, the gracious host, immediately offered up some of his homemade rum punch while we sat on the dock taking in the uniqueness of this experience. We quickly learned that tonight's dinner options were lobster or conch steaks. We chose lobster

while a few others, now on the moorings, opted for conch. To our delight, Dustin jumped into the shallow water on the back side of the dock where he proceeded to pull a few conchs from beneath to kill and clean. He was gracious enough to show us the proper technique for the conch, and then pulled the lobsters from a cage also beneath the dock. With help from Ama, they dispatched and cleaned our very fresh meal for that evening.



Fun side story: as we sat enjoying rum punch and conversation with the handful of people coming and going, what looked like a little thrashing worm on the dock caught my eye. Upon closer examination, I was shocked and delighted to see a very, very small seahorse writhing in a few drops of water, trying to work its way back into the sea. It must have been attached to the lobster cage and was, upon discovery, immediately scooped with care by a local captain that had joined us. It was heartwarming to witness how he was so quick to protect and save this little guy. After allowing us a look in his palm, he returned it to the safety of the mangrove roots.

That evening, Kim prepared an amazing meal for what ended up being about 15 sailors. We observed as Dustin, the consummate host, told their story over and over with the same genuineness as more guests arrived. One can only imagine he has uttered those words thousands of times, but he seemed content in the moment each time. The lobster, the rum, the voices and laughter floating about from different tables, Ama and a friend from a neighboring island who had come for a sleepover scurrying about, it all made for the perfect energy to end yet another magical and unexpected day in Belize.

There are many ways I could describe King Lewey's Caye, but I think "an adult playground that you just need to see" covers it. A complete juxtaposition to our previous days' adventures and vibes, we were greeted by a colorful cast of pirate sculptures, parrots, and the friendliest local staff. The small "resort" island is clean and welcoming. There are oversized chess boards, connect four games, and bean bag tosses to entertain you when you are not at the bar or in the ocean. They even have every influencer's dream: swings over the water. (I admit they were actually cool, and I most certainly did it for the gram.) By the day's end, we had happily swum the circumference of the island, enjoyed many of the games, ate delicious tacos, and drank very cold tropical cocktails. Although this island is not surrounded by reefs, there were plenty of fish living in the relative security of the island and its structures to entertain these snorkelers. This

place is, comparatively, the Myrtle Beach of the islands, but sometimes you just have to get cheesy and end your day with a parrot on your head.

After our fill of King Lewey, we departed for a three-hour sail back to the marina. We pointed our pirate ship toward the mainland where the rain clouds hung heavily over the mountains in the distance. Mother Nature impressed with evening light on the rain clouds, reflecting the most vibrant pinks and oranges across the sky.

The setting sun loomed large as it peeked in and out of the clouds, constantly reshaping our backdrop. On the fore deck, we sat closely and silently, taking in the feel and smell of the healing salt air we knew we would soon miss. Lulled by the sway of

the ship, we were able to settle into our gratitude for the beauty and uniqueness of this trip. Quite literally, from the jungle to the sea, this remarkable country, rare in its lack of physical human manipulation, warm and friendly locals, and robust wildlife habitats, reminded us that having things isn't everything... but that preserving what you have can be. Understanding that political muscle drives every country and knowing that, here, the obvious lack of real industry makes for a harder way of life than we know, does not exactly equate to a 'worse' way either. It seems to hold true that

with less stuff comes more community.

Contrarily, more country wide wealth and infrastructure often means longer life expectancy and better measurable quality of life, but so often, less connection. Maybe I am romanticizing what I hope to be, but what remains is that I always leave places like this very torn. I am drawn to the idea of life on a little mangrove island relying on

the wind and sun for power as well as my neighbors and our shared respect to sustain, but then I hear the world calling. At this juncture, it seems the desire we have as a couple to grow through shared experience, combined with an overwhelming desire to touch all sides of the earth, will need to be satisfied further before we, too, decide to Hideaway. 🌴

