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Ambergris Caye, Belize

La Isla Bonita goes upscale, but diving has gone downhill

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www.undercurrent.org

Editorial Office:

Ben Davison
Publisher and Editor
Undercurrent
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102
Sausalito, CA 94965
BenDavison@undercurrent.org

Dear Fellow Diver:

When I first visited Ambergris Caye ten years ago, every road was either dirt or sand. The biggest post-dive nightlife was the "Chicken Drop," betting what square the chicken would poop on. The island's solitude was most apparent during the October off-season, when my dive buddies and I pretty much had the reefs to ourselves. And what glorious reefs -- every dive featured a rainbow assortment of coral and reef fish.

That was then. Now Ambergris is going upscale. Roads are being paved and more condos are under construction. Two luxury spas charge U.S. prices for herbal wraps. Greek tavernas and tapas bars have sprung up. Real estate starts in the mid-six figures. October was no longer a dead zone -- my flight from Dallas to Belize City was jam-packed.

Still, San Pedro, Ambergris' sole town, retains much of its low-key charm. I don't know why Madonna dreamt of it in her song "La Isla Bonita" for there are more beautiful Caribbean towns, but it could be a good stand-in for Margaritaville. Boys bicycling the island's skinny airstrip ambled aside as the Maya Air puddle-jumper landed. Roads in the heart of downtown are still sandy and lined with simple, whitewashed buildings. American expats mingled easily with natives of African, Spanish and Mayan descent, and I was always greeted with a nod and a smile.

A decade ago, my buddies and I had dived with Amigos Del Mar. We had our own divemaster who motored



Amigos Del Mar dive shop in San Pedro



to sites on a small, covered outboard. For surface intervals, he took us to isolated beaches or waterfront bars up north. He never bothered asking about afternoon dives, just presumed correctly that we would. Now Amigos is a major operation boasting multiple 30-foot fiberglass boats and Miss Mel, a 48-foot cruiser for atoll trips that unfortunately met its demise the day after I dived off of it (more on that later). Minimum numbers were required for every dive. No problem for morning two-tanks with six to 10 divers on every boat (we also ran into other operators' groups on dives) but it was tough to find three others for an afternoon or night dive. And forget beach-bar surface intervals -- Amigos steered

divers back to its dockside shop.

I wish I could say Ambergris diving has retained its charm, but island run-off, hurricanes and multiple divers with reckless fins have damaged the reefs. Long stretches of dead brown coral were brightened sporadically by a purple sea fan or lime-green barrel sponge. Reef fish were fewer but still in respectable numbers. Every dive featured nurse sharks, giant groupers, sea turtles or rays, sometimes all appearing simultaneously. When I jumped in at Victoria Canyons, a school of small black grouper came to greet me, obviously seeking a handout. Parrotfish chomped at coral while four-eyed butterflyfish and damselfish daintily swam about. Smooth trunkfish motored by, on a mission. Curious yellow-tailed snappers followed while I looked for bright coral among the rubble. And they wonder why the marine life is disappearing.

Amigos, like many San Pedro dive operators, had no qualms about feeding -- or touching -- the fish. They did it for divers but it obviously shaped fish behavior. At Esperanza, two nurse sharks quickly swam over but split when they saw no chum. Luis, the day's divemaster, wrestled one to the sand, flipped it over and started rubbing its chest. The shark struggled at first, then relented. When Luis released it, the shark fled, looking notably pissy. Later Luis dug into barrel sponges, pulling out an arrow crab, then a coral-banded shrimp, placing them in divers' hands.

I stayed at Banyan Bay Villas, a white stucco complex sprawled beachside at the southern edge of town. My week's stay was a timeshare gift from friends, but I was still socked with a US \$250 utility surcharge. My tile-floored two-bedroom was spacious, with a huge Jacuzzi tub in the master bathroom, but the tap water loaded with chemicals turned my hair to glue after a shower, and the towels were somewhat tattered. Banyan Bay was renovating but 7 a.m. in the room next door was too early for me. After I complained, housekeeping left fresh flowers to apologize but buzzsaws still started before 8 a.m. Certainly not worth \$325 a night. The well-stocked Hariri's Market was next door (although I had to check if food had passed their expiration dates) so I used my full kitchen often and ate on the shaded patio overlooking the pool.

For dining out, I started upscale at Rico's, Banyan Bay Villas' airy, dome-topped beachfront eatery. However, the kitchen, not the diners, had the ocean view. Waiters were attentive but my whitefish fillet was covered in a too-extreme mustard sauce. The Mayan-marinated shrimp over coconut rice was tasty but too small to be worth a \$27.50 entrée. Café Picasso, a gourmet melding of Spanish, Italian and Caribbean cuisine, had a lovely dining room and garden but the touted mojitos, margaritas and martinis had too little liquor for \$8 to \$15 prices. I preferred the hole-in-the-wall bargains. At Café Cubano, the friendly waiter in crisp black vest and white apron served thick Cuban sandwiches with fries for \$6 and San Pedro's best bargain, chicken stew with rice and beans for \$3.50. Ali Baba's had perfectly seasoned Lebanese chicken with pita and babaghanoush for \$7. A lively spot for tourists and expats was Pedro's Bar and Guesthouse near the airstrip, known for tasty \$20 pizzas and Saturday-night poker tournaments with \$100 buy-in. Pedro is actually Peter Lawrence, a 50ish Englishman with caustic humor but a welcoming attitude. In the air-conditioned bar covered in U.K. football banners, I ate Greek pizza loaded with feta and olives.

Amigos' crew was professional and prompt. During my four days of Ambergris dives, I had divemaster Tony and captain Rene, both mellow locals in their 40s. They always arrived at my hotel dock a few minutes before the 8:30 a.m. pickup. On a windy morning, office manager Chayana called at 7 a.m. to announce dives were canceled, giving me time to plan a day trip through the jungle to Mayan ruins at Lamanai. Dive boats averaged eight passengers, always American. Rene gave good briefings on the sites, bottom times and what to look for. First dives averaged 80 feet, the second 50 feet. Crew stored gear between dives, helped me into it before my backward roll, and held out hands for everything except masks before I climbed the ladder. They didn't do hard sells - when I expressed interest in a night dive, Rene said don't bother because a recent storm was causing poor visibility. Also, he made sure my buddy and I didn't make any repeat dives. Water was on board and sliced fruit was offered during surface intervals at the shop. Cholo's, a concrete slab of a bar with tables scattered in the sand, was in front of Amigos' dock. After morning dives, I ordered the cheapest Belikin beers in town (US\$2) and watched local kids play beach soccer.

Amigos had some flaws regarding equipment. On a morning dive, both tanks were only filled to 2,000 psi. My buddy's tank valve bubbled crazily on a few dives, making him surface earlier than he wanted. Tony was intent on showing me small critters like trumpetfish or yellowhead jawfish, but I cringed when big draws swam by. "Please don't touch the turtle," I silently pleaded when an old green one with a barnacle-encrusted shell approached in Tuffy Canyons. Luckily, Tony just moved in front of him and steered him back to swim in front of divers' cameras, and the turtle patiently acquiesced. But a couple of macho divers took Tony's cue and started grabbing at nurse sharks.

I wanted to go to the Elbow at Turneffe and its fish-attracting currents but when Amigos' 10-person minimum wasn't met, I went next door to Aqua Dives. The first guy at the counter told me if I signed up with the four divers on the waiting list, the Elbow trip was a go for the next morning. When I came later for rental gear, another guy said, "What? There's no trip going there, but we're going to the Blue Hole." Seeing my dirty look, he offered me \$20 off the \$180 price. Disappointed no one shared my interest in Turneffe, I agreed. At 5:30 a.m., I left with 19 divers on Aqua Dives' 52-foot boat. Stony-faced crew threw dive bags onto a ledge above the stairs to the head, and one napped on top of them during the three-hour ride. You'd expect smoked salmon for the \$180 price but breakfast was stale raisin bread. Luckily, seeing spotted dolphins leaping in the boat's wake aided digestion. At Blue Hole, two divemasters helped us into BCDs, herded us into groups of 10 for the step off the back and steered us underwater. Despite the crowded feel, I realized why the fuss about Blue Hole's collapsed cave. I was literally entering the prehistoric age as I sunk down alongside the tapering spikes of massive stalacites to the 130-foot maximum. Looking down, I could see the tips of equally monolithic stalagmites rising from the bottom and shadowy reef sharks circling in the distance.

The outer atolls' glorious diving made me regret being based in San Pedro. Half Moon Cay was a colorful garden of pillar, staghorn, fire and leaf coral. Red squirrelfish hovering behind sea fans stared at me with gigantic black eyes, spiny fins bristling. Tucked under a ledge were

We Want Your Tips About Tipping

We're doing an article on good, bad and just plain unusual tip policies. Do you know a liveaboard, dive resort or scuba operator with such policies?

For example, diver George Coughlin was on an Indonesian liveaboard that had two tip boxes, one for the dive managers and an Indonesian dive guide, and another tip box for the other 25 members of the Indonesian crew. "The dive manager told me the latter wanted it that way. But it just seemed that the crew weren't viewed as important as the others," says Coughlin.

In what situations have you been glad to tip - or outright refused to do so? Furthermore, how much do you tip? To whom, and on what basis? As traveling divers, we need to share this important information because on dive trips running at \$1,000 to \$3,000, tips can become a big hunk of expenses. So how do you tip? Send your comments to EditorBen@undercurrent.org.

Ambergris Caye, Belize

Diving (*experienced*) ★★★

(*add two more stars for day trips to the atolls*)

Diving (*beginners*) ★★★★★

Snorkeling ★★★★★

Accommodations ★★★

Food ★★★★★

Amigos Del Mar's Service and Attitude ★★★

Aqua Dives' Service and Attitude ★★

Money's Worth ★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Caribbean Scale

lemon-finned schoolmasters. Schools of iridescent blue tang shimmered while eating algae on the sea floor. After a lunch of stewed chicken and rice at Half Moon Caye Bird Sanctuary, a lovely isle that costs an extra US\$40 to set foot on, we dropped 50 feet to the aptly named Aquarium. Swarms of juvenile sergeant majors, angelfish, parrotfish and tang flickered through the corals. Visibility was 100 feet, and the sun lit everything like stained glass. The snorkelers said they had equally impressive views. The boat had no shower on board so it was a sticky ride back. After serving rum punch, the crew actually showed some smiles when intoxicated divers started dancing. They were perfunctory at best but I gave them credit for leaving marine life in peace and simply pointing them out.

After disembarking, I got a message from Amigos that an Elbow trip was going the next morning. Another 5:30 a.m. start on Miss Mel, which had more legroom and storage plus cushioned seats and a shower. Breakfast was also better -- fruit and thick cornbread -- divemasters Edgar and George were much friendlier and 12 divers made for smaller groups. The previous night's storm had made the weather windy, overcast and actually chilly but water temperatures still averaged 84 degrees. Unfortunately the Elbow was too murky, but Black Beauty and Tres Amigos were excellent substitutes. A big pufferfish approached, his huge eyes begging me to get the remora off his back. A green moray and a grouper paired together to hunt, moving in tandem down a finger of coral. Edgar was eager to point out critters, exclaiming "Mmph!" into his regulator whenever he saw something interesting. But that also meant disturbing its routine, like forcing a giant crab to crawl on demand and tapping rocks where lobster or frogfish hid. He and George were somewhat redeemed when they pulled out frozen Snickers and served bottomless rum-and-Cokes during the two-hour ride back. That trip was memorable because it was Miss Mel's last complete one. The next day, one of its engines exploded at Lighthouse Caye, burning the ship into the sea. Revenge of the fish gods? Luckily, all divers floated to other boats in their BCDs, and I was told Amigos already had a newer, larger boat en route to San Pedro.

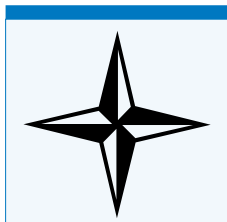
Having time to kill before my puddle jumper left, I did Amigos' snorkel trip to Hol Chan Cut and Shark Ray Alley with Tony, a teenage divemaster in training. Down 12 feet at Hol Chan, spotted eagle rays swam as gracefully as ballerinas, southern rays burrowed in the sand waiting for prey and a loggerhead ambled by with two green eels as escorts. "This was as good as any dive here," said my buddy after surfacing. The fishing ban had kept marine life healthy but dive boats still threw out chum on arrival. Eight nurse sharks were literally leaping at the boat ladder. Tony flipped a young nurse shark over and offered its stomach for me to rub. I knew he meant well but I was sad to see another standard Belizean divemaster in the making.

Who should go to Ambergris Caye? Certainly the young at heart, who aren't demanding about the quality of diving and want to party; families, since there are plenty of condos and a few things to do; people who want an American-like destination with a bit of local color and know not to expect a bargain. I enjoyed San Pedro's lively ambiance and friendly residents but if, like me, you were there years ago and want to relive that romantic dream of isolated island charm, you will be disappointed. In retrospect, I'd base myself on Turneffe or Caye Caulker for quicker access to the best diving in northern Belize. A three-hour boat ride one-way from San Pedro is too far and too pricey.

By the way, Amigos del Mar means friends of the sea, which these guys aren't. It's a PADI shop but PADI ought to get down here pronto and teach them what being a

friend of the sea is, which is not chumming in marine parks and flipping over nurse sharks for belly rubs. These guys, and other dive ops that do this, are as disrespectful as they come. If I did go back, I'd go with Pro Dive, which has several years of good Chapbook reviews. There are still plenty of photo ops in sharks and rays but bad behavior and dying coral are making the diving disintegrate as rapidly as Amigos' Miss Mel on fire.

-- J.V.



Diver's Compass: Amigos Del Mar gave a 10 percent discount after three days of diving, but I still paid a pricey \$267.50 for four two-tank dives at Ambergris Caye sites; the standard two-tank rate is \$75 . . . I paid an additional \$75 for the Hol Chan/Shark Ray snorkel trip, and the three-tank Blue Hole and Turneffe trips were priced at \$250 and \$185 respectively . . . Villas at Banyan Bay charges \$300-\$400 per night for a pool view and \$375-\$475 for beachfront views through April 30 . . . To Belize City, Continental flies twice daily from Houston as does American from Dallas and Miami; recent air-

fares ranged from \$625 on the coasts to \$750 in the Midwest . . . I took Maya Island Air for the 15-minute connection to San Pedro; round-trip fare is \$109 and maximum weight is 70 pounds; Tropic Air also flies to San Pedro . . . Decompression chamber is next to the airstrip . . . Internet connections are widespread, but Pedro's Inn offers free computer access at the bar . . . For food shopping, avoid the big Island Supermarket's high prices and go to SuperBuy on Back Street or Hariri Market next to Banyan Bay Villas . . . Ambergris Caye information: www.ambergriscaye.com; Amigos Del Mar website: www.amigosdive.com; Aqua Dives website: www.aquadives.com

Fire Sinks Amigos Del Mar's Dive Boat

The Blue Hole trip started out normally for the 19 divers on the Pro 48 Custom dive boat. It was after the briefing for the third dive at Half Moon Cay when everyone heard a strange noise coming from the engine room. "It was a bang, like a piston going through the engine," passenger Paul Stone from Silver Lake, Oregon, told *Undercurrent*. "Then grey smoke started coming out, followed by black smoke." The cabin filled with smoke in seconds and the divers rushed to the stern. Then flames started coming out of the side. "The fire started quickly and spread fast."

Another diver, Ross Tullock, told the *San Pedro Sun* there were some issues that remained unexplained.

"I sat on top of the engine compartment, putting on my equipment. I heard the engine noise and saw my divemaster open the engine cover, then promptly close it as there was 'some' smoke. At no time did crew get a fire extinguisher to tackle the smoke. The captain then put both engines in neutral and applied high revs, causing greater oil burn. He verified the steering was still working but what part of his captain's training taught him to check if the steering works when black smoke is appearing? Why would he rev the engine?"

Tullock suggested abandoning ship but the crew said no and told divers to move to the bow of the boat. "Then [when the fire appeared] the crew instructed passengers to move to the rear down the port side on the outer rail to col-

lect a scuba tank, as there were no life jackets to hand. I was shocked to see 18 passengers moving to the back of the boat, where the engine is now fully ablaze and the crew is telling us to collect a pressurized tank of air and jump. Meanwhile, the captain started throwing life jackets to me on the bow of the boat so I either passed them to passengers moving down the port side or threw them into the water for people to collect."

Stone said, "We got out with our BCDs strapped on but hardly anything else." In the waves, divers and the four crew watched the *Miss Mel* burn and sink into the water, eventually resting 15 feet at the bottom, and nothing was recovered. An Aqua Dives boat was nearby and took them to shore.

Tullock said, "It is possible the boat could have been saved had the crew been better trained in dealing with initial signs of engine fire – for they were certainly not focused on passenger safety." Other passengers onboard told the *Sun* that despite smoke everywhere, nobody panicked and the crew did a good job.

Stone says Amigos Del Mar reacted promptly by having divers fill out reports and insurance claim forms the next day. Amigos Del Mar manager Gilmar told *Undercurrent* that the cause of the fire was the capillary engine breaking its case and catching on fire, and that the company's insurance firm is handling further correspondence with the divers.