

THE WESTERN CARIBBEAN'S BEST KEPT SECRET

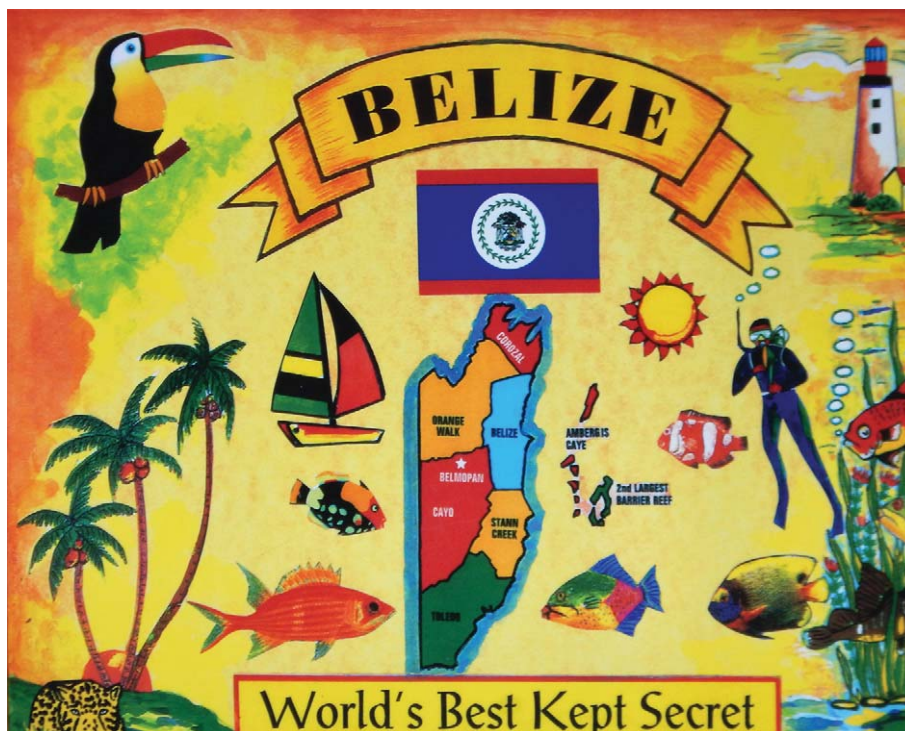
Chris Burry and Madeline Hibberd

(Chris and her husband Bill have owned Plover, a 1976 Dickerson 41, for 35 years and have twice sailed her transatlantic. They often cruise to the Canadian Maritimes from the southern part of the Chesapeake Bay where they are the Port Officers for Deltaville and Mathews, Virginia.

For their month-long trip to Belize in January 2019, they flew into Belize City where they were met by Port Officer Paul Hunt. He pointed them south in the direction of Placencia, where they joined OCC friends Roy and Madeline Hibberd who live aboard their 46ft Prout catamaran, Mithril of Newhaven.

All prices are in US dollars except where stated.)

Belize has been on our bucket list ever since we sailed past her reefs 30+ years ago, on our return trip from the Mediterranean to the US via the western Caribbean. So when we got an invitation from our British friends Roy and Madeline Hibberd to join them aboard *Mithril of Newhaven* for a month's cruise in Belize, we jumped at the opportunity.





*Mithril of
Newhaven at
Belize City
Marina*

Prior to our trip we e-mailed Paul Hunt, OCC Port Officer in Belize, and he recommended that we fly to Placencia to meet *Mithril*. Paul met us briefly at Belize City airport and



saw us onto our local flight, a short 20 minute hop south and then a two mile taxi ride into town. Roy met us at the municipal dock and took us out to the anchorage, where there were about twenty other sailing boats, most either American or Canadian.

Placencia is the southern headquarters for cruisers and for the small Moorings charter catamaran fleet. There are several well-stocked grocery stores and vegetable stands, and you can buy diesel and gasoline (petrol) from the dockside fuel station. Local cruisers hang out at a bar named Yoli's, where they leave their dinghies before walking through the back streets up to the small town. On our first day ashore we stopped at a roadside stand for a lunch of stewed beans with coconut rice and fried plantains – it only cost \$2.50 apiece.

Next day we sailed 20 miles south to the well-protected anchorage at Monkey River. We searched the mangroves for local oysters and plucked them right off the

Placencia's back channel



roots. Madeline steamed them open, and we ate them with melted lemon butter and garlic. The following day we sailed 20 miles east to the small island of Ranguana Caye (16°19'N 88°09'W) on the main Belize barrier reef. We used the most recent version of Freya Rauscher's *Cruising Guide to Belize* – see **page 49** – which includes coordinates and GPS waypoints. But even with digital charts, sometimes the waypoints and courses plotted were inaccurate.

Ranguana Caye is a beautiful, palm-treed island in the middle of nowhere. We found three moorings off the west side of the caye, but once secured we decided the NE trade winds were making it too windy and rolly to take the dinghy ashore safely. Fortunately the wind and waves died overnight and we awoke to a flat calm sea. We ventured ashore to check out the island and found a thatch-roofed bar with four beach cabanas for rent [www.ranguanacaye.com]. We enjoyed a coffee at the bar while Juan explained where we could snorkel on the reef just off the island, so we donned our gear and headed out. Once in the warm, clear water we found fish swimming around the brain coral and coral sea fans. It was a lovely spot and we felt as though we'd found paradise.

From Ranguana Caye we sailed back to Placencia as there was a weather front coming through. After the front we took advantage of the northeast wind to head 25 miles southeast to the Sapodilla Cays (16°08'3N 88 15'2W). The cruising guide describes the southern four miles of the barrier reef as a series of large shoal and reef patches intersected by deep channels, with eight islands that make up the Sapodilla Caye Marine Reserve. Good navigation was critical and we kept a watch on the bow when it got shallow.

We set course for Northeast Sapodilla Caye where there is a protected anchorage. Once settled in we piled into the dinghy and set off for the reef. Although the water was a bit stirred up, visibility was good and we saw more fish than at Ranguana Caye. At sunset the horizon cleared and we could see mountains on the mainland of Honduras 25 miles to the southeast, yet it felt as though we were on a South Pacific island in the middle of nowhere. After dark we watched the lights of a departing cruise ship heading to sea.



*An anhinga or snake
bird on the Sittée River*

The wind shifted to the west overnight and we awoke to a long surge which made the anchorage uncomfortable, but by mid-day the seas had moderated enough for us to explore in the dinghy. We went south to Frank's Caye, where we found a white sand beach fringed with coconut palms, then dove back in the water to explore the reef. It was better than the previous day and we saw even more fish, including a beautiful black French angelfish. On our way back to Placencia we set out two fishing lines and caught seven fish, all mackerel except for one cero, also known as pintado or kingfish.

Next day we sailed a few hours north to the Sittée River. We anchored near Sittée Point (16°48'2N 88°16'W) and took the dinghy up the river where it felt like we were on the Amazon. There were lots of birds and it was very lush and green. We saw an anhinga, also called the snake bird, and there were royal terns and white egrets. There were eerie noises in the jungle which sounded like jaguars stepping on branches, but we saw nothing except birds.

With another front and northwest winds coming, Madeline recommended that we take a slip at The Reserve [thereservebelizemarina.com], the new Sapodilla Lagoon marina (16°47'1N 88°18'3W). They had an introductory offer of \$25 per night so we motored in and secured at the dock. There was a building close by with laundry and hot showers, plus we were able to buy diesel, gasoline and water. It is a huge marina with over 100 slips to accommodate megayachts, but there were fewer than a dozen boats. Unfortunately the marina property is in receivership and there is a major investigation under way.

In the morning we set off for our third trip out to the barrier reef. We spent a night anchored at Blue Ground Range, before heading 20 miles offshore to Glover's Reef (16°42'9N 87°51'1W), one of three offshore atolls. An atoll is





*Diving at
Glover's
Reef*

a circular reef with reefs inside. There are only four in the western hemisphere, three of which are in Belize. Glover's Reef is the southernmost and is 15 miles long and 5 miles wide. It was declared an underwater park more than 15 years ago, and is managed by the Belize government which collects Belize \$10 per person per day – about US \$40 for the four of us for two days.

As we approached from the west we could see the turquoise waters surrounding the atoll. We anchored off the Southwest Cayes and took the dinghy ashore to explore, learning that there was a bar and restaurant at the Marisol resort where we could have drinks and eat dinner. But first we wanted to snorkel on the reef. We spent two glorious days exploring the reefs, swimming with the fish among the prettiest coral we had seen so far. We saw a spotted ray, plus large schools of blue tang, colourful rainbow and stoplight parrotfish.

On the second day two local boys paddled by in their canoe. They offered to sell us lobster and conch, and returned with four cleaned and split lobsters and conch meat. We paid \$5 per pound for the cleaned conch and \$12 per lobster. In the evening we went ashore to the Marisol resort where we paid \$25 per person for a dinner of barracuda, baked macaroni and cheese, coleslaw, cooked vegetables and homemade biscuits. The meal was great value and a nice break from *Mithril's* galley.

After our trip out to Glover's Reef we headed back to the mainland. It was a four-hour sail and a large pod of porpoises joined us. They surfed the waves and then swam under *Mithril's* bow before circling back and doing it all again. We entered the barrier reef at South Water Caye (16°48'9N 88°05'1W), where there is a wide cut. We planned to anchor off the island and go ashore, but not until we had swum on the reef at the cut, where we saw some schools of fish and a stingray. South Water Caye is one of the largest inhabited sand cayes in southern Belize and home to International



South Water Caye

Zoological Expeditions Belize [izebelize.com], which runs expeditions to the reef and marine biology courses for students. There were coconut trees all over the island and a beautiful site with nice-looking cabanas.

Next we headed to the mainland town of Dangriga ($16^{\circ}57'9\text{N}$ $88^{\circ}12'7\text{W}$) so that Mithril's visa could be extended for another 30 days. With a population of 11,500, Dangriga is the largest city in southern Belize, and was originally named Stann Creek. The people are of Garifuna culture, descendants of African slaves shipwrecked in

the eastern Caribbean. They were moved to Belize from the islands years ago and are famous for their unique culture and drumming. We bought food at the local supermarket, plus lots of fresh produce including coconut, plantain, papaya and pineapples at the Dangriga Central Market. It is a very colourful town and the local people were very



Roy opens a coconut

Entering Dangriga Creek



friendly, though there is a shallow bar you must cross to get up the Stann Creek river, on which you can get swamped in the dinghy and eaten by crocodiles.

From Dangriga we headed 10 miles back out to the barrier reef for a night before sailing out of Tobacco Caye Cut early the next morning. The wind was east-northeast 15–20 knots and right on the nose. We pounded into the waves through the cut, and then pointed *Mithril's* bow northward. The winds and waves were much higher than we had anticipated as we sailed due north to Turneffe Atoll, the largest of the three atolls in Belize. We entered Turneffe on the west side at Blue Creek and passed through a channel in the mangroves. Once inside it opened up, and we anchored in the southwest corner near Turneffe Island. A local skiff approached us with three young men, part of the Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association (TASA) who work to preserve the atoll. They questioned us about what we planned to do, how many people were aboard, and how many days we planned to stay. They live on Caye Bokel and invited us to stop by and visit their camp.

After lunch we went out exploring and to snorkel. The waves breaking over the reef were rough so we didn't get too close, but we found a small buoy we could tie on to and dove over the side. The water was stirred up but we saw some fish, including a grey angelfish which blended in with the coral, plus some staghorn coral. In the morning, a local fisherman approached in his *panga*, a type of small canoe, to ask if we wanted any lobster, fish or conch. We asked for fish and he said he would come back later that afternoon. He asked for rum in payment and offered us a free barracuda, which we accepted and then cooked for lunch. Just before sundown a different boat approached with the fish. They sold us three large snapper and cleaned them on Roy's fish-cleaning table while a frigate bird hovered off *Mithril's* stern.

The next day we took the dinghy to Caye Bokel to visit the young men. They showed us the small cabin that four of them shared. They live on the island for two weeks and then get one week off, and get supplies from the mainland to cook their meals. After a few days at Turneffe and increasing trade winds, we sailed back to the mainland inside the barrier reef. We had a fabulous downwind sail, with gusty NE trade winds of 20–25 knots behind us.

Our next destination was St George's Caye (17°33'3N 88°04'9W), where Paul Hunt's family have a holiday home. It was the country's first capital in the 1700s, and when the Spanish tried to take the island from the British in September 1798 the British defeated the Spanish fleet. The Battle of St George's Caye is commemorated with a national holiday on 10th September and there is a cannon to mark the location. In addition to a

Chris & Bill on St George's Caye



handful of private residences the island has a resort, the St George's Caye Resort [<https://www.belizeislandparadise.com/>] where we went ashore for dinner. From St George's Caye it was a short day sail north to Caye Caulker (17°44'·8N 88°02'·5W). This island is more populated, so was a good place to buy provisions and explore ashore. It used to be known as a backpacker's heaven but, with a daily ferry to Belize City two hours away, is no longer as quiet as it used to be. There are no cars on the island, only bicycles and golf carts.

*Caye
Caulker*



After a day on shore, we positioned *Mithril* so we could access the Caye Caulker Marine Reserve. It was a short dinghy ride out to the reef and we had a beautiful, calm day. We were protected inside the reef and picked up a mooring while we snorkelled, then moved to another mooring further north to try another spot. When I went to grab the mooring line we saw brown shapes below the surface and Madeline called out, "Sharks in the water!". Hundreds of brown nurse sharks were surrounding the dinghy. The local tour boat operators feed them – it is known as Shark Ray Village with a shark and ray habitat! We did not get in the water but were brave enough to put our cameras underwater for photos!

From Caye Caulker we meandered back south to the Drowned Cayes (17°29'2N 88°06'6W), 10 miles east of Belize City. We explored in the dinghy and saw barges in the mangroves. We thought they were abandoned until a tug came in and began manoeuvring them and collected them on a tow line. We were told that the barges are used to transport bulk sugar out to cargo ships waiting offshore. From the Drowned Cayes, *Mithril* sailed west towards Belize City. We got in touch with Paul Hunt, who lives in the heart of the city and volunteered to drive us around.

First we had to find and enter the channel to the Cucumber Beach Marina [<https://www.oldbelize.com/marina/>], five miles west of the city. The marina was very pleasant with hot showers and laundry plus diesel, gasoline and water. Paul took us for a propane tank refill and to the local chandlery, Duke's Marine, to buy marine supplies. We were very impressed with all the boat stuff they had in stock, including a copy of the *Cruising Guide to Belize*. Paul took us grocery shopping to two different stores and, most importantly, to the local Traveller's rum distillery.

Shark alley off Caye Caulker





Lunch in San Ignacio – Bill, Roy, Paul, Madeline & Chris

Next day we ventured west almost to the border with Guatemala. We drove through Belmopan, the capital city, which relocated there in the 1980s. Then through a community called Spanish Lookout where Mennonites live. They are hard-working people who contribute to much of the agriculture of Belize. Some still drive horse-drawn carriages though they do have rubber tyres. From Spanish Lookout we crossed a small

river on a hand-cranked ferry – a man worked tirelessly to crank the ferry from one side to the other as it had room for only three cars! Our next stop was at a store called British Food Belize [<https://>



Local produce



The jaguar at Belize Zoo

britishfoodsbelize.com/]. Madeline and Roy were excited to buy some of their favourite foods from home. Next we drove to the town of San Ignacio for lunch and shopping at the fresh vegetable market, and before heading home visited Belize Zoo, where our favourite was the jaguar. When we first saw him he looked like a stuffed animal! Then he moved, and we realised how big he was. His paws were huge.

Our last stop was a tour of Belize City, during which we drove over an unusual swing bridge. Built in 1923, it is the oldest swing bridge in Central America and one of the few manually operated swing bridges in the world still in use. It opens twice a day, early in the morning and again in the evening. There was a fleet of colourful local wooden fishing sailboats anchored just south of it.

Next day it was farewell to Belize, after a month's cruising in one of the Western Caribbean's best kept secrets.

PRACTICALITIES

Customs and Immigration

Foreign yachts clearing into Belize from Honduras or Guatemala can clear in at Punta Gorda. The sequence is: Port Office first, then Immigration (who will stamp your passport), next Belize Agriculture Health Authority, (BAHA, who charge US \$10), followed by Customs, and finally back to the Port Office which will issue a 30-day cruising permit. This costs US \$50 for the first day and US \$2.50 per day thereafter. The maximum initial period is 30 days, after which it can be renewed for a further 30 days, which we did at Dangriga.

Both are day anchorages, suitable in settled weather only. Other places to clear in and out include Big Creek near Placencia, Belize City and San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. There are additional charges at these places – eg. for travel by you to the offices – and other charges may be made by the officials for overtime and visiting your boat etc. Clearing out also incurs charges.

Cruising guide

The only available cruising guide is the *Cruising Guide to Belize and Mexico's Caribbean Coast, including Guatemala's Rio Dulce*, by Freya Rauscher. The third edition, published by Windmill Hill Books in January 2007, includes waypoints and plotted courses. *Belize & Guatemala Cruising Notes* by Curtis Collins (available for Kindle via Amazon but apparently not in a printed version) complement her guide. The websites of Lonely Planet, the Belize Audubon Society and Noonsite provide additional information.

Navigation

We found Navionics' digital charts the most reliable, but even they were not 100% accurate, especially near the reef and the offshore atolls. When used in combination with Rauscher's guide and waypoints, we would often find charts off by quarter to half a mile (400–800m). The best option is to rely on eyeball navigation with a sharp lookout on the bow. Even so, depths of more than 1m are not always readable due to lack of water clarity, particularly in areas near mangroves and rivers.

A typical Belizean sailing fishing boat



A number of sailors who have cruised the area for many years have a list of waypoints that they are often willing to share. Although these should be used with caution, they can be a great help in conjunction with the cruising guide and eyeball navigation.

Weather

Chris Parker's Western Caribbean forecast is broadcast on 8137 MHz and 12350 MHz at 0830 Western Daylight Time (UTC 1430) six days a week. It covers a wide swath of the Western Caribbean from Cuba west to Mexico and Belize and south as far as Colombia. You can subscribe via the website www.mwxc.com, in which case Chris will tailor his forecast to your location. The website also gives a list of times and frequencies for forecasts covering the whole of the Caribbean and the East Coast of the USA.

Provisions

Food and alcohol, including local rum, are expensive compared to Guatemala and Mexico. Well-stocked supermarkets are available in most towns, including Placencia, Dangriga, Belize City and Caye Caulker, and carry supplies such as UHT milk, canned goods, snacks, cookies, frozen meat and bottled water. Locally-grown fresh fruits and vegetables are plentiful – papaya, plantain, pineapples, white and sweet potatoes, tomatoes, lettuce, zucchini, oranges, and limes – as are eggs.

Marinas

There are only a few marinas in Belize. The Reserve at Sapodilla Lagoon [thereservebelizemarina.com] is only partially open and in January 2019 was charging an introductory rate of \$25 per night. It has a laundry with three commercial washers and dryers costing \$1.50 per load in US quarters. Hot showers are available, as are diesel, gasoline and water at 10 cents a gallon. There is a small store on the premises which carries canned goods, snacks, eggs, soft drinks and some frozen meat. We had access to the private Beach Club which serves meals and drinks beach-side. As of January the marina was in some financial difficulties, so check first.

We also spent two nights at the Cucumber Beach Marina [<https://www.oldbelize.com/marina/>] west of Belize City, one of the few safe places in the city. Rates were \$1 per foot but berths were only available when the local charter fleet was out.

Communications

We used a cellphone (mobile) with a Belize SIM card for communications, for local calls and for data on the internet. This worked almost everywhere in Belize except at the atolls outside the barrier reef.



I am a citizen of the most beautiful nation on earth. A nation whose laws are harsh yet simple, a nation that never cheats, which is immense and without borders, where life is lived in the present. In this limitless nation, this nation of wind, light and peace, there is no other ruler besides the sea.

Bernard Moitessier