



Bountiful Belize

By Don Mankin

My inflatable kayak hung for a split-second on the lip of the 12-foot waterfall before plunging into the churning waters below. This was the first of dozens of waterfalls, pour-overs and twisting rapids I paddled over or through during the final three days of my recent trip to Belize.

My trip, hosted by Island Expeditions (www.islandexpeditions.com), began with a very wet boat ride to Glover's Reef, an hour or so from the funky beach town of Dangriga. Waiting for us on the beach were big comfy tents, a bar and restaurant, lots of palm trees swaying in the stiff breeze (more on that shortly), and a spanking clean compost toilet a minute away (or less, depending on urgency and speed).

The weather was cloudy and windy but I sort of appreciated the break from the unrelenting sunshine of Los Angeles where I live. The wind-



whipped palms added an element of drama to the picture of paradise.

We were able to get out in the afternoon for an hour or so of drift snorkeling beyond the reef, though the clouds above and the murk below, stirred up by the winds and waves, did not make for great snorkeling. But the slow drift over the reef more than made up for the muted color of the fish and coral.



The wind roared that night, stirring the water up even more so I spent most of the next day reading, napping and hanging out with the guides, staff and several of the other guests “marooned” on the island. After several days of packing and traveling to get here, the forced indolence was more than welcome.

Next day, the weather turned glorious so we took the kayaks out in the lagoon to Jesus Island, a sandbar just below the surface of the water. To the observer, someone walking on the sandbar looks like they are walking on water, ergo the name. I adapted my white boy shuffle to the circumstances to avoid stepping on stingrays buried in the sand, demonstrating that Jesus wasn't the only Jew that could walk on water.

We then put sails up on the kayaks and made our way serenely back to the beach.

The final three days of the trip took us south to the Moho River near the border with Guatemala for the beginning of our three-day paddle through the jungle in inflatable kayaks.

Within a minute or two of launching our kayaks, we encountered our first pour-over, then several more in rapid succession. Several of the pour-overs were higher than the length of the kayaks. After pausing for an instant on the edge of the drop-off, the kayaks plunged nose first into the water, engulfing its occupants in a huge splash. It's like the best possible amusement park ride, but instead of hordes of screaming people and metal towers and contraptions, it was just us, whooping and laughing in the middle of the jungle.

On the first two tries, I ended up bouncing out of the kayak into the warm water. Then I got the hang of it by grabbing the straps that held my seat. After those

first two dunking's, the only time I ended up in the water is when I wanted to.

We paddled and plunged for a few hours before pulling into camp, a large flat, open area with lots of space for our tents, kitchen and “living room” furnished with sofas made up of our overturned kayaks. I set up my tent and changed into dry clothes, then plunked down on one of the overturned kayaks within arm's reach of the bottle of rum that our guides had thoughtfully brought along. I leaned back on the makeshift sofa and sipped the rum straight while they made dinner.

The night was quiet except for the howler monkeys that woke us up at 2 am with growls and screams like creatures from a Grade B horror movie.

The next day was pretty much the same, a peaceful float down the river through thick jungle until we heard the sounds of rushing water ahead. Then the adrenaline took over as we dove nose first over the waterfall into the water. Invariably we ended up wet and laughing on the other side. I can't remember the last time I had this much fun sober.

We saw no one else the entire trip. The only sign of “civilization” was the occasional clearing for a farmer's field just behind the fringe of trees and bushes lining the banks. The only sounds, besides the rushing water, were the birds (cormorants, herons, eagles, buzzards, among others) and howler monkeys. We never saw the monkeys but we did see lots of iguanas in the trees overhead. At one point, one of our guides grabbed an iguana that had fallen from a tree into the water and held him long enough for a few photos.

The last night of the trip was spent in a hotel room near the airport with showers, flush toilets and Wi-Fi. No winds, howler monkeys or waterfalls to keep me up. It was my worst night of sleep the entire trip.

For more information and photos go to the blog on Don's website, www.adventuretransformations.com.

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