The Man on the Bike Told the Truth: Adventure in Belize

Jeff Rasley
Butler University, jrasley@butler.edu

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February may be the shortest month, but its cold temperatures, icy streets, and grey skies make it the cruelest month to live in Indiana. I try to find a sunny beach, coral reefs for scuba diving, or some adventure in warmer climes away from the cruel Indiana weather each February. I found all of that in Belize with my dive buddy, John.

Between us, we have dived most of the desirable island destinations in the Caribbean. But neither of us had been to Belize or had dived the great Blue Hole off Ambergris Caye. The Blue Hole is on most divers’ top ten list, so we decided that would be our goal that February. We found a package deal with Capricorn Tours out of New York for $1,000 each, including air fare, transfers, four nights on Caye Caulker, which is 40 minutes by boat south of Ambergris Caye, three nights at the Black Rock Jungle Lodge in the northern rain forest of Belize, and four days rental of a 4-wheel drive Jimmy. Diving the Blue Hole, 4-wheeling around Belize, and exploring rain forests and Mayan ruins would certainly beat enduring another week of the grim depressing Midwestern winter sky.
Caye Caulker is less expensive and funkier than Ambergris Caye, we learned from our internet research. And it turned out to be one of the coolest places either of us has visited. It is a great place to kick back and hang out. We had planned to dive 3 days with the Blue Hole our final dive. But I just dug hanging out at the Split and wandering around the island so much I only dove the first day. The Split is where a fast-flowing channel splits off a chunk of the island at its north tip. Sunbathers, swimmers and snorkelers splash, picnic and play and while away the day under the warm sun.

I am usually a gung-ho diver, and didn't expect to so fall in love with Caye Caulker that I would pass up the chance to add the Blue Hole to my dive pelt belt. But I don't really regret leaving it for the future after hearing John’s description of the experience. The divers were beaten up riding choppy seas in a small dive boat for four hours. The dive was a descent of 145 feet for five minutes of bottom time. Because of the extreme depth and risk of nitrogen narcosis, divers are only allowed a few minutes at depth. John reported the visibility as only fair, but he did enjoy the experience of descending through a huge cave with stalactite-like structures hanging from the walls. John was glad he did the dive, but was ready for a visit to his chiropractor after having his butt beaten on the return boat ride.

While John was visiting the aqueous nether world, I had an extra day to enjoy Caye Caulker. It is such a funky little town with dirt streets, no vehicles except golf carts, and cool little bars and restaurants lining the main road just off the water. Locals and tourists were so friendly. Each evening we found ourselves hanging out with people we met at a bar or restaurant, laughing, drinking and telling tales of travel and other adventures. After sunset each evening, we finished off the day watching TV on the counter of Maria's ice cream shop. An eclectic assembly of Americans, Canadians, and Euros sat together on the side of the dirt main street watching Maria's TV, which she left on even after she closed the shop. Later TV there went off the air and the group would retire to one of the nearby bars for a last call or to drink a final Belikin Beer at the
Rainbow Hotel, where John and I were staying. The Rainbow is the largest hotel on the island with 12 rooms.

My favorite hangout during the day was at Wish Willy's just off the main street. Willy aka Maurice, is a Rastafarian, who graduated from culinary school in Chicago and has studied philosophy. He makes an extraordinary breakfast and steak dinners and is a very amiable conversationalist. He cooks, clears his tables when he feels like it (or a customer asks him to), and will rap philosophy until he has to wash dishes for the next meal. His kitchen is in his house and the restaurant is divided between the upstairs of the house and a wooden shelter beside the house. Painted on the white, back door of the house in black letters is a koan: "The man on the bike told the truth." A koan in Eastern philosophy is a simple statement that tells a deep truth about which one should continue to ponder throughout one's life.

Flying a puddle jumper from Caye Caulker to Belize City and then driving the Jimmy to the Black Rock Lodge in the rain forest north in the Cayo District, John and I began to ponder the koan on Wish Willy's outhouse door. We continued to contemplate the deep truths the koan might hold for us while we rode horses, swam in the Macal River, explored a cavern and various Mayan ruins. I particularly enjoyed piloting the Jimmy down the jungle roads in 4-wheel drive and adding to John's need for chiropractic therapy.

The nearest town to the Black Rock Lodge is San Ignacio, where the locals are quite friendly. The American & Euro travelers hang out at Eva's or Martha's drinking Belikin Beer, and there are a few malaria-eyed old timers carrying scruffy packs and pitching get-rich-schemes or offering themselves as guides. Except for the 4-bys lining the streets and the fresh-faced
backpackers, the town still has an out-of-time Hemingwaysque feel of a Banana Republic on the Mosquito Coast.

After our return to Indy, John and I agreed that we had not yet plumbed the depths of the statement, "The man on the bike told the truth." But we decided that we could at least adapt it to the entrepreneurial American spirit. We were planning to ride our Harleys to Sturgis, South Dakota for Bike Week in August. Our plan: silk screen "The man on the bike told the truth" in white letters on black T-shirts and sell them to bikers. Our dilemma: will we owe Maurice a contingent fee? That, we will continue to ponder.