

Ambergris Caye, Belize

Ambergris Caye is the most-popular tourist destination in Belize, and for many it's the perfect choice for a laid-back tropical trip.

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Although fairly developed by Belize standards, Ambergris Caye (pronounced Am-BER-Gris Key) is a world away from the high rises of Cancun or the timeshares of Cozumel. Ambergris is an island off the coast of Belize, just south of Mexico, in the Caribbean Sea. The only town, San Pedro, is small, with 2,000 residents, sleepy around the edges, and prosperous in a Belizean way.

Your arrival on Ambergris will tell you a lot about the kind of island this is. You can

come by boat from Belize City (US\$10 one way). Most visitors fly, either from Belize's international (US\$70 round trip) or municipal airport (a bit less.) Flights are frequent. Ask your hotel to make reservations for you.

Your Island Air or Tropic Air flight lands at the San Pedro airstrip, maybe after a brief stop on Caye Caulker's unpaved runway. You look around. You're at the edge of San Pedro. Terminal? What's that? There are just offices for the little commuter airlines. The folks behind the counter and the hangers-on are friendly but not pushy. There's no rush of car rental or hotel hustlers as you find on many Caribbean islands, even well-off ones like Anguilla, and certainly no beggars, as in Haiti or the Dominican Republic.

The streets are mostly sand. There are only a few cars and pick-up trucks, and some golf carts. Houses and shops nearby are in one and two-story wood frame houses, painted in island blues and pinks, many with tin roofs, or in small Caribbean-concrete buildings. Close by is a primary school, Leny's Restaurant and the Sun Breeze Hotel. If you walk into town, on the "main" streets, Barrier Reef Drive or Pescador Drive, as they're called now, you'll find this is no hurly-burly resort. It's a real village, with Belizeans going about their business, and highly relaxed visitors who are happy they aren't in Florida.

Just next door to Barrier Reef Drive is the Caribbean Sea. There are few postcard-perfect stretches of white sand here, because the barrier reef keeps the wave action from forming the kind of beaches you see in the Yucatan. But, out there, just a few hundred yards away, in the ridiculously turquoise sea, is the reef, rich with life and beauty. A breeze keeps things cooled down and the bugs away.

Ambergris is a place to kick back. Put your watch away. Settle in. Grab a Belikin for breakfast. Have lunch at Elvi's or snack on some of the best pizza south of Chicago at the Pizza Place at Fido's. Walk and talk. Maybe tomorrow you'll get out to the reef, maybe tonight you'll have conch fritters at Lily's or listen to some music at Tarzan's. Or maybe you'll just read that Travis McGee novel again.

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