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Why I Loved My Terrible Vacation in Belize

Belize may be known as a scuba-diving mecca, with beaches worthy of a postcard. But to taste the real flavor of this Central American country, our writer went off the beaten path... and got a lot more than she bargained for.

By [Haley Shapley](#)

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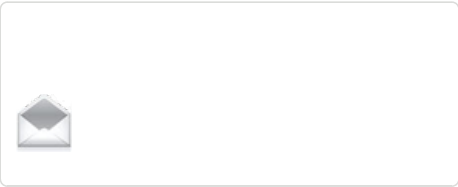
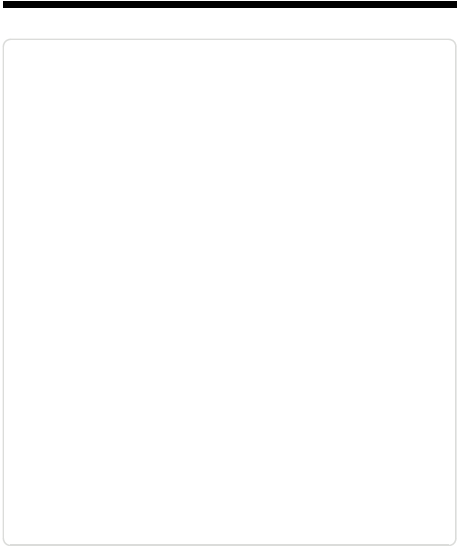
This is the Belize of most people's dreams. (iStockphoto)



Photo Essay:
Rockin' Out at
Virginia's FloydFest
Music Festival

Although it's only 4:30, it's getting dark enough that I have to squint when Pedro opens the door to his home, introducing me to his wife, Victoriana. Her bright pink dress stands out from the dull interior, a single room flanked by a concrete floor and wooden boards that don't quite match up for walls.

I'm here for what's in the back left corner, a pair of stone slabs, one of which holds a large metal pot that's slowly spitting steam into the air. The heat feels nice. As my eyes adjust, I



see I'm not the only one who feels that way—a calico cat and her mouse-sized kitten are curled up under the pot for a warm late-afternoon nap. Making corn tortillas is the lesson for the afternoon in the Belizean Maya village of San Jose, population 1,000.

In this Central American country, it's easy to have a luxury ecotourism experience that's popular among adventurous yet convenience-craving travelers. Check into Francis Ford Coppola's Blancaneaux Lodge and ride horses through the wilderness by day, order room service with the touch of a conch-shell-concealed button by night. Or dive along the Belize Barrier Reef and then lounge by your resort-style pool on Ambergris Caye. But it's just as easy—or rather, just as possible—to have the kind of local, no-special-accommodations experience Belize became known for when redefining the concept of ecotourism a couple of decades ago. Today, that's what I've chosen.

"You sit there," Victoriana says authoritatively. I crouch down on the low wooden stool, fidgeting with how to arrange my legs. "No, wash your hands!" she barks, her angular jaw becoming more pronounced as she points toward the corner.

I dip my hands into a cold bucket of water and look for soap and a towel to dry off with, but neither is available. I shake my wrists a little and head back to my perch, a sheet of wax paper now waiting. Victoriana plops a blob of dough down, then gets to work on her own.

"How are you named?" Victoriana's 16-year-old daughter asks, as she expertly swivels her dough, creating corn tortillas in the kind of perfect circles I could only accomplish with a cookie-cutter. I tell her: Haley.

"Your parents still alive?" It becomes the question most commonly asked of me while I'm in the village, always followed by: "How old are they?" My response is invariably taken in with a thoughtful look of contemplation on the questioner's face, as if this has provided great insight into who I am and why I'm here.

"You married?" she continues. I tell her that I'm not. "You have a... friend?" she presses on. I smile and say no. "Do you?" I ask. She blushes and casts her eyes downward.

While picking up assorted facts—like that the word dessert doesn't exist in this culture and that Victoriana's daughter has dropped out of school, not uncommon here—I concentrate hard, reshaping the edges once I've pressed out all the dough in an effort to cheat my way to the desired spherical shape. The end result reminds me of the way a preschooler writes her name, with the "e" inevitably backward and letters scattered about the page—it may not be exactly right, but the point gets across. Each tortilla gets a little better. Victoriana goes to toss my latest masterpiece into the basket, where the cat has taken up residence on top of the tortillas. So much for washing my hands.

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Details mentioned in this article were accurate at the time of publication

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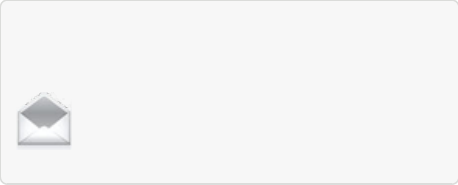
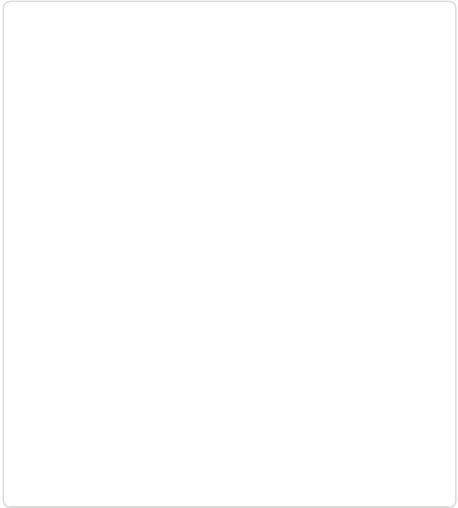
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Home in San Jose, Belize ([Renee Johnson](#))

When I'd started this whole trip in Punta Gorda—the jumping-off point for exploring “the forgotten land” of Maya and Garifuna villages scattered in the Toledo District—the only instruction I received was to ask for Felipe when I arrived at San Jose. It struck me as a strange thing to do, akin to turning up at someone's house unannounced and expecting them to be both there and ready for you. Francis Ford Coppola wouldn't let me do this. Felipe, I hoped, would.

The bus ride from Punta Gorda to San Jose tossed us passengers about like a malfunctioning carnival ride, swerving to avoid potholes decades deep and animals I couldn't identify. But I found an odd sense of familiarity perched on the ripped brown seat of an old Blue Bird U.S. school bus, its telltale yellow color peeking through the peeling mint-green paint job.



It was the last time I would feel comfortable for a while.

Now, having connected with Felipe, who directed me to my guesthouse in San Jose and set up the tortilla-making class, I'm greeted at my door by my dinner host for the evening. He's a complete stranger, but I'm so excited to eat at his house tonight... partly because I haven't had a proper meal in 48 hours, and mostly because I look forward to getting to know a local family.

Night falls while we walk to his house for dinner, bringing the lightning bugs out. They dance through the air in a captivating performance, under the watchful eye of a sky full of stars—in a town without electricity, light pollution is never a problem.

I walk through the door, expecting a bustling scene of people around a table, but instead there's no one. Off in the corner, on a small desk holding a candle is a cloth embroidered in bright colors with a plate decorated in a pink flower design. Beans, eggs, and slices of tomatoes each take up a third of the plate, with a container of tortillas and a pitcher of tea off to the side.

"You aren't eating?" I ask my host.

"No, we already ate," he says, then settles into a hammock in the center of the room and closes his eyes.

I can barely reach the table from my low lawn chair. I eat quickly, examining the artifacts around me: a Winnie-the-Pooh clock, fake red flowers, dozens of trophies for achievements in ecotourism. The tea is warm but sweet, and I guzzle as much of it as I have room for and finish my plate. My host is still dozing. My eyes scan the room for more to look at, but without much light, vague shapes are all I can make out. I shift in my chair to make a little noise. It doesn't do the trick. Still dozing. I slip out and head back to my guesthouse alone.

Later that night, I envy the man's ability to sleep. I'm bundled in the warmest clothing I've brought with me, shivering under the singular sheet that's been provided. I'm questioning my choice of "vacation," getting irritated is putting it mildly. "A blanket would be nice right about now," I think, as my clock informs me that it's 58 degrees and just past midnight. "And, oh, I don't know, some LIGHT." The four hours I spent reading by candlelight were strained, as it constantly flickered because of the wind outside—which may as well have been inside, given that the walls don't quite reach the roof. Shivering or not, it was nice to have such a long stretch of guilt-free reading time, and I relished it as long as my fatigued eyes allowed.

I've retreated from the rainbow-colored hammock in the middle of the cabin to the bunk bed area, where a mattress and pillow are laid out, situated inside a gauzy pink mosquito net. There's room for seven more, but I'm the only one who's been here in a month. Now I see why, I grumble to myself before finally dozing off.

A round of cock-a-doodle-does snaps me out of my fitful slumber, and I'm grateful that morning has come. Except that it hasn't—it's only 2 a.m. "Those roosters are probably as cold as I am," I tell myself, teeth chattering. "But at least they're not going through Internet withdrawals."

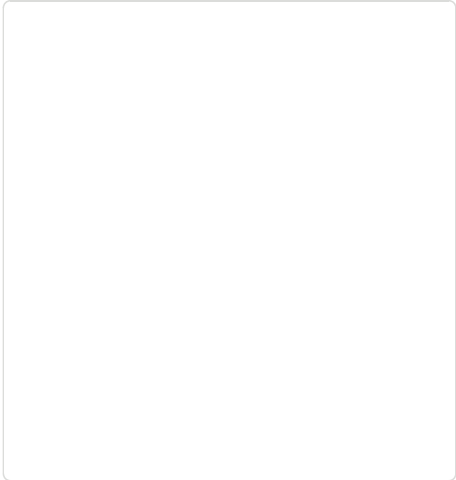
At 4 a.m., I wake up happy. I've just dreamt that I found a way out of the village and to a heat source before the next scheduled bus departure in 24 hours, and I drift back to sleep pleased by my ingenuity.

What feels like a few minutes later, an intense banging noise begins.

"Harry? Harry? It is morning!" Felipe yells to me from outside. He can't make the "I" sound in my name, Haley, but, in all fairness, I can't speak his native language of Mopan, so I let it slide. Like most in the village, he is short and slightly round, ambling along in a cotton T-shirt tucked into dress pants tucked into rain boots. It's not even 6 a.m. "Why you not up?" he spits out as I stumble to the door.

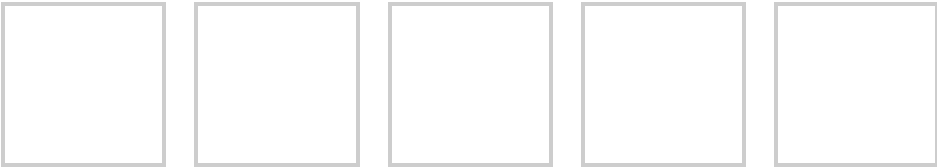
"I, I don't have breakfast scheduled until 7," I stammer.

His tanned face crinkles with laughter. "You need help getting up. Maybe I help you



tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. I realize my dream about escaping was just that, a dream. But, determined to turn this around, I try to think of tomorrow as another chance to prove I can hack this.



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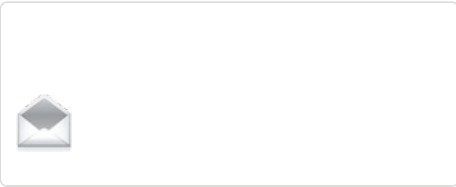
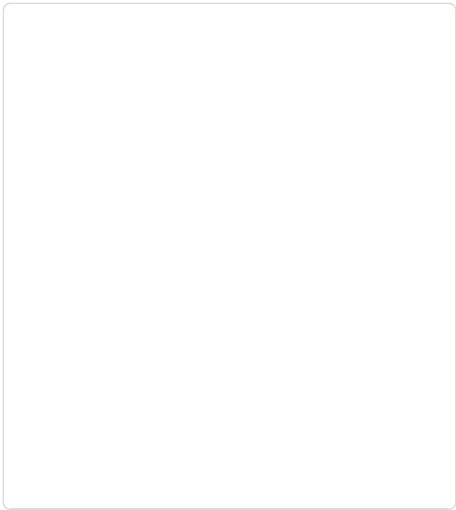
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Waterfall in the Toledo District, Belize (Ian Morton)

I can only imagine what the knee-high foliage is concealing underfoot as I trudge up a steep hill behind Guillermo, a villager who's giving me a waterfall tour. The Toledo District is the only part of Belize with a true rain forest, and it offers up all kinds of bounties, from swimming holes to a cabbage-like plant we stop to sample. This stretch of wilderness is accessible to me courtesy of Guillermo's machete, which blazes a makeshift trail to attractions he finds noteworthy. We spend some time sucking the brown seeds on the inside of a cacao plant, as sweet as juice and as addictive as candy, and examining the jippi jappa palm, a narrow green stalk that bursts into an array of thin, pointed leaves, not unlike a firework.

When I get back on the horse that's brought me on the hour-long journey here, sliding onto a



saddle that’s thoroughly numbed my tailbone, my leg is bleeding, my foot is soaked, and there are small branches clinging to my ponytail. Sitting on this white horse, I am something of a damsel in distress, except I don’t feel distressed at all. I distract myself from the discomfort with thoughts of how this cultural immersion is nothing short of empowering—and far less boring than a fairy tale in which everything works out perfectly.

After my horseback ride, I have a few hours before my next activity of learning to weave a basket. In the meantime, I stroll with no destination in mind, past hordes of chickens, dozens of dogs, a whole flock of turkeys, a tied-up horse here and there, and the river where children bathe and laundry is washed. The dusty dirt road undulates in peaks and valleys, each hill steeper than the next. “Good morning,” passersby say to me, even when it’s no longer morning. “Hello, Miss!” the children exclaim before launching into a game of peekaboo if they’re young, or hanging around for conversation if they’re older. “How much your shoes cost?” a man wonders of my Nikes. A woman carrying a baby approaches. “What medicine should I give him?” she asks. “He is sick.”

I can’t help but stand out—when I first arrived, Felipe showed me a “tourist tree” on which the red bark peels off to uncover a white trunk underneath. Americans visit Belize, he told me, and burn, their skin turning red and peeling. Although sunscreen has saved me from peeling like the tree, my tennis shoes and pants assure that there’s no mistaking me for a local.

I make the 3 a.m. wake-up time the next morning and do the roller-coaster bus ride eight hours to the western region of the country, the Cayo District, where my resort has hot water, a bed, a blanket, plumbing, Wi-Fi access, and electricity to return to after a day of swimming into a cave or hiking up an ancient pyramid.

I eat dinner in restaurants, where people actually talk to me, and no children come in unannounced and swing from my hammock. The ever-present knot in my stomach subsides when I can check my e-mail, and I’m able to reassure my mom that I am, in fact, still alive. When I return to my accommodations past dark, I can flick the lights on. It is still an adventure, but one with decidedly more creature comforts.

As I’m responding to messages while enjoying lunch overlooking the resort’s vibrant blue pool, I think of the famous quote about how a vacation is like love: anticipated with pleasure, experienced with discomfort, and remembered with nostalgia.

“Women laughed at me while I tried to make corn tortillas, men laughed at me when the horse I was riding hated me, and children followed me around and giggled often, so a good time was had by all,” I write to a friend. “It’s slightly disconcerting how anxiety-provoking being so disconnected was. But that’s why I did it—because apparently my idea of a good vacation is to be totally uncomfortable.”

And by that measure—and any other, really—this was a very good vacation.

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