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SHARE

UNSAVE STORY

Excitement builds as our boat nears our destination and the dark shadows in the water grow larger. We see nurse sharks everywhere, circling at the surface. Everyone looks over the edge of the boat in amazement at the big bodies slipping through the water. We quickly don our flippers and masks and jump into the ocean. In front of me, numerous nurse sharks curiously come to take a closer look at the snorkellers in the water, before they swim back down to the sandy seafloor to continue their naps. Our tour guide for the day, Captain Amado, claps his hands together underwater to get our attention as a giant eagle ray swims directly towards me. I pull my underwater camera up to my mask to capture images as the ray looks at me, gliding right past before continuing down the reef. I squeal in the snorkel with delight, excited about the pure magic of the moment.

All of these incredible wildlife experiences happened in less than 10 minutes in the Hol Chan underwater marine preserve. In Central America, the coastal country of Belize is home to the biggest portion of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, the second-largest Barrier Reef in the world, which sports the highest concentration of marine biodiversity in the Atlantic.

I recently had the chance to visit the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef and stay on Caye Caulker, a small limestone coral island less than a mile wide and five miles long. This ocean paradise allows no cars so that the main modes of transport are walking, biking, and using golf carts.

With 40% of the Belizean economy attributed to tourism, it's vital to have sustainable and environmentally-friendly tourism along the barrier reef system. Unfortunately, as I learned throughout my time on the island, many tour companies are falling behind on this objective. Yet, with around 30 snorkelling tour companies on the island, there are some providers that have an eye on sustainability and responsible wildlife encounters. Captain Amado of Reef Friendly Tours is one of them.

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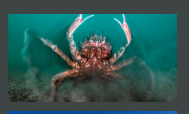

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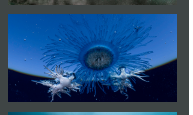

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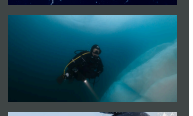
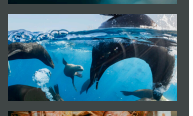
The first dive



CONSERVATION
Behind the lens: Henley Spiers



CONSERVATION
The false promise

On our tour, he identified and told all visitors many facts about the local fish, coral, and wildlife. As we swam over the reef, he would point out animals, telling us about the conservation efforts and issues these creatures face as we all bobbed at the ocean's surface before sticking our faces back into the water to find the next reef inhabitant we could learn more about. Before we would get into the water, he ensured that we knew how to properly use the snorkel gear so as not to cause harm to the environment. Captain Amado also urged us not to get too close to the animals, causing unnecessary stress or harassment. He enforced protection laws like with manatees, ensuring we all kept a safe distance.

One of the primary differences that sets this tour operator apart, I learned, is that they have never fed or baited the wildlife to provide entertainment for tourists. This contrasts with most tour options on the island, as most will provide sardines to attract sharks and rays. Captain Amado explained that nurse sharks are scavengers as we sat in his boat on the clear blue water. "Their job is to clean the reef," said Captain Amado. "Normally, they would feed on lobsters, lobster carcasses, crabs, and these types of things. Some of them even go as far as to eat algae from the coral."

FEEDING THE SHARKS CHANGES THEIR BEHAVIOUR OVER TIME.

Due to the nurse sharks getting fed sardines by humans, they are not scavenging the reef like they should. Captain Amado explains: "The things that they're supposed to take away from this world, from around the reef, is accumulating and suffocating the coral." He tells me that feeding the sharks changes their behaviour over time. The animals get conditioned to depend on the boats for food, so when you go to Shark and Ray Ally in Hol Chan or Caye Caulker Marine Reserve, the sharks come up close to the boat, which is not considered a normal behaviour. "They come to the boat now because they're expecting something from you," said Amado.