



It's the Little Things, Mon

A FAMILY SEA KAYAKING AND SNORKELING TRIP
TO BELIZE'S HALF MOON CAYE

BY EUGENE BUCHANAN

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Y 12-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, BROOKE, and I glide to a stop and tie our tandem Necky Amaruk to a string of other sea kayaks tethered to our support boat. We've paddled three miles from Half Moon Caye to reach this snorkeling spot, one of the finest coral reefs in Belize.

We pull masks and fins from the deck rigging, cinch them on, and then slip over the side of the kayak. Soon we're swimming in the aquamarine waters of the Caribbean, gliding effortlessly over forests of coral and an oasis of marine life. It's the first time either of us has snorkeled via sea kayak, and we're instantly addicted.

Our Belizean guide, James, points out queen angels, barracuda and nurse sharks. We make a leisurely circle around a column of pillar coral, admiring every detail. "You have to get close to see its beauty," James says in a thick Creole accent as we catch our breath back on the surface.

If anyone knows the importance of being patient and going with the flow, it's James. One of 10 kids, with six of his own, he works as a fisherman when not guiding. He knows these waters as well as anyone, and his statement is an apt metaphor to follow in life: Look closely to see things' inner beauty.

Brooke grasps the concept immediately. I'm a little slower on the uptake. As I flutter-kick from reef to reef, Brooke pokes her fingers into every sea anemone in sight, enjoying the finer points that I miss. Eventually I start to relax too, following James' advice, admiring the details I had soared past before—the tiny goby fish, darting damsels and "gang of tangs" that ride herd like the mafia. I've learned a valuable lesson: Go slow, mon — it's the small things in life that make it whole.

The Half Moon Caye is the outermost atoll in Belize, a two-hour boat ride from the mainland. The protected Natural Monument sits at the edge of the Lighthouse Reef Atoll, one of the crown jewels of the Belize Barrier Reef, the second largest reef in the world.

My wife Denise, daughters Brooke and 8-year-old Casey, and I are here with Island Expeditions for the week. The outfitter's a la carte approach to paddling adventure—an island base camp surrounded by protected waters, with access to more challenging fare—provides paddling opportunities for everyone from seasoned paddling pros to newcomers. It's a good mix, the island's 13 guests plus our family: I'm an experienced whitewater and sea kayaker, and the girls are relative beginners. The crew includes families from New Jersey to California with five other children, as well as couples. While the majority of the guests are beginner paddlers, British twentysomethings Dave and Becky are experienced sea kayakers. After this trip, they will rent kayaks from Island Expeditions for a self-guided adventure.

When we arrive at the 45-acre island, Andi, a marine biologist turned adventure guide from Hawaii, leads us down a sandy path to a camp comprised of wall tents, hammocks and a large, canvas-walled dining hall, which doubles as a living room, bar and library. With no electricity



Jack Wilde

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on the island, oil lamps provide lighting in our tents, and the Caribbean breeze our air conditioning. Inside our tent is a raised wooden floor supporting a double bed and nightstand, plus a canvas-and-wood clothes shelf hanging in the corner, not that we'll need anything more than T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops.

Adjacent to camp is a research center for the Belize Audubon Society, here to help protect and study Half Moon's 10,000-acre reserve, the first protected marine area in the entire Caribbean. The group is also here to study the red-footed booby, which nests on the island.

After settling in, we select kayaks from a multi-colored lineup on the beach for an afternoon paddle. Andi then walks everyone through a beachside lesson on how to hold the paddle, stroke effectively with the shoulders and torso, and use the kayaks' rudders to help steer. She also points out the kayaks' deck rigging and hatches to stow our snorkel gear.

Next, she asks for a volunteer to show everyone how to wet-exit from the kayaks in case of a capsizing. Brooke, who has done it at home, enthusiastically raises her hand. She tips over, somersaults out effortlessly, and comes up beaming. "I needed that," she exclaims. "I was getting hot."

Anyone's previous trepidations about paddling are washed away like Brooke's sunscreen. Soon we're all in the water practicing our strokes. We paddle to the far end of the island, where we beach our kayaks and don snorkeling gear. We're in a world-class aquarium filled with rays, octopus, and thousands of multicolored fish. A lobster scurries out of a cave, sending Brooke and Casey flutter-kicking away in fright. Back on the beach, Brooke announces that she wants to be an underwater photographer when she grows up. Two hours on the island and her career is mapped out.

After paddling back to camp, Casey ogles a hermit crab on the path. There's little reason for the fanfare. That night, the path crawls with them, like a scene from *Night of the Living Dead*. James draws concentric circles in the sand for crab races; the first crab out wins. Casey's, which she names Pinchy, takes top honors.

Breakfast the next morning is in the dining hall, under a canvas roof stretched over three giant beams. A raised wooden floor keeps sand at bay. A few kids play Jenga at the coffee table. Next to this is the bar, above which "cocktails" is written on a wooden fish. To the left is a bookshelf filled with games, novels and guidebooks.



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After fresh fruit, bacon and from-the-tree banana pancakes, Andi tells us the day's itinerary. We'll sail our sea kayaks four miles to Long Caye, where we'll drift-snorkel along a 100-foot-deep reef wall. Casey and I go together in a double kayak, while Brooke decides to ride in the motor support boat to snorkel for conch for lunch.

Though I've been paddling nearly 30 years, I've only rarely sailed a sea kayak. Andi gives us a few pointers—let the sail luff if it causes the boat to keel over too far, and watch out for the boom when you jibe—and we make out just fine. Soon, the breeze fills our sail like the pirate craft of yesteryear. In the main channel, Andi shows us another trick. She asks Denise to latch her single kayak onto the side of our boat as a “barnacle” for additional stability. As we gain speed, waves arc over the bow, splashing Casey with 80-degree water. She laughs with each dousing.

Once at Long Caye, we drop sail and paddle through a swath of seagrass to make landfall. James makes ceviche from freshly harvested conch—Brooke contributed two shells to the haul—while the kids throw cannonballs off an old dock.

After our drift snorkel we return to Half Moon, towing our kayaks like linked sausages behind the motorboat. No one felt like a long slog into the wind, but we're not finished paddling for the day. Andi and I help Dave and Becky perfect their kayak rolls in the warm lagoon before heading over to camp for a sunset game of beach volleyball. The net is strung between two palm trees, and the game runs concurrently with a rum-and-coconut-juice happy hour. The smell of fresh-grilled fish and coconut pie beckon us inside for dinner. Later, Andi outlines the next day's activities on the chalkboard. Options include fishing—or “catching,” as the locals call it—a tour to a “secret” snorkeling spot, or an advanced kayaking excursion.

I opt for a mixed bag—a morning yoga session followed by kayaking and snorkeling. We end the day with a sunset stroll to the Audubon Society's bird observation deck. We climb a stairway to a platform above the treetops to ogle more than 4,000 red-footed boobies and frigate birds that nest in orange-flowered Zircote trees, their guano providing the trees with fertilizer in return. Matching the pink sunset are the bright red, puffed-out gular sacs of male frigates hoping to attract mates.

In the morning, Andi has written “Meet the Fish of Lighthouse Reef” on the chalkboard. She’s listed some of the prominent families we’re likely to see, including angel, funky dudes and tiny gobies, as well as silver guys, snappers and grunts. We’ll also see the diminutive, attitude-filled damselfish and butterflies, which have the fake eyes on their rears. Surgeons, we learn, pack heat in the form of switchblades that pop out from their side to stab predators.

We return from our afternoon paddle to see James cleaning a barracuda on the beach. Today’s “catching” session went well, the fruits of which chef Bol will barbecue this evening. The entrails draw nurse sharks and opportunistic frigates. The kids wander by with a lasso for coconuts.

On our final full day, I paddle around the island with Andi and Dave. So far the island’s windward side has been off limits, with huge swell crashing on the reef off shore. But it’s let up and we beeline out of a protected cove to open sea beyond the breakers. With five days of relatively calm paddling under our spray skirts, it’s invigorating to have some swell beneath our hulls, rising and dropping our boats as much as six feet at a time. Paddling a single, at one point I don’t see Dave or Andi for several minutes. Then their heads pop up at the top of a swell. I wait to regroup, the swell lifting and dropping my hull. After clearing the island’s tip, we turn to starboard, carefully surfing the rollers home.

It’s our last night and Bol breaks out his congo for a Garifuna drum dance. James leads the dance, striking a log with a stick, wiping his brow and then shimmying over the log. He then passes the stick. The rum punch helps everyone join in.

The volleyball net is strung between two palm trees, and the game runs concurrently with a rum-and-coconut-juice happy hour.

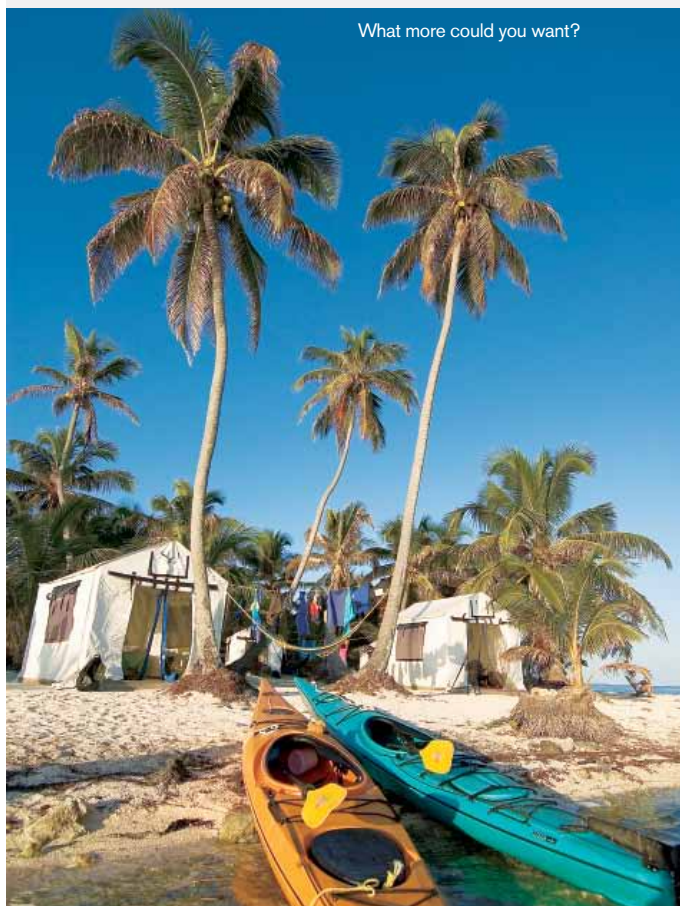
After a final yoga session the next morning, I grab Casey for a quick tandem paddle along shore. I’ve been in my kayak for six days now and my arms feel loose and relaxed. Even Casey seems to have it wired, dipping her blades with the comfort of riding her bike back home.

Before the boat arrives to take us home, James leads us to a secret snorkeling spot on the island’s windward side. It’s the best yet, allowing us to explore deep, canyon-like passages through the reef. A huge manta ray glides away from its hiding spot in the sand while giant tarpon patrol the perimeter like sentries. But rather than give chase, I look past them in favor of the little things—the fingernail-size gobies and darting damselfish—all in the stride of a flipper. It’s a notion I vow to follow back home.

If You Go

Island Expeditions offers sea kayak and snorkel trips throughout Belize from November through April, for all levels of paddlers, from Bed & Breakfast trips, to point-to-point camping trips, to basecamp-oriented trips on islands like Half Moon Caye and Glover’s Reef.

Info: Islandexpeditions.com, (800) 667-1630.



Tom Bol



B-B-B-Barracuda: Casey, Brooke and Jame's son Clint Logan with lunch.