

Tobacco Caye	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
43 FAEGON'S POINT		•		
44 FAEGON'S BLUFF			•	
45 'CUDA POINT		•		
46 FISHY POINT			•	
47 TURTLE'S REST		•		
48 TOBACCO CUT	•	•		
49 TOBACCO CHANNEL			•	
50 EAGLE RAY BOWL			•	
51 JACK FISH CITY			•	
52 CORAL MONUMENT CANYON			•	

The Middle Cayes



Close to the big city but far enough away to be another world are the small isles and resorts that are idyllic and really convenient for barrier reef divers. Normally not as busy as the reefs farther north, it is quite possible at many of these sites to go the whole day and not see another dive boat.

Spanish Lookout Caye is one of the most interesting destinations just off of Belize City. It is home to a resort run by Nancy Parkey, who is the wife of the late Hugh Parkey - one of the Belize diving pioneers. This well developed caye has a dive facility, daily boat dive and snorkel trips to many dive sites near and far, a restaurant, bar and waterfront bungalows, plus a cute gift shop.

It also hosts a number of marine groups and student organizations that are involved in research and conservation. Waterways through the mangroves provide memorable sea kayaking experiences and perhaps a chance to see a resting saltwater crocodile.

Farther south, the area in the central part of the country is pretty much an uncrowded and wide-open affair that can be dived from the mainland or by staying on one of the Middle Cayes, such as Tobacco Caye or South Water Caye. A boat ride to the dive sites on good days is roughly 30 minutes from a mainland-based dive operation around Dangriga and Hopkins to the Middle Caye sites.

Beautiful on sunny, calm days with blue sandy flats, reefs and old staghorns peeking above the surface, the dives are done in the deep passes in the middle of the reef. Near Dangriga and rustic and peaceful Hopkins there are nine passes or cuts, and these are dived the same as the northern counterparts, with a descent to 35-55ft and then a swim along the deep drop-off looking for denizens.

The nightlife may be pretty much non-existent, but the starry nights and sound of the wind and waves more than make up for it.

Swimming with Dolphins

A Spanish Lookout Caye visitor is greeted by a bottlenose dolphin



The highlight at Spanish Lookout Caye may be the new dolphin facility. Captively bred young bottlenose dolphins from Anthony's Key Resort in nearby Honduras were brought here. The facility has a natural setting created in the mangroves and the dolphins have a huge training and living area. Biologists and trainers live on the facility, which is solar powered and uses a freshwater catchment for conscientious use of the caye resources.

There is a daily informational and educational presentation for visitors to the dolphin facility. The dolphins give performances and do a couple of tricks that allow guests to interact with them. This new offering is indeed a crowd pleaser and a plus for young people as well as old to learn more about marine mammals. If you're staying at the waterfront bungalows, there is a boardwalk through the mangroves to the dolphin area that you can use to watch the training sessions.



A spotted drum intermediate stage

TOBACCO CAYE

43 FAEGON'S POINT

Location: 1.5 nautical miles (2.4km) north of Tobacco Caye
Depth: 40-100ft (12-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



This is a popular spot for newly arrived divers to take their first dive in order to check buoyancy and also get the cobwebs out. Divers drop down to a large sandy area here and get things right before swimming east to a series of coral spurs that hold some good

coral growth and provide shelter for nurse sharks.

The dive is normally done in the 60ft range but there's plenty to see down to 90ft if you are keen. On the reef, look for hiding trumpetfish, scrawled cowfish and hogfish. Hunting graysbys may also lurk in the corals and lie in wait for a meal to swim by.

Faegon's Point is a bountiful spot for macro photography, with bristleworms to be found in the sea fans and soft corals. There are many gorgonians that hold flamingo tongues at their base and perhaps a fingerprint cowrie if you're lucky. There are also cleaning stations with banded coral shrimp that attract many of the usual suspects for cleaning. Take it slow and easy at this site and there will be plenty to see and photograph.

44 FAEGON'S BLUFF

Location: 1.25 nautical miles (2km) north of Tobacco Caye

Depth: 45-130ft (14-40m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This is the first glimpse of the special double reef system that highlights many of these dives and runs well past South Water Caye. These sandy plains are dotted with coral heads and fans or sea whips, providing good habitat and much diversity. The reef top rises to about 45ft and divers slip over the side and swim in the 60ft to 70ft range along a sandy slope.

Hard corals such as big brain corals and spreading star corals are extremely healthy and dominate much of the reef. Plating corals provide a good deal of shelter for juvenile fish and hyper angelfish, with morays also hiding in the various cracks and crevices. Sea turtles, especially green sea turtles, are commonly found resting along these shelves or roaming for sponges. Angelfish obviously like the sponges as well. Large gray angels can be found as solitary fish and in pairs.

45 'CUDA POINT

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.6km) north of Tobacco Caye

Depth: 40-130ft (12-40m)

Access: Boat

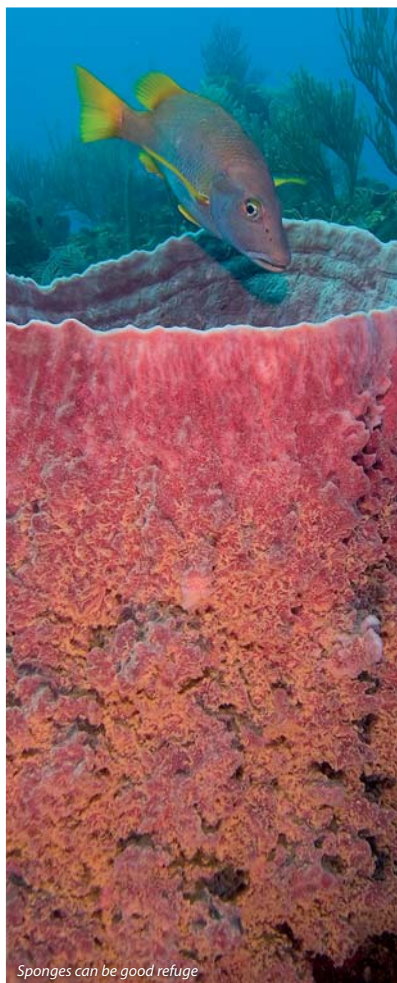
Expertise Rating: Novice



Named for the large great barracudas which lurk in the cracks and crevices or hover midwater on this reef, the sponge life here is also quite remarkable, mak-

ing for an exciting deep dive along the outer wall. Look for healthy barrel, tube and vase sponges all along the wall, along with layers of big plate corals. Loggerhead and green sea turtles are often seen here, and there may be an occasional visit from an eagle ray.

Head up from 80ft into the shallower parts of the spur and groove reef system to see a diverse assortment of fish life, including Nassau and tiger groupers and the colorful rock beauty.



Sponges can be good refuge

Diving Around Spanish Lookout Caye



Frigates soar on the atoll thermals

Although a lot of trips go up to the atolls, Spanish Lookout has some nice dive and snorkel areas. The sandy area near the caye is the remains of Sergeant's Caye. It was actually a much bigger island with vegetation and buildings but a sand bank is all that is left after a couple hurricanes came through years ago. It is a popular place for snorkeling and introductory scuba diving. The area to the front of the caye for the dive courses is spur and groove coral formations. The shallow canyons run perpendicular to the shore and wall. It can be used for regular sport dives as well as the wall starts at 35ft and drops to just over 90ft then slopes down gently to 180ft. It then drops to over 600ft.

Turneffe Atoll, which is normally visible, is less than 9 miles to the east. Another good site on the barrier reef close to the caye is Gallows' Point. The name has a rather gruesome history as the island inside this portion of the reef hosted the gallows used for hanging convicted criminals in the colonial days. That tidbit aside, the reef here forms an impregnable barrier for about 2 miles. The inside is great for snorkeling since the barrier keeps the area calm.

There is an abundance of yellow stingrays, star coral, elkhorn coral, pillar coral, and bladed fire coral are all found in abundance as well as vast schools of juvenile barracuda. Fish include blue tangs, doctorfish, all sorts of parrotfish, snapper and juvenile grouper. Moray eels and lobster are among the coral heads. The walls outside Gallows' Point are similar to Sergeant's Caye. The spur and groove formation are deeper and some even form swim-throughs. This wall drops to over 1500ft.

East of the Barrier Reef is Turneffe Atoll where shops from Belize City and the cayes do most of their diving since the mangrove islands inside the atoll offer protection from prevailing winds. They can always find a leeward side to Turneffe. Elkin Bay and The Terrace are great because current is normally low and visibility is about 80ft on average. A favorite here is Chasbo's Corner when the tide changes. A slight current comes in bringing rich nutrients. Huge schools of Creole wrasse, dog and cubera snapper, horse eye jacks, and tiger and black grouper gather to feed. Occasional sharks, rays and turtles are regular visitors.

Trips to the popular reefs and a nearby sandy but extremely fishy snorkeling site can be made from Spanish Lookout Caye.

A Double Reef

Horse-eye jacks



The reef at Tobacco Caye and south past South Water Caye has a distinct feature that's a real plus for divers. The usual spur-and-groove formations so familiar in the north aren't as prevalent here. Instead, reefs usually have an inside wall and a sandy plain of varying size and depth, then another upper reef and wall.

This double-wall system and the plain in-between contains good habitat attracting diverse fish, invertebrate and coral life. This even affects the mid-water column where schooling jacks or grunts may hover high above the middle plain.

This is somewhat similar to the double-reef system of southern Bonaire but is larger in dimension and holds a great deal of coral variation in the plains areas. The outcrops, mounds and pillars make the topography here special.

Keep an eye out for this formation at many of the Middle Cayes reefs. The first reef will be obvious in the 40ft to 60ft range and then the plain will appear. Swim across it and the second reefline will appear somewhere between 60ft and 90ft. This outer wall is often very active with pelagic life as well.

46

FISHY POINT

Location: 0.5 nautical miles (0.8 km) north of Tobacco Caye

Depth: 40-100ft (12-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This dive is best done in the 40ft to 70ft range, as there's plenty of fish life to see and the outer reef wall is somewhat deep and a fair swim to reach. The first reefline is at 40ft and its resulting plain is full of coral heads, thickly covered with sea fans, sea rods and other growth.

Sponge growth is excellent here so be sure to inspect them for the diverse goby life found here. Look for sharknose gobies, colorful orange-sided gobies on the star corals and peppermint gobies on the brain corals, along with the wrasse blenny inside coral head holes that mimic the juvenile bluehead wrasses.

This upper reef area is also a good place to look for roaming schools of fish such as colorful herbivorous blue tangs that search for algae among the corals. You may also see Nassau and tiger groupers, and black durgemons in the upper water column.



Reef lobsters



A school of Creole wrasse



47 TURTLE'S REST

Location: 0.25 nautical miles (0.4 km) north of Tobacco Caye
Depth: 50-130ft (15-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



One of the main attractions of Tobacco Caye for divers is the springtime nesting of the endangered loggerhead sea turtles.

The reddish-brown shell (carapace) of a loggerhead can be over 4ft long and an aged adult can weigh up to 350 pounds.

Their broad heads have large powerful jaws that they use to crush critters like crabs, lobsters and sea shells.

Competition for space during mating and egg-laying time is such that the turtles often sleep under the raised beach huts of lodges on Tobacco Caye. They lay eggs in nests across the island then rest in the plating corals and other reef structures at this dive site.

Even if the loggerheads are not here, the interesting topography and deep sand channels are still great to explore. From about 50ft to 80ft look for sponge growths including pink vase and leathery coral sponges, while also keep an eye out for barracuda, which lurk in the shadows.

48 TOBACCO CUT

Location: South side of Tobacco Caye
Depth: 6-30ft (2-9m)
Access: Shore
Expertise Rating: Novice



This dive is shallow but popular with divers as it is a dock entry for those staying on the island. It has a great variety of fish life including French grunts and schoolmasters.

Enter from the boat dock on the cayes southeast corner and head over shallow corals and reef flats until you reach the channel's north side. Drop down and head toward the mouth. There is always a current, normally quite gentle, running through here, so the fish life is good almost all of the time. Just don't go too far as the actual channel entrance out toward the wall can have strong currents that may be tough to handle. Look also for eagle rays to come in and circle in schools on occasion. They are sometimes reported to even swim up to the dock.

In the spring this is a spawning area for tarpon. Loggerheads can also be

seen at that time of year. At other periods, tarpon school in the channel in smaller numbers, and can be seen at night as well. Just stay within the channel and you can have a long, safe dive with many fishy surprises.

Seahorses

The seahorses found around Belize aren't always so easy to see. They don't move much and take on the color of encrusting and small reef sponges, making them easily overlooked by the casual diver. Bring a small light and look for yellow, red, black or orange blotches on the reef, then take a closer look. If you see a fat one it may be a male carrying babies.

It never hurts to take a local guide with you if you really want to find a seahorse. Guides talk to one another and may know where the seahorses congregate – this local knowledge can save you a lot of hunting time. Often seen in the flowing stalks of gorgonians, seahorses are sensitive creatures and should not be harassed, as they may move on, preventing other divers from seeing them. Please just look and don't touch.

Spotfin butterflyfish mate for life



Yellow coney. Like the shallows



49 TOBACCO CHANNEL

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.6km) southeast of Tobacco Caye
Depth: 40-100ft (12-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



If you want to see where the spillway to **Tobacco Cut** leads, this boat dive goes into the sandy channel that runs from about 40ft to 100ft in front of the cut and out to the drop-off.

In the sand, look for eagle, rougtail and southern stingrays. Nurse sharks also like to lay down here and have the current run across them.

Farther down, the deepwater sea fans and sponges are healthy and there is lush coral growth at the 100ft mark, along with the chance of seeing pelagic fish like Spanish mackerel.

50 EAGLE RAY BOWL

Location: 1 nautical mile (1.6km) southeast of Tobacco Caye
Depth: 45-100ft (14-30m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This site is said to be the end of the familiar spur and groove system that makes up so much of Belize's barrier reef. The dive is done as a 'drift' with the boat following divers as they drop down into a large sand area known as the bowl. Divers often see eagle rays nosing around in the sand as they forage for food.

This site is a photographer's paradise with coral heads providing shelter for all kinds of reef fish and invertebrates. If the dive goes east, hard coral cover and gorgonians increase and the usual suspects – big green morays, lobsters and channel clinging crabs – are all present.

The wall starts at 80ft and is known to have good pelagic life such as Caribbean reef sharks, sea turtles and mackerel. Jack schools have also been seen here.

Spotted moray



Banded cleaner shrimps



Shy hamlet perform a strange mating ritual at dusk

51 JACK FISH CITY

Location: 2 nautical miles (3.2km) south of Tobacco Caye
Depth: 50-130ft (15-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The double wall reef becomes a major feature here, with a large school of horse-eye jacks at depth. The dive starts rather deep at 50ft and crosses a sandy plain to a compact spur-and-groove-like reef with nicely adorned reef walls and sandy channels. It then spills into a 60ft plain that eventually drops to the second wall crest at 80ft.

The current line out over the outer wall supports schools of horse-eye jacks and dancing Creole wrasse. Dip down to 80ft to 100ft and watch the pelagic life.

Up shallow, guides usually tend to head northwest to the sand channel to look for stingrays and nurse sharks. This entire reef area is vibrant with quivering deepwater sea fans, barrel sponges busy with cleaning activity and large gorgonians and sea rods.

52 CORAL MONUMENT CANYON

Location: 2.5 nautical Miles (4km) south of Tobacco Caye
Depth: 40-130ft (12-40m)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Big sandy channels at this site cut the double reef, where stunningly massive corals are covered with marine life. The site gets its very name from a huge coral pillar down very deep at 115ft in the middle of the sand. It rises up to 95ft and supports lots of sea life, heavy algae growth, red rope sponges and basslets.

Past the sandy plain and rather deep is the reefline, where shoals of snapper and jacks swim in the blue, just off its wall.

The upper reef area is alive with fish life and porkfish, angels and other critters such as lobsters can all be found amid the coral growth.

This can be a deep dive so be sure to do a long open-water deco stop at 15ft to 20ft before surfacing.



Beautiful golden coral shrimp

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