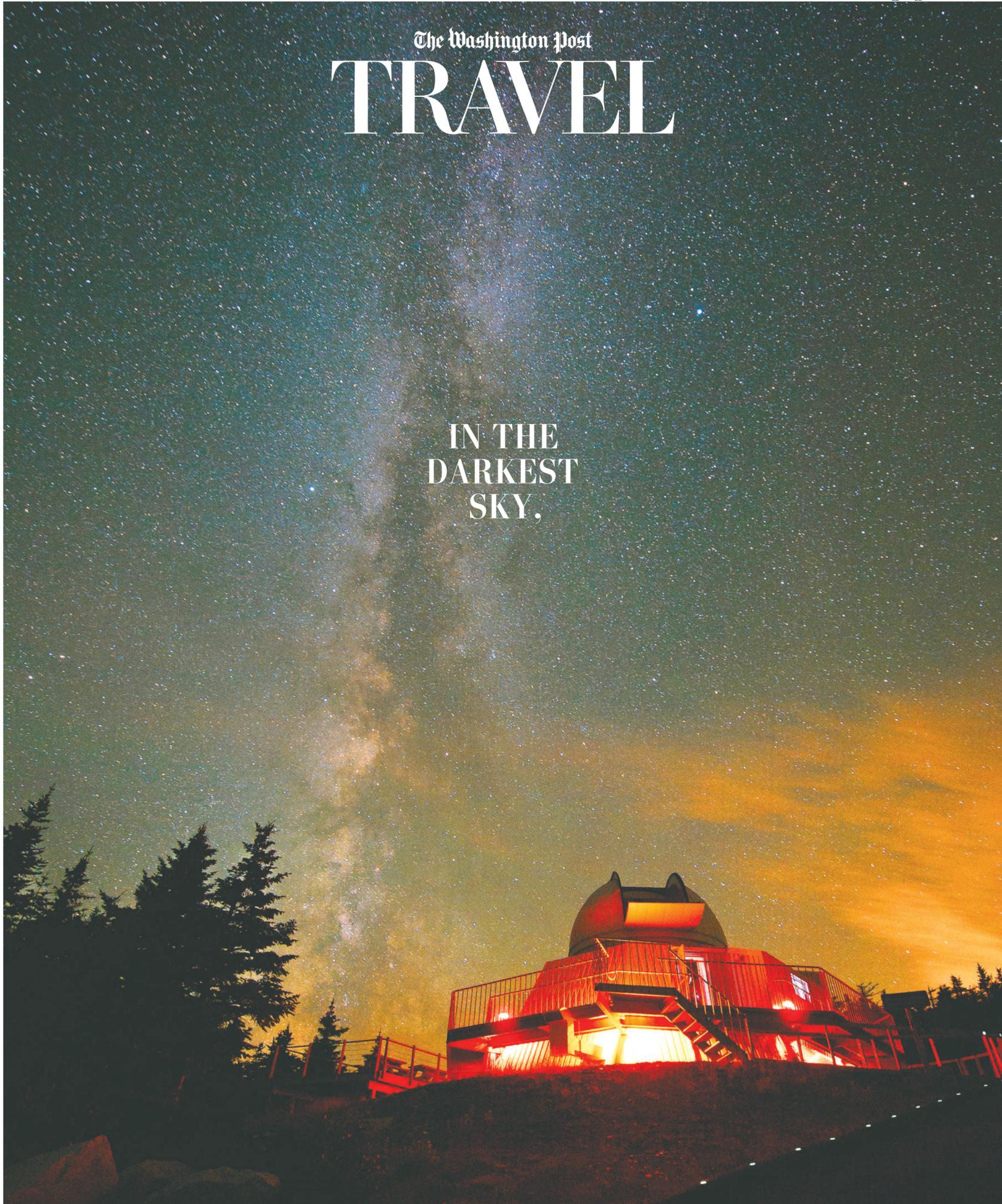


The Washington Post  
**TRAVEL**

**IN THE  
 DARKEST  
 SKY,**



GUILLAUME POULIN/DOMINIQUE HARMEGNIES PHOTOOTHÈQUE VIDEOOTHÈQUE

**BY PAUL ABERCROMBIE**  
*Special to The Washington Post*

**M**ost families choose vacation spots for what they offer. You could say ours picked one for what it lacks: light. Specifically, the kind of illumination produced by umpteen electric bulbs.

Eager to really see the night sky (not just be able to pick out a few stars) with my wife and son, last summer we visited Quebec's Mont-Mégantic National Park, site of the International Dark-Sky Association's first International Dark Sky Reserve. With little ambient

**THE  
 BRIGHTEST  
 STARS**

Quebec's Mont-Mégantic National Park is a top spot on the planet for gazing at the heavens

light, the park is one of the darkest — and best — places on the planet to stargaze.

Even before our now-teenage son Ewan could walk, he loved gawking skyward, often from a BabyBjorn carrier during predawn strolls around our neighborhood. "Moon" was among the first words he spoke. Since then, planetarium visits and TV science programs on celestial marvels had only whetted our appetites.

While there are dozens of other excellent places for stargazing, we decided that a trip north to Canada would also be a dandy excuse to get our fix of French-inflected culture and

**QUEBEC** CONTINUED ON F3

The Popular Observatory at Quebec's Mont-Mégantic National Park is in the International Dark-Sky Association's first International Dark Sky Reserve.

**Beneath the surface — caving and diving — Belize is breathtaking**

**BY DINA MISHEV**  
*Special to The Washington Post*

"Fishing" for a tarantula — using a twig to tease it out of the hole in the ground it calls home — is cool by me, at least after I pull the thick sleeve of my rain jacket over my hand. But I draw the line at holding the scorpion spider that my guide, Alex Guzman, offers me. He had nonchalantly plucked it off its perch and it now rests in his palm, looking as sedate and nonvenomous as a spider the size of an adult's palm can look.



DINA MISHEV

It's still a spider, though. The size of my palm.

Except it's not a spider. Alex tells me this in an attempt to convince me that holding it isn't such a bad idea. "So it's a scorpion?" I ask. I'd rather hold a spider. But it's not a scorpion, either. A scorpion spider is related to both spiders and scorpions, but is its own thing, which Alex assures me is not venomous. Whatever it is or

**In a canoe, a guide takes his charges through Barton Creek Cave in the Cayo District of Belize.**

isn't, there's no question it's the size of my palm. I'm not sold.

My attention returns to the main attraction. We're in the front cavern of a cave in the limestone-rich Cayo District in west-central Belize. The undulating walls, ceiling and floor are cartoonish and otherworldly — "The Snorks" on Mars — and glisten with mineral-rich water. It's impossible to see the entirety of the chamber we're in at once; sight is limited to the areas that our headlamps illuminate. As amazing as the features illumi-

**BELIZE** CONTINUED ON F5

**NAVIGATOR**

Airlines charge a fee for kids to fly alone, but do parents get what they pay for? **F2**

**SIDE ORDER**

The Vermont Teddy Bear Company may be the state's cuddliest attraction. **F4**

**A PLACE IN THE SUN**

In laid-back Anguilla, Caribbean travelers find the right mix of bistro and beach. **F6**

# Belize: From rain forest to reefs, rife for exploration

**BELIZE FROM F1**

nated by our lights is the utter darkness surrounding us when we switch them off.

Belize has thousands of caves, and the country's antiquities laws ensure that most of them are under governmental control. The laws give the government jurisdiction over all archaeological sites, underground or above. No private individual can own an archaeological site — which most of Belize's caves are, because the Mayans used them extensively. But when you have a small cave — which the one home to that scorpion spider is by Belizean standards — in the middle of more than 50,000 privately owned acres, access is an issue.

There are many caves at Caves Branch Adventure Company and Jungle Lodge, the resort I've signed up with for this caving excursion and owner of the 58,000 acres in which this cave sits. Caves Branch, named for a river that flows through the property, has cabanas, bungalows, treehouses and a botanic garden. Wildlife roams free through all of it. Caves Branch offers activities including cave tubing, rappelling, birdwatching and an overnight jungle adventure.

By the time we hit this unnamed cave, guides Alex and Rosa Montero, both in their 20s, have already taught me about several edible plants. They have built a passable dining table from bamboo. They have helped me hang my sleeping hammock. They have cooked dinner — they brought food, allaying my fears that we'd have to forage for it — and made hot tea from the bark of a tree. And they have taken me into another cave, one that requires swimming.

The Caves Branch River “disappeared” near our campsite and, after Alex and Rosa build the dining table, we walk down to investigate the disappearance. It turns out to be superficial; the river flowed into a kilometer-long underground cavern. We swim into it wearing our headlamps and, in most places, the water is too deep to touch bottom. I go in far enough that there was no hint of daylight. How do places like this exist outside of “Avatar's” Pandora or “Star Wars'” Endor?

I reluctantly sign up for the overnight jungle adventure. Individually, humidity, bugs and mud can put me in a bad mood. I don't know how I would do with all three simultaneously. Thirty minutes into it, I decide it is one of the coolest things I've ever done. I can't shake the feeling that we are explorers in a landscape no human had ever trod. We hack our way with machetes — at least, Alex and Rosa do — through dense jungle, slog through ankle-deep mud and wade across creeks and streams. The humidity is profound, I am covered in mud, and it is glorious. It reminds me of my very best days from childhood.

By the time we hit the scorpion spider cave, we are on our way back to the lodge — the overnight jungle adventure is almost over. Alex and Rosa say they don't usually bring jungle adventurers to this cave, but since I have taken so well to dirt and mud, they offer it to me as extra credit.

They had whacked their way to this cave's entrance before, squeezed through the slot that opens into the front chamber and descended into the second cavern, where Alex found the spider. But neither has ever been past the second cavern. To do this, you must negotiate a 10-inch tall, shoulder-wide tunnel. “I'm not sure it goes anywhere or how long it is,” Alex says about the tunnel as I direct my headlamp at it.

I'm afraid of spiders, but not of confined spaces, and ask if we can check it out.

On my hands and knees in front of the tunnel, I'm still too tall. I lie down on my stomach and am able to put my head, arms and shoulders into the hole. The only way I fit is with my arms stretched out in front of me, not that there's any room to move them. I briefly enjoy my Superman pose and then start thinking through how I might move along the tunnel on my stomach without the help of my arms or legs. I flex my feet and dig the toes of my shoes into the soft dirt. Then I point my toes and push. Flex, point and push. Flex, point and push. I'm no longer Superman, but a centipede. Except I've only got two feet instead of the 35 an average centipede has.

I am impressed both with my problem-solving and the general awesomeness of our world. This is not an amusement-park ride or an exhibit in a museum. The creator and curator of this adventure is Mother Nature. If my smile gets any bigger, it'll get me stuck in this tunnel.

After I'm safely through and standing back on my feet, Alex



PHOTOS BY DINA MISHEV



THE WASHINGTON POST



**TOP:** The view from a cabana at Ramon's Village Divers, with dive boats in the distance. **CENTER:** Rosa Montero starts a cooking fire in the jungle belonging to Caves Branch resort. **ABOVE:** Montero and Alex Guzman walk along the Caves Branch River.

follows. Moving my light around the new room, I spot a pile of something on the floor and walk over to examine it. Pottery shards. “The Maya must have used this cave for something,” Alex says. I ask him how old he thinks these artifacts are: “The Maya were in serious decline in the 10th century,” he says.

Forget Superman. I am Indiana Jones.

Alex is sure this cave has been explored and we're not the first to find these relics. Ian Anderson, who developed and owns Caves Branch, previously offered week-long “Bad Ass Expeditions” around the property to explore and discover new Mayan sites. Still, stumbling upon a millennium-old artifact of a long-gone civilization in situ is thrilling. No glass protects the shards, which look like they came from a medium-sized urn. I can bend down and pick up a piece. But I don't.

## Into the depths

Seeing and not touching the Mayan urn is good practice for the next part of my Belize adventure: scuba diving. The second-

longest barrier reef in the world sits off the coast of Belize. It is home to 500 species of fish and 65 types of coral. For both my sake and the health of the reef, I don't want to touch its flora or fauna, especially the coral, which is sharp and easily broken by a kick from an errant swim fin.

The Belize Barrier Reef runs the length of the country and down into northern Honduras. It's 186 miles long and reportedly visible from space. (Only Australia's Great Barrier Reef is longer.) In 1996, the Belize Barrier Reef was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The farther north on Belize's coast you go, the closer the reef is to land. At San Pedro, the largest town on Ambergris Caye, it's a quarter-mile offshore. Further south, at Placencia, it's about 20 miles offshore. I like the convenience of diving from San Pedro.

Planning this trip, I wanted the clash of rain forest and reef because there aren't many places in the world (outside of hard-to-reach South Pacific islands) where the two are in such easy proximity. The flight from San

Ignacio — I recover from the overnight jungle adventure with a couple of nights of jungle luxe at Ka'ana Resort — to San Pedro is about 80 minutes in a Tropic Air prop plane. Ramon's Village Divers is directly opposite the San Pedro Airport and does three dive trips a day. Forty dive sites are within a 15-minute boat ride from its dock.

During my three days in San Pedro, I divide my time between diving and napping in the hammocks that Ramon's has strung up under palm trees on the beach. Each day, I walk to Belize Chocolate Company and get the gooiest brownie I've ever eaten. The big surprise in San Pedro is how much I think about the jungle. I planned this trip as a diving vacation with a side of jungle adventure. And the diving is good, but I've been diving before. Never before had I belly-crawled through a tunnel and found a shattered urn centuries older than the Magna Carta.

Maybe I'm mooning over the jungle because it's October and not April or May. If I was on Belize's coast in the spring, I

could have seen whale sharks, which migrate at that time. I've always wanted to see a whale shark. They're the largest fish in the world; they can be close to 40 feet long. But October is when I have the time to travel. Whale sharks might not be around, but it turns out there are plenty of other fish, such as reef sharks, one of which I see on Day 2 at the Tackle Box dive site. My group of five divers and our divemaster hang suspended about 40 feet below the water's surface watching as the shark, about five feet long, lazily fins around us.

On land, I'm a sucker for big wildlife. But while diving, I prefer the micro for its predictability (unless the macro is a whale shark). Coral and colorful, small fish are almost always around, but mantas, hammerhead sharks and turtles are in shorter supply. The Belize Barrier Reef has coral of all shapes and sizes. Some look like brains, others like fans, still others like organ pipes. After several minutes of watching the reef shark doing lots of nothing — they are more active at night — I turn to the coral.

## If you go

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Ramon's Village Resort

Coconut Dr., San Pedro

800-624-4215

ramons.com

This full-service resort with thatched-roofed, air-conditioned cottages is directly across from San Pedro's small airport. But being on the beach, you hear waves more often than planes. Rooms from \$150.

#### Caves Branch

Mile 41½ Hummingbird Hwy., Belmopan

800-357-2698

cavesbranch.com

An adventure-based jungle lodge — caving, tubing, hiking, rappelling — on a 90-square-mile estate located 12 miles outside of the country's capital. Three-night minimum. Rooms from \$169.20.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Elvi's Kitchen

Pescador Dr., San Pedro Town, Ambergris Caye

501-226-2404

elviskitchen.com

Go for the coconut shrimp at this restaurant with a sand-floored dining room. Entrees from \$15.

#### Belize Chocolate Company

Barrier Reef Dr., San Pedro Town, Ambergris Caye

501-226-3015

belizechocolatecompany.com

Treats made from organic ingredients starting at \$3.

### INFORMATION

travelbelize.org

—D.M.

For more dining and lodging suggestions in Belize, visit [washingtonpost.com/travel](http://washingtonpost.com/travel)

[travel@washpost.com](mailto:travel@washpost.com)

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