

COASTAL LIVING



Inset: A deluxe beachfront casita at Matachica Resort & Spa; inside, a gauzy-canopied bed and sleek sofa face out to open wood-shuttered doors, sandy shore, and the reef.



SNORKELING THE BELIZE BARRIER REEF



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I AM IN A 16-SEATER FLYING ABOVE the aquamarine waters of Belize, and already my life has changed: Being claustrophobic, I have always avoided anything much smaller than a jet for air travel, yet I'm feeling a mixture of peace and exhilaration in this tiny space with an outsized view of the Caribbean. It's a short flight from Belize City to the country's largest island, Ambergris Caye, and I'm soon in a water taxi speeding to El Pescador, a colonial-style resort facing the big draw of Belize: its barrier reef. The world's second-largest (after Australia), it's home to some 500 species of fish, and I am here to swim among them.

El Pescador's dive instructor, Alonzo Flota, was raised on the island and grew up free-diving with his father for lobster. He has a wide smile and an easy manner, and seems part fish himself. Our first destination is a protected marine reserve a few minutes away called Hol Chan, meaning "little channel," marked only by a buoy above the sea. Below the surface, life is teeming. First to approach are six wide-eyed fish called permits, Flota says as we bob up. Plunging back down, I'm surrounded by a school of yellow-and-black striped fish—sergeant majors—and I'm instantly one of them, swimming alongside. Through the blur of stripes, Flota points downward, where an enormous sea turtle nuzzles the sandy bottom,

beautifully intricate markings decorating his shell. He flaps to the surface in slow motion, takes a long breath, and then sinks.

Blue, yellow, even lavender-eyelidded fish with multi spots and stripes dart or meander by—but there are also odd little beings, like an arrow crab with spidery, pine-straw legs sprouting tiny purple claws. We encounter giant things: a green moray eel with mouth agape (I keep my distance), and stingrays skirting the ocean floor like massive, undulating car mats. In nearby Shark Ray Alley, we're surrounded by nurse sharks, which look and act less like sharks and more like a combo of catfish and seal, with whiskers and brown bodies that feel like sandpaper.

Back at my spacious, cathedral-ceiling villa, I head outside. Two long, family-style dinner tables preside under palm trees strung with paper lanterns, and fishing, snorkeling, and diving tales from the day are shared. I sample snapper that my tablemate Tim caught that afternoon—amazingly light and delicious.

From amiable El Pescador, I travel north the next day to the romantic Matachica Resort & Spa, where I lie on my casita's hammock, the low-breaking waves of the barrier reef in the distance, a mere 20-minute kayak ride away. As I mull over that possibility, I know that anytime from now on, I can close my eyes and transport myself back to the middle of a school of fish by the reef, happy under the sea.

—Jennifer Brunner Slaton

Villa rates at El Pescador start at \$280; elpescador.com. Rates at Matachica Resort & Spa start at \$225; matachica.com.



MATACHICA RESORT FEATURED IN COASTAL LIVING
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