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Magazine

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Roatan?

Where is Roatan?

story and photos by Fred Nagy

“Where the HELL is Roatan”. I couldn’t resist it. There we were in one of the few up-scale souvenir shops in Coxen Hole on the island of Roatan and I was looking at the inscription on a standard white coffee mug – perfect for bringing back home. Because ... before the trip, when we had told friends and family we were off to Roatan, without exception the response was always: “Roatan? Where is Roatan?” So, you see, I just had to have the mug!

Roatan IS unique and, so far, pretty much overlooked as a Caribbean holiday destination. A few miles off Honduras’ mainland, it’s part of the Bay Islands grouping made up of Roatan (the largest), Guanaja and Utila, both considerably smaller; and the Cayos Cochinos, a small group of keys barely above water. Roatan is, to say the least, underdeveloped. You don’t go to Roatan looking for casinos, à la Curaçao, or for extensive night-life and entertainment. There is little. There are no Cancun-style high-rise resort developments or expensive shopping malls. On the other hand, there are no hordes of tourists tripping over each other in a mad dash for sun and sand, either.

Oh, there is sun and sand in abundance. In fact, if you want to find that proverbial beach with only you and your mate to enjoy it, go to Roatan, just don’t expect a snack bar on the beach. Roatan has one world-class beach, West Bay Beach – one kilometer of pure white sand, gently, and I

mean gently, sloping into the sea – no crashing waves with undertow here. This stretch is being developed but with two-storey condo-style, low-impact developments. We stayed here in a one-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of a large villa, barely twenty steps from the surf. With sun, sand and palm trees in abundance, it’s all you’ll want.

Did I mention that Roatan is cheap compared with the rest of the Caribbean? We bought almost everything we needed for a two-week stay at the well-stocked supermarket and paid \$60 (all prices US). Then every couple of days we would take the water taxi to West End Village nearby (think Key West circa 1940) to meet the ‘fruit-and-veggie’ pick-up truck. There we would collect a couple of grapefruit, two or three oranges, a mango, a few potatoes, a couple of onions and so on, and pay - a dollar! There are plenty of decent restaurants both in West Bay Beach as well as West End Village. A lobster supper for two at the Argentinian Grill in West End (www.roatanposada.com/restaurant), arguably the best eatery in Roatan, with drinks and coffee and tip cost less than \$60. Main courses at most restaurants start at \$6 and top out at \$17. Accommodation at our place: “Casa de Paradise” (what a great name) cost \$500 per week, off-season. You can check out our great accommodations (we were more than pleased at what we found) at www.casadeparadise.com/savannahs.

However, if you are looking for all-inclusives, they exist as well, all low-rise, some pretty nifty, others more

basic and rustic. You can find a room with a bed near the beach for a hundred bucks a week. Or, if you want upscale, you might book in at the Luna Beach Resort, www.lunabeachresort.com, halfway between West End Village and West Bay Beach offering mahogany, mahogany, mahogany; VERY tastefully appointed grounds with cabanas and villas tucked into the hillside, a pool (a rarity in Roatan) and dining al fresco to die for. A unique experience.

Roatan: think laid-back holiday. Bring a couple of books, visit Coxen Hole and French Harbour, do some souvenir shopping, look for 'yaba ding dings' - imitations of AmerIndian artefacts once found on the island. Drink some Bahia Beer (75¢). Bargain with the taxi drivers, strike up a conversation with the local expatriate community (think Provincetown circa 1960), fantasize about spending six months of the year here.

Rent a car for a day or two (not cheap), www.roatansalesandrentals.com, explore the island; it's banana-shaped - 30 miles long by a few wide with one paved road running down half its length near the shore, the other half is dirt. Drive to the extreme east end of the island along the dirt road and find the Paya Bay Beach Club, www.payabay.com, (think Papa Hemmingway) and Paya Bay Beach of course. Stop for a drink and a swim on the deserted beach. Climb up into the hills on rutted dirt roads (4X4 necessary) to the spine of the island and look left and right to see the coral reefs fringing both sides of the island. Descend on the other side to find small beaches or Garifuna fishing villages, where the spotlessly clean children run to say hello, and hold out their hands for a treat.

Most everyone speaks English and Spanish as Roatan belonged to Great Britain during the time of British Honduras, now Belize. It's trite but true - the locals were friendly and outgoing, never did we feel threatened, even when completely alone in some remote village.

If you're looking for a dense tropical rain forest, well, you won't find it on Roatan, but the "Salt and Pepper Gourmet Club and Eco Tours" (what a name!) local tour company, will hop you over to the mainland by plane and whisk you off to Pico Bonito Rain Forest for a full-day hike with guide, food and drink, insurance all included.

Oh, did I forget to mention the coral reefs. How could I? This is THE Mecca for scuba diving in the Caribbean. Forget Cozumel or the Caymans. This place is IT. In West End Village every fourth shop is a dive shop. The largest dive fleet in the Caribbean is located at Anthony's Key Resort, the upscale dive resort on Roatan. Roatan is the top of an underwater mountain range, hilly and rugged with little flat land; these contours continue underwater, thus every dive in Roatan is a wall dive, sloping into the abyss. We dove with Bananarama, www.bananaramadive.com, a PADI Gold Palm dive shop, run by Ania and Liber, a young husband and wife team. No cattle-car diving with them, and this, for the unheard-of price (elsewhere, that is) of \$25 per dive. They also rent cabanas for \$55/day.

Diving off Roatan is spoken of in superlatives: the

steepest walls, the healthiest corals, the largest sponges, the most extensive underwater canyons, the spookiest channels, the best chance of meeting large creatures like mantas, sharks and turtles. If you just like snorkelling, nothing beats the west end of West Bay Beach and, if you are brave enough, The Wall is just 200 feet off shore.

Alas, this will not last for long. Already the cruise ships have discovered Roatan and disgorge their shiploads of tourists into Coxen Hole and onto West Bay Beach, where they own 200 yards of beach, twice a week. A nine-hole golf course is under development in the East End (where there currently is nothing but fishing villages), a couple of the chain hotels are sniffing around and real estate prices are on the rise. As an aside, we met an old man lazing on a hammock at the extreme west end of West Bay Beach, just before the iron shore begins. We struck up a conversation with him and found out that he is the owner of this last 300 yards of beach. It is the last bit of undeveloped beach front on West Bay Beach. He had recently been offered one million American dollars but had turned it down. He said to us "If I sell, what would I do with the money and where would I go?" I hope he manages to keep it pristine for a little longer.

Roatan: our kind of island. We will be going back - maybe for six months.

Some Details:

* TACA Honduran Airlines flies Direct to Roatan from Miami on Sundays and from Houston on Saturdays. Check out their website: www.taca.com. There are flights daily but then you will have to connect through either San Pedro Sula or La Ceiba on the mainland.

* Visit So Tropic on the Main Street in Coxen Hole for interesting gifts. The owner, Judy Griffith, can put just about any logo or slogan on your coffee mug, including, of course, the one quoted above. And Yaba Ding Ding is near Warren's Grocery store in Coxen hole, www.roatanisland.net/shops.htm, for locally-made clothing, rugs, throws and art crafts.

* Talk to Paul David at Salt and Pepper if a mainland excursion to the rainforest, or golf, or a visit to the Mayan ruins at Copan interests you. The day hike to the rain forest costs \$135, Fridays only, www.roatansaltnpepper.com, tel: 504 445 1306.

* Visit Anthony's Key Resort to check out the Roatan Museum (real yaba ding dings!), dive with dolphins, or just watch the sunset from their tree-house bar, www.anthonyskey.com. You can't go wrong.

* For everything you ever wanted to know about Roatan, these two web-sites will help you on your way: www.roatanisland.net www.roatanonline.com

If Fred Nagy isn't back in Roatan for six months, he's probably at home in Dollard-des-Ormeaux, PQ