

Back To Belize

Traveling to salt in the Covid era? Easy.

By Jess McGlothlin



By the time Belize reopened in October 2020, I'd held five sets of flight tickets, the travel date having been continually pushed back by changing border closures. The summer of 2020 was, essentially, spent watching flight delays and cancellations. So, when the border finally reopened and I stepped off the plane in Belize City on October 3, I was very happy.

But the process of travel had changed. I'd taken a PCR test before leaving Montana, carrying the results with me to present during a new health screening process in Philip Goldstein International Airport. Upon arrival in Belize City, all passengers were ushered through a line for health screenings. I presented my negative test results. Had my temperature taken. Was asked details about where I was going and how long I was staying. After a successful jaunt through the health screening, then customs, and then immigration, I rechecked my bags for my in-country Tropic Air flight and took a seat on one of the many wooden benches lining the airport waiting area. I considered how grateful I was to be outside my home state of Montana.



Five of us had made the trek to El Pescador Lodge on Ambergris Caye. All but one were return guests. Ken, a retired Delta pilot and Wyoming horseman was an old-school gentleman. Old friends Mike and Bill brought humor and tales of permit adventures to the dinner table each evening. And newcomer Bryan fit right in, being promptly bitten by the tarpon bug and boating more than a dozen silver kings over the course of the week. And I was there toting cameras and, occasionally, a fly rod. Within a day, our little squad had morphed into a family. Things like that happen easily at fishing lodges.

The daily routines had changed, of course. Every morning, Dunia arrived and took our temperatures, bringing along a cup of coffee and a breakfast burrito. Pangas were sprayed with a disinfectant before we could climb aboard, and at dinner we were carefully spaced out, an empty seat between each angler. The tempo of the lodge had changed slightly; even here it was impossible to escape the concept that the world was different.

But despite the little details, so much remained. Mariano whipped up magical concoctions in the bar. Isa gave casting lessons on the dock, helping me conquer my tailing loop habit. Lodge manager Bruce kept everyone entertained with tales of South Africa, and he was always keen to have a drink and chat.

Like most fishing destinations, once you're on the water it's easy to forget the outside world, with everything turning to a blend of water, sun, and air, and little else. Boated fish are celebrated with Belikins, and cold ceviche is provided during runs between the flats. The guides, who had been without work since March, were incredibly happy to see anglers (as was the entire staff) and they put in the work for us.



And the fishery? The flats surrounding San Pedro—El Pescador has access to more than 400 square miles of them—hadn't been fished in nearly seven months. Despite persistent tropical storms, our group made a good dent in the resident fish population, landing bonefish, tarpon, and permit throughout the week. One rainy morning Bryan boated a 100-plus pound tarpon that towed the panga around the mangroves for an hour-and-a-half before coming to hand.

Four of us extended our stay at the last minute, adding on a day on account of a morning we'd lost to wind. (That's the excuse we gave ourselves, at least.) Newly flexible airline flight changes come in handy for anglers. In truth, none of us wanted to climb back on a plane and return to the chaos of the "real world." We'd settled back into that magical tempo of rise-fish-drink-eat-sleep. Rinse. Repeat. In good company, there's nothing better.



After that October trip, I returned to El Pescador in January. The health screening process for incoming travelers has only become easier, and I hope to return again this summer. In a world gone mad, carving out time with like-minded anglers and breathing the salt air has become more important than ever, and somewhat safer than it was a year ago.



Jess McGlothlin

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