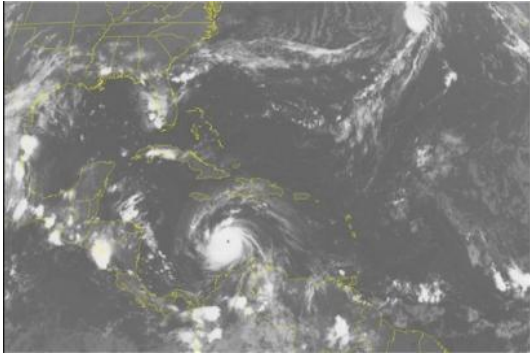


### Belize 3 - 15 September 2007



The day before we left for Belize I phoned the group to let them know - Hurricane Felix (shown on the left) was making a beeline for our little Island and was expected to be a Cat 5 (that's a bit windy!). Insurance companies would not pay out if we didn't go, but would pay to move us once there, so with some wonderful British stoicism and determination not seen since the Blitz we boarded the Continental flight to Houston. We then sat on the runway for 2 hours while they waited for an AA van and some jump leads to start the left side

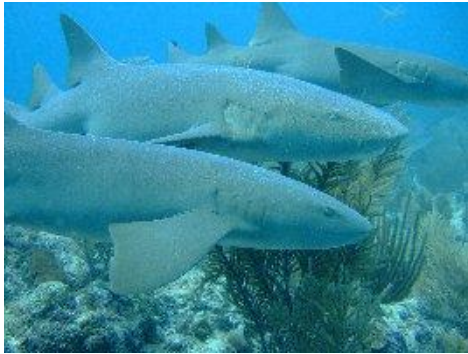
engine, and then proudly announced that both engines were working fine .... well pleased to hear it! However, the delay meant that we were going to have to spend the night in Houston as we would miss our connection. On arrival we were provided with accommodation details and a \$12 voucher (wow) and went to find a Starbucks. The TV cameras were waiting to interview people being evacuated from Honduras, so as you can imagine they jumped on a bunch of idiots who were actually flying into the region. Being a media tart and never one to miss an opportunity to perform, oh, and wearing my BBC tee shirt I couldn't resist. The interview was going well. I probably even mentioned that we were the premier dive centre in England or some similar unsubstantiated claim, but hey, why not. However, when I told her that my worse fear of the hurricane was being stuck in Houston for 2 weeks she cut me off. Maybe it was a local station!



The hotel was nice and after a sumptuous dinner not even remotely covered by the generous \$12 voucher we went to bed. The following morning all eyes were on the telly (and they have a whole channel devoted to weather) to see where Felix had gone - and miraculously it was heading South and missing us completely. So off we went. A couple of hours later we were flying over the jungles of Central America. When we arrived we were met by my good friend John Searle who runs Sea Sports Belize ([www.seasportsbelize.com](http://www.seasportsbelize.com)) who handed me a bottle of rum to help "get over de stress man". He and Linda had kindly sorted out emergency accommodation, no longer needed so we jumped onto the water taxi in glorious weather and headed off to Caye Caulker. So only half a day late, we arrived, booked in at the accommodation (which was lovely) ([www.seasidecabanas.com](http://www.seasidecabanas.com)) and signed up at Belize Diving Services ([www.belizedivingservices.com](http://www.belizedivingservices.com)). We also found the Sports Bar on the beach, and the realization that a whole lobster dinner was a fiver and a cold beer was only a quid sent nearly everyone into a feeding frenzy - especially Becs!



The first day of diving was an experience .. more so for Ruth and Anne than the rest, but as we held on for dear life going through the reef we hoped it was going to get better. The dive was ok - nothing special in hindsight but we were going to be spoilt later on. It was too rough to do another dive ..... so we went back to the Sports Bar! And we also discovered that rum was only £3.50 a bottle ..... oh oh! The next day was a trip to Spanish Lookout Caye and our first of many turtle sightings. We opted for an alternative to the Sports Bar and also discovered that the waitress in Seaside Cabanas was amenable to persuasion and would add additional rum to the punch! Good girl.



Day 3 of diving saw us heading off to Hol Chan Marine Park on the reef at Ambergris Caye - the biggest island in Belize, that stretches up to the Mexican border. I had dived this many times in the past and Shark Alley had always lived up to its name - we were not disappointed on this occasion.

There were nurse sharks everywhere, giving the budding underwater photographers in the group the opportunity to snap away until their batteries ran out .... and then spend

the rest of the day looking through the images for a good one. The second dive of the day was the first caving experience for several of the group as we squeezed through some amazing tunnels and swim throughs. Lunch was in San Pedro where we discovered that the company had expanded into the realty industry (see the photo). A gentle stroll around the town made us realize how nice it was to be on Caye Caulker. By this time we were really, **really**, getting chilled right down to de core man! Touch me!



The next day of diving was South Turneffe Atol. It was a clear calm day and the 2 hour journey didn't seem to take long. The diving was superb and we were treated to our first of what would be many sightings of Spotted Eagle Rays. These graceful creatures appeared in groups of 3 on many occasions and would come out of nowhere. Turtles and Nurse sharks were getting a bit common as well - guess we were starting to get spoilt. With around 30m of visibility this was diving at its best.

On the Sunday, some of the group got a bit culture vulture and decided to take a trip inland. For me, it was the chance to see some of my old haunts when I had lived here for 6 months in the mid-80s. We were picked up at Belize City and drove the 2 hours towards Guatemala to Xunantunich, a preserved Mayan ruin and one of many in the country. From there we went to Chaa Creek ([www.chaacreek.com](http://www.chaacreek.com)) for a bit of rest and relaxation where we were going to spend the night. The whole group decided that taking to the river in canoes was a good idea and after lots of "left, left, no go right, now back paddle!" we finally got the hang of it. Steve and Nigel were desperate



to show how only real men can negotiate rapids upstream .... and failed miserably. We got to see huge iguanas hanging in the trees and toucans flying around. A lovely experience in wonderful surroundings. The following morning (after one or two too many cocktails to be honest) we were off again to Jaguar Paw Resort for a spot of cave tubing. It does what it says on the tin, you sit on a rubber tube in the river and go through the cave system. Absolutely brilliant. There was a 45 minute trek through the jungle to get to the system entrance during which time most of us

donated at least 1/2 a pint of blood to the local insect population. Talking of which, a big word of thanks to Becs, Ruth and Anne for donating more than most and for keeping the pesky critters off the rest of us! Smith Kline Pharmaceuticals are currently investigating what it is that attracts blood sucking animals to the girls in an effort to find the ultimate insect repellent.



So, now with bite lumps the size of Mount Vesuvius adding to the attractiveness of our already sunburnt bodies (not a good look I can tell you) we jumped into our inner tubes and off we went. The first set of rapids "took out" Ruth and Steve T in a

1er! Steve promptly lost his glasses and jewellery in the process and Ruth added a huge bruise to the lumps, bumps, bites and sunburn .... yummy! "Stray ref, stray ref" the guide was shouting! Where was the football match? "Whatefa don gorite, stray ref". That'll be the wrong way then! Eventually we got the hang off the paddling directions required once we had managed to decipher what our Mayan guide was actually telling us to do. An hour later with huge grins we came to the end of our adventure. There was some rapid showering and drying and we made the ferry back to Caye Caulker in time to tell everyone else what they had missed.



Back to diving and Turneffe North. A wonderful couple of wall dives and yet more Eagle Rays. The wind had picked up and the journey across open sea was a bit concerning as the next day we were going to be going to Lighthouse Reef to "do" the Blue Hole. Thankfully Kathy at Belize Diving Services informed us that we would be doing the trip with another company in a much bigger boat. I think Anne and Ruth were much relieved!

It was an early start when we boarded for the long journey - about 2 1/2 hours into the wind but once within the reef flat calm. I remembered having trouble finding it in the 80s when I first dived the hole - but then there were no other boats to mark

the way in. We jumped into the water and swam to the North end as we sank down to 30m. From here we could see the top of the huge stalactites and stalagmites that were once part of this ancient collapsed cavern system. We descended to 40m to swim behind these huge pillars. As we did so large numbers of Bull Sharks hovered around outside and a pair of Eagle Rays glided by. The sharks were everywhere and cameras were clicking manically. They even followed us up to the reef as we started to ascend. The other 2 dives and lunch on Half Moon Caye made it a day to remember. Even the trip to the "Booby" colony was fun. Dale even bought a T-shirt which had a picture of the Caye and the words "It all started with the Boobies" ... strategically placed over her left one! On the way back the rum punch came out at Turneffe so by the time we got back to Caulker the party was well under way. It continued the following morning - Neils 50th Birthday! He and a few others opted out of the dives and instead spent the day in the hotel pool undertaking scientific research to discover whether or not a bottle of rum would change the human body's buoyancy characteristics - well at least that is what I assumed they were doing as they were still in the pool 6 hours after they had started. Happy birthday Neil!

There were plenty of sore heads on the last day as we packed and cleaned and generally took it easy before the flight home. We polished off what remained of duty free and supermarket purchases which helped get through the return flight which was full to the brim with our over-loud American colleagues all off to fill the Chancellor's coffers with good old US\$. God bless em! Was the trip a success - you bet it was. It was certainly on a par with the Philippines socially and while not quite as good for diving as Indonesia it is still spectacular. We were extremely lucky with the weather and apart from the odd thunderstorm the sun shone everyday .... resulting in the tops of the girls' flesh mosquito mountains developing some lovely looking blisters! mmmm nice. Hey but we all got a bit of a tan! At the end of the day, it was a great holiday. Caye Caulker is a great place to relax, cheap to live and thoroughly recommended. Another fantastic club dive trip. Make sure you book on the next one.

