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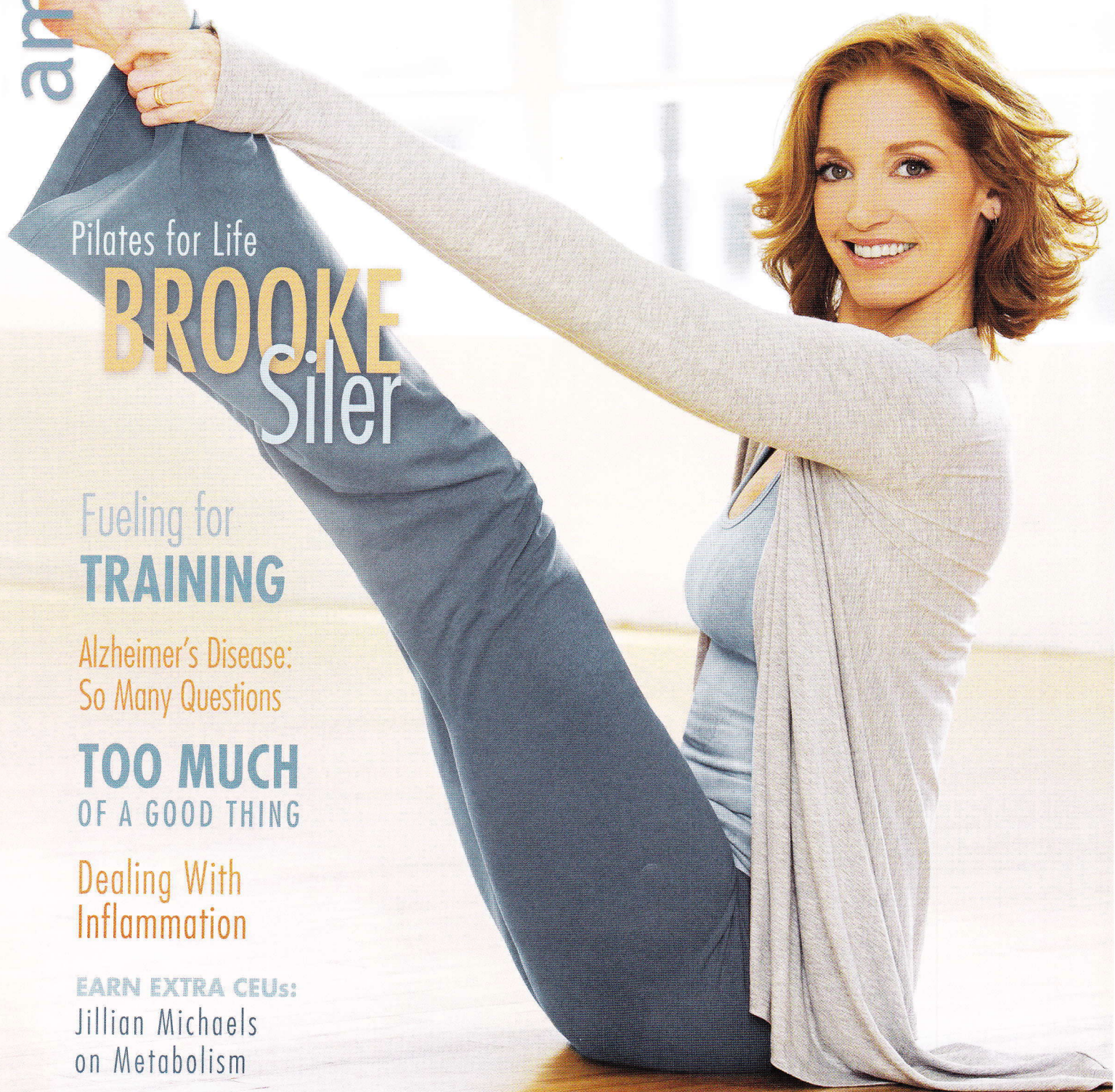
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# Bountiful BELIZE

There is more to this tiny country  
than beaches.

BY JODI HELMER

Verticle Side View of Xunantunich

I can be a little unorthodox when it comes to choosing a travel destination. I booked a trip to Hong Kong after reading a newspaper article; I landed in Spain because I got an e-mail advertising a great seat sale; and I went to Jamaica in search of a painting like the one my parents bought on the island when I was 12.

## Finding "The Place"

This year, I had the vacation dates all picked out—10 days in May set aside for a mini adventure—but, with no newspaper article, pilgrimage to find a piece of artwork or news of a great travel deal in my inbox, I also had no idea where to go. So, I went to the one place where any traveler can find inspiration: Barnes & Noble. Going straight to the travel section, I let my fingers wander along the spines of the guidebooks, pulling out titles that sounded interesting.

The minute I picked up *Moon Belize*, I knew that I was going to Central America. The guidebook was filled with pictures of waterfalls, jungle lodges and ancient ruins, and read more like a sports and adventure almanac than a staid travel guide. Diving?

Check. Canoeing? Check. Hiking? Check. Spelunking? Check. Snorkeling? Check.

## Getting There

I bought the guidebook and one month later it was tucked into my backpack as I climbed aboard a water taxi in Belize City, slipped off my shoes, lowered my sunglasses and set off across the crystal clear waters of the Caribbean Sea on the way to Ambergris Caye. The island is just 27 miles long and the main modes of transportation (besides walking barefoot on the beach) are electric golf carts and colorful bicycles. I spent three days splashing in the sea, playing in the sand and snorkeling on the longest continuous barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere. Tanned and relaxed, I was ready for the real adventure: the jungle.

## Lots to See and Do

Belize is a former British colony that lies on the northeast coast of Central America. The mainland is 180 miles long and just 68 miles across at its widest point, and is best known for soft jungle adventures. Cruise ship passengers flock to the Cayo District where properties like Jaguar Paw Resort offer activities from zip lining to cave tubing. I opted to explore the trails on the 200-acre resort property instead. The paths rise into the jungle, past the Caves Branch River and into darkened caves that echo with the sound of running water. No one knows the exact mileage of the trails but it's possible to hike through the rainforest for hours (trust me).

I returned to the hotel with aching calves, two empty water bottles, a sweat-soaked T-shirt and a sunburn, and headed straight to the front desk to sign up for the cave tubing tour. The entire time I was plopped in an inner tube and floating in and out of the caves along the river, I alternated between relaxing and feeling like an out-of-shape tourist (minus the fanny pack and socks/sandals combo). It seems that I'm not cut out for spending long periods of time just floating, even if the setting is beautiful.

Over the next 72 hours, I learned to be grateful for shaded breaks in cool waters. I swam in the azure-tiled pool at Chaa Creek after a hike through the 365-acre forest preserve wearing dusty sneakers and half a tube of SPF 45; I dropped my paddles and dove into the Macal River to frolic with fat minnows after canoeing miles upstream

from the put-in at the resort; I played in the water following a morning on the back of Salsa, the horse that led me on a four-hour ride through the jungle and caused my legs to ache for days. One morning, I jumped in the pool for some relief from the 110-degree temperatures and spent the better part of the afternoon swimming from one end to the other, pausing to listen to the sounds of the howler monkeys in the distance and admire the tiny lizards perched on tropical flowers. Guess where I was after taking in views of the ancient Mayan site of Xunantunich from the top of the mountain biking trails? Yep, the pool.

## Cave Trekking

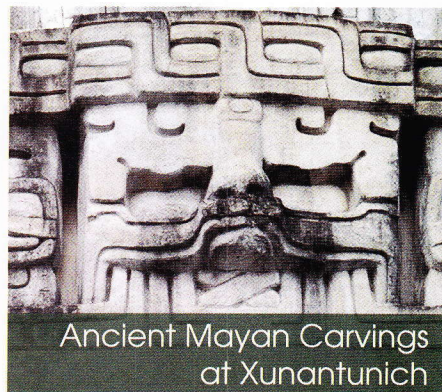
I pulled out my dog-eared guidebook between activities, scoping out options for what to try next. A write-up about Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM), an ultimate hiking-swimming-caving-rock climbing adventure caught my eye. I found a tour guide, stuffed my backpack with water, snacks and a camera, and prepared for a workout—and a history lesson. ATM is also called the “Cave of the Crystal Maiden” and is a sacred site that was once used for Mayan ceremonies. It was an hour-long hike through the jungle before we reached the hourglass-shaped mouth of the cave. Once we arrived, our guide had one simple instruction: “Jump in and swim!”

Navigating the 2.5-mile long cave system required wading and swimming through the chilly waters, scrambling over rocks and squeezing between narrow cave walls. Along the way, the guide pointed out crystals, stalactites and rocks that were carved by the Maya to create shadows on the cave walls. Just days before, camera crews from the Discovery Channel had navigated the same waters to produce a series on ATM. Hours after our group entered the cave, we hoisted ourselves out of the water, braced our soaking wet shoes on a rock wall and climbed to the top and into an enormous cavern. The cavern is filled with more than 1,400 artifacts ranging from Mayan pottery and tools to human remains. A ladder placed carefully at the back of the cavern leads to the Crystal Maiden, the intact skeleton of a young girl for which the cave is named.

We wandered back through the caverns, scrambled down the rock wall, jumped back into the water and waded, swam, climbed



Jaguar Temple



Ancient Mayan Carvings  
at Xunantunich

and squeezed our way back through the cave to the entrance. I was soaking wet and muddy and had scratches along my arms and legs—and I was smiling from ear to ear. Trusting the guidebook listing had led to a daylong trek that was the most strenuous and incredible adventure I had in Belize.

## Savoring the Adventure

I flipped through the pages of the guidebook one last time on the way to the airport and came across a passage about the jungle district that read, “*Days fly by differently up here than they do at the beach—maybe because of how busy most Cayo visitors find themselves signing up for a new activity every day...*” and I realized it was true: In contrast to floating in the water and drinking rum punch on the beach, I had been on the go since the moment I arrived in the jungle—which was exactly the way I wanted to spend my vacation. I returned home with aching muscles, a killer tan, a memory card filled with pictures and a guidebook filled with notes of things to try when I return to Belize.

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