



escape

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Just dive right in



Try Roatan for an unparalleled island escape

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 Sun Media

"You're going where? Where is that anyway?" I must have heard this a dozen times before I packed my bags to head off on my solo journey.

I have to admit, six months ago I too had never heard of Roatan. But after coming across it on the Internet and doing some further research, my curiosity got the better of me, and I had to see for myself if the azure waters and lush, green foliage was for real, or just the clever work of PhotoShop.

I was tired of all the typical all-inclusive resorts, with hundreds of rooms and impersonal service. I wanted serenity and adventure, with the amenities of an all-inclusive resort. Did a place like that exist?

Roatan is the largest of the eight islands that make up Honduras' Bay Islands. It is located 55 km off the north coast of mainland Honduras and rests upon an extensive fringing reef system on the Caribbean Sea. At 60 km in length and less than six kilometers in width, Roatan would be the idyllic place for a single gal like myself to spend a week filled with equal parts relaxation and exhilaration.

As I made the short shuttle bus journey from the airport, I lifted my shades and drank in my new surroundings. Here I was on an

island which, just five short years before, was paid an unwelcome visit by the tropical storm Hurricane Mitch. I saw no signs of devastation.

Instead, I was welcomed by a bounty of palm trees, white sand beaches and the aroma of tropical flowers.

Granted, the roads were a little primitive, but somehow anything else would have seemed out of place. At one point, the bus stopped as a small turtle made its way across the road - perhaps an indication of the pace at which I would be spending my next eight days.

I settled in for my adventure at Anthony's Key Resort, an all-inclusive diving resort perched on the edge of the world's second largest barrier reef.

The escape begins

With so many activities to take in, I began with a morning snorkel tour. The boat made its way to a reef just minutes off the coast of Roatan. I donned my mask, fins and snorkel as my body and the Caribbean Sea met for the very first time.

Within seconds, I was sharing the water with colorful parrot fish, angelfish and, as our guide Kenley pointed out, an enormous tiger slug.

My next feat was horseback riding along the sugar white beach. I hadn't been on a horse for more than a decade, but Pedro, the guide, made me feel instantly at ease. As we trotted along the shoreline we passed children playing soccer (or football, as they called it) on their lunch break. The happy, easy-going attitude of the locals was infectious.

Next, it was off to take part in a canopy tour. I really had no idea what this would entail, until I found a harness being strapped around my rear and

my waist. I was led to a platform high up in the jungle and handed some leather gloves for "brakes." Before I knew it, I was hooked up to a cable about 24 metres above the ground, zipping along at lightning speed.

Suddenly, I was eight years old again - free, without a care in the world. There were 11 stops in all as we made our way down the jungle and on to Tabyana Beach. I was disappointed when the rush was over but was quick to head back to the resort and share my experience with my new friends.

While staying at the resort, I had the opportunity to meet my fellow guests in passing. The first question they'd ask was "Where ya from?" The second, "Are you diving?" I found that most guests were on Roatan for that very reason - diving and more diving.

As for me, the thought of strapping 30 excess pounds to my back and submerging myself in foreign waters was terrifying, to say the least. But, as I saw a tiny 12-year old girl begin her descent without any fear, I knew I had to do it.

After a classroom session and safety drills, it was time to take the plunge. In no time at all the breathing apparatus and I became one, and I found myself in awe of the sights before me - groupers, enormous crabs, sea-horses and what seemed like miles of brain coral. Amazing.

One of the highlights was the opportunity to interact with the dolphins at the Roatan Institute for Marine Sciences, located at Anthony's Key Resort. This centre brings in trainers from all over the world to research dolphins in their natural habitat.

Show offs

I hooked up with a trainer from Sweden, who took me into the water for a close encounter with one of the dolphins. I was amazed at how human these beautiful creatures were.

They genuinely seemed excited to "show off," and were quick to offer "hugs" and "kisses" when instructed. I donned my snorkel gear and plunged into the water to join them in their home.

They were not shy to brush up against me and invite me to stroke them as they went by. Their smooth skin reminded me of a banana peel, not slimy as I expected. After a game of fetch with kelp (yes, they fetch!), it was time to say farewell.

So, did I find my paradise? Absolutely. I read on a sign there - "Leave nothing but bubbles, take nothing but memories." And, oh, the memories I have.



- AP photo

Whether you head to Roatan like writer Shellene McConnell, get up close and personal with a nurse shark in Belize or do your diving among Bonaire's soft coral community in the Netherlands Antilles, like the diver pictured above, diving holidays are a great way to escape the everyday stresses of life.

IF YOU GO

- Sol Air offers direct flights from Miami to Roatan from \$299 U.S. return (www.solair.net)
- Continental Airlines offer flights from many North American cities to Miami. (www.continental.com). Reduced fares can be found through Expedia's site (www.expedia.com).
- For information on Roatan and Honduras, the following Web sites offer an abundance of information: www.roatanonline.com, www.honduras.com or www.letsghonduras.com
- For accommodation and services offered by Anthony's Key Resort, visit www.anthonyskey.com.