



A fishing guide at Turneffe Flats Lodge in Belize released a permit fish. Most guests at the resort come for the angling, so the dive boats that zip off to fish-filled reefs are never crowded.

## Follow the fishermen

**A fly-fishing lodge on a remote atoll in Belize makes a splash among divers and snorkelers, offering intimate outings led by knowledgeable guides.**

By KAREN CATCHPOLE • Special to the Star Tribune

Fly fishermen have flocked to Turneffe Flats Lodge (nicknamed T-Flats by repeat guests) for more than two decades in search of the “grand slam,” a dream trio of catches that includes bonefish, permit and tarpon, which all swim in the mangroves and shallows around Turneffe Atoll off the coast of Belize.

T-Flats quietly added scuba diving and snorkeling in 1994. Today, it offers dive instruction, equipment and three trips onto the water daily with its 48-foot dive boat, the Ms. Ellie.

It might sound counterintuitive to spend your diving or snorkeling vacation looking for marine life alongside people with fishing poles, but think about it: the fishermen are there to catch (and usually re-



Snorkeling in Belize can bring glimpses of sea turtles and fantastical fish.

lease) fish, which means the marine environment is rich. And because most of the people at the resort are there to fish, you're more likely to be part of small groups of divers and snorkelers at a fishing destination than at a dive resort.

This is certainly the case at Turneffe Flats Lodge on Turneffe Atoll, the largest of only four coral atolls in the Western Hemisphere and a spot where the second largest reef in the world passes within a stone's throw of the shoreline (which means excellent snorkeling is literally within walking distance of your bungalow). Unlike the handful of dive resorts that operate on Turneffe Atoll, roughly 90 percent of your fellow guests at T-Flats will be fishermen, and the Ms. Ellie routinely carries between two and six divers.

Smaller groups of divers and snorkelers mean fewer disturbances to the marine life and a greater likelihood of sightings, more attention from dive masters and snorkel guides and more room and comfort on the dive boat.

**Belize continues on G6 ►**  
**Snorkeler's paradise:** Top fishing lodges around the globe. **G6**

# Finding fish around the globe

• These fishing resorts host divers and snorkelers, too.

## Bimini Big Game Club

Bimini Island, the Bahamas  
The Bimini has hosted fishermen for 70 years, including Ernest Hemingway. Here the Gulf Stream, which has been described as a "sushi conveyor belt of fish," delivers marlin, tuna, sailfish, wahoo, swordfish, grouper and barracuda. Snapper can be found on the reefs and the flats are home to bonefish and permit fish. With more than 50 record-setting catches in the waters around the island, Bimini has been called the Sport Fishing Capital of the World.

In the summer of 2010 the resort unveiled a multimillion-dollar overhaul, which included creation of the Dive Bimini dive and snorkel program. The program is overseen by Neal Watson, a Bimini native who holds two Guinness World Records, including the underwater distance record (he swam 66 miles nonstop) and the deepest dive on compressed air (a don't-try-this-at-home-kids depth of 437 feet).

Because a mere 20 percent of Bimini guests are there for diving or snorkeling, an average of 12 people hop the dive boat to world-class sites including reefs, wrecks, wall dives, drift dives and the famous Atlantis Road site, thought by some to be part of the lost underwater city of Atlantis. Guests commonly spot Southern stingrays, dolphins and nurse sharks.

**Rates:** The resort's Diver Package includes two nights of accommodation and two dives for \$272 per diver. A la carte dives (including tanks, weights and weight belt) are \$100 for two morning boat dives, \$60 for one afternoon boat dive and \$85 for a night dive. Snorkeling rates (including mask, fins and snorkel rental) are \$39 for adults and \$29 for children under 12 with a guide ([www.biggameclubbimini.com](http://www.biggameclubbimini.com)).

## Hawks Cay Resort

Duck Key, Fla.  
This is where the Versus channel fishing show "Saltwater Experience" is shot, chronicling the excellent offshore, reef and backcountry flats fishing in the area.

Hawks Cay is also close to the third-largest living barrier reef system in the world with pristine snorkeling locations and more than 30 dive sites. A highlight is the Thunderbolt, a 188-foot-long ship that lies upright and fully intact in about 120 feet of water. Intentionally sunk in 1986, the wreck is now habitat for nurse sharks, manta rays, spotted eagle rays, loggerhead sea turtles, goliath grouper, and colorful tropicals like sergeant majors plus puffer fish and moray eels.

At Hawks Cay the ratio of fishermen to divers and snorkelers is 2-to-1, and dive boats average five to 20 divers.

**Rates:** If you have your own scuba gear it's \$60 for two dives, or \$115 for two dives with gear rental. Snorkeling is \$39 with your own gear or \$44 with fins, mask and snorkel rental ([www.HawksCay.com](http://www.HawksCay.com)).

## Solmar All-Inclusive Resort & Beach Club

Cabo San Lucas, Baja, Mexico  
With one of the largest and most experienced sport fishing fleets in Cabo San Lucas, this is the place fishermen come to hunt enormous blue marlin, stripe marlin and black marlin. This spot at the tip of Baja, dubbed "The Marlin Capital of the World," also offers cabrilla, dorado, roosterfish, sailfish, Sierra, snapper, wahoo and yellowfin tuna.

Guests are roughly 90 percent fishermen and 10 percent divers and snorkelers at this 40-year-old property, which upgraded to a premium all-inclusive resort in December of 2010. An outing with just two divers is not uncommon, making exploration of sites like El Arco (the natural rock formation that is iconic of Los Cabos and home to a sea lion community) that much more spectacular.

**Rates:** \$75 per dive including full gear rental. Snorkeling is \$45 per person per trip including beverages and a light lunch ([www.solmar.com](http://www.solmar.com)).

## Weigh West

Tofino, Vancouver Island, British Columbia  
Opened in the early 1990s, the recently renovated Weigh West

« WITH VISIBILITY UP TO 100 FEET IN WATERS TEEMING WITH LIFE, WE WERE ABLE TO SEE HUGE SCHOOLS OF FISH FLASHING BY IN A BLUR OF COLOR. »



Belize's Turneffe Atoll offers a vast array of marine life and coral formations. Among the eye-popping beauties found there is the queen triggerfish.

TURNEFFE FLATS

# Follow the fishermen



Turneffe Flats Lodge captain and dive master Alex Edwards and dive master Eli Rodriguez.

A frosty local Belikin beer is an end-of-the-day ritual at Turneffe Flats Lodge in Belize.

Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune



## IF YOU GO

Diving packages at Turneffe Flats Lodge start at \$2,200 per person per week, all-inclusive of boat transfers to the atoll, double accommodation, three meals a day and three dives a day, including one dive at the Great Blue Hole.

Atoll Adventure packages, including snorkeling, are \$1,875 per person per week, including boat transfers to the atoll, double accommodation, three meals a day and all snorkeling. For more info: [www.tflats.com](http://www.tflats.com).

## ◀ BELIZE FROM GI

Smaller groups also allow divers and snorkelers to tailor their days. If the group agrees to focus on shallow dive sites with great corals or drift dives with sharks, the T-Flats dive masters and snorkel guides are happy to accommodate.

During a recent trip to T-Flats I heard more than one guest credit snorkel guide Abel Coe's personal attention, ability to make them feel at home in the water, and uncanny knack for finding the area's most mesmerizing coral formations and marine life as highlights of their vacations.

And then there are the dive sites. During my time on Turneffe Atoll I explored a dozen of the roughly 60 sites around the atoll and spent almost 11 hours underwater in a group of just four divers. With visibility up to 100 feet in waters teeming with life, we were able to see spotted eagle rays slowly flapping by like underwater birds, loggerhead turtles, colorful and diverse coral formations, huge schools of fish flashing by in a blur of color, tiny snapping shrimp (which really do snap loud enough to hear underwater), spotted toadfish, peppermint shrimp, dancing crabs and much more.

The world famous Great Blue Hole, part of the Belize Barrier Reef System UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most dramatic deep wall dives on the planet, is also accessible from Turneffe Flats Lodge. During the hourlong boat journey to the Blue Hole from Turneffe Atoll, the Ms. Ellie was escorted part of the way by a pod of spinner dolphins, a bucket list-worthy treat even before we reached the site.

Once anchored over the Blue Hole, our group of four quietly and quickly giant-stepped off the Ms. Ellie and began peacefully descending past the site's coral-covered walls, circling sharks and massive underwater stalactites that lie at more than 100 feet below the surface before the other boats at the site had managed to gear up the divers on their packed boats.

In our small group, one of our dive masters was even able to stay at the side of a relatively new diver who was nervously making her first deep dive. It was hard not to loat.

Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl are in the midst of a multi-year trip through North, Central and South America. Follow along at [www.trans-americas.com](http://www.trans-americas.com).

overlooks Clayoquot Sound, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and offers salmon and halibut fishing. In 2009, Weigh West began offering snorkeling and diving through neighboring dive shop Ocean Planet Adventures. Guests can now explore the reefs, walls and shipwrecks in the area, which are loaded with giant pacific octopus, wolf eels, expansive kelp beds, and resident seals and sea lions.

The water here is cold (about 46 degrees), requiring the use of thick wet suits. The upside is that the colder the water, the clearer it tends to be — so clear that Jacques Cousteau dubbed the waters in the area "The

Emerald Sea" and declared them second only to the Red Sea in terms of diversity of marine life.

With half of Weigh West guests coming to fish and just 15 percent coming to dive or snorkel, Ocean Planet Adventures' dive and snorkel boats average just four people.

**Rates:** \$199 for two boat dives at two different sites including all gear rental (including a cold water wet suit). Snorkeling rates are \$89 per person including all gear rental and a guide ([www.weighwest.com](http://www.weighwest.com); [www.divetofino.com](http://www.divetofino.com)).

KAREN CATCHPOLE



A hawksbill turtle, an endangered species, glides through waters off Turneffe Flats.

TURNEFFE FLATS