

A wet and wild getaway

You can really make a splash in tropical Roatan

By **STEPHEN RIPLEY, SUN MEDIA**

ROATAN, Honduras -- As tropical fish go, the Bermuda chub is an unremarkable specimen. It's grey, about 40-cm-long and shaped like a football ... not exactly the darling of the snorkel-and-flippers set.

But at this moment, the lowly Bermuda chub has my full and undivided attention. That's because several dozen of them are swarming all around me as I float face-down above the coral reef. And they're hungry.

First, I feel couple of nips on my fingers and hands, followed by exploratory bites on my left shoulder and right elbow. Suddenly realizing I could be bitten in more sensitive areas, I panic, thrusting my begoggled head out of the water and thrashing my arms and legs wildly to disperse the ravening hordes.

With this, my guide Roger surfaces, pulls the snorkel from his mouth and begins to chuckle. He's the one who attracted the chubs in the first place, having emptied a bag of baitfish in the water so I could watch the feeding frenzy. He had warned me to keep my extremities at my side, but I ignored him, holding out my camera in a futile attempt to capture the carnage.

The baitfish gone and my nerves soothed, we resume our exploration of the reef. We glide past multicoloured clusters of parrotfish, clownfish and grouper, through purple fans of coral and above the pulsating tentacles of sea anemones. Roger points out a lobster hiding under a rock, a stingray buried in the sand and a small barracuda, which I foolishly chase after, more worried about getting a photo than another, nastier bite.

A narrow, 60-m-long strip of coral off the coast of Honduras, Roatan has some of the best diving and snorkeling in the world. At Anthony's Key Resort, where I'm staying, dive boats load up every morning and afternoon with serious-looking men and women clad in wetsuits and lugging oxygen tanks. When the boats return, the divers are all grinning broadly, taking turns describing their encounters with various denizens of the deep.

For those, like me, who aren't scuba certified, the resort offers plenty of other activities. In addition to snorkelling, guests can go kayaking, horseback riding or check out the Roatan Institute for Marine Sciences. Another must-see attraction are the resort's dolphins, which put on daily shows and are available for swims with adventurous guests.

One of the highlights of my stay at Anthony's Key comes on my third night, when all the guests gather for a beach barbecue. After scarfing down platefuls of ribs and two-for-one beers, we place our bets and cheer lustily during the crab race. After dark, we watch in



Looking toward the key from the viewing deck at Anthony's Key Resort in Sandy Bay, Roatan, Honduras. (Stephen Ripley, Sun Media)

amazement as resort staff dance with flaming torches to the driving beat of bongo drums.

The next day, nursing a hangover and wanting to explore, I hire a gold-toothed cabbie named Tex to give me a tour around the island. Putting away a bucket and scrub brush, he apologizes for the fish smell coming from the trunk of his car and we head off.

Holding our noses, we pass first through West End, a crowded little town on the beach, filled with gift shops, small bars and gringos in Hawaiian shirts. It's more of the same in Coxen Hole, the island's capital and largest city, which caters to the cruise ship crowd. As we leave town, Tex points out the "Coxen Hole" sign and says the last Canadians he had in his cab found it to be uproariously funny and insisted on having their pictures taken beside it.

After passing the rusted-out hulks of two ships which ran aground three decades ago, we continue on to Sherman's Arch iguana farm. It's not really a farm, Tex tells me, just that rare place on Roatan where the lizards aren't hunted for food. As a result, hundreds of iguanas converge on the sanctuary whenever it's feeding time, slowly crawling in comfort without fear of hungry islanders with machetes.

The place is a lizard-phobe's worst nightmare, with reptiles of all shapes and sizes covering the ground as I gingerly walk through them, trying not to step on their tails. The biggest are more than two metres long -- half of that tail -- with huge fringes around their faces or big spikes running the length of their bodies.

As with the Bermuda chub, I have nothing to fear from the vegetarian lizards. But that knowledge doesn't stop me from jumping when I feel a sharp pain in the back of my calf as I bend down to feed them. I whirl around to see Tex behind me, grinning and holding a car key in his right hand.

Very funny. I wonder if Roger told him how much fun it is to play pranks on jumpy Canadians.

IF YOU GO

- San Pedro Sula is the ideal jumping-off point for trips to Roatan or Copan. American Airlines has two flights daily, connecting out of Miami International. Visit aa.com.

- The official currency in Honduras is the lempira, but most businesses in tourist areas, including Copan and Roatan, also take the U.S. dollar. The exchange rate is about 16 lempiras to one loonie.

- English is the main language on Roatan, which was once in British hands. On the mainland, everyone speaks Spanish.

- Nondescript lagers dominate the Honduras beer market. Port Royal, Salva Vida, Barena and Imperial aren't memorable, but they definitely hit the spot after a day of hiking or snorkelling.