

AUTUMN 2022

# DEPARTURES

THE  
TRAVEL  
ISSUE



## Where the Heart Is

*Lizzette Kattan Pozzi* recalls a lifetime of technicolour memories spent on the magical island of Roatán, a far-flung Caribbean paradise sixty-five kilometres off the coast of Honduras.

**“THE BEST WAY** to observe a fish,” French filmmaker and oceanographer Jacques-Yves Cousteau once said, “is to become a fish.” This is how I feel when I visit Roatán. My connection to this pristine little island, off the northern coast of Honduras, began in the 1970s but remains embedded in my soul. Even all these decades later.

I fell in love with the 64km-long, eight-kilometre-wide island aboard a tiny DC3. From above, I witnessed the beautiful way in which Roatán interlinks with its environment. Forming part of the three Bay Islands, together with Guanaja and Utila, it is complemented by smaller islands that include Barbareta, Morat, St Helena, plus 53 cays. Together, they form a small enclave along the world’s second-largest barrier reef. Like puzzle pieces, everything seamlessly fits together.

At the time, I was editor-in-chief of *Harper’s Bazaar Italia* and living in Milan. I had travelled the world but had never visited Roatán in my native Honduras. Before landing, the plane was forced to skim the dirt runway not once, but twice, in order to shoo away the chickens and dogs who had parked there and refused to leave. On the side of the jet’s aisle, I noticed a woman holding a loudly clucking live chicken on her lap. I turned to my then-boyfriend, now husband, Costantino, and smiled.

In the midst of the sleepy fishing village in which we had landed, I saw a lush tropical exotic landscape, the water a million different shades of aqua, stretches upon stretches of empty beaches and reefs. Although I had never visited before, I felt like I had come home. Even before we drove off the single dirt road circling the island, Costantino and I inhaled the salty air and knew that we had to establish roots in this tucked-away gem.

From then on, Costantino’s crisp white linen suits would stay packed in his suitcase. Instead, we lived in bathing suits, idling by the beach ready to go

## What to Do

Navigate the wildlife-rife mangroves of the island's pretty east end aboard a local *cayuco*, a small canoe, and stop for a seafood lunch at Hole in the Wall, a legendary island haunt.

Visit The Buccaneer in French Harbour, a heritage-steeped institution offering a turtle-education centre, coffee tasting and an eye-opening museum dedicated to the history of the Bay Islands. [thebuccaneerroatan.com](http://thebuccaneerroatan.com)

At The Beach Club San Simon at the Mayan Princess Resort, indulge in a poolside lunch of seafood gazpacho, lobster carpaccio or fried tacos washed down by ingenious cocktail creations. [mayanprincess.com](http://mayanprincess.com)

Spend a convivial evening downing ice-bold brews and cocktails as you rub elbows with the expat crowd at Sundowner bar and restaurant (and internet cafe!) on Half Moon Bay. [roatanonline.com/sundowner](http://roatanonline.com/sundowner)

where the breeze took us – including diving, the ultimate reward in this lush landscape. We could stick our bare faces in the water, no mask required, and be surrounded by hundreds of fish. Vibrant dancing rainbows of coral life: giant groupers, whale sharks, eagle rays, fireworms, seahorses, several eels and even the welcome sight of dolphins. I would later learn that this wonderful biodiversity was fiercely protected by the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve.

Since our first visit, Costantino and I have returned to “the Reef”, as it is called by locals, nearly every year. The name suits the island well because Roatán is surrounded by the Mesoamerican Reef, the largest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere that extends from Mexico to the Honduran Bay Islands. Like us, Jacques-Yves Cousteau discovered the allure in Roatán's crystal-clear waters. His son, Jean-Michel Cousteau, an ocean explorer, conservationist and filmmaker, was also smitten by the wonders of Roatán. He visits often, and has set up a camp for students to study ocean preservation here.

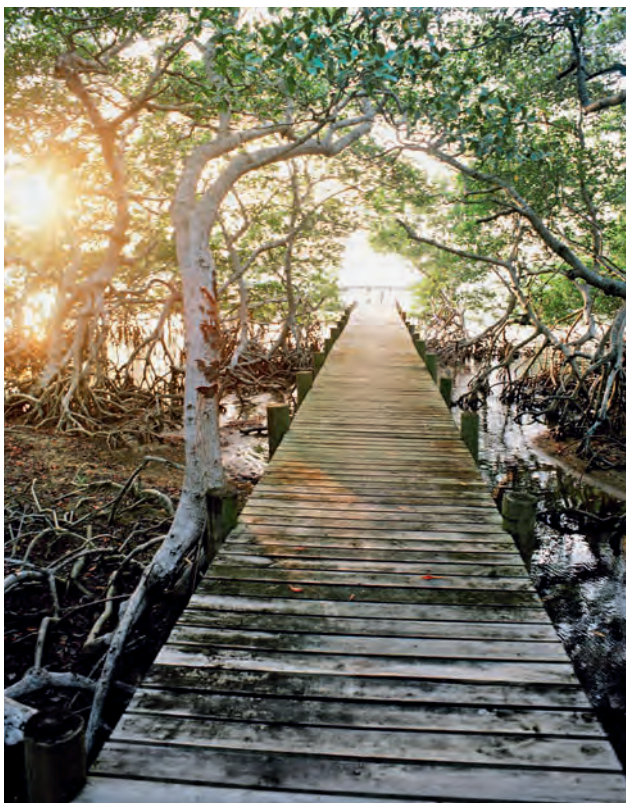
Granted, some things have changed since our first visit. The solitary dirt road encircling the island has been replaced with a paved thoroughfare that crosses from west to east. The cars, which could once only be



identifiable by make, now bear licence plates. And yet Roatán remains a serene oasis. There are still no traffic lights, no big restaurant or business chains, no monolith hotels. What a privilege it has been to watch this island grow and evolve, year by year, in its own patient way.

It is important for visitors to remind themselves that they are no longer in the city: island life calls for a mental shift. Things here happen at their own pace. If you're looking for something in a store, and it's not there, no worries: *mañana*. Just not today. And while “ROA”, as the locals have dubbed it, has now drawn an international community of visitors, it has still managed to keep its laid-back vibe. Michael Douglas and his wife, Catherine Zeta-Jones have been spotted at Eldon's, the island's only supermarket, which is also a popular meet-up location for residents. Julio Iglesias, Christopher Lambert, Bill Gates, Richard Gere and Paul Allen have visited, too. Roger Moore, a man who had travelled everywhere, said he had never taken more photos anywhere than he did in Roatán.

Still, I am mostly inspired by the people who form the beating heart of this enchanted isle: the Garifunas, the descendants of an Afro-indigenous population. Their





From left: San Simon Beach Club in West Bay; lionfish are part of Roatán's colourful aquatic menagerie; opposite: a boardwalk stretches across the mangroves of Gibson Bight in northern Roatán

story is one of endurance. Although their people were once forced into slavery, their culture perseveres despite their journeys from island to island. Today, a sense of heritage and culture remains strong among the island's communities. Then there are the Caracols, local people of Hispanic and English heritage, and the expats, visitors-turned-residents from all over the world who decided this is the place they wanted to grow roots in. Together, these divergent cultures are a melting pot of varied experiences, beautifully intertwined, matched and woven together.

That being said, there's no doubt that Roatán is changing, with homes, restaurants, resorts and other developments popping up all over the island. This includes two family-owned hotels: Ibagari and the Grand Roatán, the latter of which launched an island-first with its wellness-focused retreat, comprising four luxury spa suites that are fully dedicated to wellness.

I remain in awe of Sunday mass in Punta Gorda, where the local Garifunas convene to pray in their colourful handmade garb. I marvel at the brave souls from around the globe who hold their breath for up to four minutes without a mask or apparatus during the annual freediving event.

I delight in witnessing my own sons, Ronald and Charles, fall in love with the island as much as I have. We've made it our tradition that, every year in August, we invite friends to join us for a week of island magic.

A short boat ride from Roatán is Cayos Cochinos, a perfectly preserved Marine Protected Area, managed by the Honduran Coral Reef Foundation. Named one of the top 10 destinations to visit around the world, it forms an archipelago of 13 cays of coral origin and two volcanic islands. It is inhabited by Garifuna communities, who are so welcoming to visitors and make them feel right at home. The islands are also home to the pink boa constrictor – it is found nowhere else in the world other than here!

Back on Roatán, life continues without pretence. A perfect day involves a jaunt to West Bay Beach or the more remote Camp Bay, where there is usually not another soul in sight. We read, watch the birds, catch fish for dinner and gaze at the sunset with a glass of white wine. Roatán certainly has that "je ne sais quoi". It's more of a feeling, just like when you sip an icy cold Salva Vida, the beer for which Honduras is famous, and feast on refried beans and tostones. And you realise you have all you need.

## Where to Stay

### IBAGARI BOUTIQUE HOTEL

A family-run property abutting West Bay Beach with crisp, white rooms and suites, the seaview Luna Muna restaurant and bucolic swimming hole shaded by hulking tropical trees. [ibagarihotel.com](http://ibagarihotel.com)

### GRAND ROATÁN CARIBBEAN RESORT

Perched less than 30 metres from the aquamarine waters off West Bay Beach, this retreat offers 48 contemporary suites, a concept spa and stellar comfort food at the Iron Shore Grill. [grandroatanresort.com](http://grandroatanresort.com)

### BAREFOOT CAY

A collection of five villas and five lofts – each with unbeatable ocean vistas – with its own private marina, PADI 5 Star dive centre and romantic poolside eatery. [barefootcay.com](http://barefootcay.com)