

An aerial photograph of a tropical island. The island is surrounded by clear, turquoise water. In the center of the island is a large, dark blue lagoon. A small white boat is visible in the lagoon. The island's terrain is a mix of brown and green, suggesting a mix of land and vegetation. The overall scene is serene and beautiful.

THE OTHER CARIBBEAN

A Norwegian expedition cruise line takes adventurous travellers to explore a very different Caribbean, far from the madding crowds and trinket shops of the popular tourist hotspots. Dan and Zora Avila capture the beauty of the islands.

Think of cruising the Caribbean and the mind conjures up images of lazy days by the pool aboard giant, floating hotels and classic island visits following the well-worn paths of millions of tourists taking an effortless wander from one relaxing bar to another.

There are, however, other options for those with an adventurous spirit that want to take a path less travelled to truly explore hidden treasures that the more multicultural and lesser-known Caribbean islands have to offer.

Hurtigruten, an innovative Norwegian expedition operator, is now offering an authentic, small-ship Central American experience, with equal parts adventure and discovery, suited to those that want to explore and experience the Caribbean's natural and historical wonders.

When it comes to nature and history, the islands of the Caribbean are, quite literally, a treasure trove. The legends of pirates past are still celebrated today, with tiny islands rumoured to hold the hidden spoils of battle. Stepping back further in time, ancient Mayan cities inspire awe, and although long since abandoned, pure-blood Mayan descendants are scattered in regional pockets today.

That's the unique advantage of expedition cruising on ships with fewer than 150 guests. A typical shore visit does not involve a wander through a trinkets market; more like a 90-minute speed-boat trip, snaking through the Belizean jungle to a remote Mayan city that was once home to 30,000 people. All this without a fast-food restaurant or souvenir shop in sight.

Our Caribbean journey with Hurtigruten covers no less than seven countries in 14 days – boarding in Costa Rica and voyaging through Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras,

Belize and Mexico – each exemplifying the contemporary aspects of modern Caribbean life with deference to the traditions of old.

Arriving at Big Corn Island, part of Nicaragua, the colours of the silky calm seas, powder-white sand and tropical vegetation resemble a movie set. Aside from the hundred or so guests that make the shore visit, there are essentially no tourists. The vibe on the island is calm, friendly and relaxed.

Having the day to explore the island, we grab snorkelling gear, a simple island map and our cameras and head towards the township. A few minutes later, we've hired an electric golf cart for US\$20 or so and are hightailing it around the island, checking in with locals for the best snorkelling spots.

The sense of freedom to individually explore is one of the most appealing aspects of small-ship expeditions. With a few secret tips from locals, we are soon snorkelling through dense corals teeming with fish. We depart with the last rays of sunset and arrive in a new country to witness dawn the next day.

Isla de Providencia is larger than Big Corn, but with a single town centre surrounded by villages, mountains and beaches, it doesn't take long to lose ourselves in another incredible setting.

We skip a mountain hike and opt to circumnavigate the island in a rental buggy, stopping where we please for scenic drinks or photos. Parts of Providencia have an almost Greek island feel with small houses and boatsheds constructed along a pristine coast. We are the last to leave the island, squeezing every minute from the trip.

One of the final destinations before reaching our disembarkation point in Miami is beautiful Belize. Our speedboat ride amid steamy jungle waterways only slows to pause for photo opportunities with birdlife, howler monkeys, a three-toed sloth and crocodiles.

The further we venture into the jungle, the heavier the humidity hangs in the air until we reach the ancient Mayan city of Lamanai. Its scale is incredible and matched only by the precision architecture and artisanal stonework, which contrast starkly against the backdrop of bloodshed and sacrifice that



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permeated all aspects of this culture. With limited time remaining at the site, we run up the largest pyramid to take in a commanding view above the forest.

Off the coast, the Belize Blue Hole is a drawcard for global ocean lovers. With a cruisy team of Belizean professional guides, we step off a local skiff into the otherworldly geological marvel which is one of world's largest sinkholes, surrounded by an ornate fringing reef.

The marine life is as spectacular as the pastel colours and pristine condition of the coral. The Blue Hole appears like an entrance to the underworld, but it was a reef shark lurking in the shallows that caught my attention. So perfectly suited to its environment and unaffected by our presence, the shark went about its business, and even complete novices felt nothing but awe at another extraordinary expedition moment.

It is true that expedition cruising is not for everyone, but you don't need to be a hardcore adventurer to take advantage of everything this journey has to offer. Just have an adventurous spirit and an inquisitive mindset. ♦

TOP TIPS

- Have US currency handy. Credit cards are not commonly accepted and everyone loves the greenback.
- The sandflies can be diabolical. Be serious about insect repellent and sun protection.
- Be prepared to get hot and sweaty at times. The best experiences take a bit of effort, but the payoff is well worth it.
- Pack comfortably and informally. Forget the dinner jacket and bring practical clothes, shoes and accessories.



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01 The world-famous Blue Hole © Dietmar Denger
02 Fishing boats at Big Corn Island 03 Pristine beaches
04 The Lamanai ruins 05 A Hurtigruten expedition ship.
06 The perfect islands of Cayos Cochinos. Images 02-06
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