

top spots to snorkel

Underwater photographer and adventurer
Tanya Burnett-Palmer shares her favorite
places to sightsee beneath the waves

WRITER & PHOTOGRAPHER **TANYA G. BURNETT-PALMER**

1 DEAN'S BLUE HOLE, LONG ISLAND, BAHAMAS

A blue hole is created when the ceiling to an ancient cave system collapses in the ocean—Dean's is thought to be the world's deepest. Fin your way off the powder-white beach and watch the sand go from 5 to more than 600 feet deep in just a few kicks.

On-site secret: I found I could circumnavigate the entire blue hole by swimming along the cliff base and sandy shoals. On a light-wind day, it's easy to snorkel the protective reef near the mouth of the small bay.

Keep an eye out for: jacks, tarpon, turtles, the occasional dolphin or porpoise—almost anything can wander in. Small reef fish stay in the shallows.

When to go: all year; 242/338-0011 or reeldivers.com. >

2 BUCK ISLAND, ST. CROIX, USVI

An underwater trail makes navigating the tropical fish and young elkhorn coral easy. What rounds out a trip to this national park so nicely for me is a visit to Turtle Beach on Buck Island's west end. A nap under a palm tree here, poised between emerald forest and aquamarine seas, will enhance your definition of paradise.

On-site secret: If you're still honing your snorkeling skills, seek out the operators sanctioned by the park; they're quick with instruction and help.

Keep an eye out for: the three species of sea turtles that call the park a nesting area.

When to go: all year, but check for wind speed—the waters can get choppy. Summer offers fewer crowds; gotostcroix.com/buck_island.php.

3 CRYSTAL RIVER, FLORIDA

The best place in the country to experience the gentle West Indian manatee is in the springs and protected estuary of this coastal hamlet. Guides will gladly help you with manatee etiquette; for instance, gentle contact is allowed, but only if initiated by the manatee.

On-site secret: Swim slowly and stay calm and you may

Buck Island, St. Croix, USVI



Go blue! To help protect marine life in snorkeling spots like these and do your part to keep America's beaches beautiful, sign up for the Ocean Conservancy's 24th annual International Coastal Cleanup. For more information, go to coastalcleanup.org.

enjoy a manatee encounter for 15 minutes or more.

Keep an eye out for: a whiskery face nuzzle, a flipper hug, and a full-body rub. Though the manatee defines your interaction, they can be very sociable.

When to go: all year. In winter there are more manatees, but in summer there are fewer crowds; 800/291-3483 or americanprodive.com.

4 ROCKHOUSE, NEGRIL, JAMAICA

The Rockhouse resort sits far from the bustle of Montego Bay on the rocky shores of Negril. Each bungalow is just steps from the water that laps languidly at the base of the

cliffs. Being here is like diving into your personal aquarium populated by species usually found only on offshore reefs.

On-site secret: Book a bungalow close to the restaurant for the most direct access to the best snorkeling. The grottos are absolutely magical.

Keep an eye out for: huge schools of silversides and such wonders as the snake eel—a nonthreatening beauty.

When to go: anytime year-round for usually calm, protected waters; 876/957-4373 or rockhousehotel.com.

5 PIGEON CAY, HONDURAS

This postcard-perfect uninhabited island is a 45-minute boat ride from Roatán but feels a world away from everything. When I pulled up to the long spit of sand extending from the dense green of the island's interior, I knew I was someplace extraordinary. Only one little girl and her mother were on the beach; otherwise, the island, with its calm waters and birds chattering in the trees, was ours. The 360-degree loop of sand beckons for a low-tide stroll.

On-site secret: Have the boat driver take a return route by

Oak Ridge, a charming Honduran fishing village.

Keep an eye out for: juvenile reef fish and fantastic elkhorn coral in the sparkling waters.

When to go: year-round, but summer offers the calmest conditions; 011/504/413-2229 or subwaywatersports.com.

6 GRAND CAYMAN

Stingray City, situated on a shallow sand bank off Grand Cayman Island, may be the most popular snorkel site in the world. It's spectacular fun to be mobbed by a gregarious flock of soaring Southern stingrays in water clear as air.

On-site secret: Every snorkel operator runs trips to Stingray City, but check the cruise ship schedules to avoid the crowds.

Keep an eye out for: the stingray's unusual "vacuum cleaner" mouth. Stingrays are soft and slippery, but their mouths have the suction of a Shop-Vac, and in their excitement I have received the occasional stingray hickey. Don't worry—it's a harmless souvenir that goes away in a day or two.

When to go: spring and summer for the calmest conditions; stingraycitytrips.com. >



Pigeon Cay, Honduras



7 HOL CHAN MARINE RESERVE, BELIZE

One of the western Caribbean's great delights resides roughly 20 minutes by boat from Ambergris Cay. On my first visit, I was mesmerized by dozens of nurse sharks, jacks, stingrays, and grunts cavorting with snorkelers over turtle grass and reefs. Here, I have swum with the most substantial wild fish—normally only seen by scuba divers—in only 6 to 10 feet of water.

On-site secret: Float from the feeding area to the shallow reefs and discover a dreamlike setting of sun-dappled coral and tiny reef denizens.

Keep an eye out for: eagle rays. On more than one occasion I've been thrilled to see a majestic spotted eagle ray soaring through the reefs.

When to go: all year, but

check cruise ship schedules to avoid the busiest times; holchanbelize.org.

8 BIMINI ISLANDS, BAHAMAS

I love the half-hour flight from Fort Lauderdale to this little island, where the water's dramatic change from cobalt to preternatural aqua signals your arrival to one of the friendliest wild dolphin habitats in the world. After a short boat ride out of the harbor, you just might be snorkeling with 20 Atlantic spotted dolphins on shallow banks—unforgettable!

On-site secret: The more you can spin, flip, and dive like a dolphin, the more the dolphins will play with you.

Keep an eye out for: young dolphins, which may be quite small and have few or no spots. Adults are more speckled.

When to go: year-round, but summer offers warm conditions and calmer seas; 800/348-4644 or biminiundersea.com.

9 LOVER'S COVE, CATALINA ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

The most popular snorkel spot off Catalina, this protected area sports kelp forest, rock reef, and a menagerie of cool-water inhabitants. Guides and operators can help you in by boat, or try heading out on your own from the Pebbly Beach access stairs; just don't forget your flag marker.

On-site secret: A lot of the fish here are used to being fed and aren't shy. Wear gloves if you're bringing peas or bread for them, as their enthusiasm leads to finger nibbling—more of a nuisance than a danger.

Keep an eye out for: sea stars, eels, anemones, octopuses, and, most notably, the brilliant orange Garibaldi fish. If you are comfortable diving down

10 to 15 feet, you'll find many small crustaceans and beautiful nudibranches.

When to go: summer, when water temperatures warm to the low 70s; 877/766-7535 or catalinadiveshop.com.

10 PAPALAUA WAYSIDE PARK, MAUI, HAWAII

This laid-back beach is a long sliver of sand off Honoapiilani Highway. That makes for a little road noise but means easier access than some of Maui's other snorkeling spots. Idyllic sunsets cast light on surfers along Papalaua's west shore.

On-site secret: For primo snorkeling, visit Coral Gardens, at the park's eastern end.

Keep an eye out for: shallow corals, butterfly fish, and green turtles. With luck, you'll spot *humuhumunukunuuapuaa*, dynamic Hawaiian triggerfish.

When to go: year-round, with light winds in the mornings; mauibeachguide.com. 🌴



DIVE IN: TANYA'S TIPS FOR BEGINNER SNORKELERS

- **Go to a local dive shop** to get fitted properly for comfortable gear, instead of just wearing what's provided.
- **Invest in a neoprene mask strap.** Most masks come with a silicone strap, but neoprene versions easily adjust to fit your head—and won't tangle hair!
- **Pick up some mask-defogging spray**, available at any dive supply store. Smear a little inside the mask lens, then rinse it gently right before you put on your mask.
- **Take lessons.** You'll learn easy techniques for blasting air through a snorkel or clearing your mask

without taking it off. Practice breathing with the snorkel and keeping your face in the water so you're more prepared when you hit the open sea.

- **Always snorkel with a buddy.** It's not only safer but also way more fun, and it helps to have another set of eyes scoping out the reef and pointing out stuff you might miss.
- **Rinse gear in freshwater** after your excursion. Never let your gear sit in a hot car in the sun. Store it in a mesh bag, and cover with a towel if exposed to the sun when not in use.

For information about Tanya's dive tours, visit islandexposure.us.