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Trip Report: Virtual Wayfarer snorkels Hol Chan and Shark Ray Alley



Hol Chan Marine Reserve & Shark Ray Alley Snorkeling

The morning had been delightful. My nap had been enjoyable and now it was time to get to work. Eager to finally have a chance to see the reef and go for a swim I quickly booked the trip, tried on my fins and snorkel and then made my way down to the boat.

The captain and guide quickly appeared, jumped in the boat, introduced himself and then we were off. As luck had it the trip only had a total of 3 people booked on it and after a brief detour down the coast to pick up the other two we were skipping across the surf towards the reef.

As we made our way towards the reef and Hol Chan Marine Reserve I quickly got acquainted with the other two people on the trip – Mannie and Catherine. We shared the usual details, made sure we had sunscreen on, and then set to putting on our gear – just as we arrived at the Hol Chan Reserve.

The Hol Chan Marine Reserve is part of the Belize Barrier Reef, which in turn is part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System. The Mesoamerican reef is the 2nd largest barrier reef in the world. Second only to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. The Belize Barrier Reef itself is home to more than 100 species of coral and a wealth of marine species. The Hol Chan or “little channel” in Mayan is a break in the reef that serves as a major gathering point for marine life.



Hol Chan Marine Reserve & Shark Ray Alley Snorkeling

As we jumped into the shallow water we kept in mind the requests our guide had made – don't touch the coral. Don't chase sea turtles and above all don't stand on the reef. Before long we were snorkeling along as our guide pointed out various interesting fish popping his head above the water just long enough to call out the name of the animal or coral we were looking at. It was incredible. The fish were relatively tame and prolific. The coral was vibrant and diverse and the water was crystal clear and as warm as bath water.

As we snorkeled along we encountered hundreds of fish, a nurse shark and even a small sea turtle...and then as quickly as it had begun it was back into the boat and off to the next destination.

As we hooked the anchor rope and tied up to the buoy we quickly realized that a greeting party was already eagerly waiting for us. Our hosts? A group some 10 or so nurse sharks ranging between some 4 and 6 feet in length. As we pulled on our snorkeling gear and paused for a quick photo or two our guide chuckled at our slight anxiety encouraging us to jump in and join our surprisingly gentle hosts. Eager to oblige I paused just long enough to snap this photo before slipping over the side...careful to make sure I didn't land on one of the sharks.

It was an exhilarating experience. Despite the knowledge that nurse sharks are largely harmless, and that these were basically pets – it was still enough to get my heart racing. I was doing it – one of my main goals for the trip: to swim with sharks. It was every bit as enjoyable as I had hoped. The sharks were gorgeous, friendly and at times nearly within reach.

I quickly realized that the sharks had a system. Drawn by the sound of the boat's engines they'd approach, spend several minutes circling and waiting for chump or bits of food used to bait them in by guides, and then as the food supply dried up or failed to appear would move on to the next boat to arrive.

The sharks were anything but alone though! Our guide pointed out boundaries for us and then set us free to wander at will. As I snorkeled along enjoying the reef, vibrant colors of the reef fish and incredible mixture of large schools of fish, small solo fish and large predatory fish I could not help but smile. No small task since the smile inevitably broke the seal on my snorkel and flooded my mouth with saltwater.

Large schools of large yellow tailed jacks and permit followed the Shark's lead as they schooled in the shade the boats created. All the while I dove, barrel rolled and floated along the barrier reef. Truly, it is a must see stop along any trip through Belize.

Tired, thirsty and with pruning hands we made our way back to the boat and prepared for the quick (albeit windy) ride back to San Pedro. As the sun slipped away and the evening settled in I paused briefly on the dock to reflect. Enjoying the sunset and letting the richness of the experiences i'd enjoyed over the last 24 hours sink in. Truly, it had been an incredible day. Source: [Virtual Wayfarer](#)

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1. [Alex Berger](#) says:
[01/18/2010 at 3:32 pm](#)

A beautiful part of the world! Thanks for reading and the re-post =)

2. [info](#) says:
[01/18/2010 at 4:32 pm](#)

you are very welcome, thanks for writing such an interesting trip report



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