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Swimming With the Fishes

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Some of my favorite vacations have been in tropical locations where I can relax on the beach but also enjoy adventures in the water. For my money, the best aquatic activity of all is snorkeling, which combines a front-seat view of wildlife with swimming.


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Scuba diving in Fiji. (Stephen Frink / Science Faction/Getty Images)

Some of my favorite vacations have been in tropical locations where I can relax on the beach but also enjoy adventures in the water. For my money, the best aquatic activity of all is snorkeling, which combines a front-seat view of wildlife with swimming. It's perfect for people like me, who aren't PADI certified for scuba and who prefer the liberation of swimming near the surface to the claustrophobia of the depths. There's no better way to explore coral reefs and commune with a variety of fish and other wildlife.

I was a little spoiled by my first snorkeling experience, which happened to be in the sport's ultimate location: Australia's Great Barrier Reef. While staying at the Hayman Island Resort (\$1,179 a night for a lagoon suite king) in the Whitsunday Islands of Queensland, I took a chartered day trip out to explore the reef. I was excited to see all the exotic marine life and catch my first glimpse of coral. But I was also nervous; I remember walking cautiously backward into the water, fidgeting with my goggles and breathing apparatus, quite certain I wouldn't be coordinated enough to work the equipment properly while taking in the incredible underwater scenery. It turned out to be easier than learning how to ride a bike. After a few minutes of flopping around in the water and adjusting to the apparatus attached to my face, I relaxed, immersed my head underwater, and gasped in disbelief. The colors of some of the fish were far more vibrant and varied than I'd imagined. I glimpsed parrotfish, various mollusks, clams,



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clown fish, toadfish, and, of course, plenty of green, turquoise-, and beige-colored coral. I loved the solitude of the experience, and after that trip I was hooked. I couldn't wait to go on another snorkeling adventure.

There are plenty of people like me out there. Typically, snorkelers head to many of the same destinations that scuba divers frequent, since that's where the best marine life resides. In addition to Australia, prime destinations include Fiji, Hawaii, the Seychelles, and the Maldives. The Caribbean also has some of the most popular sites in Belize and Utila, Honduras, as well as in the waters off the Cayman Islands. One of the best ways to plan a snorkeling holiday is to pick a resort that offers plenty of half-day and full-day snorkeling trips—complete with high-quality snorkels, masks, and flippers—to various sites rich in coral life and teeming with an abundance of exotic fish, sharks, and even dolphins.

That's just what I did when I traveled to Ambergris Caye, Belize, three years after my Great Barrier Reef excursion. In addition to being located next to the world's second-largest coral reef, the Belize Barrier Reef, the island is also famous for inspiring Madonna's hit '80s song "La Isla Bonita." I stayed at Banana Beach Resort (\$465 a night for a deluxe oceanfront suite) and immediately signed up for a snorkeling trip at the hotel's on-site travel store, Monkey Business (\$40 for a half day of snorkeling Hol Chan and Shark Ray Alley). At first I was anxious about hopping on to the most highly recommended trip: snorkeling with nurse sharks in Shark Ray Alley. It was my assumption that anything with the name "shark" in it couldn't be too safe, but the guides assured me that the animals were tame, and the trip was an absolute must for anyone visiting Belize. So against my better judgment, I decided to go for it. I was still feeling a little shaky as I lowered myself off the side of the boat into the water, but one woman on my trip was already in the water swimming close to two nurse sharks, and she didn't seem the least bit scared. The guides, of course, hadn't lied; the nurse sharks were relatively benign and none of the half dozen or so I encountered while in the water made any move to attack me. I was able to check out some beautiful gold and orange coral, too, which rivaled some of what I had seen in Australia.

While in Barbados, relaxing on the gold coast of St. Peter Parish at Almond Beach Village (\$800 per night for superior deluxe ocean-view room) I once again enrolled in a snorkeling trip. At this resort, snorkeling is complimentary for most hotel guests paying standard resort rates. This time my goal wasn't so much to check out the coral and brightly colored fish—after all, I'd done that before—but to snorkel with turtles, a popular option for tourists visiting Barbados. At one time, leatherback and hawksbill turtles were endangered because of overfishing, but now they are protected by Barbados and their population has been slowly growing. While in the water, I found that the turtles seemed very gentle and comfortable around me and the other snorkelers. When a teenager from another boat starting pulling on the back legs of one of the turtles, his guide yelled at him to stop, explaining that it had taken many years for the turtles to regain their trust in humans and that kind of behavior would set back the relationship. I didn't try to pet the turtles—I was content enough to watch them swim nearby—but several of them nonchalantly brushed up against me, tickling my legs as they swam past.

I can't wait to dive in again. My next snorkeling trip will most likely be Sharm al-Sheikh on the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. The Red Sea is one of the best places in the world to partake in my favorite water sport. But then again, I've always wanted to check out the Maldives.

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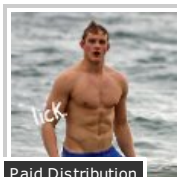
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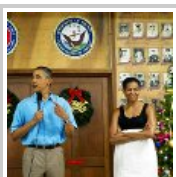
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