

## 14 TRAVEL

# Beautiful Belize



Rick Waghorn and his family enjoy a jungle paradise in Belize.

It is a question that has obviously been asked a thousand times — so much so that some bright spark has actually turned it into a clothing label.

Indeed, the wife even bought a hat with the question embroidered on as we waited to catch the water taxi to San Pedro. “Where the hell is Belize?”, it read.

Courtesy of 12 unforgettable days as the guests of one-time Norwich Union-worker-turned Premiership striker Andy Hunt and his partner, ex-MTV star Simone Angel, at their Jungle Dome home, I now know the answer to that all-too familiar inquiry.

Belize is a little corner of paradise, not that far from holiday heaven.

It is also roughly the size of Wales and sits, in what must be a slightly uncomfortable squash, in between Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west. To the east lies the shimmering, sky blue seas of the Caribbean.

If in doubt, grab the nearest soldier. For though Belize gained its full independence from Britain in 1981, colonial ties between the UK and what was British Honduras remain very strong.

English is still the first language, while the British Army still maintains a permanent base in the country complete with SAS-types

passing on jungle warfare secrets to generation after generation of sun-burned squaddies.

It was a detachment from the Green Howards passing round the sun cream on our water taxi to the out-lying islands; a column of their dusty Land Rovers heading for a spot of rum-laden R&R in Belize City as we headed inland from the airport at the start of our big family adventure.

The first challenge is, however, actually getting there. There are currently no direct flights out of the UK into Belize.

The preferred route is via either Miami or Houston in the United States after which it is a simple two-and-a-bit hour flight down across the Gulf Of Mexico with teenage American back-

packers and sun-dried Californian hippies for company. We opted for Houston, Texas, and a two-night stop-over at the Derek Hotel. Funnily enough, it happened to be little more than a block away from the biggest and brightest shopping centre in Houston, the Galleria. Given the strength of the pound to the US dollar — and, for that matter, the linked Belizean dollar — it was time to invest in a third suitcase and even if the Texas branches of Saks Fifth Avenue and Tiffany’s were still a little beyond our reach, it was time to fill your boots clothes-wise. Cowboy boots, of course.

One final tip for anyone who opts to stay at the Derek — try the hotel restaurant, the Bistro Moderne. The food is superb; the service impeccable. And being all nouveau and French, the portions are tiny.

Tiny by Texan standards; spot-on by English. We actually cleared

our plates. A first for Houston. And so on to Belize. Part of the whole Jungle Dome joy is the level of personal service and attention Andy, Simone and their staff offer each and every guest. In part, that comes from the fact that their family adventure centre remains a relatively small operation with just three family rooms gathered around a stunning swimming pool; in part, it comes from the warm and welcoming nature of the individuals themselves.

Put it this way, within two hours of his arrival, the Evening News’ football writer finds himself enjoying a kick-about in the setting Central American sun with a six-foot plus ex-Charlton Athletic star — who actually smashed home a hat-trick for the Addicks on his last visit to Carrow Road — and the rest of his five-foot something Mayan Indian cowboy team-mates. Three days later and we were all jumping on to the back of the team’s pick-up truck for the trip to the neighbouring town of San Ignacio, where Banana Bank — named after the equestrian resort that surrounds the Jungle Dome — were duly beating their hosts 4-3 on a parched, dust bowl of a pitch. Andy Hunt scored a hat-trick.

Had I been at work, it would have been Arsenal away that particular weekend and the chance to watch Thierry Henry rip Norwich apart. Instead it was San Ignacio versus Banana Bank, half an hour from the

