

Ambergris Cay, Belize

CARIBBEAN FISH OUTSIDE YOUR FRONT DOOR

WHY AMBERGRIS? The sandy streets of San Pedro, the affordable properties available a few flip-flop steps away from the beach, and an exuberant expat community earned this Central American island a place on our list. It's pretty easy to move here, too, since immigration policies are friendly, the locals speak English and it takes about two hours to reach Belize from Florida. Once there, life on Ambergris Cay entails lazing the days away on star-white beaches, spending afternoons snorkeling the world's second-largest barrier reef and enjoying nights at beachfront barbecues with newfound friends.

LIFE OF AN EXPAT "I just knew I needed to get somewhere with palm trees on a permanent basis. I knew that doing so would open up my life in ways I could not imagine," says Laurie Norton, who left Toronto, Canada, for Ambergris Cay in 2006. Laurie, age 40, and husband Paul Jewitt, 34, first traveled to the island on a three-week vacation. "We both fell in love with Ambergris Cay on that first visit and decided to make the move a permanent one," she says. But after the couple returned to Toronto, two years went by and they still hadn't made the move. "Finally, I came to the realization that we just needed to go ahead with it," says Laurie. "So we set a date and booked our tickets, making the dream a reality."

Two years later, full-time Ambergris Cay residents Laurie and Paul have only been back to Canada once. "From the moment we stepped off the plane, it felt like we were home," says Laurie, an Internet consultant. "The first thing we did was change into our swimsuits and jump in the Caribbean Sea." Laurie's zest for the island's tropical environment hasn't waned. "There is nothing like looking out your windows and seeing tropical plants and being able to have your door open year-round to catch a breeze," she says. She also loves the island's sense of community. "I often say living here is like living on Sesame Street. Something as simple as going to the store to buy milk can take you on a

journey of meeting someone you know, getting side-tracked in a good way."

Laurie gives back to Ambergris Cay's close-knit community by volunteering at the Holy Cross Anglican Primary School, where she sits on the advisory board and writes a school blog. Laurie also created a site called *tacogirlblog* to share her life on the island. "As my blog has grown, I've heard from many people who have been here," says Laurie. "They tell me that my blog is their lifeline to San Pedro. Each day they enjoy a little piece of island life until they can come back themselves." But Laurie doesn't think others should just live this life vicariously. "If you have a dream to be somewhere special," she says, "why wait till you retire?"

FACTS OF LIFE • **Climate:** Tropical • **Population of island:** 15,000 • **Percentage expats:** 12 percent • **Population of main town, San Pedro Town:** 10,445 • **House starting price:** \$60,000 • **Travel from U.S.:** Fly into Belize City; then a 20-minute flight or a 1.5-hour ferry • **Closest hospital:** San Pedro Town • **Price of local beer:** A bottle of Belikin costs \$2. • **Languages:** English, Spanish, Creole • **Ease of immigration:** Easy, especially through the Retired Persons Incentive Program • **Ease of buying a home:** Easy • travelbelize.com



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PURCHASING PARADISE

☞ Sunny three-bedroom house 1.5 miles from San Pedro: \$89,000.

☞ Large two-bedroom home; French doors onto an ocean-view veranda: \$285,000.

☞ Eight-bedroom beachfront mansion with Jacuzzi, freshwater pool and private dock: \$2.9 million.