

Christmas in Belize | Trip Report

December 19-27, 2021 | by Peg Abbott

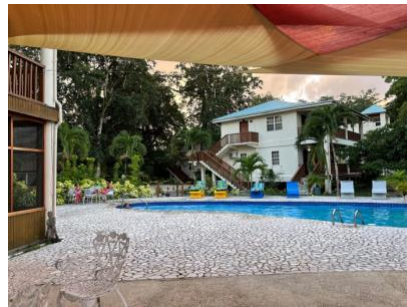
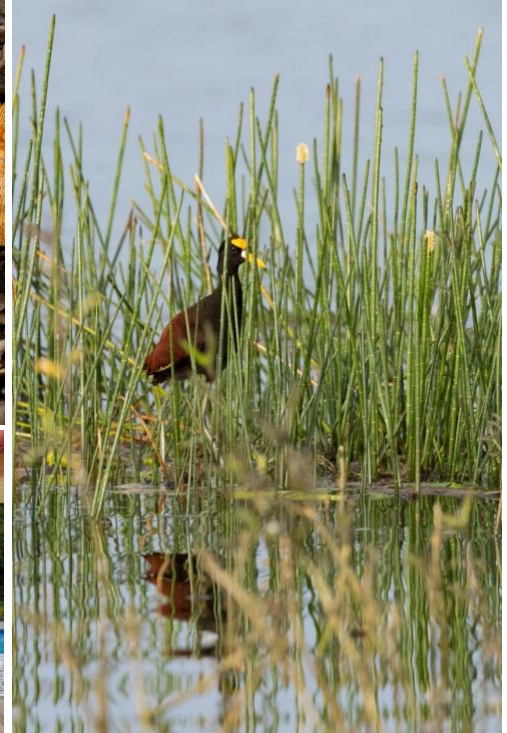


With local guides Ruben Arevalo (Lamanai) and Steve Choco (Lodge at Big Falls), Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys and participants: Beth, Clare, David, Linda, and Margaret, Pat, and Toni.



Early Arrivals

Hooray for a tropical welcome! David, Toni and Pat arrived first, coming in to spend several nights early and a full day on the water with a local tour company, swimming and snorkeling while Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans flew overhead. They had fun visiting the local fish market and brought some of their sample home to add to the dinner fare, enjoying some interaction with the chef at Black Orchid. Peg came in a day later and joined them for drinks and dinner, time to catch up and celebrate just getting away. Peg spent her added day on a photo jaunt to Crooked Tree Lagoon, while the three enjoyed shopping and exploring Belize City with a visit to the well-regarded Belize Zoo where they could see a Tapir, a King Vulture and other species up close while learning from local signage of a Caribbean flair. Black Orchid is not far from the airport which makes a good place to rest up from travels. It also has some nice birding on the grounds and a most personable and helpful staff.



Sun., Dec. 19

Arrival in Belize | Black Orchid

David and Peg met for early morning birding at 6:15 by the river shore and their efforts were rewarded with a veritable bird explosion. There was a fruiting tree hanging over the river, visible from the platform ramada. Social Flycatchers were joined by Blue-gray Tanager, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, and a very tame Gartered Trogon that seemed to pose for photos. A sneaky Lesson's Motmot came in, and two Masked Tityra. American Redstart and Magnolia Warbler joined the bunch, so it was a good start to the day. The rest of the group gathered from various arrivals today, some already at Black Orchid and others coming in on two different flights. They were met at the airport and our timing was right to be able to enjoy the first Belizean wine festival hosted today right on the resort property. There were two wine vendors that had a mix of grape and other fruit wines that we could sample, along with cheese and sausages. We got to mingle with some locals and that was fun, to talk about schools and their elections and cycles of rain and dry times. We gathered by the pool and had a view of the river. At 4PM Peg did a circle around the property with those that wanted to bird, and we found some good species to kick off our week, Red-lore Parrot, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Golden-fronted Woodpecker and Great Kiskadee.

We had a welcome dinner, minus one as Linda was sadly delayed in Charlotte, but by the level of laughter and fun from the start it was settled that we'd have a good week to come. This was Beth's first official bird trip, and for her and our veterans of multiple tours, it was with great JOY that we were here and ready to experience nature and whatever lay ahead.



Mon., Dec. 20

Crooked Tree Lagoon | River Boat Trip to Lamanai Outpost Lodge | Birding the Lodge Grounds

This was our earliest morning of the week, we met at oh-dark-thirty (complete with suitcases) and headed about an hour north to the boat launch at Bird's Eye Resort to meet Michael our local guide, and Rubin of Lamanai Lodge, our guide at that location for subsequent days. The lodge had rest rooms and had coffee and muffins set out for us, so we were set to begin! It was a beautiful tropical morning, with a fresh breeze and reflections of light over the reeds and water plants of the lagoon. As Peg had been here just the day before and we had these two local experts, we were primed to find a lot of species. Indeed, we logged over 80 species on this morning cruise! Peg had warned everyone the bird sightings would come fast and furiously and they did. Wood Stork, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Anhinga, White Ibis, Snail Kite, Limpkin, Osprey, Great Black Hawk flashed before us - front, back and center! There were also enormous Green Iguanas and a few massive Morelet's Crocodiles. The rattle call of Ringed Kingfisher rang out constantly and smaller Belted Kingfisher hovered at several bends and turns. Green Kingfisher started to appear as we entered the Spanish Creek portion of the route. Here among root and vine tangles we spotted Gray-necked Wood-Rail, a stunning Agami Heron, and several Boat-billed Heron among the numerous Black-crowned Night-Herons. It was just a magical start to the trip. As we returned to the dock, a Vermilion Flycatcher was on the lawn to greet us. And we did not go hungry – as Ruben had brought us some breakfast egg burritos and these were delicious. Ruben had come out by boat from Lamanai (his home base) this morning to meet us, and was ready then to take us back in. By bus we repositioned to the Lamanai dock, then headed up the New River, adding several species to our already abundant list. He found a roosting Lesser Nighthawk we could photograph, and we enjoyed seeing two Purple Gallinule feeding in floating vegetation. Reaching the lodge by water, we passed the Lamanai archeological site from which we could hear loud rumbles of Central American Mantled Howler Monkey. So much to see and take in. This was going to be fun! We had lunch, settled into our cabins and then took a short walk around the property to find some birds made more beautiful by the lovely afternoon light. Barred Antshrike, Yellow-winged Tanager, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Bat Falcon were among the star species of our walk.

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Tues., Dec. 21 Lamanai Archeological Site | Solstice Spotlight Safari

The Lamanai Archeological site is always impressive and there are more aspects of the culture to learn with each visit. As David pointed out to us, this is one of the only cultures known to have spanned a time frame of over two thousand years. He's studied the Mayan culture but learned something new today when Ruben described use of mica to amplify the astronomical points of some of the structures. Its existence here in the lowlands was evidence of an intricate trade structure between Belize, Guatemala and Mexico, the latter countries having highlands and resources not attainable locally.

We wandered the full loop trail of the site, stopping at various temples for descriptions and learning and birding in between. We found Red-throated Ant-tanager, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Wood Thrush, numerous warblers and a host of other species, including several warblers. Almost all the group climbed to the High Temple for an aerial view. We enjoyed exhibits, maps and timelines in the Visitor Center. Ruben had just the right style of interpretation, in-depth, with insight and fresh research – he'd studied this culture, but he'd also grown up here, as a child they played on the ruins and went to school nearby. That the Maya have a rich living culture today is obvious at Indian Creek Village and at Lamanai. We returned for lunch and a siesta, then met about 3PM to walk a trail that goes by an old sugar mill and some Spanish churches. Ruben again combined history and birding and near the ruins of the Sugar Mill where during his talk two Mayan Antthrush walked ahead of us on a trail – a hard species to get good views of and we certainly felt satisfied with ours. We also found some of the smaller forest birds that require a trained ear and good eye and had fun with a Black-headed Trogon. We met in the bar to do our bird list and enjoy margaritas and other drinks. Dinner was delicious regional cuisine. We enjoyed fresh greens ahead and a scrumptious dessert following.

Could we fit one more thing in on this shortest day of the year! It seemed like a fitting night to be out on the water, so once we finished our dinner, we gathered down at the dock to glide across the New River Lagoon into Dawson Creek and smaller channels. We got fabulous looks at what became Pat's favorite bird of the trip, Northern Potoo. We had two different individuals, both perched up on dead snags protruding from marsh grasses. The second one sallied out to catch insects and returned several times, wow! We saw sleeping kingfishers (Green and Ringed) and several sleeping herons. Along the main channel we stopped to check out



some possible night-herons and instead came up with a sleeping Great Curassow. A big female, this was a fabulous spotting by Christian our Lamanai boat driver and guide tonight. It was great to see as it lifted its fancy head feathers above the leaves to peer out at us. Beth then convinced us of her mimicry talent with bird calls as she had quite a spirited conversation with a Mottled Owl. We have no idea what they discussed, but it was not enough to bring it out, but it was lively and responsive (better than our sound recordings) and we clapped in applause for her skills. Birding with a group lends so many dimensions and its fun!

Wed., Dec 22. Rice Trail Loop | Indian Church Village | Sunset Cruise

We woke early to the sound of a Plain Chachalacas making a racket, enjoyed coffee, tea and muffins and headed out for a loop walk, about 1.5 miles in total through varied habitat. It was a birding bonanza! We headed down to the dock, then past the generator clearing through some open habitat and then dipped into the forest.

While still in the open we scored several warbler species and Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Barred Antshrike and, new for the trip, White-bellied Emerald. While still in secondary growth with lots of tangles we came onto a mixed flock but Ruben's enthusiasm over one species dominated our focus – Gray-collared Becard, a female of which we got outstanding views. Rounding a corner into thicker forest, we found Smoky-brown Woodpecker, quiet but steadily feeding among shaded vines. With luck it came into the open and we got good views and photographs. Not long after a second woodpecker sought after came into view, a Golden-olive, nice! Several huge Guanacaste trees had birds of note, including Red-legged Honeycreeper and Greenish Elaenia. There was a good mix of trees and the wide path let us walk with ease. We made our way around to a small canal of water, and across it we found a flock of warblers including a Golden-winged, such a beauty. We found Rose-throated Becard, Orchard Oriole, and on a pink-flowering acacia a Northern Parula in good light. In all we saw over 70 species, quite something for a few hours' walk!

Breakfast called and we picked up our pace, a White-necked Puffbird commanded a stop for several until Ruben declared we just had to go! We returned to bacon and eggs and good coffee, and several commented "we could get used to this life!" The ambiance of Lamanai was so gracious, we were greeted each time we returned from



an outing as friends and the wait staff enjoyed hearing about our sightings. Other guests paused to check in and compare notes. At 9:30 AM, having already had a wonderful start to the day we gathered to walk over the village. Ruben described his childhood here, and the role of his mother as a community mid-wife, as a lead into the medicinal plants we would find walking the half mile to the village behind the lodge. We tasted several plants, learned about various remedies, and caught sight of some excellent birds as well. A Gartered Trogon posed as if a model for us, three or four times landing from a hunting sally and then perching for a while. Brown Jay, a Roadside Hawk, Red-lored Parrots and other species caught our attention as we walked to the woman's cooperative where we were due to a cooking lesson (great fun!) and lunch. Our teachers, Daisy and Sophia, were patient and fun, and well-prepared. We made our own tortillas from scratch, literally grinding the corn, shaping them, and carrying them over to cook on a hot comal over the fire. We then made tamales and wrapped our creations with pride in local banana leaves. These we would taste with our dinner later and they were truly fabulous! It was an easy, relaxed exchange and we were rewarded with a delicious lunch of a chicken soup, empanadas and some bean tostadas. After a nice rest we gathered at the dock at four pm for a boat ride trolling birds of the grassy banks of the lagoon and sunset, all with libations. The birding "booze cruise" was just right after our bird-rich and very full day. We picked up a few new species including Yellow-headed Parrot and Laughing Gull. David recited some poems for us, one a love song to Belize that was sweet, indeed with such nice hospitality and all the great birds we were feeling the love! We met in the cozy bar area for our checklist and then enjoyed dinner, a stuffed chicken with vegetables followed by a soursop cheesecake.

Thurs., Dec. 23 Lamanai Savanna | Charter Flight to Punta Gorda

Ruben got us out early so we could beat the heat, but it turns out a cold front arrived, and it was just 60 degrees as we started up Dawson Creek. The mist was thick and out of it flew Neotropic Cormorants, Little Blue Herons and Ringed Kingfisher. It was magical watching the morning unfold. We pulled up to a shoreline trail and headed into open landscape, perched on sandy soil unladen by clay, a savanna, dotted with palmettos and pine. We could hear parrots calling, White-fronted and Red-lored, and we got a few in the scope. Overall, the birding due to this cold front was quiet; we tried to lure in a distant singing Botteri's Sparrow to no avail. We did find Yellow-bellied



Elaenia, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Pale-vented Pigeon. Coming back to the boats, we found a group of birds working a flowering mimosa, including quite a trio of color with Baltimore, Yellow-backed and Black-cowled Orioles. A male Vermilion Flycatcher put on quite a show. Manuel spotted a Yucatan Woodpecker, and we heard a distant Lineated. We returned for a lovely breakfast, frittatas backed in individual ramekins, and then had time to pack. As we gathered for lunch, a little bird party arrived, with Boat-billed Flycatcher, White-collared Manakin being new for our time here thus far. Yellow-winged and Blue-gray Tanagers fed on small fruits, and Brown Jay came in loud and boisterous. As this was a short trip over the Christmas holiday, Peg splurged on a charter flight for our small group.

The Tropic Air pilot was perfectly on time and in no short order we loaded our gear and lifted off into the sky. David had asked if he would fly over the ruins, and he did, making a wide circle from which we could see the Jaguar temple poking out of intense lush jungle. We then passed over extensive wetlands, reminiscent of the Okavango Delta of Botswana (minus the elephants). We flew between the coast and mountains, looking over the aqua and turquoise reef to our left, and on our right the Maya Mountains, rugged vegetated mountains. Clare was co-pilot and called out to us updates on the landscape from the pilot, pointing out the highest mountain of the country, impressive spires at the back of the range. The flight was 50 minutes, and it went quickly. It was awesome to get a birds-eye view and on a travel day, with the charter we had no security to pass through or luggage limits, we just lifted off into the air. Guide Steve Choco was there to meet us with a big smile, and we did a few errands while in town (bank ATM and grocery) and then headed out. We paused to scope the Front Street dock, where Royal, Sandwich and Forster's Tern lounged with Herring and Laughing Gulls.

Fri., Dec. 24 Dump Rice Fields | Traditional Luminarias

Waking up at the Lodge at Big Falls we have birding right out our doors, including a fruit feeder in front of the lodge. We gathered on the porch for coffee with Steven calling out species. With the open lawn rimmed by huge trees we could catch views as various species crossed the opening – nice! Today, Brown Jay were hogging the morning fruit offering with determination to hold on to their find. We spent the morning on the lodge grounds and trails, running into an army ant swarm on the road on the way in, but they were traveling rather than



intently feeding so while there was some interest from the birds it did not provide an explosion. Some of the morning walk species highlights included Squirrel Cuckoo, Collared Aracari, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, good views of the tiny Stub-tailed Spadebill and a very pretty Hooded Warbler up by the cabins. Lunch was at a local restaurant, some of the best home-cooked Caribbean food possible. We had rice and beans, chicken, plantains, cooked vegetables and topped it off with ice-cream. Yum! After lunch we ventured on to two spots, the famous Dump Rice Fields and Piedra Lagoon. While the Dump Rice Fields are alongside a very busy highway, they do host some amazing birds. Where a tiny opening cut through the reeds, Steve got us to see an elusive species, two Ruddy Crakes, wow! We watched Yellow-headed Vulture course over the open expanse and had good views of a Short-tailed Hawk. By request, we had some post-lunch local shopping, tis the holiday season! Steven talked to a woman that makes weavings and various jewelry and bags and we made a stop en route back to the Lodge for some treasures. Gathering for the afternoon birding we could see that our crew from New Mexico had been busy – they brought over 50 bags and candles for traditional luminarias. They looked so gorgeous on the pathway and steps up to the thatched-roof lodge, it was magical. David and Toni went into town with Carlos for the local midnight mass, the rest of us enjoyed conversation and a tropical night on the porch in view of the lovely luminarias' glow. Margaret shared a book of drawings she had done to prepare for the tour, lovely watercolors of her list of hoped-for species, quite a treasure. Clare's photo library was growing daily, hopefully an inspiration for further post tour artwork.

Sat., Dec 25

Nim Li Punit Mayan Ruins | Birding on a laid-back Christmas Day

Merry Christmas! We woke to the first rain of the trip, but it was a steady rain, the kind that makes the rainforest green and we did not mind it. What a lovely way to spend a Christmas day, birding, enjoying each other's company and eating some nice meals. We left early to be at Nim Li Punit, a Mayan archeological site of sacred significance, evidenced by 27 stellae, several intricately carved, found there. We walked among the plazas, the ballcourt, and a plaza and temple known to be oriented to the shortest and longest days of the year, marked by stellae. Excavation of the tomb of a ruler from here, held a stunning find, a pure jade chest plate decorated with carvings and holes to hang it from the neck. This is a later Mayan site than Lamanai, quite small and intimate. Birding was also excellent here, though a bit dampened by rain as it cleared birds came out to sun themselves. American Redstart, Northern Parula, and Magnolia, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers were easy to



find. We had a high-flying whiz-by Keel-billed Toucan, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper and cracking views of an Orange-billed Sparrow. Clare spotted a perched White-bellied Emerald, nice to be able to scope it. Beth trained her big lens on some of the overarching trees as Steve called out bird after bird.

A young man set up a vendor stand across from the Visitor Center and we enjoyed both views from the porch and his wares – some lovely carved wooden bowls and intricately woven baskets, some of the best quality we'd seen. His effort to come out on Christmas paid off as several were in the mood to find a few treasures. Linda got a nice basket and had a big smile as she interacted with seller and his wares. We came back to a nice breakfast and took a break for people to touch base with loved ones back home or simply wander the garden to take in its beauty. Another cup of coffee on the porch with birds in view seemed just right.

We then headed out to Blue Creek, a lovely walk from a village of that name to the south and west of the lodge. The creek is a stunning aqua color when sunlit, in shade a deep jade green. It was crystal clear and along the route we found White-whiskered Puffbird, Slaty-tailed and Collared Trogon and both White-crowned and Brown-hooded Parrots. A dock by some old cabins that had been used by a university group at one time for studies was our lunch spot and the turn around. We relaxed here and both David and Beth took a swim. We laughed that Beth was not going to get out, she was having so much fun in the water, communing with the local fish, swimming up the little waterfall and just enjoying the beauty of floating in a tropical realm. The rest of us dangled our feet in, looked at birds and plants (some beautiful mushrooms and ferns in the dense woods here) before we walked back. Driving home the sunlight on the rice fields was just golden light, views of the Maya mountains capped our day. After time to freshen up a full Christmas dinner was waiting for us, turkey and all the trimmings! The staff of the Lodge at Big Falls had simply outdone themselves. Delicious potatoes, stuffing and even cranberry sauce. Ahead of this we sampled appetizers of conch fritters and liver pate with our drinks. We all felt regally spoiled!



Sun., Dec. 26

Punta Gorda | Tunich Ha Reserve | Ixtapec Chocolatiers

Steve was anxious to show us a new property where he'd been working with the owners to welcome birders onto the property. It turned out to be the perfect spot for us this day as we woke to rain, and the forecast was for it to continue much of the morning. But as breakfast was at the reserve, we headed down towards Punta Gorda and as there were two covered porches with ample room for us all we never missed a beat. Right out of the van there were birds calling, two Gray-headed Tanagers checking out some army ants did not reveal further activity, but we found a Black-headed Trogon, quite a few migrant wood warblers, and Least, Yellow-olive and Brown-crested Flycatchers.

From the second story porch we could look down on the garden and across to vines and trees, and we found White-eyed Vireo, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Long-tailed Hermit, and both Yellow-crowned and Olive-backed Euphonias. Toni was very happy that she could watch the euphonias from a hammock – quite a luxury of the tropics! David was quick to spot Red-capped Manakin, the female put on a good show, but the male was more elusive, with some work we got repeated glimpses. White-collared Manakin was feeding on small fruits and both male and female came out in the open for stellar views. In the background Gray Catbird and Yellow-breasted Chat could be found. In between bouts of birding Nick and Jennifer and their family made us a scrumptious breakfast, complete with Belizean hot chocolate and good coffee. There was plentiful fresh fruit, homemade tortillas, beans, eggs, plantains boiled in a fruit sauce that were just delicious, callaloo and meats. It was pretty and nutritious and once fortified we walked out into some open country to check on a few specialties out there. These included Plain-breasted Ground Dove and Green-backed Sparrow among the quite numerous Variable Seedeater and Blue-black Grassquit. We watched several Indigo Buntings investigate downed limbs of a fallen tree and then were delighted when Margaret called out Black-crowned Tityra – a male and female feeding in the same tree as a Masked Tityra. Rain chased us back in before we found all we had hoped to but all in all it was a great day, and our photographers enjoyed some close-up time with colorful species.



From Nick and Jennifer's Tunich Ha Reserve we made our way to Blue Creek, turning down several roads in search of Keel-billed Toucan. Normally common, so far, we'd had quick fly overs and no time to gawk at this tropical icon. We had to settle for an active group of Montezuma Oropendola and two Bat Falcon as our key finds. Our next stop was Ixtaptec Chocolatiers where we were scheduled not just for lunch but for a chocolate tasting. Driving in Steve excitedly called out "White Hawk" and we all scrambled out to get good views. It was distant but making circles against lush green hillsides so we could see it quite well. Eventually it caught a thermal and went skyward, leaving us with all smiles for witnessing this tropical beauty. We learned the process of chocolate making in depth and will forever appreciate all that goes into good chocolate. We watched the beans being ground into a paste, finer and finer, as heat from the friction of grinding brought out the natural oils. We tasted the raw 100% cacao, then 90% with nibs, then a variety of 80%'s with flavoring – 13 kinds in total, mace, ginger, cardamom, chile, sea-salt, orange and more. We even had a chocolate liqueur ahead of a walk out into the cocoa trees to learn about varieties. David led the pack, buying many chocolate bars, but Pat was not far behind, and Toni scored a beautiful pair of Mayan-inspired earrings.

Satiated, we headed our way back to Big Falls and the Lodge. The light was just lovely on the lawn and arching large trees. A Gartered Trogon came in for a visit, as did Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Brown Jay and Clay-colored Thrush. Rob was tending the barbecue as we gathered for drinks and the bird checklist on the patio. We were over 200 species now and still finding new species daily. Steven heard a Black-and-white Owl and hopped up with his powerful spotlight. There it was! This is a big owl, striking in plumage and we got fabulous views right there from the lawn. A super grand finale. At dinner, we toasted the chance to get away, the fun we had had together, and a special toast to David and Toni who had played Santa Claus and brought the luminarias and treats for us all.

Mon., Dec. 27 Departures

It was time to use the Christmas gift Peg had brought down from Naturalist Journeys – a set of packing cubes for each traveler. In went those chocolate bars and various items, making our packing more organized than normal



and fun. Steve was there on the porch to greet us for coffee, ready to find a few new birds. Several Agouti scampered across the lawn to get out of our way. We walked the garden perimeter and added sightings of Great Antshrike and Golden-hooded Tanager, plus better views of Rufous-capped Spinetail and Slaty-headed Tody-flycatcher. The Long-billed Gnatwren stayed high but called often, and the Plain Chachalacas and Brown Jays created their normal morning cacophony. We had our breakfast, settled accounts, and were on our way to Punta Gorda, adding in a bit of birding time upon arrival, adding House Sparrow and House Wren, and watching a Common Black Hawk perch just across the runway. Our third sighting of Spot-breasted Oriole was made as we passed through town, this species in on the increase and a beautiful addition to the tropical species found here. We checked readily into our flights in Belize City and had several hours to spare, so why not fill it at an eBird hotspot site where organic fresh shrimp are on the menu for lunch! Off to Captain Hook's it was. This stop is getting to be a tradition. Water was high in the shrimp ponds, so we did not find shorebirds as we had in March, but we did spot a Blue-winged Teal and a Lesser Scaup, our only northern wintering ducks of the trip. David had a big smile as he was able to get his lobster finally, indeed he ordered two. Shrimp tacos, fish tacos, and ice-cold beer, not a bad end to a festive journey. Until the next adventure!

Photo Credits: Great Egret (Peg Abbott - PA), Flower (PA), Coati (PA), Group Boating (PA), Green Iguanas Fighting (PA), Black Orchid River (PA), Lodge (PA), Northern Jacana (PA), River Boating! (PA), Pygmy Kingfisher (PA), Great Black Hawk (PA), Limpkin (PA), Guide (PA), Birding at the water (PA), Royal Flycatcher (PA), Group Birding (PA), Starting the day (PA), Bird Silhouettes (PA), Happy start (PA), Portrait (PA), Vermilion Flycatcher (PA), Relaxing on the water (PA), Smooth-billed Ani (PA), Barred Antshrike (PA), Charter Flight View (PA), Tropical Pewee (PA), King Vulture (PA), Flower (PA), Scenic (PA), Lodge (PA), Breakfast (PA), Morelet's Seedeater (PA), River (PA), White-collared Manakin (PA), White-eyed Vireo (PA), Least Flycatcher (PA), Gartered Trogon (PA), Montezuma Oropendola (PA), Bat Falcon (PA), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (PA), Lodge (PA)