

Top 5... OFF-THE-GRID ISLANDS

Nothing says "getaway" quite like these five island destinations.

BY PAUL RUBIO

1. MONTSERRAT

A 20-minute flight from Antigua's international airport, the sleepy Caribbean island of Montserrat has made a huge comeback since its devastating volcanic eruption in 1997. Turning tragedy into triumph, the Montserrat Development Corporation (MDC) is in the process of rebuilding the capital city on the island's northwest coast, luring investors to return to this lush, mountainous island formerly frequented by the rich and famous.

2. PEARL ISLANDS

Commencing 30 miles off the coast of Panama City, a love match between jungle and sea dazzles across the archipelago of the 200-plus sparsely inhabited Pearl Islands. Due to limited infrastructure, it's only possible to visit a handful of these natural treasures. Standouts include the 17-square-mile Isla San José and neighboring Isla Pedro González, which has been rechristened as Pearl Island and is the site of an in-progress luxury resort community.

3. AMBERGRIS CAYE

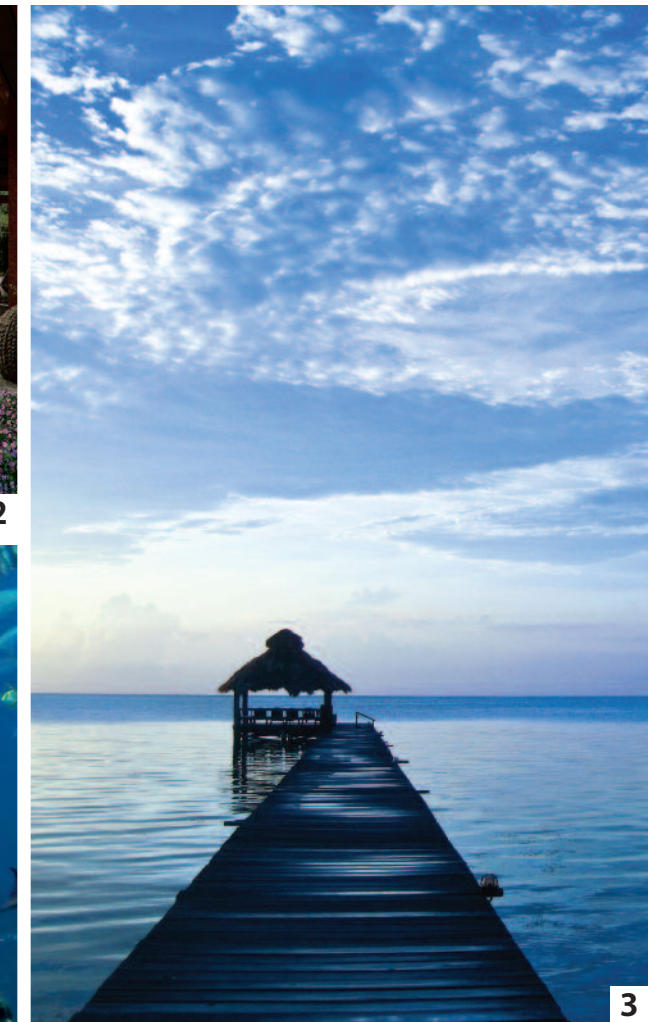
Belize's largest island may be off-the-grid for most, but it's no secret to divers in the know. This laid-back, palm-laced paradise, a mere 15-minute flight or 45-minute speedboat ride from Belize City, serves as the principal gateway to the second-largest barrier reef in the world, offering proximate access to renowned dive sites such as the Great Blue Hole and Shark Ray Alley.

4. SILHOUETTE ISLAND

In the heart of the Indian Ocean, Silhouette Island is one of 115 islands that comprise Seychelles, Africa's smallest nation. About 98 percent of this high-rising boulder-strewn granitic island (population: 135) is a nature reserve, which features a single resort, the Hilton Seychelles Labriz Resort & Spa. Though just 45 minutes by speedboat from Seychelles' capital island of Mahé, Silhouette feels oceans away from modern civilization.

5. HOLBOX ISLAND

About a 45-minute ferry ride off the northern tip of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, Holbox Island hosts the world's largest known congregation of whale sharks in the summer months and thriving populations of native pink flamingos year-round. Beyond nature, the island—completely void of cars and most other reminders of globalization—flourishes with a small boho-chic downtown, wide swathes of quiet beaches, mom-and-pop-run beachfront bungalows and colorful beach bars.



Clockwise from top left: the coast of Montserrat; a private resort on Pearl Island; early morning on Ambergris Caye, Belize; a beautiful beach at the Hilton Seychelles Labriz Resort and Spa; whale sharks off the coast of Holbox Island.

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