

# Cayo District



Welcome to the Wild West of Belize. Covered with jungle, woven with rivers and dotted with Maya sites, Cayo District is a magnet for hikers, bikers, birders, canoeists, kayakers, cavers and archaeologists. The lush environs of San Ignacio are peppered with Maya ruins, ranging from small, tree-covered hills to massive, magnificent temples. Connoisseurs of the pre-Columbian era will have a field day, roaming around unexcavated mounds, crawling into empty tombs and ascending the heights at Cahal Pech, Xunantunich and El Pilar.

The mother of all Belizean Maya sites is Caracol, the mighty empire that defeated Tikal. Caracol towers atop the Pine Mountain Ridge, a dense forest that blankets the mountains in southern Cayo. Getting to this remote site is an adventure in itself, especially when it entails stopping for a swim in one of the many pools or waterfalls that decorate the countryside. The Maya also left traces of their age-old rituals in caves all around the region. There is no adventure more thrilling than climbing, crawling, canoeing, tubing, swimming or scrambling through a dark cavern, only to come across artifacts and skeletons from rituals over 1000 years old.

Besides its ancient history, Cayo District is teeming with life in the here and now. Wander around the Belize Botanic Gardens or a butterfly house to see it up close and personal, or take your binoculars out into the wild to be amazed by the flora and fauna that flourish there. You can live it up in luxury in an exotic jungle lodge or pick a lower-priced place in San Ignacio, or even pitch your tent alongside the Macal River. No matter where you set up camp, you are sure to sleep well after a day of action and adventure in Cayo.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Discovering the artifacts from ancient Maya rituals deep in the darkest depths of **Actun Tunichil Muknal** (p191)
- Spotting a toucan twosome atop the High Temple at the Maya ruins at **Caracol** (p213)
- Floating in a river-tube along the **Mopan River** (p206) or through the caves of the **Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve** (p186)
- Witnessing the intersection of art and nature at **Poustinia Land Art Park** (p209)
- Exploring the jungle on horseback with guides and horses from **Mountain Equestrian Trails** (p193) or **Banana Bank Lodge** (p187)



■ POPULATION:  
62,000

■ MONTHLY RAINFALL:  
Jan 4.7in, Jun 9.1in

■ HIGHEST ELEVATION:  
3640ft

## History

In ancient Maya times, the Belize River valley was a key trade route between the Caribbean coast and cities such as Tikal and Naranjo. Cahal Pech (p196) on the outskirts of San Ignacio is the oldest site in the valley, settled between 1500 and 1000 BC. Both Cahal Pech and nearby Xunantunich reached their peak in the 7th and 8th centuries AD, in late Classic times. The more splendid Xunantunich (p205) probably controlled the valley during these final centuries of Classic Maya civilization. But the most important ancient city of western Belize – indeed of all Belize – lay 23 miles south of Xunantunich, up on the Vaca Plateau. This was Caracol (p213), which conquered the mighty Tikal in AD 562 and grew to a city of perhaps 150,000 people (far bigger than modern-day Belize City) in the succeeding century.

Classic Maya civilization ended abruptly in western Belize, as elsewhere, around AD 850–900, although Xunantunich remained occupied a little longer. When the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, the town of Tipu, now on the site of Negroman Farm south of San Ignacio (not open to visitors), was capital of the Postclassic Maya province of

Dzuluinicob. A Spanish expedition from the Yucatán in 1544 conquered Maya settlements as far inland as Tipu. But the Tipuans never really accepted Spanish political or religious control, rebelling several times and burning down their Catholic church in 1618. Tipu was the epicenter of a major rebellion beginning in 1638 that drove the Spanish out of most of Belize for good. The Spanish had the final victory over Tipu, however, returning to re baptize more than 600 people in 1680, and eventually resettling the Tipuans on Lago de Petén Itzá, near Flores (p272), Guatemala, in 1707.

Mahogany cutters moved up the Belize River into western Belize in the late 18th century, suffering attacks from Maya who were scattered in the forests. The town of San Ignacio (p195), near the confluence of the Macal and Mopan Rivers, was founded as a collecting point for mahogany and, later, chicle, which were floated downriver to the coast. Work in the mahogany camps was one reason people began to move into the area from Guatemala in the 19th century. River and mule remained Cayo District's only means of contact with the outside world until the Western Hwy was built in the 1930s.

## CAYO DISTRICT IN...

### Two Days

Stay in the best lodge or hotel you can afford and take your pick from the jungle activities on offer, such as birding, canoeing or horseback riding. Finish off with dinner at **Hannah's** (p200) or **Erva's** (p200). On your second day, visit one of the Maya sites – either **Xunantunich** (p205) or **Caracol** (p213).

### Four Days

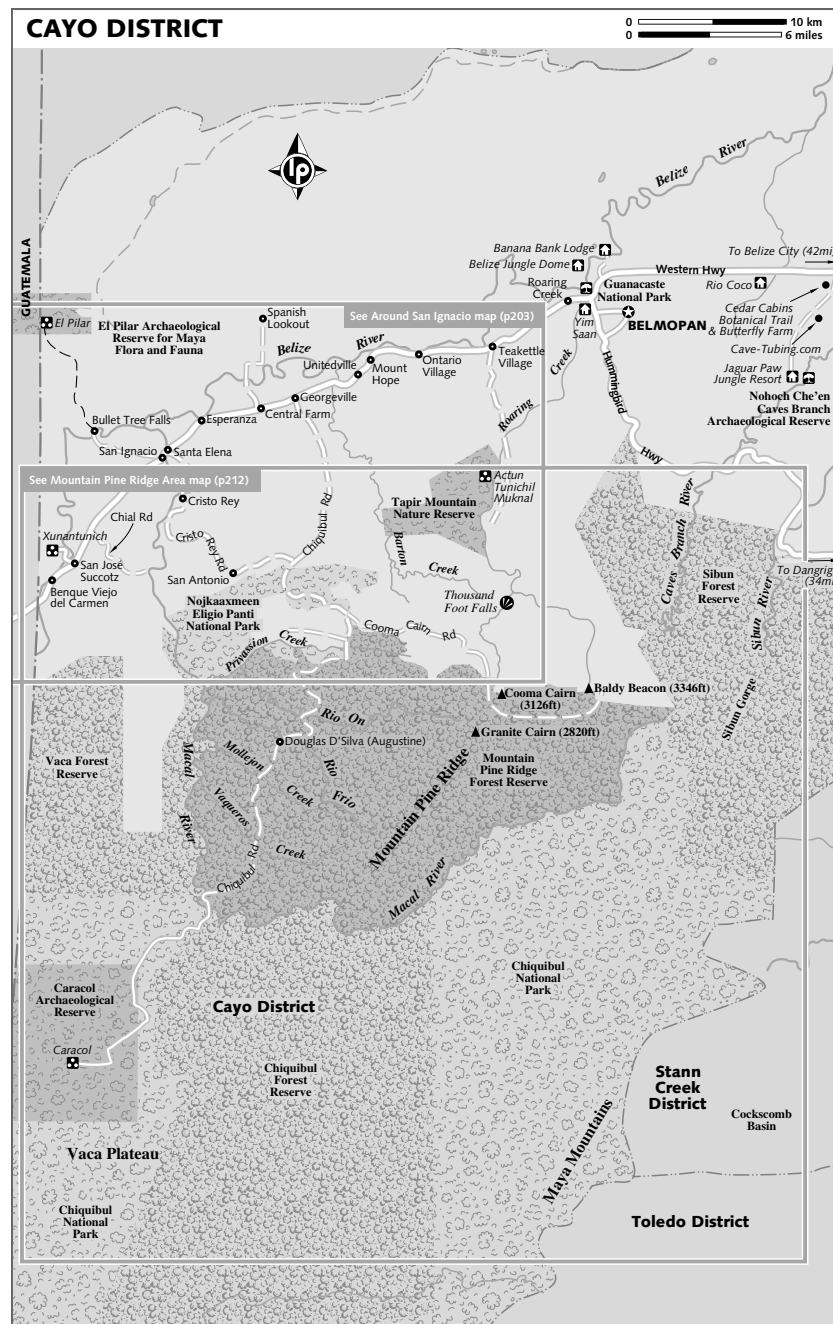
Follow the two-day itinerary, but spend an extra day engaging in the jungle activities of your choice. On your remaining day, explore the amazing ritual cave of **Actun Tunichil Muknal** (p191).

### One Week

If you have a week at your disposal, you can split your time between San Ignacio and a more remote jungle lodge, indulging in the best of the area's attractions. Follow all of the activities outlined in the four-day itinerary. In addition, you can wander around **Poustinia Land Art Park** (p209) and cave-tube at **Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve** (p186).

### Ten to 12 Days

Add further activities and attractions to the one-week itinerary, such as horseback riding at **Banana Bank Lodge** (p187) or canoeing through **Barton Creek Cave** (p193). Avid archaeology fans should visit **Cahal Pech** (p196) and **El Pilar** (p204), while nature lovers might prefer **Belize Botanic Gardens** (p207) or the Green Iguana Exhibit & Medicinal Trail (p198).



As the logging and chicle industries declined in the 20th century, Cayo turned to cattle ranching and agriculture, growing sorghum, fruit and vegetables. The selection of Belmopan (p188) as the site of the new national capital in 1971 gave the region a big push forward, and since the 1980s tourism has proved an increasingly important addition to the local economy.

### Getting There & Around

The Western Hwy is the region's artery, running across the country from Belize City through San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen and on to the Guatemalan border. The Hummingbird Hwy diverges southward 2 miles northwest of Belmopan. Buses run along the Western Hwy between Belize City and Benque Viejo del Carmen, stopping in Belmopan and San Ignacio. Bus travelers going between western and southern Belize need to change in Belmopan.

Unpaved or partially paved roads head off the main highway to villages, farms and remote lodges and attractions, the most important of these routes being Chiquibul Rd, which heads up and over the Mountain Pine Ridge, and Cristo Rey Rd, which links Chiquibul Rd directly with San Ignacio.

There are few bus services off the main highway. To access isolated lodges and attractions, if you don't have your own vehicle, you need to take tours from San Ignacio (or from the lodges themselves).

#### CRUISING FOR A BRUISING

Assuming you are not coming off a cruise yourself, you would be wise to avoid the Caves Branch Reserve and Jaguar Paw resort in the middle of the week. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are the days that cruise ship passengers descend on Belize by the boatload; many of them squeeze into river-tubes and harnesses, in the hope of getting some action. Hundreds of people get herded through the caves and along the zip-line on these days; worse, prices are higher due to the increase in demand.

Remember, these people have been eating at buffets all week long – you don't want to mess with them. Better to do your cave-tubing and zip-lining between Friday and Monday.

### BETWEEN BELIZE DISTRICT & BELMOPAN

West of the Belize District, the Western Hwy speeds along for about 50 miles on smooth, unbroken pavement. This is probably the country's most heavily trafficked road. It leads to the capital, of course, but even more significantly, it carries busloads of island-based tourists and cruise ship passengers to inland adventures such as cave-tubing, zip-lining and horseback riding.

About 11 miles east of Belmopan, a turn-off leads south to the Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve and the Jaguar Paw Jungle Resort, two perennially popular attractions. In 2007 this road was paved, making it a quick and easy drive from the coast and exponentially increasing the number of visitors to the region.

### Sights & Activities

#### BOTANICAL TRAIL & BUTTERFLY FARM

Less than a mile from the Western Hwy, an area formerly used for timber extraction is now the **Cedar Cabins Botanical Trail & Butterfly Farm** (☎ 821-5020; www.cedarcabinsbelize.com; Mile 47 Western Hwy). This recreation area – an excellent spot for families – features a 1-mile trail through the mahogany, chicle, yemeri and palm trees; bromeliads, ferns, orchids and other epiphytes are also abundant. The trail is also excellent for birding, with almost 30 different species in residence. Nearby, a 2000-sq-ft butterfly house is home to 25 different species, as well as a caterpillar growing area. Cedar Cabins also has a restaurant, gift shop and campsites on the grounds.

#### CAVE-TUBING

River-tubing is all the rage in Belize, and why not? What more pleasant way to spend a hot day than sitting inside an inflated river-tube and floating down a cool, calm river? How about floating down a river through a series of dark, mysterious caves?

The country's most popular cave-tubing site is the **Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve** (admission BZ\$10), east of Belmopan. Here, the Caves Branch River flows through five caves, taking tubers between the open air and cool caverns, and giving them an up-close view of stalactites, stalagmites, crystalline formations and artifacts from ancient Maya rituals. The extensive network allows for exploration of side passages, which sometimes

lead to other caves, such as the spectacular **Crystal Cave**.

Independent cave-tubing guides gather just inside the entrance to Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve. You can choose between the full five-cave float (BZ\$70 per person, two hours) or a shorter two- or three-cave venture (BZ\$50). Both involve a jungle walk to your starting point. Some guides also offer exhilarating night-tubing trips.

Prices include river-tubes, headlamps and life vests, but admission to the park must be paid separately. Bring your own swimming costume, tennis shoes and sun block, as well as a set of dry clothes to change into afterward. Beware: prices double on cruise-ship days (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday)!

More organized outfits that cater to cruise-ship traffic include the Jaguar Paw Jungle Resort (p188) and **Cave-Tubing.com** (☎ 222-5523, 605-1575; www.cave-tubing.com; per person BZ\$90). Tour companies in San Ignacio (p198) can also arrange this trip with transfers from San Ignacio for about BZ\$130.

To reach Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve, turn south off the Western Hwy, 11 miles east of Guanacaste National Park (look for the signs to Jaguar Paw Jungle Resort). Follow this road south for 6 miles until you come to the reserve's entrance.

#### ZIP-LINING

On the grounds at Jaguar Paw Jungle Resort (p188) is the **Zip-line Canopy Tour** (BZ\$110), where you zoom through the treetops from platform to platform on six linked cable runs up to 200ft long. Trained guides give you a safety briefing and help you into your harness. The tour takes about two hours, but on busy cruise-ship days, you'll be rushed through in less than an hour.

#### HORSEBACK RIDING

Belize's largest equestrian center is **Banana Bank Lodge** (☎ 820-2020; www.bananabank.com; Mile 47 Western Hwy; 2/4hr jungle tour BZ\$120/180), set on a jungle- and pasture-covered property of more than 6 sq miles. Banana Bank has over 100 well-tended horses enjoying an extensive grazing area and state-of-the-art stables. Besides miles of jungle and riverside trails, facilities include a round pen and a large arena for training and exercising the horses. Owner

John Carr has lived and worked with horses all his life, having grown up on a Montana ranch and worked as a rodeo rider and cattle-man before coming to Belize in the 1970s. See below for directions to Banana Bank.

#### GUANACASTE NATIONAL PARK

Belize's smallest national park is **Guanacaste National Park** (Map p185; admission BZ\$5; ☎ 8am-4:30pm), named for the giant guanacaste tree on its southwestern edge. Somehow, possibly thanks to the odd shape of its trunk, the tree survived the axes of canoe-makers and still rises majestically in its jungle habitat. Festooned with bromeliads, ferns and dozens of other varieties of plants, the great tree supports a whole ecosystem of its own.

The guanacaste (tubroos) tree is one of Central America's largest trees. Its light wood was used by the Maya to make dug-out canoes. The tree is identifiable by its wide, straight trunk and broad, flat seed pods that coil up into what looks like a giant, shriveled ear (you'll see fallen 'ears' on trails throughout Belize).

Perched at the junction of the Western and Hummingbird Hwys, this 250,000-sq-yd park is an excellent place to break a drive. At the confluence of Roaring Creek and the Belize River, the park contains 2 miles of hiking trails that will introduce you to the abundant local trees and colorful birds. Birding is best here in winter, when migrants arrive from North America. After your hike, you can head down to the river for a dip in the park's good, deep swimming hole.

#### Sleeping & Eating

**Rio Coco** (☎ 621-3328; www.rio-coco.com; Mile 45 Western Hwy; d BZ\$100; ☎) Although it's billed as a 'private resort,' this place is more like a private house, available for rental by the room or as a whole. La Casa Grande contains four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a big kitchen with comfy living space. A gazebo hung with hammocks is at the doorstep, as is a wooden walkway leading into the overgrown surrounding jungle. Although Rio Coco is right on the Western Hwy, it is in a funny no-man's-land a few miles east of Belmopan.

**our pick** **Banana Bank Lodge** (☎ 820-2020; www.bananabank.com; Mile 47 Western Hwy; chalet s/d/tr/q BZ\$144/168/192/216, standard s/d/tr BZ\$240/284/316, cabana s/d/tr/q BZ\$250/316/370/425, ste s/d/tr BZ\$327/382/436, all incl breakfast; lunch/dinner BZ\$22/33; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This

wonderful lodge and equestrian center (see p187) sits on the banks of the Belize River, 4 miles from Belmopan. Each of the mahogany-and-thatch cabanas has a unique two-bedroom design, with sitting room, bathtub, mosquito nets, ceiling fans and wrought-iron or carved-mahogany bedsteads. Now Banana Bank also has the budget conscious 'chalet,' with three rooms sleeping five people.

With a fascinating history as an old logging-company headquarters and the scene of colonial-era horse races, Banana Bank is an expression of the personalities and interests of its owners, horseman John Carr and his artist wife Carolyn. For nonequestrians, the lodge has a bird observation tower overlooking a lagoon, an orchadia with over 50 species of orchids and some small unexcavated Maya ruins on site.

The turnoff to Banana Bank is 1 mile east along the Western Hwy from Guanacaste National Park. About 1 mile north of the highway, you reach a metal gong hanging beside a path leading down to the river. Bang the gong and someone will come from the lodge (on the opposite bank) to get you in a hand-operated ferry. It's also possible to drive to the lodge via a vehicle ferry over the Belize River just west of Roaring Creek village.

**Belize Jungle Dome** (☎ 822-2124; www.belizejungle.com; Mile 47 Western Hwy; standard/junior/ste/upper terrace BZ\$231/297/352/396; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$18/22/44; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This is, undoubtedly, an architectural oddity, but the signature dome deserves a mention, its skylights allowing sunlight to filter, reflecting off the polished mahogany interior. Standard rooms, suites and terraces are fully equipped with modern conveniences such as air-con, cable TV and internet access, and have easy access to the central swimming pool. There's also an organic fruit orchard, an orchid house and an enticing treetop café from which to survey the domain. Drive to Belize Jungle Dome via the village of Roaring Creek.

**Jaguar Paw Jungle Resort** (☎ 820-2023, in USA 877-624-3770; www.jaguarpaw.com; s/d BZ\$384/440; breakfast BZ\$10-16, lunch dishes BZ\$16-20, dinner mains BZ\$30-50; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Set in the midst of the jungle, Jaguar Paw is just 200yd from where the Caves Branch River issues from one of its caves. You're right on the spot for cave-tubing and zip-lining, and 9 miles of trails wind around the property. The resort decor is over-the-top, with each of the 16 rooms following a different

theme, ranging from English Country Garden to Wild West. The grounds, lush with vegetation, also contain an aviary, a small butterfly farm and several restaurants. Drive past the entrance to Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve and follow signs on the jungle road up the hill to the resort.

## BELMOPAN

pop 17,570

In 1961 Hurricane Hattie all but destroyed Belize City. Certain that a coastal capital would never be secure from further terrible hurricanes, the government decided to move. In 1971 the government declared its intention to build a new capital in the center of the country, which would become Belmopan.

A grand new National Assembly was built to resemble a Maya temple and plaza, with government offices around it. Government needs have since outgrown these core buildings and a variety of less-uniform government offices is spread out around the central green.

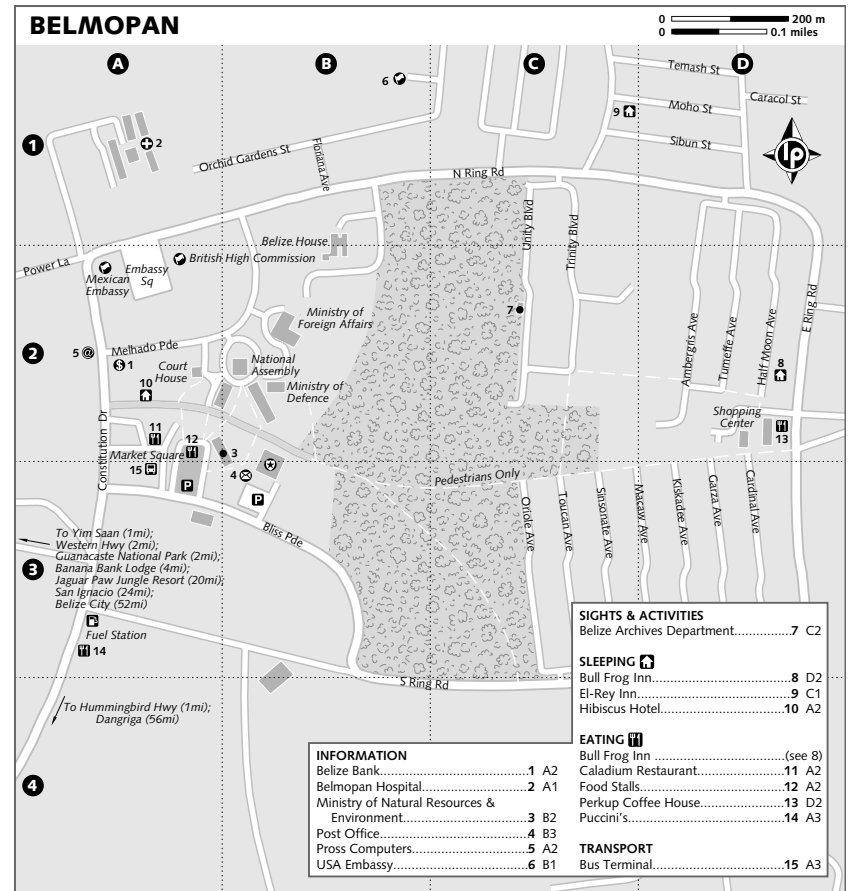
The capital was slow to come to life; a lot of people still prefer to commute from Belize City or San Ignacio. But increasing numbers are seeing the plus points of the broad, leafy streets of Belmopan's quiet suburbia, and the population has increased significantly in recent years. Many government ministries and other organizations are based here, as well as a few embassies, giving the place an unexpected international atmosphere.

There has long been talk of opening a branch of the Museum of Belize in the capital, but there has been little movement on that front. In the meantime, this is a common place to change buses, but there is little reason to linger.

## Orientation

Belmopan is located 1 mile east of the Hummingbird Hwy, reached by either of two turnoffs, 1 and 2 miles south of the Hummingbird's junction with the Western Hwy, 50 miles from Belize City. Belmopan is a small place that is easily negotiated on foot. A ring road encircles the central area of town. The bus terminal and the main commercial area are within the west side of this ring.

The government buildings at the heart of town are surrounded by grassy lawns and are vehicle-free, but look like a drab college campus of concrete bunkers. The square



National Assembly building occupies the highest point of the area, surrounded by various ministry buildings.

## Information

**Belize Bank** (☎ 822-2303; Constitution Dr; 📞 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri) ATM and currency exchange.

**Belmopan Hospital** (☎ 822-2264; off N Ring Rd) Just north of the center, this is the only emergency facility between Belize City and San Ignacio.

**Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment** (☎ 822-2226; www.mnrei.gov.bz; 📞 8am-noon & 1-4:30pm Mon-Fri) The Land Information Center here sells the best topographic maps of Belize available, including 1:50,000 sheets.

**Post office** (📞 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Thu, to 4:30pm Fri)

**Pross Computers** (☎ 601-3529; Constitution Dr; 📞 hr BZ\$6; 📞 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat) Internet access.

## Sights

### BELIZE ARCHIVES

The **Belize Archives Department** (☎ 822-2247; www.belizearchives.gov.bz; 26-28 Unity Blvd; 📞 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) has rotating displays on hurricanes, the Garifuna, Belmopan, Baron Bliss and other subjects. The extensive collections of photographs, newspapers, books, maps, documents and sound and video archives are also open to the public.

## Sleeping

**El-Rey Inn** (☎ 822-3438; www.belmopanhotels.com; 23 Moho St; r BZ\$54; 📞 📺) An affordable option

for budget travelers is just outside the ring road, northeast of the green. Named after the affable owner, 'Elroy' Garbutt, the El-Rey has 12 plain, clean rooms equipped with private bathrooms and fans.

**Hibiscus Hotel** (☎ 822-1418; www.belmopanhoteles.com; Market Sq; s/d BZ\$85/105; 📞 📺) With easy access to the bus station and everything that Belmopan has to offer (as limited as that may be), the friendly little Hibiscus Hotel offers good value. Rooms are spacious and clean, with tiled floors and freshly painted walls.

**Yim Saan** (Map p185; ☎ 822-1356; Hummingbird Hwy; s/d/tr BZ\$94/94/120; 📞 📺) This big hotel on the outskirts of Belmopan represents the Chinese population in the capital. Clean, crisp rooms are sparsely decorated, with breezy balconies overlooking the parking lot. The downstairs restaurant serves a steaming and satisfying *lo mein* (noodles).

**Bull Frog Inn** (☎ 822-2111; www.bullfroginn.com; 25 Half Moon Ave; s/d BZ\$130/160; 📞 📺 📺 📺) On the edge of the village green, just inside the ring road, the Bull Frog is a cheerful, civilized place. The 25 rooms are void of any special atmosphere, but they are spacious and comfortable, complete with telephones and cable TV, while big bathrooms have strong, hot showers.

## Eating & Drinking

For a cheap meal, you can't go wrong at the food stalls just east of the bus station. They serve Mexican snacks such as burritos and *salbutes* (mini tortillas, usually stuffed with chicken) amid the sounds of rhythm and blues.

**Caladium Restaurant** (☎ 822-2754; Market Sq; mains BZ\$8-12; 🕒 7:15am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-7pm Sat; 📞) Just across the street from the bus station, the Caladium is one of Belmopan's longest-standing family businesses. It offers a dependable menu of Belizean favorites such as fried fish and coconut rice, conch soup and barbeque chicken.

**Perkup Coffee House** (☎ 822-0001; 4 Shopping Center, E Ring Rd; mains BZ\$10-22; 🕒 9am-9pm Wed-Mon; 📺) With excellent food, great coffee and desserts, and free wireless internet, it's no wonder the Perkup seems to be Belmopan's in spot. From breakfast bagels (perhaps the only bagels in Belize?) to steak sandwiches to lasagna, the place has a fairly wide culinary bandwidth. Leave room for cappuccino and cake!

**Bull Frog Inn** (☎ 822-2111; www.bullfroginn.com; 25 Half Moon Ave; mains BZ\$15-20; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & din-

ner) This popular and breezy hotel-restaurant serves up good steaks and seafood. The adjoining bar is a popular watering hole, livened up by karaoke and live mariachi music.

**Puccini's** (☎ 822-1366; Constitution Dr; mains BZ\$15-30; 🕒 lunch & dinner; 📞) This lively restaurant and bar has a great selection of pasta and other Italian dishes, as well as a few Mexican specialties. Take a seat at the open-air bar, or sit inside and enjoy the air-con. Service is friendly but slow.

## Getting There & Away

The **bus terminal** (☎ 802-2799; Market Sq) is a stop for all buses operating along the Western and Hummingbird Hwys, including those operated by James bus line and National Transportation Services, Ltd (NTSL). Along the Western Hwy, buses head east to Belize City (BZ\$4, one hour) and west to San Ignacio (BZ\$4, one hour) and Benque Viejo del Carmen (BZ\$6, 1½ hours) every half-hour from 6am to 7pm. Along the Hummingbird Hwy, buses go south to Dangriga (BZ\$6, two hours) once or twice an hour from 6:45am until 7:15pm. Three of these southbound buses continue to Placencia (BZ\$18, 8:30am, 2pm and 3pm). Almost all of the other Dangriga buses continue on to Punta Gorda (BZ\$18, 5½ hours), including one express bus (BZ\$22, four hours) at 4:30pm.

## BETWEEN BELMOPAN & SAN IGNACIO

The 22 miles of the Western Hwy between San Ignacio and the Belmopan turnoff wind through verdant, well-shaded countryside, with a number of villages strung along the road. The road to Actun Tunichil Muknal (opposite) heads off south at Teakettle Village, midway between the two larger cities. About 6 miles from San Ignacio, at Georgeville, Chiquibul Rd (p193) turns south off the highway heading to Barton Creek and the Mountain Pine Ridge. It joins with Cristo Rey Rd (p194), which circles back to the Western Hwy in Santa Elena. Almost as soon as you turn off the highway, you enter another ecosystem, as these unpaved roads wind through the broadleaf forest, occasionally intersecting with a village or jungle lodge, but not much else.

Right on the highway, east of Georgeville, **Orange Gifts** (Map p203; ☎ 824-2341; www.orangegifts.com; Mile 60 Western Hwy) is one of the best gift shops in the country. It has a wide selection

of Belizean souvenirs and handicrafts, including fine hardwood furniture, kitchen wares and sculptures made right here in the family's own workshop. The owner and founder of this place – Caesar Sherrard – designed the comfortable folding 'clam chair' that now furnishes just about every resort in Belize.

Behind Orange Gifts, **Caesar's Guesthouse** (Map p203; ☎ 824-2341; www.belizegifts.com/guesthouse; Mile 60 Western Hwy; s/d/tr/q BZ\$80/100/110/120, with air-con BZ\$110/130/140/150; breakfast & lunch BZ\$14, dinner BZ\$28; 📞 📺 📺) is a friendly, family-run inn. The excellent restaurant serves Belizean and international food; much of the produce is grown on site. The rooms are good and clean, if not luxurious, and there's a sweet swimming hole in Barton Creek at the bottom of its grounds. Besides being a master woodworker, Caesar is a jazz musician and his band Mango Jam plays here on the first Saturday of each month.

**Garden of Eve Resort** (Map p203; ☎ 824-3688; www.gardenofevesort.com; Mile 62 Western Hwy, Central Farm; ste BZ\$174-218; 📞 📺 📺 📺) is a lovely, romantic resort set in the foothills of the Maya mountains. What is its claim to fame? No, it's not irresistible apples or a rascally resident snake... It's the swimming pool, which is apparently the largest in Cayo District. Aside from this swanky place for a swim or a soak, Garden of Eve boasts spacious suites with separate sleeping and living areas, as well as private porches. Also on the grounds are a small fitness center in a *palapa* (thatched-roof shelter), a playground and a campsite.

## Actun Tunichil Muknal

One of the most unforgettable and adventurous tours you can make in Belize, the trip into 'ATM' (Map p203) takes you deep into the underworld that the ancient Maya knew as Xibalbá. The entrance to the **3-mile-long cave** lies in the northern foothills of the Maya Mountains, approximately 8 miles south of Teakettle Village on the Western Hwy. The trip is moderately strenuous, starting with an easy 45-minute hike through the lush jungle and across Roaring Creek (your feet will be wet all day). At the wide, hourglass-shaped entrance to the cave, you'll don your helmet, complete with headlamp. To reach the cave entrance, you'll start with a frosty swim across a deep pool (about 15ft across), so you must be a satisfactory swimmer. From here, you will follow your guide, walking, climbing, twisting and turning your

way through the blackness of the cave for about an hour.

Giant shimmering flowstone rock formations compete for your attention with thick calcium-carbonate stalactites dripping from the ceiling. Phallic stalagmites grow up from the cave floor. Eventually you'll follow your guide up into a massive opening, where you'll see hundreds of pottery vessels and shards, along with human remains. One of the most shocking displays is the calcite-encrusted remains of the woman who Actun Tunichil Muknal (Cave of the Stone Sepulcher) is named for.

Although it was discovered earlier, ATM was officially reported in 1989 and investigated in detail in the 1990s by Belizean and North American archaeologists. The researchers found some 200 ceramic vessels and the skeletal remains of 14 humans (seven of them children), all almost certainly sacrificial victims. The people and the pottery are all believed to have been offerings to the rain god Chaac (who dwelt in caves) in supplication for rain at a time of drought in the second half of the 9th century.

In the cave's Main Chamber, you will be required to remove your shoes. Make sure you wear socks – not only to protect your feet from sharp rocks, but also to protect the artifacts from the oils on your skin.

In view of the unique value and the fragility of the cave's contents, visits are strictly controlled. The common belief is that it won't be long before the ATM is closed to the public, so check it out now, while you still can. At the time of writing, only two companies were licensed to take groups of six to eight people: **PacZ Tours** (Map p197; ☎ 824-0536; www.paczours.net; 30 Burns Ave, San Ignacio), the original ATM company, and **Mayawalk Tours** (Map p197; ☎ 824-3070; www.mayawalk.com; 19 Burns Ave, San Ignacio), also recommended.

The trip takes about 10 hours from San Ignacio, including a one-hour drive each way. Both companies charge BZ\$160 per person, including lunch and equipment. Most hotels and lodges can book these trips for you (although they may charge more). Bring closed-toe shoes (not sandals), socks and a change of clothes.

Off the dirt road that leads to ATM, **our pick Pook's Hill Lodge** (Map p203; ☎ 820-2017; www.pookshillodge.com; s/d/tr cabanas BZ\$294/404/468; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$22/22/44; 📞) is a gorgeous

## WELCOME TO XIBALBÁ

The limestone outcrops of the northern foothills of the Maya Mountains have been eroded over millennia by the action of water running off the older crystalline rocks of the range's central core. Absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere when it falls as rain, and more carbon dioxide from the decaying plant material on the ground, the water becomes a weak acid that dissolves into limestone, eventually producing what is known as a karst landscape, characterized by caves, sinkholes and underground rivers.

To the ancient – and many modern – Maya, caves were entrances to the underworld, Xibalbá, and the homes of all-important deities such as the agricultural fertility god and Chaac, the rain god. The Maya entered caves to present the ritual offerings considered necessary to keep the gods happy: pottery, tools, pine needles and food such as corn, chili peppers, and cacao seeds. Very few known caves in Belize do not contain some evidence of ancient Maya ritual activity more than a millennium ago. The most important offerings were human blood and human lives. Caves in western Belize such as Barton Creek Cave (opposite) and Actun Tunichil Muknal (p191) contain the remains of many children and adults, the majority almost certainly sacrificial victims, although some may have been interred in a form of ancestor worship.

Ritual activity in caves seems to have increased in the last century of Classic Maya civilization, from about AD 750. This was a time of growing stress and discord in the Maya world, leading to the Classic Maya collapse of 850–900. If, as recent research suggests, it was a series of devastating droughts that destroyed Classic Maya civilization, then it would be no more than logical for the Maya to have been redoubling their efforts to propitiate their rain god at this time.

Visiting caves is a relatively new and extremely exciting tourist activity in Belize. In addition to the fascinating Maya history, you'll be awed by the geomorphological structures where undulating flowstone decorates the walls, stalactites and stalagmites grow like ancient trees, bats flit in and out of ceiling nooks and darkness prevails.

When visiting, do remember that the caves themselves and their contents are very fragile. Take special precautions so as not to disturb the artifacts, which are left in situ. In some cases, you may be requested to remove your shoes and/or wear socks to reduce the inevitable erosion. At all times, stay close to your guide and follow instructions carefully.

lodge on the site of a small Classic Period Maya residential complex. Round, thatch-and-stucco cabanas sport wrap-around windows and immaculate natural-stone bathrooms. They are well spaced, allowing plenty of privacy. Set within a 300-acre private reserve, the grounds are lush with life, excellent for swimming, river-tubing and horseback riding. The birding is also superb, from the lodge verandah or along the forest trails or river frontage on Roaring Creek.

## Spanish Lookout

A thriving Mennonite community, Spanish Lookout (population 2000) is located about five miles north of the Western Hwy, accessed from a turnoff at Central Farm. A hand-crank ferry transports cars across the Belize River.

Spanish Lookout is an excellent place to see the Mennonites' industriousness in action. Surprisingly, this road is paved; not surprisingly, it was the Mennonites – not the government – who paved it. They are the country's

primary producers of dairy, meat, poultry and produce: here in Spanish Lookout you will find Quality Chicken, the biggest poultry producer, as well as Western Dairy, the only commercial dairy.

Since 2006, Spanish Lookout has been in the news related to the discovery of commercial quantities of oil in its environs. Understandably, drilling was highly controversial in this conservative community. A Mennonite spokesperson was quoted in the local press as saying: 'We would prefer not to have any production in our lands rather than money. Our way of life means more than money. Because of the laws of Belize we have to allow oil drilling.' The Mennonites have since come to an agreement to share profits with the landowner and oil companies, but the developments promise to bring big changes to this community.

Several buses a day go to Spanish Lookout (BZ\$6, one hour) from San Ignacio, via Bullet Tree Falls.

## Chiquibul Road

Chiquibul Rd (sometimes called Pine Ridge Rd) turns south off the Western Hwy at Georgeville, heading for the Mountain Pine Ridge and the Vaca Plateau to the far south. If you are heading to Mountain Pine Ridge from Belize City or Belmopan, this is the route you'll take. After 9 miles, Chiquibul Rd hooks up with Cristo Rey Rd, coming east from San Ignacio and Santa Elena.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Barton Creek Cave

Barton Creek rises high in the Mountain Pine Ridge and flows north to join the Belize River near Georgeville. Along the way it dips underground for a spell, flowing through the Barton Creek Cave (Map p203). During the Classic Period, the ancient Maya interred at least 28 people and left thousands of pottery jars and fragments and other artifacts on 10 ledges. Today, the cave is only accessible by canoe.

This peaceful trip takes you (in groups of six or fewer) about 750ft into the cave so you can get a look at the crystal cave formations, as well as the spooky skulls, bones and pottery shards that remain from the Maya. You must be accompanied by a guide to enter the cave.

If you have your own vehicle, you can drive yourself to Barton Creek and hook up with a guide at **Mike's Place** (Map p203; ☎ 670-0441; per person BZ\$60), the restaurant in front of the cave entrance.

Be aware that this is a precarious drive. The narrow and very rough 4-mile track to Barton Creek Cave heads east off Chiquibul Rd, about 5 miles south of the Western Hwy. Along the way you pass through the scattered traditional Mennonite farming community of Upper Barton Creek and ford both Barton Creek itself then one of its tributaries. Between the two fords a turning to the right leads to the friendly **Barton Creek Outpost** (Map p203; ☎ 607-1813; dishes BZ\$10-16; ☎ 10am-5pm), which has home-prepared food and a few inviting hammocks on a deck by a cool swimming hole.

Coming from the other direction (via El Progreso), take the fork to the left as you exit the village. Heading down to the river, the steep incline and hairpin turns absolutely require 4WD. If you are not up for driving yourself, most of the jungle lodges and San Ignacio tour agencies (p198) can organize this trip. The half-day trip (4½ hours) costs between BZ\$80 and BZ\$90, including transportation.

## Green Hills Butterfly Ranch

If butterflies make your heart flutter, don't miss the chance to see 30-plus exotic and exquisite species at **Green Hills Butterfly Ranch** (Map p203; ☎ 820-4017; <http://biological-diversity.info/greenhills.htm>; Mile 8 Chiquibul Rd; adult/child BZ\$10/5; ☎ 8am-4pm), which is 8 miles off the Western Hwy. Biologists Jan Meerman and Tineke Boomsma breed the butterflies, mostly for export to butterfly houses in the USA. Research activity includes tracking interaction between different species and compiling a field guide, as well as cultivating a botanical garden that supports the butterfly population.

On the guided tours, knowledgeable guides will walk you around the largest live butterfly display in Belize. You will come away with a good understanding of the insects' life cycle from egg to caterpillar to pupa to butterfly. A minimum of two people are required for the tour; the last one leaves at 3:30pm.

## Horseback Riding

Explore the jungles and river valleys of Cayo on horseback by joining a tour with **Mountain Equestrian Trails** (Map p203; ☎ 820-4041, in USA 800-838-3918; [www.metbelize.com](http://www.metbelize.com); Mile 8 Chiquibul Rd; half/full day BZ\$126/166). On a half-day ride, you might visit the ruins of the ancient city of **Pacbitun** or the secluded Vega river valley (excellent for birding). Full-day rides include Barton Creek Cave (including canoeing into the cave), Big Rock Falls and Mountain Pine Ridge. Horseback riding trips include a picnic lunch and breaks for swimming and exploring, making for a glorious day away from civilization. Wear long pants and closed-toe shoes or boots. You might go riding in the 1500-hectare **Slate Creek Preserve**. This private land in the Upper Barton Creek area is protected by the efforts of a community-based conservation group that MET is an active part of. Slate Creek provides an important buffer zone for Mountain Pine Ridge in the south and Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve in the north.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Gumbolimbo Village Resort** (Map p203; ☎ 665-3112; [www.gumbolimboresort.com](http://www.gumbolimboresort.com); Mile 2 Chiquibul Rd; r BZ\$240; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$18/14/40; ☎ ☎ ☎) The namesake gumbo-limbo tree is known locally as the 'tourist tree,' due to its red, peeling bark. The resort is perched high atop a hillside that is covered with such trees. Indeed, visitors to the Gumbolimbo are particularly vulnerable

to the trees' fate, because they will be loath to leave the swimming pool and spectacular vista over the valley. Four modern cabins surround the pool, with cool white interiors and large glass doors. Rooms are sparse but spacious, with plenty of room for extra beds (sleeping up to four people). This place is surprisingly green (with the exception of the too-blue swimming pool), running completely on solar power.

**Mountain Equestrian Trails** (Map p203; ☎ 820-4041, in USA 800-838-3918; www.metbelize.com; Mile 8 Chiquibul Rd; s/d/tr/q BZ\$264/316/370/422; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$16/22/40; 📍) After a day of horseback riding, rest your weary body in the spacious thatched-roof cabanas, decorated with beautiful Maya tapestries and boasting lovely forest views. Kerosene lamps light the way (as there is no electricity), making for a particularly romantic atmosphere. Good home-style meals are served in the cantina, while a wide deck offers wonderful views of the valley. Turn off Chiquibul Rd immediately opposite Green Hills Butterfly Ranch and drive about 0.75 miles on the unpaved road. Multiday packages and transfers also available.

### Cristo Rey Road

Cristo Rey Rd turns south off the Western Hwy in Santa Elena and winds up through the forests and villages of **Cristo Rey** and **San Antonio** to meet Chiquibul Rd after 12.5 miles. You'll come this way if you're heading to the Mountain Pine Ridge from San Ignacio.

Buses from San Ignacio to San Antonio (see p201) run along the Cristo Rey Rd. Return buses leave San Antonio at 6am, 7am, 1:15pm and 4:15pm.

Half a mile before San Antonio, the colorfully painted facade on the left side is the **García Sisters' Place** (Map p203; ☎ 7am-7pm), which displays and sells a wide assortment of black slate carvings. These five sisters – born and raised right here in San Antonio – invented this craft, which is now widely imitated around Belize. Their carvings, selling for between BZ\$10 and BZ\$200, depict a variety of subjects including local wildlife and Maya deities. You are likely to meet at least one of the sisters (or their wizened mother) working in the shop, doing their part to keep local traditions alive.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Cristo Rey Rd has an excellent choice of lodges, ranging from affordable to opulent.

The location is within striking distance of many of Cayo's best adventures. The relative remoteness also means that there is adventure right at your doorstep, in the forests and rivers in the immediate surrounding area.

**Mango Walk Inn** (Map p203; ☎ 609-8892; www.mango-walkinn.com; Cristo Rey Rd; cabanas per person incl dinner BZ\$50; 📍) Set on 20 acres of rain forest and fruit trees, at the edge of the Macal River, this family-owned lodge is about 2 miles south of Cristo Rey village. The grounds are ideal for horseback riding, canoeing and birding. Rustic thatched-roof cabanas overlook the river. Be sure to contact the family in advance, so somebody is here to greet you upon arrival.

**Crystal Paradise Resort** (Map p203; ☎ 820-4014; www.crystalparadise.com; Cristo Rey Rd; non-thatched s/d/tr BZ\$120/186/250, garden-view BZ\$164/230/294, valley-view BZ\$208/278/338, all incl breakfast & dinner; 📍) Spread out over well-tended gardens just above the Macal River, Crystal Paradise is one of the few Cayo lodges owned by a local family. All of the members of the large Tut family get in on the fun, with the various sons acting as nature guides and the daughters cooking up hearty Belizean meals. Son Jeronic is a top-class bird guide who runs Paradise Expeditions (p198). Of the various cabanas and rooms, all are utilitarian but comfortable, the best ones sporting palm-thatched roofs (although the valley views are not worth paying for). Most of the guests come here on packages that incorporate preplanned tours, including horseback riding, canoeing, Maya ruins and other activities.

**Maya Mountain Lodge** (Map p203; ☎ 824-2164; www.mayamountain.com; 9 Cristo Rey Rd; rsmall/large BZ\$140/236, cottages BZ\$142; breakfast & dinner BZ\$52; 📍) A long-standing favorite in Cayo, this lovely lodge is set on beautiful grounds less than a mile from Santa Elena. The gardens are lush, with a trail leading to a small, ancient Maya ceremonial site. Eight thatched cottages have tile floors and porches hung with hammocks. The rooms are less attractive but perfectly acceptable, opening up to a shared verandah. Owners Bart and Suzi Mickler pioneered many of the tours that are now widely offered throughout. One way they share their unbridled enthusiasm for the region is by asking their guests to subscribe to a simple ecological 'code of ethics,' which is presented upon arrival.

**ourpick Macaw Bank Jungle Lodge** (Map p203; ☎ 608-4825; www.macawbankjunglelodge.com; off Cristo

### CANOE-SERVATION

One morning in March the waters of the Macal River beneath San Ignacio's Hawkesworth Bridge are the gathering place for a colorful flotilla of three-person canoes. They are assembled for the start of **La Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge** (www.larutamayabelize.com; registration fee BZ\$250), a grueling four-day race down the Belize River to Belize City, where contestants arrive on Baron Bliss Day, a national holiday in memory of a great Belizean benefactor (see boxed text, p98). From relatively humble beginnings in 1998, the race has grown rapidly into Central America's biggest canoe event, attracting international as well as Belizean canoeists.

Even though it's all downstream, this is no gentle paddle. The fastest teams cover the river's 170 or so winding and beautiful miles from San Ignacio to Belize City in around 19 hours, while the slowest take around 36 hours. The race is divided into four one-day stages: Hawkesworth Bridge to Banana Bank Lodge near Belmopan (around 50 miles); Banana Bank to Bermudian Landing (60 miles including Big Falls Rapids); Bermudian Landing to Burrell Boom (35 miles); and Burrell Boom to Belcan Bridge, Belize City (25 miles).

In addition to being Belize's largest competitive sporting event, La Ruta Maya is an impressive conservation effort, as all proceeds are donated to local environmental efforts to revitalize and sustain Belizean waterways.

Rey Rd; d small/large BZ\$140/272; 📍) Getting to these gorgeous grounds – spread out along the Macal River – is an adventure in itself. Turn off Cristo Rey Rd about 3 miles south of the village, then drive another 3 miles on the narrow, overgrown dirt track. Once you're here, you won't want to leave, as this place is a wildlife wonderland, teeming with birds and other animals. Hike the network of trails or float down the river in a tube, then retire to your rustic, kerosene-lit cabin, decorated with hand-hewn furniture and woven tapestries. A restaurant is on site, but meals must be ordered in advance.

**Table Rock Camp & Cabanas** (Map p203; ☎ 670-4910; www.tablerockbelize.com; Cristo Rey Rd; d BZ\$250-294, camping incl tent BZ\$60; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$18/22/40;

📍) This exquisite little resort has only three classy cabanas, each named for an exotic bird you might see on the grounds. The Kiskadee, Aracari and Motmot rooms are all furnished with custom-made four-poster beds, tile floors and thatched roofs. Or get up close and personal with the sounds and scents of the jungle when you pitch a tent alongside the Macal River. Delicious meals are served in the open-air *palapa*. Your hosts – Alan and Colleen Spring – built this place from scratch and are committed to preserving its pristine environment. They produce their own electricity, grow their own fruits and vegetables and use purified rain water. Although this used to be farmland, the Springs are actively working to return it to its natural state by planting native mahogany trees.

**Mariposa Jungle Lodge** (Map p203; ☎ 670-2113; www.mariposajunglelodge.com; Cristo Rey Rd; d BZ\$310; 📍) Luxe it up at this new jungle lodge near the turnoff to Mountain Pine Ridge. Each named for a jungle creature, the beautiful bamboo cabins feature handmade thatched roofs and hardwood furniture. Enjoying views of the rain forest or the mountain ridge, the screened porch is a perfect place to hang a hammock. King-size canopy beds are dressed with Egyptian linens and mosquito nets. And if all this is just a little too rustic for your tastes, you can retreat to the main lodge to watch your favorite program on the big-screen TV.

### SAN IGNACIO pop 19,084

Travelers to Cayo spend their time swimming in jungle-clad rivers, canoeing or crawling through mysterious caves, spying on birds, butterflies and other creatures, and learning the secrets of the ancient Maya. And at the end of the day, many of them make their way back to San Ignacio to rest up for the next day's adventure.

Together with neighboring **Santa Elena**, on the east bank of the river, San Ignacio forms the chief population center of Cayo District. Staying here is generally the more economical option for travel in Cayo; furthermore, there is no shortage of tour operators who are willing to show you the attractions and activities in the surrounding area. It is a friendly, functional base for your explorations in the region.

But San Ignacio is not one of those towns that exist only for tourists. It has a very positive local vibe, with a bustling market and a steady influx of immigrants. Residents are Mestizos, Maya and Garifuna, as well as a bunch of free-spirited expatriates from Europe and North America. They are easygoing and outgoing. Sure, they might try to make a buck off you, but there is no hard sell and they are just as likely to engage you in a discussion or invite you for a beer.

San Ignacio is located on the west bank of the Macal River a couple of miles upstream from its confluence with the Mopan River – a meeting of waters that gives birth to the Belize River. This once-remote location between two rivers gives San Ignacio its alternative name of Cayo – a Spanish word meaning ‘island.’

**Orientation**

Two bridges cross the Macal – the Hawkesworth Bridge (a suspension bridge) to the south and the lower, wooden New Bridge to the north. Traffic is normally west-bound over the wooden bridge and eastbound over the Hawkesworth. So if you’re coming into San Ignacio along the Western Hwy from Belmopan or Belize City, you’ll pass through Santa Elena first and then cross the wooden bridge, entering San Ignacio at the north end of its football ground. Sometimes during the rainy season the northern bridge floods and traffic goes both ways across the Hawkesworth Bridge.

Burns Ave, running north-south, is San Ignacio’s main street, running past the football field and terminating at the traffic circle in the south, where you’ll find the town hall and the police station. There is no bus terminal in San Ignacio, but most buses stop in the market square, just east of Burns Ave.

**Information**  
**EMERGENCY**

**Police station** (☎ 824-2022; cnr Missiah & Buena Vista Sts)

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**Café C@yo** (☎ 824-2709; Burns Ave; per hr BZ\$6; ☎ 10am-10pm)

**Cocopelle Bar** (8 Hudson St; per hr BZ\$6; ☎ 10am-midnight) Free internet access with purchase of a drink.

**Tradewinds** (☎ 824-2396; cnr Waight’s Ave & West St; per hr BZ\$5; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) Reduced rates for students.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**La Loma Luz Hospital** (☎ 804-2985, 824-2087; Western Hwy; ☎ emergency services 24hr) This Adventist hospital in Santa Elena is one of the best in the country.

**MONEY**

**Belize Bank** (☎ 824-2031; 16 Burns Ave; ☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Thu, to 4:30pm Fri, 9am-noon Sat) The ATM here accepts international Visa, MasterCard, Plus and Cirrus cards.  
**Scotiabank** (☎ 824-4190; cnr Burns Ave & King St; ☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

**POST**

**Post office** (☎ 824-2049; Hudson St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri)

**Dangers & Annoyances**

San Ignacio is not a dangerous place, but travelers should always exercise caution, especially after dark. The area north of Market Sq – especially around the football ground – can be pretty dark and desolate after hours. A reader reported an attack and attempted robbery that took place in the evening on Burns Ave, north of Waight’s Ave.

**Sights & Activities**

**CAHAL PECH**

High atop a hill on the southern outskirts of San Ignacio, **Cahal Pech** (☎ 824-4236; admission BZ\$10; ☎ 6am-6pm) is the oldest known Maya site in the Belize River valley, having been first settled between 1500 and 1000 BC. It is, perhaps, less impressive than Xunantunich (p205) or Caracol (p213), but it’s still a fascinating example of Preclassic Maya architecture. It was a significant Maya settlement for 2000 years or more.

Cahal Pech (kah-hahl pech) is Mopan and Yucatec Mayan for ‘Place of Ticks,’ a nickname earned in the 1950s when the site was surrounded by pastures grazed by tick-infested cattle. Today it’s a pleasantly shady site with plenty of trees and few tourists. Its core area of seven interconnected plazas has been excavated and restored since the late 1980s.

The earliest monumental religious architecture in Belize was built here between 600 and 400 BC, though most of what we see today dates from AD 600-800, when Cahal Pech and its peripheral farming settlements had an estimated population of between 10,000 and 20,000. The place was abandoned around AD 850.

**TRANSPORT**

Amigo's Belize.....	34	C3
Buses to Belize City, Belmopan & Benque Viejo del Carmen.....	35	D5
Buses to Bullet Tree Falls & San Antonio.....	(see 36)	
Colectivo Taxis to Benque Viejo del Carmen & Guatemala		
Border.....	36	C2
Safe Tours Belize.....	37	D6
Savannah Taxi Association.....	(see 35)	
Taxi Stand.....	38	D5
Taxi Stand.....	39	D6
Taxis to Bullet Tree Falls.....	40	D6

**INFORMATION**

Belize Bank.....	1	D5
Café C@yo.....	2	D6
Cocopelle Bar.....	(see 28)	
Police Station.....	3	D6
Post Office.....	4	D5
Scotiabank.....	5	D6
Tradewinds.....	6	C5

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Easy Rider.....	(see 30)	
Eva's Restaurant.....	7	D5
Green Iguana Exhibit & Medicinal Jungle Trail.....	(see 15)	
Mayawalk Tours.....	8	D5

**SLEEPING**

Casa Blanca Guest House.....	9	D6
Elvira's Guesthouse.....	10	B2
Hi-Et Guest House.....	11	C5
Hotel Mallorca.....	(see 2)	
Mana Kai Camp & Cabins.....	12	B1
Martha's Guesthouse.....	13	C5
Pacz Guesthouse.....	(see 21)	
Pacz Tours.....	(see 31)	
Rosa's Hotel.....	14	C6
San Ignacio Resort Hotel.....	15	C4
Tropicool Hotel.....	16	D5
Venus Hotel.....	17	D5

**EATING**

Amore Mio.....	18	D5
Café Sol.....	19	C4
Eagle's Landing.....	20	D5
Erva's.....	21	B2
Firenza Café.....	22	D5
Hanna's Restaurant.....	23	D6

**DRINKING**

Coconut's.....	27	D5
Cocopelle Bar.....	28	D6
Pitpan Tavern.....	29	D5

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Stork Club.....	(see 15)	
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**SHOPPING**

Arts & Crafts of Central America.....	30	D5
Back to My Roots.....	31	D5
Belize Gifts.....	32	D5
New Hope Woodworking.....	33	B4

CAYO DISTRICT

CAYO DISTRICT



A small visitors center explains some of the history of Cahal Pech. Sometimes independent guides hang around here offering **tours** (2hr tours BZ\$20). Otherwise, walk about 150yd to the area of excavated and restored plazas and temples. **Plaza B** is the largest and most impressive complex; **Structure A1**, near plaza A, is the site's tallest temple. Two ball courts lie at either end of the restored area.

Cahal Pech is 1 mile south of central San Ignacio. Head up Buena Vista St and turn left immediately before the Texaco station.

### BRANCH MOUTH

Branch Mouth is the meeting place of the Mopan River, coming from Guatemala, and the Macal River, flowing down from Mountain Pine Ridge. The confluence of these rivers forms the beginning of the Belize River, which flows northeast to the sea.

The surrounding parkland is home to an abundance of **birdlife** as well as an **iguana reserve**. The confluence of these rivers forms a sweet **swimming hole**, which is an enticing prospect on a hot day. Cycle or walk 1.5 miles north on scenic Branch Mouth Rd to the Hammock Bridge.

### GREEN IGUANA EXHIBIT & MEDICINAL JUNGLE TRAIL

The **Green Iguana Exhibit** (admission BZ\$11; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm, tours every hr) is in the lush Macal Valley grounds of the San Ignacio Resort Hotel (p200). The green iguana can grow a very impressive 6ft long, but it's threatened chiefly because the eggs were once considered a delicacy (it's now illegal to eat them or to hunt the iguanas). This program collects and hatches iguana eggs, raising the reptiles until they are past their most vulnerable age. The iguanas are then released into the wild, but not before giving guests a chance to get to know them. You'll get plenty of face time (and photo ops), as well as fun facts about iguanas. On the way back from the exhibit, learn about local herbs and plants on the **medicinal jungle trail** (☎ 8am-4pm) that winds through the forest.

### Tours

Many of the most exciting sights and activities in Cayo District are most easily reached on a guided trip; some (such as Actun Tunichil Muknal and Barton Creek Cave) cannot be visited without a guide.

Typical day-trip prices per person are BZ\$160 for Actun Tunichil Muknal, BZ\$60 to BZ\$90 for a half-day trip to Barton Creek Cave, BZ\$140 to BZ\$180 to Caracol, BZ\$130 for a cave-tubing trip to Nohoch Che'en, BZ\$60 to BZ\$90 for Mountain Pine Ridge and BZ\$200 to BZ\$240 (plus border fees) for Tikal in Guatemala. Most agencies can pick you up from hotels and lodges for an extra fee.

Leading tour companies or booking agencies based in or near San Ignacio include the following:

**Belize Explorer** (☎ 624-8071; www.belize.com; Central Farm; tours per day BZ\$200, support vehicles per day BZ\$500) Besides all the regular tours, Belize Explorer also organizes custom-designed mountain- and jungle-biking expeditions, which generally feature three to six hours of riding each day, and warm Maya hospitality in local homes at night. Hard-core adventurers may want to engage in '30 days of nonstop action.'

**Belizean Sun** (☎ 824-4841, 601-2630; www.belizean.sun.com) Offers canoeing or river-tubing, jungle hikes, horseback riding. Also organizes trips to any of the nearby Maya ruins, including Tikal.

**Easy Rider** (☎ 824-3734; 24 Burns Ave; half-day tour BZ\$60) Highly recommended horse-riding trips to Bullet Tree Falls or Cahal Pech. Two person minimum. Inquire inside Arts & Crafts of Central America (p201).

**Eva's Restaurant** (☎ 804-2267; www.evasonline.com; 22 Burns Ave) Eva's is a San Ignacio institution, now under new ownership. It's better for information than for eating, although it's a fun place to hang out in the late afternoon as groups return from their outings. Offers all of the standard tours, including hiking, biking, birding and trips to Caracol.

**Everald's Caracol Shuttle** (Map p203; ☎ 804-0090, 604-5097; info@crystalparadise.com; Crystal Paradise Resort, Cristo Rey Rd.) Knowledgeable guide Everald Tut organizes day trips to Caracol (per person BZ\$150). Tour groups may be large, as he takes guests from the resort, as well as other organized groups and independent travelers.

**Mayawalk Tours** (☎ 824-3070; www.mayawalk.com; 19 Burns Ave) Mayawalk is one of the biggest and best established tour companies, offering everything from canoeing, cave-tubing and horseback riding to Maya ruins and ATM trips.

**Pacz Tours** (☎ 824-2477; www.pacz tours.net; 30 Burns Ave) The original tour company for Actun Tunichil Muknal. This company has new ownership, but trips are reliably excellent. Check out the bike trip to Spanish Lookout (p192; per person BZ\$120), a local Mennonite community.

**Paradise Expeditions** (Map p203; ☎ 820-4014, 610-5593; www.birdinginbelize.com; Crystal Paradise Resort, Cristo Rey Rd) Run by the accomplished local bird guide Jeronie Tut, offering trips for both the 'casual and serious birder.' Operates from Crystal Paradise Resort (p194).

**River Rat Expeditions** (☎ 824-2166, 605-4480; www.riverratbelize.com) Specialist in kayaking, river-tubing and cave trips. Enjoy a relaxing paddle down the Mopan River near Clarissa Falls, or take on some white water near Paslow Falls. Also books multiday kayaking and camping adventures, but arrangements must be made in advance.

### Sleeping

San Ignacio accommodations are mostly in the budget bracket but there are also some excellent value establishments here. More luxurious options can be found at lodges out of town.

### BUDGET

**Pacz Guesthouse** (☎ 604-4526; Far West St; dm BZ\$15, r with shared bathroom BZ\$20, s/d/tr with private bathroom BZ\$30/40/45) There is not much to say, except this is the cheapest place in town. It's a tiny 2nd-floor hostelry – stark but spotless – with a few private rooms, plus one three-bed dorm. Owner Ramón Rosado is a friendly face, but this place is bare-bones basic.

**Tropicool Hotel** (☎ 824-3052; 30 Burns Ave; s/d/tw/tr with shared bathroom BZ\$23/28/33/38, cabins with private bathroom s/d/tw/tr BZ\$56/56/63/67) The rooms in the main building are stark but clean and equipped with fans and mosquito screens. The cabins in the back are more appealing, with private bathrooms, televisions and breezy verandahs overlooking a shady garden. Check in at the gift shop next door.

**Hi-Et Guest House** (☎ 824-2828; thehi@bt.net; 12 West St; s/d from BZ\$25/45) The friendly, funky Hi-Et occupies two adjacent and connected houses, each with its own verandah overlooking the busy street below. Some rooms have shared bathrooms, but all are clean and comfy. Bonus: free coffee in the mornings!

**Venus Hotel** (☎ 824-3203; emoring@bt.net; 23 Burns Ave; s/d with shared bathroom BZ\$28/32, s/d/tr with private bathroom BZ\$49/59/75, s/d/tr with private bathroom & air-con BZ\$85/85/105; ☎) The dark hallway and reception area are not overly inviting, but the rooms at the Venus Hotel are well maintained and comfortable (if unimpressive). Tile bathrooms and cable TV are some of the available perks in the pricier rooms.

**Elvira's Guesthouse** (☎ 804-0243, 620-5940; 6 Far West St; r with shared bathroom BZ\$30, r with private bathroom BZ\$40-55; ☎) Simple and spacious rooms all have colorful paint jobs and warm woven blankets. The guesthouse is upstairs from Elvira's cool and cozy café, an excellent place

for coffee, cakes, sandwiches and snacks (whether or not you are staying here).

**Mana Kai Camp & Cabins** (☎ 824-2317, 624-6538; Branch Mouth Rd; d BZ\$45; ☎) Just north of the football grounds, Mana Kai is a big swath of swampy land with colorfully painted cottages. There is plenty of space to spread out, with hammocks strung up around the grounds and an open-air wood stove for cooking. Inside, the cabins have few perks, but they are basic and clean. It's an excellent, affordable option if you are feeling stifled by the big city of San Ignacio.

**Rosa's Hotel** (☎ 804-2265; www.toucantrail.com/rosas-hotel.html; Hudson St; s/d incl breakfast BZ\$45/50; ☎) It's not much to look at, but Rosa's has been around for a long time. It attracts long-term residents, who appreciate the friendly management, the free continental breakfast and the view of the rooftops from the shared balcony. The rooms themselves are pretty bare, but they do have the basic necessities.

**Hotel Mallorca** (☎ 824-2960; mallorcahotel@gmail.com; 12 Burns Ave; s/d BZ\$45/55) Aside from the colorful quilts that cover the firm beds, the dark spacious rooms at the Hotel Mallorca are unadorned. Super service is provided by managers Yolanda and Carlos, who live upstairs. All guests have access to the kitchen, a pleasant lounge area and a tiny balcony overlooking Burns Ave.

**Casa Blanca Guest House** (☎ 824-2080; www.casablancaguesthouse.com; 10 Burns Ave; s/d/tr BZ\$50/60/70, s/d with air-con BZ\$80/100; ☎) Intimate and immaculate, the Casa Blanca gets rave reviews for its simplicity and hospitality. Decent sized rooms have clean white walls and crisp fresh linens. Guests have a comfy sitting area, a clean kitchenette and a breezy rooftop terrace, from which to watch the world go by.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Our pick: Martha's Guesthouse** (☎ 804-3647; www.marthabelize.com; 10 West St; r BZ\$80-90, r with air-con BZ\$100-110, all incl breakfast; ☎) This family-run guesthouse has bright, sparkling clean rooms, each with a private balcony. Woven Maya tapestries accent the mahogany walls and furniture, while tile floors keep the rooms cool. Hotel amenities include a laundry and an excellent restaurant (p201). Offers a perfect blend of comfort, class and congeniality.

**Midas Tropical Resort** (☎ 824-3172, 824-3845; www.midasbelize.com; Branch Mouth Rd; s/d with fan BZ\$96/107, with air-con BZ\$118/129; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Both exotic

and convenient, this affable, affordable option is surrounded by jungly wilderness on the bank of the Macal River, but it is only a five-minute walk from the center of San Ignacio. Bright, breezy cabanas are lined up in a colorful row, each with a porch overlooking the shady grounds. You can cool off in the river, just 100yd away, or stroll into town and take a dip at its sister property, Venus Hotel (p199).

**Chidero Camp Resort** (☎ 824-3132; www.chidero.camp.com; Cahal Pech Hill; d without/with air-con BZ\$108/131; P ☹) Just past Cahal Pech, this little resort is on quiet grounds, shaded by palms. The cheaper rooms are in thatched-roof cabanas with tile floors, ceiling fans and modern bathrooms. They are actually more appealing than the dark, pricier rooms in the cement structure nearby. A pleasant restaurant and bar, as well as a communal kitchen are on site.

**Cahal Pech Cottages** (☎ 620-4366; www.cahalpechcottages.com; Cahal Pech Rd; r BZ\$120; P ☹) Heading up the hill toward Cahal Pech, you can't miss these concrete cottages, which are built to optimize the panoramic view over the town of San Ignacio. Simple rooms feature plenty of hardwood, and every cottage has a screened-in porch hung with a hammock.

**Cahal Pech Village** (☎ 824-3740; www.cahalpech.com; Cahal Pech Hill; d/q BZ\$182/225; P ☹) Atop Cahal Pech hill, 1.25 miles up from the town center, you can enjoy splendid views from this upscale resort. Choose between bright, tile-floored, air-con rooms in the large main building or comfortable cabanas with thatched roofs and varnished wood floors. Wherever you stay, you'll enjoy a view of the Maya Mountains or surrounding villages from your verandah. The on-site restaurant serves good international food (mains BZ\$12 to BZ\$20), so you don't need to trek into town for dinner. In summer the place is very popular with groups of archaeology students, who spend their days doing fieldwork.

**San Ignacio Resort Hotel** (☎ 824-2034; www.sanignaciobelize.com; 18 Buena Vista St; s/d balcony r BZ\$228/296, regal r BZ\$376, ste BZ\$684; P ☹) About 400yd uphill from the town center, this is as upscale as it goes in San Ignacio. The lobby is graced with a gorgeous mahogany staircase, marble floors and huge bouquets of orchids and bromeliads. Newly renovated, luxurious rooms boast hardwood floors, down comforters and views of the forest covered hillside. The lush grounds on the Macal River are lovely, with

excellent birding from the terrace and an on-site jungle trail, leading to the Green Iguana Exhibit (p198). Also on site: a restaurant, bar and casino.

## Eating

Head to the market on Savannah St for San Ignacio's best fruit, vegetables, jams and dairy products. Farmers sell from all over the Cayo District – you can't get fresher than this. There is also a string of stand-up food stalls strung along this road, offering breakfast, burritos and other cheap eats.

**Pop's Restaurant** (☎ 824-3366; West St; breakfast BZ\$8-10; ☹ 6:30am-2pm & 6:30pm-10pm Thu-Tue, 6:30am-2pm Wed; ☹) This small, friendly diner is a good choice for a filling, slightly greasy breakfast at a good price, served all day.

**ourpick Hanna's Restaurant** (☎ 824-3014; 5 Burns Ave; breakfast BZ\$8-12, Belizean dishes BZ\$10-12, Indian dishes BZ\$15-20; ☹ 6am-9pm) Hanna's is the most popular spot in town, any time of day. Go for fresh-squeezed juices, hearty omelettes and homemade yogurt at breakfast; rice and beans or filling sandwiches for lunch; or Hanna's delectable spicy ginger rum shrimp for an unbeatable dinner. Indian dishes and other meatless options cater to vegetarians.

**Erva's** (☎ 824-2821; 2 Far West St; mains BZ\$8-16; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Locals recommend Erva's for top-notch Belizean food and super-friendly service. Try the local Cayo specialty known as *chaya*, which is a leafy green, often sautéed with butter and garlic. The interior of this place is pretty nondescript; take a seat on the tiny terrace and enjoy the breeze while you wait for your meal.

**ourpick Café Sol** (☎ 824-2166; West St; mains BZ\$12-20; ☹ 7am-9pm Tue-Sat, to 2:30pm Sun) The menu at Café Sol is eclectic, with Greek salad wraps, pineapple ginger chicken and Thai noodle shrimp salad, making it a delightfully delicious place to eat. But the café also enjoys an easygoing coffee shop atmosphere, with artwork on the walls and plush sofas in the corner, so you might be just as inclined to order coffee and dessert or a fruit smoothie while you read and relax.

**Hode's Place** (☎ 804-2522; Branch Mouth Rd; mains BZ\$12-20; ☹ 10am-midnight) Locals love this rambling place north of the center. A large terrace restaurant opening onto a citrus orchard and kids' playground, it's a popular spot for families (a jukebox and games room also help). Friendly service and satisfying

food – from burritos and fajitas to steaks, seafood and rice and beans – complete the successful recipe.

**Firenza Café** (☎ 601-6537; Wyatt St; mains BZ\$12-20; ☹ dinner) Please your palate with daily changing seafood specials, handmade Italian sausage or fresh pasta. There is an inviting seating area on the back patio, but be warned: you can't avoid the aromas wafting from the pizza oven, so it's virtually impossible not to order one of the specialty pies!

**Amore Mio** (☎ 602-8365; JNC Mall, Market Sq; mains BZ\$15-20; ☹ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Who can resist homemade pizza and pasta dishes made by a real Italian chef? On an inviting terrace overlooking Market Sq, Amore Mio's husband-wife team – Fabio and Simonetta – serves up crispy-crust pies and pasta al dente. Wash it down with a swig of vino rosso and you might forget you are in Central America.

**Martha's Kitchen** (☎ 804-3647; 10 West St; mains BZ\$15-20; ☹ 6:30am-3pm & 4-11pm) Martha's receives all-round rave reviews, not only for its well-appointed rooms, but also for the diverse and delectable menu. Highlights run the gamut, from tasty pizza and delicious fish burritos, to juicy steaks and vegetarian kebabs. Take a seat inside the wood-accented dining room or outside on the foliage-fronted terrace, but don't be surprised if you have to wait.

To eat local food and hang out with local people, stop by **Eagle's Landing** (☎ 824-0378; Wyatt St; ☹ 24hr).

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Pitpan Tavern** (JNC Mall, Market Sq; ☹ 2pm-midnight Tue-Sun) This tiny little bar is a great local hangout, just behind Market Sq. Excellent atmosphere, by day or night. Come for cold drinks, hot music and plenty of local flavor.

**Cocopelle Bar** (8 Hudson St; ☹ 10am-midnight) A friendly place for drinks, pool, foosball and loud music. The deck out back is a great place for a drink on a warm night.

**Stork Club** (☎ 824-2034; San Ignacio Resort Hotel, 18 Buena Vista St; ☹ bands & DJs 9:30pm-2am Fri & Sat) This hotel is a bit of a social hub, attracting tourists and expats but not too many locals. There is often live music on Saturday; otherwise, DJs play on Friday and Saturday nights.

Another option is **Coconut's** (10 Savannah St), which was undergoing a name change at the time of research. It attracts a steady stream of regulars.

## Shopping

**Back to My Roots** (☎ 824-2740; 30 Burns Ave) Offers cool handmade jewelry, including silver, amber and other semiprecious stones. The name of the place refers to the drums and other Rasta gear for sale.

**Belize Gifts** (☎ 824-4159; JNC Mall, 21 Burns Ave) This place has an excellent selection of high quality souvenirs, including beautiful salad bowls, jewelry boxes and other wooden items. There is also a small selection of books and guidebooks about Belize, including the useful *Guide to the Maya Sites of Belize* by Jaime Awe.

**New Hope Woodworking** (☎ 824-2188; Buena Vista St) South of the center, this carpentry workshop is a worthwhile stop if you are in the market for wooden furniture, cabinetry or smaller items made from mahogany or native woods. Be prepared to check it with your luggage, because it is prohibitively expensive to ship.

**Arts & Crafts of Central America** (☎ 824-2253; 24 Burns Ave) This little shop sells a wide variety of handmade jewelry, handbags and textiles, mostly from Guatemala. This is also the place to book your tours with Easy Rider (p198).

## Getting There & Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

All of the local tour agencies (p198) will provide transfers to/from the Philip Goldson International Airport in Ladyville (near Belize City); Belizean Sun charges BZ\$50 per person (minimum three people). For slightly cheaper rates, check out Cocopelle Bar (p196) or Tropicool Hotel (p199).

## BUS

For information about bus schedules, stop by the stand for the **Savannah Taxi Association** (☎ 824-2155) in the center of Market Sq. This is where buses stop en route to/from Belize City (BZ\$6, two hours), Belmopan (BZ\$4, one hour) and Benque Viejo del Carmen (BZ\$3, 30 minutes). Buses run in both directions just about every half-hour from 7am to 9pm, with less frequent service on Sunday. One bus a day goes to Dangriga (BZ\$12, three hours), Friday to Monday only.

Alternatively, **Amigo's Belize** (☎ 622-0283; www.amigosbelize.com; Missiah St), across the Hawkesworth Bridge, is affiliated with San Juan Travel and Línea Dorada. Twice a day, buses go to Chetumal, Mexico (BZ\$40, 8:30am and 10:30am) via Belize City. An additional bus

comes from Flores, Guatemala and continues on to Belize City (BZ\$20, 11am).

From a vacant lot on Savannah St, buses leave for Bullet Tree Falls (BZ\$1, 15 minutes) at 10:30am, 11am, 11:30am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm, 4pm and 5pm, Monday to Saturday. From the same spot, buses go to San Antonio (BZ\$3, 45 minutes) at 10:45am, 1:15pm, 3:15pm and 5:15pm, Monday to Saturday.

### CAR

Rates include third-party insurance and unlimited mileage at the following agencies:

**Cayo Auto Rentals** (☎ 824-2222, 610-4779; www.cayoautorentals.com; 81 Benque Viejo Rd) Daily rates start at BZ\$164 for a Kia Sportage; rent six days and the seventh day is free.

**Matus Car Rental** (☎ 824-2005, 663-4702; www.matuscarrental.com; 18 Benque Viejo Rd) Rates start at BZ\$115/630 per day/week for a Suzuki Sidekick or Kia Sportage.

**Safe Tours Belize** (☎ 824-4262, 670-4476; 278 Western Hwy, Santa Elena; ☽ 7am-9pm) Rents vehicles for BZ\$164 per day; inquire at the office just north of Hanna's.

### TAXI

Several taxi stands are dotted around the town center. Sample fares are BZ\$20 to the Guatemalan border (9 miles) or Crystal Paradise Resort (5 miles), BZ\$60 round-trip to Xunantunich, and BZ\$80 to BZ\$100 one-way to the Mountain Pine Ridge lodges.

**Colectivo taxis** (charging per person and leaving when they have a full car) head from a vacant lot on Savannah St to Benque Viejo del Carmen (BZ\$4) and the Guatemalan border (BZ\$6). Taxis to Bullet Tree Falls (*colectivo*/private BZ\$4/15) go from Wyatt St, just off Burns Ave.

### NORTHWEST OF SAN IGNACIO

A paved road leads northwest out of San Ignacio, through green pastures and farmland to Bullet Tree Falls, a pretty little town straddling the Mopan River. Beyond Bullet Tree Falls, a rough track covers the 8 miles to the remote Maya site of El Pilar on the Guatemalan border.

### Bullet Tree Falls

Bullet Tree Falls is a quiet and quaint little village, home to a few laid-back lodges overlooking the Mopan River. Although it's on the edge of the jungle, it offers easy access into San Ignacio, even if you don't have your own

vehicle. There is also a handful of outdoor adventure activities at your doorstep, including hiking in the nearby forests and river-tubing down the Mopan.

As you come into the village you'll see the bus stop at the junction of a road to the right (which leads to Iguana Junction and Cohune Palms). Straight ahead, the main road continues 200yd to the bridge over the Mopan.

Eighty yards past the bus stop, **Be Pukte Cultural Center** has a display on El Pilar, with a model of the site and booklets for sale. It also sells tickets for El Pilar and can arrange a taxi there (BZ\$50 round-trip with one hour at the site). Unfortunately, it is open sporadically, so don't come here with high expectations.

Up the road to the left, you'll find the **Masewal Forest Garden** (admission BZ\$5), an herbal and botanical garden that is maintained by the local healer Heriberto Cocom. For the price of admission, he will also offer a consultation and remedy for whatever ails you.

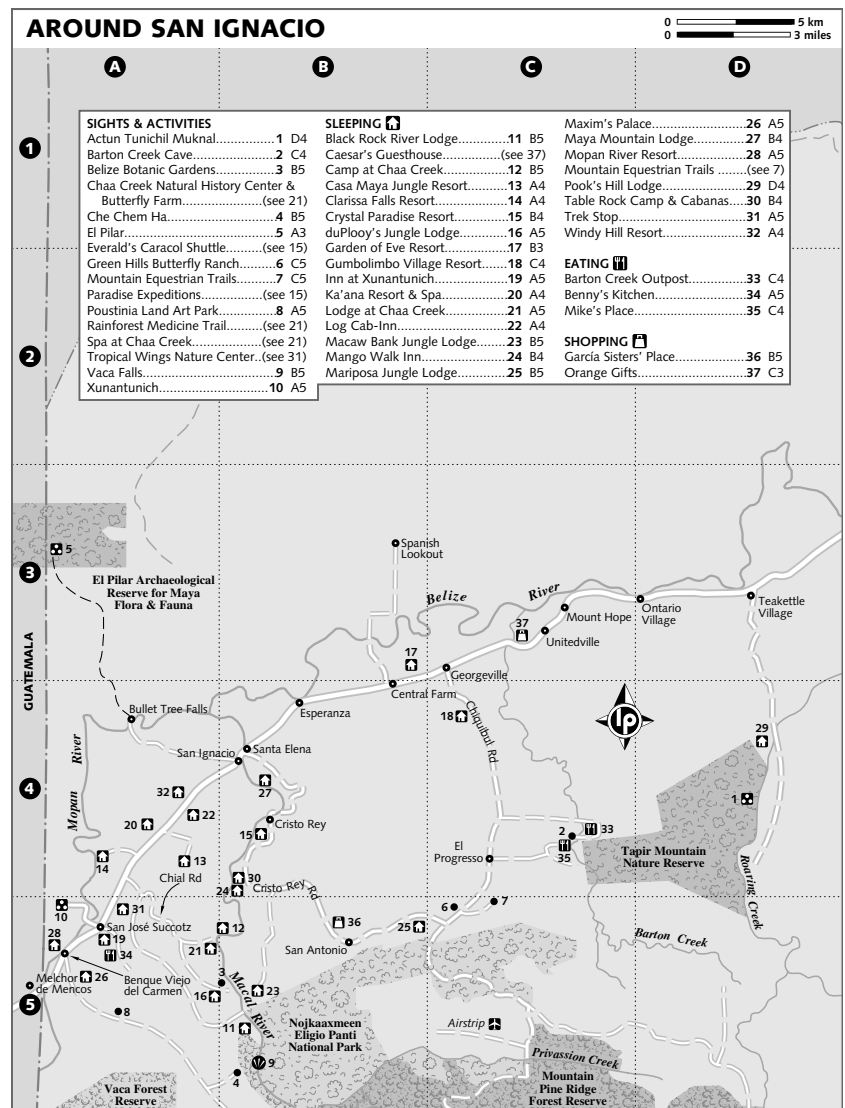
A few knowledgeable local guides lead tours in the area, including tours to El Pilar (BZ\$40 per person including transportation), as well as river-tubing trips (BZ\$25 per person) on the Mopan River and guided hikes along the medicine trail. Contact cousins **Teddy Waight** (☎ 669-2255; vteddy@yahoo.com) or **Anthony Chuc** (☎ 667-6060; keepitsecret@gmail.com).

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Casa del Caballo Blanco** (☎ in USA 707-97-4942; www.casacaballoblanco.com; Bullet Tree Rd; s/d/tr BZ\$266/310/353, breakfast/dinner BZ\$21/47; P) Midway between San Ignacio and Bullet Tree Falls, the 'House of the White Horse' is a concrete yellow ecolodge set on 23 acres of rolling hills and forest overlooking the Mopan River valley. Guests stay in spacious thatched-roof cabanas that are sparingly decorated with hardwood furniture and Maya fabrics. Homegrown veggies and locally produced baked goods cover the tables at meal time. Aside from the sweeping views, the highlight of the White Horse is the bird sanctuary, an impressive facility that is used for the rehabilitation and release of native species.

The following places are listed in order from west to east along the Mopan River.

**Iguana Junction** (☎ 824-2249; www.iguanajunction.com; r with shared bathroom BZ\$66, cabanas with private bathroom BZ\$88) Now under new ownership, the Iguana Junction was recently revamped with a fresh coat of paint, new landscaping



and a gorgeous, spacious riverside deck. All accommodations are simple and clean, but the cabanas feature delightful details such as locally made furniture and lamp shades. The central *palapa* is generously draped with hammocks, making it the ultimate hang-out place. The on-site restaurant is now open only for guests.

**our pick Cohune Palms** (☎ 600-7508, 609-3728; www.cohunepalms.com; s/d/tr BZ\$128/172/216; breakfast/lunch BZ\$16/24; P) Always laid-back but absolutely lovely, Cohune Palms is set on the riverbank, surrounded by its namesake tree. Four spacious cabanas – all topped with a thatch roof – have high ceilings, wood carvings, tile floors and woven tapestries. They

share access to a shady deck, where meals are served. Spend the day swinging in a hammock or sign up for one of the many tours on offer. Cohune Palms also offers week-long yoga retreats several times a year.

**Parrot Nest Jungle Lodge** (☎ 820-4058, 602-6817; www.parrot-nest.com; d with shared/private bathroom BZ\$100/120; breakfast BZ\$8-12, dinner BZ\$22; 📍) If you ever wanted to live like the monkeys, here is your chance to sleep in the branches of a massive guanacaste tree. Five cabins – some on stilts, some in trees – all have sturdy wood construction, thatch roofs and shared bathroom; one larger cabin has a private bathroom and inviting verandah. The overgrown grounds are a haven for wildlife watching, river swimming and hammock swinging. Free shuttle to San Ignacio every morning.

Other options in Bullet Tree Falls are open somewhat sporadically:

**Riverside Lodge** (☎ 824-3580; cabanas BZ\$100; meals BZ\$15-20) Sitting by the north side of the bridge, this place is better for eating than sleeping. The *palapa* restaurant serves decent food in a lovely river setting. Three light-filled cabanas have wood accents and tile floors, but the place does not seem prepared for visitors.

**Hummingbird Hills** (☎ 614-4699; www.hummingbirdhills.com; Paslow Falls Rd; cabanas with shared/private bathroom BZ\$109/175; 📍) The verdant 12-acre grounds are dotted with a dozen cute cabanas and a funky tree house, all constructed with bamboo, thatch and hardwood. It's 500yd along the road to the left between Be Pukte Cultural Center and the bridge.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run seven times daily (except Sunday) from San Ignacio to Bullet Tree Falls (BZ\$1, 15 minutes) and back. Alternatively, *colectivo* taxis pick up passengers at the bus stop at the junction. See p201 for details on departures from San Ignacio and taxi services between the two places.

## El Pilar

The rough road to **El Pilar** (Map p203; admission BZ\$10; 🕒 8am-4pm) heads off to the left 400yd past the bridge in Bullet Tree Falls. Be prepared for a bumpy ride: 4WD is required for the 7-mile jungle trek.

El Pilar was occupied for at least 15 centuries, from the middle Preclassic Period (around 500 BC) to the late Classic Period (about AD 1000). Long before present-day political borders, El Pilar stretched to modern-day Pilar Poniente in Guatemala, and the

two countries are now working as partners to preserve the area. **El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora & Fauna** straddles the international boundary.

With 25 plazas and 70 major structures, El Pilar was more than three times the size of Xunantunich (opposite). Despite excavations since 1993, not much of El Pilar has been cleared; this has been to avoid the decay that often follows clearing of ancient buildings. While appreciating El Pilar's greatness requires some imagination, this may actually help to give you the feeling that you're discovering the place rather than following a well-worn tourist trail.

Six archaeological and nature trails meander among the mounds. The most impressive area is **Plaza Copal**, which has four pyramids 45ft to 60ft high. A partly visible Maya causeway runs 500yd west from here to Pilar Poniente. The site attracts archaeology enthusiasts as well as bird nerds. Toucans, orioles, toucanets, hummingbirds, woodpeckers and even the occasional scarlet macaw are sighted here.

If you have your own vehicle, it's an incredible, remote and rewarding place to wander on your own. Otherwise, you can hire a taxi (BZ\$50 from Bullet Tree Falls) or take a tour. Bullet Tree local **Anthony Chuc** (☎ 667-6060; keepitsecret@gmail.com) brings small groups here (BZ\$40 per person, including transportation).

## SOUTHWEST OF SAN IGNACIO

Southwest from San Ignacio, the Western Hwy runs across rolling countryside toward Benque Viejo del Carmen and the Guatemalan border. There is a variety of places to stay strung out along the highway. Buses between San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen will drop you anywhere along this stretch.

## Between San Ignacio & San José Succotz

As the Western Hwy heads out of town, it passes through the suburbs of San Ignacio – basically a series of resorts scattered around the forested hills. The location is ideal, as the highway provides easy access into town, but the atmosphere feels like it's far from anywhere.

**Bamboo Crafts & Furniture** (☎ 624-0808; www.bamboobelize.com) is a small family-run business with a showroom in the village of Callow Creek, about 7 miles out of San Ignacio. Stop by to

see how the bamboo is cultivated and harvested, then crafted into fine furniture. This sustainable practice results in uniquely rustic pieces that are reasonably priced (if you can figure out how to get them home). Turn north off the Western Hwy and follow the signs.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Clarissa Falls Resort** (Map p203; ☎ 824-3916; www.clarissafalls.com; Mile 70 Western Hwy; camping per person BZ\$15, cottages per person BZ\$65, ste BZ\$350; meals BZ\$10-20; 📍) In an idyllic setting on the banks of the Mopan River, this rustic little ranch welcomes guests and makes them feel like part of the family. The lodging is in cement blocks with thatched roofs and no windows, meaning very little natural light gets in, but it is simple, clean and comfortable. Ample activities are at your doorstep, including horseback riding, river rafting and river-tubing. Located about 1 mile off the Western Hwy.

**Log Cab-Inn** (Map p203; ☎ 824-3367; www.logcabinn-belize.com; Mile 68 Western Hwy; s/d BZ\$142/164, incl meals BZ\$233/347; 📍 📺 📶) Despite the unfortunate name, the Log Cab-Inn is a wonderful, welcoming resort on a scenic hillside, almost opposite Windy Hill. The cabins are indeed built from mahogany logs, and much of the furniture is crafted at the carpentry workshop on site. Orange and palm trees dot the grounds, which also feature an open-air restaurant and bar. Kids under 12 stay free with parents.

**Casa Maya Jungle Resort** (Map p203; ☎ 820-4020; www.casamayaresort.com; Mile 68½ Western Hwy; s/d cabanas BZ\$220/240, incl meals BZ\$298/318; 📍 📺 📶) Follow the signs about 1.4 miles off the highway to this extensive resort, spread out over the back slope of the Maya Mountains. White stucco cabanas have hardwood frames and bay leaf palm-thatched roofs, all of which is harvested sustainably from the local jungle. On the grounds, you can explore nature and medicinal trails, ride mountain bikes and admire the birds from the beautiful hilltop *palapa*. A full range of tours and activities is offered, including multiday wilderness treks.

**Ka'ana Resort & Spa** (Map p203; ☎ 824-3350; www.kaanabelize.com; Mile 69 Western Hwy; d/q BZ\$600/800, breakfast BZ\$16-24, lunch & dinner BZ\$40-60; 📍 📺 📶) If you are in the market for some indulgence, this new boutique resort and spa is a good place to start. Luxurious rooms and casitas are fully equipped with high-thread-count sheets, down comforters, LCD televisions and classy,

contemporary decor. Private terraces overlook the lush grounds. The gourmet restaurant offers innovative, organic local cuisine and a well-stocked wine cellar. Most tempting is the full menu of spa treatments at the Caribbean Spa (open 7:30am to 8:30pm), ranging from facials and pedicures to mud wraps and the signature couples' massage. Nonguests also welcome at the spa.

**Windy Hill Resort** (Map p203; ☎ 824-2017; www.windyhillresort.com; Mile 68 Western Hwy; 3-night/4-day packages s/d/tr/q from BZ\$2634/3046/3424/3800; 📍 📺 📶) Windy Hill, set on – yes – a breezy hillside located 1 mile west of the edge of San Ignacio, is a family-run resort for the interested and active. Packages (three to seven days) cover all of the major sights and activities of western Belize combined with lodging, meals and airport transfers. Accommodations are in attractive wooden cottages spread across manicured gardens, all with custom-made furniture, local art and hand-woven rugs. Plentiful meals are served in a large *palapa*; the bar, games room and fitness center will fill any spare moments. Reduced rates for kids.

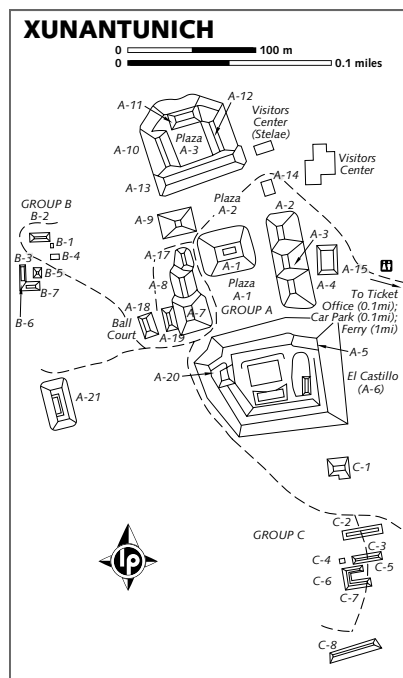
## San José Succotz

There's not much to this little village, located 6.5 miles west of San Ignacio on the Western Hwy. On the way from San Ignacio to the Guatemalan border, Succotz gets plenty of people passing through, many of whom stop to spend a morning at Xunantunich, an impressive and easily accessible Maya site (see below). A handful of restaurants and mini-resorts is strung out along the Western Hwy to cater to archaeology buffs and other adventurers. It's easy to visit Xunantunich on an outing from San Ignacio, or you may prefer to use this slow-paced barrio as your base for exploring Cayo and Guatemala. The bus between San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen will drop you here.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Xunantunich

Set on a leveled hilltop, **Xunantunich** (Map p203; admission BZ\$10; 🕒 7:30am-4pm), pronounced *shoonahn-too-nee-ch*, is one of Belize's most easily accessible and impressive Maya archaeological sites. To reach the ruins, take the free, hand-cranked ferry across the Mopan River. From the ferry, which comes and goes on demand, it's about 1 mile uphill to the parking lot and ticket office. It's a semi-strenuous walk with



great opportunities for sighting birds and butterflies. At the end, your reward is a complex of temples and plazas that date back to the 7th century.

Xunantunich may have been occupied as early as 1000 BC but was little more than a village. As mentioned, the large architecture that we see today began to be built in the 7th century AD. From AD 700 to 850, Xunantunich was possibly politically aligned with Naranjo, 9 miles west in Guatemala. Together, they controlled the western part of the Belize River valley, although the population probably never exceeded 10,000. Xunantunich partially survived the initial Classic Maya collapse of about AD 850 (when nearby Cahal Pech was abandoned), but was deserted by about AD 1000. A good visitors center, located between the ticket office and the hilltop ruins, explains this history.

The site centers on **Plazas A-2** and **A-1**, separated by Structure A-1. Just north of Plaza A-2, Structure A-11 and **Plaza A-3** formed a residential 'palace' area for the ruling family. The dominant **El Castillo** (Structure A-6) rises 130ft high at the south end of Plaza A-1. El

Castillo may have been the ruling family's ancestral shrine, where they were buried and/or represented in sculpted friezes. Structures A-1 and A-13, at either end of Plaza A-2, were not built until the 9th century and would have had the effect of separating the ruling family from the rest of the population, possibly a response to the pressures that came with the decline of Classic Maya civilization at that time.

You can climb to the top of El Castillo to enjoy a spectacular 360-degree view. Its upper levels were constructed in two distinct phases. The first, built around 800, included an elaborate **plaster frieze** encircling the building; the second, around 900, covered over most of the first and its frieze. The frieze on the east end of the building and part of the western one have been uncovered by archaeologists; these depict a series of Maya deities, with Chac, the rain god, probably being the central figure at the east end. The friezes you see today are actually replicas, with the originals underneath for safe keeping.

South of El Castillo is a partly overgrown area of lesser structures (Group C) that were abandoned as the city shrank after 900, leaving El Castillo (formerly at the center of the ancient city) on the southern edge of the occupied area.

### Tropical Wings Nature Center

Perhaps you are looking for something to do on a rainy day or you need a low-key afternoon activity after spending an exhausting morning at Xunantunich? Look no further than the **Tropical Wings Nature Center** (Map p203; ☎ 823-2265; www.thetrekstop.com; Mile 71 Western Hwy; adult/child BZ\$6/3; ☎ 9am-5pm). The interactive ecology exhibits are aimed at kids, but even adults will enjoy the butterfly house and medicinal gardens. If you crave some more active recreation, try your hand at **Frisbee golf** (per person BZ\$6), a newfangled sport that requires floating the disk through the trees and into baskets. It's all on the grounds of the Trek Stop (opposite).

### River-Tubing

Between San José Succotz and Clarissa Falls, the Mopan River twists and turns through green pastures and lush jungles, teeming with wildlife, birds and butterflies. Women do their washing on the rocks and kids play in the cool rapids. You can see it all from the comfy perch of a **river-tube** (BZ\$20) as you float along the 2-

mile route. There is no cooler way to spend a hot afternoon. Look for the 'tubing' sign just northeast of the ferry; price includes pick-up at Clarissa Falls Farm.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Trek Stop** (Map p203; ☎ 823-2265; www.thetrekstop.com; Mile 71 Western Hwy; camping per person BZ\$11, s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom BZ\$33/52/83/96, d/tr/q with private bathroom BZ\$83/109/131; breakfast BZ\$5-10, main dishes BZ\$10-15; ☎ restaurant 7am-8pm; ☎) The Trek Stop offers a unique combination of ecotourism and backpackers' outpost, perfectly located to provide a remote jungle setting and easy access to all the local sites. Hand-hewn cabins have simple wood furnishings and private verandahs. Toilets are self-composting. There is plenty of hang-out space, including a shady hammock lounge, a self-catering kitchen and a highly recommended (and affordable) restaurant. The entrance to the Trek Stop is right on the Western Hwy (just before San José Succotz), but its 22 acres extend back into the wilds, where you can enjoy Frisbee golf, nature trails and other jungle activities.

**Inn at Xunantunich** (Map p203; ☎ 624-5262, 662-2036; info@innatx.com; Mile 72 Western Hwy; r BZ\$60-90; meals BZ\$10-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☎) Opposite the ferry to Xunantunich, this hotel provides brightly colored rooms set around a pool. The atmosphere is enhanced by carved wood masks and totems, perched up on the bar and around the patio. The rooms are rather plain, though the pricier options have more space and some Maya masks for decoration. The 2nd-floor dining terrace overlooks the river, making it a lovely place to lunch after exploring the ruins at Xunantunich.

**Benny's Kitchen** (Map p203; ☎ 823-2541; Mile 72 Western Hwy; meals BZ\$10-20; ☎ 7am-10pm Sun-Thu, to midnight Fri & Sat) Sample the local specialties at Benny's, just a few steps from the Xunantunich ferry. Come for tangy *escabèche* (spicy chicken and onion stew), spicy BBQ or – only in Belize – cow foot soup! It's about 50m off the Western Hwy; turn off the road that heads south in Succotz.

### Chial Road

Chial Rd, heading southeast off the Western Hwy, 5 miles from San Ignacio, gives access to three exquisite lodges on the west bank of the Macal River. In operation for as long as 30 years, these are some of the region's longest established and best-loved lodges. Aside

from the rather luxurious accommodations, they also offer an extensive range of activities, including some unique nature attractions that are open to nonguests.

Getting here is half the fun: Chial Rd is unpaved and very bumpy, traversing miles of agricultural fields, orange and lemon orchards and untamed wilderness. A 4WD may be required, especially outside the driest months. If you don't have your own vehicle, any of the lodges can provide airport transfers.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

#### Belize Botanic Gardens

On the grounds at duPlooy's Jungle Lodge (p208), the **Belize Botanic Gardens** (Map p203; ☎ 824-3101; www.belizebotanic.org; per person unguided/guided tour BZ\$10/20, self-guided tour booklet BZ\$15, guided tour with transport BZ\$30; ☎ 7am-3pm) is one of the region's highlight attractions. The bountiful 45-acre zone boasts 2 miles of trails, many fruit trees and four different Belizean habitats: wetlands, rainforest, Mountain Pine Ridge (with a lookout tower) and plants of the Maya. Two ponds attract a variety of waterfowl; Hamilton Hide allows birders to bring their binoculars and spy on various species. Highlighting native species, Belize Botanic Gardens has a native orchid house and a special exhibit on the products and uses of native palms.

It's easy to while away a day (or a half day) at the botanic gardens. Sign up in advance for the **Early Bird Tour** (per person BZ\$45; ☎ 6am), which includes transportation, guided tour and breakfast. Or spend a **Day at the Gardens** (per person BZ\$65), which includes transportation, guided tour and your choice of horseback riding or canoeing.

#### Chaa Creek

North along the Macal River, the Lodge at Chaa Creek (p208) also has extensive grounds and facilities that are open to nonguests.

Running through the jungle just above the river, the **Rainforest Medicine Trail** (guided tours BZ\$10; ☎ tours hourly 8am-5pm) was established by Dr Rosita Arvigo (see boxed text, p209). This is just one of a series of projects, which aim to spread knowledge of traditional healing methods and preserve the rainforest habitats, from which many healing plants come. It identifies about 100 medicinal plants used in traditional Maya and/or modern medicine. A gift shop near the start of the trail sells a guide to the trail's plants and some of Dr Arvigo's books.

From here, hike up the tree-covered hillside to the **Chaa Creek Natural History Center & Butterfly Farm** (Map p203; guided tours BZ\$10; ☒ tours hourly 8am-4pm), a small nature center with displays on Belize's flora and fauna, as well as the early Maya. The highlight is the butterfly farm, which breeds the dazzlingly iridescent blue morpho (*Morpho peleides*) for export.

On the crest of the hill, the **Spa at Chaa Creek** (Map p203; ☎ 824-2037; [www.chaacreek.com](http://www.chaacreek.com); 1-day packages BZ\$474) overlooks the 365-acre grounds, offering a spectacular panorama of the Macal River valley. Enjoy the view while indulging in a massage, facial, aromatherapy, body wrap or some other sensual treat.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Our pick Black Rock River Lodge** (Map p203; ☎ 824-2341; [www.blackrocklodge.com](http://www.blackrocklodge.com); d with shared bathroom BZ\$152, river view/deluxe d BZ\$240/316, extra person BZ\$22; breakfast BZ\$20, lunch items BZ\$8-10, dinner BZ\$80; ☑) High up the Macal in beautiful Black Rock Canyon, this is a stunning setting for a jungle adventure. Comfortable slate-and-wood cabins look down on the river, where there are sandy beaches for swimming. From here you can hike a signed trail up the mountain behind the lodge, ride a horse to Vaca Falls up the Macal, or bike to the little-visited Flour Camp Cave, with its abundant ancient Maya pottery, stalactites and stalagmites. The vast dining area and deck, covered by a *palapa*, is fantastic for birding, but you may also spot howler monkeys, otters and iguanas. The electricity here is solar and hydro. Black Rock River Lodge is at the end of a good, well signposted, 6-mile unpaved road that leaves Chial Rd 0.8 miles off the Western Hwy.

**duPlooy's Jungle Lodge** (Map p203; ☎ 824-3101; [www.duplooy.com](http://www.duplooy.com); r BZ\$431, bungalows BZ\$540, ste & casitas BZ\$695, all incl breakfast; 3 meals BZ\$92; ☑ ☒ ☑) Relaxed but well-managed, duPlooy's is a family-run lodge that sits in large and lovely grounds above the Macal. Founded in 1989 it's one of the longest-running Cayo lodges. Rooms and bungalows are spacious and comfortable, sleeping up to four people in two queen- or king-size beds. The suites and the casita can comfortably sleep as many as eight people, and they also include a kitchen and living space. All lodging options have private verandahs overlooking the jungle grounds. Guests can enjoy swimming or canoeing in the river, hiking along the jungle trails, and coffee and bird observation from the bar in

the morning, all for free. To reach duPlooy's, turn right off Chial Rd after 2.5 miles and go on for 1.7 miles. Another perk is free access to the Belize Botanic Gardens (p207), on the grounds here.

**Lodge at Chaa Creek** (Map p203; ☎ 824-2037, 820-4010; [www.chaacreek.com](http://www.chaacreek.com); cottages s/d/tr BZ\$512/714/820, ste BZ\$833, all incl breakfast; lunch/dinner BZ\$22/70; ☑ ☒) Consistently rated among the best lodges in Belize, Chaa Creek's tropical gardens and beautifully kept thatched cottages spread across a gentle slope above the Macal, 3 miles from the highway. Owned and operated by Lucy and Mick Fleming since 1977, Chaa Creek blossomed from an overgrown farm into Belize's original jungle lodge. The cottages, richly decorated with Maya textiles and local crafts, all have good decks, fans and private bathrooms. An array of tours and activities is offered, and Chaa Creek is proud of its state-of-the-art spa on a hilltop overlooking the river. Chaa Creek is one of the original ecolodges, with its rainforest medicinal trail (p207) and organic Maya farm.

The **Camp at Chaa Creek** (Map p203; Macal River Camp; per person incl dinner & breakfast BZ\$130) is Chaa Creek's more economical alternative, half a mile away on the banks of the river. Wooden cabins on stilts are screened on all sides, with comfy cots inside and a shady verandah outside. The place is not landscaped, but rather inhabits the jungle without disturbing the environs. They all share clean bathrooms and excellent hot showers. A campfire is lit nightly, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie. To reach the Camp at Chaa Creek, you'll have to park in the designated area and hike in through the jungle for about half a mile. Room rates at both the Lodge and the Camp include canoeing, guided bird walks and visits to the on-site rainforest medicine trail, natural history center and butterfly farm.

### Benque Viejo del Carmen

About a mile from the Guatemalan border and 7 miles from San Ignacio, Benque Viejo del Carmen (population 6700) is a small town with a surprisingly sophisticated cultural scene. Aside from the interesting attractions in the vicinity, it is home to the **Benque Viejo House of Culture** (☎ 823-2697; 64 St Joseph St; ☒ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri), which hosts exhibits, and **Stone Tree Records** ([www.stonetreerecords.com](http://www.stonetreerecords.com)), which produces some of Belize's best known music.

### RAINFOREST REMEDIES: ROSITA ARVIGO

Rosita Arvigo is doing her part to bring the wisdom of the Maya to the whole wide world. She has been studying herbal healing and rainforest remedies for more than a quarter of a century.

She credits much of her knowledge to the wisdom of Don Eligio Panti, one of the last known Maya natural healers, from San Antonio village. In decades of healing, Don Eligio had treated thousands of patients who traveled from all over Belize to seek his help with physical, emotional and spiritual ailments. To Arvigo, it seemed that the illiterate Don Eligio had an almost magical power to heal. But she knew that this healing power didn't come out of thin air; rather, it came from plants, flowers and the Maya spirits that lived high on tree branches, under bushes and in the ground. So she convinced Eligio to pass on his knowledge to her. She studied and worked with Eligio for 14 years, gathering plants from the forests and knowledge from the old man's wisdom, until his death in 1996, at age 103.

In the meantime, Arvigo also began working with Dr Michael Balick, director of the Institute of Economic Botany at the New York Botanical Garden. Together, under the Belize Ethnobotany Project, they identified, cataloged and collected 3560 plants, some of which are being investigated in the US for potential use in the fights against cancer and AIDS. Arvigo is adamant that natural healing should not replace conventional medicine, but rather complement it. They both serve their purposes, she insists.

Arvigo set up the Ix Chel Tropical Research Foundation (named for the Maya goddess of healing and medicine), with a mandate to preserve traditional healing methods and conserve the rainforest through research and education. At her farm she established the Rainforest Medicine Trail (p207), now operated by Chaa Creek, which demonstrates the medicinal values of Belize's plant life. Arvigo was also involved in starting Rainforest Remedies, a San Ignacio enterprise whose herbal remedies are on sale throughout Belize. These remedies, with names such as 'Belly Be Good,' help everything from backaches and colds to traveler's diarrhea and frayed nerves.

More recently Dr Arvigo has focused on abdominal massage, using ancient Maya techniques, which repositions organs that have dropped, seeking to restore the body's balance (see [www.arvigomassage.com](http://www.arvigomassage.com)).

Arvigo tells her fascinating story in her book *Sastun: My Apprenticeship with a Maya Healer*, coauthored by Nadine Epstein. She has also coauthored *Rainforest Remedies: One Hundred Healing Herbs of Belize* and *Rainforest Home Remedies: The Maya Way to Heal Your Body & Replenish Your Soul*. To learn about some of her remedies, see p63.

The centerpiece of the town is **Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church**, visible from all corners. On Good Friday (the Friday before Easter), the church hosts a dramatic procession through town. In mid-July, Benque breaks out of its tropical somnolence, when the **Benque Viejo del Carmen Fiesta** celebrates the town's patron saint with several days of music and fun.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

#### Poustinia Land Art Park

Drive about 2.5 miles south of Benque Viejo along the unpaved, overgrown Hydro Rd, and you will come to one of the hidden jewels of Western Belize. **Poustinia Land Art Park** (Map p203; ☎ 822-3532; [www.poustiniaonline.org](http://www.poustiniaonline.org); Mile 2½ Hydro Rd; admission by appointment only BZ\$20) is a highly unexpected avant-garde sculpture park in 60 acres of rainforest. Created by Benque broth-

ers Luis and David Ruiz, it displays some 30 works by Belizean and international artists. Poustinia was conceived as an environmental art project, where, once in place, the exhibits – including a car, a greenhouse and a strip of parquet flooring – become subject to the action of nature, which may rot, corrode or otherwise transmute them.

One piece, *Stone Labyrinth*, is set on top of an unexcavated Maya mound with views to Xunantunich (p205). Poustinia is best enjoyed if you have time to contemplate the art and the natural environment it's set in. Allow at least two hours, preferably more.

Make arrangements and buy your admission ticket at Benque Viejo House of Culture (opposite), just off Campo Santo Memorial Park. The House of Culture can also arrange for a taxi cab to take you to Poustinia (BZ\$20). Otherwise, turn south off George Price Blvd

## GETTING TO GUATEMALA

The Belize–Guatemala border is 1 mile beyond Benque Viejo del Carmen. If you are crossing the border on foot, it is advisable to do so in the morning, as onward transportation dwindles with the approach of nightfall. If you are traveling on a through bus en route to Flores, you will have to unload your luggage and carry it across the border, stop at passport control desks for both countries, then reboard your bus on the other side.

Travelers leaving Belize must pay a departure tax of BZ\$30, plus a conservation fee of BZ\$7.50. Pay this fee on the Belizean side of the border, before passing through passport control. You do not have to pay any fees in Guatemala; see p260 for information on Guatemalan visa requirements.

There are no banks on either side of the border (nor in Benque Viejo del Carmen), but money changers on both sides buy and sell Guatemalan, Mexican, Belizean and US currencies at decent rates. See p260 for information about money in Guatemala.

Taxis run to the border from San Ignacio and Benque Viejo. On a *colectivo* basis you pay BZ\$4 to/from San Ignacio and BZ\$2 to/from Benque. A private taxi costs about BZ\$20 to/from San Ignacio and BZ\$10 for Benque.

On the Guatemalan side of the border, you can often charter a taxi or minibus to Flores or Tikal (Q300 to Q350, two hours); chances of this are best in the morning. Otherwise, walk about half a mile to the market in Melchor de Mencos, the border town on the Guatemalan side. From the market there are minibuses to Flores (Q20) about every half-hour from around 5am to 6pm. If you're heading for El Remate, these vehicles can drop you at Puente Ixlu (El Cruce).

onto Hydro Rd, beside the Long Luck Super Store, and drive 2.5 miles to the park.

## The Chem Ha

William Morales' dog was busy chasing down a gibbon on his lush property one day in 1989, when the dog seemingly disappeared into a rock wall. Morales pressed into the 'wall' and found it was actually a cave mouth; inside he came upon probably the largest collection of Maya pottery ever discovered. The cave is **Chem Ha** (Map p203; ☎ 820-4063; Mile 8 Hydro Rd; tour per person BZ\$40), or the 'Cave of Poisonwood Water.'

Morales' family has been farming this land since the 1940s, and today they also conduct tours through the cave, offering lunches and simple lodgings to visitors. The cave, about 800ft long, was used by the Maya for many centuries for food storage and rituals.

Narrow passages wind past ceremonial pots, many of them intact, to a stela at the end of the tunnel. Short ladders enable you to climb up rock ledges. Bring strong shoes, water and a flashlight. The tour lasts about 90 minutes, following an uphill jungle walk of about 30 minutes to the cave mouth. After the cave, you can visit a lovely waterfall on the property and/or hike about 30 minutes down to **Vaca Falls** for a swim in the Macal River.

It's a good idea to ring ahead, and, if you like, order a good home-cooked lunch

(BZ\$15). You can also make arrangements for transportation from San Ignacio or Benque Viejo del Carmen; continue south on Hydro Rd, about 5.5 miles beyond Poustinia.

## SLEEPING

**Mopan River Resort** (Map p203; ☎ 823-2047; [www.mopanriverresort.com](http://www.mopanriverresort.com); Riverside North; 3-night packages per person cabanas/ste BZ\$1314/1446; 📅 Nov-Jun; 🍷 🍷) Set in beautifully manicured gardens on the north bank of the Mopan River (you'll be ferried across from Benque on arrival), this resort specializes in worry-free adventure vacations. Guests get to know each other remarkably easily with the assistance of fruity cocktails (included in the package price)! The packages (from three nights upward) also include meals, airport transfers and daily activities. After an outing exploring archaeological sites, river-tubing, bird-watching or kayaking, guests return to lovely accommodations with hardwood floors and furniture, modern bathrooms with tub, and spacious verandahs. The food is first class, with a different international buffet each night.

**Maxim's Palace** (☎ 823-2360; [cayobenque@yahoo.com](mailto:cayobenque@yahoo.com); 41 Church Hill St; s/d BZ\$80/120; 📍 🍷) If you are passing through en route to/from Guatemala, considering crashing at *chez Maxim*. Spacious rooms, warm hospitality and affordable rates make it a decent place to use as a base as you explore the sights around the border.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Benque Viejo del Carmen is the end of the line for most Western Hwy buses from Belize City. Buses depart for San Ignacio (BZ\$2, 30 minutes), Belmopan (BZ\$6, 1½ hours) and Belize City (BZ\$10, 2½ hours) about every half-hour from 7am to 5:30pm (and about every hour on Sundays).

## MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE AREA

South of San Ignacio and the Western Hwy, the land begins to climb toward the heights of the Maya Mountains, whose arching ridge forms the border separating Cayo District from Stann Creek District to the east and Toledo District to the south.

In the heart of this highland area, 200 sq miles of submontane (ie on the foothills or lower slopes of mountains) pine forest is protected as the **Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve**. Unlike the tropical broadleaf forests so prevalent in Belize, whose shallow soils sit on limestone, much of the Mountain Pine Ridge's soil sits on a superficial level of red clay, beneath which lies solid granite, making agriculture almost impossible.

The sudden switch from tropical rainforest to pine trees as you ascend to the Mountain Pine Ridge – a broad upland area of multiple ridges and valleys – is a little bizarre and somewhat startling. Also unexpected is the number of dead pines, the result of an infestation by the southern pine beetle in 2000. Fortunately the forest is growing back, thanks in part to a reforestation program; initial fears that the beetle would kill the entire forest have proved groundless. With luck it will be back to something like its former glory in 20 or 30 years.

The reserve is full of **rivers, pools, waterfalls** and **caves**; the higher elevation means relief from both heat and mosquitoes. Beyond the Pine Ridge, to the southwest, are the ruins of Caracol (p213), Belize's largest and most important Maya site.

The main road into the Mountain Pine Ridge area is the Chiquibul Rd (also called the Pine Ridge Rd), which heads south off the Western Hwy at Georgeville. The Cristo Rey Rd from Santa Elena (near San Ignacio) meets up with the Chiquibul Rd after 9 miles. Both of these roads and all others in the area (except for the final 12 miles to Caracol) are unpaved and very rough. For the most part, they are drivable in an ordinary car with reasonably high clearance, except in some cases

after a lot of rain. Give priority to any large trucks you meet. Without a car, you can take one of the Mountain Pine Ridge or Caracol tours from San Ignacio (see p198).

At the entrance to the protected area, 1.4 miles up the Chiquibul Rd from the Cristo Rey Rd junction, a warden stops all vehicles and registers names and license plates. This is to control illegal activity and to keep track of who is in the area in case of accidents or bad weather. You can inquire here about road conditions further on.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Keep in mind that this massive area is largely uninhabited. The exceptions include a small presence of forestry and dam-construction workers in the village of Douglas D'Silva (also called Augustine), staff at the area lodges, a few archaeologists, occasional troops on training exercises and a smattering of illegal squatters from Guatemala. Nonetheless, Mountain Pine Ridge is one of the country's most remote regions.

In recent years, there were several reported incidents of tourist vehicles being stopped by armed robbers, presumed to be Guatemalan bandits. For this reason, the park instituted a convoy system, where rangers accompany all vehicles traveling to Caracol (see p214). It's an extreme measure that does not allow for much flexibility but it seems to be working.

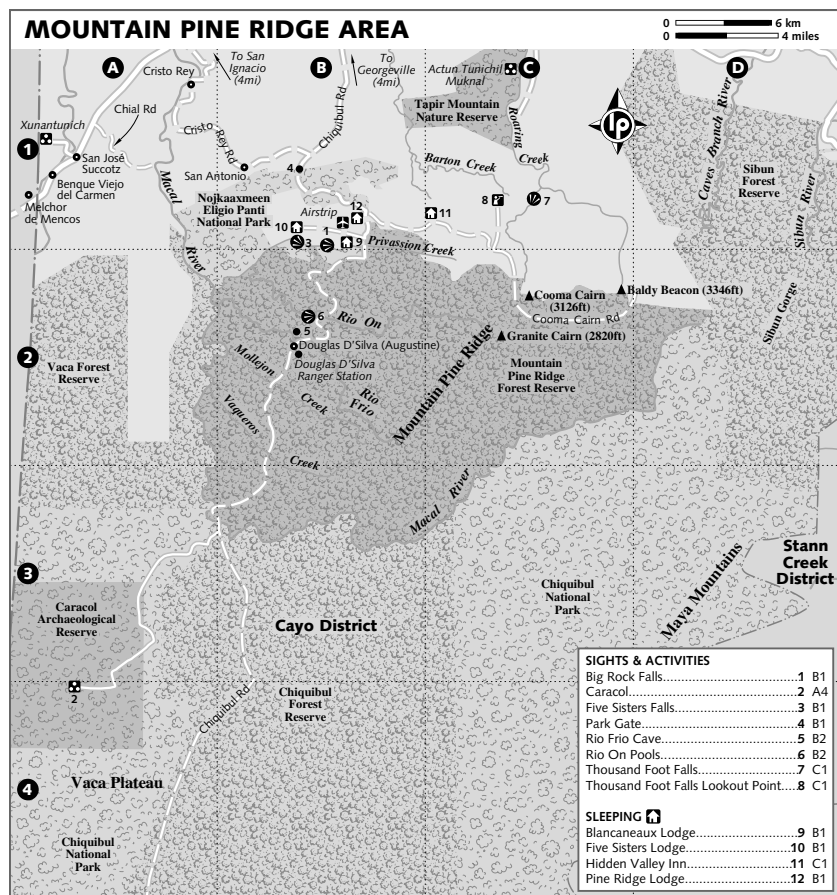
## Sights & Activities

### WATERFALLS & CAVES

It's a far cry from the rainforest, but the pine forest is also a thriving ecosystem, covered with flora, traversed by river systems and replete with birds and other wildlife. The Macal River, Rio Frio, Barton Creek and Roaring Creek all start up on Mountain Pine Ridge. From here they flow north to the Belize River and out to the sea, cascading across rocky cliffs and verdant hillsides along the way.

### Thousand Foot Falls

Ten miles off Chiquibul Rd, the Thousand Foot Falls are reckoned to be the highest falls in Central America. Access them by turning onto Cooma Cairn Rd, then turning left after 7 miles at the '1000 Ft Falls' sign. What you actually reach is a **lookout point** (admission BZ\$4; 📅 8am-5pm) with a view of the falls plunging over the edge of the pine-covered plateau into the tropical broadleaf valley far below. The



falls are in fact around 1600ft high, but the thin long stream of falling water is unlikely to hold your interest for a very long time. Birders should keep their eyes peeled for the rare orange-breasted falcon.

The highest point of the Mountain Pine Ridge is **Baldy Beacon** (3346ft), topped by a cluster of transmitter masts. Follow the signs a further 8 miles from the Thousand Foot Falls turnout.

### Privassion Creek

The shorter (150ft) and wider **Big Rock Falls** on Privassion Creek are more powerful and, for many people, more beautiful and impressive than Thousand Foot Falls. Take the road toward Five Sisters Lodge and, 1.5 miles past

Blancaneaux Lodge, turn along a track to the left where a 'Five Sisters Lodge' sign points straight ahead. The track ends after about 175yd, and a foot trail continues 400yd down to the river. You can swim in the river and the falls are 100yd upstream. There's also a trail to the falls from Blancaneaux Lodge (p215).

**Five Sisters Falls**, a set of smaller cascades with swimming pools and shelter pavilions at their base, are on the property of Five Sisters Lodge (p215). From the lodge, walk along the trail for about 45 minutes, or take the hydro-powered **mini-tram** (lodge guests/non-guests free/BZ\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm). Near the falls, Five Sisters maintains an impressive floral display of hundreds of species of orchids, bromeliads and palmettos.

### Rio Frio & Rio On

Just off Chiquibul Rd, 2.5 miles north of Douglas D'Silva, **Rio On Pools** is a series of small waterfalls connecting pools that the river has carved out of granite boulders. It's a beautiful spot: the pools are refreshing for a dip and the smooth slabs of granite are perfect for stretching out on to dry off. A picnic area and outhouse are the only amenities here, but it's a popular spot for tour groups on their way back from Caracol.

In Douglas D'Silva itself, look for the signed turnout to **Rio Frio Cave**, less than 1 mile away. The river gurgles through the sizeable cave, keeping it cool while you explore.

### CARACOL

Once one of the most powerful cities in the entire Maya world, **Caracol** (admission BZ\$15; ☎ 8am-4pm) now lies enshrouded by thick jungle near the Guatemalan border, a 52-mile, two-hour drive from San Ignacio.

Sitting high on the Vaca Plateau, 1650ft above sea level, this is the largest Maya site in Belize, having stretched over possibly 70 sq miles at its peak around AD 650. Nearly 40 miles of internal causeways radiate from the center to large outlying plazas and residential areas, and connect parts of the city. At its height, the city's population may have approached 150,000, more than twice as many people as Belize City has today. Though they had no natural water source, the people of Caracol dug artificial reservoirs to catch rain-water and grew food on extensive agricultural terraces. Its central area was a bustling place of temples, palaces, busy thoroughfares, craft workshops and markets. Caracol is not only the preeminent archaeological site in Belize but also exciting for its jungle setting and prolific bird life.

At the ticket office, a small visitors center outlines Caracol's history and has a helpful scale model. A museum under construction will house much of the sculpture found at Caracol. There are toilets, picnic tables and a small gift shop. Be sure to bring food, water and, if you're driving, a spare tire. Overnight stays are not permitted.

### Maya History

Caracol was settled by 600 BC but remained a modest place until the Classic Period. What sparked a sudden explosive growth in the 6th century AD was a confrontation with mighty

Tikal, some 50 miles northwest. Caracol appears to have been allied with Calakmul (in Campeche state, Mexico), Tikal's major rival in the ancient Maya world. Caracol's Altar 21 (actually a ball court marker) records an 'axe event' in AD 556 that is thought to have been the sacrifice at Tikal of someone from Caracol, triggering hostilities between the two cities.

Altar 21 further records a successful war against Tikal by Caracol's ruler Lord Water in 562. Tikal's ruler Double Bird may have been sacrificed by Caracol at this time. The decades following these events saw a surge of construction and population at Caracol and a halt in the erection of monuments at Tikal. Tikal may have been forced to hand over much of its wealth to Caracol in the form of tribute for a century or more. Caracol's Lord Kan II conquered Naranjo, 25 miles north (in Guatemala), in 631, but Naranjo later turned the tables, defeating Caracol in 680. Thereafter Caracol declined in importance, although a prosperous elite continued to occupy the central area until around 895.

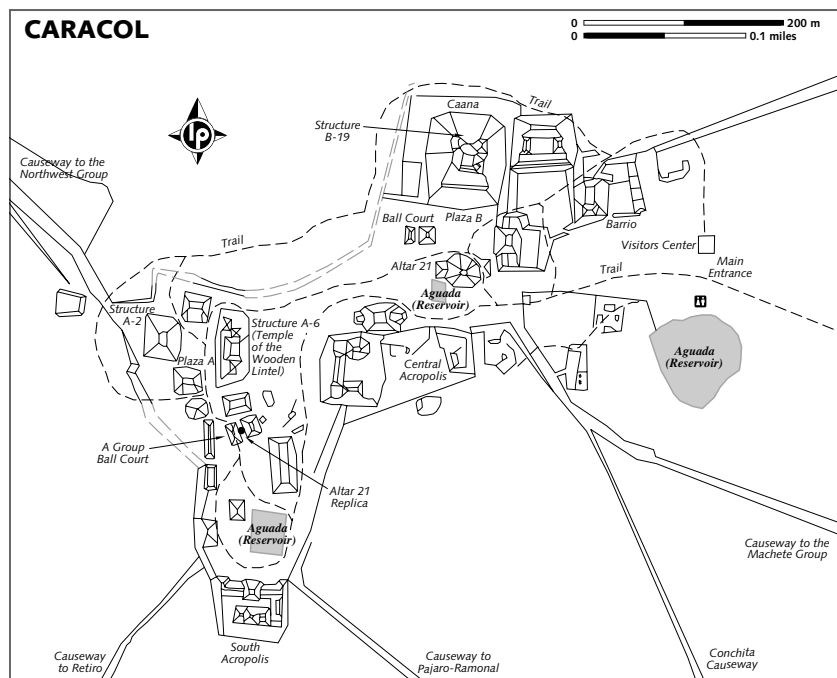
### Excavation History

In 1937 a logger named Rosa Mai first stumbled upon the ruins. In 1938 commissioner of archaeology AH Anderson named the site Caracol (Spanish for snail), perhaps because of all the snail shells found in the soil. In 1950 Linton Satterthwaite from the University of Pennsylvania recorded the visible stone monuments, mapped the site core and excavated several tombs, buildings and monuments. Many stelae were removed and sent to Pennsylvania. Since 1985, Drs Diane and Arlen Chase have led the **Caracol Archaeological Project** ([www.caracol.org](http://www.caracol.org)), with annual field seasons conducting surveys and excavations that have revealed Caracol's massive central core and complex urban development. From 2000 to 2004 the Tourism Development Project carried out an excavation and conservation program led by Belizean archaeologist Jaime Awe, and improved the road access to Caracol.

### Touring the Site

A system of trails meanders through Caracol, but Plazas A and B are the most excavated. The highlight is **Caana** (Sky-Place), which rises from Plaza B, and at 141ft is still the tallest building in Belize! Caana underwent many





construction phases until its completion in about 800. It supports four palace compounds and three temples. High steps narrowing up to the top probably led to the royal family's compound, where **Structure B-19** housed Caracol's largest and most elaborate tomb, containing the remains of a woman, possibly Lady Batz' Ek from Calakmul, who married into Caracol's ruling dynasty in 584. Climb to the top of Caana to feast upon one of the most magnificent views in all of Belize. On the way down, don't miss the hidden tombs around the back on the left side.

South of Plaza B, the **Central Acropolis** was an elite residential group with palaces and shrines. To its west, Plaza A contained many stelae, some of which are still in place. Atop **Structure A-2** is a replica of a stela found here in 2003 that is engraved with the longest Maya inscription found in Belize. Structure A-6, the **Temple of the Wooden Lintel**, is one of the oldest buildings at Caracol. One of its lintels (the one to the left as you enter the top chamber) is original.

South of the Temple of the Wooden Lintel is the A Group Ball Court where the all-

important **Altar 21**, telling us so much about Caracol's history, was found. A replica of the 'altar,' actually a ball court marker, sits in the middle. Further south is one of Caracol's many **reservoirs**, and beyond that the **South Acropolis**, a Classic Period elite residential complex where you can enter two tombs.

### Getting There & Away

Most people come on a guided tour but it's possible to drive here on your own, as long as you are prepared for a bumpy ride. All visitors – individuals and groups alike – travel to Caracol in a convoy that departs Douglas D'Silva (Augustine) ranger station at 9:30am every morning. On the return trip, the convoy departs at 2pm. Each car must sign in and out. The convoy is accompanied by two park ranger vehicles to ensure the safety of all passengers.

Most of the vehicles in the convoy are tour buses, driven by experienced drivers and guides. Unless you are used to driving on crazy, bumpy, mind-numbing and muddy roads, you might want to let the more experienced drivers go ahead.

The final 12 miles to the site are paved. Once you cross the bridge over the Macal River you will appreciate the smooth sailing to the parking lot.

### Tours

Most tour companies and lodges in and around San Ignacio run tours to the Mountain Pine Ridge and Caracol. On a typical day tour (usually BZ\$140 to BZ\$180 per person), you'll visit the Rio On Pools, Rio Frio Cave and one of the waterfalls. Caracol trips also stop at Rio On Pools and Rio Frio Cave on the way back, usually for around BZ\$150. See p198 for tour operators.

### Sleeping & Eating

The Mountain Pine Ridge has a handful of places offering accommodations, meals and tours and activities – including some of the most luxurious lodges in the country. Although you might find a room if you show up unannounced, it's a long way to come for a 'No Vacancy' sign, so it's best to book ahead.

If you don't have your own transportation, you'll need a taxi or lodge transfer to get to/from these places. A taxi from San Ignacio should cost about BZ\$100; lodge transfers are BZ\$120 to BZ\$150 for up to four people.

**Pine Ridge Lodge** (Map p212; ☎ 606-4557, in USA 800-316-0706; www.pineridgelodge.com; d/tr/q incl breakfast BZ\$180/233/286; lunch/dinner BZ\$15/43; 📍) The most rustic of the Pine Ridge lodges has six little cabins decorated with Guatemalan handicrafts and original pieces created by local artists. Screened porches and hammocks are prime spots for relaxation. The Little Vaqueros Creek runs across the bottom of the grassy gardens, which are bursting with orchids. There's no electricity, but you'll come to love your kerosene lantern's soft glow, and the restaurant cooks up delicious meals using butane. The lodge is 4 miles along the Chiquibul Rd from the warden post.

**Five Sisters Lodge** (Map p212; ☎ 820-4005; www.fivesisterslodge.com; s/d/tr/q BZ\$202/250/298/356; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$17/19/40; 📍) This locally owned lodge, 2.5 miles west of Blancaneaux Lodge, is named for five side-by-side cascades on the Privasson Creek at the bottom of its property (see p212). The open-air restaurant has a great view over the falls. Otherwise, a hydro-powered mini-tram and a 45-minute medicinal plant trail will both take you down

to the river for swimming and sunbathing. Cozy cabanas were built from pimento sticks and bay leaf thatch roofs, and have beautiful mahogany floors and terraces hung with hammocks. You'll not see a clearer sky, which you can admire from the star-gazing deck.

**Our pick Hidden Valley Inn** (Map p212; ☎ 822-3320; www.hiddenvalleynn.com; s/d/tr BZ\$400/462/524; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$29/35/72; 📍 📺 🚰) Hidden Valley Inn is set on 11 gorgeous sq miles of Mountain Pine Ridge, all for the exclusive use of its guests. The grounds straddle pine and tropical forest ecosystems, and have access to 90 miles of signposted trails, eight sets of waterfalls and some inviting swimming spots and spectacular lookouts. Set out on foot, on a free mountain bike, or get a vehicle drop-off and make your own way back – whichever you choose, you get a map and a two-way radio and, if you like, they'll ensure that no one else is walking your trails at the same time! You can even rent a waterfall for the day, complete with champagne lunch. Birders, look out for the orange-breasted falcon (which nests here), the king vulture and the Stygian owl, as well as heaps of colorful and less rare species. The 12 cottages feature earth-toned tapestries, brick fireplaces and mahogany furniture, creating a warm, intimate atmosphere that extends throughout. The lodge is 4 miles off the Chiquibul Rd, along Cooma Cairn Rd.

**Blancaneaux Lodge** (Map p212; ☎ 824-3878, 824-4912, in USA 800-746-3743; www.blancaneaux.com; garden-view cabanas s/d BZ\$535/619, riverfront cabanas s/d BZ\$631/750, honeymoon cabanas BZ\$820, 2-bedroom villas from BZ\$1190, all incl breakfast; lunch & dinner mains BZ\$25-50; 📍 📺) This indulgent lodge was formerly a private retreat for its owner, movie director Francis Ford Coppola. Blancaneaux offers 17 thatched cabins and luxury villas, spread around beautifully manicured gardens, with some looking right over the picturesque Privasson Creek. The lodgings feature beautiful tiled bathrooms, with open-air living rooms in the villas, and handicrafts from Belize, Guatemala, Mexico and Thailand. Blancaneaux has its own stables, walking trails and riverside spa with a large hot pool. The restaurant serves Italian cuisine (Coppola's own recipes), gourmet pizzas from the brick oven and wines from the Niebaum-Coppola Estate Winery in California's Napa Valley. Much of the produce comes from the lodge's own organic garden.

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