

Belize District



What contrast offers the district that shares its country's name! On one hand, you've got Belize City, a seaside urban jungle replete with neighborhoods so gritty that any inner-city denizen would feel right at home. On the other, you've got the area that surrounds the city on three sides and stretches for long and largely unpopulated miles, comprising majestic savannah, wildlife-filled jungles and lagoons, and some of the hemisphere's most breathtaking natural beauty.

Separating the city from the district is mere semantics; Belizeans themselves, referring to a given location, use the term 'Belize' interchangeably, as in 'Altun Ha is up in Belize (District)' or 'I got carjacked in Belize (City).' For the purpose of this book, we've put both Belize (the city) and Belize (the district) as a chapter called simply 'Belize District.'

Just a few miles out of the city center, Belize City's gritty Caribbean urbanism crumbles and evaporates in a great puff of savannah country to the north, jungle to the west, and a verdant gumbo of mangrove lagoon and jungle to the south. This is where, to most travelers and Belizeans alike, the real Belize can be said to begin. There is plenty to see and do in Belize District, so much in fact that a visitor with only a week could spend it all here, gleaning samples of Belize's Maya heritage, Creole culture and ecotourism, all within an hour's drive of Belize City.

HIGHLIGHTS

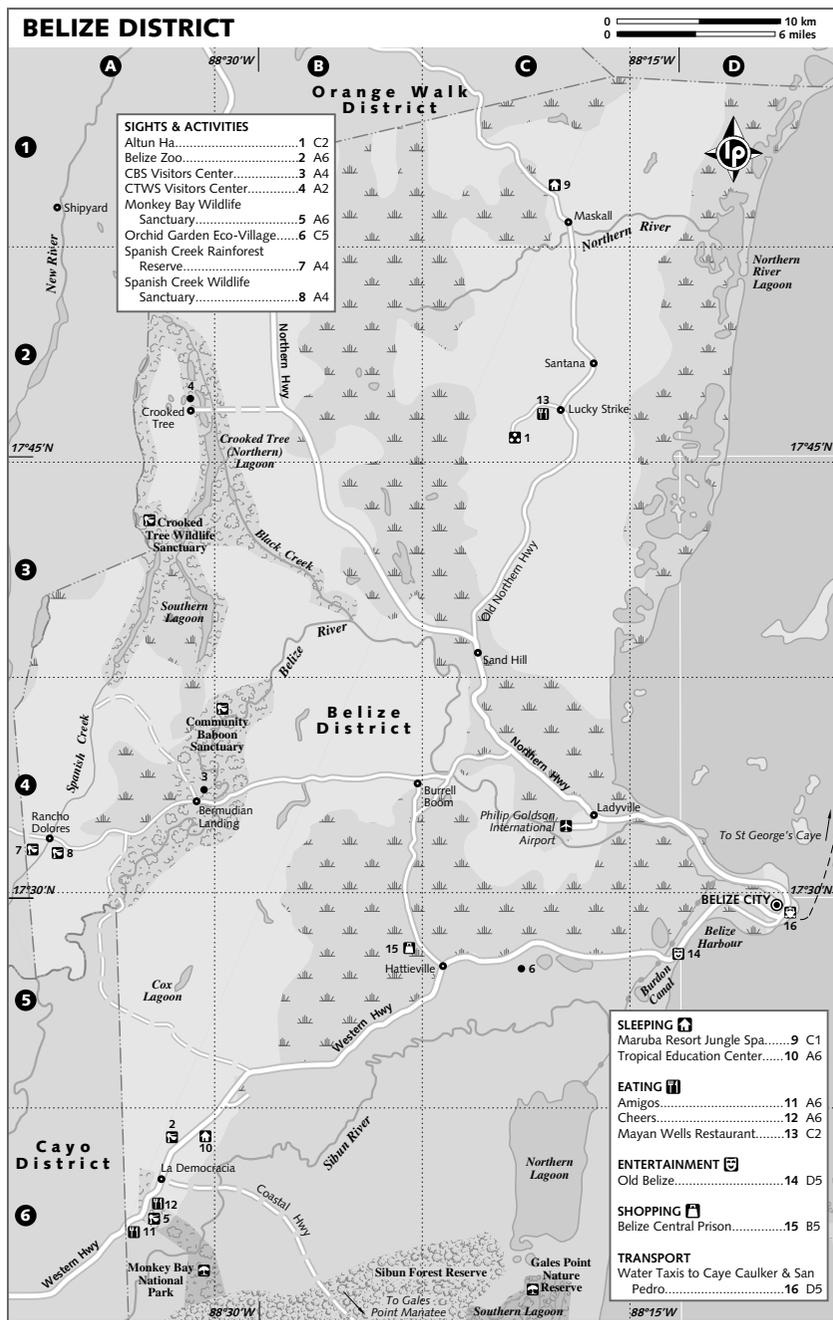
- Visiting **Belize Zoo** (p113) during the day then coming back for a night tour to check out nocturnal wildlife
- Spending a night surrounded by the roar of howler monkeys at the **Community Baboon Sanctuary** (p108) or **Spanish Creek Wildlife Sanctuary** (p109)
- Bird-watching at **Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary** (p110)
- Soaking up Belize's fascinating history at the **Museum of Belize** (p94) in Belize City
- Learning about the area's fascinating biodiversity through an internship at **Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary** (p115) or **Spanish Creek Rainforest Reserve** (p110)



■ POPULATION:
93,215

■ MONTHLY RAINFALL:
Jan 5.5in, Jun 10.2in

■ HIGHEST ELEVATION:
300ft



BELIZE CITY

pop 63,670

A fair percentage of tourists in Belize choose to spend as little time as possible in Belize City, the country's only major urban area. This may be explained by the fact that, on the whole, the country's main attractions are natural and nautical, making any kind of prolonged visit to its only metropolis superfluous. But another (and equally likely) explanation is this: outside of certain spots, the city itself just isn't a very safe place for anyone, let alone cash-and-camera toting tourist types. 'Dodgy' is the word many travelers use to describe Belize City, and even those who admire its raffish charms and cultural vibrancy (and, to be fair, there's plenty of this) admit that the city – unlike the rest of the country – is anything but relaxed.

That being said, Belize City is still the historical (if no longer the actual) capital of the nation, making it an interesting place to spend a day or two for those interested in the nation's history and culture. Its ramshackle streets are alive with colorful characters who represent every facet of Belize's ethnic variety, especially the Creoles. The urban scenery encompasses not just malodorous canals and grungy slums, but also handsome colonial houses, seaside parks, bustling shopping areas and sailboats bobbing at the mouth of Haulover Creek. You might find Belize City menacing, but you won't find it dull.

HISTORY

Belize City owes its existence to the harbor at the mouth of Haulover Creek, a branch of the Belize River, down which the Baymen (early British woodcutters) floated lumber from their inland camps. It had little significance until the Spanish briefly captured St George's Caye, the Baymen's first main settlement, in 1779. 'Belize Town' then became and remained the British headquarters in Belize. Popular lore has it that the settlement, at first just a few huts surrounded by mosquito-ridden swamps, grew on a landfill of mahogany chips and rum bottles deposited by the Baymen, who would come to the coast after the rainy season to dispatch their lumber overseas and spend most of the proceeds on rum.

During the 19th century the town grew on both sides of Haulover Creek, with the British merchants' homes and buildings of the ruling elite clustered along and near the southern

seafloor. African slaves and their descendants lived in cabins inland of here. By the 1880s the town had a population of around 5000; the great majority being Creoles descended from the British and their slaves – though whites still held all the power and wealth. Belize City witnessed most of the significant events on the long road to Belizean independence, including riots in 1894, 1919 and 1950.

The city was devastated by hurricanes in 1931 and 1961. It was 1961's Hurricane Hattie that spurred the government to build a new capital at Belmopan, 52 miles inland. This left Belize City, and the Creole population in general, feeling rather neglected; it was then that people started to emigrate to the USA to seek an escape from overcrowding, unemployment and poor sanitation in Belize City.

Drug-related gangsterism kicked in during the 1980s and 1990s, which helped keep conditions pretty tough for the city's underemployed working class. Middle-class residential areas have developed on the northern and northwestern fringes of the city, while the central areas either side of Haulover Creek remain the country's cultural and commercial hub.

The biggest change to the city's face in the 21st century has been the invasion of cruise-ship tourists: cruise liners anchoring off Belize City brought 850,000 passengers in 2004, up from almost zero five years previously. Most cruise-ship tourists come ashore at the city's new Tourism Village, located at the mouth of Haulover Creek. Generally, the passengers wander around the downtown area for a few hours or head off on excursions to inland attractions.

ORIENTATION

Haulover Creek, running across the middle of the city, separates the downtown commercial area (focused on Albert St) from the slightly more genteel Fort George district to the northeast. Hotels, guesthouses and places to eat are found on both sides of the creek, with the majority of the city's high-end hotels being in Fort George.

The Swing Bridge (the hub of the city, and – some reckon – the heart of Belize itself) crosses Haulover Creek to link Albert St with Queen St. The Caye Caulker Water Taxi Terminal stands by the north side of the bridge.

West of Albert St is Southside, the poorest part of the city. The main bus station and other bus stops are found here, right next to

the Collet Canal. It's safest to take taxis to and from these bus points, even during the day. East of Albert St is Regent St and the Southern Foreshore; you'll be able to see cruise ships on the horizon from this coastal avenue on most days. This area is generally OK during the day, but be wary at night.

North, up the coast from the Fort George district, are the Newtown Barracks and Kings Park neighborhoods, home to some of the city's best restaurants and entertainment venues.

The Philip Goldson International Airport is some 11 miles northwest of the city center, off the Northern Hwy; the Municipal Airstrip is 2 miles north of the center. Take a taxi to or from either.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

You'll be able to find some Belize-related books at the National Handicraft Center (p103), Brodie's department store (p103) and at the up-market gift shops; however, the following places have the more comprehensive selections.

Angelus Press (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-5777; 10 Queen St; ☎ 7:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Office-supply store and internet café with a reasonable supply of books with Belizean themes.

Book Center (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7457; 4 Church St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5:30pm Mon-Thu, till 9pm Fri, till 6pm Sat) New and secondhand English literature, maps, guidebooks and books on Belizean history, society and natural history.

Image Factory (Map pp96-7; ☎ 203-4151; 91 N Front St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) This art gallery has the country's best range of books, including international literature and titles on Belizean and Caribbean society and history.

Cultural Centers

Institute of Mexico (Map p93; ☎ 223-0193/4; http://portal.sre.gob.mx/belize_eng; cnr Newtown Barracks Rd & Wilson St) This is the consular, cultural and educational section of the embassy of Mexico in Belize (the actual embassy itself is in Belmopan). Come here to check out a variety of programs, exhibitions, concerts and films.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 90, private ambulance 223-3292)

Crime Stoppers (☎ 922, 224-4646) To report crimes.

Fire Service (☎ 90, 227-2579)

Police (☎ 90, 911, tourist police 227-6082) Tourist police wear a special badge on the left shoulder and patrol central areas of the city. There are police stations located on Queen St (Map pp96-7) and Racoon St (Map pp96-7).

Internet Access

Angelus Press (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-5777; 10 Queen St; per hr BZ\$7; ☎ 7:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

KGS Internet (Map pp96-7; ☎ 207-7130; 60 King St; per hr BZ\$5; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat, 9:30am-2:30pm Sun) Will also burn CDs for BZ\$3.50.

M Business Solutions (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-6766; 13 Cork St; per hr BZ\$10; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) High-speed internet access, in the Great House hotel building.

Maya Coffee (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-4788; 158 N Front St; per hr BZ\$7; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Kevin Chen's coffeshop, just across from S&L Travel, sells souvenirs and books, as well as peddling internet access.

Laundry

G's Laundromat (Map pp96-7; ☎ 207-4461; 22 Dean St; wash per load BZ\$10; ☎ 7:30am-5:30pm) Wash and dry in about 1½ hours. Most hotels can arrange laundry service at similar prices.

Medical Services

Belize Medical Associates (Map p93; ☎ 223-0302/3/4; 5791 St Thomas St; ☎ 24hr emergency services) Private hospital in Kings Park district with a good reputation among expats.

Brodie's (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7070; 2 Albert St; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Thu, 8:30am-8pm Fri, 8:30am-5pm Sat, 8:30am-1pm Sun) This department store has a very well-stocked pharmacy.

Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital (Map p93; ☎ 223-1548/64; Princess Margaret Dr; ☎ 24hr emergency services) A public hospital in the north of town that enjoys a less-than-stellar reputation.

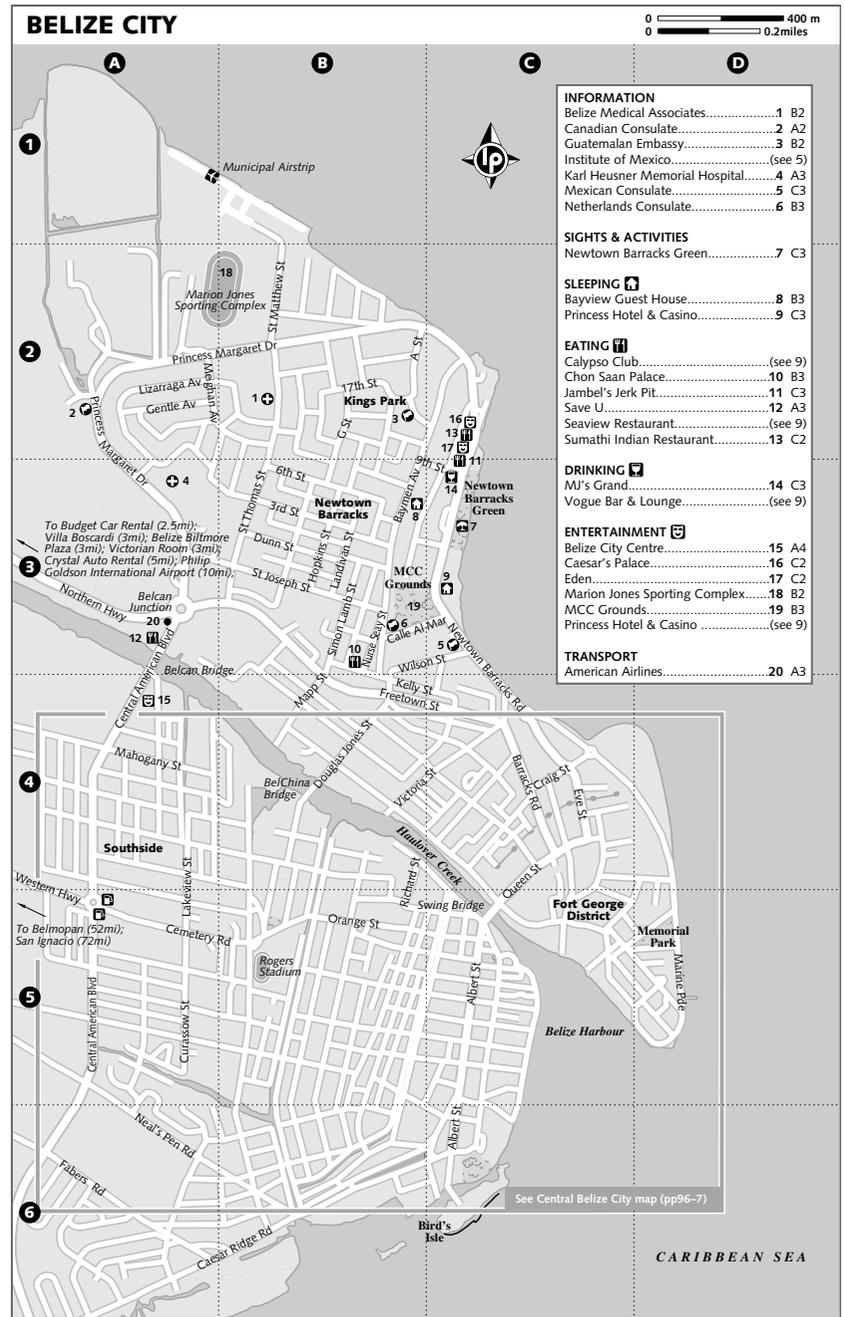
Money

The following banks exchange US or Canadian dollars, British pounds and, usually, euros. The ATMs at Belize Bank downtown and First Caribbean International Bank will accept foreign Visa cards and, in Belize Bank's case, MasterCard, Cirrus and Plus cards. Most ATMs are 24-hour, though it's highly recommended that you visit them during daylight hours.

Belize Bank Downtown (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7132; 60 Market Sq; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, 8am-4:30pm Fri); Philip Goldson International Airport (☎ 8:30am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) The downtown branch's ATM is on the east side of the building.

First Caribbean International Bank Downtown (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7211; 21 Albert St; ☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-4:30pm Fri)

Scotiabank Downtown (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7027; cnr Albert & Bishop Sts; ☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Thu, 8:30am-4pm Fri, 9am-noon Sat)



Post

Main post office (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-2201; N Front St; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-4:30pm Fri)

Telephone

Public card-operated phones can be found around the city. You can also rent a cell phone from the Radisson Hotel (p100) for BZ\$22 per day plus usage charge.

BTL (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7085; 1 Church St; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) Has indoor booths for phone-card calls, country-direct calls to Canada and the UK, and collect calls.

Tourist Information

Belize Tourism Board (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-2420/17; www.travelbelize.org; 64 Regent St; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) This is the brand-spanking-new (as of January, 2008) head office of the BTB, where you can pick up maps, magazines, and all sorts of information relating to travel around Belize.

Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA; Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-5717/1144; www.btia.org; 10 N Park St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) The BTIA is an independent association of tourism businesses, actively defending 'sustainable ecocultural tourism'. The office provides leaflets about the country's regions, copies of its *Destination Belize* annual magazine (free), and information on its members, which include many of Belize's best hotels, restaurants and other tourism businesses. The website is a plethora of information.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Not to put too fine a point on it, but Belize City isn't exactly the relaxed place the rest of the country is. Hotel windows are barred and, in many hotels, front doors are kept locked even during the day. Street crime is fairly common, and if you look like a tourist the chances of being harassed are fairly high. On the other hand, the city is fairly safe in comparison to other urban areas in Central America. Most violent crime occurs in the Southside district, south of Haulover Creek and west of Southside Canal. Take a taxi when you're going to or from the main bus station or other bus stops in this area. Even in the middle of the day these streets can have a threatening atmosphere.

After dark, it's best to take a taxi anywhere you go in the city. If you must walk, even just a couple of blocks, get advice from your hotel about safety in specific neighborhoods. Stay on better-lit major streets and don't go alone if you can help it.

East of Southside Canal you're in the downtown commercial area – Albert St, Regent St

and their cross-streets. Though tourists are sometimes the victims of robberies around here, statistically speaking you're more likely to simply be harassed for a dollar or two (usually in rapid succession by the same person). After dark, your odds of being separated from your valuables increase markedly.

The Fort George district is generally safe in daylight, but you should still stay alert.

In contrast to the rest of Belize, any stranger who attempts to engage you in conversation – even just by shaking your hand or claiming they have seen you before – is almost certainly after your money. Don't be afraid to shake these people off rapidly. Tricksters may just try to pressure you for a 'gift' or 'tip,' but they may also be aiming to pick your pockets or worse.

Police maintain a fairly visible presence in the main areas frequented by tourists in Belize City, and will intervene to deter hustlers and other shady characters, but you can't rely on them to always be where you need them. Take the commonsense precautions that you would in any major city. Don't flash wads of cash, cameras, jewelry or other signs of wealth. Don't leave valuables lying around your hotel room. Don't use illicit drugs and avoid deserted streets, even in daylight.

See p282 and p290 for more tips on avoiding trouble in Belize.

SIGHTS**Museum of Belize**

This excellent modern **museum** (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-4524; Gabourel Lane; admission BZ\$10; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) in the Fort George district is a must-see for anyone interested in the story of Belize. Housed in the country's former main jail (built of brick in 1857), the museum preserves one cell in its original state, complete with inmates' graffiti; if you thought your hotel room was cramped, think again! Fascinating historical photos and documents bear testimony to the colonial and independence eras and the destruction wrought by hurricanes.

The Maya Treasures section, upstairs, is rather light on artifacts (most of Belize's finest Maya finds were spirited away to other countries) but makes up for that with informative models and explanations. Other sections of the museum are devoted to Belize's highly colorful postage stamps, and its insect life, with full detail on the disgusting manner in

which the human botfly uses living human flesh to nourish its larvae! The museum also has a good little gift shop.

Government House

Fronting the sea down at the end of Regent St, this handsome two-story wooden **colonial mansion** (House of Culture; Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-3050; Regent St; admission BZ\$10; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) served as the residence of Britain's superintendents and governors of Belize from its construction in 1814 until 1996. The house, one of the oldest in Belize, is now a cultural center and museum – well worth a visit for its historical exhibits, colorful displays of modern Belizean art, spacious colonial ambience and grassy gardens. It was here at midnight on September 21, 1981 that the Union Jack was ceremonially replaced with the Belizean flag to mark the birth of independent Belize. Displayed in the gardens is the tender from Baron Bliss' yacht.

St John's Cathedral

Immediately inland of Government House stands **St John's Cathedral** (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-2137; Albert St; ☎ 6am-6pm), the oldest Anglican church in Central America. It was built by slave labor between 1812 and 1820 using bricks brought from Britain as ballast. Notable things to see inside are the ancient pipe organ and the Baymen-era tombstones that tell their own history of Belize's early days and the toll taken on the city's early settlers.

A block southwest is **Yarborough Cemetery**, where you'll see the graves of less prominent early citizens – an even more turbulent narrative of Belize, which dates back to 1787.

Swing Bridge

This heart and soul of Belize City life, crossed by just about everyone here just about every day, is the only remaining working **bridge** (Map pp96-7) of its type in the world. Its operators manually rotate the bridge open, usually at about 6am and 5:30pm, Monday to Saturday, just long enough to let tall boats pass, bringing vehicles and pedestrians in the city center to a halt. It's quite a procedure, and if you're in the right place at the right time, you might even get to help out. The bridge, a product of Liverpool's ironworks, was installed in 1923, replacing an earlier bridge that had opened in 1897.

Downstream from the bridge, Haulover Creek is usually a pretty sight, with numer-

ous small yachts and fishing boats riding at anchor.

The Swing Bridge is ground zero for hustlers looking to part tourists from their valuables. You will very likely be approached by seemingly friendly sorts with outstretched hands asking, 'Where you from?' Be advised that the chances of said encounter resulting in a mutually beneficial cultural exchange are slim to none.

Image Factory

The country's most innovative and exciting **art gallery** (Map pp96-7; www.imagefactory.bz; ☎ 203-4151; 91 N Front St; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), near the Caye Caulker Water Taxi Terminal, stages new exhibitions most months, usually of work by Belizean artists. Opening receptions are usually held early in the month; cocktails are served on the Image Factory's deck, which looks out on Haulover Creek. The adjoining shop sells art, gifts and the country's best range of books.

Baron Bliss Tomb

At the tip of the Fort George peninsula lies the granite **Baron Bliss Tomb** (Map pp96-7), the final resting place of Belize's most famous benefactor (see the boxed text, p98), who never set foot on Belizean soil while alive. Next to the tomb stands the **Fort George Lighthouse**, one of the many benefits the baron's munificence has yielded the country.

Coastal Zone Museum

Next door to, and entered from, the Caye Caulker Water Taxi Terminal, this small **museum** (Map pp96-7; N Front St; admission adult/student/child BZ\$4/2/2; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm) has a limited number of pictures, models and carapaces of Belizean aquatic life, plus summary information on the Belize Barrier Reef World Heritage sites and a few dioramas of marine ecosystems. The museum merits a peek if you're in the area.

ACTIVITIES

Although most divers and snorkelers base themselves out on the cayes, it is actually quicker to access some of the best sites direct from Belize City. Some hotels in the city offer their guests diving and snorkeling outings. Other reputable operators include Sea Sports Belize (p98) and Hugh Parkey's Belize Dive Connection (p98).

CENTRAL BELIZE CITY

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0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

BLISS OF BELIZE

Only Belize could have an annual holiday in honor of a national benefactor with a name like Baron Bliss. Born Henry Edward Ernest Victor Bliss in Buckinghamshire, England, in 1869 (the title 'Baron' was hereditary), Bliss was a man with a powerful love of the sea, and of sailing. So much so, in fact, that he left his wife and his native land for the Caribbean in 1920, spending the next six years living aboard his yacht *Sea King II* off the Bahamas and Trinidad. After a bad bout of food poisoning in Trinidad, the baron took up an invitation from Belize's Attorney General, Willoughby Bullock, and dropped anchor off Belize on January 14, 1926.

Sadly, Baron Bliss' health took a decisive turn for the worse before he could leave his yacht; his doctors pronounced that the end was nigh. On February 17, 1926, the baron signed a will aboard the *Sea King II*, leaving most of his one-million-pound fortune to Belize. On March 9 he died. He had, apparently, fallen in love with Belize without ever setting foot on its soil.

The testament decreed that a Baron Bliss Trust be set up to invest his bequest, and that all income from it be used for the permanent benefit of Belize and its citizens, while the capital sum was to remain intact. No churches, dance halls or schools (except agricultural or vocational schools) were to be built with Bliss Trust moneys, nor was the money to be used for any repairs or maintenance to the Trust's own projects!

Over the decades the Baron Bliss Trust has spent more than US\$1 million on projects such as the Bliss Centre for the Performing Arts (p103), the Fort George Lighthouse (beside which lies the baron's tomb; see p95) and the Bliss School of Nursing, which are all in Belize City; and several health centers and libraries around the country. An annual national holiday, Baron Bliss Day, is celebrated on or close to March 9, the anniversary of the good man's death.

The usual destinations are the barrier reef (p64), Turneffe Atoll (p74) and Lighthouse Reef (p75). Prices (including equipment) range from around BZ\$240 for a two-tank dive at the barrier reef to BZ\$400 or so for a three-tank dive at Lighthouse Reef (usually including the Blue Hole). A day's snorkeling runs from around BZ\$150 to BZ\$300. Sea Sports Belize can also take you sea or river fishing.

TOURS

Popular day-trip activities and destinations from Belize City include cave-tubing at Jaguar Paw (p188); visits to the Maya ruins at Lamanai (p167), Altun Ha (p167), Xunantunich (p205) and even Tikal (p205) in Guatemala; Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (p110); the Community Baboon Sanctuary (p108) and Belize Zoo (p113). Trips such as these vary in cost; expect to pay between BZ\$120 and BZ\$200 per person. Several hotels offer tours to their guests. Tour companies include the following:

Belize Global Travel Services (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7185/7364; www.belizeglobal.com; 41 Albert St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Amex representative and full-service travel agency.

Belize International Travel Services (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-1701; 18 Bishop St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm

Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) Agent for American Airlines, Continental, Maya Island Air and Tropic Air.

Discovery Expeditions (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-0748; www.discoverybelize.com; 13 Cork St) Has offices at the Great House hotel and Philip Goldson International Airport.

Hugh Parkey's Belize Dive Connection (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-4226; www.belizediving.com; inside of Radisson hotel) Offers diving and snorkeling tours to most nearby cays and reefs, as well as kayaking and wildlife tours.

S&L Travel (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7593/5145; www.sltravelbelize.com; 91 N Front St) A very reputable agency run by the Tillett family, who also run a lovely guesthouse in Crooked Tree (p111). The shop also has internet access at BZ\$0.10 per minute.

Sea Sports Belize (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-5505; www.seasportsbelize.com; N Front St) A dive shop that also specializes in wildlife-encounter tours, river cruises, barrier-reef snorkeling and manatee- and dolphin-spotting.

Many taxi drivers in town are part-time tour guides; they may give you a sales pitch as they drive you around the city. These cabbies/guides can be quite knowledgeable and personable and may suit you if you want a customized tour; in general, you can negotiate such tours for around BZ\$200 per day. Hotel staff can often make personal recommendations of cabbies known to them. Make sure your guide has a Belize Tourism Board (BTB) license.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Belize International Film Festival (www.belizefilmfestival.com; takes place annually, check website for details) At the Bliss Centre for the Performing Arts.

Baron Bliss Day (March 9) Festivities include a regatta in front of Fort George Lighthouse.

September Celebrations (September 10 to 21) Celebrations all over the city lasting from National Day (September 10) to Independence Day (September 21), including a huge carnival parade, bands, parties, music and dancing, with many of the country's top bands playing on Newtown Barracks Green on September 21.

SLEEPING

Accommodations are found both north and south of Haulover Creek. The top-end places are to the north, and most of the midrange and budget places are to the south.

Budget

our pick Seaside Guest House (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-8339; 3 Prince St; dm/s/d BZ\$30/40/50, VIP room BZ\$90; ☎) Under new management since the last update, this long-time budget-traveler favorite has a mellow vibe befitting its classic two-story wooden Caribbean exterior (painted in a very groovy lilac and white). Dorms are more than adequate, if a tad on the small side, and the VIP room (with its own bathroom) is quite nice. There's a breezy verandah facing the sea and cool game- and book-filled chill-out spots on the 1st and 2nd floors. Great meals are available for a nominal charge.

Caribbean Palms Inn (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-0472; www.thecaribbean-palmsinn.com; 26 Regent St; r BZ\$36-140; ☎) This friendly, homy hotel occupies a rambling two-story house a few minutes' walk south of the Swing Bridge. Furnished with attractive wrought iron and wood, the rooms vary in size and light: those upstairs at the front are among the biggest and brightest, but being on the street side, they're also the noisiest. Most rooms have a private bathroom, but the cheapest ones have bathrooms out in the hall. There's also a nice rear terrace where you can hang out (though the bar that once was there has closed), and a comfy indoor sitting area providing plenty of chill-out and social space.

Ma Ma Chen Guesthouse (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-4568; 7 Eve St; r BZ\$60) Rooms are small and cell-like at this Taiwanese-owned budget guesthouse north of the Swing Bridge but, on the bright side, they've all got cable TV and are cheap and close enough to the center of town to

be convenient. Best of all, the Chen family run a great vegetarian café in the same building (p101).

Three Sisters Guesthouse (Map pp96-7; ☎ 203-5729; 55 Eve St; s/d BZ\$55/63) This is a friendly place with large rooms. It's on a quiet residential street, a short distance north of the center of town, and is a solid budget choice for those who want to be a bit further from the rougher edges of the Haulover Creek/Regent St areas.

Bayview Guest House (Map p93; ☎ 223-4179; www.belize-guesthouse-hotel.com; 58 Baymen Ave; s with fan BZ\$40, d with air-con BZ\$80; ☎) Located in the quiet northern end of town in Newtown Barracks, this guesthouse is part of a family home run by the Huang family from Taiwan. Its eight rooms are very clean and simply furnished; all have their own small bathrooms. The large, gated yard, filled with fruit trees, is a great place to decompress after a day hanging out in the city. Apartments can be rented by the month for BZ\$375.

Belcove Hotel (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-3054; www.belcove.com; 9 Regent St W; s/d with shared bathroom BZ\$55/70, r with private bathroom BZ\$104, r with air-con & private bathroom BZ\$109; ☎) A comfortable – if somewhat ramshackle – hotel near the south end of the Swing Bridge, the Belcove offers cheaper rooms with mosquito-netted windows and fans, and five higher priced rooms with air-con and TV. Overlooking the river, the upstairs terrace is a good place to chill. Management offers free luggage storage and transportation to the airport for BZ\$40 (book ahead). They can also help with diving, snorkeling and tour bookings. While the hotel itself has decent security, the surrounding area is fairly dodgy; keep alert.

Midrange

Hotel Mopan (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7351; www.hotelmopan.com; 55 Regent St; s/d BZ\$78/98, s/d with air-con BZ\$98/118; ☎) Recently refurbished, this big, old, Caribbean-style hotel provides spacious, clean rooms (all nonsmoking) with good bathrooms, comfortable beds and cable TV. Broad verandahs provide sitting space and there's a large dining room with breakfast available. The best rooms are on the top floor, where you can get a rooftop view of the city. A range of day and half-day trips can be booked at reception.

our pick Coningsby Inn (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-1566; www.coningsby-inn.com; 76 Regent St; d/tr BZ\$119/131; ☎) A friendly and comfortable small

hotel in an attractive colonial-style house, the Coningsby is unbeatable for midrange value. Rooms are sparkling clean and decent-sized, all with bathtub, phone, cable TV and air-con, and breakfasts (BZ\$10) are served in a lovely dining room upstairs. Like the Bakadeer, the Coningsby has wireless internet and 24-hour security.

Bellevue Hotel (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7051/2; bellevue@btl.net; 5 Southern Foreshore; r BZ\$120; 🏠 📺 📶) The rambling seafront Bellevue has all the hallmarks of a place that's seen better decades, but it's still good value for money. Clean, though threadbare, rooms come with air-con, private bathrooms and cable TV. The nicest is room 127, which has bay windows and an ocean view. There's an airy verandah up front, which droops at an odd angle off the building itself. The pool and pool bar at the back are perhaps this hotel's biggest plus, though that area seems to need maintenance as well.

Bakadeer Inn (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-0659; www.bakadeerinn.com; 74 Cleghorn Street; s/d BZ\$120/131; 🏠 📺 📶) Located on a quiet side street north just north of the Haulover Creek, the Bakadeer's rooms are comfortable and basic, though the ones on the 1st floor are a bit on the dark side. The hotel has wireless internet and tight security, making it a good base for those traveling with laptops.

Villa Boscardi (off Map p93; ☎ /fax 223-1691; www.villaboscardi.com; 6043 Manatee Dr, Buttonwood Bay; s/d with breakfast BZ\$130/150; 🏠 📺 📶) Set in a secure middle-class suburb, this guesthouse and its charming hosts will smooth away any stresses that Belize City's rougher edges might induce. The six rooms are large and elegant, built with Belizean materials with plenty of comfortable touches, including big beds, cable TV and hair dryers. Two of the rooms have bathtubs. Children under eight stay free. About 4 miles west of the city center and 7 miles from the international airport; airport pickup is available for BZ\$40.

Chateau Caribbean Hotel (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-0800; www.chateaucaribbean.com; 6 Marine Pde; s/d/tr/ste BZ\$158/178/198/218; 🏠 📺 📶) This converted colonial mansion in the Fort George district offers a spacious lobby, bar and dining room overlooking the Caribbean. Rooms are breezy and gracefully appointed with big beds, large windows with white curtains, and wicker furniture from which to sit with a suitably colonial beverage (gin and tonic, anyone?) and enjoy the view. The 2nd-floor bar is equally

lovely, though the food at the restaurant isn't anything to write home about.

Top End

Princess Hotel & Casino (Map p93; ☎ 223-0638; www.princessbelize.com; Newtown Barracks Rd; s/d BZ\$262/284, ste from BZ\$327; 🏠 📺 📶 📺) This six-story, seafront hotel in the north of the city is also an entertainment and social center, with plenty of bustle in its lively lobby and public areas – in fact more of a place to visit for a bit of diversion than a place to base yourself. Clocks at reception show the time in Las Vegas, Miami and Cancún. The rooms are ample, pretty much what you'd expect for the price at a seaside casino. Prices for all rooms include breakfast.

The hotel boasts two restaurants, the Seaview and the Calypso Club (p102), as well as an Olympic-size pool, marina, casino, cinema (Belize's only movie theatre!), bowling alley and a lively lounge bar (p102).

Radisson Fort George Hotel (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-3333; www.radisson.com/belizecitybz; 2 Marine Pde; s BZ\$260-300, d BZ\$280-340; 🏠 📺 📶 📺) The city's top hotel has 102 conservatively decorated rooms with all the comforts. While offering top international-class service, the Radisson avoids the cultural detachment that often comes with such a package. Local woods, furnishings and decorations confer genuine Belizean character.

There are three classes of room here (all with high-speed internet connection): Club Tower (the fanciest option, in a glass tower where the marble-floored rooms all enjoy a full sea view); Colonial (in the original hotel structure, with fine wooden furnishings and partial sea views); and Villa (the least expensive, across the street from the main hotel). Besides two swimming pools, two restaurants (the Stonegrill, p102, and St George's Dining Room, p102) and bars (p102), the hotel has its own dock, home to Hugh Parkey's Belize Dive Connection (see p98).

Great House (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-3400; www.greathousebelize.com; 13 Cork St; s/d BZ\$250/300; 🏠 📺 📶) A gorgeous, four-story, colonial-style mansion built in 1927 on a piece of prime Fort George real estate, the Great House features individually decorated, hardwood-floored rooms, all fully equipped with air-con, phone, safe, big-screen cable TV and refrigerators. A full range of land and offshore day trips are available to guests. The hotel usually reduces room

rates from May to October, and in November and December if business is a bit slow. The Great House is also where you'll find Habanos Cigars, a great place to stock up on Cuba...er, Honduran cigars to bring back home.

EATING

Belize City's restaurants are a good sampler of Belizean eating options, from plain but satisfying rice-and-beans-based local meals to plenty of good seafood and meat and a few more exotic possibilities from the Caribbean, Asia or Europe. Most of the fancier and more upmarket restaurants are in the Fort George and Newtown Barracks districts, north of the Swing Bridge, while you'll find some reliable local restaurants in the commercial area south of the Swing Bridge.

Budget

Dit's Restaurant (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-3330; 50 King St; snacks BZ\$3, mains BZ\$6-12; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch & dinner Sun & public holidays) Dit's is a local favorite, a fine place to get rice-and-bean Belizean standards, sandwiches and Mexican dishes such as *panades* and *salbutes* (variations on the tortilla). Especially good are the desserts, coconut and lemon pies, milk shakes and juices. The surrounding neighborhood is a bit dicey.

Big Daddy's (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-0932; 2nd fl, Commercial Center, Regent St; lunch BZ\$7-10; 🍳 breakfast & lunch) You'll get hearty, low-priced meals and friendly service here. At breakfast, fry-jacks (lightly fried pancake slices), eggs, bacon, sausage and a fresh juice are under BZ\$8. Lunch is served cafeteria-style from 11am until the food is gone. Rice-and-beans and vegetable-and-rice dishes are the stock in trade, and the view over Haulover Creek from the upper deck is fine.

Ma Ma Chen Restaurant (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-4568; 7 Eve St; Meals from BZ\$5 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Looking for an antidote for meat-heavy Belizean cuisine? Look no further: Ma Ma Chen's is a genuine Taiwan-style vegetarian restaurant, serving tofu, brown rice and vegetable dishes. The Chen's also run a guesthouse of the same name (p99).

Macy's (Map pp96-7; ☎ 207-3419; 18 Bishop St; mains BZ\$8-14; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Macy's provides consistently good Creole cooking, with friendly service and good prices. The menu changes daily, but you're always likely to find chicken, fish fillets and stewed beef or

meatballs. Game, such as boar, gibbon and deer, often makes an appearance.

Nerie's II Restaurant (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-4028; cnr Queen & Daly Sts; mains BZ\$8-15; 🍳 7:30am-10pm) Nerie's offers most imaginable accompaniments to rice and beans, including curried lamb, stewed cow foot, lobster, gibbon and deer. You can start things off with a choice of soups, including chicken, *escabeche* (with chicken, lime and onions), *chirmole* (with chicken and a chili-chocolate sauce) or (again!) cow foot, and round it off with cassava pudding.

Midrange

Le Petite Café (Map pp96-7; Cork St; pastries BZ\$1-5, sandwiches BZ\$11-14; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) For muffins, croissants, cookies and a wide variety of coffee drinks, stop in at this excellent little café and bakery run by the Radisson.

Wet Lizard (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-5973; Fort St; dishes BZ\$12-18; 🍳 breakfast & lunch cruise-ship days only) Inside the Belize Tourist Village (p104) but also accessible directly from the street, the Wet Lizard provides solid serves of mainly Belizean and Tex-Mex food amid bright tropical colors, '70s rock and plenty of cruise-ship passengers. Its upper-deck setting is breezy.

Jambel's Jerk Pit (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-1966; 164 Newtown Barracks Rd; mains BZ\$12-30; 🍳 lunch & dinner) Jambel's recent move from the city center to the northern outskirts is a good example of why Belize City deserves its reputation for danger: despite his restaurant having long been a neighborhood fixture, the owner decided to pack it in after a robbery at the former location on King St ended with him being shot in the stomach. Jambel's new location on the coast is far more pleasant, and his food, blending the best of Jamaican and Belizean culinary traditions, is still tops. Try the jerk fish, jerk chicken, or jerk family platter. Vegetarians won't want to miss Jambel's jerk tomato pasta. Is there anything this man can't jerk?

Chon Saan Palace (Map p93; ☎ 223-3008; cnr Kelly & Nurse Sey Sts; dishes BZ\$12-30; 🍳 11:30am-2pm & 5-11:30pm Sat-Thu, till 1am Fri) Considered the best Chinese restaurant in Belize City, Chon Saan would probably be considered mediocre in most US cities. Though portions are ample, meals are uninspired, and tacking BZ\$5 per person on the bill for Chinese tea bumps the restaurant into a price bracket disproportionate to its culinary quality.

Sumathi Indian Restaurant (Map p93; ☎ 223-1172; 190 Newtown Barracks Rd; dishes BZ\$18-38; 🕒 11am-11pm Tue-Sun) Belize City's best Indian restaurant provides a huge range of flavoursome curries, tandooris and *biryanis* (spicy rice and meat-or-vegetable dishes), with plenty of vegetarian options, all in generous quantities. Bollywood films on the TV intensify the mood. It does meals to go if you prefer.

Stonegrill Restaurant (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-3333; www.radisson.com/belizecitybz; Radisson Fort George Hotel, 2 Marine Pde; mains BZ\$20-35; 🕒 11am-10pm; 📍) At this thatched poolside restaurant at the Radisson hotel you get to grill your own meal – steak, fajitas, shrimp, chicken satay and the like – on super-hot volcanic stones. It's fun, tasty and free of added fat.

Smoky Mermaid (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-4759; 13 Cork St; mains from BZ\$20; 🕒 6:30am-10pm; 📍) Attached to the Great House hotel, the Smoky Mermaid serves tasty Caribbean and international food on a lovely patio with tinkling fountains and towering tropical trees. The meals are dependably good and the servings satisfying.

St George's Dining Room (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-3333; www.radisson.com/belizecitybz; Radisson Fort George Hotel, 2 Marine Pde; lunch buffet BZ\$26, mains BZ\$26-38; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📍) The main restaurant at the Radisson serves hearty buffet lunches with a different theme daily (Mexican, Caribbean, Asian etc) and a mainly Mediterranean dinner menu, with plenty of seafood and some vegetarian options. There are also buffets on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, and a big Sunday brunch. Dishes are reliably good.

Calypto Club (Map p93; ☎ 223-2670/2663; www.princessbelize.com; Princess Hotel & Casino, Newtown Barracks Rd; mains BZ\$25-50; 🕒 11am-10pm; 📍) A waterfront restaurant at the Princess Hotel & Casino (p100), Calypto serves ample portions of Belizean- and Caribbean-style seafood. Burgers, pasta and salads provide lighter and more economical options – but a regular Belikin is BZ\$6.

Self-catering

Brodie's (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7070; 2 Albert St; 🕒 8:30am-7pm Mon-Thu, 8:30am-8pm Fri, 8:30am-5pm Sat, 8:30am-1pm Sun) This department store has the best downtown grocery.

Save U (Map p93; ☎ 223-1291; Sancas Plaza, Belcan Junction; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun & public holidays; 📍) This modern supermarket is convenient for loading up on supplies before heading out into the wilds of Belize.

DRINKING

Top-end hotel bars, especially on Friday evening, are a focus of Belize City social life, and more fun than they might sound, pulling in a range of locals, expats and tourists. Outside the hotels there are only a few dependably respectable places to drink, but plenty of others you might stick your head into.

Vogue Bar & Lounge (Map p93; ☎ 223-2670/2663; www.princessbelize.com; Princess Hotel & Casino, Newtown Barracks Rd; 🕒 noon-midnight Sun-Wed, noon-2am Thu-Sat) This 40-seat lounge at the Princess gets lively later in the week, especially on Friday night when a mixed young crowd launches a new weekend. A DJ helps things get moving from 9pm Thursday to Saturday.

Radisson Poolside Bar (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-3333; www.radisson.com/belizecitybz; Radisson Fort George Hotel, 2 Marine Pde; 🕒 11am-10pm) The Friday happy hour (5pm to 9pm) is very popular; often there is live music and sometimes there's a DJ.

Belize Biltmore Plaza (off Map p93; ☎ 223-2302; www.belizebiltmore.com; Mile 3½ Northern Hwy; 🕒 11am-10pm) The Friday happy hour (5pm to 8pm) at the Biltmore's poolside bar is a fun session, with a great steel band. There's often live music or cabaret other nights too.

Baymen's Tavern (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-3333; www.radisson.com/belizecitybz; Radisson Fort George Hotel, 2 Marine Pde; 🕒 10am-10pm) The main bar at the Radisson is friendly and sociable, with a pleasant outdoor deck.

Bird's Isle Restaurant (Map pp96-7; ☎ 207-2179; Bird's Isle; 🕒 10am-midnight Mon-Sat) Located at the end of Bird's Isle, a park-like oasis on the southern coast of town, this open-air restaurant is one of the prettiest settings for an outdoor bar you're likely to find in Belize City. In addition to beer, wine and cocktails, the restaurant serves well-prepared burgers, snacks and Belizean fare. Thursdays from 8:30pm to 1am is karaoke night; the bar also has live music occasionally.

MJ's Grand (Map p93; 170 Newtown Barracks Rd; 🕒 4pm-1am Mon-Fri, 4pm-3am Sat & Sun) You may get to enjoy some funky Belizean rhythms here, but karaoke starts up at 10pm most nights. MJ's is popular with locals both for its indoor pool tables and outdoor terrace tables overlooking Newtown Barracks Green; the atmosphere is relaxed.

ENTERTAINMENT

The hub of Belize City nightlife is, fortuitously enough, located in the relatively safe

Newtown Barracks area in the north of town. It's here where you'll find the Princess Hotel & Casino entertainment complex and the best nightclubs, as well as some of the city's best restaurants. The local press publicizes upcoming events.

Nightclubs

Caesar's Palace (Map p93; ☎ 223-7624; 190 Newtown Barracks Rd; 🕒 10pm-late Thu-Sat) The music and crowd here have a strong Latino element. People start turning up at about 10:30pm, and the action on and around the small dance floor can get pretty lively on Friday and Saturday.

Bellevue Hotel (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7051/2; bellevue@btlnet.net; 5 Southern Foreshore) The karaoke at the pool bar here on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights can be fun for participants (including some tourists), but may be less so for the occupants of neighboring rooms!

Casino, Bowling & Cinema

Princess Hotel & Casino (Map p93; ☎ 223-0638; Newtown Barracks; 🕒 noon-4am; 📍) The casino at the Princess Hotel is an informal and fun place to try to boost your budget (set yourself a limit on what you're prepared to lose), with roulette, poker and blackjack tables, plus hundreds of slot machines and a floor show with dancing girls kicking up their heels at 10pm. You need to show ID such as your passport or driver's license to enter (minimum age is 18).

The complex is also where you will find Belize's only eight-lane (or any-lane, for that matter) **bowling alley** (per person for 2 games BZ\$14; 🕒 11am-11pm; 📍).

The two-screen **movie theater** (☎ 223-7162; admission BZ\$10; screenings usually at 6pm or 7pm & 8pm or 9pm, plus 3pm Sat & Sun) shows first-run Hollywood films, though usually a bit later than their US release dates.

Music & Theater

To find out what's on, watch for posters, read the local press or drop by the following venues.

Bliss Centre for the Performing Arts (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-2458/2110; Southern Foreshore) The revamped Bliss Centre has a fine 600-seat theater that stages a variety of events, including concerts of traditional Belizean music and other shows that celebrate Belize and its culture. The annual Belizean Film Festival is held here, and the Children's Art Festival in May. The Bliss Centre is also a likely spot in the

city for any major cultural happenings (such as this year's memorial concert for Belizean musician Andy Palacio, which brought the city to a standstill for hours). As they don't yet have a website to promote upcoming events, your best bet is to call or drop by during business hours to learn what's going on during your visit.

Belize City Centre (Map p93; ☎ 227-2051/2092; Central American Blvd; 📍) This is the main venue for tours too large for the Bliss Centre.

Government House (House of Culture; Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-3050; Regent St) Some cultural events, including classical concerts, are held here.

Sports

The main venues are the **MCC Grounds** (Map p93; cnr Newtown Barracks Rd & Calle al Mar), for football and cricket; **Rogers Stadium** (Map pp96-7; Dolphin St) for softball; and the **Marion Jones Sporting Complex** (Map p93; Princess Margaret Dr), which is used for various events.

SHOPPING

Albert St and its side streets are the main shopping streets, with stores dealing in everything from clothes and domestic appliances to spices and music.

Augusto Quan Ltd (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-8000; quanbelize@earthlink.net; 13 Market Sq) An excellent hardware store stocking tools, camping gear, sports gear and even the kitchen sink (really...they sell plumbing supplies). A good place to hit before heading into the bush.

National Handicraft Centre (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-3636; 2 S Park St; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) This store carries the best stock of Belizean crafts, at fair prices. Attractive buys include carvings in the strikingly streaked hardwood zericote, slate relief carvings of wildlife and Maya deities, and CDs of Belizean music.

Brodie's (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7070; 2 Albert St; 🕒 8:30am-7pm Mon-Thu, 8:30am-8pm Fri, 8:30am-5pm Sat, 8:30am-1pm Sun) Brodie's is the biggest department store in the country. Some of the 'departments' are pretty small, but it's still a good place to look for many things.

Image Factory (Map pp96-7; ☎ 203-4151; www.imagefactory.bz; 91 N Front St; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Some original Belizean art lurks among the handicrafts and books here.

Belize Photo Lab (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-4428; photo lab@btlnet.net; cnr Bishop & E Canal Sts) The best place in town for photographic supplies.

Belize Tourist Village (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-7789; 8 Fort St; ☎ 8am-4pm, cruise-ship days only) This waterfront complex exists for the convenience of cruise-ship passengers, who disembark here on their land trips. Non-cruise tourists may enter from the street with a temporary pass, obtainable on presentation of an identity document such as a passport. Most of the stores are gift shops, liquor stores, jewelers or pharmacies offering Viagra without prescription. Some items are cheaper than elsewhere in the city; others are more expensive. You'll know when it's open from the crowds of hawkers, hustlers and tour agents thronging the street outside.

You'll find similar gift shops at the Museum of Belize (see p94), the Radisson (p100), Princess (p100) and Belize Biltmore Plaza (p102) hotels, and Old Belize (p112). For a most unique handicraft shopping experience, check out Belize Central Prison (p113).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air
Belize City has two airports: Philip Goldson International Airport (BZE), which is 11 miles northwest of the city center off the Northern Hwy; and the Municipal Airstrip (TZA), around 2 miles north of the center. All international flights use the international airport. Domestic flights are divided between the two airports, but those using the Municipal Airstrip are cheaper (often significantly). See p291 and p294 for further information on flights to, from and around Belize. The following airlines fly from Belize City:

American Airlines (Map p93; ☎ 223-2522; www.aa.com; Sancas Plaza, Belcan Junction) Direct flights to/from Miami and Dallas/Fort Worth.

Continental Airlines (www.continental.com) Downtown (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-8309; 80 Regent St); Philip Goldson International Airport (☎ 225-2263) Direct flights to/from Houston.

Delta Air Lines Philip Goldson International Airport (☎ 225-3429; www.delta.com) Direct flights to/from Atlanta.

Grupo TACA (www.taca.com); Downtown (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-7363/4; Belize Global Travel Services, 41 Albert St); Philip Goldson International Airport (☎ 225-2163) Direct flights to/from Houston and San Salvador (El Salvador).

Maya Island Air (www.mayaairways.com); Municipal Airstrip (Map p93; ☎ 223-1140); Philip Goldson International Airport (☎ 225-2219) Direct flights to Caye Caulker, Dangriga, Placencia, Punta Gorda and San Pedro (Ambergris Caye).

Tropic Air (www.tropicair.com); Philip Goldson International Airport (☎ 225-2302); Municipal Airstrip (Map p93;

☎ 223-5671) Direct flights to Caye Caulker, Dangriga, Placencia, Punta Gorda, San Pedro and Flores.

US Airways (Map pp96-7; ☎ 225-3589; www.usairways.com; Belize Global Travel Services, 41 Albert St) Direct flights to Charlotte, North Carolina.

Boat

Caye Caulker Water Taxi (Map pp96-7; ☎ 203-1969, 226-0992; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com; Caye Caulker Water Taxi Terminal, 10 N Front St) provides the main service that connects Belize City with Caye Caulker and San Pedro (Ambergris Caye). Departures to Caye Caulker (one-way/return BZ\$15/30, 50 minutes) and San Pedro (one-way/return BZ\$20/40, 1½ hours) are at 8am, 9am, 10:30am, noon, 1:30pm, 3pm and 4:30pm.

If there are more than enough passengers for one boat, one will go direct to San Pedro. An extra boat, to Caye Caulker only, goes at 5:30pm. On request from passengers the boats will stop at Long Caye or Caye Chapel (both one-way BZ\$15).

Triple J Express (Map pp96-7; ☎ 207-7777, 223-3464; Court House Warf) has a similar service from Belize City to Caye Caulker and San Pedro leaving at 8am, 10:30am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm; their terminal is across the creek in front of the court house. Though their prices are exactly the same, Triple J occasionally offers discounts (of around BZ\$5) to compete with the more well-known Caye Caulker Water Taxi.

You can actually get all the way to Corozal, Sarteneja and Cerros by transferring at San Pedro and continuing north on a Thunderbolt boat (p177).

Bus

The story of Belize's bus system is either a good example of the effectiveness of what acolytes of unfettered capitalism call 'the invisible hand of the free market' – or a bad one. Since the bankruptcy of Belize's main long-distance bus service, Novelo's (the story of which might make a good argument *against* an unrestrained free-market), a dozen or so smaller companies have stepped in to fill the gaps. The southern Belize City–Punta Gorda route is pretty straightforward, as only three companies (James, National and Usher) really service the south, with James being the most reliable (see p105 for a bus schedule).

North to Corozal and west to San Ignacio is where the majority of the little fish have stepped in to meet the needs of the market. While there are plenty of buses servicing both

BUS TIMETABLE: BELIZE CITY TO PUNTA GORDA

Belize City	Belmopan	Dangriga	Independence	Punta Gorda	Service
5:30am	6:30am	8am	9:30am	10:30am	Express
6am	7:30am	9am	10:30am	12:30pm	Regular
8am	9:30am	11am	12:30pm	2:30pm	Regular
9am	10:30am	noon	1:45pm	3:30pm	Regular
10am	11:30am	1pm	2:45pm	4:30pm	Regular
11am	12:30pm	2pm	4pm	5:30pm	Regular
noon	1:30pm	3pm	5pm	7pm	Regular
3pm	4:30pm	5:30pm	7pm	8:30pm	Regular
3:30pm	4:30pm	5:30pm	7pm	8:30pm	Express

routes from morning to night, trying to decipher the schedules (a series of yellowing hand-written charts glued to the wall, with endless barely legible additions and deletions) can be difficult. As it's fairly doubtful whether today's schedule will even be relevant when this book comes out, we'll instead opt for giving generalized information along with a hearty Belizean reassurance: 'Relax, you'll get there.' Prices listed are approximate for regular and express services, and are subject to change.

Belmopan (BZ\$4 to BZ\$7, 1¼ hours, 52 miles) Lots of buses daily; nearly all buses heading south, and all heading west, pass through Belmopan. Any bus heading to Belmopan can drop you anywhere along Western Hwy.

Benque Viejo del Carmen (BZ\$8 to BZ\$12, 2½ to three hours, 80 miles) Plenty of buses.

Chetumal (BZ\$10 to BZ\$14, 3½ to 4½ hours, 102 miles) Several each day; Buses pass through Belize City en-route from Flores, Guatemala. Tickets are sold by the same outlets as for Flores buses (see right).

Corozal (BZ\$9 to BZ\$12, 2½ to 3¼ hours, 86 miles) Plenty of buses daily; all buses to Chetumal stop in Corozal.

Crooked Tree (BZ\$3.50, one hour, 36 miles) From the Pound Yard bus stop at 4:30pm and 5pm, Monday to Saturday, and from the corner of Regent St W and W Canal St (Map pp96-7) at 10:45am from Monday to Saturday; can also take any northern bus and hitch from turnoff.

Dangriga (BZ\$10 to BZ\$14, 2½ to three hours, 107 miles) Many daily buses; all southern buses stop in Dangriga. See (see p250 for a schedule).

Gales Point Manatee (BZ\$5 to BZ\$7, two to 2½ hours, 65 miles) Gales Point has lost a significant amount of its bus service since Novelo's bankruptcy; currently, two buses per week pass through each way; see p118 for schedule.

Orange Walk (BZ\$5 to BZ\$7, 1½ to two hours, 57 miles) Many daily buses; all buses to Corozal, Chetumal and Sarteneja stop in OW.

Punta Gorda (BZ\$20 to BZ\$22, six to seven hours, 212 miles) The terminus for James Bus' southern line; see p250 for a schedule. A few other services also go to Punta Gorda.

San Ignacio (BZ\$14 to BZ\$22, two to 2½ hours, 72 miles) Many daily buses.

Belize City's **main bus station** (Map pp96-7) is the old Novelo's terminal next to the canal, now painted Rastafarian red, gold and green, and still bearing the Novelo's name. Most buses leave from here or from the next-door **Pound Yard bus stop** (Map pp96-7; Cemetery Rd). **James bus line** (☎ 702-2049, 722-2625) has the most reliable schedule:

Other bus lines leaving from Belize City: **Jex & Sons** (Map pp96-7; ☎ 225-7017) Runs buses to Crooked Tree (BZ\$3.50, one hour, 36 miles).

R-Line buses (Map pp96-7; cnr of Euphrates Ave & Cairo St) Buses to Bermudian Landing (BZ\$3, one hour, 27 miles) go at 12:15pm, 4pm and 9pm, Monday to Friday, and noon and 5pm Saturday.

Sarteneja bus line (Map pp96-7; off Regent St) departs for Sarteneja (BZ\$9, 3½ hours, 96 miles) at noon and 4pm, Monday to Saturday from the north side of Supreme Court building; you can also catch this bus in Orange Walk (p163).

TO FLORES, GUATEMALA

Buses to Flores (five hours, 145 miles) leave from the Caye Caulker Water Taxi terminal. The Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya company has the most reliable reputation; you can get tickets for a bus to Tikal leaving at 9:30am (BZ\$30, daily) or one to Flores (BZ\$40) at **Mundo Maya Deli** (☎ 223-0457) or **Khan Store** (☎ 223-7611), both inside the water-taxi terminal.

Car & Motorcycle

The main roads in and out of town are the Northern Hwy (to the international airport, Orange Walk and Corozal), which heads northwest from the Belcan Junction, and the Western Hwy (to Belmopan and San Ignacio), which is the westward continuation

of Cemetery Rd. Cemetery Rd gets its name from the ramshackle Lord's Ridge Cemetery, which it bisects west of Central American Blvd.

Auto rental firms in Belize City include the following:

Avis (☎ 225-2385; www.avis.com) Offices at Philip Goldson International Airport and in Ladyville.

Budget (off Map p93; ☎ 223-2435/3986; www.budget-belize.com; Mile 2½ Northern Hwy) There is also an office at Philip Goldson International Airport.

Crystal Auto Rental (off Map p93; ☎ 223-1600; www.crystal-belize.com; Mile 5 Northern Hwy) One of the best local firms; allows vehicles to be taken into Guatemala. There's another branch at Philip Goldson International Airport.

Euphrates Auto Rental (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-5752, 614-6967; www.ears.bz; 143 Euphrates Ave, Southside)

Local firm that offers some of the best deals in town.

Hertz (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-0886/5395; www.hertz.com; 11A Cork St, Fort George District) Hertz also has a branch at Philip Goldson International Airport.

GETTING AROUND

Though many of the spots where travelers go are within walking distance of each other, it's always safest to take a taxi after dark.

To/From the Airports

There is no public transportation to or from either airport. The taxi fare to or from the international airport is BZ\$40. An alternative is to walk the 1.6 miles from the airport to the Northern Hwy, where fairly frequent buses pass heading to Belize City. Taxis from the Municipal Airstrip to the center of town cost around BZ\$10.

Car & Motorcycle

Belize City has the heaviest traffic in the country, as intense as that of a medium-sized country town in North America or Europe. There's a limited one-way system, which is easy to work with. If you need to park on the street, try to do so right outside the place you're staying. Never leave anything valuable on view inside a parked car.

Taxi

Cabs cost around BZ\$7 for rides within the city, give or take; if it's a long trip from one side of town to the other, expect to be charged a bit more. Confirm the price in advance with your driver. Most restaurants and hotels will call a cab for you.

NORTHERN BELIZE DISTRICT

The Northern Hwy stretches from Belize City and into Orange Walk District, passing through the communities of Ladyville and Burrell Boom (west of which you'll find the Community Baboon Sanctuary and Spanish Creek Wildlife Sanctuary). At Sand Hill the road forks. To the west, the Northern Hwy continues to Orange Walk, passing the turnoff for the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. To the east, the Old Northern Hwy leads to the Maya ruins of Altun Ha.

ALTUN HA

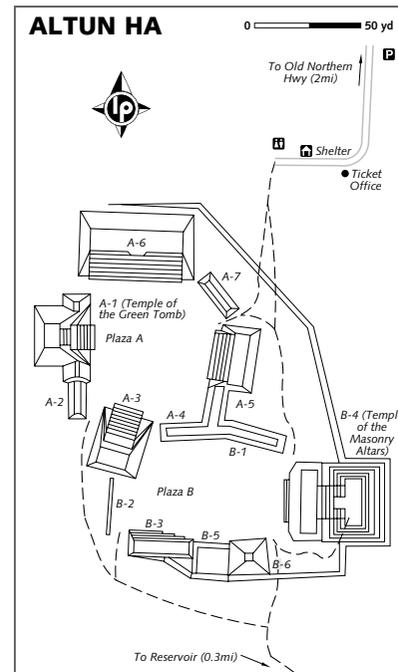
The ruins that have inspired Belikin beer labels and Belizean banknotes, **Altun Ha** (admission BZ\$10; ☎ 8am-5pm) stands 34 miles north of central Belize City, off the Old Northern Hwy.

Altun Ha was a rich and important Maya trading and agricultural town with a population of 8000 to 10,000 at its peak in the Classic Period (AD 300–1000). The entire site covered some 1500 acres, but what visitors today see is the central ceremonial precinct of two plazas surrounded by temples, excavated in the 1960s and now looking squeaky clean following a stabilization and conservation program from 2000 to 2004.

Altun Ha existed by at least 200 BC, perhaps even several centuries earlier, and flourished until the mysterious collapse of Classic Maya civilization around AD 900. Most of the temples date from around AD 550 to 650, though, like many Maya temples, most of them are composed of several layers, having been built over periodically in a series of renewals.

In Plaza A, structure A-1 is sometimes called the **Temple of the Green Tomb**. Deep within it was discovered the tomb of a priest-king dating from around AD 600. Tropical humidity had destroyed the garments of the king and the paper of the Maya 'painted book' buried with him, but many riches were intact: shell necklaces, pottery, pearls, stingray spines used in bloodletting rites, ceremonial flints and the nearly 300 jade objects (mostly small beads and pendants) that gave rise to the name Green Tomb.

The largest and most important temple is the **Temple of the Masonry Altars** (B-4). The restored structure you see dates from the first half of the 7th century AD and takes its name



from altars on which copal was burned and beautifully carved jade pieces were smashed in sacrifice. This is the Maya temple that's likely to become most familiar during your Belizean travels, since it's the one depicted (in somewhat stylized form) on Belikin beer labels.

Excavation of the structure in 1968 revealed several priestly tombs. Most had been destroyed or desecrated, but one, tomb B-4/7 (inside the stone structure protruding from the upper steps of the broad central staircase), contained the remains of an elderly personage accompanied by numerous jade objects, including a unique 6in-tall carved head of Kinich Ahau, the Maya sun god – the largest well-carved jade object ever recovered from a Maya archaeological site. (Look for the jade head illustration in the top left corner of Belizean banknotes.)

A path heading south from structure B-6 leads 600yd through the jungle to a broad pond that was the main **reservoir** of the ancient town.

Modern toilets, and drinks and souvenir stands are near the ticket office, and the site has good wheelchair access.

Sleeping & Eating

Mayan Wells Restaurant (Map p90; ☎ 220-6039; www.mayanwells.com; Altun Ha Rd; camping per person BZ\$10, r BZ\$60, lunch BZ\$12; ☎ breakfast & lunch Mon-Fri; ☎) Mayan Wells is 1.4 miles from the ruins, on the road in from the Old Northern Hwy, and makes a fine stop for lunch or refreshments. Traditional Belizean lunches of rice, beans, stewed chicken and a drink are served under a *palapa* (thatched-roof shelter) beside a cenote amid lovely tropical gardens. If you fancy staying there, there's a cozy mosquito-netted cabana with private bathroom and hammock-slung verandah, accommodating up to four adults – or you can camp. Free internet is available to people staying here. Birders and other nature lovers will particularly enjoy this hospitable place.

Maruba Resort Jungle Spa (Map p90; ☎ 322-2199, in USA ☎ 713-799-2031, 800-627-8227; www.maruba-spa.com; Mile 40½ Old Northern Hwy; s/d from BZ\$400/440, ste BZ\$540-1400; ☎) Maruba, 2 miles north of Maskall village (13 miles from Altun Ha), takes the jungle-lodge-and-spa concept to extremes of expensive pampering. There are luxurious amenities and a slew of health and rejuvenation treatments. Lush tropical grounds harbor individually designed rooms in a variety of African, Creole, Maya and even Gaudiesque styles – including honeymoon and 'fertility' suites and a jungle tree house. There are two pools and a tree-house restaurant that serves good seafood, game and salads to nonguests as well as guests. For the active, there are a range of adventures and tours on offer.

Getting There & Away

Many tours run to Altun Ha from Belize City, Caye Caulker, or from San Pedro on Ambergris Caye.

To get here in your own vehicle, turn off the Northern Hwy 20 miles from Belize City at a junction signed 'Altun Ha,' then drive 11.5 miles along the paved but narrow and often potholed Old Northern Hwy to Lucky Strike village, where a better paved road heads off west to Altun Ha (2.4 miles).

Buses to Maskall, four times daily from the main bus station in Belize City (see p104), will drop you at Lucky Strike. Heading back to the city, buses leave Maskall at 5:30am, 6am, 6:30am and 7am, passing through Lucky Strike 20 to 30 minutes later. Traffic along the jungle-lined Old Northern Hwy tends to be light, so if you're hitchhiking prepare to wait.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING HOWLER MONKEYS *Joshua Samuel Brown*

They roared periodically through the night; at times the sound seemed far away, and at other times it was as if the howlers were right on the grounds of the lodge in which we were staying. Although I knew the howling wasn't directed at me – my being a different order of primate entirely – it still sent chills down my spine. Something about the growling roar of the black howlers was not merely eerie, but eerily familiar. I couldn't figure out what it was.

The next day I ran into a sound engineer who was vacationing a few miles away at the Spanish Creek Rainforest Sanctuary. He'd set up a high-quality digital audio recording device out in the jungle specifically to capture the monkeys' howling, and let me listen to some excerpts through his headphones. Then and there I realized exactly why the howls sounded so familiar to me: in every one of George Romero's *Living Dead* films (I'm a big fan, and have seen them all many times) there's always at least one scene – usually mid-way or towards the end – in which Romero tries to get the audience to feel the survivors' terror; they are, after all, hopelessly outnumbered by walking corpses. The camera pans out to show the endless horde, and the audio...it's the same in every movie, an echoing cacophony of growls, bone-chilling and inhuman.

This is exactly the sound of the howler monkeys. Have filmmakers been coming to Belize to sample their growls for the benefit of horror-film geeks such as myself? Quite possibly – art does imitate life.

(For readers who might be dissuaded from visiting, don't be. The howler monkeys are not undead. Also, they're vegetarians.)

COMMUNITY BABOON SANCTUARY

No real baboons inhabit Belize, but Belizeans use that name for black howler monkeys. Though howler monkeys live throughout Central and South America, the endangered black howler exists only in Belize, northern Guatemala and southern Mexico. The **Community Baboon Sanctuary** (CBS; Map p90; www.howlermonkeys.org) is spread over several long-established Creole villages in the Belize River valley. The sanctuary has engineered a big increase in this primate's population and is doubly interesting because it's a completely community-run, grassroots conservation operation. In addition to the near-certainty of seeing some of these fascinating primates, the sanctuary offers river trips (day and night) and horseback riding. There are also nearly 200 bird species here to keep wildlife watchers busy.

The sanctuary takes up approximately 20 sq miles; however, the black howlers have made an amazing comeback in the area, and the monkeys now roam freely all around the surrounding area. While you're most likely to see the monkeys in the sanctuary (the ones who live here are the most socialized, and least prone to shun humans,) you'll probably hear their distinctive howls at dusk and dawn in places such as Spanish Creek Wildlife Sanctuary (several miles to the west; opposite) or in other areas of Belize District that offer

the monkeys the broadleaf-forest habitat in which they thrive.

The **CBS visitors center** (☎ 220-2181; admission BZ\$10; ☎ 8am-5pm), in Bermudian Landing, has a number of good exhibits and displays on the black howler, the history of the sanctuary, and other Belizean wildlife. Included with the admission fee is a one-hour guided nature walk on which you're likely to encounter a resident troop of black howlers. Along the way the trained local guides also impart their knowledge of the many medicinal plants. Lodge staff can connect you with a wide variety of touring options, as can Edward and Melissa Turton at the nearby Howler Monkey Lodge (opposite).

Sleeping & Eating

With the closing of the CBS restaurant, the only choices for eating while in the Community Baboon Sanctuary are to bring in your own food, get snacks at the local grocery store on the main road, or to have your hotel/resort arrange meals for you. Luckily, they all do this – some exceedingly well. **Bed & Breakfast** (d and 2 meals BZ\$49) is available in local homes or specially built visitor cabanas in several Community Baboon Sanctuary villages. Conditions are rustic (not all places have showers or flush toilets), but there's no better way to experience Creole village life. Book at the visitors center.

Howler Monkey Lodge (☎ 220-2158; www.howlermonkeylodge.com; s/d/tr cabanas BZ\$50/90/120; 📍 🚶) Owned and operated by Edward and Melissa Turton, the lodge consists of seven cabins set on 20 acres on a jungle-filled patch of land above a bend in the Belize River. Like the nearby CBS visitors center (just 400yd away), the lodge has regular visits from local howler monkeys. Cabins are BZ\$120, 'jungle cabins' are BZ\$90 and what they call their 'purple berry cabins' (covered by blackberries), which are three rooms with a shared bath, rent out for BZ\$50. There's a lodge serving three meals a day, but only if requested beforehand (the Turtons are excellent cooks).

Nature Resort (☎ 223-3668; naturer@bt.net; cabanas BZ\$60-130; 📍 🚶) Right next to the visitors center, this is the most comfortable place to stay, with friendly management and clean, well-maintained cabanas holding up to four people, spread around an attractive lawn area with some trees. Most have private bathrooms (with unheated water); one is air-conditioned.

Getting There & Away

Bermudian Landing is 28 miles west of Belize City. Leave the Northern Hwy at the turnoff for Burrell Boom. Turn right after 3 miles, into Burrell Boom village, then carry straight on to Bermudian Landing, 9 miles beyond. If you're heading to western Belize after you visit the sanctuary, save time by taking the direct road 8 miles south from Burrell Boom to Hattieville on the Western Hwy.

R-Line buses run between Belize City and Bermudian Landing (BZ\$4, one hour). See p105 for details of departures from Belize City. Departures from Bermudian Landing to Belize City are at 6:20am, 6:30am and 4pm Monday to Friday, and 6:30am and 6:45am Saturday.

SPANISH CREEK WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Several miles past the Community Baboon Sanctuary sits this amazingly pristine 5900-acre sanctuary managed by the **Rancho Dolores Environmental and Development Group** (RDEDG; ☎ 220-2191). Another of Belize's protected areas, Spanish Creek Wildlife Sanctuary is part of the biological corridor that runs through much of the nation, allowing once-highly endangered animals such as howler monkeys and pumas to roam and breed. The sanctuary runs 5 miles along the length of the

Spanish Creek beginning by the small Creole/Maya community of **Rancho Dolores** (population 200). Though the village is traditionally agricultural, many families also work locally in the tourism sector.

Activities

Visitors to SCWS will find a number of excellent opportunities to mix recreation with tropical education. Canoes are available for rent (half-/full day BZ\$10/\$20), and trips upriver by motorboat go for about BZ\$50 for up to six people. There are lovely riverside paths for **hiking**, and locals will be glad to 'hook you up' with a hand line to fish the creek. Another Belizean activity you can try in the area is **dory poling**; similar to a canoe, the Belizean dory is hand-carved from a single log. Though the dory can be paddled with a hand-carved cedar paddle, the more traditional method of movement is pushing it with a bamboo pole. The catch, you ask? Whoever's poling the dory has to remain standing. Horses can also be rented for trail rides for around BZ\$15 per hour.

Sports fans take note: Rancho Dolores is a hotbed of cricket and softball, with the former being played in town every other Saturday from January through June and the latter every other Sunday. Food and drinks are usually available at the games.

Sleeping & Eating

Though there are no hotels in Rancho Dolores, RDEDG offers a homestay program with families throughout the village. In addition to providing room and meals, host families will often act as guides and liaisons between guests and the general community. Contact RDEDG for details of price and availability. RDEDG also arranges internships for volunteers (p110) to help with both conservation work inside the Spanish Creek Wildlife Sanctuary and education through the local primary school.

Getting There & Away

Rancho Dolores is located 17 miles from the junction at Burrell Boom. You will pass through several villages along the way and Rancho Dolores is at the end of the road. **Russell's Bus** (☎ 610-5164, BZ\$4) leaves Belize City at 5pm Monday to Friday and 1pm Saturday from the R-Line bus stop, corner of Euphrates Ave and Cairo St, and gets to Rancho Dolores

INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITY: SPANISH CREEK RAINFOREST RESERVE

An excellent place where those looking for a deeper understanding of the area can be found at the **Spanish Creek Rainforest Reserve** (☎ 670-0620, 668-3290 www.belizebamboo.com). Begun in 2004 by Sol Tucker and Marc Ellenby, the 2000-acre solar-powered farm cultivates the largest collection of noninvasive clumping bamboo in Central America, using no pesticides, herbicides or energy-intensive irrigation. The farm also has hundreds of tropical fruit trees including avocados, mangoes, and jackfruit. Interns on the farm can learn farming techniques and study medicinal rainforest plants while living in one of the most undisturbed corners of Belize. There's plenty of time left over for reading and relaxation, observation of wildlife, canoeing, meditation and exploration. The cost of the program is BZ\$50 per day, which includes comfortable accommodations and gourmet organic meals. Casual travelers are also welcome with advanced notice.

about an hour later. The same bus departs Rancho Dolores at 5am Monday to Saturday. You can also call **Cyril Smith** (☎ 606-4627), proprietor of the one licensed taxi service of Rancho Dolores, to arrange pick up from just about anywhere.

CROOKED TREE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Thirty-two miles up the Northern Hwy from Belize City lies the turnoff to the **Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary** (CTWS; Map p90; admission BZ\$8). Quite possibly one of the best birding areas in Belize (perhaps even all of Central America), the sanctuary isn't merely a park for nature enthusiasts, but a living community of about 900 folks, mostly of Creole descent, who were farming and fishing the area long before the word 'ecotourism' was ever coined. It is well worth a visit for anyone who loves nature or fancies experiencing a peaceful rural community with an interesting history and a beautiful setting. It's best to stay the night so you can be here at dawn, when the birds are most active. The village has several midrange and budget accommodations. Don't forget your binoculars – though if you do local guides should be able to lend you a pair.

The story goes that **Crooked Tree village** got its name from early logwood cutters who boated up Belize River and Black Creek to a giant lagoon marked by a tree that seemingly grew in every direction. These 'crooked trees' (cashew trees, in fact) still grow in abundance around the lagoon. Founded in the early 18th century, Crooked Tree may be the oldest village in Belize. Until the 3½-mile causeway from the Northern Hwy was built in 1984, the only way to get here was by boat, so it's no wonder life still maintains the slow rhythm of bygone centuries.

Migrating birds flock to the lagoons, rivers and swamps each year between December and May. The best **bird-watching** months are usually February to May, when many migrants stop over on their way north, and the low level of the lagoon draws thousands of birds into the open to seek food in the shallows.

Bird-watchers are in for hours of ornithological bliss. Boat-billed, chestnut-bellied and bare-throated tiger herons, Muscovy and black-bellied whistling ducks, snail kites, ospreys, black-collared hawks and all of Belize's five species of kingfisher are among the 286 species recorded here (see a near-complete list at www.belizeaudubon.org/parks/ctws.htm). Jabiru storks, the largest flying bird in the Americas, with wingspans of up to 12ft, congregate here in April and May and a few pairs nest in the sanctuary in the preceding months.

The **CTWS visitors center** (☎ 8am-4:30pm), with good displays and a range of books and information materials for sale, stands at the entrance to the village, just off the causeway. It's here that you'll be asked to pay your admission fee. The helpful, knowledgeable staff will give you a village and trail map and answer questions on anything to do with visiting the sanctuary, including information on expert local bird guides.

The obvious reference point in the village is the 'Welcome to Crooked Tree' sign, at a junction 300yd past the visitors center as you enter the village from the causeway.

A series of reasonably well-signposted **walking trails** weave along the lakeshores and through and beyond the village. About 3 miles north of the village center are an excellent 700yd boardwalk and an observation tower, allowing access to swampy areas of thick, low vegetation around the lagoon's edge. From

December or January to May you can reach the boardwalk by driving and walking; the rest of the year you'll need a boat to reach it.

If you can afford it, take a **boat tour** as well as walking. A two- to three-hour boat tour, costing around BZ\$150 for up to four people, can be arranged at the main accommodations (see below). A boat trip gets you out onto the lagoon and into the surrounding swamps.

You can also explore Spanish Creek and Black Creek, leading south out of the main lagoon, which, with their thick tree cover, harbor plenty of birds all year. Black Creek is also home to black howler monkeys, Morelet's crocodiles, coatimundi and several species of turtle and iguana; Spanish Creek gives access to **Chau Hix**, an ancient Maya site with a pyramid 80ft high.

Festivals & Events

Crooked Tree is home to a great number of cashew trees and the village's annual **Cashew Festival**. Happening the first weekend in May, the festival celebrates the cashew harvest in a big way, with music, dancing and lots of cracking, shelling, roasting and stewing of cashews, not to mention the making of cashew cake, cashew jelly, cashew ice cream, cashew wine (not unlike sweet sherry) and cashew you-name-it. The harvest season continues into July.

Sleeping & Eating

Rhaburn's Rooms (☎ 225-7035; s/d BZ\$20/35; P) The four wooden rooms here are on the small and rustic side, but clean and neat nonetheless. All have fans and a shared hot-water bathroom and verandah. Owners Owen and Maggie Rhaburn are friendly and welcoming, which is a good thing, as the rooms are above their own home. Go south at the 'Welcome to Crooked Tree' sign and after 300yd cross the cricket field on the right immediately past the Church of the Nazarene. Follow the track through the trees from the far left corner of the cricket field and you'll see the Rhaburn's sign on the first bend. The house is the cream-colored one on the left side of the broad lawn area.

Sam Tillett's Hotel & Tours (☎ 220-7026; samhotel@bt.net; s/d/f BZ\$60/80/150, d with air-con BZ\$110, breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$8/12/16; P) The Tilletts are a local Crooked Creek clan; Patriarch Sam Tillett (who passed away last year) was one of the most celebrated bird guides in the country.

The 10 thatched rooms and cabanas here are clean and well furnished with private bathrooms. All of the rooms and cabanas have beautiful murals depicting local avian life (the place is, after all, for the birds), painted by local Belizean artists. Sam's is beside the main street, 500yd north of the 'Welcome to Crooked Tree' sign.

Bird's Eye View Lodge (☎ 205-72027, 203-2040, in USA 570-588-0844; www.birdseyeviewlodge.com; camping per person BZ\$12, s/tw/d/tr/q downstairs BZ\$120/140/160/180/200, s/d/tr upstairs BZ\$160/200/220, meals BZ\$20-30; P) Aply named, this lodge has the best spot in the village for viewing birds, especially the waterfowl that inhabit the sanctuary's main lagoon on whose banks the lodge is set. The furthest from the entrance of the park's lodgings, Bird's Eye View is at the south end of the village, 1 mile from the 'Welcome to Crooked Tree' sign. Comfortable and clean without being impersonal, the lodge is especially popular with birdwatchers and nature lovers. Rooms are of ample size, with good beds, bathrooms, fans and reading lights; upstairs rooms have patios that look out on the lagoon. Good meals are served in a bright dining room. Room rates are reduced by up to one-third from May 15 to October 30. The lodge offers lagoon boat tours, nature walks with experienced bird guides (per person per hour BZ\$10), horseback riding (per hour BZ\$20) and canoe rental (per person per hour BZ\$10).

Carrie's Kitchen (☎ 205-7076; meals from BZ\$5; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Thur, 10am-11pm Fri & Sat) Serves Creole and Belizean specialties such as rice and beans, stewed chicken and jerked pork, cooked just the way locals like.

There are two other eateries inside the village as well.

Getting There & Away

Driving to Crooked Tree is the easiest way to get here, though nearly all listed accommodations will arrange transfers to and from Belize City or the international airport for between BZ\$90 to BZ\$160, depending on group size. Jex & Sons runs buses from Belize City (BZ\$3.50, one hour); see p105 for details of departures from Belize City. Departures to Belize City from Crooked Tree are at 5am, 6:30am and 7am Monday to Saturday. Alternatively, you can get a bus on the Northern Hwy to the Crooked Tree turnoff, then thumb it the 3.5 miles to the village.

SOUTHERN BELIZE DISTRICT

Most of the southern Belize District's attractions are along the Western Hwy, which stretches from Belize City through Belmopan and out to Guatemala. It's in this area where you'll find the Belize Zoo, Monkey Bay and perhaps Central America's strangest gift shop. This is also where you'll find more kitsch than you can shake a stick at in 'Old Belize'.

OLD BELIZE

You know that one really famous American roadside attraction that straddles the North Carolina–South Carolina border, the one you always wanted to stop at when you were a kid because highway signs hype it for about a thousand miles in either direction, but your parents said no because they knew it was just a tourist trap, causing you and your siblings to whine for, like, 50 miles until dad just gave in and said, 'Fine, stop whining, we'll stop at South of the Border...I need some coffee anyway.'

If you liked it, despite the overwhelming kitsch, you'll love **Old Belize** (Map p90; ☎ 222-4129/4286; www.oldbelize.com; Mile 5 Western Hwy; adult/child BZ\$15/7.50, children under 6 free; ☎ 8am–4pm Tue–Sat, 10am–4pm Sun & Mon). Initially designed to provide hurried cruise-ship tourists with a neatly encapsulated version of Belizean history and culture, this place is so tourist-trap plastic that in a weird sort of way it's actually fun.

After paying your (rather hefty) ticket price, you'll be allowed to enter the Old Belize museum, where plastic models of trees (representations of the same trees you'll find in the rainforest just a few miles south) sit beneath speakers through which the songs of (presumably) Belizean birds are piped. You'll then walk through a series of other plastic exhibits depicting genuine scenes of old Belize – plastic Maya people frozen in amber, plastic Garifuna people settling on plastic shores, and plastic workers working in plastic recreations of the sugarcane, chicle and logging industries of an early 20th-century Plastic Belize (or 'Plastic British Honduras,' as it would have been known back then). Lest visitors get the idea that plastic was actually in use in actual old

Belize, the exhibit also includes a number of genuine artifacts, including a sugarcane press and a steam tractor used for dragging logs. Your trip through the plastic bowels of Old Belize ends at the gift shop, which is actually pretty well stocked with interesting knick knacks, including T-shirts, rum, gum made of chicle, and Cuban cigars.

Old Belize's partly open-air restaurant, **Sibun Bite Bar & Grill** (mains BZ\$12–25; ☎ 9am–9pm), serves up good burgers and grilled shrimp and chicken dishes. It overlooks the beach, which has a good swimming area and plans to boast three more attractions: a 750,000-gallon salt-water pool filled with a faux-reef (and presumably real fish) for snorkelers who can't make it to an actual reef; a 50ft-high water slide; and a zip-line from which adventurous types will be able to descend at high speeds over the water from a 50ft platform. Yowza!

Any Belmopan-bound bus will drop you at the Old Belize entrance (BZ\$1, 10 minutes from Belize City).

ORCHID GARDEN ECO-VILLAGE

This **eco-village** (OGEV; Mile 14.5 Western Hwy; ☎ 225-6991; www.trybelize.com; 1st-night package s/d/tr/q BZ\$200/280/360/440; ☎ P) is in many ways the exact opposite of Old Belize; whereas the latter attempts to encapsulate the essence of Belize as an easily grasped, photo-friendly model, the Taiwan-born proprietors have done so by creating a natural microcosm of the nation. On the grounds of their village, visitors can walk around in beautifully cultivated gardens, visit geological exhibits, and learn about the complicated web of flora and fauna that makes up Belize's ecosystem.

Built in a natural setting encompassing 43 acres of jungle savannah (half of which is designated as a protected sanctuary), OGEV offers not just a place to stop by for a quick overview of Belize, but also a convenient place from which to be based in Belize District. The eco-village's onsite hotel is lovely and understated; the rooms are large and subtly decorated, with double beds, wardrobes, and bathrooms (but no TV), giving the place a 'meditation center' feel. This fits well with the ethos of OGEV's owners, whose stated aim is to 'promote a way of life for people of different cultures to live in harmony with nature on both a physical and spiritual level.'

The village's location – 15 miles outside of Belize City – makes it an excellent choice for

those looking to avoid staying in Belize City itself. The proprietors offer a wide variety of nature- and culture-oriented day trips all over central Belize, including meals and transportation. The eco-village's Orchid Garden Restaurant is also excellent, serving dishes prepared using vegetables and herbs from the family's own organic garden. Vegetarian dishes are especially excellent (in fact, the website offers a seven-day 'vegetarian tour' of Belize).

The main focus of Orchid Garden seems to be on multiday packages that include meals and tours; check their website for full rates and details.

BELIZE CENTRAL PRISON

Only in a country as laid-back as Belize could a fully functioning **prison** (Mile 2 Burrell Boom Rd, Hattieville) also be considered a tourist attraction. It's the only prison in Belize (the name 'Hattieville' is to Belizeans what 'San Quentin' is to Americans) and, as such, houses criminals of all stripes, from pickpockets to murderers. But don't come looking for some sort of American-style corporate-owned Supermax with imposing concrete walls topped with electrified razor ribbon and manned guard towers every 20 yards. The 'Hattieville Ramada' (as it's called on the streets) looks more like a summer camp, its main prison buildings set back from the road and surrounded by farmland (where the prisoners work). This is surrounded by a fence about as daunting as what you'd find surrounding a suburban junkyard. According to a few Belizeans we've spoken to, Hattieville residents have been known to break out at night to go drinking with nearby friends only to return in the morning before head-count. So what makes the prison worth a visit?

Two words: gift shop.

Belize Central Prison has an amazing **gift shop** (☎ 225-6991; ☎ 9am–3pm), filled with items from the reformatory's renowned woodshop. Inside the small shop (located on the road and outside of the actual prison itself) you'll find hand-carved walking sticks, traditional masks, religious icons such as crucifixes, statues depicting saints and a host of carved Jesus figures, and even beautifully crafted wooden doors. All items in the shop are meticulously crafted by the prisoners themselves from locally grown woods including mahogany, teak and sandalwood. There's also a fine variety of

smaller items, including jewelry, cards, calendars, hammocks, clothing and other assorted knick knacks, all of which have been made by the prisoners themselves.

This most unusual penal facility is part of the larger vision of an organization called the **Kolbe Foundation** (☎ 225-6190, www.kolbe.bz), which took over the management of the once-notorious government prison and restructured it in a way that would be more in line with the foundation's Christian philosophy. Rather than merely punishing criminals by sequestering them from society, the Kolbe approach focuses more on rehabilitation through education and development of skills. In addition to the various craft-making shops inside the prison, there are also a number of small-scale animal farms and gardening operations, from which the prison gets some of its food. One of the long-term goals of the foundation is for the prison to be self-sustainable; as such, all funds earned by gift-shop sales go back to the maintenance of the prison, meaning that your purchases directly assist in the rehabilitation of Belize's criminal element (who might otherwise wind up robbing you on your next visit to Belize).

While the gift shop is open to the public, the prison itself isn't. Plans are in the works to expand operations to include a snack stand.

BELIZE ZOO

Anyone with an interest in wildlife, and Belize's wildlife in particular, should place a visit to this amazingly well-cared-for **zoo** (Map p90; ☎ 220-8004; www.belizezoo.org; Mile 29 Western Hwy; adult/child BZ\$15/7; ☎ 8:30am–5pm, closed major public holidays) high on their Belize 'to do' list. Set in natural forest, 31 miles from Belize City along the Western Hwy, the Belize Zoo is a must-visit even for people who don't like zoos.

The origin of Belize Zoo begins with filmmaker Richard Foster, who shot a wildlife documentary entitled *Path of the Rainwoods* in Belize in the early 1980s. Sharon Matola – a Baltimore-born biologist, former circus performer and former US Air Force survival instructor – was hired to take care of the animals. By the time filming was over, the animals had become partly tame and Matola was left wondering what to do with her 17 charges. So she founded the Belize Zoo, which displays native Belizean wildlife in natural surroundings on 29-acre grounds. From these beginnings, the zoo has grown to provide homes for animals endemic to the region that have been

injured, orphaned at a young age or bred in captivity and donated from other zoos.

Many of the animals in Belize Zoo are rescue cases, that is, wild animals that were kept as pets by individual collectors. The zoo makes every attempt to recondition such animals for a return to the wild, but only when such a return is feasible. In cases where return is impossible (as is the case with most of the zoo's jungle cats, who've long since forgotten how to hunt, or never learned in the first place), they remain in the zoo: perhaps not the best life for a wildcat, but better than winding up in Zsa Zsa Gabor's closet.

The zoo has many animals you're unlikely to see elsewhere – there are two fat tapirs (a Belizean relative of the rhino), gibnuts, a number of coatimundi (they look like a cross between raccoons and monkeys), scarlet macaws, white-lipped peccaries, pumas, and many others. But what really sets Belize Zoo apart is that the zoo itself – and in some cases, even the enclosures of individual animals – are relatively porous. This means that the wildlife you'll see inside enclosures are outnumbered by creatures who've come in from the surrounding jungle to hang out, eat, or – just maybe – swap tales with incarcerated brethren. Among the animals you'll see wandering the grounds are Central American agouti (also called bush rabbits), huge iguanas, snakes, raccoons, squirrels, and jungle birds of all sorts.

Take a night tour (one of the best ways to experience Belize Zoo, as many of the animals are nocturnal) and you'll be just as likely to see a gibnut outside enclosures as in. You'll also be able to hear ongoing long-distance conversations between the zoo's resident black howler monkeys and their wild brethren just a few miles away.

If most zoos are maximum security wildlife prisons, than the Belize Zoo is more like a 'country-club jail'. Some would even call it a halfway house for wild animals that can't make it on the outside. We call it a must-visit.

Sleeping & Eating

The **Tropical Education Center** (TEC; ☎ 220-8003; tec@belizezoo.org; Mile 29 Western Hwy; camping per person BZ\$15, dm/cabana/guesthouse BZ\$32/70/75, meals BZ\$10-12; 📍) is the zoo's environmental education center. It's situated just over a mile away and is an excellent accommodation option for travelers, set on 84 acres of tropical savannah with lush gardens and good birding (with a treetop

viewing platform), especially for those who want to do night tours at the zoo.

Sleeping options run from electricity-free dorms to neat, modern 'tent cabanas' (made of wood, on stilts, with electricity and fan), and two 'VIP guesthouses' with private bathrooms and kitchens overlooking the center's own small lake (home to Morelet's crocodiles). All options have good mosquito screens. If you want meals here, you need to request them in advance.

The TEC also offers nocturnal zoo visits (adult/child US\$10/6, with a minimum of five people), and canoe trips on the nearby Sibun River (half-/full day per two-person canoe US\$30/40). The TEC is 0.9 miles off the Western Hwy, from a signposted turning 50yd east of the zoo. If you're staying, staff can pick you up from the zoo.

Juice, snacks, and other assorted items (including Red Bull) are available in the zoo's **gift shop** (☎ 8:30am-5pm, closed major public holidays). It's an easy drive a couple of miles along the highway to one of the good restaurants near Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (see opposite).

Getting There & Away

Any nonexpress bus from Belize City heading along the Western Hwy will drop you at the zoo entrance (BZ\$3, 45 minutes).

MONKEY BAY WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (Map p90; ☎ 820-3032; www.monkeybaybelize.org; Mile 31½ Western Hwy; camping per person BZ\$15, tent rental BZ\$6, bunkhouses per person BZ\$25, cabanas per person BZ\$35; 📍 ☎ 📍) is a wildlife sanctuary and environmental education center offering lodging and activities for casual travelers, as well as internship activities for those with a more long-term interest in Belize (see opposite). Established in the 1980s by Matthew and Marga Miller, the 1.7-sq-mile sanctuary stretches from the Western Hwy to the Sibun River, encompassing areas of tropical forest and savannah and providing an important link in the biological corridor between coastal and inland Belize.

Across the river is the remote **Monkey Bay National Park**, which together with the sanctuary creates a sizable forest corridor in the Sibun River Valley. The park gets its name from a bend in the river – in Belize called a 'bay' – once noted for its resident black howler monkeys. Though the species had all but disappeared in the area, they have returned in

INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITY: MONKEY BAY WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Those with more long-term interest in the area may be interested to learn about **Monkey Bay's internship program** (☎ 820-3032; www.monkeybaybelize.org/intern.html). Generally speaking, the program is geared towards university students (though not exclusively). Internships can be of varying lengths, but should be no shorter than a month. ('It takes about that long for a new intern to get into the swing of things,' says staff member Anna Zabrowski.)

Interns can study a variety of disciplines, working alongside staff members and getting exposed to all the various tours offered to guests; interns are also encouraged to explore the country on their own. Interning at Monkey Bay is an excellent way to experience in depth what Belize has to offer, while having both a support network and base of operations; the general price for internship is BZ\$50 per day. Internship applications are available on the website.

sizable numbers, thanks in no small part to the work done at the sanctuary.

Accommodations at the sanctuary range from camping out on offground decks to mosquito-screened bunkhouses or cabanas for three with fans. The amenities demonstrate ecological principles in action, with biogas latrines producing methane for cooking, rainwater catchment and partial solar energy. Independent visitors can partake of group meals if a group is present: otherwise you can make your own meals.

Around 230 bird species have been identified at the sanctuary. Larger wildlife such as pumas and coatimundi have been spotted on the 2-mile track running down beside the sanctuary to the river. A well-stocked library provides plenty of reference and reading matter on natural history and Belize. Also at the site is a splendid green iguana enclosure – these monarchs of the lizard world can grow to 6ft long.

Casual visitors should contact the sanctuary in advance to find out what activities will be available at the time of their visit. Possibilities include canoe and caving trips and dry-season trips to Cox Lagoon, about 12 miles north, which is home to jabiru storks, deer, tapir, black howlers and lots of crocodiles.

Eating & Drinking

Meals are available within the sanctuary but should be arranged at least a day in advance. Within a few hundred yards along the Western Hwy on either side of Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary are two fun eateries that are often filled with just-off-the-plane travelers happily adjusting to the fact that they're on holiday. They're also worth noting if you're spending the afternoon at the Belize Zoo (just a few miles north; p113).

Amigos (Map p90; ☎ 822-3031; Mile 31¼ Western Hwy, 200yd west of sanctuary turnoff; mains BZ\$12-22; ☎ 8am-10pm) Amigos serves both American and Belizean cuisine in a distinctly Belizean setting (a mosquito-screened *palapa* house) drenched in pure American whimsy (walls covered in kitschy signs and bumper stickers). Carnivores should order the BBQ pork ribs (BZ\$22); those with a serious sweet tooth won't want to miss Amigo's desserts.

Cheers (Map p90; ☎ 614-9311; Mile 31¼ Western Hwy; mains BZ\$10-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This large, airy and friendly place serves hearty meals, from all-day breakfasts to French-dip roast beef sandwiches to excellent Cuban tilapia. Naturally, rice, beans and stew chicken are served as well. It's about 500 yards east of the Monkey Bay turnoff.

Getting There & Away

Any nonexpress bus doing the Belize City–Belmopan run will drop you at the sanctuary turnoff (around 220 yards from the main entrance) or at Cheers or Amigos (BZ\$3, 50 minutes from Belize City).

GALES POINT MANATEE

pop 450

The Creole village of Gales Point Manatee sits on a narrow peninsula that juts out about 2 miles into the **Southern Lagoon**, one of a series of interconnected lakes and waterways between Belize City and Dangriga. The village was initially founded by runaway slaves from Belize City escaping south into jungle and lagoon country around 1800. A more beautiful spot you'd be hard pressed to find; to the west, jungle-clad limestone hills rise above the plains that end on the shores of the Southern Lagoon; to the east, also across the lagoon, sits the narrow stretch of forest and mangrove swamp

DRUM MASTER SPEAKS WITH HIS HANDS: MR EMMETH YOUNG *Joshua Samuel Brown*

I'd come to Gales Point Manatee to interview Emmeth Young, one of Belize's most respected Creole drummers. Finding his school wasn't hard; it's a house on stilts behind his wife's restaurant, a wooden shack dreamily painted in sky-and-ocean blue hues with a sign on the door reading 'Open: Honk o' Halla.' The interview itself was also easy; relaxed and effusive, Young is as friendly an interview subject as a reporter could hope for. It was only later, when I went home to type up the recorded session, that I realized that putting our conversation on paper might present a special challenge.

For while Young, oral historian of his village, is a master of the spoken word, drums are a different beast entirely. And when it comes to talking drums, Emmeth Young speaks with his hands.

Tell me a little about what kind of drumming you do.

I play traditional Creole drums; there are many of these. The Sanbai, the Goomba, the Sabaia...

(I point to a the largest drum in the school; as wide as a mature tree-trunk, the drum reaches up to Young's waist.) What's this drum called?

Ah, this one here is the Sanbai.

It looks like it's made of a single piece of wood.

Yes, it's made of a coconut trunk, and the head is made of deer skin, caught by hunters not far from here.

(Young places the drum between his legs, and I begin to suspect that our interview will not be carried by words alone. I ask him if he can give me an example of a traditional Creole rhythm, and within seconds the sounds of drumming flood the room, a rhythm deep and steady. As he drums, Master Young begins to speak.)

This is the main rhythm. It is very significant, you see. This rhythm is part of the fertility dance that takes place in the days surrounding the full moon. It begins two days before the full moon, and everyone in the village will join, some dancing, some drumming. The rhythm will continue through the full moon, and until two days after. First the men will play, dance and sing. Then the women will play, dance and sing. If the energy is right, the rhythm can go on for five days straight.

(Young continues drumming, singing in Creole as he plays. I can't understand the words, and can only imagine the thunderous rhythm that would be produced by an entire village during a session running around the clock for five days.)

that separates the lagoon from the Caribbean Sea. Gales Point Manatee has some superlative wildlife attractions. Chief among them is the highest concentration of West Indian manatees in the Caribbean (an estimated 70 of these gentle aquatic giants are present in the lagoon). The 14-sq-mile **Gales Point Wildlife Sanctuary** covers the Southern and adjoining lagoons. The nearby beaches are the primary breeding ground for hawksbill turtles in Belize, and there's excellent bird-watching too.

Orientation & Information

Getting lost in Gales Point Manatee would be difficult – the town's only street runs about 2.5 miles north from the Coastal Hwy to the tip of the peninsula, and if you walk too far either east or west you'll be wading in the lagoon. Once you hit town from the south (the only way you can hit town barring an amphibious landing), you'll pass by the police

station, Ionie's Bed & Breakfast, Gentle's Cool Spot and the Sugar Shack (behind which you'll find the Maroon Creole Drum School) before winding up at Manatee Lodge at the end of the peninsula.

Activities

Nature tours bring most visitors to Gales Point Manatee, and for the majority of these you'll need to hire a guide with a boat; all accommodations can set you up with one (your hosts will certainly be able to connect you with a guide, if they aren't guides themselves). In addition to fishing, the lagoons surrounding Gales Point Manatee are specifically noted for birding, turtle-ing, and of course, manatee-ing. (Are those last two even words? They should be!)

MANATEE-WATCHING

Manatees graze on sea grass in the shallow, brackish Southern Lagoon, hanging out around

Do you also have some Garifuna drums? (Young picks up a smaller drum.)

Actually, in the house here I don't really have any that are skinned up like Garifuna drums. But this one is similar, though if this were a true Garifuna drum it would have a snare going across the top.

So a Garifuna rhythm would be very different...

Yes yes, and the technique itself is actually different. They play with a lot of drumrolls. This is the Punta rhythm of the Garifuna people. (Picking up a new drum, Young Plays for me a typical Garifuna rhythm, something slightly more complex than the previous Creole sounds, a rhythm punctuated by quick fingertip rolls along the edge of the drum head.)

Definitely a different sound. What sort of person comes to your school?

Well, I get a wide variety of people. I get people from the United States, from Canada and from Europe. Some of them come for drum class and some take a workshop so they can make their own drum.

How long would it take – I mean, if I were coming to make my own drum, how long would I stay? And how much would it cost?

A medium-sized drum takes three to four days, and maybe it would cost about two-fifty, or maybe three hundred Belize dollars. It depends on the size.

How long have you been making drums?

I've been making drums since I was 13, and now I'm 40. And I've been playing the drums since I was eight years old.

Belize has got these three strong cultures; the Maya, Garifuna and Creole. Are there any bands in Belize that mix together these styles?

Sometimes the Creole and Garifuna mix their styles together, but I don't know about the Maya. Once I had an intern down here and he did something with all three.

Do you feel that young people in Belize are interested in drumming?

Yes, that is what I do. There are young people in Belize who want to learn about drumming and other cultural things and that is why I am here. I am here sharing the drums and sharing the culture so they can carry on when I'm not here. So the drumming can live on through them.

Joshua's interview with Emmeth Young can be read online at lonelyplanet.com, with audio samples of Mr Young's drumming.

the **Manatee Hole**, a depression in the lagoon floor near its east side that is fed by a warm freshwater spring. They rise about every 20 minutes for air, giving views of their heads and sometimes their backs and tails. A 1½-hour manatee-watching boat trip costs BZ\$100 for up to four people. Manatee-watching can also be combined with other activities.

TURTLE-WATCHING

Around 100 hawksbill turtles, which are protected in Belize, as well as loggerheads, which aren't, lay their eggs on the 21-mile beach straddling the mouth of the Bar River, which connects the Southern Lagoon to the sea. For both species, this is the main nesting site in the country. Turtle-watch outings from Manatee Lodge (p118) during the nesting season (May to October) involve a boat trip down the river, then a 4-mile nocturnal beach walk looking for nesting turtles (BZ\$350 for up to four people).

BIRD-WATCHING

In the **Northern Lagoon**, about 45 minutes from Gales Point Manatee by boat, is **Bird Caye**, a small island that is home to many waterfowl, including frigate birds, great egrets, and toucans. Gentle's Cool Spot (p118) combines trips here with a stop at the Manatee Hole for BZ\$190.

FISHING

Large tarpon quite often break the surface of the Southern Lagoon. You can also fish for snook, snapper, jack and barracuda in the lagoon and rivers. A half-/full-day trip for up to three people costs around BZ\$350 from Manatee Lodge (p118).

CREOLE DRUMMING

Lest culture be given short shrift over nature, Gales Point Manatee is also home to one of Belize's pre-eminent Creole drummers and

IBO ECHOES

Gales Point Manatee is believed to have been founded over 200 years ago by runaway slaves from Belize City, of Nigerian Ibo (or Ebo) origin, and is probably the only place in Belize where the Ibo *sambai* dance rhythm – traditionally beaten out with drums under the full moon – survives. Creole rhythms such as the *sambai* are quite distinct from the Garifuna rhythms you hear in Dangriga or Hopkins.

drum-makers, Emmeth Young. Young runs the **Maroon Creole Drum School** (☎ 603-6051, www.maroondrumschool.com; lessons BZ\$20), teaching traditional percussion when he isn't touring with his band, Fore Afrique (Black Africa). His very cool studio-on-stilts is a renowned center of learning, both cultural and musical. It's here where Young – the village *griot* (a Creole word meaning 'oral historian') – teaches visitors from around Belize and abroad about Creole culture and history using music and words (see the boxed text, pp116). Young is also known as a master craftsman who both builds custom drums and teaches students the art of drum-making. Typically a student can build their own drum from scratch in about three days. Traditional Creole drums include the Sambai, Sabaya, Djembe, Kenkeni, Sangban and Dunumba, and materials range from Mahogany to cashew wood and coconut wood. Rates vary depending on the type of drum and material used.

Tours

Manatee Lodge (right) offers a wide range of trips at fixed prices; rates elsewhere can be lower. One licensed guide who comes recommended is **John Moore** (☎ 608 3373 johnsmoorebz@yahoo.com). A native of Gales Point, John has a Mexican Pelican boat, and does both birding and fishing tours. Prices for the former are BZ\$250 per couple, and the latter BZ\$300. Both tours take a half day, and extra people (up to six, total) can be added for an additional BZ\$50 per person. Another guide with a good reputation in town is Raymond Gentle of Gentle's Cool Spot (below).

Sleeping & Eating

Gentle's Cool Spot (☎ 609-4991; d/tr BZ\$30/50, mains BZ\$6; 🍷) Three kinds of dingy rooms with

cold-water showers, double bed, a tiny window and little else go for BZ\$30. A somewhat nicer room with three double beds in a higher house on stilts goes for BZ\$50. Ms Gentle also does hair braiding for BZ\$40. Anyone with hair long enough to braid and an hour and a half to kill is welcome.

Sugar Shack (☎ 603-6051, camping per person BZ\$10, cabana BZ\$30, meals BZ\$5-8; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Jill, the wife of Creole drummer Emmeth Young, operates this establishment, cooking up excellent vegetarian cuisine from a small and colorful shack that doubles as a gift shop. The couple also have a couple of cool stilt cabanas for rent out back, as well as space for camping. Look for the wooden shack with the sign reading 'Open: Honk o' Halla' on the door. Many of Emmeth's drum students wind up staying here while studying or making drums.

Ionie's B&B (☎ 220-8066; s/d BZ\$33/38) This B&B is run by friendly Ionie Samuels (also a justice of the peace, if you've matrimony in mind). Rooms are in a house on stilts, and have fans and shared bathrooms with cold showers. Good-sized Belizean meals (BZ\$5 to BZ\$9) include a drink.

Manatee Lodge (☎ 220-8040, from USA 877-462-6283; www.manateelodge.com; r BZ\$180; 🍷 🍳 🍷) The only mid-priced lodge in the area, Manatee Lodge takes up the tip of the Gales Point peninsula and is situated in a beautiful garden surrounded on three sides by the Southern Lagoon. The eight rooms, spread over two floors, are spacious and comfortable, with bathtubs and lots of varnished wood. There is a large sitting/reading room with a lovely, breezy verandah that overlooks the lagoon. There is also a dining room for guests of the lodge (breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$22/18/32). A wide range of activities is on offer, and canoes and a sailboat are provided free for guests.

Getting There & Away

Gales Point Manatee is located about 1 mile off the Coastal (Manatee) Hwy; the turnoff is 22 miles off the Western Hwy and 14 miles from the Hummingbird Hwy. The Coastal Hwy and the road into the village are mostly unpaved, but quite drivable in a normal car during the dry season. In the rainy season, those without a 4WD risk getting stuck in the mud.

Bussing it requires a bit of scheduling flexibility, as the once-daily bus from Dangriga

now only passes through twice a week. You can catch a bus leaving Dangriga at 5am on Monday and Friday, arriving at Gales Point Manatee around 6am before heading out to Belize City. Coming the other way, you can catch a bus from Belize City at 5pm on Monday and Friday, which should reach Gales Point Manatee around 7pm before heading south to Dangriga. The whole trip is around BZ\$5.

The best way to travel to or from Gales Point Manatee for those who can afford it is by boat via a network of rivers, canals and lagoons stretching from Belize City. The trip takes about two hours, and costs around BZ\$350 for up to four people. John Moore makes the trip with advanced notice, and arrangements can also be made through Manatee Lodge, Gentle's Cool Spot and some agencies in Belize City.

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