

# History

## FROM LORDLY REALM TO LOST WORLD: ANCIENT MAYA

Belize hosted one of the great Mesoamerican civilizations of ancient times, the Maya. The Maya created vibrant commercial centers, monumental religious temples and exquisite art works. They possessed sophisticated knowledge about their earthly and cosmological environments, much of which they wrote down. The Maya thrived from roughly 2000 BC to AD 1500, before succumbing to domestic decline and alien assault. The stone foundations of their lordly realm became a lost world submerged beneath dense jungle.

The Maya ranged across Central America, from the Yucatán to Honduras, from the Pacific to the Caribbean. They were not ethnically homogenous, but only loosely related, divided by kinship, region and dialect. The different communities sometimes cooperated and often competed with one another, building alliances for trade and warfare.

Archaeological findings indicate that Maya settlements in Belize were among the oldest. In the west, Cahal Pech, an important commercial center between the coast and interior, was dated to at least 1200 BC. In the north, majestic Lamanai, a major religious site for over 2000 years, was founded as early as 900 BC. In Belize today, three distinct Maya tribes still exist: the indigenous Mopan in the north; the Yucatec, who migrated from Mexico, also in the north; and, the Kekchi, who migrated from Guatemala, in the west and south.

The Maya were organized into kingdoms, in which social and economic life was an extension of a rigid political hierarchy. At the top were the king – or high lord – and his royal family, followed by an elite stratum of priests, warriors and scribes; next came economically valued artisans and traders; and finally, holding it all up were subsistence farmers and servant workers. The system rested on a cultural belief that the high lord had some influence with the powerful and dark gods of the underworld, who sometimes took the form of a jaguar when intervening in human affairs. This view was reinforced through the ruling elite's elaborately staged power displays, a temple theater of awe.

Even before the germ-ridden Europeans arrived, the cultural underpinnings of Maya society were already coming undone. A prolonged drought had caused severe economic hardship, leaving the impression that the kings and priests had somehow lost their supernatural touch. It was left to the Spanish, however, to officially cancel the show.

Possibly the most impressive of the Maya kingdoms in Belize was at Caracol (p213), in the western Pine Ridge Mountains. At its height, in the 6th and 7th centuries, Caracol was a major urban metropolis, with over

The name Belize is derived from the Mayan word 'Belix' which means 'muddy water' and refers to the mouth of the Belize River.

Joyce Kelly's *An Archaeological Guide to Northern Central America* offers the best descriptions of the Maya sites of Belize, along with those in Guatemala and Mexico.

## TIMELINE

### 2000 BC–AD 250

The earliest sedentary Maya communities are formed during the Preclassic Period. The earliest settlements in Belize are at Cuello in Orange Walk and Cahal Pech in Cayo.

### AD 250–1000

The Classic Period of the Maya civilization is characterized by construction of cities and temples, inscriptions recording historic events and other artistic and intellectual achievements. The population reaches around 400,000.

### 562

Water Lord of Caracol defeats King Double Bird of Tikal. The latter is sacrificed and Caracol becomes the dominant city in the Maya world.

100,000 residents. It boasted first-rate jewelers and skilled craftsmen, an intricately terraced agriculture system, a prosperous trading market, and 40 miles of paved roads (considerably more than it has today). According to the story carved by Maya artists into commemorative stone, the king of Caracol, Water Lord, defeated his chief rival, Double Bird, king of Tikal, in a decisive battle in AD 562, ushering in a long period of Caracol supremacy in the central highlands. The pictographic stone inscriptions also suggest that Water Lord personally sacrificed Double Bird to further emphasize the Caracol triumph. Perhaps this had something to do with the still-simmering feud between Belize and Guatemala.

In the 1500s, the jaguar kings were forced to take cover in the rainforest, when the sword-wielding Spanish arrived in Belize with the aim of plundering Maya gold and spreading the word of God. The Maya population of Belize at this time numbered about a quarter of a million, but their ranks were quickly decimated by as much as 90 percent, from the lethal combination of the diseases and greed of the Spanish. In the 1540s, a conquistador force based in the Yucatán set out on an expedition through much of present-day Belize, down the coast and across to the central highlands. Disappointed by the lack of riches uncovered, they left a bloody trail of slaughtered victims and abandoned villages in their wake. Religious sites, such as Lamanai, were forcibly converted to Catholicism.

In the early 1600s, the Maya finally staged a counter offensive that successfully drove out the few Spanish settlers and missionaries that had decided to stay. Weakened and fearful, the Maya did not return to the now desolate old cities, choosing instead to stay huddled in the remote interior.

### BAYMEN OF THE CARIBBEAN: BRITISH SETTLEMENT

When Columbus accidentally bumped into the continental landmass soon to be known as the Americas, his Spanish royal patrons had it made. Soon, Aztec gold and Incan silver overflowed in the king's coffers, making Spain a transatlantic superpower. In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas established an exclusive Iberian claim on the region, declaring New World riches off-limits to old-world rivals. But the temptations were too great, and the hiding places too many. Spain's spoils were set upon by British buccaneers, French corsairs and Dutch freebooters. In times of war, they were put into the service of their Crown as privateers; at other times, they were simply pirates.

Belize emerged as one of several Caribbean outposts for Britain's maritime marauders. In the early 17th century, English sea dogs first began using the Bay of Honduras as a staging point for raids on Spanish commerce; henceforth the Brits in the region came to be known as Baymen.

The Belizean coast had several strategic advantages from a pirate's perspective. The land was both bountiful and uninhabited as the Spanish had already driven the Maya out but never bothered to settle in themselves. It

Emory King's *The Great Story of Belize* is a fun read, and quite detailed, even though it has come under criticism for glamorizing the swashbuckling ways of the early British settlers.

The virtually unexplored Glover's Atoll is named for the pirate John Glover, who hung out there in the 1750s; there are supposed to be pirate graves on Northeastern Caye.

### THE FIRST MESTIZO

In 1511, the Spanish ship *Valdivia* was wrecked at sea, when a reef ripped through its hull. About 15 survivors drifted for several days before making it to shore in northern Belize, where they were promptly apprehended by anxious Maya. Just to be on the safe side, the locals sent 10 to the gods and kept five for themselves.

One of the captives was conquistador Gonzalo Guerrero, a skilled warrior and apparently not a bad diplomat either. Guerrero managed to win his freedom and a position of status with the Maya chief at Chetumal. He became a tribal consultant on military matters and married the chief's daughter; their three children are considered to be the first Mestizos (mixed race Spanish and Amerindian) in the New World.

Eight years later, Hernán Cortés arrived in the Yucatán and summoned Guerrero to serve him in his campaign of conquest. But Guerrero had gone native, with facial tattoos and body piercings. He turned down the offer, saying instead that he was a captain of the Maya. Cortés moved on in his search for gold and glory. Guerrero, meanwhile, organized Maya defenses in the wars that followed. It would take the Spanish more than 20 years to finally defeat the Maya of Yucatán and Belize.

was just a short sail away from the heavily trafficked Yucatán Straits, where – if luck be with ye – the Treasure Fleet might be gathering in Havana or the Silver Train passing through on its way from Panama. And, the shoreline, concealed behind thick mangroves and littoral islands, offered protective cover, while the long barrier reef was a treacherous underwater trap that kept Spanish war galleons at a distance.

For the sake of historical record, the year 1638 was made the official founding date of a British settlement at the mouth of the Belize River. It was sometime around then that a Scottish pirate captain, Peter Wallace, decided to organize the building of a new port town. Legend has it that he laid the first foundations of what became Belize City with woodchips and rum bottles, presumably empty.

Meanwhile, the Baymen found yet another activity to annoy the Spanish king – poaching his rainforest. The settlement became a rich source of hardwoods, especially mahogany, much valued by carpenters, furniture-makers and shipbuilders back in Britain. In addition, the lowland forest was abundant in logwood trees, which provided a valuable dye extract used to make woolen textiles.

By the 18th century, Britain's monarch finally had a navy and merchant fleet to match Spain's. Privateers were no longer needed, and pirates were a nuisance. In 1765 Jamaican-based British naval commander Admiral Burnaby paid a visit to the rough-hewn Baymen and delivered a code of laws on proper imperial etiquette: thieving, smuggling and cursing were out; paying taxes and obeying the sovereign were in.

A History of Belize ([www.belize.net.com/history/toc.html](http://www.belize.net.com/history/toc.html)) is an online version of a Belizean school textbook – quite a good read, with some excellent illustrations.

## 900–1000

The great Maya civilization declines, possibly as a result of drought, disease or environmental disaster. Large urban centers come under stress and their populations disperse throughout the region.

## 1100–1600

During the Postclassic Period, the Maya civilization continues to persist and develop, although populations are not as concentrated. Political and cultural centers migrate from the lowlands to sites in northern Belize and the Yucatán.

## 1540s

Spanish conquistadors sweep through northern and western Belize, attempting to establish strongholds in Chetumal in Corozal, Lamanai in Orange Walk, and Tipu in Cayo.

## 1638–40

Maya rebellion finally drives out the Spanish once and for all, although they never give up their claim on the territory. The Maya population drops dramatically in number due to war, drought and disease.

## 1638

The British Baymen 'settle' Belize when former pirate Peter Wallace lays the foundations for a new port at the mouth of the Belize River, on the site of today's Belize City.

## 1724

The first African slaves are recorded in Belize. Slaves are put to work cutting logwood and mahogany, as well as doing domestic work and farming.

### BELIZEAN STARS & BARS

At the end of the US Civil War, several thousand Confederate soldiers chose not to return to their defeated and occupied homeland. The rebels instead accepted an invitation to resettle under the British flag in Belize.

The white colonial elite of Belize sympathized with the Southern cause during the conflict. During the war, they supplied the Confederacy with raw materials and guns. After the war, colonial officials enticed the war veterans with promises of land grants and other economic incentives. It was hoped that these expatriate Americans could help rejuvenate the Belizean economy, which suffered from a decline in timber exports, by sharing their expertise of the plantation system.

As many as 7000 American Southerners made it to Belize in the 1860s, mostly arriving from Mississippi and Louisiana, with the dream of re-creating the Old South in tropical climes. Their initial attempts to cultivate cotton, however, were dashed by the inhospitable steamy jungle climate. They had better luck with sugarcane. The Confederate contribution to the colonial economy was notable, as Belizean sugar exports between 1862 and 1868 increased four-fold, from 400,000lb to 1,700,000lb.

But the move did not go smoothly. The American newcomers had run-ins with the local white landowners, who resented their presence and privileges, and with the local black workforce, who refused to submit and serve. All but a couple of hundred of the Confederate contingent eventually cashed out and returned home. Maybe they should have bought time-shares instead.

As the British settlement became more profitable, the Spanish king became more irritable. His armed forces made several unsuccessful attempts to dislodge the well-ensconced and feisty squatters. With the Treaty of Paris, in 1763, Spain instead tried diplomacy, negotiating a deal in which the Brits could stay and harvest wood as long as they paid rent to the Spanish Crown and promised not to expand the settlement. The Baymen did neither.

Spain finally got the better of the Baymen in 1779, burning down Belize City in a surprise attack and consigning the prisoners to slavery in Cuba. The conflict reached a decisive conclusion in 1798 at the Battle of St George's Caye when a squadron of 30 Spanish warships was met and turned back by the alerted Baymen operating in smaller but faster craft. From this point, Spain gave up trying to boot the Brits from Belize. And the battle made such a good story that it eventually inspired a national holiday (see National Day, p285).

### IN LIVING COLOR: BRITISH HONDURAS

In the 19th century, modern Belize began to take form, largely shaped by its economic role and political status in the Empire, where it was officially dubbed British Honduras. At first it was administered from Jamaica, but later was made a Crown Colony with its own appointed royal governor. Belizean society was an overlapping patchwork of British, African, Maya and

Spanish influences. It was a haven for refugees and a labor camp for slaves, a multicultural but hierarchical Crown Colony in living color.

At the top of the colonial social order were the descendants of the Baymen. In earlier times, their outlaw ancestors comprised an ethnically mixed and relatively democratic community. But as the colony grew larger and ties with the Empire stronger, an oligarchy of leading families emerged. They may have descended from antiestablishment renegades, but now they were all about aristocratic manners. They touted their white, cultured British lineage, and used the Crown's authority to reinforce their status. By order of His Majesty's Superintendent for British Honduras, they alone were given political rights in colonial affairs and private entitlement to the forest and land. This elite colonial cohort managed to hold sway until the early 20th century.

As the economy was centered on timber exports, strong bodies were needed to perform the arduous labor of harvesting hardwoods from the dense rainforest. Like elsewhere in the Americas, African slaves provided the muscle, along with much sweat and pain. By 1800 the settlement numbered about 4000 in total: 3000 black slaves, 900 mixed-race coloreds and free blacks, and 100 white colonists. Slave masters could count, and acted shrewdly to stay on top. Male slaves were kept divided into small work teams based on tribal origins. They were forced to do long tours of duty in remote jungle camps, separated from other teams and from their families. Slave women performed domestic chores and farm work. Intra-racial separation, however, did not mean interracial segregation, as mixed-race Creoles (descendants of African slaves) would eventually make up nearly 75% of the population.

In 1838 slavery was abolished in the British Empire. The plight of Afro-Belizeans, however, did not much improve. They were forbidden from owning land, which would have enabled them to be self-sufficient, and thus remained dependent on the white-controlled export economy. Instead of slaves, they were called 'apprentices' and worked for subsistence wages.

When the timber market declined in the 1860s, landowners diversified their holdings by introducing fruit and sugarcane. One persistent historical narrative has it that slave life in Belizean logging camps was more benign than the harsh conditions that existed on Caribbean sugar plantations. While this may be so, the facts remain that Belize experienced four major slave revolts between 1760 and 1820, and recorded high annual incidences of runaways, suggesting instead that repressive inhumanity may come in different packages.

Toward the mid-19th century, British colonists finally came into contact – and conflict – with the indigenous Maya. As loggers penetrated deeper into the interior, they encountered the elusive natives, who responded with hit-and-run assaults on the encroaching axmen.

At this time in the neighboring Yucatán Peninsula, an armed conflict broke out among the lowly Maya, second-class Mestizos and privileged

Most slaves came to Belize via the West Indies from Niger and Nigeria in West Africa and from Congo and Angola further south. Around the year 1800, slaves comprised more than 75% of the population.

Assad Shoman's *13 Chapters of a History of Belize* is a detailed, readable, anticolonialist account up to the 1990s; the author himself has helped make modern history as a pro-independence activist and People's United Party cabinet minister.

In 1872 the Crown Lands Ordinance established 'Carib Reserves' and 'Maya Reserves,' which prevented the Garifuna and Maya from owning private property.

September is the holiday season in Belize, including National Day on September 10 and Independence Day on September 21. See [www.septembercelebrations.com](http://www.septembercelebrations.com) for information on celebrations around the country.

1717–63

Spanish attacks attempt to end British extraction of hardwoods. Finally, the Treaty of Paris gives Britain the right to cut and export logwood, but the Spanish still claim the land as their own.

1779–98

The Spanish capture St George's Caye. Despite attempts to reach a compromise, Spain and Britain are unable to reach an agreement. Spain launches another attack but is defeated at the Battle of St George's Caye.

1832

A group of Garifuna settle in present-day Dangriga, after migrating from Honduras. This ethnic enclave was previously deported from the British-ruled island of St Vincent, after being defeated in the Carib Wars.

1838

According to the Abolition Act, slavery is outlawed throughout the British Empire, including Belize. However, former slaves are unable to own property and they are dependent on their ex-masters for employment.

1847

Spanish, Mestizo and Maya peoples engage in the War of the Castes in the neighboring Yucatán Peninsula. The violence sends streams of refugees into Belize.

1862

The settlement in Belize is declared a Crown Colony and is named British Honduras. Initially it is administered from Jamaica, but a separate royal governor is appointed soon thereafter.

Spanish-descended landlords. The bloody War of the Castes raged for over a decade and forced families to flee. Caste War refugees more than doubled the Belize population, from less than 10,000 in 1845 to 25,000 in 1861.

The movement of peoples redefined the ethnic character of northern Belize. Mestizo refugees, of mixed Spanish-Indian stock, brought their Hispanic tongue, corn tortillas and Catholic churches to scattered small town settlements. Yucatecan Maya refugees, meanwhile, moved into the northwestern Yucatecan forest, where they quickly clashed with the logging industry. In 1872 the desperate Maya launched a quixotic attack on British colonists at Orange Walk, in what was a fierce but futile last stand. Diminished and dispirited, the remaining Maya survived on the territorial and social fringes of the colony.

### PATIENCE & RESISTANCE: BELIZEAN INDEPENDENCE

Belize remained a British colony until 1981; rather late for the West Indies. Spain and France lost most Caribbean possessions in the early 19th century, while Her Majesty's island colonies were liberated in the 1960s. With its deep ethnic divisions, a unifying national identity formed slowly, and the Belizean independence movement displayed more patience than resistance.

As the 19th century closed, the orderly ways of colonial life in British Honduras showed signs of breakdown. The old elite was becoming more isolated and less feared. Its cozy connections to the mother country were unraveling. By 1900 the United States surpassed Britain as the main destination of the mahogany harvest; by 1930 the US was taking in 80% of all Belizean exports.

The colonial elite's economic position was further undercut by the rise of a London-based conglomerate, the British Estate and Produce Company, which bought out local landowners and took over the commodity trade. Declining timber fortunes caused colonial capitalists to impose a 50% wage cut on mahogany workers in Belize City, which provoked riotous protests and the first stirrings of social movement.

During the first half of the 20th century, Belizean nationalism developed in explosive fits and starts. During WWI, a regiment of local Creoles was recruited for the Allied cause. The experience proved both disheartening and enlightening. Ill-treated because of their dark skin, they were not even allowed to go to the front line and fight alongside white troops. They may have enlisted as patriotic Brits, but they were discharged as resentful Belizeans. Upon their return, in 1919, they coaxed several thousand into the streets of Belize City in an angry demonstration against the existing order.

It was not until the 1930s that a more sustained anticolonial movement arose. It began as the motley 'Unemployed Brigade,' staging weekend ral-

*The Caste War of the Yucatán* by Nelson Reed is a dramatic account of that event and a detailed analysis of the causes and outcomes, both in Mexico and Belize.

*Belize: A Concise History* by PAB Thomson, a former British high commissioner to Belize, tells the country's story right up to the 21st century in a comprehensive but not overly lengthy form.

### WHEN ROYALTY MEETS

In the 1980s, big-cat specialists determined that the Cockscomb Basin, in the Maya Mountain foothills of southern Belize, was a vital habitat for the long-term survival of the jaguar – not only in Belize, but in Central America as a whole. They successfully persuaded the government to protect the region from loggers and ranchers. In 1988 the Duke of Edinburgh and World Wildlife Fund head, Prince Philip, was on hand to celebrate the creation of the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235), the world's first wildlife sanctuary for the jaguar. The protected realm of the Belizean jungle's king eventually reached more than half a million acres. The reserve soon attracted a steady stream of visitors, eager to catch a glimpse of the ferocious feline. The ecotourism boom was on.

lies in Battlefield Park in Belize City (p91). The movement fed on the daily discontents of impoverished black workers, and spewed its wrath at prosperous white merchants. It soon was organizing boycotts and strikes, and shortly thereafter its leaders were thrown into jail.

Finally, in the early 1950s, a national independence party, the People's United Party (PUP), became politically active. When WWII caused the sudden closing of export markets, the colony experienced a severe economic crisis that lasted until well after the war's end. Anti-British demonstrations spread all across Belize, becoming more militant and occasionally violent. Colonial authorities declared a state of emergency, forbidding public meetings and intimidating independence advocates.

In response, the PUP organized a successful general strike that finally forced Britain to make political concessions. Universal suffrage was extended to all adults and limited home rule was permitted in the colony. The imperial foundations of the old ruling elite crumbled, as the colony's ethnically divided peoples now danced to a common Belizean drum beat.

Full independence for Belize was put off until a nagging security matter was resolved. Spain never formally renounced her territorial claim to Belize, which was later appropriated by Mexico and Guatemala. In the 19th century, Britain signed agreements with both claimants to recognize the existing colonial borders, but the one with Guatemala did not stick.

Guatemala's caudillo rulers – mostly inept at managing their own affairs – remained obsessed with the perceived wealth of British Honduras. The 1945 Guatemalan constitution explicitly included Belize as part of its territorial reach. Britain, in turn, stationed a large number of troops in the west. Guatemala barked, but did not bite. By the 1960s, the border threat was stabilized and the demand for independence was renewed.

Belizeans waited patiently. In 1964 the colony became fully self-governing, installing a Westminster-style parliamentary system. In 1971 the capital

The Belizean government tells its side of the story about the Belizean-Guatemalan territorial dispute at [www.belize-guatemala.gov.bz](http://www.belize-guatemala.gov.bz).

1866–72

1919

1950

1958

1961

1972

Loggers conflict with the Maya, who launch attacks on the British settlements in an attempt to extract payment for the use and destruction of the land. The Maya are defeated and forced off the land.

After returning from WWI, demobilized Creole soldiers protest against the discrimination they experience at the hands of the colonial administration. The protest is violently crushed by police.

A severe economic crisis sparks anti-British protests, and the pro-independence movement is launched under the leadership of George Price and the People's United Party (PUP).

After being driven out of Mexico, the first wave of Mennonites settles in Belize and begins to farm the land, producing much of the fruit, vegetables, poultry and dairy consumed in the country.

Hurricane Hattie devastates Belize, killing hundreds of people and destroying Belize City. In response to this catastrophe, a new inland capital is established at Belmopan 10 years later.

Jacques Cousteau takes his research ship *Calypso* to the Blue Hole, bringing unprecedented publicity to the amazing natural resources of this tiny country and kicking off its popularity as a destination for divers and snorkelers.

In 1984, 18-year-old David Stuart became the youngest person to receive a McArthur Genius Award for his work in cracking the Mayan hieroglyphic code, which he had been working on since the age of 10.

*Timber, Tourists and Temples: Conservation and Development in the Maya Forest of Belize, Guatemala & Mexico* is an academic assessment of the pros and cons of ecotourism.

Long the opposition party, the United Democratic Party (UDP) won a landslide victory in the 2008 elections, promising to clean up corruption and stick up for the little guy. Follow their progress at [www.udp.org.bz](http://www.udp.org.bz).

was relocated to Belmopan (p188), a geographic center symbolically uniting all regions and peoples. In 1973 the name was officially changed from the colonial sounding British Honduras to the more popular Belize. And in September 1981 Belize was at last declared an independent nation-state within the British Commonwealth. Even Guatemala recognized Belize as a sovereign nation in 1991, although to this day it maintains its territorial claim, whatever that means.

## RETURN OF THE JAGUAR KING: CONTEMPORARY BELIZE

Independence did not turn out to be a cure-all. The angry nationalists that led Belize to independence turned into accommodating capitalists. The country had a small economy whose fortunes were determined beyond its control in global commodity markets. Belizeans eventually discovered that rather than remain vulnerable to exports, they had something valuable to import: tourists. The rise of ecotourism and revival of Maya culture has reshaped contemporary Belize, and cleared the jungle overgrowth for a return of the jaguar king.

Belizean politics was long dominated by the founder of the nationalist People's United Party, George Price. His party won nearly every parliamentary election, consolidating political independence and promoting a new middle class. In 1996, at age 75 years, Price finally stepped down with his national hero status intact; the PUP, however, looked vulnerable.

The party was tainted by corruption scandals: missing pension funds, selling off of public lands. According to critics, the PUP never met a greased palm it wouldn't shake. Supporters argue that other parties' politicians are guilty of similar crimes. Once a haven for pirates, Belize became a new kind of haven – for tax-avoiding North Americans. In a hotly contested 2008 election, the PUP was sent packing.

The frail economy inherited at the time of independence was slow to recover. Many Creoles began to look for work outside the country, forming sizable diaspora communities in New York and London. As much as one third of the Belizean people now live abroad. Meanwhile, civil war and rural poverty in neighboring Guatemala and Honduras sent more refugees into Belize, whose demographic profile changed accordingly, with Spanish-speaking Mestizos becoming the majority ethnic group. From the time of independence, the Belize nation has doubled in size, from 150,000 in 1981 to 321,000 in 2008.

Belize was an ideal candidate for a green revolution. Wide swaths of lowland rainforest were unspoiled by loggers, while sections of the interior highland had never even been explored by Europeans. The jungle hosted a rich stock of exotic flora and fauna, feathered and furry; while just offshore was the magnificent coral reef and mysterious Blue Hole (p157), which Jacques Cousteau had already made famous.

A Tourist Ministry was created in 1984, but it was not until the 1990s that the government began to recognize ecotourism as a viable revenue source and invested in its promotion and development. Infrastructure associated with various sites improved, small business loans became available, training programs were organized for guides, and a Bachelor's degree in tourism was created at Belize University.

Over the next decade, more than 20 sites from the western mountains to the eastern cays were designated as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves and marine preserves (see p64). More than 40% of Belizean territory received some form of protective status, including 80% of its pristine rainforest. The number of visitors rose steadily, from 140,000 in 1988 to 250,000 in 2006. By the end of the 1990s, tourism was Belize's fastest growing economic sector, surpassing commodity exports.

The ecocraze coincided with archaeological advances to spur a revival of Maya culture. In the 1980s, significant progress was made in cracking the Mayan hieroglyphic code, enabling researchers to gain deeper insight into this once-shrouded world, while NASA satellite technology revealed over 600 previously unknown sites and hidden temples beneath the Belizean rainforest. In 2000 the government allocated nearly \$30 million to support excavation projects. A lost culture became a live commodity. Maya descendants re-engaged with traditional ceremonies, craft-making, food preparation and healing techniques, often in response to tourist curiosity.

The commercial aspects of cultural revival are controversial. Maya human-rights activist and Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú spoke out against the outside world's desire to mystify the Maya experience, stating 'we are not the myths of the past, or ruins in the jungle; we are people, and we want to be respected.'

In contemporary Belize, the new understanding of the Maya past fostered a changed attitude in the Maya present. The Maya culture is no longer disparaged at the fringe of society, but now is a source of pride and a defining feature of Belizean identity, just as is the jaguar king, who has reclaimed his ancient throne.

For lots on Ambergris Caye and some great stuff on the rest of Belize, including a hugely detailed Maya Sites in Belize section, go to [www.belizehistory.com](http://www.belizehistory.com).

1973

1981

1981–2008

1991

2006

2008

In response to an increase in nationalist sentiment, the country officially changes its name from the colonial 'British Honduras' to the more popular moniker 'Belize.'

After years of anticolonial and pro-independence political movements, Belize receives formal international recognition of independent statehood. George Price (PUP) is the first prime minister of independent Belize.

In the years following independence, the population of Belize more than doubles, reaching 321,000 in 2008. The increase is attributed to high birth rates and a steady stream of immigration from neighboring countries.

Guatemala finally recognizes Belize as a sovereign, independent state. Tensions continue, however, as the neighbor to the west refuses to relinquish its territorial claim over parts of Belize.

Black gold. After more than four years of exploration around the country, oil is discovered in commercially viable quantities in the Mennonite village of Spanish Lookout.

Led by Dean Barrow, the United Democratic Party (UDP) overwhelmingly defeats the PUP in countrywide elections, capturing 25 out of 31 seats in the House of Representatives.

# The Culture

## THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Belizeans have elevated 'taking it easy' to an art form. (Where else will you be told that checkout time is 'Whatever time you like?') Shopkeepers will close early if they feel they've made enough money for the day, and hammock swinging is pretty much a national pastime. Most people here live life at a sane pace. The idea is that taking time to communicate with fellow human beings is more important than stressing out for the sake of an extra bit of profit. Not that they don't work, of course – but they know when they have done enough. As a visitor, you too will find yourself slowing down to the Belizean pace and relearning some of the forgotten art of human communication.

Most Belizeans look around at other Central American countries and find their own country measures up favorably. Its peaceful history and high standard of living are indisputable factors; socialized medicine, mandatory and free education and a relatively clean record on human rights are also positives.

Not that the picture is completely rosy. Poverty is still widespread, with an estimated one-third of the population living below the poverty line. Crime is almost a way of life in some sectors of Belize City and some rural areas. (Even the Belize City Council reports that 'the crime rate...is escalating at an appalling rate.')

Corruption in the government was the thorniest issue in the 2008 election. Each party came up with its own strategy to combat the corruption that it claimed other parties were perpetrating. All of this has left most Belizeans with a deep cynicism about the country's possibilities for progress.

Because of the mix of ethnicities and cultures in Belize, its residents are very open, tolerant and accepting of other people's differences. The cultural influence of the United States is significant; indeed, most educated Belizeans have spent time studying or working in the US. But Belizeans are proud of their cultural heritage, whether it is Maya, Garifuna, Mestizo or Creole. Tourism is playing a role in preserving some cultural practices, as visitors to Belize are keen to purchase Maya handicrafts, to hear Garifuna drumming or to attend a local food festival. Tourism has also made Belizeans more

Belizean Journeys ([www.belizeanjourneys.com](http://www.belizeanjourneys.com)) is an on-line magazine of culture and nature, showcasing articles, photographs and multimedia art from contemporary Belize.

## RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

We hear a lot about the environmental impact of tourism, but what about the cultural impact? Traveling responsibly means being aware of cultural norms and showing respect for the people in your host country, as well as for their customs and beliefs. Here are some tips for traveling responsibly in Belize:

- Follow local laws. Foreigners are not exempt!
- Do not take photos of people without asking permission.
- Do not sunbathe topless unless your beach is completely deserted.
- Feel free to haggle in markets and souvenir stalls. Vendors will likely start the process by offering a 'discount' off the bat.
- Be patient and enjoy the slower pace. Belizeans have a relatively loose interpretation of time. Tours may not leave precisely when indicated, buses may not arrive on schedule and stores may close at random.
- Support the preservation of local cultures: purchase handicrafts straight from the source, go to hear local bands and drummers and attend festivals.

## BELIZEANS BUILD HOUSES ON STILTS BECAUSE...

- They avoid floods
- They get more breeze
- They get less ground heat
- It's easier to control termites
- It keeps other bugs and rodents out
- It provides shelter for dogs, cats etc
- It permits infilling if the family gets bigger
- It's tradition!

aware of the value of their ecological and archaeological heritage, and its preservation has become a high priority for most.

## LIFESTYLE

According to the most basic benchmarks, Belize is flourishing, with compulsory education, a relatively stable democracy, a thriving tourism industry and an economy that is plugging along. Unfortunately, many people have not seen the benefits of these positive developments. A few entrepreneurs have made big money from arcane financial dealings, and a small middle class survives from business, tourism and other professions. But many more Belizeans live on subsistence incomes in rudimentary circumstances. You can admire lovely, large, breezy, two-story, old, Caribbean-style wooden houses in parts of Belize City, but these are not typical dwellings. New houses are usually small, cinder-block boxes, while old wooden ones are often warped and rotting.

Labor – whether washing dirty hotel sheets, cutting sugarcane or packing bananas – is poorly paid, especially compared with the high cost of living. (The average income in Belize is less than BZ\$600 per month.) Unemployment hovers just under 10% and it is estimated that one third of the population lives below the poverty line. That's why tens of thousands of Belizeans live in the USA these days.

Among the blessings of Belize are its tiny population and tiny area. It's said that everyone here knows everyone else. It is true that many people have supportive networks of family and friends, not only in their local neighborhood, but also in other parts of the country. Belize's different ethnic groups socialize primarily among themselves, but there is little animosity between them.

Education in Belize is free and compulsory up to the age of 14. After that, instruction is free, but students are required to buy their own books, which is a deterrent against higher education. Most schools are state-subsidized church schools, mainly run by Catholics, Methodists and Anglicans; recently evangelical religions such as the Seventh Day Adventists have opened schools.

Belize doesn't have much of a gay scene, but this does not imply that in this tolerant land people are secretive, just that they are low-key.

## MULTICULTURALISM

Belize is a tiny country (population around 321,000), but it enjoys a diversity of ethnicities that is undeniably stimulating and improbably serene.

Creoles are descendants of British loggers, colonists and African slaves. They now form only about 25% of Belize's population, but theirs remains a sort of paradigm culture. Racially mixed and proud of it, Creoles speak a fascinating and unique version of English: it sounds familiar at first, but it

Experts estimate that the number of Belizeans living overseas is roughly equal to the number of Belizeans living at home.

Belize Kriol ([www.kriol.org.bz](http://www.kriol.org.bz)), the website of the National Kriol Council of Belize, has interesting information on Creole history, culture, language and more.

### BILEEZ KRIOL

While English is the official language of Belize, when speaking among themselves most locals use Creole, or Kriol. According to one local journalist, Kriol is 'di stiki stiki paat,' or 'the glue that holds Belize together.' While this patois sounds like English, most Anglophones will have a hard time understanding it. It is a language that 'teases but just escapes the comprehension of a native English speaker,' as one frustrated American traveler so aptly stated.

Kriol derives mainly from English, with influences from Mayan and West African languages, as well as Spanish. Linguists claim that it has its own grammatical rules and a small body of literature, as well as speaking populations in different countries – criteria that determine the difference between a dialect and a language.

In 1995 the **National Kriol Council** ([www.kriol.org.bz](http://www.kriol.org.bz)) was established to promote Kriol language in Belize. The council believes that the use and recognition of the language can solidify national identity and promote interaction and cooperation among different ethnic groups. Kriol is used by more than 70% of the population; not only by Creoles, but also many Garifuna, Mestizos and Maya who speak Kriol as their second language. The council believes that a better understanding of Kriol will actually improve local English. As people recognize that Kriol is a different language – and not just improper English – both children and adults will make the effort to learn the differences in grammatical construction.

is not easily intelligible to a speaker of standard English (see the boxed text, above). Most of the people you'll encounter in Belize City and the center of the country will be Creole.

Mestizos are people of mixed Spanish and Amerindian descent. Over the last couple of decades, Mestizos have become Belize's largest ethnic group, now making up about 49% of the population. The first Mestizos arrived in the mid-19th century, when refugees from the Yucatán flooded into northern and western Belize. Their modern successors have been thousands of political refugees from troubled neighboring Central American countries. While English remains Belize's official language, Spanish is spoken by over half of the population; this has caused some resentment among Creoles, who are fiercely proud of their country's Anglo roots.

The Maya of Belize make up almost 11% of the population and are divided into three linguistic groups. The Yucatec Maya live mainly in the north, the Mopan Maya in the southern Toledo District and in western Belize, and the Kekchi Maya, who also live in the Toledo District. Use of both Spanish and English is becoming more widespread among the Maya. Traditional Maya culture is strongest among the Maya of the south.

Southern Belize is also the main home of the Garifuna (see opposite), who account for 6% of the population. The remaining 9% of the population is composed of several groups: East Indians (people of Indian subcontinent origins), Chinese, Arabs (generally known as Lebanese), the small but influential group of Mennonites (see p44), and North Americans and Europeans who have settled here in the last couple of decades.

### MEDIA

Belizean newspapers are small in size and circulation, and present news by party line. The twice-weekly, left-wing *Amandala* ([www.amandala.com.bz](http://www.amandala.com.bz)) has the largest circulation. Its Sunday edition comes out on Thursday or Friday and its Tuesday edition comes out on Tuesday but is datelined Wednesday. Other papers are Sunday only: the *Belize Times* ([www.belize-times.com](http://www.belize-times.com)) represents the People's United Party (PUP) perspective, while the *Guardian* ([www.guardian.bz](http://www.guardian.bz)) is the voice of the United Democratic Party (UDP). The *Reporter* ([www.reporter.bz](http://www.reporter.bz)) presents the most independent coverage.

Most TV you'll see in Belize will be international cable channels, but there are a few local stations: Channel 5 ('Great Belize TV'; [www.channel5belize.com](http://www.channel5belize.com)), Channel 7 ('Where News Comes First'; [www.7newsbelize.com](http://www.7newsbelize.com)) and CTV ('We bring the world into your home'; [www.ctv3belizenews.com](http://www.ctv3belizenews.com)). This is a country where the national news can contain items such as 'There will be a fireworks display on the football field in Hattieville at 7pm tonight.'

Love FM ([www.lovefm.com](http://www.lovefm.com)) is the most widely broadcast radio station in Belize, with spots at 95.1MHz and 98.1MHz. It's a charming mix of local news, public-service announcements and the world's best love songs. KREM FM, at 96.5MHz, plays a more modern selection of music.

### RELIGION

Ethnicity is a big determinant of religion in Belize, with most Mestizos, Maya and Garifuna espousing Catholicism as a result of their ethnic origins in Spanish- or French-ruled countries or colonies. Catholicism among Creoles increased with the work of North American missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Approximately a quarter of Belizeans are Protestants,

For links to most of Belize's main media, including on-line radio, visit [www.belize-news.com](http://www.belize-news.com).

### THE GARIFUNA

In the 17th century, shipwrecked African slaves washed ashore on the Caribbean island of St Vincent. They hooked up with the indigenous population of Caribs and Arawaks and formed a whole new ethnicity, now known as the Garifuna (plural Garinagu, also called Black Caribs).

France claimed possession of St Vincent in the early 18th century, but eventually ceded it to Britain according to the Treaty of Paris. After prolonged resistance and a series of wars, the Garifuna finally surrendered in 1796, and Britain decided to deport them. Over the course of several years, the Garifuna were shuffled around various spots in the Caribbean, with many dying of malnutrition or disease. Finally, 1465 of the original 4338 deportees arrived at the Honduran coastal town of Trujillo. From here, this people of mixed Native American and African heritage began to spread along the Caribbean coast of Central America.

The first Garifuna arrived in Belize around the turn of the 19th century. But the biggest migration took place in 1832, when, on November 19, some 200 Garifuna reached Belize in dugout canoes from Honduras.

Most Garifuna in Belize still live in the south of the country, from Dangriga to Punta Gorda. The Garifuna excelled at growing food and made a significant contribution to the colonial economy. By the 1850s they numbered over 2000. Today the Belize Garifuna are around 16,000 people, about 6% of Belize's population.

The Garifuna language is a combination of Arawak and African languages with bits of English and French thrown in. The Garifuna maintain a unique culture with a strong sense of community and ritual, in which drumming and dancing play important roles. The *dügü* ('feasting of the ancestors' ceremony) involves several nights and days of dancing, drumming and singing by an extended family. Its immediate purpose is to heal a sick individual, but it also serves to reaffirm community solidarity. Some participants may become 'possessed' by the spirits of dead ancestors. Other noted Garifuna ceremonials include the *beluria* (ninth-night festivity), for the departure of a dead person's soul, attended by entire communities with copious drumming, dancing and drinking; and the *wanaragua* or *jonkonu* dance, performed in some places during the Christmas-to-early-January festive season (see p222).

Garifuna culture has been enjoying a revival since the 1980s, with no small part played by the punta rock phenomenon (see p45). The anniversary of the Garifuna arrival on November 19, 1832 is celebrated as Garifuna Settlement Day, a national holiday. In southern towns – especially Dangriga – a festival takes place with traditional Garifuna food, punta music and a re-enactment of the first landing (see p222). In 2001 Unesco declared Garifuna language, dance and music in Belize to be a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' – one of the initial selections for what is intended to become the cultural equivalent of the World Heritage list.

*Garifuna History, Language & Culture of Belize, Central America & the Caribbean*, by Sebastian Cayetano, gives an easily understood overview of the Garifuna people and their culture.

### THE MENNONITES

It almost seems like an aberration, an odd sight inspired by the hot sun, or maybe just a blurry result of too much sweat dripping in your eyes. But the vision of women in bonnets and wintry frocks, and blond men with blue eyes, denim overalls and straw cowboy hats is not something your imagination has conjured up: you're looking at Belizean Mennonites.

The Mennonites originate from an enigmatic Anabaptist group that dates back to 16th-century Netherlands. Like the Amish of Pennsylvania, the Mennonites have strict religion-based values that keep them isolated in agricultural communities. Speaking mostly Low German, they run their own schools, banks and churches. Traditional groups reject any form of mechanization or technology, which is why they're often seen riding along in horse-drawn buggies.

Mennonites are devout pacifists and reject most of the political ideologies (including paying taxes) that societies down the centuries have tried to thrust upon them, so they have a long history of moving about the world trying to find a place where they could be left in peace. They left the Netherlands for Prussia and Russia in the late 17th century. In the 1870s, when Russia insisted on military conscription, the Mennonites there upped and moved to Canada. They built communities in isolated parts of Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. But after WWI the Canadian government demanded that English be taught in Mennonite schools, and the Mennonites' exemption from conscription was reconsidered. Again, the most devout Mennonites moved, this time to northern Mexico and South America. By the 1950s Mexico wanted the Mennonites to join its social security program, so once again the Mennonites packed up.

The first wave of about 3500 Mennonites settled in Belize (then called British Honduras) in 1958. Belize was happy to have their industriousness and farming expertise.

Today, Belize has both progressive and traditional Mennonite communities. The progressives, many of whom came from Canada, speak English and have no qualms about using tractors to clear their land, or pickup trucks to shuttle their families about. These well-off groups are found in Blue Creek, west of Orange Walk, or at Spanish Lookout in Cayo District. Strongly conservative groups, such as the ones at Shipyard near Orange Walk or Barton Creek in Cayo District, still ride in horse-drawn buggies and shun electricity.

Belize has been good to the Mennonites and in turn the Mennonites have been good to Belize. Mennonite farms now supply most of the country's dairy products, eggs and poultry. Furniture-making is another Mennonite specialty and you'll often see them selling their goods at markets.

Some Mennonites are open to the rest of the world and don't mind a good chat. Others don't want contact, so treat them with respect and ask permission if you want to take a photo.

chiefly Anglicans and Methodists. Today, the number of Pentecostals and Adventists is growing due to the strength of their evangelical movements. Mennonites also constitute a small minority (see above).

Among the Garifuna, and to a lesser extent the Maya and Creoles, Christianity coexists with other beliefs. Maya Catholicism has long been syncretized with traditional beliefs and rites that go back to pre-Hispanic times, while some Creoles (especially older people) have a belief in obeah, a form of witchcraft.

Belize's tradition of tolerance also encompasses Hindus, Muslims, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses and a small (but eye-catching) number of Rastafarians.

### WOMEN IN BELIZE

On the surface, women in Belize enjoy a fair degree of freedom. Laws protect women from discrimination with regards to education, ownership and inheritance of property, management of business or participation in politics. Girls outnumber boys in classrooms and, in recent years, boast higher rates of graduation.

In reality, however, women are a long way from achieving equality. Traditionally, women have devoted their lives to raising families and managing households. Birth control and family planning are not widely practiced, thanks in part to the religious influence in schools. The average family in Belize has four or five children, which leaves little time for mum to find a job. As a result, women are often financially dependent on their husbands and fathers.

Women who work outside the home are generally concentrated in female-dominated occupations with low status and low wages, including the service sector and agricultural jobs. Unemployment is twice as high for women as it is for men. Women often find it harder than men to obtain business or agricultural financing. Women are not active in politics at a national level (at the time of research, there were no women in the House of Representatives). Furthermore, research shows that women consistently receive less pay than their male counterparts.

In contrast, Belizean women are widely employed in the world's oldest profession, as are women from neighboring countries. The British military presence and the growth of tourism have both contributed to the rise in prostitution, which is not explicitly illegal in Belize. On a related note, Belize has the highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection in Central America, estimated at 2.4%.

Domestic violence is another issue that affects far too many women. Country-specific numbers are hard to come by, but the Pan-American Health Organization reports that approximately one in three women in Latin America and the Caribbean are victims of domestic violence. Unfortunately, most women are too scared to report crimes for fear (justifiably) they will not receive the support they need. In recent years, this subject has started to receive the attention it deserves, including the implementation of public awareness campaigns, and of the zero-tolerance Domestic Violence Act in 2007.

### ARTS Music

Belize knows how to get its groove on. You'll hear a variety of pan-Caribbean musical styles, including calypso (of which Belize has its own star in Gerald 'Lord' Rhaburn), *soca* (an up-tempo fusion of calypso with Indian rhythms) and, of course, reggae.

But much of the music you'll hear is specifically Belizean – especially the phenomenon known as punta rock, which has attained the status of Belize's national music. Punta rock is a combination of punta – a traditional Garifuna drumming style – and the electrified instruments of rock. Punta rock was invented in 1981 by Dangriga's Pen Cayetano after travels in other Central American countries made him aware that Garifuna traditions were in danger of withering away. Punta rock can be frenetic or it can be mellow, but at its base are always fast rhythms designed to get the hips swiveling. The dance is strongly sexually suggestive, with men and women gyrating their pelvises in close proximity to each other. Cayetano's Turtle Shell Band spread the word, and the rhythm, to neighboring Guatemala, Honduras (both with their own Garifuna populations), Mexico and even the USA (where there are sizable Belizean and Garifuna communities). They have been followed by a host of other performers.

Andy Palacio was a leading ambassador of punta rock until his untimely death in 2008. As his last project, he collaborated with other musicians, known as the Garifuna Collective, to create *Wattina*. Each track on the album is based on a traditional Garifuna rhythm, and all of the songs are in the Garifuna language.

Author Zee Edgell shocked the country when she wrote about the realities of domestic violence and discrimination in *The Festival of San Joaquin* (1997).

After musician Andy Palacio's untimely death, an estimated 2500 people descended on his home village of Barranco, where he was laid to rest following a Catholic mass, a Garifuna ceremony and an official state funeral.



## TOP PICKS – ALBUMS

- **Wattina** (Andy Palacio & the Garifuna Collective) The last masterpiece by the late great one.
- **Cult Cargo: Belize City Boil Up** (Various artists) Check out the funky blend of reggae and jazz that was coming out of Belize in the 1960s.
- **Bumari** (Lugua Centeno) Raw passionate vocals accompanied by traditional Garifuna drumming.
- **Garifuna Soul** (Aurelio Martínez) The quintessential *paranda* piece.

Another recent sensation is Supa G, who provides a fusion of punta rock, techno and even a spot of Mexican balladeering. Also look out for Mohobub, Myme Martinez (both members of the Turtle Shell Band and still going strong), Aziatic (who has blended punta with R&B, jazz and pop), Lloyd and Reckless, and the Coolie Rebels, a popular East Indian punta rock group from Punta Gorda. For more traditional Garifuna drumming, keep an eye open for Lugua Centeno.

Another great Garifuna style is *paranda*, which grew out of the melding of African percussion and chanting with Spanish-style acoustic guitar and Latin rhythms that occurred when the Garifuna reached Spanish-dominated parts of Central America. *Paranda's* Belizean master is Paul Nabor from Punta Gorda, born in the 1920s, and its bright young light is Aurelio Martínez, a Honduran who is often in Belize. The title of Martínez' album *Garifuna Soul* gives a good idea of what *paranda* is about. Its rhythms are fairly fast, but it has a lyrical tone, too.

The Creoles have given us *brukdown*, traditionally played by an ensemble of accordion, banjo, harmonica and a percussion instrument – usually the jawbone of a pig, its teeth rattled with a stick. Nowadays a drum and/or electric guitar or two might be added. Deeply African-rooted with its layered rhythms and call-and-response vocals, *brukdown* developed in the logging camps during the 18th and 19th centuries and its heartland is the Belize River valley. Wilfred Peters, with his band Mr Peters' Boom & Chime, is still the preeminent *brukdown* artist after many years, but watch out for singer Leela Vernon from Punta Gorda, too.

Bredda David & Tribal Vibes are the creators of *kungo* music, a fast-paced fusion of Creole styles with other African rhythms.

The Maya of Belize have their own favored instruments. Top artists include flautist Pablo Collado and harpist Florencio Mess. In the north you'll hear plenty of Mexican styles popular with the Mestizo people.

Hearing live music in Belize is a matter of keeping your eyes open for posters and press announcements of coming events. Gig organizers make sure the public knows what's cooking.

You can take classes in Garifuna drumming in Hopkins (p230), and in Creole drumming at Gales Point Manatee (p117).

## Literature

Belizean writer Zee Edgell has won international attention with three novels treating different aspects of Belizean society and history. *Beka Lamb* (1982) tells of adolescence at a Belize City girls' school amid the political upheavals of the mid-20th century, with detailed pictures of life in the city during that time. *In Times Like These* (1991) delves into the independence-era political and social landscapes through the experience of a woman returned from studies in London, and *The Festival of San Joaquin* (1997) focuses on a Mestizo woman's painful clashes with machismo, poverty and class discrimination.

Another talented writer is Zoila Ellis, whose *On Heroes, Lizards and Passion* brings together seven short stories that demonstrate an acute perception of Belize and Belizeans.

Carlos Ledson Miller's *Belize* is the closest you'll get to a Belizean bodice-ripper. The story begins in 1961 with Hurricane Hattie, and tells the tale of a Belizean-American man and his two sons, with a realistic portrayal of Belize's recent history, including the mahogany industry, drug smuggling, hurricanes, the move to independence and the development of ecotourism. It's fun to walk through neighborhoods in Belize City and Ambergris Caye that are described in the book.

While you're in Belize, look for titles in the Belizean Writers Series, which includes anthologies of poetry, plays and short fiction.

## Cinema & Television

Belize doesn't have a film industry but it does stage the admirable **Belize International Film Festival** ([www.belizefilmfestival.com](http://www.belizefilmfestival.com)) in Belize City. The festival started in 2003, thanks to the efforts of the Film Commissioner (and well-known American expat) Emory King ([www.emoryking.com](http://www.emoryking.com)). After a few successful runs, the film festival took a break for a few years, but was expected to re-launch in the summer of 2008.

The 1986 film *The Mosquito Coast*, with Harrison Ford and River Phoenix, was filmed in Belize, even though the story is set in Nicaragua. Likewise, Belize substituted for Africa in the 1993 version of *The Heart of Darkness*, with John Malkovich, as well as the 1980 film *The Dogs of War*, with Christopher Walken.

There are two major TV channels in Belize: Channel 5 and Channel 7. Most programming is from the United States and other Caribbean countries, although both channels show some local programming that is not particularly innovative. One of the most popular shows on Belizean TV is the ubiquitous *Karaoke TV*. Its main competition is the local soap opera, *Noh Matta Wat!*, which follows the members of the Diego family while they struggle with relationships, finances and other life obstacles. Other locally produced shows are documentary-style programs about Belizean history, geography, nature and culture, including a music show that was hosted by Andy Palacio.

## Painting & Sculpture

Belizean art started to develop in the 1970s. Today, a distinct Belizean style has emerged, focusing on flora and fauna, landscapes, seascapes and ethnic groups. Pen Cayetano ([www.cayetano.de](http://www.cayetano.de)) is a polymathic figure who started the punta rock musical phenomenon, but he also does oil paintings in a realist style. A native of Dangriga, he now lives in Germany but usually returns to Belize each year.

Benjamin Nicholas has a primitivist style, with flat perspective, bright colors and stylized figures. Also look out for the street scenes of Terryl Godoy. Beach areas such as Caye Caulker, Placencia and Corozal have attracted communities of expat artists who love to depict local village life, cultural festivals and wildlife.

In western Belize, art lovers should make an effort to visit the avant-garde rainforest sculpture park, Poustinia (p209).

Belizean wood-carvers work chiefly with the hardwoods pericote and mahogany. Ignatius Peyrefitte Jr has developed a distinctive personal style with Madonnas, abstracts and family scenes. The Garcia sisters, of San Antonio, Cayo (see p194), carve some finely worked figures from Maya mythology and Belizean wildlife out of local black slate – a craft that has spawned a host of imitators.

The annual Sidewalk Art Festival in Placencia, held on the weekend nearest to Valentine's Day, provides an excellent window on Belizean art.

Listen to a great sampling of Belizean music at the website of Stonetree Records ([www.stonetreerecords.com](http://www.stonetreerecords.com)), which produces many of the best artists.

**SPORTS**

Like any Central American country worth its stripes, Belize is a soccer-playing nation and has national tournaments contested by a number of semi-pro clubs. The Regent Insurance Cup competition runs from about January to June, and the Prime Minister's Cup starts in August. Leading clubs include Kulture Yabra of Belize City, Juventus of Orange Walk, Sagitún of Independence and San Pedro Seahawks. Games are played on Saturday and Sunday. The stadiums are easy enough to find in each town: you'll be in a crowd of a few hundred at most.

Softball, basketball and cricket are also popular (cricket mainly in Belize District, from February to June); horse races and long-distance cycling races occur at times such as New Year's Day and the Easter weekend. Burrell Boom, 18 miles west of Belize City, is the main horse-racing venue. Belize's most unique sporting event is La Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge, a four-day canoe race down the Belize River from San Ignacio to Belize City, which takes place in March (see p195).

# The Ancient Maya World

Dr Allen J Christenson

The ancient Maya patterned their lives according to precedents set by their first ancestors. Nearly all aspects of Maya faith begin with their view of the creation, when the gods and divine forebears established the world at the beginning of time. From their hieroglyphic texts (see p53) and art carved on stone monuments and buildings, or painted on pottery, we can now piece together much of the Maya view of the creation. We can even read the precise date when the creation took place.

In AD 775, a Maya lord with the high-sounding name of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoat (Fire Burning Sky Lightning God) set up an immense stone monument in the center of his city, Quirigua, in Guatemala. The unimaginative archaeologists who discovered the stone called it Stela C. This monument bears the longest single hieroglyphic description of the creation, noting that it took place on the day 13.0.0.0.0, 4 Ahaw, 8 Kumk'u, a date corresponding to August 13, 3114 BC on our calendar. This date appears over and over in other inscriptions throughout the Maya world. On that day the creator gods set three stones or mountains in the dark waters that once covered the primordial world. These three stones formed a cosmic hearth at the center of the universe. The gods then struck divine new fire by means of lightning, which charged the world with new life.

This account of the creation is echoed in the first chapters of the *Popol Vuh*, a book compiled by members of the Maya nobility soon after the Spanish conquest in 1524, many centuries after the erection of Quirigua Stela C. Although this book was written in their native Mayan language, its authors used European letters rather than the more terse hieroglyphic script. Thus the book gives a fuller account of how they conceived the first creation:

This is the account of when all is still, silent and placid. All is silent and calm. Hushed and empty is the womb of the sky. These then are the first words, the first speech. There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow or forest. All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of all the sky. There is not yet anything gathered together. All is at rest. Nothing stirs. All is languid, at rest in the sky. Only the expanse of the water, only the tranquil sea lies alone. All lies placid and silent in the darkness, in the night.

All alone are the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons. Luminous they are in the water, wrapped in feathers... They are great sages, great possessors of knowledge... Then they called forth the mountains from the water. Straightaway the great mountains came to be. It was merely their spirit essence, their miraculous power, that brought about the conception of the mountains.

The Maya saw this pattern all around them. In the night sky, the three brightest stars in the constellation of Orion's Belt were

Dr Allen J Christenson has an MA and a PhD in Pre-Columbian Maya Art History, and works as an associate professor in the Humanities, Classics and Comparative Literature department of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. His works include a critical translation of the *Popol Vuh* from the original Maya text, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (2003).

The oldest known copy of the *Popol Vuh* was made around 1701–03 by a Roman Catholic priest named Francisco Ximénez in Guatemala. The location of the original *Popol Vuh* from which Ximénez made his copy, if it still survives, is unknown.

conceived as the cosmic hearth at the center of the universe. On a clear night in the crisp mountain air of the Maya highlands, one can even see what looks like a wisp of smoke within these stars, although it is really only a far-distant string of stars within the M4 Nebula.

*Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*

## MAYA CITIES AS THE CENTER OF CREATION

Perhaps because the ancient Maya of northern Belize didn't have real mountains as symbols of the creation, they built them instead in the form of plaza-temple complexes. In hieroglyphic inscriptions, the large open-air plazas at the center of Maya cities are often called *nab'* (sea) or *lakam ja'* (great water). Rising above these plastered stone spaces are massive pyramid temples, often oriented in groups of three, representing the first mountains to emerge out of the 'waters' of the plaza. The tiny elevated sanctuaries of these temples served as portals into the abodes of gods that lived within. Offerings were burned on altars in the plazas, as if the flames were struck in the midst of immense three-stone hearths. Only a few elite persons were allowed to enter the small interior spaces atop the temples, while the majority of the populace observed their actions from the plaza below. The architecture of ancient Maya centers thus replicated sacred geography to form an elaborate stage on which rituals that charged their world with regenerative power could be carried out.

Many of the earliest-known Maya cities were built in Belize, including Cuello (p164), Lamanai (p167), Cerros (p178), Caracol (p213) and Altun Ha (p106), all of which were founded at some point during the Middle and late Preclassic Periods (in the first millennium BC). The earliest temples at these sites are often constructed in this three-temple arrangement, grouped together on a single platform, as an echo of the first three mountains of creation. The ancient name for the site known today as Caracol was Oxwitzá' (Three Hills Place), symbolically linking this community with the three mountains of creation and thus the center of life. The Caana (Sky Place) is the largest structure at Caracol and consists of a massive pyramid-shaped platform topped by three temples that represent these three sacred mountains.

The Belizean site of Lamanai is one of the oldest and largest Maya cities known. It is also one of the few Maya sites that still bears its ancient name (which means Submerged Crocodile). While other sites were abandoned well before the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century, Lamanai continued to be occupied by the Maya centuries afterward. For the ancient Maya the crocodile symbolized the rough surface of the earth, newly emerged from the primordial sea that once covered the world. The name of the city reveals that its inhabitants saw themselves as living at the center of creation, rising from the waters of creation. Its massive pyramid temples include Structure N10-43,

### GUIDE TO THE GODS *Mara Vorhees*

The Maya worshipped a host of heavenly beings. It's practically impossible to remember them all (especially since some of them have multiple names), but here's a primer for the most powerful Maya gods.

**Ah Puch** – God of Death

**Chaac** – God of Rain and Thunder

**Izamma** – God of Priestly Knowledge and Writing

**Hun Hunahpu** – Father of the Hero Twins, sometimes considered the Maize God

**Hunahpu & Ixbalanque** – The Hero Twins (see p53)

**Ixchel** – Goddess of Fertility and Birth

A good introduction to the art of the Maya world is Mary Ellen Miller's *Maya Art and Architecture*. For a more complete overview of Maya cities and culture from the point of view of an eminent archaeologist, try *The Ancient Maya* by Robert J Sharer.

For up-to-date articles on archaeological discoveries as well as essays on Maya theology and ritual practices, visit [www.mesoweb.com](http://www.mesoweb.com).

which is the second-largest pyramid known from the Maya Preclassic Period and represents the first mountain and dwelling place of the gods.

## THE MAYA CREATION OF MANKIND

According to the *Popol Vuh*, the purpose of the creation was to give form and shape to beings who would 'remember' the gods through ritual. The Maya take their role in life very seriously. They believe that people exist as mediators between this world and that of the gods. If they fail to carry out the proper prayers and ceremonies at just the right time and place, the universe will come to an abrupt end.

The gods created the first people out of maize (corn) dough, literally from the flesh of the Maize God, the principal deity of creation. Because of their divine origin, they were able to see with miraculous vision:

Perfect was their sight, and perfect was their knowledge of everything beneath the sky. If they gazed about them, looking intently, they beheld that which was in the sky and that which was upon the earth. Instantly they were able to behold everything... Thus their knowledge became full. Their vision passed beyond the trees and the rocks, beyond the lakes and the seas, beyond the mountains and the valleys. Truly they were very esteemed people.

*Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*

In nearly all of their languages, the Maya refer to themselves as 'true people' and consider that they are literally of a different flesh than those who do not eat maize. They are maize people, and foreigners who eat bread are wheat people. This mythic connection between maize and human flesh influenced birth rituals in the Maya world for centuries.

No self-respecting Maya, raised in the traditional way, would consider eating a meal that didn't include maize. They treat it with the utmost respect. Women do not let grains of maize fall on the ground or into an open fire. If it happens accidentally, as I saw once, the woman picks it up gently and apologizes to it. The Maya love to talk and laugh, but are generally silent during meals. Most don't know why; it's just the way things have always been done. I once asked an elder about it and he said, 'for us, tortillas are like the Catholic sacramental bread: it is the flesh of god. You don't laugh or speak when taking the flesh of god into your body. The young people are beginning to forget this. They will someday regret it.'

## MAYA KINGSHIP

But the creation wasn't a one-time event. The Maya constantly repeated these primordial events in their ceremonies, timed to the sacred calendar. They saw the universe as a living thing. And just like any living thing, it grows old, weakens and ultimately passes away. Everything, including the gods, needed to be periodically recharged with life-bearing power or the world would slip back into the darkness and chaos that existed before the world began. Maya kings were seen as mediators. In countless wall carvings and paintings, monumental stone stelae and altars, painted pottery and other sacred objects, the Maya depicted their kings dressed as gods, repeating the actions of deities at the time of creation.

A common theme was the king dressed as the Maize God himself, bearing a huge pack on his back containing the sacred bits and pieces that make up the world, while dancing them into existence. A beautiful example of this may be seen on the painted *Buena Vista Vase*, one of the true masterpieces of Maya art. Discovered at Buenavista el Cayo, a small

For a lively discussion of Maya religion and the creation, pick up a copy of *Maya Cosmos* by David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker.

For an incredibly beautiful and searchable collection of photographs of painted vases, monuments and other works of ancient Maya art, visit the Kerr Archives at [www.famsi.org/research/kerr/index.html](http://www.famsi.org/research/kerr/index.html).

The Maya hieroglyphic writing system is one of only five major phonetic scripts ever invented – the others being cuneiform (used in ancient Mesopotamia), Egyptian, Harappan and Chinese.

site in the Cayo District of Belize, right on the river (north side) close to the border with Guatemala, it is now one of the gems of the Maya collection housed in the Department of Archaeology, Belize City. These rituals were done at very specific times of the year, timed to match calendric dates when the gods first performed them. For the Maya, these ceremonies were not merely symbolic of the rebirth of the cosmos, but a genuine creative act in which time folded in on itself to reveal the actions of the divine creators in the primordial world.

In Maya theology, the Maize God is the most sacred of the creator deities because he gives his very flesh in order for human beings to live. But this sacrifice must be repaid. The Maya, as 'true people', felt an obligation to the cosmos to compensate for the loss of divine life, not because the gods were cruel, but because gods cannot rebirth themselves and need the intercession of human beings. Maya kings stood as the sacred link between their subjects and the gods. The king was thus required to periodically give that which was most precious – his own blood, which was believed to contain

If you are curious about how scholars unlocked the secrets of Maya hieroglyphics, read Michael Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code*. It reads like a detective novel.

### HOLLYWOOD VS HISTORY *Mara Vorhees*

The Maya is not one of the world's better-known ancient civilizations. We learn about the Egyptians and the Romans at school, but when it comes to indigenous American history, common knowledge is pretty much nil.

That's why historians, archaeologists and anthropologists were outraged by *Apocalypto*, Mel Gibson's 2006 film about the ancient Maya civilization – not only due to its historical inaccuracy but also its cultural insensitivity.

To his credit, Gibson did employ Amerindian actors who actually spoke the Yucatec Mayan language. And the film did capture many elements of the Maya culture, from the elaborate tattoos on their bodies to the jungle setting of their cities. But, according to most scholars, these small details pale in comparison to the vast misrepresentation of the civilization and the inherently colonialist message of the film.

Nobody denies that violence was an integral part of the ancient Maya culture. Yes, they were known to kill off a few people here and there to keep Chaac happy (see p50). But human sacrifice did not take place in the mass quantities depicted in the movie, and there is no evidence of mass graves at Maya sites. Rather, this is an aspect of the Aztec culture that was co-opted for the film. Most victims of Maya sacrifice were rulers of rival kingdoms who were killed after their capture, or individuals that had been groomed for the honor. (According to one critic, when it came to human sacrifice, the Maya placed their emphasis on quality, not quantity.)

Also absent from Maya society: slavery. *Apocalypto* depicts crowds of slaves toiling under harsh conditions. But when you go to Tikal and Caracol, you learn that these cities were likely built by ordinary citizens, who may have been conscripted or may have volunteered for the job.

So Gibson added a few of his own elements to spice up his story, but he left out some others: art, architecture, astrology, spirituality, hieroglyphics, calendar and more. The Maya civilization endured for thousands of years and its accomplishments were many; *Apocalypto* ignores that.

*Apocalypto* ends with the arrival of the Spanish, who offer the first and only moment of peace in the entire film. Indeed, the Spanish rescue our hero Jaguar Paw from his bloody fate. The implication is that the Spanish save the Maya from the violence they are perpetrating upon themselves.

Never mind the jumbled timeline: in reality, the Maya cities (with the exception of Lamanai) had long since been abandoned by the time the Spanish arrived. What's worse is that the film completely overlooks the horrific violence the Spanish would inflict on the Maya in the coming years. Some experts estimate that the Maya population declined by as much as 90% within 100 years of the arrival of the Spanish, yet here they are perceived as saviors.

So, viewer, beware: *Apocalypto* is a heart-racing, gut-wrenching, action-adventure film; a history lesson, it is not.

### THE HERO TWINS *Mara Vorhees*

According to the *Popol Vuh*, the Lords of Xibalbá (the Underworld) invited Hun Hunahpu and his brother to a game in the ball court. Upon losing the game, the brothers were sacrificed and their skulls were suspended from a calabash tree as a show of triumph.

Along came an unsuspecting daughter of Xibalbá. As she reached out to take fruit from the tree, the skull of Hun Hunahpu spat in her hand, thus impregnating her. From this strange conception would be born the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Ixbalanque.

The Hero Twins would go on to have many adventures, including vanquishing their evil half-brothers. Their final triumph was overcoming Xibalbá and avenging the death of their father – first by defeating the Lords in a ball game, and then by sacrificing them. After this, the twins ascended into the sky, being transformed into the sun and moon. They were considered the original ancestors of the ruling dynasties of the ancient Maya.

the essence of godhood itself. Generally, this meant that members of the royal family bled themselves with stingray spines or stone lancets. Males did their bloodletting from the genital area, literally birthing gods from the penis. Women most often drew blood from their tongues. This royal blood was collected on sheets of bark paper and then burned to release its divine essence, opening a portal to the other world and allowing the gods to emerge to a new life. At times of crisis, such as the end of a calendar cycle, or upon the death of a king and the succession of another, the sacrifice had to be greater to compensate for the loss of divine life. This generally involved obtaining noble or royal captives through warfare against a neighboring Maya state in order to sacrifice them.

Altar 23 from Caracol shows two captive lords from the Maya cities of B'ital and Ucanal, on the Guatemala-Belize border, with their arms bound behind their backs in preparation for sacrifice, perhaps on that very altar. If this were not done, they believed that life itself would cease to exist.

The beauty of Maya religion is that these great visions of creation mirror everyday events in the lives of the people. When a Maya woman rises early in the morning, before dawn, to grind maize for the family meal, she replicates the actions of the creators at the beginning of time. The darkness that surrounds her is reminiscent of the gloom of the primordial world. When she lights the three-stone hearth on the floor of her home, she is once again striking the new fire that generates life. The grains of maize that she cooks and then forms into tortillas are literally the flesh of the Maize God, who nourishes and rebuilds the bodies of her family members. This divine symmetry is comforting in a world that often proves intolerant and cruel.

### MAYA HIEROGLYPHIC WRITING

More than 1500 years prior to the Spanish Conquest, the Maya developed a sophisticated hieroglyphic script capable of recording complex literary compositions, both on folded screen codices made of bark paper or deer skin, as well as texts incised on more durable stone or wood. The importance of preserving written records was a hallmark of Maya culture, as witnessed by the thousands of known hieroglyphic inscriptions, many more of which are still being discovered in the jungles of Belize and other Maya regions. The sophisticated Maya hieroglyphic script is partly phonetic (glyphs representing sounds tied to the spoken language) and partly logographic (glyphs representing entire words), making it capable of recording any idea that could be thought or spoken.

Ancient Maya scribes were among the most honored members of their society. They were often important representatives of the royal family and, as

Like ancient Greece, there was no unified Maya empire. Each city had its own royal family and its own patron gods. Warfare was often conducted not for conquest, but to obtain captives who bore within their veins royal blood to be sacrificed.

## HOW THE MAYA CALENDAR WORKED

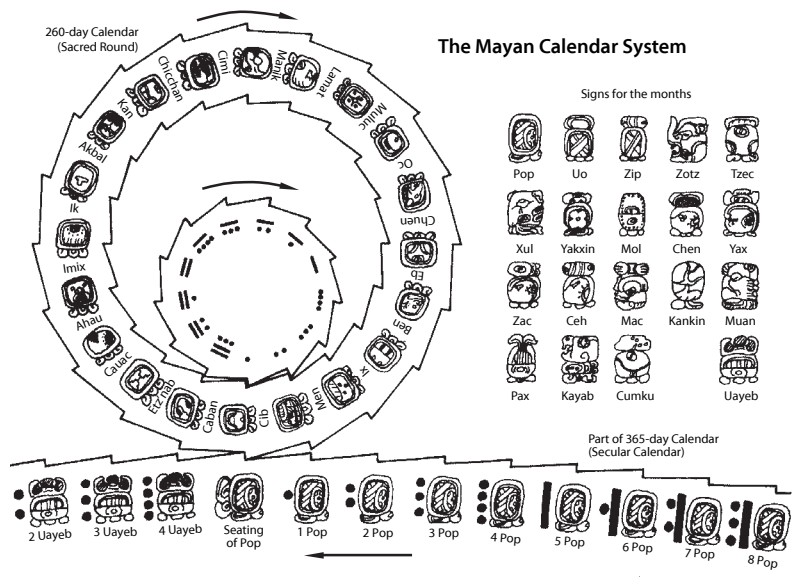
The ancient Maya used three calendars. The first was a period of 260 days, known as the Tzolkin, likely based on the nine months it takes for a human fetus to develop prior to birth. Traditionalist Maya priests still undergo a 260-day period of training before they are 'reborn' as priests worthy to interpret the ancient calendar on behalf of petitioners. The second Maya calendar system was a solar year of 365 days, called the Haab. Both the Tzolkin and Haab were measured in endlessly repeating cycles. When meshed together, a total of 18,980 day-name permutations are possible (a period of 52 solar years) called the Calendar Round.

Though fascinating in its complexity, the Calendar Round has its limitations, the greatest being that it only goes for 52 years. After that, it starts again and so provides no way for Maya ceremony planners to distinguish a day in this 52-year Calendar Round cycle from the identically named day in the next cycle, or in the cycle after that. Thus the Maya developed a third calendar system that we call the Long Count, which pinpoints a date based on the number of days it takes place after the day of creation on August 13, 3114 BC.

Let's use the example of the day on which I am writing this chapter. The Maya Long Count date corresponding to today, Monday, March 31, 2008, is 12.19.15.3.14, 2 Uayeb 7 lx.

The first number, '12,' of this Long Count date represents how many *baktuns* (400 x 360 days or 144,000 days) that have passed since the day of creation (thus  $12 \times 144,000 = 1,728,000$  days). The second number, '19,' represents the number of *katuns* (20 x 360 or 7200 days) that have passed, thus adding another  $19 \times 7200 = 136,800$  days. The third number, '15,' is the number of *tuns* (360 days), or 5400 days. The fourth number, '3,' is the number of *uinals* (20 days), or 60 days. Finally the fifth number, '14,' is the number of whole days. Adding each of these numbers gives us the sum of  $1,728,000 + 136,800 + 5400 + 60 + 14 = 1,870,274$  days since the day of creation.

The Maya then added the Calendar Round date: the Haab date (2 Uayeb) and the Tzolkin date (7 lx). If that weren't precise enough, the Maya would also often mention the dates from various planetary cycles (which lord of the night was in place etc).



such, were believed to carry the seeds of divinity within their blood. Among the titles given to artists and scribes in Maya inscriptions of the Classic Period were *itz'aat* (sage) and *miyaatz* (wise one).

## COUNTING SYSTEM

Maya arithmetic was elegantly simple: dots were used to count from one to four, a horizontal bar signified five, a bar with one dot above it was six, a bar with two dots was seven etc. Two bars signified 10, three bars 15. Nineteen, the highest common number, was three bars stacked up and topped by four dots.

The Maya didn't use a decimal system (which is based on the number 10), but rather a vigesimal system (that is, a system that has a base of 20). The late Mayanist Linda Schele used to suggest that this was because they wore sandals and thus counted not only their fingers but their toes as well. This is a likely explanation, since the number 20 in nearly all Mayan languages means 'person.'

To signify larger sums the Maya used positional numbers – a fairly sophisticated system similar to the one we use today and much more advanced than the crude additive numbers used in the Roman Empire. In positional numbers, the position of a sign and the sign's value determine the number. For example, in our decimal system the number 23 is made up of two signs: a 2 in the 'tens' position and a 3 in the 'ones' position; two tens plus three ones equals 23.

In the Maya system, positions of increasing value went not right to left (as ours do) but from bottom to top. So the bottom position showed values from one to 19 (remember that this is a base-20 system so three bars and four dots in this lowest position would equal 19); the next position up showed multiples of 20 (for example four dots at this position would equal 80); the next position represents multiples of 400; the next, multiples of 8000 etc. By adding more positions one could count as high as needed.

Such positional numbers depend upon the use of zero, a concept that the Romans never developed but the Maya did. The zero in Maya numbering was represented by a stylized picture of a shell or some other object – but never a bar or a dot.

## CALENDAR SYSTEM

The Maya counting system was used by merchants and others who had to add up many things, but its most important use – and the one you will most often encounter during your travels – was in writing calendar dates. The ancient Maya calendar was a way of interpreting the order of the universe itself. The sun, moon and stars were not simply handy ways of measuring the passage of time, but living beings that influenced the world in fundamentally important ways. Even today, the Maya refer to days as 'he.' The days and years were conceived as being carried by gods, each with definite personalities and spheres of influence that colored the experience of those who lived them. Priests carefully watched the sky to look for the appearance of celestial bodies that would determine the time to plant and harvest crops, celebrate certain ceremonies, or go to war. The regular rotation of the heavens served as a comforting contrast to the chaos that characterizes our imperfect human world.

In some ways, the ancient Maya calendar – still used in parts of the region – is more accurate than the Gregorian calendar we use today. Without sophisticated technology, Maya astronomers were able to ascertain the length of the solar year as 365.2420 days (a discrepancy of 17.28 seconds per year from the true average length of 365.2422 days). The Gregorian

When the Spaniards arrived, Christian missionaries zealously burned all the Maya hieroglyphic books they could find. Only four are known to have survived and are held in Dresden, Madrid, Paris and Mexico City.

The Maya likely used their counting system from day to day by writing on the ground, the tip of the finger creating a dot. By using the edge of the hand they could make a bar, representing the entire hand of five fingers.

calendar year works out to be 365.2425 days. Thus the Maya year count is 1/10,000 closer to the truth than our own modern calendar.

Maya astronomers were able to pinpoint eclipses with uncanny accuracy, a skill that was unknown among the brightest scholars in contemporary medieval Europe. The Maya lunar cycle was a mere seven minutes off today's sophisticated technological calculations. They calculated the Venus cycle at 583.92 days. By dropping four days each 61 Venus years and eight days at the end of 300 Venus years, the Maya lost less than a day in accuracy in 1000 years!

The ancient Maya believed that the Great Cycle of the present age would last for 13 *baktun* cycles in all (each *baktun* lasting 144,000 days), which according to our calendar will end on December 23, AD 2012. By my count we have 1728 days left. By the time you read this, it will be less. The Maya saw the end of large cycles of time as a kind of death, and they were thus fraught with peril. But both death and life must dance together on the cosmic stage for the succession of days to come. Thus the Maya conducted ceremonies to periodically 'rebirth' the world and keep the endless march of time going. These ceremonies continue today among traditionalist Maya, so likely we have nothing to fear.

The Maya never expected the end of this Great Cycle to be the last word for the cosmos, since the world regularly undergoes death and rebirth. Koba Stela 1 (the first stela from the site of Koba) records a period of time equivalent to approximately 41,341,050,000,000,000,000,000,000 of our years! (In comparison, the Big Bang that is said to have formed our universe is estimated to have occurred a mere 15,000,000,000 years ago.)

If you would like to convert a modern Gregorian date, such as your birthday or anniversary, to the Maya Long Count and Calendar Round calendars, you could use the Maya Date Calculator found at [www.halfmoon.org](http://www.halfmoon.org).

# Environment

With Belize's sparse human population and history of relatively low-key human impact, more than 70% of the country still has natural vegetation cover, a much higher proportion than in most other Central American countries. The hot, moist climate and varied topsoil have yielded a vast diversity of animal and plant species, many of which are able to live undisturbed in their natural habitats. Thanks to an admirable conservation agenda pursued by governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) since Belizean independence in 1981, more than 40% of the national territory is under environmental protection. All of this makes Belize a particularly fascinating destination for anyone interested in nature, be it the marine life of the coral reefs, the vegetation and animal life of the forests or the hundreds of bird species that soar, flutter and swoop through the skies.

## THE LAND

At 8866 sq miles, Belize is certainly a small country – only slightly bigger than Massachusetts or Wales – but it harbors great geological variety. If you were a magnificent frigate bird flying in westward over the Caribbean toward Belize, the first breaks you'd notice in the surface of the waters would be the three offshore atolls of Lighthouse Reef (p157), Glover's Reef (p227) and Turneffe Atoll (p156). These broken rings of coral reef, dotted with low islands, surround shallow inner lagoons. They're the tips of tall, steep, underwater mountains pushed up by the action of the Caribbean tectonic plate (to their south) sliding past the North American plate on which Belize sits. The sea floor drops away rapidly to great depths around the atolls – to 6000ft within 5 miles east of Lighthouse Reef, for instance.

West of the atolls you'll see Belize's barrier reef breaking the water surface for 160 miles parallel to nearly the entire coastline of the country, ranging between 10 and 25 miles off the mainland. Like the atolls, the reef sits atop geological fault blocks, with steep drop-offs on its eastern side but shallow waters inshore, where the sea floor is a continuation of the continental shelf and rarely more than 15ft deep. The reef itself, and the area between it and the mainland, are dotted with hundreds of islands known as cayes (pronounced 'keys'). The inshore cayes – mainly the northern cayes – tend to be mangrove-lined, while the islands on and beyond the reef are generally sandy with palm trees.

On the mainland, low-lying plains spread across the northern half of the country and the coastal areas of the south. Belize's uplands, stretching southwest from the center of the country to just across the Guatemalan border, are the Maya Mountains. Their highest peak is Doyle's Delight (3687ft) in the southwest. Another well-known landmark is Victoria Peak (3675ft), on the fringe of the Cockscomb Basin (p235) on the northeast side of the mountains.

Numerous rivers drop down off the mountains to snake their way south, east or north across the plains to the Caribbean. None of them is of huge magnitude, but all the country's bigger towns lie on the rivers, which have always been key trade and transportation routes. The biggest is the Belize River, running west to east across the middle of the country, from its source in San Ignacio (see Branch Mouth, p198) to Belize City.

The central core of the Maya Mountains is hard granite, laid down 125 million or more years ago, but the northern, western and southern fringes of the range – such as Belize's northern plains – are limestone, evidence that

Doyle's Delight is named after Arthur Conan Doyle, author of *The Lost World*, who wrote 'there must be something wild and wonderful in a country such as this, and we're the men to find it out!'

Belize switched to driving on the right in the 1960s, partly because Hurricane Hattie had wiped out most of the lefty cars.



these areas were once under warm, shallow seas. The erosive action of water on the relatively soft limestone has produced numerous underground rivers and caves. Many of the caves were ritual sites for the ancient Maya and they can be visited today (see Cave-Tubing, p186; Actun Tunichil Muknal, p191; Barton Creek Cave, p193; and Che Chem Ha, p210).

The interior of the country, including most of the Maya Mountains, is still mostly covered in moist, tropical broadleaf forests, which are highly diverse and shelter a great range of wildlife. Pines and savannah break out west of Belize City and on Mountain Pine Ridge (p211), a northwestern spur of the Maya Mountains. Nearer the coast you'll find littoral forests with tougher-leaved, salt-tolerant trees.

## WILDLIFE

Belize's animal and plant life are the stars of the country, thanks to the conservation of its forests and reefs. Getting to see the animals and to identify and understand the plant life is in large measure a matter of having a knowledgeable guide. Resorts, lodges, hotels and tour agencies throughout

### HURRICANE WATCH

Hurricanes have long bedeviled the Belizean coast, leaving their marks in very visible ways. For example, the Split on Caye Caulker (p141) was created when Hurricane Hattie whipped through here and split the island in two. This is the same storm that motivated the Belizean government to build a new inland capital (see Belmopan, p188).

The effects of these tropical storms are not only physical: hurricane season is engrained in the brains of the residents, who long remember the last evacuation and always anticipate the next one. The most treacherous events are even recorded in Belizean literature, providing the setting for crucial scenes in *Beka Lamb* by Zee Edgell and *Belize* by Carlos Ledson Miller.

Any visitor to Belize is likely to engage in at least one conversation about the most recent tempest (more, if it was a bad one). Here are a few of the lowlights from Belizean hurricane history:

- **Hurricane Dean (2007)** Residents feared the worst, and thousands of people were evacuated from Belize City, Caye Caulker and Ambergris Caye in anticipation of this Category-5 hurricane. Thankfully, Hurricane Dean was a near miss, as it made landfall about 40 miles north of the Belizean–Mexican border. Nonetheless, there was millions of dollars worth of damage done in Corozal and Orange Walk, as well as severe repercussions for the sugar and papaya industries.
- **Hurricane Iris (2001)** This devastating Category-4 storm made landfall in southern Belize, destroying many rural Maya villages and leaving upward of 10,000 people homeless. Off the coast south of Belize City, a live-aboard dive ship capsized, killing 20 people. Joe Burnworth recounts the tragic tale in his book *No Safe Harbor*.
- **Hurricane Hattie (1961)** This history-making hurricane killed 275 people and destroyed much of Belize City. Afterward, survivors apparently roamed the rubble-strewn streets in search of food and shelter. Many moved to refugee camps, which later morphed into permanent settlements (the origins of Hattieville; see Belize Central Prison, p113). Hurricane Hattie provides the backdrop for Carlos Ledson Miller's novel *Belize*.
- **Hurricane Five (1931)** One of the deadliest seasons in Atlantic-coast hurricane history, 1931 also saw the highest death toll in Belize. Hurricane Five hit the coast of Belize on September 10, a national holiday, meaning that emergency services were slow to respond. The entire northern coast of the country was devastated, and around 2500 people were killed.

Recent scientific evidence suggests that the strength of hurricanes increases with the rise of ocean temperatures. So as our climate continues to change, countries such as Belize are likely to experience more frequent and more intense hurricane hits.

the country offer a range of tours, nature walks, birding trips, botanical trails and other activities for nature lovers.

Good guides will show you a surprising variety of creatures and plants, many of which you would never spot otherwise. Night forest walks can be especially (and literally) illuminating, as you use flashlights to check out kinkajous, crocodiles and other nocturnal creatures. Birds, of course, are everywhere, but again guides will spot and identify far more than you likely would alone.

## Animals MAMMALS Felines

Everyone dreams of seeing a jaguar in the wild. Even though Belize has healthy numbers of the biggest feline in the Western hemisphere (up to 6ft long and 250lb in weight), your best chance of seeing one, as with many other species, is still at the Belize Zoo (p113). They're widely distributed, living almost anywhere that has large expanses of thick forest. The biggest populations and most frequent reported sightings are in the Chan Chich area (p171) and Rio Bravo Conservation & Management Area (p169). You stand a good chance of seeing their tracks and maybe the remains of their meals in Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235), which was established as a jaguar reserve in the 1980s, when the then highly endangered jaguar became protected in Belize.

Belize has four smaller wildcats, all elusive like the jaguar: the puma (aka mountain lion or cougar), almost as big as the jaguar but a uniform gray or brown color (occasionally black); the ocelot, spotted similarly to the jaguar but a lot smaller; the margay, smaller again and also spotted; and the small, brown or gray jaguarundi.

## Monkeys

The endangered black howler monkey exists only in Belize, northern Guatemala and southern Mexico. Its population has made a comeback in several areas, especially in the Community Baboon Sanctuary (p108), set up in the 1980s specifically to protect this noisy animal. The sanctuary is now home to some 3000 individual monkeys. Other places where you stand a good chance of seeing and hearing howlers include: the Lamanai ruins (p167); Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235); Chan Chich Lodge (p171); and the Rio Bravo area (p169). There is also a healthy population in Tikal National Park (p263) in Guatemala. The howler's eerie dawn and evening cries – more roars than howls – can carry two miles across the treetops.

Less common, though you may still spot some in similar areas, are the smaller, long-tailed spider monkeys.

## Other Land Mammals

Related to the horse but with shorter legs and tail, a stouter build and small eyes, ears and intellect, the Baird's tapir (or mountain cow) eats plants, bathes daily and runs like mad when approached. It's shy and seldom seen in the forest.

You may well see a peccary, a sort of wild pig that weighs 50lb or more; it is active by day and tends to travel in groups. There are two types, whose names – white-lipped peccary and collared peccary – define their differences.

Resembling a large spotted guinea pig, up to 2ft long and weighing up to 22lb, the nocturnal gibbon (or paca) is a rodent that often lives in pairs. The agouti is similar but diurnal and more closely resembles a rabbit, with strong back legs.

Most jaguars have yellow-brown fur, with black spots known as rosettes; jaguars with black fur (known as black panthers) also have rosettes, though they are less visible.

### SPOTTING WILDLIFE

Nature viewing with a guide can be thrilling, but it's even more exciting when you start to develop the skills to spot animals on your own.

Birds and other animals will ignore you if you stay fairly still and don't make too much noise: move slowly, avoid sudden movements and keep your voice low. Most animals are well camouflaged, so they're not going to stand out against their natural background. Look for unusual movement in trees, on the ground or on the surface of water. Keep your binoculars around your neck – they're useful only if you can get to them quickly and with little movement. With or without binoculars, a good trick is to scan the horizon rather than peer at one spot.

Listen carefully, because noises in the forest can be very telling. Your best chance of spotting most birds and animals is early in the morning when they're having their early meal. Don't overlook the little things such as bugs, ants, small reptiles or small birds and crabs – they can be some of the most interesting and accessible wildlife on any excursion.

The tayra (or tree otter) is a member of the weasel family and has a dark-brown body, yellowish neck and 1ft-long tail. The coatimundi (or quash) is a rather cute-looking, rusty brown, raccoon-like creature with a long nose and striped tail that it often holds upright when walking. You stand a chance of seeing a coatimundi in daylight on the sides of roads or trails. Also in the raccoon family is the nocturnal kinkajou (or nightwalker), mainly a tree-dweller.

### Aquatic Mammals

West Indian manatees can be seen at river mouths, in coastal lagoons and around the cayes. The sure-fire places to spot these gentle, slow-moving creatures are Southern Lagoon, near Gales Point Manatee village (p115), and Swallow Caye (p144), off Belize City. Manatees are the only vegetarian sea mammals in existence. Just a few hundred survive in Belizean waters. They are threatened by increased boat traffic (you'll see some with scars from propellers) and erosion that threatens their feeding areas. Typically 10ft long and weighing 1000lb, adults eat 100lb to 150lb of vegetation, especially sea grass, daily. For more on manatees, see the boxed text on p145.

### REPTILES

The protected green iguana is a dragon-like vegetarian lizard that can grow to 6ft in length and is often spotted in trees along riverbanks. You can also see it in iguana houses at Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (p114) and the San Ignacio Resort Hotel (p198).

Of Belize's two crocodile species, the American crocodile can live in both saltwater and freshwater, while the smaller Morelet's crocodile lives only in freshwater. Both are on the endangered species list. The American usually grows to 13ft, the Morelet's to 8ft. Belizean crocs tend to stick to prey that's smaller than the average adult human. Still, it's best to keep your distance.

Hawksbill, loggerhead, leatherback and green sea turtles can be seen in the waters of Belize. They live at sea and the females come ashore only to lay their eggs. Sea turtles are victims of poaching and egg hunting, as their eggs are believed by the uninformed to be an aphrodisiac. However, while all sea turtles are endangered, the hawksbill, which was hunted for its shell, is the only one currently protected in Belize. Turtle-viewing trips are organized in the May to October laying season from Gales Point Manatee village (p115).

Up to 60 species of snake inhabit the forests and waters of Belize and, of these, only a handful are dangerous (see p304). The nasties include the (sometimes fatally) poisonous fer-de-lance (commonly known as the

yellow-jaw tommygoff), which is earth toned and a particular threat to farmers when they're clearing areas of vegetation; the coral snake, banded with bright red, yellow and black stripes; the tropical rattlesnake; and the boa constrictor, which kills by constriction but can also give you a mean (but venomless) bite.

### OTHER MARINE LIFE

Belizean waters are home to whale sharks – notably Gladden Spit (p228), near Placencia. Between March and June, most commonly during the 10 days after the full moon, these filter-feeding behemoths come in close to the reef to dine on spawn. These are the world's largest fish (yes, they're sharks not whales), growing up to a whopping 60ft (although the average length is 25ft) and weighing up to 15 tons. Whale sharks can live up to 150 years. They're gray with random light-yellow spots and stripes, and are quite harmless to humans.

Other sharks – nurse, reef, lemontip and hammerhead – and a variety of rays often make appearances around the reefs and islands. They tend to leave divers and snorkelers alone.

Sharing the coral with the larger animals is a kaleidoscope of reef fish, ranging from larger barracuda and groupers to parrotfish, angelfish, butterfly fish and clown fish (they're the ones who like to nestle into the anemones). Belizean waters host nearly every species of fish and coral found in the Caribbean, plus an amazing variety of sponges. The total number of fish and invertebrate species is around 600, and there are over 40 species of coral, from hard elkhorn and staghorn coral (named because they branch like antlers) to gorgonian fans and other soft formations that sway with the current.

Just in case you're wondering what you've just seen, most dive and snorkel boats have laminated fish-identifier cards on board.

### BIRDS

Almost 600 bird species have been identified in Belize, 20% of them winter migrants from North America. Even if you are not a 'bird nerd,' you'll be amazed by the unusual and colorful species that guides will show you on any nature trip.

You're likely to see interesting birds almost anywhere at any time, although February to May are particularly good months in many places. Wetlands, lagoons, forested riverbanks and forest areas with clearings (the setting of

Belize finally got its own birding guide with the publication in 2004 of the comprehensive *Birds of Belize* by H Lee Jones, which is well illustrated by Dana Gardner.

The best all-in-one wildlife guide is *Belize & Northern Guatemala: The Ecotravellers' Wildlife Guide* by Les Beletsky, offering helpful descriptions along with full-color drawings and photographs.

### TOP PICKS – BIRDING DESTINATIONS

- Caracol (p213)
- Caye Caulker (p147)
- Chan Chich Lodge (p171)
- Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235)
- Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (p110)
- El Pilar (p204)
- La Milpa Field Station (p171)
- Lamanai and New River (p167)
- Aguacaliente Wildlife Sanctuary (p252)
- Poustinia Land Art Park (p209)
- Sittee River (p234)

many jungle lodges and Maya ruins) are propitious for observing a variety of birds. Some lodges proudly announce how many hundreds of species have been spotted in their areas: these are likely to be places with a focus on birding, providing reference materials and good guides.

### Sea Birds

Magnificent frigate birds are constantly soaring over the coastline on pointed, prehistoric-looking wings with a span of up to 6ft. They have difficulty taking off from the ground, so their method of hunting is to plummet down and catch fish as they jump from the sea. They often hang out around fisherfolk and other birds so that they can swoop in on discarded or dropped catches. Males have red throats that are displayed during courtship.

Sharing a habitat with the frigate birds is a colony of red-footed boobies living out at Half Moon Caye (p158). They dive from great heights deep into the sea to catch fish. The frigate birds often try to snatch their catch away as they resurface.

### Raptors & Vultures

Raptors usually hunt rodents and small birds. The most common species in Belize include the osprey (look for their huge nests atop houses and telephone posts), peregrine falcon, roadside hawk and American kestrel. Most of these birds of prey are territorial and solitary. The majestic harpy eagle is rarely seen in the wild, but is a resident at the Belize Zoo (p113), as is the ornate hawk eagle, a beautiful large raptor with a black crest, striped tail and mottled breast.

Inland along the sides of the road and flying overhead you'll see large turkey, black and king vultures. Their job is to feast on dead animals. The turkey vulture has a red head, the king has a black-and-white color scheme with a red beak, and the black vulture appears in black and shades of gray.

### Other Well-Known Birds

The beautiful scarlet macaw, a member of the parrot family, is highly endangered. Belize's small population – possibly under 200 – lives most of the year in remote jungles near the Guatemalan border, but from January to March scarlet macaws can be seen at the southern village of Red Bank (p239), where they come to eat fruit.

The jabiru stork is the largest flying bird in the Americas, standing up to 5ft tall and with wingspans of up to 12ft. Many of the 100 or so remaining Belizean jabirus gather in Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (p110) in April and May. They feed by wading in shallows, enjoying fish, frogs, snails and the occasional snake.

Belize's national bird, the keel-billed toucan, is black with a yellow face and neck and is widely distributed around the country. Its huge multicolored bill is very light and almost hollow, enabling it to fly with surprising agility and to reach berries at the end of branches. Toucans like to stay at treetop level and nest in holes in trees.

You'll also have the chance to see (among others) many colorful hummingbirds, kingfishers, motmots, parrots, woodpeckers, tinamous, tanagers and trogons.

### Plants

Belize is home to over 4000 species of flowering plant, including some 700 trees (similar to the total of the USA and Canada combined) and 250 orchids. Nonspecialists can usefully distinguish three chief varieties of forest in the

country: coastal forests (19%), moist, tropical broadleaf forests (68%) and pine and savannah (13%).

### COASTAL FORESTS

Coastal forests comprise both the mangrove stands that grow along much of the shoreline and the littoral forests slightly further inland. Mangroves serve many useful purposes as fish nurseries, hurricane barriers and shoreline stabilizers, and they are credited with creating the cayes: when coral grows close enough to the water surface, mangrove spores carried by the wind take root on it. Mangrove debris eventually creates solid ground cover, inviting other plants to take root and eventually attracting animal life. There are four common species of mangrove: red, buttonwood, white and black.

Trees of the littoral forests typically have tough, moisture-retaining leaves. They include the coconut palm, the Norfolk Island pine, the sea grape and the poisonwood, whose sap causes blistering, swelling and itching of the skin, as well as (happily) the gumbo-limbo, with its flaky, shredding bark that acts as an antidote to poisonwood rashes! These forests often provide a key refuge for migrating birds. The sandy bays off the coast are covered in sea grass, including turtle grass, manatee sea grass and duckweed sea grass.

### TROPICAL BROADLEAF FOREST

Tropical broadleaf grows on thin clay soils where the principal nutrients come not from the soil but from the biomass of the forest – that is, debris from plants and animals. Buttressed trunks are a common phenomenon here. These forests support a huge diversity not only of plants but also of animal life.

One of the fascinating elements of these forests is their natural layering. Most have at least three layers: ground cover (a ground or herb layer); a

The tropical broadleaf is often called rainforest, although technically only far southwestern Belize receives enough rain to officially support rainforest.

### MAYA MEDICINE

The Maya have not only long depended on the forest for food and shelter, but also for hygiene and healing. These days in Belize, tour guides are quick to recommend an herbal remedy for everything from stomach ills to sexual failures. But there are only a few remaining healers who are skilled and knowledgeable in the science of Maya medicine. If you are curious about this holistic and natural approach to medicine, consult a professional (eg at the Chaa Creek Rainforest Medicine Trail, p207, or the Maseval Forest Garden in Bullet Tree Falls, p202). Here is a sampler of what might be prescribed:

- **Bay cedar** (*Guazuma ulmifolia*) The bark is boiled and used to calm the stomach and to treat dysentery.
- **Cockspur** (*Acacia cornigera*) The tea from cockspur thorns is used to treat acne, while the bark can be used to treat some snake bites.
- **Cohune palm** (*Orbignya cohune*) The oil is used for cooking and as a skin moisturizer. The shell was used for fuel, as charcoal.
- **Guava** (*Psidium guajava*) Boil the bark of a guava and drink the tea as an antidote for dysentery or diarrhea.
- **Gumbo-limbo tree** (*Bursera simaruba*) The gumbo-limbo tree always grows near poisonwood, which causes an itchy rash similar to poison ivy. The sticky inner bark of the gumbo-limbo is effective treatment for the poisonwood rash.
- **Skunk root** (*Petiveria alliacea*) The skunk root – boiled into a tea – is an effective way to treat stomach ulcers.

Source: *Rainforest Remedies: One Hundred Healing Herbs of Belize*, by Rosita Arvigo & Michael Balick

**BELIZE'S WORLD HERITAGE SITE**

In 1996 Unesco designated the **Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System** as a World Heritage site. The World Heritage listing covers seven separate reef, island and atoll areas, not all of which include bits of the barrier reef. The seven sites (in the following list) were recognized for demonstrating a unique array of reef types (fringing, barrier and atoll) and a classic example of reef evolution; for their exceptional natural beauty and pristine nature; and for being an important habitat for internationally threatened species, including marine turtles, the West Indian manatee and the American crocodile.

- Bacalar Chico National Park & Marine Reserve (p126)
- Blue Hole Natural Monument (p157)
- Half Moon Caye Natural Monument (p158)
- Glover's Reef Marine Reserve (p227)
- South Water Caye Marine Reserve (p226)
- Laughing Bird Caye National Park (p228)
- Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve (p247)

canopy layer formed from the crowns of the forest's tallest trees; and, in between, shorter subcanopy or understory trees. Throughout the layers grow hanging vines and epiphytes, or 'air plants,' which are moss and ferns that live on other trees but aren't parasites. This is also the habitat for over 300 species of orchids, including the national flower, the black orchid.

The national tree in Belize is the majestic mahogany, known for its handsome hardwood. Also important is the ceiba (the sacred tree of the Maya), with its tall gray trunk and fluffy kapok down around its seeds. The broad-canopied guanacaste (or tubroos) is another tree that can grow over 100ft high, with a wide, straight trunk and light wood used for dugout canoes (its broad seed pods coil up into what look like giant, shriveled ears). The strangler fig has tendrils and branches that surround a host tree until the unfortunate host dies. The flowering calophyllum, sometimes called the Santa Maria tree, is used for shipbuilding, while its resin has medicinal uses.

**PINE & SAVANNAH**

The drier lowland areas inland of Belize City and the sandy areas of the north are designated as lowland savannah and pine forest. Growth here is mostly savannah grasses and Honduran and Caribbean pine, as well as Paurotis palm, giant stands of bamboo and some oak and calabash.

The Mountain Pine Ridge (p211) is a fascinating phenomenon. As you ascend these uplands, the forest changes abruptly from tropical broadleaf to submontane pine, due to a transition to drier, sandier soils. Predominant species include Mexican white pine, Pino amarillo (or Mexican yellow pine) and Hartweg's pine.

**NATIONAL PARKS & PROTECTED AREAS**

Just over 40% of Belizean territory, a little over 3600 sq miles, is under official protection of one kind or another. Belize's protected areas fall into six main categories:

**Forest reserve** Protects forests, controls timber extraction and conserves soil, water and wildlife resources.

**Marine reserve** Protects and controls extraction of marine and freshwater species; also focuses on research, recreation and education.

**National park** Preserves nationally significant nature and scenery for the benefit of the public.

**Natural monument** Protects special natural features for education, research and public appreciation.

**Nature reserve** Maintains natural environments and processes in an undisturbed state for scientific study, monitoring, education and maintenance of genetic resources; not usually open to the general public.

**Wildlife sanctuary** Protects nationally significant species, groups of species, biotic communities or physical features.

**ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

The Belize government and the populace recognize that their forests and reefs are natural treasures that need to be preserved – not only for their intrinsic ecological value, but also for attracting tourism. Early on, the government developed a large network of national park and reserve areas, but these are only as inviolable as the degree to which the community is able to protect them. Belizean natural heritage is threatened by lack of management, lack of money and the ever-present temptation to sell out to developers, prospectors and other investors.

**Ecotourism**

A simple definition of ecotourism is tourism that benefits – or at least minimizes its impact on – the environment. This means small-scale and slow-moving, usually with a focus on investigating the natural environment without disturbing it. Belize practically invented the concept. Its ecolodges allow guests to live in luxury but also in harmony with the creatures and plants in their midst. Its educational tours and activities allow travelers to learn about the forest and the reef without harming these fragile ecosystems. Conscientious enterprises minimize their environmental impact by employing alternative and renewable energy sources; avoiding destruction of surrounding habitats; effectively managing waste and employing recycling programs; and using locally grown produce whenever possible. Dedicated entrepreneurs also give back to the community by employing local people and investing in local causes, thus sharing the wealth.

Ecotourism depends on a precarious balance: welcoming tourists, but not too many of them; allowing access to natural sights, but not too much access; maintaining an infrastructure to support the visitors, but not having too much infrastructure. Belize is constantly struggling to maintain this balance, with varying degrees of success.

The recent increase in cruise-ship traffic in Belizean waters has shocked and outraged many conservationists and concerned citizens, who see the huge numbers of tourists disturbing wildlife, overwhelming the infrastructure and even threatening the tourism industry (see p22 for more).

Development along the coast – catering to the growing demands of tourists – continues unchecked. A 2007 study suggests that as much as 80% of coastal property is foreign-owned, with construction planned or underway. Construction of buildings and pavement of the roads on Ambergris Caye has dramatically changed the aesthetics and the atmosphere of that island, once a sleepy outpost and now a destination for package-tourists and partiers. In a recent struggle, San Pedro developers petitioned to eliminate the protected status of the southern portion of Bacalar Chico National Park & Marine Reserve (p126). The petition, thankfully, was rejected.

Even on Caye Caulker – which somehow seems immune to the changes sweeping the nation – snorkel guides have noticed that the increased tourism can lead to overfishing, which depletes the reef (see boxed text, p146).

Of course, there is no hard and fast rule about how many tourists are too many or how much development is too much. Many Belizeans compare their

*Jaguar: One Man's Struggle to Establish the World's First Jaguar Preserve* is the story of American zoologist Alan Rabinowitz' efforts to set up what has become the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235).

The Belize Audubon Society's website ([www.belizeaudubon.org](http://www.belizeaudubon.org)) is a fine resource for information on protected areas and other environmental topics.

**BELIZE'S PROTECTED AREAS AT A GLANCE**

Protected Area	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit
Actun Tunichil Muknal (p191)	spectacular cave with ancient Maya sacrificial remains	caving	year-round
Bacalar Chico National Park & Marine Reserve (p126)	northern Ambergris Caye barrier reef & surrounding waters	diving, snorkeling, birding & wildlife watching	year-round
Blue Hole Natural Monument (p157)	400ft-deep ocean-filled sinkhole, home to sharks	diving, snorkeling	Dec-Aug
Caracol Archaeological Reserve (p213)	Belize's biggest & greatest ancient Maya city	exploring ruins, birding	year-round
Caye Caulker Marine Reserve (p144)	barrier reef reserve with plentiful marine life	diving, snorkeling	year-round
Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235)	large rainforest reserve established for jaguars, with huge range of wildlife	hiking, wildlife & plant observation, river-tubing	Dec-May
Community Baboon Sanctuary (p108)	forest sanctuary for black howler monkeys	wildlife watching, birding, horseback riding	year-round
Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (p110)	wetland area with huge bird population	birding, walking, canoeing, horseback riding	Feb-May
Gales Point Wildlife Sanctuary (p115)	inland lagoons with Belize's colony of manatees	manatee & turtle observation, birding, fishing, sailing	year-round
Gladden Spit & Silk Cayes Marine Reserve (p228)	barrier reef & island reserve visited by whale sharks	diving, snorkeling, kayaking	Mar-Jun
Glover's Reef Marine Reserve (p227)	beautiful atoll with coral-filled lagoon & seas swarming with marine life	diving, snorkeling, swimming, fishing, sailing, kayaking	Dec-Aug
Guanacaste National Park (p187)	small forest park centered on huge guanacaste tree	birding, swimming, plant identification	year-round
Half Moon Caye Natural Monument (p158)	lush bird-sanctuary atoll island with spectacular underwater walls offshore	diving, snorkeling, birding, kayaking	Dec-Aug
Hol Chan Marine Reserve (p126)	waters off Ambergris Caye with the famous Shark Ray Alley	diving, snorkeling	year-round

country to Cozumel or Cancun and they are proud of the way that ecotourism is preserving their paradise. On Ambergris, few locals would stop the construction of condos and resorts that is taking place up and down the coast. Only the expats – who came to Belize to ‘escape civilization’ – complain about the rampant development. Locals, by contrast, appreciate the influx of cash into the economy – the jobs, the roads, the restaurants – not to mention the constant flow of tourists who keep bringing money to spend.

**Deforestation**

Despite the impressive numbers about the area of protected territories, deforestation in Belize is occurring at an alarming rate. Agriculture and aquaculture, development and illegal harvesting all contribute to the felling of the forests, which is taking place at a rate of 2.3% per year (twice the rate of Central America overall).

This contradiction is a result of poor management and monitoring. Protection requires money and even at the best of times Belizean governments are short of cash. Underfunding means understaffing, which doesn't help the fight against poaching and illegal extraction. Many protected areas are dependent on funding and management from local and international NGOs; others go unchecked.

Protected Area	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit
Laughing Bird Caye National Park (p228)	island on unusual faro reef in waters full of marine life	diving, snorkeling	Dec-Aug
Mayflower Bocawina National Park (p229)	rainforest park with hills, waterfalls, howler monkeys & hundreds of bird species	hiking, birding, swimming	year-round
Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (p114)	small private sanctuary on savannah & tropical forest	birding, wildlife watching, canoeing, caving	year-round
Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve (p211)	upland area with rare pine forests & many waterfalls	walking, swimming, birding, horseback riding	year-round
Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve (p186)	stretch of Caves Branch River running through caverns	river-tubing	year-round
Port Honduras Marine Reserve (p247)	inshore islands & coastal waters important for marine life	diving, snorkeling	Dec-May
Rio Bravo Conservation & Management Area (p169)	large rainforest reserve with great wildlife diversity	birding, wildlife watching, trail hikes, canoeing	year-round
St Herman's Blue Hole National Park (p218)	small rainforest park with cave & swimming hole	swimming, caving, hiking, birding	year-round
Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve (p247)	beautiful barrier reef islets with healthy coral & abundant marine life	diving, fishing, kayaking, snorkeling, swimming	Dec-May
Shipstern Nature Reserve (p180)	wetlands & rare semideciduous hardwood forests with diverse wildlife, including wood-stork colony	wildlife observation	year-round
South Water Caye Marine Reserve (p226 & p226)	large reserve encompassing parts of barrier reef & inshore islands	diving, snorkeling, fishing, swimming, birding, kayaking	Dec-May
Swallow Caye Wildlife Sanctuary (p144)	small island with permanent manatee population in surrounding waters	manatee observation	year-round
Temash-Sarstoon National Park (p255)	rainforests, wetlands & rivers with huge variety of wildlife	wildlife observation, walks, boat trips	Dec-May

There is a perception in Belize that illegal Guatemalan immigrants are responsible for many of these incursions into protected areas. The ongoing territorial dispute between Guatemala and Belize exacerbates the situation, as many Guatemalan peasants believe they have a right to hunt and harvest there.

**Oil**

The discovery of sweet crude oil in Belize in 2002 caused dollar signs to start flashing inside the minds of Belizean officials and international prospectors. At least 17 oil companies obtained licenses for exploration all around the country, sometimes without conducting any sort of environmental impact survey or community involvement campaign. Sadly, there is significant overlap between the petroleum map and the protected areas map, so the prospects for striking it rich are threatening the sanctity of those spots.

In 2006 explorers in Spanish Lookout (p192) found what they were looking for: the first oil field with commercially viable quantities. Under pressure from local communities and conservationists, the government of Belize responded by instituting a 40% tax on oil production profits, declaring that the ‘petroleum fund’ would be used to improve education, fight poverty and strengthen the Belizean dollar. Oil companies balked at this, of course, and it still remains to be seen exactly how much will be paid and to whom.

**TOP PICKS – ECOLOGES**

- Capricorn Resort (p136), Ambergris Caye
- Driftwood Lodge (p152) Caye Caulker
- Calypso Beach Retreat (p159), Long Caye
- Chan Chich Lodge (p171), Orange Walk District
- Cerros Beach Inn (p179), Copper Bank
- Pook's Hill Lodge (p191), Cayo District
- Lodge at Chaa Creek (p208), Cayo District
- Thatch Caye Resort (p228), Central Cayes
- Hickatee Cottages (p248), Punta Gorda
- Cotton Tree Lodge (p257), the Deep South

Conservationists fear the environmental degradation that is sure to result from further oil exploration and extraction. At the very least, they argue, the government of Belize should utilize a percentage of oil income to establish a fund for environmental protection.

**Environmental NGOs**

Many environmental organizations are active in Belize, providing funding, monitoring protected areas and conducting research related to biodiversity and sustainability. Environmental organizations of interest to travelers include the following:

**Belize Audubon Society** (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-5004; www.belizeaudubon.org; 12 Fort St, Belize City) Prominent NGO involved in the management of eight protected areas and campaigning on environmental issues.

**Friends of Nature** (☎ 523-3377) Placencia-based NGO co-managing Laughing Bird Caye National Park (p228) and Gladden Spit & Silk Cayes Marine Reserve (p228).

**Oceanic Society** (☎ 220-4256; www.oceanic-society.org; Blackbird Caye) Paying volunteers can assist with natural history research, collecting data and documenting the incredibly diverse wildlife (manatees, crocodiles, bottle-nosed dolphins and hawksbill sea turtles among others) that lives in the Turneffe Islands (p156).

**Programme for Belize** (Map pp96-7; ☎ 227-5616; www.pfbelize.org; 1 Eyre St, Belize City) Owns and manages Rio Bravo Conservation & Management Area (p169).

**Toledo Institute for Development & Environment** (TIDE; ☎ 722-2274; www.tidebelize.org; Mile 1 San Antonio Rd, Punta Gorda) Punta Gorda-based organization involved in managing the Port Honduras Marine Reserve (p247) and other projects.

**Wildlife Conservation Society** (in USA ☎ 718-220 5100; www.wcs.org) US-based international conservation body involved in research and conservation at Glover's Reef (p227).

# Belize Outdoors

If you want it, Belize has got it. The extraordinary array of national parks and wildlife and marine reserves provides an incredible stage for the adventure traveler.

Ever since the days of Jacques Cousteau, Belize has been famous for the spectacular diving and snorkeling along its 160-mile barrier reef and around its coral atolls. More recently, Belize has blossomed as a perfect place to pursue other saltwater activities, too: kayakers, sailors and windsurfers whiz across the surface of those crystal-clear Caribbean waters, and anglers from around the world are starting to discover that there are other fish in the sea (not to mention the rivers, estuaries and lagoons).

Inland, the cool waters of Belize's network of rivers provide plenty of refreshing swimming holes, as well as jungle-clad routes for canoeing and river-tubing. Some of these waterways wind their way through caves, adding a little extra adventure to your canoeing or tubing trip.

Out of the water, the Maya Mountains and the dense forests provide an incredible, exotic setting for jungle treks and mountain bike excursions. Bird and wildlife enthusiasts will be wowed by the amazing array of life that inhabits this tiny country. And, of course, if your idea of 'outdoor activities' is sunbathing on a sandy beach, you can do that, too.

Most of the outdoor activities in Belize are available year-round, although some seasons are better than others. In general it's preferable to avoid the wettest months (June to November in most parts of the country). There is no shortage of activity-oriented lodges and resorts, as well as capable, knowledgeable guides who are eager to facilitate your Belizean adventure.

## DIVING & SNORKELING

For divers and snorkelers Belize is a world-class destination. The world's second-longest barrier reef parallels the country's entire coastline from north to south.

Although tourism is big business in Belize, the development of the diving industry has been slower than in other Caribbean destinations. This is good news for divers, as it means fewer people and more pristine reefs. Scattered among more than 450 cays and small islands, the sites provide an amazing variety of diving. Here you will find dazzling coral reefs, some of the most spectacular walls in the Caribbean region and the sensational Blue Hole (p157), first made famous on TV by Jacques Cousteau and the *Calypso*.

### PUTTING DOWN THE GUIDE

No, we're not talking about insulting the local guy who is leading you through the rainforest. We're talking about closing this book that you have in your hands and leaving it behind. We're talking about following your own path, discovering your own dive site and paddling up your own stream. It is bound to be an adventure more memorable than the one you'll find along the tourist trail.

We at Lonely Planet are dedicated to providing comprehensive coverage of every country and region that we research, but we recognize the sometimes detrimental effect of places being 'discovered.' Even more than that, we are dedicated to creating a sustainable global traveler culture, and we recognize the universal benefit of 'discovery.'

So put your guidebook down for a day or – even better – a week. Explore the places that are not covered in the pages of this guidebook. And discover your own lonely planet.

The diving and snorkeling in Belize can be divided into four main areas – the Northern Cayes, Central Cayes, Southern Cayes and offshore atolls – each of which offers a variation. Some sites are particularly suited to snorkeling and free diving, but whatever your level of experience or taste, you can find a location that will allow you to do both.

The majority of dive sites are accessible only by boat. A few dives can be reached from the shore on Tobacco Caye, South Water Caye and the atolls. Most operators offer two-tank dive trips in the morning and afternoon, plus a night dive, which means it is usually possible to do four or five dives a day from your island base. Choosing a live-aboard boat gives you the opportunity for up to five dives a day if you have the energy.

### Northern Cayes

The two main centers in this northern sector of the barrier reef are Ambergris Caye (p126) and Caye Caulker (p145), both of which are a short flight or boat ride from Belize City. Ambergris Caye is the largest offshore island and the most developed, so it attracts most of the visiting divers. Many choose Ambergris for its variety and quality of accommodations and nightlife, though it is pretty laid-back compared with other Caribbean destinations. The hub of diving activity is the town of San Pedro, at the southern end of the island. Many of the accommodations that are strung along the shoreline have their own dive shops on site.

Caye Caulker, a few miles to the south of Ambergris Caye, is smaller and less developed. It is a popular choice for travelers on a budget and there are a few dive shops. It is also possible to dive these reefs and the atolls on a daily basis from a base in Belize City (p95), where there are currently two major dive operators.

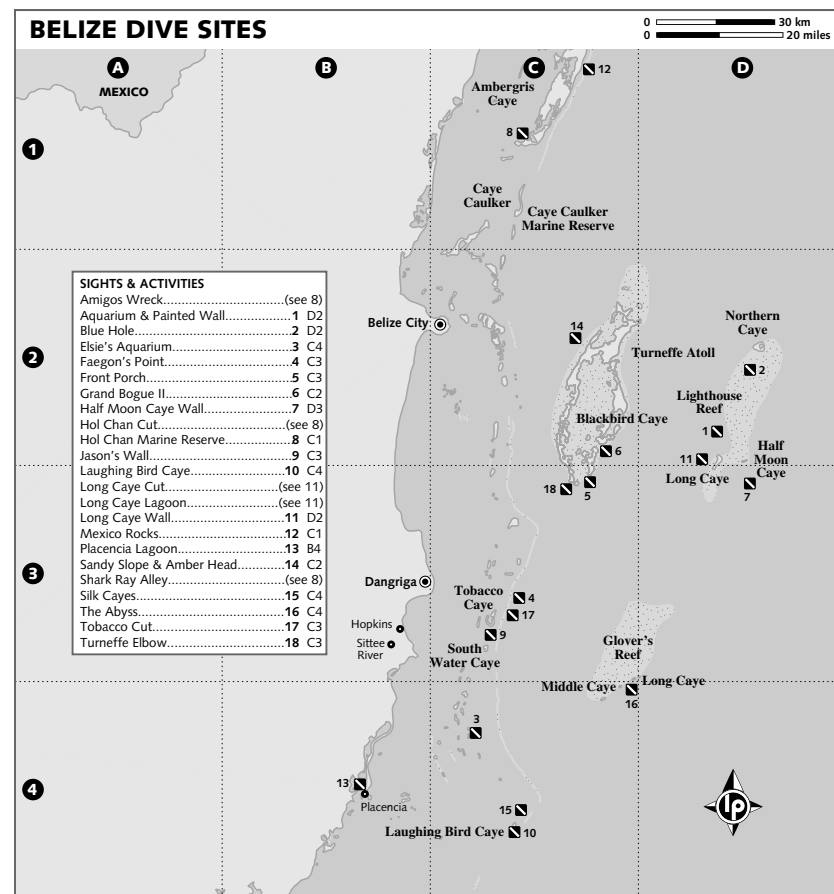
The barrier reef is only a few minutes by boat from either island. Diving here is quick and easy, though visibility is not always prime and the water can be somewhat surging. Some divers will put up with a longer boat ride to get better visibility and drop-off clarity. Most of the dive shops offer similar deals in terms of the sites they visit and the prices of their packages. All of the dive shops take boats out to the offshore atolls.

At the southern end of Ambergris Caye is Hol Chan Marine Reserve (p126), which was established more than two decades ago. The profusion of marine life is a testament to the reserve's success. A lot of Hol Chan Marine Reserve is shallow and in many cases the sites are better for snorkeling, but divers have the opportunity to explore a sunken ship at Amigos Wreck (p131). While the reef is fishier in the south of this section, the north holds more formations, with deep spur-and-groove cuts and interesting terrain. See p130 for more information on the best dive and snorkel sites in the Northern Cayes.

#### LIVE-ABOARD BOATS

If you are a truly dedicated diver wanting to maximize the number of dives during your trip, then choosing a live-aboard boat is the only way to go. Your 'hotel' moves with you to the dive site, which gives you the opportunity to dive four or five times a day, including night dives. The boats that operate in Belizean waters are comfortable and well equipped and will even pamper you with hot showers on the dive deck and warm towels to wrap up in. If you do not need dry land and nightlife, then this is definitely the way to see the best that the barrier reef has to offer. All boats depart from Belize City and operators organize all ground transfers for you. Live-aboard boats in Belize include the *Belize Aggressor II* ([www.aggressor.com](http://www.aggressor.com)), *Sun Dancer II* ([www.peterhughes.com](http://www.peterhughes.com)) and *Nekton Pilot* ([www.nektoncruises.com](http://www.nektoncruises.com)).

Undertaking a search for the illusive jaguar shark, Bill Murray stars in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, a hilarious parody of Jacques Cousteau.



### Central Cayes

Close to the big city but far enough away to be another world apart, the small isles and resorts on the Central Cayes are idyllic and convenient for barrier reef divers. They're normally not as busy as the reefs further north; it is quite possible to go the whole day and not see another dive boat.

Dangriga (p220), Hopkins (p229) and Sittee River (p234) provide fine shore bases for exploring a range of dive sites on a daily basis. A boat ride to the dive sites from the mainland is about 30 minutes on good days. Beautiful on sunny, calm days with sandy flats, reefs and old staghorns peeking above the surface, the dives are done in the deep passes in the middle of the reef. Near here there are nine passes or cuts; the dive involves a descent to between 35ft and 55ft and then a swim along the deep drop-off looking for denizens.

If your primary interest is diving, depart from Dangriga for the offshore resorts on the Central Cayes, including Tobacco Caye and South Water Caye. Tobacco Caye (p226) is a tiny 5-acre island only 10 miles from Dangriga. Dotted with rustic hotels and guesthouses, it offers a low-key atmosphere. This caye sits right on the edge of the barrier reef, provides

There is only one decompression chamber in Belize, on Ambergris Caye. You will be asked to support it by donating BZ\$2 for every tank used. Be sure to use a decompression computer and dive well within safe limits.



excellent snorkeling and is one of the few beach-diving locations in Belize. There is a variety of reef topographies to be explored, ranging from shallow-water coral gardens to spur-and-groove formations, and, of course, the drop-offs from the reef edge.

A little further south, toward South Water Caye (p226), the spur and grooves change to what is locally known as a double-wall reef system. Here there are two separate systems, the first of which slopes sharply seaward from depths of 40ft down to 120ft. This is followed by a wide sand channel with isolated coral outcrops and pillars, and then a second coral reef rising to 60ft before it plunges over the wall beyond scuba diving depths.

The reef systems in this area are considered unique, and Tobacco Caye has been the base for an **Earthwatch** ([www.earthwatch.org](http://www.earthwatch.org)) reef-study project for several years; in fact, both Tobacco Caye and South Water Caye are designated as marine reserves. South Water Caye is a little larger and offers more expensive accommodations, but also sits on the crest of the barrier reef, offering beach diving and spectacular snorkeling.

### Southern Cayes

The Southern Cayes are developing into a diving hot spot. The sandy Placencia peninsula (p237) has some of the best beaches in Belize, while laid-back restaurants, colorful beach huts and even some five-star Hollywood-name hideaways have been erected among the tiny Garifuna villages. Most of the swanky spots are being developed north of town, while budget hotels and guesthouses are still on the beachfront. Dive shops are scattered around town, as well as being connected with specific resorts. Divers will find the waters full of marine life and the reefs slightly less crowded than the popular northern sites.

The big draw here is the 13-mile-long Placencia Lagoon, an incubation area for virtually every creature found on the outer reef. Manatees and

Part of a set of three, *Reef Creature Identification and Reef Fish: Florida, Caribbean, Bahamas* by Paul Humann and Ned DeLoach is invaluable to snorkelers or divers wishing to identify marine life.

### LEARNING TO DIVE

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to swim along a spur-and-groove reef system, to tunnel through underwater caves or to peer over a drop-off into the blue and watch schools of fish cruise by? Your trip to Belize is a great opportunity to find out. Learning to dive is not as difficult as you might think, and most of the larger dive centers offer 'try dives' to see if the sport appeals to you.

The PADI system is now the most popular certification program worldwide. The first step is the basic Open Water qualification, which usually requires three days of instruction. It is possible to complete the full three-day program while you are in Belize, or you might undertake your basic theory training close to home and complete your open-water dives in Belize under the PADI referral system. You can hire everything from fins and mask to a full scuba kit, which saves on baggage weight and provides the opportunity to test different equipment before investing in your own.

Belize's best spots for novice divers include the following:

- **Mexico Rocks** off Ambergris Caye (p130)
- **Hol Chan Cut** south of Ambergris Caye (p131)
- **Half Moon Caye Wall** in Lighthouse Reef (p157)
- **Faegon's Point** and **Tobacco Cut** near Tobacco Caye (p226)
- **Jason's Wall** or **Elsie's Aquarium** near South Water Caye (p226)
- **Long Caye Lagoon** and **Long Caye Cut** at Glover's Reef (p227)
- Any site near **Laughing Bird Caye** (p228)

### RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimize your disturbance of marine animals. *Never* ride on the backs of turtles.

bottlenosed dolphins come to mate, feed and raise their young in these protected waters. Myriad fish do the same, and juveniles can be seen in profusion. Located between the mainland and the Placencia peninsula, it is not yet designated as a protected area and there is some development taking place along the inner banks.

The northernmost point of this reef area is Gladden Spit (p228). Blue-water action takes the form of whale sharks, bull sharks, hammerheads, dolphins and shoaling fish, all due to the seasonal spawning of cubera snapper. Looking for whale sharks in blue water is hard work, however, and not always fruitful. The April through June spawning season (about 12 miles off the barrier reef) is always exciting, with plenty of fish aggregations, along with their predators. Nurse sharks stack one atop another in sandy channels and big groups rise up from the depths.

All year round, dives can produce sightings of spotted eagle rays, turtles, moray eels, southern stingrays, large grouper, barracuda, king mackerel, dolphins and several shark species, as well as many smaller tropical reef fish and invertebrates. Manta rays appear with more frequency during winter months when the water temperatures drop, starting in December and January.

The reef table here is much wider and so it takes a little longer to reach the barrier reef by boat; however, the numerous islands with large expanses of coral reef and connecting channels between them are a bonus, providing a host of alternative dive and snorkeling sites on the way to/from the reef.

### LAUGHING BIRD CAYE FARO REEF SYSTEM

Laughing Bird Caye appears to be all that is left of another submerged atoll, its approximately 2.5 acres of land seemingly diminishing with passing storms and wave action. The caye got its name from the many laughing gulls that once nested here, but most of their nesting areas have since been swallowed

Dedicated to diving in Belize, [www.scubadivingbelize.com](http://www.scubadivingbelize.com) is very useful for detailed information about specific areas and dive sites.

by the rising sea. Pelicans and osprey still use the island as nesting grounds, as do sea turtles. Laughing Bird Caye (p228) is one of Belize's national parks and a part of the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System World Heritage site (see p64), which includes the island and surrounding reefs.

Within the faro is a system of patch reefs and coral ridges boasting luxuriant hard-coral growth and a variety of sponges and soft corals. The tremendous diversity of fish and invertebrate life in the inshore waters around the island make them ideal for both snorkeling and diving. There are several dive sites at the north and south of the island, all with basically the same marine life and terrain, although in the north it is possible to go a bit deeper.

### Offshore Atolls

There are only four atolls in the Caribbean and three of them are right here in Belize. All three – Turneffe Atoll, Lighthouse Reef and Glover's Reef – lie offshore from the barrier reef, rising from great depths to just a few feet above sea level. You can dive them on day trips from the main islands, choose one of the atoll-based resorts or take a live-aboard boat, which concentrates on diving the atolls.

#### TURNEFFE ATOLL

Turneffe Atoll (p156) is the largest of the offshore trio and comprises a series of islands that runs north-south. Here you will find an area dominated by purely mangrove islands, where juveniles of every marine species are protected until they make their way into the wider waters. Sand flats, shallow gardens and life-filled walls are all highlights of Turneffe dives.

The Elbow is the most beloved Turneffe dive site, with its enormous schools of pelagic fish and pods of dolphins. Visibility varies widely depending mostly on the wind direction. A lot of wave action can stir things up in the mangroves, carrying nutrients into the water and reducing visibility. But more often, the deep water around the atolls guarantees excellent visibility and some of the most thrilling wall-diving you'll find anywhere.

#### SURF SAFARI BIG FIVE

While African adventurers have long had their famed 'Big 5' list of must-see big game animals, the Caribbean now boasts its own version for those who prefer a surf safari. For the wet set, the Big 5 includes a selection of the coral reef's most notorious predators. With a couple of trips out to the reef and a little luck, you should be able to complete this checklist. In fact, one visit to Shark Ray Alley (p131) will get you nearly halfway home.

- **Shark** – even the nurse shark that you are most likely to encounter will on first sight cause a Spielbergian shiver, but that should soon pass after you watch your guide tickle its belly.
- **Stingray** – these demons of the deep come armed with venomous spike-tipped tails. The spotted eagle ray is the bigger and badder ray; it cruises the coral in Belize and is more rare to see.
- **Barracuda** – reaching 6ft in length and possessing powerful jaws with multiple rows of razor-sharp teeth, meet the pit bull of the reef, capable of a thrusting propulsion when it makes a deadly strike.
- **Moray eel** – easily concealing their 5ft-long bodies in a dark pocket of the reef or a crevice in the sea floor, these elongated serpents lie in wait for a quick-strike ambush on passing prey.
- **Octopus** – with eight arms to hold you, the most cunning of the reef's predators is armed with a sharp beak for biting into fish and suction cups to pry open shellfish. It is also prey for barracudas, sharks and eels, which it eludes in a cloud of ink.

*Diving & Snorkeling Belize* by Mark Webster (Lonely Planet) describes 66 of the best dive and snorkeling sites in the Northern Cayes, Central Cayes, Southern Cayes and offshore atolls.

#### SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba diving, skin diving or snorkeling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognized scuba diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local trained divers deal with these considerations.

The northwest site moorings such as Sandy Slope and Amber Head normally sit in 35ft to 40ft of water and the reef becomes a spur-and-groove system that leads to a vertical wall. This drops to a sandy shelf around 100ft to 120ft at most sites, then falls off again past sport-diving limits. The northwest side is protected from the occasional strong eastern and southeastern winds that sometimes blow in.

When the wind shifts to the north-northwest, blowing down from the US Gulf, conditions are better to dive on the east side, at sites such as Grand Bogue II and Front Porch. This reef top and wall starts a bit deeper, in the 40ft to 60ft range, and is known for being less of a slope and quite sheer in some spots. The reef top also has interesting swim-throughs and some tight spurs and grooves.

Being the closest atoll to the coast, Turneffe is a quick trip from Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker, although there are also resorts on Blackbird Caye (part of Turneffe Atoll; see p156).

#### LIGHTHOUSE REEF

At 50 miles offshore, Lighthouse Reef (p157) is the atoll that lies furthest to the east. Lighthouse Reef is probably the best-known atoll in Belize and it is certainly the most popular, due to the Blue Hole Natural Monument (p157). While this icon of Belize diving makes the atoll a major attraction, it is really the stunning walls, many swim-throughs and superb blue water that make it a favorite with both longtime, experienced Belize divers and complete novices.

Lighthouse Reef is home to Half Moon Caye Natural Monument (p158), a national park managed by the Belize Audubon Society, where a colony of rare red-booted boobies can be observed up close. There are a few fantastic dive sites nearby, such as Aquarium and Painted Wall. Other sites in the vicinity include the coral-covered Long Caye Wall.

The easiest way to see the sites and sights of Lighthouse Reef is via a live-aboard boat. The commute from site to site is minimal, and divers can take advantage of early morning dives and fascinating night dives. There are a few small lodges on Long Caye (p158), while camping is allowed on Half Moon Caye.

*Three Adventures: Galapagos, Titicaca, the Blue Holes* is a classic book about Jacques Cousteau's underwater explorations.

**GLOVER'S REEF**

In southern Belize, divers will find the third of the Belizean atolls. Of the three, Glover's Reef (p227) sees the least amount of human contact and remains largely unexplored. Glover's Reef Atoll was named after the 17th-century pirate John Glover, who used the remote islands as a base for raids against treasure-laden Spanish galleons heading to and from the Bay Islands of Honduras.

First recognized as a bird sanctuary in 1954, it has long been atop the conservation list, getting various conservation designations in 1978 before finally being declared a complete marine reserve in 1993, then a Unesco World Heritage site in 1996. There is a marine research station on Middle Caye and the remains of an ancient Maya settlement are being studied on Long Caye.

Located about an hour's boat ride from Hopkins or Placencia, Glover's Reef rises from abyssal depths of well over 2000ft; indeed, a dive site located midway between Long Caye and Middle Caye is known as The Abyss. Oval in shape, it is comprised of more than 700 patch reefs within a 100-sq-mile lagoon. Just to the south is one of the Caribbean's deepest valleys, where depths reach 10,000ft.

There are several rustic outpost resorts here for divers and fishers, each occupying its own island and offering an eco-friendly existence. Otherwise, there is day-boat diving from Dangriga, Hopkins, Sittee River, Tobacco Caye and South Water Caye, and live-aboard boats occasionally cruise this far south.

The chance of seeing dolphins, mantas and whale sharks keep adventurous divers coming back for more. The spectacular walls and hard-coral formations are just a few minutes from the islands that fringe the eastern side of the atoll. If you get the chance, dive the west side of the atoll as well to explore some wonderful swim-throughs and caves.

**FISHING**

This angler's paradise is home to 160 miles of barrier reef, hundreds of square miles of flats and dozens of jungle-lined rivers and lagoons – all of which are teeming with a great variety of fish. The best months are May through July, with their hot sunny weather, though every species has its ideal time and place. Spin fishing, fly-fishing and trolling can all be enjoyed year-round.

Tarpon, snook and jacks inhabit the estuaries, inlets and river mouths, while bonefish, permit and barracuda are found out in the lagoons and flats. The coral reefs support grouper, snapper and jacks, and the deeper waters beyond are home to sailfish, marlin, pompano, tuna and bonito. The flats off the cayes and mainland raise realistic hopes of the angler's 'Grand Slam' of permit, tarpon and bonefish all in one day. Catch-and-release is the norm for these fish and for most snook. Check with your guide or hotel about the regulations for your area and season.

The most popular fishing bases are in the Northern Cayes, especially San Pedro (p128) and Caye Caulker (p147), but there are also fishing outfits in Sarteneja (p179) and Belize City (p95).

For tarpon and bonefish, Belize's southern waters, from Placencia to Punta Gorda, are gaining popularity. It's easy to charter a boat in places such as Glover's Reef (p227), Hopkins (p230), Placencia (p238) and Punta Gorda (p247).

River fishing for big tarpon, snook, cubera snapper and 35lb to 100lb jefish is also practicable year-round. The Sibun and Belize Rivers and Black Creek are the most frequently fished rivers, but the Deep, Monkey, Temash and Sarstoon Rivers in the south are good, too.

Destinations Belize (www.destinationsbelize.com) is full of useful information on fishing in Belize, including fish guides, tide charts and fishing location descriptions.

**TOP PICKS – SNORKEL SITES****Northern Cayes**

- Hol Chan Cut (p131)
- Shark Ray Alley (p131)
- Mexico Rocks (p130)

**Central Cayes**

- South Water Caye (p226)
- Tobacco Caye (p226)

**Southern Cayes**

- Laughing Bird Caye (p228)
- Silk Cayes (p228)

**Offshore Atolls**

- Half Moon Caye (p158)
- Glover's Reef (p227)

Expect to pay about BZ\$500 to charter a boat (for up to four people) with an experienced guide for a day's fishing. Lodges and guides may have equipment to rent but it's best to bring your own tackle.

**KAYAKING & CANOEING**

The translucent waters of the Caribbean are as inviting for kayakers as they are for divers and snorkelers. It's amazing how much underwater life is visible from above the surface! And you can enjoy snorkeling and bird-watching as you go.

If you fancy some kayaking, consider staying at one of the resorts or hotels on the Placencia peninsula or Ambergris Caye, many of which provide free kayaks for guests. At San Pedro, Caye Caulker, Hopkins, Placencia village and Punta Gorda, you can rent a kayak for anywhere between BZ\$30 and BZ\$60 per day. Glover's Atoll Resort (p227) rents out single/double touring kayaks by the week for BZ\$272/382.

If you would like to see Belize from the seat of a kayak – guided or not – check out the kayaking organizations listed in the boxed text, p78.

Canoes are more common than kayaks on inland rivers, especially the Mopan and Macal Rivers near San Ignacio. Both have some rapids, so be sure to choose a stretch of river that's right for your level. Many lodge accommodations in the area rent out canoes (around BZ\$50 per half day), and tour outfits in San Ignacio (p198) will also take you out on guided trips.

One of the most unusual canoe trips is the underground river through Barton Creek Cave (p193). Another nice place to use a canoe is the bird paradise of Crooked Tree Lagoon (p110). For information on La Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge, an annual 170-mile canoe race, see p195.

**SAILING**

A day's sailing on crystal-clear Caribbean waters, with a spot of snorkeling or wildlife watching topped with an island beach barbecue, is a near-perfect way to spend a day. These tours depart from San Pedro (p129), Caye Caulker (p146) or Placencia (p238). The going rate is around BZ\$150 per person.

Some of these companies offer multiday sailing and camping trips, as well as popular boozey sunset and moonlight cruises. Raggamuffin Tours and Seahawk Sailing (p147) both do relatively economical island-hopping sails to Turneffe Atoll, Lighthouse Reef and Placencia. At San Pedro (p129) you can rent small craft by the hour or longer for light sailing on your own.

On longer sailing trips you can reach not only Belize's hundreds of islands but also the attractive Guatemalan ports of Livingston and Río Dulce, Honduras' Bay Islands and much of the rest of the eastern Caribbean.

**BELIZE FROM THE SEAT OF A KAYAK**

If you want to see Belize with a paddle in your hands, a number of Belize- and North America-based firms offer recommended kayaking holidays:

- **Belize Kayak Rentals** (☎ in USA 800-667-1630; [www.belizekayaking.com](http://www.belizekayaking.com); s/d per day BZ\$66/110, per week BZ\$420/700) If you prefer to go it alone on your kayaking expedition, this branch of Island Expeditions (following) rents out kayaks from its base camp in Dangriga. Also offers weekly packages, which include a boat charter out to the cayes.
- **GAP Adventures** (☎ in USA 800-465-5600; [www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com); 8-day trip BZ\$2450) Using Placencia as a base, GAP's trip gives you four nights of island-hopping on the cayes.
- **Island Expeditions** (☎ in USA 800-667-1630; [www.islandexpeditions.com](http://www.islandexpeditions.com); 5-/10-day package BZ\$3060/4180) This ecologically minded company takes tours departing from Dangriga and spending the night at rustic lodges on Tobacco Caye, Southwater Caye and Coco Plum Caye. Island also does a tasty 10-day Coral Jaguar Expedition, which includes four days of hiking in the Cockscomb Basin and then six days of paddling around the islands.
- **Slickrock Adventures** (☎ in USA 800-390-5715; [www.slickrock.com](http://www.slickrock.com); 5-/9-night package BZ\$2590/3950) These top-class water sports holidays are based on Long Caye, Glover's Reef, combining sea kayaking, surf kayaking, windsurfing, snorkeling and diving. Accommodations are in stilt cabanas, and the meals are notably good.
- **Toadal Adventure** (☎ 523-3207; [www.toadaladventure.com](http://www.toadaladventure.com); 4-/6-day package BZ\$1890/2760) Take your pick between sea kayaking and snorkeling and sleeping on an island, or paddling through the rainforest rivers and watching for wildlife. Based in Placencia.

**Belize Sailing Charters** (☎ 523-3138; [www.belize-sailing-charters.com](http://www.belize-sailing-charters.com); Placencia) and **Sailing Belize** ([www.sailingbelize.com](http://www.sailingbelize.com)) offer a variety of crewed and bareboat charters on catamarans and monohulls. A crewed yacht for up to six people will cost BZ\$1200 to BZ\$1500 (plus a per-person charge) per night; seven nights bareboat for four to eight people can run anywhere from BZ\$4000 to BZ\$12,000.

The Lodge Hopper's Special of **Under the Sun** (☎ 523-7127, in USA 800-285-6967; [www.underthesunbelize.com](http://www.underthesunbelize.com); Hopkins; 8-day trip BZ\$4400) is an outstanding eight days of Caribbean cruising on an 18ft Hobie Cat, with plenty of stops for snorkeling, fishing, kayaking and hammocking, and instruction provided for novice sailors. Accommodations in lodges on the cayes, food, a guide and support boat are all included in the price.

The recommended Caribbean charter specialist **TMM Yacht Charters** (☎ 226-3026, in USA 800-633-0155; <http://sailtmm.com>; San Pedro; per week BZ\$7800-18,000) has bases in San Pedro and Placencia for its fleet of catamarans and monohulls. Placencia is also the Belizean base for the luxury catamaran charters of **Moorings** ([www.moorings.com](http://www.moorings.com)).

**RIVER-TUBING**

River-tubing is the latest rage in Belize, blessed as the country is with many fairly gentle and temperate watercourses working their way through gorgeous scenery. You may wonder what exactly is involved, but it's not too complicated: it requires sitting in an inflated inner-tube and floating or paddling along a river. You go downstream most of the time and the only technique that needs to be learnt is how to avoid getting beached, eddied or snagged on rocks while continuing to face the right direction.

The Mopan River near San Ignacio is a popular spot for river-tubing, and you can leave from Bullet Tree Falls (p202) or San José Succotz (p205). Most lodges offer tubes and transportation for their guests, or you can rent tubes at the river's edge and go it alone.

*Freya Rauscher's Cruising Guide to Belize and Mexico's Caribbean Coast* provides comprehensive information for anyone navigating these complicated waters as well as Guatemala's Río Dulce.

The best of all Belizean tubing adventures is the float in and out of a sequence of caves on the Caves Branch River inside the Nohoch Che'en Archaeological Reserve (p186). People come on day trips from all over Belize for this (it costs around BZ\$130 from San Ignacio). If you can get here on your own, you can do it for BZ\$70 with the guides that hang around the park entrance.

**WINDSURFING & KITESURFING**

With a light-to-medium warm easterly breeze blowing much of the time and the barrier reef offshore to calm the waters, conditions on Caye Caulker (p147) and Ambergris Caye (p129) are ideal for windsurfing. Regulars here boast occasional runs of 10 miles. You do have to take care with the boat traffic though, especially at San Pedro. More mellow windsurfing beaches can be found in Hopkins (p230), home to a small but dedicated group of windsurfers.

Sailboard rentals run at about BZ\$40 per hour or BZ\$130 per day, with classes around BZ\$100 per hour. Winds are biggest (typically 10 to 17 knots) from February through April.

Kitesurfers also use sailboards but they catch the wind with a kitelike sail high in the air, to which they're attached by a harness and long cords. You can do introductory courses on Ambergris Caye or Caye Caulker from around BZ\$300.

**CAVING**

The karstic geology of parts of western Belize has produced many extensive and intricate cave systems, which are fascinating, challenging and awesome to investigate. To the ancient Maya, caves were entrances to Xibalbá, the underworld and residence of important gods. Many Belizean caves today still contain relics of Maya ceremonies, offerings or sacrifices. This archaeological element makes cave exploration doubly exciting. One of the few caves in the country that you can enter without a guide is St Herman's Cave (p218), but even there you are required to take a guide if you want to go more than 300yd into the cave.

The most exciting caves in the west of the country include Actun Tunichil Muknal (p191), with its evidence of human sacrifice; Barton Creek Cave (p193), which you explore by canoe; Che Chem Ha (p210), with its vast array of ancient pottery; and the caves in the Nohoch Che'en Archaeological Reserve (p186). All of these can be visited with guides, and tours to most of them run from San Ignacio (p198).

Remember that caves and their contents are extremely fragile. Don't disturb artifacts or cave formations, and try to avoid tours with large groups of people. For your own well-being, check the physical demands of a cave

The remote Chiquibul cave system, south of Caracol, is possibly the biggest cave system in the Western Hemisphere. Because of difficult access, it remains largely unexplored.

**TOP PICKS FOR KIDS**

- Cave-tubing at Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch (p186)
- Canoeing into Barton Creek Cave (p193)
- Snorkeling at the southern dock on Caye Caulker (p147); Long Caye, Lighthouse Reef (p158); Laughing Bird Caye (p228); or Glover's Reef (p227)
- Horseback riding at Banana Bank (p187) or Crystal Paradise (p194)
- Sailing at Caye Caulker (p146)
- Going on a night safari at Belize Zoo (p113)

**MORE THAN JUST A WALK IN THE PARK: MARCOS CUCUL**

Mr Marcos Cucul is a well-known figure in Belize's travel scene. Over the past several years, he's expanded his work to include not just cave-tubing and day trips, but also multiday jungle survival expeditions into the deepest jungles that Belize offers. We spoke to Marcos about the intensity of his tours: 'My tours come in different levels. The most hard-core of these entail basically going into the jungle with nothing, just a machete, a first aid kit and a two-way radio for emergency communications. Everything that we use for the duration of this tour is gotten from the jungle itself. On our tours we make hammocks by weaving together vines and barks, and we string them between the trees. We learn what kind of leaves to use for blankets to keep us warm. It's really something.

'Some of the people I've taken into the jungle have been military people, police and firefighters. But I've also led courses with many middle-aged people, couples and families. Not long ago I went out with a family, a mother, father and daughter. The daughter was 21. They wanted to experience the jungle at the most primitive level. For this one we brought in some food, some rice and other easily carried food to cook. But most of their diet consisted of what we were able to catch ourselves in the streams: fish, snails, even freshwater lobster!

'Another component of my tours is learning about medicinal plants and herbs, about what things are good to eat and what to leave alone. People come away realizing that the jungle can be safe, and on the other hand it can be dangerous.

'On one of these tours we see every kind of wildlife that Belize has, from snakes to howler monkeys, spider monkeys, owls, coatimundis and many, many birds. A big percentage of the animals in Belize's jungles is nocturnal, so spending several days and nights in the jungle is a unique way to get to experience all that Belize has to offer. Some people come on tours just to experience the wildlife. It is quite different from a trip to the zoo!

'By the end of a four- or six-day course like this, participants are very comfortable with making their own shelter and foraging for their own food, making do with what the jungle has to offer. An experience like this really opens people's minds. When they come out of it, they do so with a new respect for both the jungle and for themselves. This is the essence of the course.

'Our ancestors thought highly of their surroundings. Their religion was based on nature, and on contact with the natural world. A lot of what I have learned was passed on to me from elders in the community, from conversations around the fire with parents and grandparents.

'My son is also a guide. I didn't push him into the life; it was his choice. He likes the job and at the same time he understands the importance of both protecting the ecosystem and preserving our Maya culture. I'm very proud of him.'

*Marcos Cucul is a native of Belize from the Kekchi Maya tribe; he runs his jungle treks through Maya Guide (p219).*

trip beforehand, and remember that some caves are subject to flash floods during rainy periods. An extra flashlight and a spare set of batteries is never a bad idea. And finally, if you have claustrophobic tendencies or are terrified of the dark (or bats), it's no shame to admit that caves are not for everyone!

**CYCLING**

Belize is in the tropics, and mostly at low altitude, so temperatures are high and not terribly conducive to strenuous cycling. But the generally flat terrain of most of the country is good for leisurely touring of local areas and short excursions.

Some coastal accommodations provide free bikes for their guests. Otherwise you can rent bikes, usually for around BZ\$20 a day, in places such as San Pedro (p129), Caye Caulker (p155), Corozal (p172), Sarteneja (p182), Copper Bank (p179), Hopkins (p233), Sittee River (p234), Placencia (p244) and Punta Gorda (p250).

In Cayo, Pacz Tours (p198) offers a day-long mountain-biking tour to the Mennonite village of Spanish Lookout, while Belize Explorer (p198) provides bikes and support vehicles for multiday biking adventures. Casa Maya Jungle Resort (p205) also rents out mountain bikes to its guests.

There are many different long-distance bike races in Belize, some of which have only been instituted in recent years, including the following:

**Krem New Year's Day Bicycle Classic** Three different races commence at different places in northern Belize (the elite racers in Corozal, juniors in Orange Walk and women in Crooked Tree) and converge in Belize City.

**Temple to Temple** ([www.templetotemple.com](http://www.templetotemple.com)) A one-week race from Lubaantun to Caracol in late January.

**Tour of Belize** ([www.tourofbelize.com](http://www.tourofbelize.com)) A five-day, six-stage road race that traverses 500 miles in mid-February.

**HIKING, BIRDING & WILDLIFE WATCHING**

In Belize, hiking usually means guided walks in search of birdlife, as well as other flora and fauna. Many lodges have access to trails on their own or nearby properties that you can walk on your own. Among these are Chan Chich Lodge (p171), Macaw Bank (p194), Black Rock River Lodge (p208) and Blancaneaux Lodge (p215). Hidden Valley Inn (p215) is especially well placed and well designed for hikers, who can take advantage of 90 miles of signposted trails. But more often lodge walks are with a guide who'll show you the animals and plants along the way. Several places offer night walks, which can be real eye-openers!

Two areas with well-developed and well-maintained jungle trail networks that you can walk with or without guides are Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235), with a 12-mile network, and Mayflower Bocawina National Park (p229).

It gets hot and bug-infested out in the bush, so carry enough water, a hat and sunscreen, and protect yourself from mosquitoes (with long pants and sleeves as well as bug spray). Compact binoculars are always a plus, as is swimming gear when you reach those welcome swimming holes!

**HORSEBACK RIDING**

Belize has an active equestrian community. A growing number of lodges offers rides to their guests and – in some cases – nonguests. Often you'll be riding jungle trails. Preeminent is Banana Bank Lodge (p187) near Belmopan,

**TOP PICKS – WILDLIFE WATCHING**

Go where the wild things are:

- **Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary** (p110) The best birding in the country. Giant jabiru storks congregate here in April and May.
- **Community Baboon Sanctuary** (p108) Surefire encounters with black howler monkeys.
- **Chan Chich Lodge** (p171) or the **Rio Bravo Conservation & Management Area** (p169) Excellent chance of seeing coatimundis, peccaries, kinkajous and spider or howler monkeys. Even jaguars are regularly sighted around Chan Chich.
- **Gales Point Manatee** (p115) or **Swallow Caye** (p144), home to small communities of West Indian manatees, which are often sighted from boats cruising in these areas.
- **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary** (p235) The world's first jaguar reserve is home to 40 or 50 jaguars, but you'll probably just see their footprints.
- **Belize Zoo** (p113) Get up close and personal with many of Belize's indigenous species. Great for photos!

with a well-tended stable of 150 horses, where you can enjoy anything from a two-hour ride to a multiday riding package. Windy Hill Resort (p205) near San Ignacio has another large stable.

Also near San Ignacio is Mountain Equestrian Trails (p193), offering rides and riding-based holidays that combine lowland jungles and Mountain Pine Ridge. Other good riding spots include Crystal Paradise Resort (p194), duPlooy's Jungle Lodge (p208) and Black Rock River Lodge (p208), all located around San Ignacio; Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (p110) is also good. A two- to three-hour ride can cost anywhere from BZ\$50 to BZ\$130, while full-day outings start at around BZ\$150.

# Food & Drink

Rare is the tourist who raves about Belizean food. On the other hand, rare is the tourist who complains about it. Belize has never developed an elaborate cuisine of its own, but rather borrows from its Caribbean neighbors, as well as from Mexico, England and the United States. But Belizean food puts these adopted flavors and recipes to good use, incorporating plenty of tropical fruits, fresh seafood and other local delights. It's available at every kind of establishment, from the stand-up snack bar to the classy café and the occasional ritzy restaurant.

Mexican, Chinese and Indian restaurants exist throughout the country. Nowadays, the high level of immigration from Europe and the US ensures an ample array of international cuisine, from straightforward travelers' favorites to gourmet *haute cuisine*.

## STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

Belizeans love it and most of them would happily eat it every day. Most non-Belizeans think it's filling and inexpensive but not very exciting. What is it? It's rice and beans. It comes in two varieties: 'rice and beans,' where the two are cooked together; and 'beans and rice,' or more politely 'stewed beans with rice,' where beans in a soupy stew are served separately in a bowl (the idea is to spoon them over the rice). Both variations are prepared with red beans, which distinguishes them from other countries' rice and beans. Rice and beans is usually accompanied by a serving of chicken or seafood, plus coleslaw, potato or fried plantain as a garnish. Both kinds of rice and beans are flavored with coconut milk.

Just like their Caribbean and Central American neighbors, Belizeans like to cook with habaneros, jalapeños and other peppers. Most restaurants have a bottle of hot chili sauce on the table next to the salt and pepper so guests can make their meals as spicy as they like.

Not surprisingly, most restaurant menus feature a variety of creatures from the sea, with lobster playing the starring role. Distinguished from the American and European lobster by their lack of claws, the Caribbean crustaceans are no less divine, especially when grilled. Lobster is widely available in coastal towns, except from mid-February to mid-June, when the lobster season is closed.

Conch (pronounced 'konk') is the large snail-like sea creature that inhabits conch shells. Much like calamari, it has a chewy consistency that is not universally appreciated. From October to June, it is often prepared as *ceviche* or conch fritters (and it's considerably cheaper than lobster).

Belizeans really know how to prepare their seafood, be it barbecued, grilled, marinated, steamed or stewed. A common preparation is 'Creole-style,' where seafood, peppers, onions and tomatoes are stewed together. Snapper and other fillets are good, reasonably priced fish choices.

Belizeans do not eat a lot of beef, but they do love cow-foot soup. This is a glutinous concoction of pasta, vegetables, spices – and an actual cow's foot. It's particularly popular as a way to refuel in the small hours after a night out.

Belizean breakfast is usually simple and hearty, often featuring eggs, fried jacks (deep-fried dough) slathered with beans or fresh-baked johnnycakes (biscuits) smothered in butter. In small towns, the best breakfast is usually found at the local taco vendor's cart, where tortillas stuffed with meat and lettuce are sold.

*Mmm... A Taste of Belizean Cooking* brings together about 100 recipes from chefs around the country, some of whose food you'll probably eat while you're in Belize.

Cow-foot soup is supposed to be 'good for the back,' in other words, an aphrodisiac.

### SHARP ON THE TONGUE

Belizean meals are not usually very spicy, but your table and your meal are always enlivened by the inimitable presence of Marie Sharp's fiery sauces, accurately labeled 'Proud Products of Belize.'

Marie Sharp got into the hot-sauce business in 1981. One season she and her husband found themselves with a surplus of habanero chili peppers at their family farm near Dangriga. Hating to see them wasted, Marie experimented with sauce recipes in her own kitchen. She felt that other bottled hot sauces were often watery and sometimes too hot to be flavorful. She wanted one that would complement Belizean cuisine and would not have artificial ingredients. She tried out some of her blends on her friends and family, and by far the favorite was one that used carrots as a thickener and blended the peppers with onions and garlic.

Once she had her formula, Sharp embarked on a guerrilla marketing campaign, carrying samples of the sauce, along with corn chips and refried beans, door-to-door to shopkeepers all over Belize. When proprietors liked what they tasted, Marie asked them to put the sauce on their shelves and agreed to take back the bottles that didn't sell. The sauce, initially bottled under the name Melinda, caught on and was soon not only in stores but also on restaurant tables all over the country.

Marie bottled the sauces from her kitchen for three years, finally bringing in a couple of workers to help her mix the zealously guarded formula. She eventually hybridized her own red habanero pepper – a mix of Scotch bonnet and Jamaican varieties – which contributes to the distinctive color of her sauces. She opened her own factory in 1986 with two three-burner stoves and six women to look after her pots, and moved to her current factory outside Dangriga (see p222) in 1998.

Today, Sharp's hot red-habanero sauces come in six heat levels ('Mild', 'Hot', 'Fiery Hot', 'No-Wimps-Allowed', 'Belizean Heat' and 'Comatose'), and Sharp also produces a range of mixed sauces (habaneros with prickly pears or citrus fruit), pepper jellies and tropical fruit jams. Peruse the selection at [www.marisharps.us](http://www.marisharps.us).

Other Mexican snacks, such as *salbutes*, *garnaches*, *enchalades* and *panades* – all variations on the tortilla, beans and cheese theme (*salbutes* usually add chicken, *panades* generally have fish) – are available in eateries around the country and as snacks from food carts. You'll also come across burritos and tamales (wads of corn dough with a filling of meat, beans or chilies).

### Maya Specialties

Maya meals are sometimes on offer in the villages of southern Belize and in Petén, Guatemala. *Caldo* is a spicy stew, usually made with chicken (or sometimes beef or pork), corn and root vegetables. Served with tortillas, it is hearty and delicious. *Ixpá'cha* is steamed fish or shrimp, cooked inside a big leaf. The Maya also make Mexican soups-cum-stews such as *chirmole* (chicken with a chili-chocolate sauce) and *escabeche* (chicken with lime and onions), though these are not specific to the Maya.

### Garifuna Specialties

Garifuna dishes may appear on numerous restaurant menus, but there are few actual Garifuna restaurants (although see the boxed text, opposite). If you have a chance to try a Garifuna meal, you shouldn't pass it up. The most common dish on menus is 'boil-up,' a stew of root vegetables and beef or chicken. Less common is *alabundiga*, a dish of grated green bananas, coconut cream, spices, boiled potato and peppers served with fried fish fillet (often snapper) and rice. *Sere* is fish cooked with coconut milk, spices and maybe some root vegetables. *Hudut* is a stew with similar ingredients including mashed plantain.

*Foods of the Maya* by Nancy & Jeffrey Gerlach focuses on the Yucatán, but it provides an excellent guide to the food, flavors and recipes of the Maya culture.

## DRINKS

### Nonalcoholic Drinks

Delicious and refreshing fruit juices – lime, orange, watermelon, grapefruit, papaya and mango – are available throughout Belize.

'Seaweed shakes' sold by street vendors – a blend of condensed milk, a few spices and extract of *Eucheuma isoforme*, which grows underwater as a tangle of yellow branches – are claimed to have aphrodisiac and many other restorative properties.

In recent years, Belize has started catering to coffee drinkers with its own homegrown beans. Although Belize lacks the high altitudes that benefit other Central American coffee-growing countries, some lodges in Mountain Pine Ridge (p211) have begun experimenting with growing their own beans to serve fresh coffee to their guests. On a *finca* (farm) in Orange Walk, a local company called Gallon Jug is producing shade-grown beans for commercial distribution. Caye Coffee in San Pedro gets its beans from Guatemala, but roasts them in its facility right in San Pedro, producing such popular blends as Belizean Roast and Maya Blend.

### Alcoholic Drinks

Belikin is the native beer of Belize. You'll be hard-pressed to find any other beer available, as there are severe import duties levied on foreign brews. Fear not, however, as Belikin is always cold and refreshing. Most commonly served is Belikin Regular, a lager, but Belikin also brews a lower-calorie, lower-alcohol beer, called Lighthouse Lager. There is also a stronger Belikin Stout and Belikin Premium, in a bigger bottle but the same strength as Belikin Regular. Beer usually costs around BZ\$3 to BZ\$5 a bottle, although this can vary from place to place.

'Belikin' is Mayan for 'road to the east' and the main temple of Altun Ha is pictured on the label.

### THE ROOTS OF GARIFUNA COOKING: MRS DELONE JONES-LINO *Joshua Samuel Brown*

When people talk about Belizean food, they think of rice, beans and stewed chicken. But to get the real flavor of Belize, you have to go to a genuine Garifuna restaurant. In Dangriga, I spoke with local chef Mrs Delone Jones-Lino about what makes Garifuna food so good.

'Garifuna people are very indigenous people. We have our own food, our own dances, our own beliefs and our own music. And we definitely have our own food! Our culinary traditions come from St Vincent. When the Garifuna people came here, we brought our traditions, our recipes, and even our crops with us.

'Cassava is a Garifuna staple. Cassava is a starch, like a sweet potato. Here we make cassava bread from it. Then we have something called *varasa*; it's like a tamale, but it's made from a kind of cross between a banana and a plantain, picked while it's still hard and cooked until it's soft.

'*Hudut* is the one food that everyone loves. We serve it here on Wednesday and Friday, and people come from miles around for it. *Hudut* is made from plantain, cooked until tender and mashed with a big mortar and pestle. Then we cook it up with local fish like snapper and coconut milk.

'The best day to come and try Garifuna food is definitely on Garifuna Settlement Day (p222). That's when we have something called a "boil-up." We have all the traditional foods of our people, and a variety of beverages, sometimes rum or other alcoholic beverages.

'People come to Roots Kitchen from all over the world. When they find us, and see what a small restaurant we are, they're sometimes surprised. A lot of Belizeans go overseas to work, you know. But when they come home, the first thing they want is to eat some traditional Belizean food. Because it doesn't matter how rich you are, outside of Belize you can't get food like this anywhere!'

*An expert in Garifuna cuisine, Mrs Delone Jones-Lino is the head chef at Roots Kitchen (p223) in Dangriga.*



**TOP PICKS FOR FOODIES**

- **Hanna's** (p200), San Ignacio – Belizean and Indian fare that also caters for vegetarians
- **Wild Mango's** (p137), San Pedro – fresh seafood and Cajun spices on the island beachfront
- **Capricorn** (p139), San Pedro – high-end nouvelle cuisine in an open-air setting
- **Agave** (p154), Caye Caulker – a delightful blend of Caribbean and Mediterranean flavors
- **Roots Kitchen** (p223), Dangriga – *the* place to experience a traditional Garifuna feast
- **Earth Runnins'** (p249), Punta Gorda – where food presentation becomes an art form
- **Cerros Beach Inn** (p179), Cerros – eco-friendly enterprise *and* the best chocolate cake in Belize

In a Caribbean country that produces so much sugarcane, it's not surprising that rum is Belize's number one liquor. The country has four distilleries; the Travellers distillery in Belize City has won several international awards with its thick, spicy One Barrel rum.

Cuba libre (rum-and-coke) and piña colada are the most popular ways of diluting your fermented sugarcane juice. But according to Belize bartenders, the national drink is in fact the 'panty-ripper' or 'brief-ripper,' depending on your gender. This concoction is a straightforward mix of coconut rum and pineapple juice, served on the rocks.

**CELEBRATIONS**

Belizeans are mad for rice and beans at any time, but on Sunday it is a compulsory ritual. Before Christmas most folks get baking: rum-flavored, dark fruit cakes are popular. On Christmas Day, many Belizeans consume a more elaborate version of rice and beans – perhaps with turkey or ham instead of chicken. The Maya love their tamales and prepare these at Christmas, while Mestizos might tuck into roast pork and gravy with their corn tortillas.

Several festivals around the country focus chiefly on food. Beach communities celebrate the opening of the lobster season with Lobster Festivals: the last weekend of June in Placencia (p240), the first weekend of July on Caulker (p149), and the second weekend of July in Ambergris (p132). Punta Gorda has a weekend Fish Fest in November (p247), and Crooked Tree celebrates the cashew harvest at its Cashew Festival in May (p111).

**WHERE TO EAT & DRINK**

Belizean eateries are a wide-ranging lot but you can distinguish between two main types. At the lower end (pricewise) of the scale are the straightforward places aimed at a local clientele, offering mainly Belizean favorites – rice and beans, fried chicken, fried or grilled fish, burgers, Mexican soups and snacks and the occasional Garifuna dish. In such down-to-earth diners you can usually eat for BZ\$10 to BZ\$20 per person.

At the upper end are the fancier places geared to tourists and middle-class customers, where you can dine on steaks, lobster and shrimp; Italian, Thai, Arabic, Tex-Mex and Indian cuisines; gourmet salads; and whole foods and vegetarian preparations. The classier places are mostly at the upscale jungle lodges in Cayo District, on the cayes, and around Belize City and Placencia. These places are catering to foreigners, so you can expect to pay international prices. Ambergris is particularly expensive, and it is easy to spend upwards of BZ\$40 per person.

Of course plenty of eateries bridge the gap, serving a selection of Belizean and international fare. In a class of their own are the many

For thousands of classic and creative cocktails made with rum, visit [www.rumcocktailrecipes.com](http://www.rumcocktailrecipes.com).

Chinese restaurants, some of which are dingy, flyblown dives while others are sparkling places serving tasty food.

On the whole, service in Belizean restaurants is friendly and fairly prompt and efficient. A tip of around 10% is normal in the fancier places, unless the service charge is already included. In humbler establishments tips are not necessarily expected but are still appreciated.

Typical restaurant mealtimes are 7am to 9:30am for breakfast, 11:30am to 2pm for lunch and 6pm to 8pm for dinner. Belizeans themselves tend to eat at the early ends of those ranges. In Belize City and tourist haunts, many places don't close between meals and may stay open late at night. Opening hours of bars are very diverse. Some open from about noon to midnight, others just for a few evening hours, and yet others from early morning to early evening.

**Quick Eats**

All around the country you'll encounter street vendors selling a variety of light eats – tacos, tamales, conch fritters, johnnycakes, meat pies – and even fuller fare such as rice and beans or barbecued chicken. Some of this food can be very tasty, and it's always cheap (usually BZ\$2 to BZ\$5 per item). Pick stands that look clean and are patronized by others – they're likely to provide the tastiest and most hygienic fare.

**VEGETARIANS & VEGANS**

Vegetarians will rejoice at the wide variety of tropical fruits and fresh fruit juices. Also delicious and filling are the Belizean baked goods: banana bread, coconut bread, pumpkin bread etc.

In short, non-meat-eaters will have no problem feeding themselves. But if you're on an organized tour or participating in a beach barbeque you should make your requirements known beforehand. Be prepared for rice, beans, tortillas and plantains. Potato salad and coleslaw crop up regularly, but fresh greens (read: iceberg lettuce) can be elusive. Stewed beans are often prepared with ham or bacon, so double-check. Maya and Mestizo foods generally

Get the scoop on the San Pedro Lobster Festival at [www.sanpedrolobsterfest.com](http://www.sanpedrolobsterfest.com).

**JOHNNYCAKES**

There is no more satisfying Belizean breakfast than a fresh-baked johnnycake with a pat of butter and a slice of cheese. These savory biscuits – straight from the oven – steal the show when served with eggs or beans.

**Ingredients**

- 2lb flour
- 6 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ cup shortening
- ½ cup margarine
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups coconut milk or evaporated milk

**Method**

Sift dry ingredients. Heat oven to 400°F. Use fingertips or knife to cut margarine and shortening into flour. Gradually stir in milk with a wooden spoon. Mix well to form a manageable ball of dough. Roll out dough into a long strip and cut into 1½in to 2in pieces. Shape into round balls and place on greased baking sheets. Flatten lightly and prick with a fork. Bake in hot oven for 10 minutes or until golden brown.

contain meat but tamales *de chaya* (spinach and cheese tamales) and *garnaches* (tortillas with beans, cabbage and cheese) are vegetarian fare.

In tourist areas you'll often find entire menu sections devoted to vegetarian dishes, with an awareness of whole-food cooking in places like Ambergris Caye and at some of the Cayo jungle lodges. Be on the lookout for Thai and Italian restaurants, which usually have good vegetarian selections. Lots of vegetarian dishes will use dairy products so vegans will need to check this.

### EATING WITH KIDS

You won't have to work hard to feed your children, who will probably be happy to eat most everyday Belizean foods such as sandwiches, rice and beans, fried chicken, hamburgers and fruits. Bakery goods, pasta and pizzas are additional favorites with kids. Most children will happily quaff a *licuado* (blended fruit juice). If you want to prepare soft foods for infants, you can mash bananas and avocados and other tropical fruits.

### HABITS & CUSTOMS

Belizeans love their food (anxiety about weight is rare here). They view the act of sitting down to eat with family and friends as a deserved pleasure.

Belizeans usually eat their main meal at noon, and many offices, shops and even schools close from noon to 1pm so that people can go home and eat lunch with their families. Rice and beans is almost always the staple of this meal, earning the lunch hour the nickname 'rice hour.' Dinner for Belizeans is usually a lighter meal, taken early (around sundown, at 6pm to 6:30pm).

It is not uncommon for Belizeans to eat and drink at restaurants and at street vendors, although most meals are taken at home with family. Community and church events often center around barbecues, where people cook and eat together.

Rice and Beans (www.riceandbeansindc.blogspot.com) is a blog about mindful eating, written by a Belizean ('I love me some spicy food') with organic roots ('I want my food straight from the dirt').