

Destination Belize

With one foot planted in the Central American jungles and the other dipped in the Caribbean Sea, Belize blends the best of both worlds.

Offshore, kayakers glide from one sandy, palm-dotted islet to another, while snorkelers swim through translucent seas, gazing at a kaleidoscope of coral, fish, dolphins and turtles. Inland, explorers investigate ruins of ancient civilizations, and birders aim their binoculars at some 570 species. Between national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and marine reserves, more than 40% of the country's area is protected in one form or another, creating a haven for countless creatures of land, sea and sky.

The value of these natural resources is unquantifiable, but Belize attracts more than 850,000 annual visitors eager to climb a Maya temple, spot a toucan, snorkel the reef and otherwise partake of paradise. Tourism is the country's top source of employment and investment. The irony is that it is also the country's biggest environmental threat.

Belize does not yet have the infrastructure to support the massive numbers of tourists that arrive, especially by way of cruise ships. It does not have the resources to truly protect its sanctuaries and reserves and their inhabitants. And it does not have the political will to stop the rampant coastal development, which would mean turning down millions in investment dollars. According to sources such as Tropical Conservation Science, as much as 80% of coastal land has already been sold to foreign interests with the intention of building condos and resorts.

Fortunately, Belizeans are environmentally aware and indefatigably active. Thanks to a progressive populace, Belize offers myriad ways for travelers to tread lightly, from beach resorts powered by solar energy to jungle lodges built from reclaimed hardwoods. Licensed guides not only direct, but also educate their clients – about the fragility of the reef, the medicinal uses of flora and the threats to the jaguar's habitat.

It's never easy to maintain the delicate balance between preserving natural resources and cashing in on economic opportunity. But most Belizeans are proud of their natural heritage and they recognize that the goals of environmental conservation and economic prosperity are not mutually exclusive. This is the enlightened approach that has earned Belize its reputation as a paradigm of ecotourism.

Sub Umbra Florero reads the motto on the Belizean flag. It refers to the mighty mahogany tree, and it means 'Under the shade, I flourish.' The mahogany may not be as prevalent as it once was, but with its loss has come an understanding of its value. Belizeans recognize that their country's greatest asset must be respected and protected, and that tourists have an important role to play.

It's no wonder that Belizeans extend such a warm welcome to travelers. These easy-going people are eager to share – the staggering scenery, the bountiful biodiversity, all that exists in the shade of the mahogany tree.

FAST FACTS

Population: 294,400

Population density:
34 people per sq mile

GDP per person:
BZ\$15,600

Inflation: 2.8%

Unemployment rate:
9.4%

Literacy: 77%

HIV prevalence rate: 2.4%

Cruise-ship tourists per
annum: 624,530

Other tourists per annum:
251,650

Resident & migratory bird
species: 570

Species of hard & soft
coral: 110

Native orchid species: 304

Getting Started

Belize has something for everyone. If you are an impulsive adventurer seeking an adrenaline rush, you will find it in Belize. If you prefer to spend quality time with a good book on a sunswept beach, there are a few of those, too.

Despite its variety, Belize is a tiny place; it's relatively easy to get anywhere, even the deepest jungle or the most isolated island. Transport around the country is easy enough, but it can be expensive. Local buses and water taxis travel frequently along the main routes, but as soon as you venture off these primary highways and waterways, you'll have to rent a car, hire a taxi or book a tour. Domestic flights and charters are also useful for reaching the more remote corners.

Accommodations range from bargain-basement cabins, campsites and hammock hotels, all the way up to first-class resorts loaded with luxury. Lodging is abundant and it's usually easy to find someplace to stay when you arrive in town. However, if you have your heart set on staying somewhere in town, it is wise to book in advance. Plan ahead for the weeks between Christmas and New Year's Day, and before and during Santa Semana (the week preceding Easter Sunday). It is also a good idea to book accommodations ahead of time during the school vacation in January and February.

Note that because Belize has a high standard of living, prices here tend to be a good deal higher than those of other Central American nations.

WHEN TO GO

In Belize the high season for tourists corresponds roughly with the dry season: December to May. The shoulder months – especially December – receive a fair amount of rain, but not enough to scare away the multitudes of travelers who want to spend their holidays in the tropics. Most hotels and resorts are more expensive during this period (high-season rates are quoted throughout this book).

The biggest influx of tourists comes between December 15 and January 15, and during the weeks around Easter. Some hotels and resorts, especially top-end accommodations, charge extra-high prices during these peak periods. If you're using top-end or some midrange accommodations, you'll certainly save money by avoiding these seasons. See p279 for more on accommodations in Belize.

The rainy season runs from June to November. The early months, especially May and June, are actually a wonderful time to travel to Belize: you can avoid the tourist bustle and lodging is slightly cheaper. The only downside is

For more information, see
Climate Charts (p281).

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the latest visa situation (p289) and government travel advisories (p283)
- Any necessary immunizations or medications (see p299)
- Insect repellent containing DEET
- Pepto-Bismol or an anti-diarrheal, in case you get a bad dose of the trots
- A flashlight for those dark Belizean streets, stairs and caves.
- Waterproof sunscreen and sun hat, so you don't cook in the tropical sun
- Pocket binoculars
- An underwater camera

SUPERLATIVES

If you want to...

- See the biggest and best selection of wildlife – visit the **Belize Zoo** (p113)
- Watch the fieriest sunset – sit on the back dock on **Caye Caulker** (p141)
- Dive the deepest (and darkest) wall – take on the **Blue Hole** (p157)
- Explore the deepest (and darkest) cave – descend into **Actun Tunichil Muknal** (p191) in Cayo District
- Admire the wildest sculpture and art – don't miss **Poustinia Land Art Park** (p209) near Benque Viejo del Carmen
- Sleep in the sweetest camping spot – pitch your tent at **Backpacker's Paradise** (p180) in Sarteneja, Corozal District
- Eat the tangiest ceviche – dine at **Cerros Beach Inn** (p179) in Corozal District
- Stay at the chilliest budget guesthouse – relax at the **Sea Breeze Hotel** (p175) in Corozal
- Lay your head at the quirkiest resort – make a reservation at **Singing Sands** (p243) on Placencia Peninsula
- Leave the lightest environmental footprint – visit the **Maya Mountain Research Farm** (p253) in Toledo
- Climb the highest temple – tackle Templo IV at **Tikal** (p267)

that it's outside the lobster season, so you'll have to forego at least one local specialty. Rivers start to swell and dirt roads get muddy. Some more remote roads may not be accessible to public transportation. With too much rain, some of the caves such as Actun Tunichil Muknal (p191) are dangerous and therefore closed to the public. Southern Belize is especially precarious during the rainy season; this relatively remote region receives two to three times as much rain as the rest of the country.

COSTS & MONEY

Travel costs are significantly higher here than in most Central American countries, but cheaper than in the USA or Europe. If you're arriving from inexpensive Central American nations such as Honduras or Guatemala, get ready to bust that wallet wide open. High taxes, many imports and the fact that much of its tourism industry is geared to North Americans on fairly short vacations are the factors that keep prices high.

Prices in Belize are frequently listed in US dollars, especially at upmarket hotels, where you can expect to pay international prices. Most types of tours are charged in US dollars. In fact, US dollars are widely accepted, but the standard unit of currency is still the Belizean dollar (BZ\$). The exchange rate has hovered around US\$1=BZ\$2 for years. Prices in this book are quoted in BZ\$ and include all taxes and service charges. See p286 for more on Belizean money matters.

Shoestring travelers can survive on BZ\$60 to BZ\$80 a day, covering just the basics of food, lodging and public transportation. The cheapest hotels start at about BZ\$20 per person for a bed, four walls and shared bathroom. Better rooms with private bathrooms start at roughly BZ\$40, depending on the area. It is possible to eat cheaply at the stand-up snack bars and markets and fill up for BZ\$20 or less.

Midrange budgeters can travel comfortably on BZ\$200 to BZ\$300 per person per day. Hotels in this category offer very good value, and double rooms come with comfortable beds, private bathroom, hot water (most of the

HOW MUCH?

Papaya smoothie: BZ\$6

Water taxi to San Pedro:
BZ\$20

Grilled spinytail lobster:
BZ\$30

Hardwood cutting board:
BZ\$45

Half-day snorkel trip:
BZ\$45

time) and – usually – some stylish details. Expect to pay anywhere between BZ\$150 and BZ\$200 per night. Some hotels in this price range also have shared or private kitchenettes, which is a great option for families. A good two- or three-course meal with a couple of drinks in a pleasant restaurant will average BZ\$30 to BZ\$50 (more if you have lobster).

Top-end visitors will find a good selection of restaurants and hotels in the touristy towns and within some of the major resorts. Luxurious beachside lodges and boutique hotels cost anywhere from BZ\$300 – and all the way up – and offer meals that begin at BZ\$50.

Traveling by public bus is dirt cheap, but car hire, taxis, boats and hotel transfers are not. Expect a day's auto rental to cost between BZ\$150 and BZ\$200. Tours and excursions mostly run from BZ\$100 to BZ\$200 per person for a day (more for diving trips).

Lodging prices are generally higher in the dry season (December to May), and highest during holiday periods (between Christmas and New Year and during Semana Santa). During slower seasons, most hotels are eager for your business, so you can try to negotiate a lower rate.

Ambergris Caye is definitely the most expensive place in the country. Budget travelers can make their money last longer by hanging out in places like Caye Caulker and San Ignacio.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Belize has one of the most eco-conscious populaces you'll find anywhere on the planet. Here you'll meet some of the pioneers of the sustainable tourism movement. Today more than 40% of the national territory is under official protection.

The conservation fee of BZ\$7.50 that every visitor pays when leaving Belize goes to the **Protected Areas Conservation Trust** (PACT; www.pactbelize.org), which helps provide funding for protected areas. Besides paying the obligatory fee, there are other simple steps that travelers can take to minimize their impact:

- Don't remove coral or shells from the sea, and avoid purchasing items made from turtle shell or coral.
- Don't swim with manatees or attempt to piggyback sea turtles.
- Use air-con judiciously. It's expensive and a strain on local energy reserves.
- In the jungle, stay on trails to avoid trampling fragile plants. Never feed wild animals, including those in the sea.
- Do not order lobster, crab or fresh shrimp in their closed seasons (lobster February 15 to June 14; conch July 1 to September 30; shrimp April 15 to August 14).
- Don't fish in protected areas and always check the seasons and other regulations concerning the place and species that you're planning to fish. Catch-and-release is obligatory for some species.
- Dispose of trash properly, even if it means carrying it with you until you find a trash bin.
- For tips on responsible diving and snorkeling, see p73.

Getting There & Away

To date, the single biggest environment-related issue of the 21st century for Belize is cruise-ship tourism. Every year, cruise liners anchoring off Belize City bring more than 600,000 passengers into the country (that's two times the population of the country itself). Although the excursions made by these visitors are highly lucrative, many small-scale tour operators and officials fear that the cruisers could potentially be a threat to Belizean tourism.

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Most cruise-ship passengers are in the country for less than a day, making it next to impossible for them to experience the country in any substantive way. Furthermore, such massive numbers are likely to inflict environmental damage, whether it's by harming the reef, trampling through the rainforest or simply overtaxing the infrastructure. Finally, many ecologically aware travelers – who would normally spend lots of time (and money) in Belize – may not want to come if they know they will be sharing space with a shipload of day-trippers. So not only do the cruise ship tourists have the potential to damage the archaeological and natural sites of Belize; they could also seriously impair Belize's image as an environmentally responsible country.

When planning your trip to Belize, keep in mind that you will see more, do more and learn more if you spend some time actually exploring beautiful Belize; as a bonus, the country will also benefit more from your visit. If you really want to investigate the concept of slow travel, consider overland (or water) travel via Mexico, Honduras or Guatemala. See p292 for details.

Sleeping & Eating

Many resorts and restaurants throughout Belize are taking steps to minimize their environmental impact, by recycling and composting, managing wastewater, utilizing alternative power sources, growing their own organic ingredients and working with local community and environmental organizations. Unfortunately, Belize does not have any sort of eco-certification program to give a stamp of approval to businesses that are fulfilling these goals. We have done some on-the-ground research, creating a 'GreenDex' of Belizean businesses that are taking steps to implement environmentally sound practices (see p316). You can help by patronizing these businesses, as well as doing your own research and providing feedback. For more suggestions, see the 'Green World' itinerary, p29.

Cultural Awareness

Traveling responsibly means being culturally aware as well as minimizing environmental impact; in short, showing respect for the country and cultures you are visiting. See the boxed text (p40) for some tips.

Giving Back to Belize

One of the best ways to travel responsibly is to be proactive about it, spending some time doing volunteer work. See p68 for a list of NGOs that are active in Belize and p289 for other ideas about volunteering in Belize.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Belizean character Emory King wrote *Hey Dad, This is Belize* and *I Spent it All in Belize*. They are not exactly travel books, but more collections of amusing and insightful articles on the many quirks of a country that King has been chronicling since he bumped into it (after being shipwrecked) one night in 1953.

Bruce Barcott is a contributing editor for *Outside* magazine and an author. His latest book, *The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird*, is a compelling story of Belizean culture, society and politics. He recounts with unflinching honesty the story of Sharon Matola (local celebrity and founder of the Belize Zoo) and her fight against the construction of the Chalillo Dam on the Macal River.

'The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw recounts the story of Sharon Matola and her fight against the construction of the Chalillo Dam'

If your inner adventurer dreams of packing up and moving to paradise, take along *Belize Survivor*, by Nancy Koerner. The jungle and the sea are the backdrop for the author's harrowing tale of betrayal, courage and survival.

Richard Timothy Conroy's *Our Man in Belize* is a fun, engaging memoir of his stint as US vice-consul to the impoverished British Honduras of the early 1960s, a period marked by the devastating Hurricane Hattie.

In *Following Mateo*, Jesuit Service Corp Volunteer Tom Molanphy writes of his two years in Southern Belize and his deepening friendship with a wise village elder.

Thor Janson's *Belize: Land of the Free by the Carib Sea* captures Belize in pictures – all the color of its forests, islands, wildlife, festivals and ruins, and the smiles of its people.

Ronald Wright's *Time Among the Maya* is an acutely observed account of travels through Belize, Guatemala and Mexico in the troubled 1980s, delving into the past and present of the Maya and the profound importance they attach to their calendar and the passing of time. Peter Canby also focuses on Maya culture in his insightful 1990s book *The Heart of the Sky: Travels Among the Maya*, which has one chapter on Belize.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Belize (www.travelbelize.org) The Belize Tourism Board's site is a fine place to start for almost any Belize-related travel topic.

Belize by Naturalight (www.belizenet.com) This Belize portal has hosts of travel and business links.

Belize Forums (www.belizeforum.com) Great message board and forum discussing just about everything under the Belizean sun.

BelizeNews.com (www.belizenews.com) Links to all 18 of the country's media outlets, including newspapers, magazines and TV stations.

Government of Belize (www.governmentofbelize.gov.bz) Official site of the Belizean government. Includes political information, press releases and a general country overview.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on Belize travel, the popular Thorn Tree travel forum and travel news.

Toucan Trail (www.toucantrail.com) A network of small hotels that offer rooms for budget travelers.

The Authors



MARA VORHEES

**Coordinating Author, Northern Cayes,
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Mara first visited Belize as a student of international development, when she traveled the country on a backpacker's budget, researching the outcomes of US-sponsored foreign-aid projects. She fell in love with the reef, the rasta guys and the rice and beans (but not US development policy). The pen-wielding traveler has since taken to seeing and saving the world by other means. Besides this book, she has worked on *Costa Rica* and a slew of other titles for Lonely Planet. Her articles and photographs of Central America have appeared in the *Boston Globe* and the *Miami Herald*, among other US newspapers. Follow Mara's latest adventures at www.maravorhees.com.



JOSHUA SAMUEL BROWN

**Belize District, Northern Belize &
Southern Belize**

Reared in the dreadlock-heavy island of Staten (New York City), Joshua has long been interested in the cultures of both Central America and the Caribbean. A series of strange events brought him first to Taiwan, then to Hong Kong and China before blowing his sails to Belize. There he spent three months living on an organic farm surrounded by Maya villages and ruins, the base from which he explored the country's length and breadth. A prolific traveler and writer, his features have appeared in an eclectic variety of publications around the globe. *Belize* is his second book for Lonely Planet. Read more of his work at www.josambro.com and www.josambro.blogspot.com.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Dr Allen J Christenson wrote The Ancient Maya World chapter. He earned his MA and PhD in Pre-Columbian Maya Art History at the University of Texas at Austin, and works as an associate professor in the Humanities, Classics and Comparative Literature department of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. He is the author of *Art and Society in a Highland Maya Community* (2001); about the Maya community of Antiago Atitlan, Guatemala), and a critical edition and translation of the K'iche'-Maya epic, the *Popol Vuh* (2003).

Dr David Goldberg MD wrote the Health chapter. He completed his training in internal medicine and infectious diseases at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, where he has also served as voluntary faculty. At present, he is an infectious diseases specialist in Scarsdale, New York State, and the editor-in-chief of the website MDTravelHealth.com.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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