



Northern Belize

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Why Go?

Many travelers save a chunk of change by flying into Cancun and busing or driving down to their final destination. Passing through the flat farmland and provincial towns of Northern Belize, they may not be inspired to linger.

But what are they missing? This is a chilled-out stretch of Belize that is entirely void of crowds, with unbeaten paths, abundant wildlife and prices a fraction of those in the rest of Belize.

Northern Belize comprises two districts: Corozal and Orange Walk, both traversed by the straight, flat Northern Hwy. Off the main road, adventurous travelers will find pretty fishing villages, pristine jungles, ancient Maya cities and anachronistic Mennonite communities.

Then there's the food. Exhibiting influences from Mexico, Northern Belizean cuisine is more diverse and more daring than its southern counterpart. If you're ready to trade rice and beans for seafood ceviche, you've come to the right place.

When to Go

Weather conditions in the northern districts reflect those of the country overall. The best time to visit is during the dry season (January to April), or during the light months of the rainy season (November and December and May and June). But even the rainy season is not as rainy as it is down south. The local culture is on display during the Fiesta de Carnaval, the pre-Lenten throw-down that takes place in February or March.

History

Located on the eastern fringe of the ancient Maya heartland, Northern Belize supported many settlements through history without producing any cities of the size or grandeur of Caracol, which lies further south in Belize, or Tikal in Guatemala. It was home to important river trade routes that linked the interior with the coast: the north's major Maya site, Lamanai, commanded one of these routes and grew to a city of up to 35,000 people during the Maya peak, known as the Classic Period. The city at Lamanai continued to serve as a Maya center until the Spanish arrived in the 16th century.

Meanwhile, another city grew up further west at La Milpa. During the late Classic Period, La Milpa was home to 46,000 people, but archaeologists believe the city came to an abrupt end in the 9th century AD, possibly due to environmental and economic stresses brought on by drought.

A Spanish expedition into Northern Belize from the Yucatán in 1544 led to the conquering of many of the region's Maya settlements and, later, the creation of a series of Spanish missions distantly controlled by a priest at Bacalar in the south-eastern Yucatán. Maya rebellion was fierce, and after a series of battles the Spanish were driven out of the area for good in 1640.

British loggers began moving into the region in search of mahogany in the 18th century. They encountered sporadic resistance from the now weakened and depleted Maya population, which had been ravaged by European-introduced diseases.

In 1847 the Maya in the Yucatán rose up against their Spanish-descended overlords in the War of the Castes ('Guerra de Castas' in Spanish), a vicious conflict that continued in diminishing form into the 20th century. Refugees from both sides of the conflict took shelter in northern British Honduras (as Belize was then called), with people of Spanish descent founding the towns of Orange Walk and Corozal, and the Maya moving into the forests and countryside. It wasn't surprising that intermittent hostilities took place in British Honduras. One group of Maya, the Icaiché, was repulsed from Orange Walk after fierce fighting in 1872. The border between Mexico and British Honduras was not agreed upon between the two states until 1893.

Caste War migrants from the Yucatán laid the foundations of modern Northern Belize

by starting the area's first sugarcane plantations. Despite the sugar industry's many vicissitudes, it is now the backbone of the Northern Belize economy, with some 900 cane farms in the region.

Language

Because of Northern Belize's proximity to Mexico and Guatemala's Petén, and the Mexican or Guatemalan origins of many of the people living here, Spanish is the first language of many northerners, be they Maya, Mestizo or Mexican of origin or more-recent immigrant workers from El Salvador and Guatemala. However, nearly everybody speaks English as well.

i Getting There & Around

The Northern Hwy links Belize City with the Mexican border via the region's two main towns, Orange Walk and Corozal Town. Several bus companies service the route, with some going as far as Chetumal, 7 miles into Mexico. Approximately 30 daily buses run each way from Belize City to Corozal Town and beyond. There are also daily buses connecting Orange Walk Town with Sarteneja (though the nicest way to get to Sarteneja is by boat from Corozal Town). Both boats and flights connect Corozal Town with Sarteneja and San Pedro (Ambergris Caye) once a day.

ORANGE WALK DISTRICT

Orange Walk is one of the more spread out and thinly populated districts in Belize. The Northern Hwy cuts through the district's population center in its far northeast, and most of the communities and attractions scattered west of this are connected by a network of (mostly) unpaved roads. A casual glance at the government-produced Belize travel map shows fairly extensive grid-roads west of the Northern Hwy that stretch out into towns with names like Yo Creek and August Pine Ridge. Though this gives the impression of larger communities in rural Orange Walk, these are actually farming communities; the neatly drawn lines represent farming roads and boundaries created by the farmers themselves, and not major towns bustling with activity.

Further west and to the south, these grid roads disappear entirely, and you're in what Belizeans refer to as 'deep bush,' the backwoods jungle country that makes up most of Orange Walk District. It's here you'll find