

Understand Belize

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Belize Today

According to the most basic benchmarks, Belize is flourishing, with compulsory primary education, a relatively stable democracy, a thriving tourism industry and an economy that is plugging along. Unfortunately, many people in Belize have not seen the benefits of these positive developments.

Best on Film

Mosquito Coast (1986) Harrison Ford and River Phoenix star as members of an American family in search of a simpler life in Central America.

Apocalypse (2006) Mel Gibson's visually arresting – if not historically accurate – Mayan thriller.

Curse of the Ixtabai (2012) Belizeans are quite proud of this feature-length horror film, the first to be 100% filmed and produced in Belize using local scenery, cast and crew.

Best in Print

Beka Lamb (Zee Edgell) A heart-wrenching novel about a girl's coming-of-age amid political upheaval.

The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw (Bruce Barcott) An unflinchingly honest account of Sharon Matola's fight against the construction of the Chalillo Dam on the Macal River.

Jaguar (Alan Rabinowitz) A first-person account of two years living among the Maya and the jaguars.

Greeting People

Don't be shy about making eye contact and greeting strangers on the street. Belizeans are friendly!

The most common greeting is the catch-all 'Aarait?' (Alright?), to which you might respond 'Aarait, aarait?'

Tourism

Tourism is the country's top source of employment and investment. The challenge moving forward seems to be one of balancing the needs of the tourism industry with Belizeans' desire – expressed time and again – to protect the environment.

While the benefits of tourism for the country as a whole are acknowledged by Belizeans at nearly every level of society, Belize does not yet have the infrastructure to support the massive numbers of tourists that arrive each year. The most contentious tourism-related issue today concerns cruise-ship passengers. Belize is among the most popular stops on the Caribbean cruise-ship circuit, but many Belizeans believe these day visitors do not contribute enough to the local economy to justify their impact on environment and infrastructure. The past few years have seen increasing opposition to opening new areas to cruise-ship passengers, especially in Placencia, which is being opened to cruise tourism despite widespread local objection.

It's never easy to maintain the delicate balance between preserving natural resources and cashing in on economic opportunity. Most Belizeans are proud of their natural heritage and recognize that the goals of environmental conservation and economic prosperity are not mutually exclusive. How to pursue those goals is the subject of much debate.

Persistence of Poverty

Economic prosperity remains elusive for most people. A few entrepreneurs have made big money, and a small middle class survives on business, tourism and other professions. But many more Belizeans live on subsistence incomes in rudimentary circumstances. In 2010 an estimated 43% of the population lived below the poverty line.

Unemployment has reached 13% in recent years. And labor – whether washing hotel sheets, cutting sugarcane or packing bananas – is poorly paid when compared with the high cost of living. Although Belize has the second-highest per capita income in Central America, this does not reflect the huge disparity that exists between rich and poor.

Crime & Corruption

Crime is a fact of life in Belize, especially in Belize City whose murder rate slightly exceeds the average for Central America. Most violent crime is related to gang warfare and drug transactions, and incidents of violent crime against tourists are relatively infrequent. Still, petty crime (such as pickpocketing and break-ins) is common in tourist areas such as San Pedro and Placencia.

Belize's small Chinese minority has reported feeling especially targeted by criminals, and over the last few years has petitioned the government publicly for stronger law enforcement.

Perceived corruption in the government is also an issue. At election time both political parties come up with strategies to combat the corruption they claim the other party is perpetrating. Journalist and former police officer Wellington Ramos has written about the culture of corruption among civil servants, including in the police force. In an article published in *Caribbean News Now!* he speculates that some illegal activity – including drug running – is allowed to continue because of a few well-placed financial donations to political campaigns.

Belizeans tend to lean towards the side of optimism in general, but on issues concerning crime and corruption most express a deep sense of cynicism about the judicial process.

POPULATION: **333,200**

AREA: **8867 SQ MILES**

PROTECTED AREA: **4062 SQ MILES**

ANNUAL VISITORS: **1,040,000**

LITERACY RATE: **77%**

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: **13%**

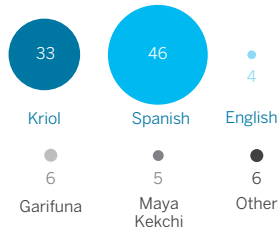
if Belize were 100 people



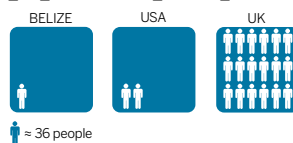
34 would be Mestizo 6 would be Garifuna
25 would be Creole 11 would be Maya
15 would be Spanish 9 would be other

languages

(% of population)



population per sq mile



History

Don't be fooled into believing that Central America's youngest independent nation is short on history. Though independence came only in 1981 (peacefully, we might add), many Belizean families trace their connection to the land back many generations. Most Belizeans have at least a tale or two to tell about the role played by their relatives in the creation of the nation they now proudly call home.

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.

Historians normally divide Maya chronology into three periods: Preclassic (around 2000 BC to AD 250), Classic (about AD 250 to 1000) and Postclassic (around AD 1000 to the arrival of the Spanish). It was in the Classic period that the Maya attained the intellectual, architectural and artistic achievements that set them apart. Maya civilization in Belize reached its peak between the 6th and 9th centuries AD, after which the Maya reverted to a more primitive cultural level, with a much-reduced population living away from their once great cities.

The first Spanish ships may have visited Belize's coast in 1508, possibly already bringing diseases that would later decimate the Maya population. Spanish expeditions – mostly from Mexico – succeeded in conquering Maya settlements as far south as Tipu. The Spanish set up Christian missions, but the Maya rebelled frequently and the Spanish did not stay.

All around the Caribbean, the 17th century was the golden age of piracy, as fortune-seekers looted slave and silver from trade ships. Another attractive prize from Spanish ships was logwood, a timber used by the wool industry in Europe. Some pirates decided that cutting this wood themselves might be as profitable as stealing it. The British pirate-woodcutters ended up congregating in the area of present-day Belize, where Spain exercised no effective control.

British settlements expanded around the mouth of the Belize River, eventually gaining the moniker British Honduras. Treaties in the late 18th century allowed the loggers to extract not only logwood, but also mahogany. In return, Britain agreed to abandon the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua, bringing to the Crown Colony thousands of new settlers, most of whom were slaves of African origin.

TIMELINE

2400 BC

The earliest known settlement in Belize is at Cuello in Orange Walk. It predates even the Preclassic period, and some archaeologists attribute the settlement to Mayan predecessors.

2000 BC –AD 250

The earliest sedentary Maya communities are formed during the Preclassic period. Among the earliest Maya settlements are Cahal Pech in Cayo and Lamanai in Orange Walk.

AD 250 –1000

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

Mexico and Spain's Central American colonies won their independence in the 1820s, but this didn't improve the lot of the Maya in the Yucatán and Guatemala. They finally rose up in bloody rebellion, however unsuccessfully. Large numbers of refugees from both sides of the conflict fled into British Honduras, founding the towns of Orange Walk and Corozal.

Organized political action against colonialism did not begin in British Honduras until after the Great Depression in the 1930s. The newborn nationalist movement started out protesting against unemployment and injustice in colonial society. The 1950s saw the formation of new political parties, national strikes and – eventually – the implementation of universal adult suffrage. In successive decades, British Honduras became an internally self-governing colony and changed its name to Belize, before finally gaining independence in 1981.

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 artworks. 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 homogeneous 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 around 1200 BC. In the north, majestic Lamanai, a major religious site for more than 2000 years, was founded as early as 1500 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

History Books

Thirteen Chapters of a History of Belize, Assad Shoman

Belize: A Concise History, PAB Thomson

The Caste War of the Yucatán, Nelson Reed

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.

1000–1600

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

1540s

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

1638

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.

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.

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, in the western Mountain Pine Ridge. At its height, in the 6th and 7th centuries, Caracol was a major urban metropolis, with more than 100,000 residents. It boasted first-rate jewelers and skilled artisans, 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%, from the lethal combination of the disease 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 counteroffensive 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 Ferdinand and Isabella had it made. Soon, Aztec gold and Incan silver overflowed in

1638–40

Maya rebellion finally drives out the Spanish for good, although they never relinquish their claim on the territory. The Maya population drops dramatically due to war, drought and disease.



• The Maya site of Xunantunich (p179)

1667

Britain and Spain sign a treaty which grants freedom of trade, as long as Britain agrees to control piracy. The result is an increase in logging and the acceleration of settlement of Belize.

PIRATES

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 Northeast Caye.

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 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 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 crown – poaching its 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.

As the British settlement became more profitable, the Spanish monarch became more irritable. Spain's 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

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.

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 Spaniards still claim the land.

1786

The Convention of London gives loggers the right to fell the forest, but not to establish any agriculture or government. However, an informal group of magistrates governs and agriculture exists.

1798

During the seven-day Battle of St George's Caye, British Baymen and Creole slaves defend their settlement from Spanish invasion, finally ending Spanish claims on the territory.

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 the first Mestizos (mixed-race Spanish and indigenous people) 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.

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 (Battle of St George's Caye Day).

In 1872 the Crown Lands Ordinance established Carib Reserves and Maya Reserves, which stripped the Garifuna and Maya of their property rights.

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 British 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

1832

A group of Garifuna from Honduras settle in present-day Dangriga. 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. Former slaves are unable to own property and are dependent on their ex-masters for work.

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.

1854

A new constitution establishes a Legislative Assembly of 18 elected, property-holding members, thus consolidating British political control of the territory.

Colonial Sights

Government House, Belize City

Museum of Belize, Belize City

St John's Cathedral, Belize City

larger and ties with the empire stronger, an oligarchy of leading families emerged. They may have descended from anti-establishment 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. As 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. Interracial 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 a high annual incidence 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 Spanish-descended landlords. The bloody War of the Castes raged for over

1862

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

1865

The Serpon sugar mill – the country's first steam-powered mill – is built on the Sittee River, ushering in an era of economic development.

1871

A new constitution establishes a nine-member Legislative Council, which governs the colony alongside the lieutenant governor.

1927

Successful international trading ties give rise to a prosperous Creole elite, which gains formal means of power when several representatives are appointed to the Legislative Council.

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.

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 Belizean 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 ethnic divisions, a unifying national identity formed slowly, and the Belizean independence movement displayed more patience than resistance.

1931

The deadliest hurricane in Belizean history hits on September 10, when the country is celebrating the national holiday. Belize City is destroyed, as is most of the northern coast; 2500 people die.

1950

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).

1961

Hurricane Hattie devastates Belize, killing hundreds of people and destroying Belize City. British naval troops arrive to control widespread violence and looting.

1971

In response to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Hattie, a new inland capital is established at Belmopan. The new National Assembly building is designed to resemble a Maya temple.

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 US 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 rallies in Battlefield Park in Belize City. 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 its territorial claim to Belize, which was later appropriated by Mexico and Guatemala. In the

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, the world's first wildlife sanctuary for the jaguar. By 1998, the protected realm of the Belizean jungle's king eventually reached more than half a million acres.

1972

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



★ Diving at Blue Hole (p120)

1975

Young activist attorneys Said Musa and Assad Shoman begin an intensive campaign to obtain international support for an independent Belize.

1981

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

MAYAN CODE

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

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 (Spanish/Latin American military dictator) rulers remained very preoccupied 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 was relocated to Belmopan, 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.

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 were long dominated by the founder of the nationalist People's United Party (PUP), George Price. His party won nearly every parliamentary election, consolidating political independence and promoting a new middle class. In 1996, at the age of 75, 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 and bribery. Supporters argue that other parties' politicians are guilty of similar crimes.

The frail economy inherited at the time of independence was slow to recover. Many Creoles began to look for work outside the country, forming sizeable 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.

1991

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.

1994

The United Kingdom withdraws military forces, with the exception of the British Army Training & Support Unit, which is established to assist the new Belize Defence Force.

1998

Promising to 'Set Belize Free,' the People's United Party (PUP) takes the national elections, winning 26 of 31 seats in the House of Representatives. Party leader Said Musa becomes prime minister.

2002

The purpose-built Tourism Village opens in Belize City to welcome cruise-ship passengers to Belize. The following year, the tiny country hosts more than half a million cruise-ship tourists.

From the time of independence, the Belize nation has doubled in size, from 150,000 in 1981 to 333,200 in 2010.

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, 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 cayes were designated as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves and marine preserves. 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 more than a million in 2010. 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 insights 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. However, the commercial aspects of cultural revival can be controversial, and one doesn't have to look far for examples where tourism and sanctity clash. One example concerns Cayo's Actun Tunichil Muknal cave, which is at once a sacred spot to the Maya and a top tourist attraction. After one visitor dropped a camera, fracturing an ancient human skull, cameras were banned from the cave. This example, among others, begs the question of how to promote cultural tourism while avoiding a carnival atmosphere.

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.

In 2008, the Belize and Guatemala governments signed an historic agreement to refer their territorial conflict to the International Court of Justice, pending approval from their electorates. The referenda – which must be held in both countries simultaneously – have not been scheduled due to the volatile political climate in Guatemala.

2006

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.

2008

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.

2011

Under pressure from local residents and hotel owners, the Belize Tourism Board decides against the development of a new cruise-ship port on Placencia peninsula.

2012

While the United Democratic Party (UDP) loses several seats in the general election, it holds onto its majority with 17 seats to the PUP's 14.

Ancient Maya

Though the Maya population of Belize is small (around 10% of the nation's population), imagining contemporary Belize without the Maya would be difficult. From the Cayo District's Caracol (which covers more area than Belize City and still boasts Belize's tallest structure) and Xunantunich to smaller archeological sites stretching from the nation's far north into its deep south, remnants of ancient Maya glory abound.

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

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 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 Maya 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

Books on Maya Art & Architecture

Maya Art & Architecture by Mary Ellen Miller
The Ancient Maya by Robert J Sharer

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 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. 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 *Oxwitza'* (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.

Preclassic Maya Sites

Cuello (p127),
Orange Walk

Lamanai (p130),
Orange Walk

Cerro Maya (p143),
Corozal

Caracol (p167),
Cayo

Altun Ha (p69),
Belize District

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.

THE HERO TWINS

According to the *Popol Vuh*, the Lords of Xibalba (the underworld) invited Hun Hunahpu and his brother to a game in the ballcourt. Upon losing the game, the brothers were sacrificed and the skull of one of them was suspended from a calabash tree as a show of triumph.

Along came an unsuspecting daughter of Xibalba. 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 Xbalanque.

The Hero Twins would go on to have many adventures, including vanquishing their evil half-brothers. Their final triumph was overcoming Xibalba and avenging the death of their father – first by fooling the Lords, and then by sacrificing them. After this, the twins ascended into the sky, being transformed into the sun and moon.

Mara Vorhees

POPOL VUH

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.

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, 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.

Maya Kingship

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

AMAZING MAIZE

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, 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. As one elder explained, ‘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.’

GUIDE TO THE GODS

The Maya worshiped 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

Itzamna God of Priestly Knowledge and Writing

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

Hunahpu & Xbalanque The Hero Twins

Ixchel Goddess of Fertility and Birth

Mara Vorhees

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 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 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

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.

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.

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 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.

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. 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. Thus the Maya developed a third calendar system that we call the Long Count, which pinpoints a date based on the number of days after the day of creation on August 13, 3114 BC it takes place.

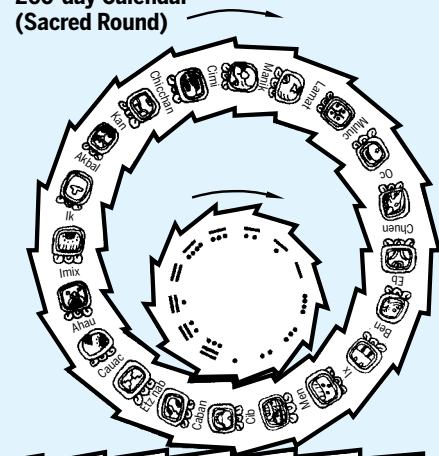
Let's use the date of Friday April 1, 2011 as an example. The Maya Long Count date corresponding to this day is 12.19.18.4.10, 3 Uayeb 11 Oc.

The first number, '12,' of this Long Count date represents how many *baktuns* (400 x 360 days: 144,000 days) have passed since the day of creation (thus 12 x 144,000 = 1,728,000 days). The second number, '19,' represents the number of *katuns* (20 x 360: 7200 days) that have passed, thus adding another 19 x 7200 = 136,800 days. The third number, '18,' is the number of *tuns* (360 days), ie 6480 days. The fourth number, '4,' is the number of *uinals* (20 days), ie 80 days. Finally the fifth number, '10,' is the number of whole days. Adding each of these numbers gives us the sum of 1,728,000 + 136,800 + 6480 + 80 + 10 = 1,871,370 days since the day of creation.

The Maya then added the Calendar Round date: the Haab date (3 Uayeb) and the Tzolkin date (11 Oc).

The Mayan Calendar System

260-day Calendar (Sacred Round)



Signs for the months



Part of 365-day Calendar (Secular Calendar)

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

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.

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.

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.

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 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 ended on December 23, AD 2012, beginning a new cycle. 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.

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.)

The People of Belize

Belize is a tiny country (population around 333,200), but it enjoys a diversity of ethnicities that is undeniably stimulating and improbably serene. Four main ethnic groups – Mestizo, Creole, Maya and Garifuna – comprise 76% of the population. The remaining 24% includes East Indians (people of Indian subcontinent origins), Chinese, Spanish, Arabs (generally Lebanese), the small but influential group of Mennonites, and North Americans and Europeans who have settled here in the last couple of decades.

Mestizo

Mestizos are people of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent. Over the last couple of decades, Mestizos have become Belize's largest ethnic group, now making up about 34% of the population. The first Mestizos arrived in the mid-19th century, when refugees from the Yucatán flooded into northern and western Belize during the War of the Castes. Their modern successors are the 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.

Creoles

Belizean Creoles are descendants of African slaves and British baymen, loggers and colonists. In the 1780s, after much conflict, the Spanish and the British finally reached an agreement allowing Brits to cut logwood from the area between the Rio Hondo and the Belize River (essentially the northern half of Belize). Three years later, according to the Convention of London, the area was extended south.

The convention also permitted the British to cut mahogany, a hardwood that was highly valued in Europe for making furniture. In return, Britain agreed to abandon the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua, prompting 2214 new settlers to come to Belize and quadrupling its non-Maya population. Three-quarters of the newcomers were slaves of African origin.

This influx of slave labor was convenient for the loggers. Mahogany is a much larger tree than logwood, and

WHO ARRIVED WHEN

2000 BC–AD 250

The oldest Maya sites in Belize – including Cahal Pech and Lamanai – date to the Preclassic period of this indigenous civilization.

16th century

By now dispersed and depopulated, the Maya nonetheless resist the Spanish attempts to convert and conquer them. Early Spanish explorers do not stay.

17th century

Belize becomes a popular hideaway for British Baymen, who eventually establish settlements along the coast and move inland.

1786

Britain cedes the coast of Nicaragua, bringing to Belize an influx of African slaves – the beginning of today's Creole population.

1832

After being deported from St Vincent and migrating from Honduras, a group of Garifuna settles in present-day Dangriga.

1847

Spanish, Mestizo and Maya peoples engage in the War of the Castes in the neighboring Yucatán Peninsula, sending streams of refugees to settle in Belize.

1958

After being driven out of Mexico, the first group of Mennonites settles in Belize.

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

it is more scattered in the forest, meaning that its extraction required more labor. Thus it was that mahogany played a key role in the creation of the Afro-Belizean population. After several generations of mixing with the loggers and other colonists, the so-called Creoles became the most populous ethnic group in Belize.

Belizean Creoles 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 is not easily intelligible to a speaker of standard English. Most of the people you'll encounter in Belize City and the center of the country will be Creole.

Maya

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 the Kekchi Maya in western Belize, and also 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.

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, 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 4000-plus deportees arrived at the Honduran coastal town of Trujillo. From here, these people of mixed Native American and African heritage began to spread along the Caribbean coast of Central America.

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.

BILEEZ KRIOL

Although English is the official language of Belize, when speaking among themselves most locals use Kriol (Creole). 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 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.

WHAT THEY BELIEVE IN BELIZE

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, 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.

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.

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. The anniversary of the arrival is celebrated as Garifuna Settlement Day, a national holiday.

Today the Belize Garifuna number around 20,000, about 6% of Belize's population, most of whom still live in the south of the country, from Dangriga to Punta Gorda. 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 ceremonies 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.

Garifuna culture has been enjoying a revival since the 1980s, due in no small part to the punta rock phenomenon. In 2001 Unesco declared Garifuna language, dance and music to be a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' – one of the initial selections for what has become the cultural equivalent of the World Heritage list.

The Mennonites

It almost seems like an aberration, an odd sight inspired by too much sun: women in bonnets and drape-like frocks; blond-haired, blue-eyed men in denim overalls and straw hats; the whole family packed onto a horse-drawn carriage, plodding along the side of the highway. In fact, it 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 explains the horse-drawn buggies).

Conservative Mennonite Groups

Shipyard, Orange
Walk

Little Belize,
Corozal

Progressive Mennonite Groups

.....
*Blue Creek, Orange
Walk*

.....
*Spanish Lookout,
Cayo*

Mennonites are devout pacifists and reject most of the political ideologies that societies have thrust upon them (including paying taxes). So they have a long history of moving about the world trying to find a place to live 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 upped and moved to isolated parts of Canada. After WWI, the Canadian government demanded that English be taught in Mennonites' schools and their exemption from conscription was reconsidered. Again, the most devout Mennonites moved, this time to Mexico. 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, and the settlements expanded.

Today, Belize has many different Mennonite communities. The progressives – many of whom came from Canada – speak English and have no qualms about using tractors or pickup trucks; other groups are strongly conservative and shun modern technologies.

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.

Rhythms of a Nation

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 what's special about the music is that the styles are uniquely Belizean.

Punta & Punta Rock

Musicians and linguists speculate that 'punta' comes from the word *bunda*, which means 'buttocks' in many West African languages. The word derivation is not certain, but it is appropriate. Heard at any sort of celebration or occasion, this traditional drumming style inspires Garifuna peoples across Central America to get up and shake their *bunda*.

The crowd circles around one couple, who gyrate their hips while keeping the upper body still. Traditionally, it is associated with death and ancestor worship, which explains why the dance is often performed at funerals and wakes.

Punta rock was born in the 1970s, when punta musician Pen Cayetano, a native of Dangriga, traveled around Central America and came to the realization that Garifuna traditions were in danger of withering away. He wanted to inspire young Garifuna people to embrace their own culture instead of listening to and copying music from other countries – and so he invented a style that is cool, contemporary but uniquely Belizean. He added the electric guitar to traditional punta rhythms and so was born punta rock.

Punta rock can be frenetic or it can be mellow, but at its base are always fast rhythms designed to get the hips swiveling. Like traditional punta, the dance is strongly sexually suggestive, with men and women gyrating their pelvises in close proximity to each other. The lyrics are almost always in Garifuna or Kriol, which differs from traditional punta.

Andy Palacio was a leading ambassador of punta rock until his untimely death in 2008. Palacio was known for mixing the Garifuna sound with all sorts of foreign elements, including pop, salsa and calypso beats. He deserves the credit for widening the audience for punta rock and turning it into the (unofficial) national music of Belize.

Another recent sensation is Supa G, who provides a fusion of punta rock, techno and even a spot of Mexican balladeering. 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), and Ideal, Mohobub and Myme Martinez are all members of the Turtle Shell Band who are enjoying success in their solo careers.

Originally from Hopkins, Aziatic has blended punta with R&B, jazz and pop, earning him an international audience, particularly in the US, where he now lives. The Coolie Rebels are a popular East Indian punta rock group from Punta Gorda.

Pen Cayetano is a polymathic figure who started the punta rock musical phenomenon, but he also does oil paintings portraying the Garifuna culture.

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.

PARANDA

In the liner notes of the album *Paranda*, Aurelio Martínez writes 'I feel very proud to be in the same album with such great *paranderos*. And in a symbolic way I feel like they are passing me the torch to carry on the tradition. To me this is more than a Grammy.'

Paranda

Shortly after the Garifuna arrived in Central America, they started melding African percussion and chanting with Spanish-style acoustic guitar and Latin rhythms. The resulting mix is known as *paranda*, named after a traditional African rhythm that is often at the root of the music. Unlike punta rock, *paranda* music is totally unplugged, played on wooden Garifuna drums, acoustic guitars and primitive percussion instruments such as shakers and turtle shells. It combines fast rhythms and lyrical melodies.

Although musicians have been playing *paranda* since the 19th century, it was not recorded and therefore rarely heard outside Garifuna communities. It is another genre of folk music that is in danger of dying out, as very few young musicians are making new *paranda* music. In the mid-1990s, producers from Stonetree Records recognized the importance of making a recording before the great *paranderos* passed. The so-called Paranda Project resulted in an album that featured eight of the most esteemed *paranda* musicians from Belize and Honduras.

The Belizean master of *paranda* is Paul Nabor from Punta Gorda, born in the 1920s, while the rising star is Aurelio Martínez, considered the future of the musical genre. The title of Martínez' album *Garifuna Soul* gives a good idea of what *paranda* is all about.

Brukdown

In the 18th and 19th centuries, most of the hard labor of logging – the intensive cutting and heavy lifting of the massive mahogany trees – was carried out by African slaves and their descendents. Here, in the logging camps of the Belize River valley, workers soothed their weary bodies and souls by drinking, dancing and making their own unique music, known as *brukdown*.

Belize's most prominent Creole music, *brukdown* is deeply rooted in Africa, with layered rhythms and call-and-response vocals. Back in the camps, it was normally 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, modern musicians might add a drum or an electric guitar.

Like the Garifuna music, *brukdown* is predominantly a rural folk tradition that is rarely recorded. The exception is the so-called King of *Brukdown*, Wilfred Peters, and his band Mr Peters' Boom & Chime. Mr Peters made music for more than 60 years before his death in 2010, and became a national icon and the country's best-loved Creole musician. In 1997 Queen Elizabeth II awarded him an MBE for his cultural contributions.

GARI-FUSION

In contemporary Belize there has been a resurgence of Garifuna music, popularized by musicians such as Andy Palacio, Mohobub Flores and Adrian Martinez. These musicians have taken many aspects of traditional Garifuna music and fused them with more modern sounds. Andy Palacio's last album, *Watina*, was a collaboration with other musicians, known as the Garifuna Collective. Each track on the album is based on a traditional Garifuna rhythm, and all of the songs are in the Garifuna language, which is a novelty itself. Rooted in musical and folkloric tradition, the album exhibits remembrance of the past and hope for the future of the Garifuna people.

Umalali, which means 'voice' in the Garifuna language, is the name of an album created by the Garifuna Women's Project. In 2002, Garifuna women from all around Central America met in the village of Hopkins to record their most beloved songs and musical stories. Their voices were then layered on top of the rhythms and instrumentation of the Garifuna Collective, fusing many elements of the rich but endangered culture.

THREE KINGS OF BELIZE

Three men. Three different geographic regions, three different cultures, three different musical traditions. What these men have in common – besides their native land – is their passion for an art that is fading, even as they fade.

Three Kings of Belize is a documentary by Katia Paradis (2007) that follows three pre-eminent musicians, each considered the 'king' of his genre. Paul Nabor is a legendary Garifuna *parandero* from Punta Gorda, Wilfred Peters was a Creole *brukdown* accordionist from Belize City, and Florencio Mess is a traditional Maya harpist living in the farming village of San Pedro Columbia. The film captures the artists in their homes, interacting with their families, recalling stories from their lives and, of course, making music.

The recurring theme – expressed by all three gentlemen – is a frustration, and perhaps a fear, that young people no longer make this music. There is a sense that when these old guys die, their music might die too. But *Three Kings* is not just about frustration or fear. It is wistful, perhaps, but ultimately accepts that nothing is eternal.

In June 2010, Wilfred Peters died at the age of 79. Hundreds of people attended his funeral, including the prime minister and the leader of the opposition – proof that music is greater than politics. The local newspaper noted that the funeral service was 'far from a solemn occasion,' with plenty of *brukdown* beats to accompany the hymns. 'The service concluded with a rising rendition of *brukdown* music with the cathedral's bells tolling in the background,' it said.

If Mr Peters was the King of Brukdwn, the Queen of Brukdwn is undoubtedly Leela Vernon. A resident of Punta Gorda, Leela Vernon is a high-energy singer and dancer. In addition to making four albums, she has also started a dance group to preserve traditional Creole dance.

Kungo Muzik

'This muzik is one of the heart beats felt out of Afrika coming by way of Belize.' So says Brother David Obi, better known in Belize as Bredda David. And he should know, as he created the fast-paced fusion of Creole, Caribbean and African styles known as *kungo muzik*.

Maya

The Maya have been making music for thousands of years. In contemporary Maya music, bones and rattles are used for percussion, while other instruments include whistles, flutes and horns made from conch shells. The ocarina is an ancient wind instrument that is something like a flute with a wider body and 10 to 12 finger holes. The same types of instruments have been found as artifacts at archaeological sites all around Central America.

Originally from Guatemala, Pablo Collado is a Maya flautist who now resides in Benque del Carmen. His new-age-style music is light and relaxing, often incorporating sounds that mimic nature, such as the gurgling of water or the calls of birds or insects.

Also popular among the Maya is the marimba, a percussion instrument that resembles a xylophone, except it is made of wood and so produces a mellower sound. Marimba music is used during Maya religious ceremonies.

Stringed instruments like the guitar, violin and harp are used in Maya ceremonial and recreational music. Crafted from native woods like mahogany or cedar, harps were traditionally carved with animal symbols, representing the Maya gods. Florencio Mess not only plays the Maya harp, but also makes these instruments from hand in the traditional style. His music – based on age-old melodies and rhythms – has been called 'a living connection to ancient Maya culture.'

Top Albums

Best of Punta Rock, Pen Cayetano & Mohobub Flores

Bumari, Lugua Centeno

Garifuna Soul, Aurelio Martinez

Brukdown Reloaded, Mr Peters' Boom & Chime

Beyond Rice & Beans

A staple of Belizean cuisine, rice and beans comes in two varieties: 'rice and beans,' where the two are cooked together; and 'beans and rice,' where beans in a soupy stew are served separately in a bowl. Both variations are prepared with coconut milk and red beans, which distinguishes them from other countries' rice and beans. You're bound to eat a lot of rice and beans (or beans and rice) while you are in Belize, but Belizean cuisine has more depth than would first appear.

Seafood

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').

When it comes to seafood in Belize, lobster plays 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. During conch season, from October to June, it is often prepared as *ceviche* (seafood marinated in lemon or lime juice, garlic and seasonings) or conch fritters (and it's considerably cheaper than lobster).

Aside from the shellfish, the local waters are home to snapper, grouper, barracuda, jacks and tuna, all of which make a tasty filet or steak.

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.

Meat & Poultry

Seafood is popular on the coast (and especially in tourist towns), but most often the main course in Belize comes from a chicken. Poultry serves as an accompaniment for rice and beans, a stuffing for burritos and *salbutes* (a variation on the tortilla), and a base for many soups and stews.

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

Pastries

Almost every town in Belize has at least one shop where the shelves are lined with sweet and savory pastries to make you drool. If you're looking for a quick, tasty and cheap snack, you can't go wrong at the local bakery. Grab a tray and a pair of tongs and make your selection from the delectable treats on display.

While these pastries are pretty to look at and delicious to eat, they are not the best in Belizean baked goods. That title belongs to fresh-baked johnnycakes, or biscuits, smothered in butter, beans or melted cheese.

Cookbooks

Mmm... A Taste of
Belizean Cooking,
Tracy Brown da
Langan

Foods of the Maya,
Nancy & Jeffrey
Gerlach

Johnnycakes are the quintessential breakfast in Belize, but they are also served throughout the day as a snack or side dish.

Every cuisine in the world includes some version of fried dough, usually topped with fruit or sugar. In Belize, it's called fry jacks. Again, it can be served sweet or savory, usually for breakfast but also throughout the day.

Maya Specialties

Maya meals are sometimes on offer in the villages of southern Belize and in Petén, Guatemala. *Caldo* is a hearty, spicy stew, usually made with chicken (or sometimes beef or pork), corn and root vegetables, and served with tortillas. *Ixpa'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).

Garifuna Specialties

Garifuna culinary traditions come from St Vincent. When the Garifuna people came to Belize, they brought their own traditions, recipes and even ingredients, meaning that cuisine is one more way that Garifuna culture is unique.

One of the most important staples, cassava, is a starch, like a sweet potato, used to make cassava bread. A *varasa* is like a tamale, but it's made from a fruit that is a cross between a banana and a plantain, picked while it's still hard and cooked until it's soft.

A 'boil-up' is a stew of root vegetables and beef or chicken. This is the dish that is most common on restaurant menus, although it is traditionally prepared for Garifuna Settlement Day.

Other Garifuna specialties feature fresh fish, bananas or plantains, and coconut milk. *Alabundiga* is 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. Possibly the most beloved Garifuna dish, hudut is made from plantain, cooked until tender, mashed with a big mortar and pestle, then cooked with local fish like snapper and coconut milk.

Food Festivals

Lobster Festivals
in Placencia, Caye
Caulker and San
Pedro

Fish Fest, Punta
Gorda

Cashew Festival,
Crooked Tree

Cacao Festival,
Toledo District

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.

Restaurants for Foodies

Sandro, Caye Caulker

Ko-Ox Han-nah, San Ignacio

Hidden Treasures, San Pedro

Capricorn Restaurant, San Pedro

Rumfish, Placencia

Cerros Beach Resort, Cerros

Mestizo Specialties

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.

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. Other Mexican snacks are also ubiquitous, including *salbutes*, *garnaches*, *enchalades* and *panades* – all variations on the tortilla, beans and cheese theme (*salbutes* usually add chicken, *panades* generally have fish). You'll also come across burritos and tamales (wads of corn dough with a filling of meat, beans or chilies).

Drinks

If you want to know what tropical paradise tastes like, sample the fresh fruit juices that are blended and sold at street carts and kiosks around the country. Usually available in whatever flavor is seasonal (lime, orange, watermelon, grapefruit, papaya and mango), they're delicious and refreshing – and healthy!

In recent years, Belize has started catering to coffee drinkers with its own homegrown beans, even though Belize lacks the high altitudes that benefit other Central American coffee-growing countries. 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.

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 (p187) 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.' Sharp also produces a range of mixed sauces (habaneros with prickly pears or citrus fruit), pepper jellies and tropical jams.

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. Belikin Regular is a tasty lager, but Belikin also brews a lower-calorie, lower-alcohol beer, called Lighthouse Lager, as well as Belikin Stout and Belikin Premium.

In a Caribbean country that produces so much sugarcane, it's not surprising that Belize's number one liquor is rum. 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 (lime, 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.

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

Wild Things

Belize's sparse human population and its history of relatively low-key human impact have yielded a vast diversity of animal and plant species. The country has an admirable conservation agenda, pursued by governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) since Belizean independence in 1981. This has led to the nation becoming a top destination for anyone interested in 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.

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.

Animals

Land Mammals

Felines

Everyone dreams of seeing a jaguar in the wild. Jaguars are found across the country, and live in large expanses of thick forest. The largest populations and most frequently reported sightings are near Chan Chich Lodge and at the Río Bravo Conservation & Management Area in Orange Walk. You might also see their tracks or the remains of their meals in Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, which was established in Stann Creek as a jaguar reserve in the 1980s. But although Belize has healthy numbers of the biggest feline in the western hemisphere (which measures up to 6ft long and 250lb in weight), your best chance of seeing one is still at the Belize Zoo.

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 in Belize District, established in the 1980s to protect this noisy animal. The sanctuary is now home to some 3000 individual monkeys. Other places to see and hear howlers include: Lamanai in Orange Walk; Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary in Stann Creek; Chan Chich and Río Bravo in Orange Walk; and Tikal National Park in Guatemala. The howler's eerie dawn and evening cries – more roars than howls – can carry 2 miles across the treetops.

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

Other Land Mammals

Visitors and residents alike are often surprised to learn that the national animal of Belize is Baird's tapir (sometimes called the mountain cow). The tapir is related to the horse, but it has shorter legs and tail, a stouter build and small eyes, ears and intellect. Baird's tapir is a herbivore and –

MIND THE MANATEES

Belonging to a unique group of sea mammals comprising only four species worldwide, manatees are thought to be distantly related to elephants. However, with at least 55 million years separating the two, their kinship is only apparent in a few fairly obscure anatomical similarities and a broadly similar diet. Like elephants, manatees are herbivores and require huge amounts of vegetation each day. Grazing on a wide variety of aquatic plants, a large adult can process as much as 110lb every 24 hours, producing a prodigious amount of waste in the process – fresh floating droppings (similar to a horse's) and almost continuous, bubbling streams of flatulence are useful ways to find them. (Not too appetizing, but it does make them easier to spot.) The best places for a chance to observe manatees are around 'blowing holes' or *sopladeros* (deep hollows where manatees congregate to wait for the high tide).

Manatees are reputed to have excellent hearing, but they're most sensitive to fairly high frequency sounds, such as their squeaking vocalizations. Apparently, the engine of a motorboat is not a high-frequency sound, which means that quiet approaches are often rewarded with good viewing, although sadly it also makes them vulnerable to collisions with these boats.

interestingly – a daily bather. It tends to be shy, so it's infrequently spotted and likely to run like mad when approached.

You have better chances of catching sight of a peccary, a wild pig that weighs 50lb or more. There are two types, whose names – white-lipped peccary and collared peccary – define their differences. Both types of peccaries are active by day and they travel in groups, making them relatively easy to check off your wildlife list. Be aware that these meanies can run fast. If you get in the way of a pack of wild peccaries, experts advise you to climb a tree (they can't catch you up there).

Resembling a large spotted guinea pig, the *gibnut* (or *paca*) is a nocturnal rodent, growing up to 2ft long and weighing up to 22lb, that often lives in pairs. You might see a *gibnut* in the wild, and you are also likely to see one on the menu at your local Belizean restaurant. The agouti is similar but diurnal and more closely resembles a rabbit, with strong back legs. 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 cute, rusty-brown, raccoon-like creature with a long nose and ringed tail that it often holds upright when walking. It's not uncommon to see 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.

Marine Life

West Indian manatees inhabit the waters around river mouths, in coastal lagoons and around the cays. The sure-fire places to spot these gentle, slow-moving creatures are Southern Lagoon, near Gales Point Manatee village, and Swallow Caye, off Belize City. Manatees are the only vegetarian sea mammals in existence. Typically 10ft long and weighing 1000lb, adults eat 100lb to 150lb of vegetation each day (especially sea grass). Only a few hundred manatees survive in Belizean waters.

Belizean waters are home to the world's largest fish. Whale sharks grow up to a whopping 60ft (although the average length is 25ft) and weigh up to 15 tons. They hang out at Gladden Spit, near Placencia. Between March and June – usually during the 10 days after a full moon – these filter-feeding behemoths come in close to the reef to dine on spawn. Fun fact: whale sharks can live up to 150 years.

Wildlife-Watching

Community
Baboon
Sanctuary

Río Bravo
Conservation
& Management
Area

Shipstern Nature
Reserve

Gales Point
Manatee or
Swallow Caye

Cockscomb
Basin Wildlife
Sanctuary

Belize Zoo

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.

Bird-Watching

*Crooked Tree,
Belize*

*Half Moon Caye,
Lighthouse Reef*

*New River, Orange
Walk*

*La Milpa, Orange
Walk*

*Red Bank, Stann
Creek*

Other sharks – nurse, reef, lemontip and hammerhead – and a variety of rays often make appearances around the reefs and islands. Sharing the water with the larger animals is a kaleidoscope of reef fish, ranging from steely-eyed barracuda and groupers to colorful parrotfish, angelfish and butterfly fish. The fish frolic amid a huge variety of coral formations, from hard elkhorn and staghorn coral (named because they branch like antlers) to gorgonian fans and other soft formations. Belizean waters host more than 500 species of fish and 110 species of coral, plus an amazing variety of sponges.

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 in Belize District and at the San Ignacio Resort Hotel.

Belize is home to two species of crocodile: the American crocodile and Morelet's crocodile, both of which are on the endangered species list. The American usually grows to 13ft and can live in both saltwater and freshwater. The smaller Morelet's crocodile, which grows to 8ft, lives only in fresh water. 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 some 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 outings are organized in the May to October laying season from Gales Point Manatee village.

Up to 60 species of snake inhabit the forests and waters of Belize, but only a handful are dangerous. The nasties include the 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.

Birds

Ornithologists have identified 570 bird species in Belize, 20% of them winter migrants from North America. You're likely to see interesting birds almost anywhere at any time, although February to May are particularly good months. Wetlands, lagoons, forested riverbanks and forest areas with clearings (the setting of many jungle lodges and Maya ruins) are good for observing a variety of birds.

Sea Birds

Magnificent frigate birds constantly soar over the coastline on pointed, prehistoric-looking wings which have a span of up to 6ft. They have difficulty taking off from the ground, so their method of hunting is to plummet 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.

Swooping and soaring with the frigate birds are neotropic cormorants, brown pelicans, nine species of heron, eight species of tern and six species of gull. The rare red-footed booby bird lives at Half Moon Caye.

Raptors & Vultures

Raptors are predators that 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, as is the ornate hawk eagle, which is 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 national bird of Belize is the keel-billed toucan. This is the species of Toucan Sam, the hungry bird who knows to 'follow your nose' to find the fruit loops. A black bird with a yellow face and neck, it has a huge multicolored bill. The 'keel bill' is actually very light and almost hollow, enabling the bird 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. They are surprisingly aggressive and are known to raid other birds' nests for breakfast.

The beautiful scarlet macaw, a member of the parrot family, is highly endangered. Belize's small population of the bird – possibly under 200 – lives most of the year in remote jungles near the Guatemalan border, but from January to March they can be seen at the southern village of Red Bank, 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 in April and May.

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

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

BELIZE'S WORLD HERITAGE SITE

In 1996 Unesco designated the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System 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 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. The sites are:

- ◆ Bacalar Chico National Park & Marine Reserve, Ambergris Caye
- ◆ Blue Hole Natural Monument, Lighthouse Reef
- ◆ Half Moon Caye Natural Monument, Lighthouse Reef
- ◆ Glover's Reef Marine Reserve, Central Cayes
- ◆ South Water Caye Marine Reserve, Central Cayes
- ◆ Laughing Bird Caye National Park, Central Cayes
- ◆ Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve, Punta Gorda

'One perceives a forest of jagged, gnarled trees protruding from the surface of the sea, roots anchored in deep, black, foul-smelling mud, verdant crowns arching toward a blazing sun...Here is where land and sea intertwine, where the line dividing ocean and continent blurs.' – Klaus Rutzler and Ilka Feller, *Scientific American*, March 1996

Plants

Belize is home to more than 4000 species of flowering plant, including some 700 trees (similar to the total of the USA and Canada combined) and 304 orchids. Nonspecialists can usefully distinguish three chief varieties of forest in the country: coastal forests (19%), moist, tropical broad-leaf forests (68%), and pine and savanna (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, the sap of which 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. 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.

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 a herbal remedy for everything from stomach ills to sexual failures. But there are only a few remaining healers who are skilled and knowledgeable in 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 in Cayo). 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 can be 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

RAINFOREST

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 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 more than 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 more than 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 & Savanna

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

The Mountain Pine Ridge 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.

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

Land & Environment

Happily, the Belize government and the populace have recognized that their country's 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 parks and reserve areas; however, these areas are only as inviolable as the degree to which the community is able to protect them.

Forest cover in
1980: 75.9%
Forest cover in
2010: 62.7%

National Parks & Protected Areas

About 44% of Belizean territory, a little over 4062 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 NGOs

Belize Audubon Society (www.belizeaudubon.org)

Oceanic Society (www.oceanic-society.org)

Programme for Belize (www.pfbelize.org)

Toledo Institute for Development & Environment (www.tidebelize.org)

Wildlife Conservation Society (www.wcs.org)

Ecotourism

Belize practically invented the concept of ecotourism. Its ecolodges allow guests to live in luxury but also in harmony with the creatures and plants in their midst, while its educational tours and activities allow travelers to learn about the forest and the reef without harming the 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.

There is no doubt about the economical boon of tourist dollars flowing from visiting cruise liners; however, the recent increase in cruise-ship traffic in Belizean waters has worried many conservationists and citizens, who view the huge numbers of tourists as disturbing wildlife and overwhelming the infrastructure.

Development along the coast caters to the growing demands of tourists. A recent 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. To the relief of many, the petition was rejected.

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 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. It's predominantly the expats – who came to Belize to 'escape civilization' – who complain about the rampant level of 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 amount of protected territory, deforestation in Belize has been slow and steady since independence. Agriculture and aquaculture, development and illegal harvesting all contribute to the felling of the forests, which is taking place at a rate of 0.6% per year.

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 impedes the fight against poaching and illegal extraction.

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.

Energy Management

The problem of power is certainly not unique to Belize. Like many other countries, Belize consumes more than it can produce, and its consumption is increasing by 10 to 15% per year. Historically, Belize has imported much of its electricity from Mexico, although the country is implementing a multiprong strategy to reduce this dependency.

Hydro

Two plants harness the power of the Macal River in Cayo to produce hydroelectric power. Built in 1995, the Mollejon Dam is limited by the storage capacity of its reservoir, but since 2006, the huge Chalillo Dam has fed both plants. The dam has the advantage that it can generate power in the evening (peak consumption hours), when the imported electricity is more expensive. The construction of the Chalillo Dam sparked massive controversy, as critics voiced concerns about the damage inflicted on wildlife habitats in the river valley, as well as the financial viability of the project.

Ecotodges

*Calypso Beach
Retreat, Long
Caye*

*Cerros Beach
Resort, Corozal*

*Chan Chich
Lodge, Orange
Walk District*

*Black Rock River
Lodge, Cayo
District*

*Thatch Caye
Resort, Central
Cayes*

*Cotton Tree
Lodge, Deep
South*

Estimated
number of cruise
ship tourists in
2011: 788,494

Estimated
number of over-
night tourists in
2011: 250,000

Bruce Barcott
investigates the
construction of
the Chalillo Dam
and the efforts
of Sharon Matola
(founder of the
Belize Zoo) to
stop it, in his fas-
cinating book *The
Last Flight of the
Scarlet Macaw*.

BELIZE'S PROTECTED AREAS AT A GLANCE

PROTECTED AREA	FEATURES
Actun Tunichil Muknal	spectacular cave with ancient Maya sacrificial remains
Bacalar Chico National Park & Marine Reserve	northern Ambergris Caye barrier reef and surrounding waters
Blue Hole Natural Monument	400ft-deep ocean-filled sinkhole home to sharks
Caracol Archaeological Reserve	Belize's biggest and greatest ancient Maya city
Caye Caulker Marine Reserve	barrier reef reserve with plentiful marine life
Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary	large rainforest reserve for jaguars, with huge range of wildlife
Community Baboon Sanctuary	forest sanctuary for black howler monkeys
Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary	wetland area with huge bird population
Gales Point Wildlife Sanctuary	inland lagoons with Belize's largest colony of manatees
Gladden Spit & Silk Cayes Marine Reserve	barrier reef and island reserve visited by whale sharks
Glover's Reef Marine Reserve	beautiful atoll with coral-filled lagoon and seas swarming with marine life
Guanacaste National Park	small forest park centered on huge guanacaste tree
Half Moon Caye Natural Monument	lush bird-sanctuary atoll island with spectacular under-water walls offshore
Hol Chan Marine Reserve	waters off Ambergris Caye with the famous Shark Ray Alley Protected Area
Laughing Bird Caye National Park	island on unusual faro reef in waters full of marine life
Mayflower Bocawina National Park	rainforest park with hills, waterfalls, howler monkeys and hundreds of bird species
Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary	small private sanctuary on savannah and tropical forest
Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve	upland area with rare pine forests and many waterfalls
Nohoch Che'en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve	stretch of Caves Branch River running through caverns
Port Honduras Marine Reserve	inshore islands and coastal waters important for marine life
Río Bravo Conservation & Management Area	large rainforest reserve with great wildlife diversity
St Herman's Blue Hole National Park	small rainforest park with cave and swimming hole
Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve	beautiful barrier reef islets with healthy coral and abundant marine life
Shipstern Nature Reserve	wetlands and rare semideciduous hardwood forests with diverse wildlife, including wood-stork colony
South Water Caye Marine Reserve	large reserve encompassing parts of barrier reef and inshore islands
Swallow Caye Wildlife Sanctuary	small island with permanent manatee population
Temash-Sarstoon National Park	rainforests, wetlands and rivers with huge variety of wildlife

ACTIVITIES	BEST TIME TO VISIT	PAGE
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diving, snorkeling	Dec-Aug	p120
exploring ruins, bird-watching	year-round	p167
diving, snorkeling	year-round	p105
hiking, wildlife and plant observation, river-tubing	Dec-May	p202
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birding, walking, canoeing, horseback riding	Feb-May	p71
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diving, snorkeling, swimming, fishing, sailing, kayaking	Dec-Aug	p193
bird-watching, swimming, plant identification	year-round	p150
diving, snorkeling, bird-watching, kayaking	Dec-Aug	p121
diving, snorkeling	year-round	p82
diving, snorkeling	Dec-Aug	p31
hiking, bird-watching, swimming	year-round	p198
bird-watching, wildlife-watching, canoeing, caving	year-round	p76
walking, swimming, bird-watching, horseback riding	year-round	p164
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bird-watching, wildlife-watching, trail hikes, canoeing	year-round	p133
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diving, fishing, kayaking, snorkeling, swimming	Dec-May	p215
wildlife observation	year-round	p144
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manatee observation	year-round	p108
wildlife observation, walking, boat trips	Dec-May	p227

BLACK GOLD

Early in the millennium, the possibility of sweet crude oil in Belize caused dollar signs to start flashing inside the minds of Belizean officials and international prospectors. Eighteen oil companies obtained licenses for exploration all around the country, sometimes without conducting an environmental impact survey or campaigning for community involvement.

After several years, the Irish-owned Belize Natural Energy (BNE) found what they were looking for in Spanish Lookout: oil fields with commercially viable quantities. In 2010, BNE discovered another oil field near Belmopan.

Conservationists fear the environmental degradation that may result from further oil exploration and extraction. There is also significant overlap between the petroleum map and the protected-areas map, threatening the sanctity of these spots. In the wake of the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, an umbrella group of NGOs called for a ban on all offshore drilling, especially in the Belize Barrier Reef, which has been designated as a World Heritage site.

Under pressure from local communities and conservationists, in 2007 the government of Belize instituted 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. Several years down the line, however, there are concerns about the success of this fund, with the local press asserting the revenues – estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars – have been 'absorbed by the government for its day-to-day operating expenses.'

The highest peak in the Maya Mountains is Doyle's Delight (3687ft), named after Arthur Conan Doyle, author of *The Lost World*. He wrote 'there must be something wild and wonderful in a country such as this, and we're the men to find it out!'

Cogeneration

A byproduct of the processing of sugarcane, *bagasse* is also a fuel. In 2009, the sugar industry opened a cogeneration facility that would supply 13.5 megawatts to the national grid, in addition to powering the sugar mill and other industry facilities.

Solar

Solar power is becoming more viable on a small scale, but it does not yet offer a feasible solution for the energy needs of the country. Solar power is still relatively expensive and – significantly – it can't produce power at night. That said, it has become a popular alternative for some ecolodges and even some villages that are off the grid. In 2011, the government of Belize signed an agreement with the University of Belize to construct photovoltaic panels, which generate solar electricity. Proponents of alternative energy are hopeful that the so-called Photovoltaic Project might lead to a long-term, large-scale commitment to solar energy.

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Directory A-Z

Accommodations

Budget Categories

Budget Within this range the best value is usually provided by small, often family-run guesthouses. Only the cheapest budget options have shared bathrooms or cold showers; a few places provide dorm accommodations.

Midrange Midrange embraces many hotels, more-comfortable guesthouses and most of the small-scale lodges and resorts. Many places in this range have their own restaurants and bars, and offer arrangements for activities, tours and other services. The range of accommodations and service is wide within this category.

Top End Top-end accommodations can be seriously sumptuous. These are resorts, lodges and classy hotels with large, well-appointed rooms and plenty of other facilities, from restaurants and bars to private beaches, spas, pools, horse stables, dive shops and walking trails. Many of these places have

their own unique style and atmosphere created with the help of architecture, decor, location and layout.

Seasons

Most establishments have high- and low-season prices, often with extra-high prices for the peak weeks.

Low season May to November

High season December to May

GREEN ACCOMMODATIONS

Ecotourism means big business in Belize, and sometimes it seems like every hotel, hostel, lodge, resort and guesthouse is a friend and protector of Mother Earth. But attaching 'eco' to the front of a name does not necessarily make it so. This prefix may mean that the enterprise is taking serious steps to reduce its environmental impact, whether by practicing recycling, implementing alternative energy, participating in conservation programs or educating its guests. On the other hand, it may mean nothing more than a remote location or rustic accommodations. Most likely, the truth is somewhere in between.

Many lodges, resorts, hostels and guesthouses are implementing 'ecopolicies' (with varying degrees of effectiveness). Look for the ♻ icon in the listings.

Peak season December 15 to January 15, plus Easter week

Taxes & Service Charges

Prices listed by Lonely Planet do not include the 9% hotel room tax or the (sometimes obligatory) service charges which might be added at some top-end places. There is some talk of this tax being raised to 12.5% sometime in the future.

Types of Accommodations

Cabañas & Cabins

These two terms are pretty well interchangeable and can refer to any kind of free-standing, individual accom-

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modations structure. You'll find cabins in every class of accommodations: they can be made of wood, concrete or brick, and be roofed with palm thatch, tin or tiles. They may be small, bare and cheap, or super-luxurious and stylish, with Balinese screens, Japanese bathrooms and Maya wall hangings. Locales vary from beachside, riverside or jungle to on the grounds of a hotel alongside other types of accommodations.

Camping

Belize does not have many dedicated campsites, but there are some (mainly budget) accommodations that provide camping space on their grounds, and just a few of those have gear for rent.

Guesthouses

Guesthouses are affordable, affable places to stay, with just a few rooms and usually plenty of personal attention from your hosts. Most are simply decorated but clean and comfortable. Rooms usually have a private bathroom with hot water. You'll find guesthouses in towns or on the coast or cayes. Some guesthouses (also called B&Bs) provide breakfast.

Located in the southern Toledo District, the Toledo Ecotourism Association (p227) runs an excellent village guesthouse program that enables travelers to stay in the area's Maya villages.

Hotels

A hotel is, more or less, any accommodations that generally doesn't give itself another name (although some smaller hotels call themselves inns). You'll find hotels in villages and towns of all sizes. Some offer lovely rooms and extra amenities like a restaurant or a pool, while others have fewer creature comforts. Hotels generally don't offer a vast range of tours and activities to their guests, but there will be exceptions to this.

SLEEPING PRICE RANGES

The following price ranges refer to a double room with bathroom during high season. Unless otherwise stated, a tax of 9% is added to the price; there is talk of this tax going up to 12.5%.

\$ less than BZ\$90

\$\$ BZ\$90-240

\$\$\$ more than BZ\$240

Lodges

In Belize the term 'lodge' usually means a comfortable hotel in a remote location, be it in the Cayo jungles or the offshore cayes. Most lodges focus on activities such as diving, fishing, horseback riding or jungle or river adventures, aiming to provide comfortable accommodations and good meals to sustain their guests between outings. Many lodges have gorgeous island, beach or forest settings, and they tend to be on the expensive side, due mainly to their high standards, wide range of amenities and sometimes remote locations.

Rental Accommodations

In main tourist destinations such as San Pedro, Caye Caulker and Placencia, there are houses and apartments for rent for short stays or by the week or month. If you plan a long stay you'll certainly cut costs by renting your own place. Plan ahead: these places can get booked up.

Resorts

Resorts have a great deal in common with lodges – again they tend to be among the more expensive options and can be found both inland and by the sea. If there is any real distinction, it's that the emphasis in resorts tends to be marginally less on activities and slightly more on relaxation.

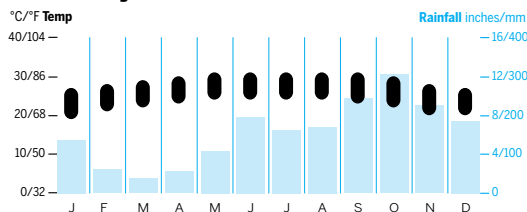
Customs Regulations

Duty-free allowances on entering Belize:

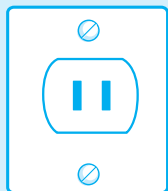
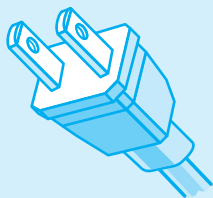
- ➔ 1L of wine or spirits.
 - ➔ 200 cigarettes, 250g of tobacco or 50 cigars.
- It is illegal to leave the country with ancient Maya artifacts, turtle shells, unprocessed coral and fish (unless you have obtained a free export permit from the Fisheries Department). It is also illegal to take firearms or ammunition into or out of Belize.

Climate

Belize City



Electricity



110V/60Hz

Embassies & Consulates

A few countries have embassies in Belize. Many others handle relations with Belize from their embassies in countries such as Mexico or Guatemala, but may have an honorary consul in Belize to whom travelers can turn as a first point of contact.

Australian Embassy (☎+52-55-1101-2200; www.mexico.embassy.gov.au) The Australian embassy in Mexico handles relations with Belize.

Canadian Honorary Consul (☎223-1060; cdncon.bze@btl.net; 80 Princess Margaret Dr, Belize City; ☎9am-2pm Mon-Fri)

French Honorary Consul (☎223-0399; malas@btl.net; 109 New Rd, Belize City)

German Honorary Consul (☎222-4369; seni@cisco.com.bz; Western Hwy, Mile 3½, Belize City)

Guatemalan Embassy (☎223-3150; embbelice@minex.gob.gt; 8 A St, Belize City; ☎8:30am-12:30pm Mon-Fri)

Honduran Embassy (☎224-5889; embahonbe@yahoo.com; 6199 Buttonwood Bay, Belize City; ☎9am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri)

Mexican Embassy (☎822-0406; www.sre.gob.mx/belize; Embassy Sq, Belmopan; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Netherlands Honorary Consul (☎223-2953; mchulseca@btl.net; cnr Baymen Av & Calle Al Mar, Belize City)

UK High Commission (☎822-2146; <http://ukinbelize.fco.gov.uk>; Embassy Sq, Belmopan; ☎8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Thu, 8am-2pm Fri)

US Embassy (☎822-4011; <http://belize.usembassy.gov>; Floral Park Rd, Belmopan; ☎8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri)

Food

More more details on Belize's culinary delights, see the Beyond Rice & Beans chapter (p278).

Gay & Lesbian Travelers

GLBT travelers should be advised that male homosexuality is illegal in Belize, although female homosexuality is legal. Tourists have not been prosecuted for homosexuality, but local people have been arrested and jailed. Generally speaking, Belize is a tolerant society with a 'live and let live' attitude. But underlying Central American machismo and traditional religious belief, as well as legal prohibitions, mean that same-sex couples should be discreet. Some useful resources:

Gay Travel Belize (www.gaytravelbelize.com) Includes country-wide information and accommodations, although it's primarily focused on San Pedro.

International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association (<http://www.iglt.org>) General information on gay and lesbian travel in Latin America.

Purple Roofs (www.purple.roofs.com) Includes some listings in San Pedro and Cayo District.

Undersea Expeditions (www.underseax.com) Gay and lesbian scuba-diving company.

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL ADVICE

Official information can make Belize sound more dangerous than it actually is, but for a range of useful travel advice (including information on healthy traveling) you should consult the travel advisories provided by your home country's foreign-affairs department.

- ➔ **Australian Department of Foreign Affairs** (www.smarttraveller.gov.au)
- ➔ **British Foreign Office** (<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/>)
- ➔ **Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs** (www.voyage.gc.ca)
- ➔ **German Foreign Office** (www.auswaertiges-amt.de)
- ➔ **New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade** (www.safetravel.govt.nz)
- ➔ **US State Department** (www.travel.state.gov)

Health

Travelers to Central America need to be concerned about food- and mosquito-borne infections. While most infections are not life-threatening, they can certainly ruin your

EATING PRICE RANGES

Eating options in Belize vary widely, from street food to full restaurant meals. The following price ranges refer to a standard meal – rice, beans, meat or fish and a side. Only the fanciest places tend to have service charges, but tipping is always appreciated.

\$ less than BZ\$15

\$\$ BZ\$15-35

\$\$\$ more than BZ\$35

trip. Besides getting the proper vaccinations, it's important that you pack a good insect repellent and exercise great care in what you eat and drink.

Medical Checklist

It is a very good idea to carry a medical and first-aid kit with you, in case of minor illness or injury:

- ➔ antibiotics
- ➔ antidiarrheal drugs (eg loperamide)
- ➔ acetaminophen/paracetamol (Tylenol) or aspirin
- ➔ anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- ➔ antihistamines (for hay

fever and allergic reactions)

- ➔ antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions
- ➔ steroid cream or cortisone (for poison ivy and other allergic rashes)
- ➔ bandages, gauze, gauze rolls
- ➔ adhesive or paper tape
- ➔ scissors, safety pins and tweezers
- ➔ thermometer
- ➔ pocketknife
- ➔ insect repellent containing DEET for the skin
- ➔ insect spray containing permethrin for clothing, tents and bed nets

- ➔ sunblock
- ➔ oral rehydration salts
- ➔ iodine tablets (for water purification)
- ➔ syringes and sterile needles

Bring medications in their original containers, clearly labeled. A signed, dated letter from your physician describing all medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

Potential Hazards Mosquitoes & Ticks

To avoid mosquito and tick bites, wear long sleeves, long pants, hats and shoes or boots (rather than sandals). Use insect repellent that contains DEET, which should be applied to exposed skin and clothing, but not to eyes, mouth, cuts, wounds or irritated skin. In general, adults and children over 12 should use preparations containing 25% to 35% DEET, which

RECOMMENDED VACCINES

VACCINE	RECOMMENDED FOR	DOSAGE	SIDE EFFECTS
Hepatitis A	all travelers	one dose before trip with booster six to 12 months later	soreness at injection site; headaches; body aches
Hepatitis B	long-term travelers in close contact with the local population	three doses over a six-month period	soreness at injection site; low-grade fever
Chickenpox	travelers who've never had chickenpox	two doses one month apart	fever; mild case of chickenpox
Measles	travelers born after 1956 who've had only one measles vaccination	one dose	fever; rash; joint pain; allergic reaction
Tetanus-diphtheria	all travelers who haven't had a booster within 10 years	one dose lasts 10 years	soreness at injection site
Typhoid	all travelers	four capsules by mouth, one taken every other day	abdominal pain; nausea; rash
Yellow fever	required for travelers arriving from yellow-fever-infected areas in Africa or South America	one dose lasts 10 years	headaches; body aches; severe reactions are rare

last about six hours. Children between two and 12 years of age should use preparations containing no more than 10% DEET, which will usually last about three hours. Products containing lower concentrations of DEET are as effective, but for shorter periods of time.

For additional protection, you can apply permethrin to clothing, shoes, tents and bed nets. Permethrin treatments are safe and remain effective for at least two weeks, even when items are laundered. Permethrin should not be applied directly to skin.

Traveler's Diarrhea

To prevent diarrhea, avoid tap water unless it's been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected (with iodine tablets); only eat fresh fruit or vegetables if cooked or peeled; be wary of dairy products that might contain unpasteurized milk; and be highly selective when eating food from street vendors.

If you develop diarrhea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an antidiarrheal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

Recommended Vaccinations

Since most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, visit a physician four to eight weeks before departure. Note that some of the

recommended vaccines are not approved for use by children and pregnant women; check with your physician.


Insurance

Travelers should take out a travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities,' which can include scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. Check that the policy you are considering covers ambulances as well as emergency flights home.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than requiring you to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation.

Internet Access

Belize has plenty of internet cafes, with typical rates ranging from BZ\$4 to BZ\$8 per hour. Many hotels and lodges also provide computers where their guests can access the internet, as indicated by the @ icon in the listings. Skype is blocked by Belize Telecom, but some internet cafes offer Skype service through satellite or virtual private networks.

For those traveling with a laptop, most accommodations also have wireless access in the rooms or in common areas, as indicated by the  icon. This access is fairly reliable, but is easily overburdened if there are several people working simultaneously. For more information on traveling with a portable computer, see www.teledapt.com.

Legal Matters

Drug possession and use is officially illegal and, if caught in possession of larger amounts of marijuana or possession or use of any

other illicit drugs, offenders will generally be arrested and prosecuted.

Persons found having sex with a minor will be prosecuted; the age of consent for both sexes is 16. Travelers should note that they can be prosecuted under the law of their home country regarding age of consent, even when abroad.

You are not required to carry ID in Belize but it's advisable to do so. If arrested you have the right to make a phone call. The police force does not have a reputation for corruption as in many countries in Central America, and it is highly unlikely that you will be asked for a bribe. A special **tourist police force** (☎227-6082) patrols tourist areas, including central Belize City, San Pedro, Caye Caulker and Placencia. The tourist police wear a special badge on their left shoulder.

For detailed information on the Belize legal code, check out the **Belize Legal Information Network** (www.belize-law.org).

Maps

Lonely Planet maps will enable you to find your way to many of the listed destinations, but if you'd like a larger-scale, more detailed travel map, you cannot beat the 1:350,000 *Belize* map, published by International Travel Maps of Vancouver. It is widely sold in Belize.

You can buy high-class 1:50,000 topographic sheets for BZ\$40 each at the **Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment** (☎822-2226; www.mnrei.gov.bz; ☎8am-noon & 1-4:30pm Mon-Fri) in Belmopan. These maps cover the country, including the cayes, in 70 different sheets; however, most of them were last updated in the 1990s.

Drivers will find *Emory King's Driver's Guide to Beautiful Belize* useful. Sold in bookstores and gift shops in

PRACTICALITIES

Currency

The Belizean dollar (BZ\$) is pegged to the US dollar at two to one (BZ\$1 = US\$0.50). Nearly every business in Belize accepts US dollars and prices are sometimes quoted in US dollars at upscale resorts and hotels.

Newspapers

Amandala (www.amandala.com.bz) The twice-weekly, left-wing newspaper has the largest circulation.

Belize Times (www.belizetimes.bz) Represents the People's United Party (PUP) perspective, Sunday only.

Guardian (www.guardian.bz) The voice of the United Democratic Party (UDP), Sunday only.

Reporter (www.reporter.bz) Presents the most independent coverage, Sunday only.

Radio

Love FM (www.lovefm.com) The most widely broadcast radio station in Belize, with spots at 95.1MHz and 98.1MHz.

KREM FM (www.krembz.com) Plays a modern selection of music at 91.1 MHz and 96.5MHz.

Taxes

Hotel room tax is currently 9%, though there is talk of raising it to 12.5% in the future. Restaurant meals are subject to an 8% sales tax. Some hotel owners quote prices with taxes already figured in.

Television

Channel 5 (www.channel5belize.com) Tagline 'Great Belize TV.'

Channel 7 (www.7newsbelize.com) Tagline 'Where News Comes First.'

Tipping

Tipping is not obligatory but is always appreciated if guides, drivers or servers have provided you with genuinely good service. Rounding up the check by somewhere between 5% and 10% is usually a suitable tip. Some hotels and restaurants add an obligatory service charge to your check (usually 10%), in which case you definitely don't need to tip.

Weights & Measurements

- ➔ Belize measures distance in miles.
- ➔ Gasoline is sold by the (US) gallon.
- ➔ Laundry is usually weighed and paid for by the pound.

Belize City, it's a compilation of route diagrams and user-friendly tips about turnoffs you might miss and speed bumps you might hit. A new edition is published annually.

Opening Hours

Standard business hours are as follows, unless otherwise noted in the text:

Banks 8am to 2pm or 3pm Monday to Thursday and 8am to 4pm or 4:30pm Friday.

Pubs and bars Noon to midnight.

Restaurants and cafes

7am to 9:30am (breakfast), 11:30am to 2pm (lunch) and 6pm to 8pm (dinner).

Shops 9am to 5pm Monday to Saturday.

Public Holidays

Many of Belize's public holidays are moved to the Monday nearest the given date in order to make a long weekend. You'll find banks and most shops and businesses shut on these days. Belizeans travel most around Christmas, New Year and

Easter, and it's worth booking ahead for transportation and accommodations at these times.

New Year's Day January 1

Baron Bliss Day March 9

Good Friday March or April

Holy Saturday March or April

Easter Monday March or April

Labor Day May 1

Sovereign's Day May 24

National Day September 10

Independence Day September 21

Day of the Americas

October 12

Garifuna Settlement Day

November 19

Christmas Day December 25

Boxing Day December 26

Telephone

Belize has no regional, area or city codes. Every number has seven digits, all of which you dial from anywhere in the country. When calling Belize from other countries, follow the country code with the full seven-digit local number.

Cell Phones

You can rent cell phones from Belize Telecommunications Ltd (BTL) at the Philip Goldson International Airport in Belize City. They require prepaid DigiCell phone cards, which you can buy where you see green signs announcing 'BTL's PrePaid Cards Sold Here.' If you're staying for more than a week or two, a cheap phone with a pre-paid SIM card can be had for less than BZ\$120.

International cell phones can be used in Belize if they are GSM 1900 and unlocked. You can buy a SIM pack for US\$25 from DigiCell distributors around the country.

International roaming is provided by T Mobil, Cingular and MexTel, but coverage is patchy – check with your service provider back home about coverage in Belize.

Phone Cards

Public phones are plentiful, with about 500 around the country. Buy phone cards wherever you see the green signs announcing 'BTL's PrePaid Cards Sold Here.' You scratch the back of the card to reveal its PIN number, then to make a call you dial the access number given on the back of the card. Automated messages will direct you through the call.

Time

Belize uses North American Central Standard Time (GMT/UTC minus six hours), as in Guatemala and southern Mexico. Belize and Guatemala do not observe daylight saving, so there is never any time difference between them, but Mexico does observe daylight saving from the first Sunday in April to the last Sunday in October, so Belize is one hour behind Mexico during that period.

When it's noon in Belize, it's 1pm in New York, 6pm in London, 10am in San Francisco and 4am the next day in Sydney (add one hour to those times during daylight saving periods in those cities).

Tourist Information

Belize Tourism Board

(www.travelbelize.org) The official tourist agency has information offices in Belize City and Punta Gorda, and there are good local tourist information offices in San Pedro and Placencia.

Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA); ☎227-

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

Travelers with Disabilities

Belize lacks accessibility regulations and many buildings are on stilts or have uneven

wooden steps. You won't see many ramps for wheelchair access. More difficulties for wheelchair users come from the lack of footpaths, as well as plentiful rough and sandy ground. With assistance, bus travel is feasible, but small planes and water taxis might be a problem.

Visitors with limited mobility do come to Belize. Accommodations suitable for wheelchair users include the Radisson Fort George Hotel (p57) in Belize City; Corona del Mar (p93) on Ambergris Caye; Mara's Place (p112) and Blue Wave (p113) on Caye Caulker; Orchid Palm Inn (p128) in Orange Walk; Hok'ol K'in Guest House (p139) in Corozal; El-Rey Inn (p153) and the Bull Frog Inn (p154) in Belmopan; Jungle Huts Resort (p189) in Dangriga; and Turtle Inn (p210) in Placencia.

There are a number of useful organizations and websites for travelers with disabilities, though there's little information that is specific to Belize.

Access-Able Travel

Source (www.access-able.com) Has good general information.

Global Access Disabled Travel Network

(www.globalaccessnews.com) Good website with interesting general travel information.

Mobility International

(www.miusa.org) US-based website that advises travelers with disabilities or mobility issues; you can organize a mentor and someone to help you plan your travels.

Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation

(Radar; www.radar.org.uk) A network of disability organizations and people with disabilities that lobbies for policy changes.

Visas

Information on visa requirements is available from Belizean embassies and

consulates, and the **Belize Tourism Board** (www.travel-belize.org). At the time of writing, visas were not required for citizens of EU or Caricom (Caribbean Community) countries, nor Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, the USA or Venezuela. A visitor's permit, valid for 30 days, will be stamped in your passport when you enter the country. This can be extended by further periods of one month (up to a maximum of six months) by applying at an immigration office (there's at least one in each of Belize's six districts). For further information you can contact the **Immigration & Nationality Department** (☎822-2423; fax 822-2662) in Belmopan.

Volunteering

There are a lot of opportunities for volunteer work in Belize, especially on environmental projects. In some cases, you may have to pay to participate (costs vary).

Belize Audubon Society (BAS; www.belizeaudubon.org) BAS invites volunteers with experience in developing countries, community development, teaching, tourism development, art, small business development, conservation or park management, and who are available to work for at least three months, to assist in the main office or in education and field programs. Divers can volunteer for marine research projects for a month at a time. Volunteer bird-watchers are always required for the Christmas bird count. Payment and housing are not provided.

Belize Wildlife and Referral Clinic (<http://www.belize-wildlifeclinic.org>) Offers short term internships in wildlife medicine ranging from two to six weeks for veterinary and non-veterinary students. Various scholarships and work exchanges are

PREVENTING CHILD SEX TOURISM IN BELIZE

Tragically, the exploitation of local children by tourists is becoming more prevalent throughout Latin America, including Belize. Various socioeconomic factors make children susceptible to sexual exploitation, and some tourists choose to take advantage of their vulnerable position. Sexual exploitation has serious, lifelong effects on children. It is a crime and a violation of human rights.

Belize has laws against sexual exploitation of children. Many countries have enacted extraterritorial legislation that allows travelers to be charged as though the exploitation happened in their home country.

Responsible travelers can help stop child sex tourism and exploitation by reporting it to websites such as the **CyberTipline** (www.cybertipline.com). You can also report the incident to local authorities and, if you know the nationality of the perpetrator, to their embassy.

Travelers interested in learning more about how to fight sexual exploitation of children can find more information through **End Child Prostitution & Trafficking** (ECPAT; www.ecpat.org).

available for students with sincere interests and skills, and the clinic is flexible and always interested in speaking with potential interns and long-term volunteers.

Cornerstone Foundation (www.cornerstonefoundationbelize.org) This NGO, based in San Ignacio, hosts volunteers to help with AIDS education, community development and other programs. Most programs require a two-week commitment, plus a reasonable fee to cover food and housing.

Earthwatch (www.earthwatch.org) Paying volunteers are teamed with professional scientific researchers to work on reef restoration and shark conservation. Most projects are 10 to 14 days.

Eco-Escuela de Español (☎3099-4846; San Andrés) A Spanish-language school in El Petén, Guatemala, that also organizes educational programs and environmentally related volunteer opportunities.

Gapforce Worldwide (www.gapforce.org) Catering to gap-year travelers, Gapforce organizes one- to five-month

programs that combine work such as trail-cutting, visitor-center building in protected areas, rural teaching or archaeological work, with optional jungle treks, diving and Spanish courses.

Global Vision International (www.gvi.co.uk) Volunteer placements of over one month or more. Projects include conservation of national parks and Maya ruins; trail maintenance and boundary clearance; contributing to crocodile surveys; assessing jaguar populations; and running environmental field courses. Placements available at Belize Audubon and the Belize Institute of Archaeology.

Help for Progress (www.helpforprogress.interconnection.org) A Belizean NGO that works with local community development organizations in fields such as education, gender issues, citizen participation and environment.

Maya Mountain Research Farm (www.mmrfbz.org) The 70-acre organic farm and registered NGO in Toledo offers internships for those interested in learning about

organic farming, biodiversity and alternative energy.

Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (☎822-8032;

www.belizestudyabroad.net; Mile 31½ Western Hwy; canoeing per person BZ\$70)

☛ Monkey Bay's programs provide opportunities in conservation and community service. It also has many links to other conservation organizations in Belize.

Oceanic Society (☎in USA

800-326-7491; www.oceanic-society.org; Blackbird Caye; 5-day research programs from BZ\$3750, family-education programs per week adult/child BZ\$3900/3580; ⓘ) ☛ Paying participants in the society's expeditions assist scientists in marine research projects at the society's field station on Blackbird Caye and elsewhere.

Plenty International (www.plenty.org) Opportunities for working with grassroots organizations (such as handicraft cooperatives) and schools, mostly in Toledo District.

ProWorld Service Corps

(www.proworldvolunteers.org) Like a privately run Peace Corps, ProWorld organizes small-scale, sustainable

projects in fields such as healthcare, education, conservation, technology and construction.

Volunteer Abroad (www.volunteerabroad.com) A sort of clearing house for volunteer opportunities around the world. The database includes a few dozen organizations that work in Belize.

Volunteer Petén (☎5711-0040; www.volunteerpeten.org) Focuses on educational projects and management of a public reserve in Petén, Guatemala. Cost includes homestay, meals and activities; Spanish lessons are also available.

WWOOF Belize (www.woof-belize.org) WWOOF stands for 'World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms,' some of which are in Belize.

One of them is at **Spanish Creek Rainforest Reserve** (☎668-3290, 670-0620; www.belizebamboo.com; Rancho Delores), but there are many other opportunities to get your hands dirty.

Women Travelers

Women can have a great time in Belize, whether

traveling solo or with others. Of course, you do need to keep your wits about you and be vigilant, as does any solo traveler. Keep a clear head, and keep in mind that excessive alcohol will make you vulnerable.

If you don't want attention, try to wear long skirts or trousers and modest tops when you're using public transportation and when on solo explorations. Some men can be quite forward with their advances or even aggressive with their comments. Such advances are rarely dangerous; be direct, say no and ignore; they're likely to go away. A bicycle can be an asset in this scenario: you can just scoot.

Avoid situations in which you might find yourself alone with unknown men at remote archaeological sites, on empty city streets, or on secluded stretches of beach. For support and company, sign up for group excursions or head for places where you're likely to meet people, such as guesthouses that serve breakfast, backpacker lodgings or popular mid-range or top-end hotels.

Transportation

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Travelers can get to Belize by land, sea or air. Overland, travelers might enter Belize from Guatemala or Mexico. Boats also bring travelers from Honduras and Guatemala. Air carriers service Belize from the United States and El Salvador. Flights, tours and rail tickets can be booked online at lonelyplanet.com/bookings.

Entering the Country

Entering Belize is a simple, straightforward process. You must present a passport that will be valid for at least three months from the date of entry. Officially, visitors are also required to be in possession of an onward or return ticket from Belize and funds worth BZ\$120 per day for the duration of their stay

in the country, but it's rare for tourists to be required to show these.

Tourists are generally given a 30-day stay, extendable once you're in Belize.

Air

Airports & Airlines

Philip Goldson International Airport (BZE; www.pgibelize.com), at Ladyville, 11 miles northwest of Belize City center, handles all international flights. With Belize's short internal flying distances it's often possible to make a same-day connection at Belize City to or from other airports in the country.

Airlines Flying To & From Belize

American Airlines (www.aa.com) Direct flights to/from Miami and Dallas/Fort Worth.

Continental Airlines (www.continental.com) Direct flights to/from Houston.

Delta Air Lines (www.delta.com) Direct flights to/from Atlanta.

Grupo TACA (www.taca.com) Direct flights to/from Houston and San Salvador (El Salvador).

Maya Island Air (www.mayaairways.com) Flights to Cancun, Guatemala City and San Pedro Sula in Honduras.

Transportes Aeros Guatemaltecos (www.tag.com.gt) Regular flights between Belize and Guatemala City and Flores, Guatemala, only.

Tropic Air (www.tropicair.com) Daily flights to Flores, Guatemala and charter flights to Roatan, Honduras. They may have flights to Cancun by the time you read this.

US Airways (www.usairways.com) Direct flights to Charlotte, North Carolina.

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Every form of transport that relies on carbon-based fuel generates CO₂, the main cause of human-induced climate change. Modern travel is dependent on aeroplanes, which might use less fuel per person than most cars but travel much greater distances. The altitude at which aircraft emit gases (including CO₂) and particles also contributes to their climate change impact. Many websites offer 'carbon calculators' that allow people to estimate the carbon emissions generated by their journey and, for those who wish to do so, to offset the impact of the greenhouse gases emitted with contributions to portfolios of climate-friendly initiatives throughout the world. Lonely Planet offsets the carbon footprint of all staff and author travel.

Land

Mexico

There are two official crossing points on the Mexico–Belize border. The more frequently used is at Subteniente López–Santa Elena, 9 miles from Corozal Town in Belize and 7 miles from Chetumal in Mexico. The all-paved Northern Hwy runs from the border to Belize City.

The other crossing is at La Unión–Blue Creek, 34 miles southwest of Orange Walk Town. If you happened to be driving in from Mexico straight to La Milpa Field Station or Chan Chich Lodge, you might consider using this crossing, as the road is paved all the way from the border on the Mexican side; otherwise you face 28 unpaved miles on the road to Orange Walk from Blue Creek.

Bus

The Guatemalan company San Juan Travel runs one daily express bus from the ADO bus terminal in Chetumal, which arrives at the Caye Caulker Water Taxi terminal in Belize City (BZ\$20, three hours). San Juan makes no other stops in Belize (though it does continue on to Flores, Guatemala). At the time of research, the foreign-owned bus companies were prohibited from picking up passengers in Belize City and taking them to Chetumal on the way back.

Many regular Belizean buses ply the Northern Hwy between Belize City and Chetumal. In Chetumal, bus-

AIR DEPARTURE TAX

Non-Belizeans must pay fees that total US\$35, in cash (US dollars only) or charge, when flying out of Belize City on international flights. Of this, US\$3.75 is the PACT (Protected Areas Conservation Trust) fee, which helps to fund Belize's network of protected natural areas. Also included in this total is a US\$15 service fee, a US\$15 airport development fee and a US\$1.25 security fee. Sometimes a portion of the tax is included in the price of the ticket.

es bound for Corozal Town (BZ\$2 to BZ\$4, one hour), Orange Walk Town (BZ\$6 to BZ\$8, two hours) and Belize City (BZ\$10 to BZ\$14, four hours) leave the north side of Nuevo Mercado, about 0.75 miles north of the city center, once or twice an hour from about 4:30am to 6pm.

Car & Motorcycle

To bring a vehicle into Belize, you need to obtain a one-month importation permit at the border. This obliges you to take the vehicle out of Belize again within the validity of the permit. To get the permit you must present proof of ownership (vehicle registration) and purchase Belizean motor insurance (available for a few US dollars per day from agents at the borders). Permit extensions can be obtained by applying to the **Customs Department** (☎227-7092) in Belize City. In the unlikely event that a Mexican or Guatemalan car-rental agency permits you to take one of their vehicles into Belize, you will also have to show the rental documents at the border.

It's not unusual to see US license plates on cars in Belize, as driving from

the USA through Mexico is pretty straightforward and car rental in Belize is expensive. The shortest route through Mexico to the crossing point between Chetumal and Corozal is from the US–Mexico border points at Brownsville–Matamoros or McAllen–Reynosa, a solid three days' driving.

You are required to obtain a temporary import permit for your vehicle at the border when you enter Mexico; as well as the vehicle registration document you'll need to show your driver's license and pay a fee of around BZ\$50 with a Visa, MasterCard or American Express credit card. You'll also have to buy Mexican motor insurance, also available at the border.

Guatemala

The only land crossing between Belize and Guatemala is a mile west of the Belizean town of Benque Viejo del Carmen at the end of the all-paved Western Hwy from Belize City. The town of Melchor de Mencos is on the Guatemalan side of the crossing. The border is 44 miles from the Puente Ixlu junction (also called El Cruce) in Guatemala, where roads head north for Tikal (22 miles) and southwest to Flores (18 miles). The road is now fully paved.

Bus

Two companies run express buses to/from Guatemala. From the Caye Caulker Water Taxi terminal in Belize City,

LAND DEPARTURE TAX

When departing Belize by land, non-Belizeans are required to pay fees that total BZ\$37.50 (US\$18.75) in cash (Belizean or US dollars). Of this, BZ\$7.50 is the PACT (Protected Areas Conservation Trust) fee, which helps to fund Belize's network of protected natural areas.

DRIVING DISTANCES BETWEEN BELIZE & USA

From Subteniente López–Santa Elena border crossing to US–Mexico border points:

Brownsville–Matamoros 1257 miles

McAllen–Reynosa 1267 miles

Laredo (Texas)–Nuevo Laredo 1413 miles

El Paso–Ciudad Juárez 1988 miles

Nogales (Arizona)–Nogales 2219 miles

you can go to Flores (BZ\$50, five hours) or Tikal (BZ\$60, 5½ hours), or connect all the way to Guatemala City (BZ\$110, 13 hours).

You can also take any of the frequent westbound Belizean buses to Benque Viejo del Carmen and then use the local service to the border. There are plenty of buses and minibuses that link Flores with Guatemala City and other destinations in Guatemala.

Sea

It's now possible to arrive in Belize by boat from all three of its neighboring countries. See the boxed text, p306.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Belize's two domestic airlines, **Maya Island Air** (www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎226-2012; www.tropicair.com), provide an efficient and reasonably priced service in small planes on several domestic routes, with plenty of daily flights by both airlines on the main routes:

→ Belize City–Dangriga–Placencia–Punta Gorda
→ Belize City–Caye Caulker–San Pedro
→ Belize City–San Pedro–Sarteneja–Corozal
→ Belize City–Belmopan (Tropic Air only)
→ Belmopan–Placencia (Tropic Air only)
→ Belize City–Cayo

Belize City flights use both the Philip Goldson International Airport and the Municipal Airstrip, about 12 miles from the international airport; flights using the Municipal Airstrip are usually BZ\$20 to BZ\$40 cheaper than those using the international airport.

Bicycle

Most of Belize, including all three of the main highways, is pretty flat, which makes for pleasant cycling, but traffic on the main highways does tend to travel fairly fast; make sure you're visible if riding along these roads. Belizeans use bicycles – often beach cruiser-type bikes on which you brake by pedaling backward – for getting around locally, but you don't see them

doing much long-distance cycling unless they're into racing.

Bikes are available to rent in many of the main tourist destinations for around BZ\$20 per day. You don't usually have to give a deposit. It may be possible to purchase a used bike from one of these rental companies for longer-term use.

Boat

There are several boat services operating between the mainland and the islands (mainly Caye Caulker and Ambergris Caye). Lodges and resorts on the smaller islands usually arrange transportation for their guests.

Otherwise, getting to and around Belize's islands and reefs is a matter of taking tours or dive-and-snorkel trips, using boats organized by island accommodations or chartering a launch. As a rough rule of thumb, launch charters cost around BZ\$200 per 10 miles. They're easy to arrange almost anywhere on the coast and on the main islands.

The regular services include:

Belize City–Caye Caulker–San Pedro At the time of research, three different companies handled this route four or five times a day, so there are plenty of options. The stalwart is the Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association, but the others offer similar price and level of service.

Corozal–Sarteneja–San Pedro The Thunderbolt has a monopoly on this route, taking passengers in each direction once a day during high season, and several times a week (based on demand) during low season.

Dangriga–Central Cayes Not exactly offering a regularly scheduled service, but there is a handful of water taxis that make the run frequently. It's easy to arrange and cheaper to share.

SEA DEPARTURE TAX

The only fee you have to pay when leaving Belize by sea is the BZ\$7.50 (US\$3.75) PACT (Protected Areas Conservation Trust) fee. It's payable in cash (Belizean or US dollars).

Placencia—Independence

The Hokei Pokey Water Taxi travels between Placencia and Independence, saving travelers a long road detour between Placencia and Punta Gorda.

Bus

To the untrained eye, the Belize bus system still seems to be in chaos. However, all you need to know is that there are still regular buses plying the regular routes, and that they charge – more or less – the same prices.

There are three main bus routes, all of which originate in Belize City:

Northern Hwy From Belize City to Orange Walk and Corozal (and on to Chetumal, Mexico). At last count there were six companies servicing this route, and between 25 and 30 buses a day going in each direction.

Western Hwy From Belize City to Belmopan, San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen. Several companies service this route, resulting in a regular service that runs in both directions every half-hour throughout the day.

Hummingbird and Southern Hwys Buses from Belize City and Belmopan head down the Hummingbird Hwy every hour or so, stopping in Dangriga then continuing on to the Southern Hwy to Independence and Punta Gorda. Other regular services run from Dangriga to Hopkins and Placencia.

Most Belizean buses are old US school buses. Regu-

lar-service buses stop anywhere to drop and pick up passengers. Express buses, sometimes air-conditioned, have limited stops and as a result are quicker and usually less crowded. They cost a bit more but they save a lot of time, especially on longer trips, so it's worth the extra few dollars.

A variety of smaller bus companies serve villages around the country. They often run to local work and school schedules, with buses going into a larger town in the morning and returning in the afternoon.

Occasional breakdowns and accidents happen with Belizean buses but their track record is at least as good as those in other Central American countries. Luggage pilfering has been a problem on some buses in the past. Carry valuables with you on the bus and give your stored baggage to the bus driver or conductor only, and watch as it is stored. Be there when the bus is unloaded to retrieve your luggage.

Car & Motorcycle

Having a vehicle in Belize gives you maximum flexibility and enables you to reach off-the-main-road destinations and attractions (of which there are many) without having to depend on tours and expensive transfers. Though car rental is costly in Belize, it doesn't look so exorbitant when you consider the alternatives, especially if there are

three or four people to share the expenses.

Belize has four asphalt-paved two-lane roads: the Northern Hwy between Belize City and the Mexican border north of Corozal; the Western Hwy between Belize City and the Guatemalan border near Benque Viejo del Carmen; the Hummingbird Hwy from Belmopan to Dangriga; and the Southern Hwy, which branches off the Hummingbird Hwy a few miles from Dangriga and heads south to Punta Gorda. Connecting the Western Hwy just south of Belize City with the Southern Hwy just west of Dangriga, the unpaved Manatee Hwy will save you a few miles but isn't recommended for cars without 4WD.

Most other roads are one- or two-lane unpaved roads. The most oft-used roads are kept in fairly good condition, but heavy rains can make things challenging. Off the main roads you don't always need a 4WD vehicle but you do need one with high clearance, such as a Chevy Geo Tracker.

Driver's License

If you plan to drive in Belize, you'll need to bring a valid driver's license from your home country.

Fuel & Spare Parts

There are plenty of fuel stations in the larger towns and along the major roads. At last report, regular gasoline was going for around BZ\$12 per US gallon, with prices on the rise. Premium (unleaded)

ENTERING BELIZE BY SEA

FROM	TO	FREQUENCY	DURATION	PRICE	FOR MORE INFO*
Dangriga	Puerto Cortés, Honduras	weekly	3-4hr	BZ\$110	p191
Placencia	Puerto Cortés, Honduras	weekly	3-4hr	BZ\$110	p214
Punta Gorda	Livingston, Guatemala	daily	30min	BZ\$50	p221
Punta Gorda	Puerto Barrios, Guatemala	twice daily	45min	BZ\$50-60	p221
San Pedro	Chetumal, Mexico	twice daily	2hr	BZ\$60-70	p122

MAIN DRIVING ROUTES

Northern Hwy Belize City to Orange Walk Town (1½ hours, 57 miles), Corozal Town (2¼ hours, 86 miles) and Santa Elena (Mexican border; 95 miles, 2½ hours)

Western Hwy Belize City to Belmopan (1¼ hours, 52 miles), San Ignacio (1¾ hours, 72 miles) and Benque Viejo del Carmen (Guatemalan border; 80 miles, two hours)

Hummingbird and Southern Hwys Belmopan to Dangriga (1½ hours, 55 miles), Hopkins (two hours, 63 miles), Placencia (3½ hours, 98 miles) and Punta Gorda (4½ hours, 148 miles)

is a few cents more. Spare parts and mechanics are most easily available in Belize City, although San Ignacio, Belmopan and Orange Walk Town also have parts suppliers. Check the Belize **Yellow Pages** (www.yellowpages.bz).

Rental

Generally, renters must be at least 25 years old, have a valid driver's license and pay by credit card.

Most car-rental companies have offices at Philip Goldson International Airport as well as in Belize City; they will often also deliver or take return of cars at Belize City's Municipal Airstrip or in downtown Belize City. Rental possibilities are few outside Belize City, but it is possible to rent cars in San Ignacio and Placencia.

Rental rates, including taxes, insurance and unlimited mileage, generally start at BZ\$160 a day for an economy vehicle with 4WD and air-con. If you keep the car for six days you'll often get the seventh day free.

Most rental agencies will not allow you to take a vehicle out of the country. One agency that allows cars to be taken into Guatemala is **Crystal Auto Rental** (☎223-1600; www.crystal-belize.com; Mile 5 Northern Hwy) in Belize City.

Insurance

Liability insurance is required in Belize. There are

occasional police checkpoints on the main highways, where you may be required to produce proof of it – you face possible arrest if you can't. You won't be able to bring your own vehicle into Belize without buying Belizean insurance at the border, but rental companies always organize the necessary insurance for you.

Road Conditions & Hazards

Outside Belize City, traffic is wonderfully light throughout the country, but there are some potential hazards to be aware of:

- ➔ On the main roads, watch out for erratic and dangerously fast driving by others. Drive defensively.
- ➔ Watch for speed bumps (also known as sleeping policemen): these are sometimes well signed, but sometimes not signed at all.
- ➔ Off the major highways, most roads are unpaved: be careful of potholes.
- ➔ After a lot of rain, some roads may become impassable; make inquiries before you set out, and if you're in doubt about whether you'll get through a stretch, don't risk it.
- ➔ Always have water and a spare tire, and always fill your tank before you head off into the back country (and turn back before you've used half of it!).

Road Rules

- ➔ Driving in Belize is on the right-hand side of the road.
- ➔ Speed limits are 55mph on the open highway, and either 40mph or 25mph in villages and towns.
- ➔ Seat belts are compulsory for drivers and front-seat passengers.
- ➔ Mileposts and highway signs record distances in miles and speed limits in miles per hour, although many vehicles have odometers and speedometers that are calibrated in kilometers.

Golf Carts

If you're spending some time at the beach and you can't fathom being dependent on your own leg-power, you might consider renting a golf cart. It's relatively inexpensive (compared to a car) but it still gets you to the beach and back without causing you to break a sweat. The golf cart is a popular form of transportation in Placencia, San Pedro and – to a lesser degree – Caye Caulker. Both gas-powered and battery-powered golf carts are available: gas goes further and faster, but battery is better for the planet. Expect to pay about BZ\$130 per day for a four-seater.

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is never entirely safe in any country and in Belize, like anywhere, it's imperative that you listen to your instincts and travel smart. Travelers who decide to hitchhike should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. You're far better off traveling with another person, and never hitchhike at night. Also keep in mind that buses in Belize are cheap and fairly efficient; you might decide that a bus is a safer and more comfortable bet.

HITCHHIKING IN BELIZE

Guidebook writers dread the day they get an email – perhaps months or years after the publication of a book – telling the ghastly story of a reader who's been hurt (or worse) doing something that the writer had ostensibly suggested was 'safe.' For that reason, Lonely Planet gives a boilerplate warning against hitchhiking. That said, it would be remiss of us not to mention the fact that hitchhiking is a common mode of transportation in Belize, especially down south, where buses between villages and towns are few and far between.

During my first research trip in Belize, I was lucky to have both pickup truck and driver (the amazing Christopher Nesbitt, who, behind the wheel of the green Maya Mountain Research Farm Toyota 4WD, proved nigh-unstoppable on even the worst roads), and giving lifts to hitchhikers was a regular part of our trip. During that journey – which ranged from the furthest southern villages and back roads of Toledo to the Mexican border with Corozal – the pan of the truck served as ad-hoc public transit for more people than I can recall. We gave rides to dozens of teenagers, university-aged students, Maya farmers, tourists, Mennonites, young mothers with babes-in-arms, and one rather gruff police constable (him we let ride up front; the baby-toting mother, too). Only once (a group of three teenagers with an air of trouble about them) did we fail to pick up anyone who needed a lift.

During my second Belize research trip I found myself without a vehicle and on the opposite side of the hitchhiking equation. This time I was the one humbly thumbing down rides throughout rural Belize, riding in the pan along with fellow travelers from all walks of Belize society. In many weeks of hitching, only once did I experience any trouble: on the road from Independence to the Southern Hwy a fellow hitcher misinterpreted a blue bandanna I'd unwisely chosen to wear as protection against the sun as a sign of membership in a gang. He seemed to feel great antipathy toward the gang in question, which resulted in his making several menacing comments as we both stood on the side of the road.

Ever the diplomat, I assured the gentleman that I was in no way affiliated with any gang, removing the offending bandanna as a gesture of goodwill. He responded by not murdering me, and soon we were both riding peacefully together in the back of a farmer's pickup truck.

Although this trip ended well, the incident serves as a reminder that hitchhiking is never 100% risk free. But the fact remains that hitchhiking is a common way that Belizeans get around themselves. If you do hitchhike in Belize, the best ways to minimize the risks are to travel in pairs if possible, ride in the backs of pickup trucks where possible, and never hitch at night. As for headgear, Mennonite straw hats work best. If you must wear a bandanna, blue or red are best avoided.

Joshua Samuel Brown

Hitchhiking is a fairly common way for Belizeans to get around. In a country where vehicle owners are a minority and public transportation is infrequent to places off the main roads, it's common to see people trying to catch a lift at bus stops or at speed bumps, where traffic slows down. If you too are trying to get some place where there's no bus for the next three hours, it's likely that you'll soon get a ride if you hold out your hand and look friendly. Offering to pay a share of the fuel costs at the end of your

ride never goes amiss. But always be aware of the potential risks.

Local Transportation

All of Belize's towns, including the parts of Belize City that most visitors frequent, are small enough to cover on foot, although for safety reasons you should take taxis for some trips within Belize City. Taxis are plentiful in all mainland towns and are also an option for getting to plac-

es out of town. Rates vary depending on where you are: the 7-mile ride from Corozal to Consejo costs BZ\$20, but the 6-mile trip from Maya Centre to Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary is BZ\$36.

Bicycling is an enjoyable way of getting around local areas and bikes can be rented at around BZ\$20 per day in many tourist haunts (and are free for guests at some accommodations). On the cayes, of course, you get around by boat if you're going anywhere offshore.

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