

# Welcome to Belize

*With one foot in the Central American jungles and the other in the Caribbean Sea, Belize may be small but it's packed with adventure and culture.*

## Barrier Reef

Belize Barrier Reef is the second largest in the world, after Australia's, and with more than 100 types of coral and some 500 species of tropical fish, it's pure paradise for scuba divers and snorkelers. Swimming through translucent seas, snorkelers are treated to a kaleidoscope of coral, fish and turtles, while divers go deeper, investigating underwater caves and walls and the world-renowned Blue Hole. Add to this island living on the sandy cays, where you can spend your days kayaking, windsurfing, stand-up paddleboarding, swimming, fishing or lazing in a hammock, and you've got the recipe for a perfect tropical vacation.

## Jungle Life

Inland, a vast (by Belizean standards) network of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries offers a safe haven for wildlife, which ranges from the industrious parades of cutter ants to the national animal of Belize, Baird's tapir, or the shy jaguar. Bird-watchers aim their binoculars at some 570 species, which roost along the rivers and lagoons and in the broadleaf forest. Keen-eyed visitors who take the time to hike can easily spot spider monkeys and howler monkeys, peccaries, coatimundis, *gibnuts* and green iguanas. Even the showy keel-billed toucan, the national bird of Belize, occasionally makes an appearance in public.

## Land of the Maya

Belize is home to one of the world's most mysterious civilizations – the ancient Maya. The Cayo District and Toledo's Deep South in particular are peppered with archaeological sites that date to the Maya heyday (AD 250–1000), where enormous steps lead to the tops of tall stone temples, often yielding 360-degree jungle views. Explore excavated tombs and examine intricate hieroglyphs, or descend deep into natural caves to see where the Maya kings performed rituals and made sacrifices to the gods of their underworld. You can appreciate the culture today by staying in village guesthouses and by learning the art of chocolate-making.

## Action & Adventure

Whether you're scuba diving the Blue Hole, zip-lining through the jungle canopy, rappelling down waterfalls or crawling through ancient cave systems, Belize is a genuine adventure. Head to Cayo District where you can tube or canoe through darkened river systems or hardcore spelunk in renowned Actun Tunichil Muknal cave. Zip-lining is virtually an art form in Cayo and Southern Belize where you can sail through the jungle at half a dozen locations. Horseback riding is well organised and hiking is superb in national parks, such as Mayflower Bocawina National Park, Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, Shipstern Nature Reserve and Río Bravo.



## Why I Love Belize

By Paul Harding, Writer

It's a cliché to say good things come in small packages, but with Belize it just feels right. No bigger than New Hampshire or Israel, Belize doesn't quite fit the mold of Latin America or the Caribbean, but proudly considers itself both. I love the low-key nature of its people and the seamless mix of cultures – Belizean, Creole, *mestizo*, Garifuna, Maya and even expat. I love the fact that you can be snorkeling on the barrier reef one day and hiking in the jungle the next. Belize is endearingly rough around the edges, but thoroughly traveler-friendly.

**For more about our writers, see p320**