

Understand Belize

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With stable government and a growing travel industry, Belize is striving to preserve its precious natural resources while building a solid economy.

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Today's independent Belize is only a little more than three decades old, but its history is rich with ancient civilizations, piracy, slavery and intercultural mixing.

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Like most countries, Belize struggles to balance the demands of economic development with the conservation of its natural environment.

Belize Today

To the casual observer, Belize seems to be flourishing, with compulsory primary education, a relatively stable democracy, a thriving tourism industry and an economy that is plugging along. Indeed a sufficient proportion of Belizeans are pleased enough with the way the country is being run to re-elect the government for a third time in 2015. However, not everyone in Belize has seen the benefits of this progress and poverty remains widespread, especially in rural areas.

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 – Maya thriller.

Curse of the Xtabai (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; 1982)

A heart-wrenching novel about a girl's coming-of-age amid political upheaval.

The Last Flight of the Scarlet

Macaw (Bruce Barcott; 2008) An unflinchingly honest account of Sharon Matola's fight against the construction of the Chalillo Dam on the Macal River.

Jaguar (Alan Rabinowitz; 1986) A first-person account of two years living among the Maya and the jaguars.

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 and the issue has come to a head with the development of Harvest Caye near Placencia by the Norwegian Cruise Lines company.

Distance from the cruise terminal at Belize City has meant, until now, Placencia and other southern towns have been mostly immune to cruise crowds. But with the opening of the Harvest Caye facility, on cruise days thousands of passengers will disembark on the tiny island and many are likely to find their way to Placencia's streets, dramatically altering the laid-back vibe.

Local groups also raised environmental concerns about the impact the facility would have on the delicate reef and local manatee populations, but despite protests, the government has given the facility the green light and it was scheduled to receive its first ships in 2016.

Most Belizeans are proud of their natural heritage and recognize that the goals of environmental conser-