

Belize

Belize bumps and grinds to an entirely different groove from the rest of Central America. Creole culture is dominant here and everybody knows the words to even the most obscure Bob Marley songs. Ever wanted to hear a policeman tell you that every little thing was going to be all right? Come to Belize.

Then there are the Garífuna. Master percussionists, proud 'cause they were never slaves, still eating and speaking as they did when they arrived here 200 years ago.

And there are the Maya, *mestizos* and Latinos. Some have 'always' been here, some came more recently, fleeing nasty situations in their homelands. Nearly everybody speaks English, but Spanish speakers outnumber the rest. In some of the Maya villages down south, there are people who only speak Mopan or Q'eqchi'.

Throw in some caves to tube, some reefs to dive, white sands and turquoise waters out on the cays, some good eatin', a barefoot, beer-drinking, hammock-swinging lifestyle and much, much more trouble to get into, and you can see why you're coming to Belize.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 22,966 sq km (8875 sq miles) – slightly larger than Wales or the US state of Massachusetts
- **Budget** US\$40 to US\$60 per day
- **Capital** Belmopan
- **Costs** Budget hotel in Belize City US\$20, bottle of beer US\$2, three-hour bus ride US\$5, set lunch US\$5
- **Country Code** ☎ 501
- **Languages** English, Spanish, Creole, Garífuna
- **Money** US\$1 = BZ\$2 (Belize dollars); US dollars accepted everywhere
- **Population** 307,899
- **Seasons** Dry (December to May), rainy (June to November)
- **Time** GMT minus six hours



TRAVEL HINTS

Keep a Belizean dollar in a separate pocket – somebody may ask you for it. And stop walking so fast.

OVERLAND ROUTES

The Mexican border town of Chetumal has good connections into Belize. The other popular entry point is Benque Viejo del Carmen on the Guatemalan border on the road from Tikal.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Northern Cays** (p231) Strap on your flippers in the second-biggest reef in the world.
- **Lamanai** (p238) Spot crocs, birds and turtles on the boat ride to the impressive Maya ruins.
- **Hopkins** (p253) Explore the beach town with good accommodations, relaxed attitude and nearly none of the usual tourist vibe.
- **Best journey** (p231) Fish, snorkel and camp your way south on an island-hopping sailing tour from Caye Caulker to Placencia.
- **Off the beaten track** (p260) Get out of the tourist flow and visit the Maya and Garifuna villages of Southern Belize's Toledo district, a great place to explore Belize's diverse culture.

CURRENT EVENTS

Belize is pretty laid-back, and there's little in the way of military coups or wide-scale unrest to grab international headlines. Current topics in Belizean newspapers concern oil exploration and the distribution of oil revenues. Belize is a small-scale oil producer, and debate is pretty fierce over whether the potential benefits of exploration and shipment are worth the risks of environmental damage. The debate is made even more heated by the fact that oil revenue is largely concentrated in a few hands, whereas the consequences of environmental damage will almost certainly damage the country as a whole.

Tourism plays a huge role in Belize, and the financial downturn of the last few years hasn't been good for the country's economy. Many Belizeans are hoping that the worst of the global financial crisis is past, and some in the tourism industry are gearing up to welcome visitors interested in learning about the country's Maya heritage in the run up to the year 2012.

Drugs are still an issue: Belize is a transshipment point for the northbound drug trade, and drug-related crime, though usually not directed towards tourists, is common.

HISTORY

Belize before Columbus

Belize certainly earns its place on the Ruta Maya – ruins are everywhere and the Maya population is still thriving, particularly in the southwest. The Maya have been in Belize since the first human habitation. One of the earliest settlements in the Maya world, Cuello, was near present-day Orange Walk. Maya trade routes ran all through the country, and the New River, Río Hondo and Belize River all played an important role in early trade and commerce. Important archeological sites such

as Cahal Pech (p248), near San Ignacio and Lamanai, date from this period.

Pirate's Paradise

Lack of effective government and the onshore safety afforded by the barrier reef attracted English and Scottish pirates to Belizean waters during the 17th century. They operated freely, capturing booty-laden Spanish galleons. In 1670, however, Spain convinced the British government to clamp down on the pirates' activities. Most of the unemployed pirates went into the logwood business.

During the 1780s the British actively protected the loggers' interests, at the same time assuring Spain that Belize was indeed a Spanish possession. But this was a fiction. By this time, Belize was already British by tradition and sympathy, and it was with relief and jubilation that Belizeans received the news, on September 10, 1798, that a British force had defeated the Spanish armada off St George's Caye.

Into the 19th Century

With the diminishing importance of logging, Belize's next trade boom was in arms, ammunition and other supplies sold to the Maya rebels in the Yucatán who fought the War of the Castes during the mid-19th century. The war also brought a flood of refugees from both sides to Belize.

In 1859 Britain and Guatemala signed a treaty that gave Britain rights to the land provided that the British built a road from Guatemala to the Caribbean coast. The treaty still stands, but the road has never been built, and many Guatemalan-made maps show Guatemala – which has never formally accepted Belize as a separate territory – extending all the way through Belize to the coast.