Welcome to Belize
Belize Map
Belize's Top 22
Need to Know
If You Like
Month by Month
Itineraries
Diving & Snorkeling
Belize Outdoors
Travel with Children
Regions at a Glance
BELIZE DISTRICT
Belize City
Northwest of Belize City
Burrell Boom
Community Baboon Sanctuary
Rancho Dolores
Crooked Tree
Old Northern Highway
West of Belize City
Old Belize
Hattieville
Belize Zoo
Monkey Bay
Along the Coast Road
Gales Point
NORTHERN CAYES
Ambergris Caye & San Pedro
Caye Caulker
Other Northern Cays
Cayo Esperanto
Turneffe Atoll
Lighthouse Reef
Long Caye
**Contents**

**NORTHERN BELIZE** .......................... 127  
Orange Walk District ........................................ 129  
Orange Walk Town ........................................ 129  
Lamanai ...................................................... 135  
Río Bravo Conservation & Management Area .......... 139  
Corozal District ............................................ 140  
Corozal Town ............................................... 141  
Cerro Maya & Copper Bank ................................ 147  
Sarteneja ..................................................... 149  

**SOUTHERN BELIZE** .............................. 188  
Stann Creek District ........................................ 190  
Dangriga ...................................................... 190  
Mayflower Bocawina National Park .................... 195  
Central Cayes ............................................... 195  
Hopkins ....................................................... 199  
Sittee Point .................................................. 203  
Sittee River .................................................. 205  
Maya Center ................................................. 205  
Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary ..................... 206  
Placencia ..................................................... 208  
Toledo District (The Deep South) .......................... 217  
Punta Gorda .................................................. 218  
Around Punta Gorda ........................................ 225  
Around the Deep South ..................................... 227  

**TIKAL & FLORES, GUATEMALA** ............ 233  
Tikal ............................................................ 234  
Yaxhá ......................................................... 240  
Uaxactún ..................................................... 241  
El Remate ..................................................... 241  
Flores & Santa Elena ....................................... 243

**CAYO DISTRICT** ............................... 151  
Belmopan ..................................................... 154  
Around Belmopan ........................................... 158  
Hummingbird Highway ...................................... 160  
West of Belmopan .......................................... 162  
Actun Tunichil Muknal ..................................... 164  
San Ignacio .................................................... 165  
Southeast of San Ignacio .................................... 173  
Cristo Rey & Chiquibul Roads ............................. 174  
Mountain Pine Ridge Area ................................ 178  
Caracol .......................................................... 180  
Northwest of San Ignacio ................................... 182  
Bullet Tree Falls ............................................. 182  
Southwest of San Ignacio ................................... 183  
San José Succotz & Around ............................... 185  
Benque Viejo del Carmen .................................. 186

**SPECIAL FEATURES**

Diving & Snorkeling ........................................ 31  
Outdoor Activities .......................................... 38  
Ancient Maya ................................................. 266  
Wildlife-Watching .......................................... 284

**Belize Today** ........................................ 254  
History ....................................................... 256  
Ancient Maya ............................................... 266  
People of Belize ............................................ 273  
Rhythms of a Nation ........................................ 277  
Beyond Rice & Beans ....................................... 280  
Wild Things .................................................. 284  
Land & Environment ....................................... 290

**SURVIVAL GUIDE**

Directory A–Z ............................................. 296  
Transportation ............................................... 305  
Index ............................................................ 313  
Map Legend .................................................. 319
Deep South

Exploring Belize’s Deep South can take just a couple of days, but to truly appreciate the village life, allow five days.

**Punta Gorda** (PG) is a chilled-out, slightly ramshackle coastal town and a natural spot to begin your trek. There are budget digs in PG but if you’d like to experience some luxury, book yourself in at **Cotton Tree Lodge, Belcampo Belize** or Lodge at Big Falls within **Big Falls** among the finest ecolodges in Southern Belize.

The true beauty is in exploring the villages, chocolate-making enterprises and cultural tours out of PG. One of the best circuits is from **Big Falls**, then head off the highway to **San Miguel**, where you can sleep cheap, then move on to **San Pedro Columbia** and use it as a base to explore nearby **Lubaantun**. Later, head further still to the small Maya village of **San Antonio**, detouring for a hike and a swim at beautiful **Río Blanco National Park**, or caving at **Blue Creek**.
Belize is small enough that you can see the whole country in a month at express pace. In two months you’re practically a resident! This itinerary leads the way, starting in the quaint mestizo town of Corozal Town, south of the Mexican border. Spend one day in Orange Walk Town to cruise the New River and explore the Maya ruins at Lamanai, then head east to the fishing village of Sarteneja for amazing wildlife watching at Shipstern Nature Reserve.

From Sarteneja, catch the fast ferry to San Pedro. Stay on either Ambergris Caye or Caye Caulker, but allow yourself at least four days to chill out in a hammock, kayak out to the reef, frolic with the fish and feast on fresh seafood. When you head back to the mainland, don’t bypass the animal-lovers’ sights outside Belize City in the Belize District, including the Community Baboon Sanctuary and the Belize Zoo. If you’re into birds, spend a night or two around the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. Further west in Cayo, base yourself in or around San Ignacio and take four or five days experiencing regional adventures, whether it be delving deep into the caves at Actun Tunichil Muknal or Barton Creek, horseback riding at Mountain Equestrian Trails, climbing the tall temples at Caracol or Xunantunich, or all of the above. Backtrack east to the beautiful Hummingbird Hwy, which carries you south across the thickly forested northern foothills of the Maya Mountains. Stop at Ian Anderson’s Caves Branch Jungle Lodge for some cave exploration, jungle expeditions and abseiling down bottomless sinkholes.

By now you have been away from the Caribbean for way too long, so spend a few days in the coastal village of Hopkins to absorb some Garifuna rhythms. From here, you can hike the beautiful jungle trails at Mayflower Bocawina National Park or Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary.

If you’re still thirsting for sun and fun, head south to Placencia to enjoy lovely sandy beaches, lively bars and lots of water sports, or indulge your tropical-island fantasies at Glover’s Reef, which has an irresistible low-key vibe and brilliant diving and snorkeling. Finish up in Punta Gorda, the southernmost town in Belize from where you can explore the Deep South.
Above: San Pedro
(p84)

Left: Maya site of
Xunantunich (p185)
On day one head to traveler-oriented San Ignacio to get a feel for the town, and visit the Maya site of Cahal Pech and the green iguanas at San Ignacio Resort Hotel. San Ignacio has plenty of good budget hotels and restaurants, so save your money for a night at one of the excellent ecotourisms in the region.

Arrange a tour to explore the amazing ritual cave of Actun Tunichil Muknal, or the superb Maya ruins at Caracol, either of which will take up all of your second day. A third option is canoeing through Barton Creek Cave and zip-lining at Calico Jack’s.

On your third day, wake up early and do a half-day trip to either Xunantunich or El Pilar before checking into one of the better hotels or ecotourisms in western Cayo: Mahogany Hall is closest to El Pilar, while the fabulous Ka’ana Resort & Spa is closer to Xunantunich. Other stand-outs include Black Rock Lodge and the Lodge at Chaa Creek.

If you only have a week to spare, make a base on one of the Northern Cayes, where you have access to an impressive array of activities on land and sea.

Choose Caye Caulker or San Pedro, as they are closest to the mainland. (We prefer Caye Caulker – not only for its easy-going vibe, but also for its easy access to Belize City, which is only 45 minutes away by water taxi.) From here, you can take snorkel or dive trips to Turneffe Atoll and Lighthouse Reef, the latter home to the amazing Blue Hole.

You can also use either of these islands as a base for day trips to the mainland. Spend a day in the Belize District to visit Belize Zoo or the Maya ruins at Altun Ha.

It’s also an easy trip to eastern Cayo District, where you can go cave-tubing in the Nohoch Che’en Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve or zip-lining through the forest canopy. You can also head north to the Maya ruins at Lamanai, enjoying a peaceful boat ride on the New River along the way.
Across the border and within easy reach lie the glory and splendors of the ancient Maya world: scores of ancient ruins surrounded by lush rainforests, and a few really lovely towns thrown in for good measure. Taking it all in would take months, so we suggest a five-day compromise.

Leaving San Ignacio on the morning of the first day, head directly to El Remate. The lakefront town makes a lovely base and has accommodations in all budget ranges. Head to Tikal early the next morning and spend the day exploring this fascinating ancient Maya city. Having made arrangements to spend the night at one of Tikal’s three hotels, you can enjoy the sunset from the top of Temple IV at your leisure. Spend the first half of the third day exploring Tikal further (it’s worth it) before heading back to El Remate to relax.

On your remaining days, hang out in Flores and soak up the town’s island ambience, perhaps taking a half-day trip to one of the parks, villages or smaller ruins that are in the area.

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Map Legend

Sights
- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours
- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkeling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping
- Sleeping
- Camping

Eating
- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife
- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment
- Entertainment

Shopping
- Shopping

Information
- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic
- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population
- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport
- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Subway/Subte station
- Taxi
- + Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book

Routes
- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries
- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography
- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas
- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- + Cemetery (Christian)
- × Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove
OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’.

OUR WRITERS

**Alex Egerton**

*Belize District, Northern Cayes, Northern Belize* A journalist by trade, Alex has been coming to Central America for almost two decades and has spent extended periods residing in colorful towns along the Caribbean. He has a keen interest in the unique culture of the region, especially in the expressive music and dance of traditional communities, and is constantly working on polishing up his *punta* moves. When not on the road for work, Alex can probably be found at home in the mountains of Colombia planning his next escape to the Northern Cayes and craving fryjacks smothered with habanero sauce. Alex also wrote the Understand and Survival Guide sections.

**Paul Harding**

*Cayo District, Southern Belize* As a writer, photographer and person with chronic itchy feet, Paul has traveled a good part of the world in the past two decades, usually in search of adventure, islands and beaches. Belize ticks all the boxes: Caribbean coast and cays on one side, remote jungle on the other. On this research trip, Paul river-tubed through caves, zip-lined over jungle canopies, explored Mayan ruins, snorkeled on the reef, sampled hot sauces and inspected many cabanas. He has contributed to more than 50 Lonely Planet guides to countries as diverse as Australia, Iceland, Vanuatu and India. Paul also wrote the Plan section.

**Daniel C Schechter**

*Guatemala* A native New Yorker, Daniel has been poking around Latin America for so long it sometimes makes more sense to him than his place of birth. After living in Colombia and Puerto Rico, he called Mexico home for more than a decade. During that time he spanned the Mundo Maya on various forays, discovering and writing about such places as Campeche, Calakmul and Tikal, and cultivating an enduring interest in Classic Maya history. Daniel currently lives in the Netherlands, where he blogs on cycling (http://netherlandsbikeways.blogspot.nl).