

# Welcome to Belize

Hidden between Mexico and Guatemala on the Caribbean coast of Central America, Belize is one of the last unspoiled places on earth. The diverse Belize people are dedicated to preserving the country's unique atmosphere and charm. From natural to man-made, marine to inland, historic to cultural there is something for the adventurous and the chilled out.

## Know your History

### Maya

The Maya culture exhibited sophisticated knowledge and architectural skill. Today monumental religious temples leave a visible trace of their legacy. The Maya civilization ran from 2000BC, peaking during 200AD-800AD through to its rapid demise in the 1540's. The Maya's pioneered the concept of zero, developed a syllabic system and machinery for preparing food. They were an agricultural people who domesticated many staple crops, such as corn, yams and cocoa. They also practiced a political hierarchy headed by kings or high lords. The reason behind their demise is contested, theories range from natural disaster to disease from the arrival of foreign visitors.

### Early Settlement

In the early 17th century, English sailors first began using the Bay of Honduras as a point for raids on the Spanish traders. These men became to be known as Baymen. The advantageous coastline led to competition for land and resources, causing a turbulent relationship between the Spanish and Baymen. Order was brought to the piracy by the British Navy, but there were numerous unsuccessful attempts to dislodge the British settlers.

### Colonial Period

In the 1840s Great Britain declared it the colony of British Honduras and development became more organized. The increased colony size and ties with the Empire strengthened. Mahogany became the main industry and slaves were brought across to support the arduous timber logging. During 1760-1820 there were four major slave revolts until 1831 when an act passed giving equal rights to people of all races. Despite the abolition of slavery in 1838, freed slaves were termed 'apprentices' and given basic wages. Throughout the 19th century the cultural make up changed dramatically after conflicts in neighboring countries and interference with the allusive indigenous Maya.

### Independence

After years of decline in timber profits the Empire began to lose belief in the profitability of British Honduras. Tensions increases as, despite being assigned as British soldiers, Belizeans were not rewarded the same compensation after WW1. Following World War 2, Belize was left in a state of economic crisis, and with little help coming from the British there was call for reform. In the 1950's a national independent party formed. By 1964 Belize was fully self-governing. The lead up to independence was fraught by claims that Guatemala in fact inherited territory rights from Spain during their own independence. Eventually in 1981 they gained independence, changed their name to Belize and joined both the British Commonwealth and UN.

## Money Talks

For many years Belize's greatest export was forestry, first for the production of dyes then for

mahogany. Production levels rose through the 1940s with improved technology. However in more recent times there has been a shift to sugar cane production as timber became unprofitable. In addition to this, Belize's natural playground has made tourism a growing contributor to the national GDP.

The national currency is the Belizean Dollar (BZ\$). Coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 25 and 50 cents and 1 dollar; bills come in denominations of 2, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 dollars. Cost are higher here than other Central American countries, but public transport is still relatively cheap. Prices are generally in BZ\$, but you may also see US\$ quoted as this currency is accepted in some places. ATMs are available in major towns but save credit cards for larger restaurants and shops. Traveler's cheques are generally accepted for exchange in banks. Bare in mind that it is easier to exchange US dollars than Euros or Pounds Sterling.

## Get Culture Savvy

### People and Traditions

The people of Belize have a beautiful knack of embracing visitors, making you feel at home with their willingness to share their land. This may be down to their array of cultures, no less than ten, boasting a melting pot of customs and traditions. The Belizean population of 333,000 comprises of Arab, Creole, East Indian, European, Garifuna, Maya, Mennonite, Mestizo, North American Chinese/Taiwanese. Mestizo represents the largest majority, followed by Creole. This amalgamation of cultures has lead to a wealth of festivities year round.

### Festivals & Holidays

January: 1st - New Year's Day

March/April: 9th - Baron Bliss Day. Celebrations held to honor the benefactor of Belize. Harbour regatta, horse and cycle races. Good Friday and Easter (variable dates).

May: 1st - Labour Day. 24th - Commonwealth day. Cashew Festival celebrating the harvest season.

June: Dia de San Pedro. Three day festival honoring St. Peter, the patron saint of San Pedro. Early morning boat parade and a special mass.

August: Deer Dance Festival San Antonio in the Toledo District with week-long celebrations.

September: 10th - St. George's Caye Day. 21st - National Independence Day.

October: 12th - Columbus Day.

November: 19th - Garifuna Day Festival. Mainly celebrated in the southern areas of the country, marking the first arrival of the Garifuna in 1832 at Dangriga.

December: 25th – Christmas Day. 26th - Boxing Day.

## Learn the Lingo

English is the official language of Belize but Kriol is the language that all Belizeans speak. Spoken in a Caribbean lilt with shortened English words and manual gestures. Kriol borrows words from all its cultures; English, African languages, Mosquito Indian and a smattering of Spanish and Maya. In time it will probably evolve to other newly arrived immigrant languages.

If at first you don't understand, listen and ask them to speak slowly, in no time you will be getting the gist.

## Lay of the Land

Located in Central America, Belize is nestled between Mexico and Guatemala and is about a tenth of the size of the UK. Its coastline runs 283km along the Caribbean Sea, and is scattered with islands, or cays (pronounced "keys"). In this position it enjoys a unique combination of natural environments considering its size. These include atolls, lowland savannahs, lagoons, rainforests and valleys. The country is divided into six districts; Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize, Cayo, Stann Creek, Toledo and the Placencia Peninsula. From the striking Maya mountains in the south west and the lowlands in the north Belize has endless fascinating opportunities for adventure and relaxation.

Northern Belize consists of the Corozal and Orange Walk. Much of the northern plains were once underwater, blanketing the region in a fertile soil that supports vegetation and crops. The New River winds its way through the Orange Walk district providing an idyllic habitat for rare wildlife. Here, sugar canes run alongside the highways, a sign of the traditional agriculture, while the bays of the north, such as the Corozal Bay provide the perfect rest bite from the busy tourist beaches further south.

Central Belize, Belize District has the largest population in the country and has the densest network of roads and urban dwellings. The Belize River that originates in Guatemala runs straight through the city and continues inland to form popular waterways. Once a busy thoroughfare the banks now offer a natural habitat for other endemic species such as the endangered Baird's Tapir.

Western Belize's most prominent protected area is the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve in the Cayo district. With pockets of grassland and sheltering pine trees, the cooler temperatures make this a pleasant place for hikers. However the reserve is best known for its Hidden Valley Falls that cascade down a striking 488m.

Southern Belize is lined with incredible white sand beaches, offshore islands, and a meticulous network of karst landforms and underground rivers. The Toledo uplands lay at the foothills of the Maya and is the most sparsely populated and least developed region in the country. This pristine land has an extensive trail system through the forests, perfect for the adventurous traveler.

The Placencia Peninsula curves alongside the southern coast of the country, with Hopkins Village's 19km stretch of golden beach being a top tourist destination.

## What's the Weather like?

Lying along the exquisite Caribbean coastline in northern Central America, Belize experiences a varied and tropical climate. The coastal area is exposed to southeast trade winds and a brisk prevailing wind from the Caribbean. This means Belize experiences a dry and wet season. The former runs January to April and the rainy season from mid-May until November, however the onset of the dry season varies widely from year to year. Climatic conditions also vary greatly, with Cayo District having an average of 125 rainy days per year compared to over 200 in Punta Gorda.

Annual temperatures and humidity are high though elevation influences this greatly. The temperature stays fairly constant year-round, varying by only about 4°C (7°F). January is the coolest month and May is the hottest.

Hurricanes play a familiar and unfortunate role in Belize's annual climate and have caused devastation in the past. The hurricane season is from June to the end of November. The most

recently hurricane to affect Belize directly was Hurricane Richard (Category 2), which made the landfall approximately 20 miles south-southeast of Belize on the 25th of October 2010.

## Biodiversity

Belize's ecology is as diverse as its cultures. From lush tropical rainforest inhabited by the elusive jaguar, to "the most remarkable reef in the West Indies" according to Charles Darwin, Belize is undeniably one of the few unspoilt places left on earth.

In land, the rainforests provide fertile ground and jungle canopies for exotic flora and fauna to flourish, including the Guanacaste (Tubroos) tree which is one of the largest tree species in Central. Along with black howler monkeys and iguanas there is an abundance of bird species. The Belizean government takes the preservation of wildlife seriously. As such, 40% of the land enjoys some form of legal protection and there are numerous national parks and reserves and government led environmental awareness campaigns.

Belize's Barrier Reef at 300km is a generous section of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, making it one of the largest coral reef systems in the northern hemisphere. Scattered with atolls, 'drop offs', fringing and an array of colourful sea creatures it makes a wondrous place to explore. Although it boast 500 species of fish and over 100 coral species, it is believed that only around 10% of all species there have been identified. The main threat to the reef is coral bleaching, which occurs due to anthropogenic impacts as well as natural events like hurricanes. These destroy and weaken the coral beds and make them prone to disease which in turn renders the coral slow, if not unable, to recover.

## Good Books

### Guides

Belize: Country Guide (Lonely Planet Country Guides)4th ed. Mara Vorhees 2011. ISBN 978-1741794656

The Rough Guide to Belize, Peter Eltringham 1848365128

### Fiction

Traveller's Wildlife Guide: Belize and Northern Guatemala Lee Beletsky ISBN 1844370453

Belize: A Concise History P.Thomson ISBN. 0333779258

Wildlife Belize Field Guide: Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles (Belize Field Guides) Loose leaf ISBN.1888538899

Birds of Belize (Helm Field Guides) H.Lee Jones and Dana Gardner ISBN.0713667605

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