

Belize: Pushing Responsible Tourism Forward

As Belize passes me by through the window of an old yellow school bus, it is apparent that this is the tropical paradise I have been searching for; palm trees line the side of the dusty road and the heat of the sun sends me into a peaceful sleep as we head to the clear waters of the Caribbean.

Belize borders Guatemala to the West and Mexico to the North. It also lies on the Caribbean Sea with the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef stretching into its territory. Its population is around 320,000 and is a multicultural society consisting of Creoles, Garifuna, Mestizos, Maya, Mennonite, Anglo-European, Middle Eastern and Asian.



Belize is varied in its natural landscape, with terrain changing from mountains and jungle to the vibrant coral reef. Certain areas in land and in the sea have been made into National Parks to preserve the environment and its inhabitants as different effects have an impact, and with its National Parks and cultural influences Belize has a growing tourist industry. This has brought a lot of money into the country proving great for the economy, but as the demand for more tourist facilities and second homes increase there are concerns over the negative consequences.

Responsible tourism has become an important topic throughout the world, but Belize is pushing the issue to the forefront, and as the country prepares to host the third International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations in May this year, its commitment to this will be highlighted. The conference will be hosted by the ICRT-Belize, Ministry of Tourism, Belize Tourist Board and various stakeholders.

In April 2008 the International Centre for Responsible Tourism-Belize was founded, as the sister

organisation of the ICRT-UK. Originally founded by Harold Goodwin at Leeds Metropolitan University the ICRT network works in “developing and promoting the concept of Responsible Tourism”, through advocacy, education, training, research and consultancy. There are other centres which include Canada, Germany, India, South Africa and West Africa.



The ICRT-Belize works to promote responsible tourism and oversee that tour operators make this a priority and its development in the Caribbean and Central America. They are in partnership with various charities and organisations to improve Belize and keep its culture and country intact. These include The Belize Hotel Association (BHA), the Belize Tourism Industry Association and the National Institute of culture and history. The BHA manages The Green Hotels Initiative, which through training, evaluation, assessment and marketing of hotels, restaurants, tour operators and auxiliary businesses can implement greener management practices, which can reduce costs and improve the company's social benefits.

This year the government of Belize has committed to a four-year, \$13.5-million plan to promote and practice responsible tourism development in the country. This will outline the infrastructure of long-term projects that focus on the preservation of Belize's natural resources and developments in San Ignacio in the Cayo District, Placencia in the Stann Creek District, San Pedro on Ambergris Caye and Belize City.



The Belize Tourism Board is also working to implement initiatives for responsible tourism. The Toucan Trail is a group of over 100 small hotels that emphasize responsible tourism that benefits the local communities as well as the visitors. The hotels are required to meet specific criteria set by the Belize Tourism Board and sign a pledge of good business practice in order to be a part of the Toucan Trail and receive support and assistance to improve their hotel.

The Belize TourismBoard is a statutory body within the Ministry of Tourism that represents a strategic partnership between the government and the private sector to "develop, market, and implement tourism programs that will fulfil the emerging needs of our local industries and the international tourism marketplace for the benefit of Belize and Belizeans."

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