

BELIZE: LAND OF MYSTERY AND EXPLOIT



During its colonial history, Belize (or British Honduras as it was then known) was sometimes described as a 'quiet backwater'; in the words of English writer Aldous Huxley, 'if the world had any ends, British Honduras would be one of them'.

Even today, invoking the name 'Belize' before an otherwise educated person often elicits no more than the baffled look of geographical ignorance. But for Belize's own citizens, and the few thousands of visitors it receives each year, this may be part of its charm. In fact, for many years now, but especially in the 80's, Belize has marketed itself informally with an ironic slogan—often printed on tee shirts; it reads: 'Where the Hell is Belize?' But as ecological awareness increases and as the limits (and sadly the diversity) of the global village shrink, the world's affluent now search for 'greener' vacation spots; and this often draws Belize in from the periphery.

Belize is a young and curious country with a rich history nestled along the Yucatan Peninsula on the Central American isthmus beside the Caribbean Sea. Belize borders the Spanish-speaking, Latin American nations of Mexico—to the North—and Guatemala—to the West and South—but its own culture is more 'Caribbean' in flavour and temperament. Beyond Belize's eastern coast lies its many islands and atolls, pristine turquoise-hued waters and parallel to the coast, stretching its massive flank off-shore—rests the mighty Belize Barrier Reef, itself forming the bulk of the **Mesoamerican Barrier Reef** system—the second-largest living structure in the world.

Subtropical, Belize's climate alternates between just two seasons—the Rainy and the Dry. The temperatures hang in the mid-eighties (Fahrenheit) but it can become quite hot in the peak of the dry season—August and September, so many people recommend visiting Belize between March and May. However, all these recommendations are contingent on your travel plans; with the proper prophylactics the weather is hardly ever intolerable—that is apart from the exceptional hurricane.

If your ultimate aim is simply to visit a warm and beautiful land then visit anytime, or better, during your winter months (if you have them). Otherwise, plan your visit to coincide with a **national holiday or festival**—there are many to choose from!

January is known as mawga season in Belize (the word mawga comes from the English 'meagre' meaning 'scarce'). This is because after the serious Christmas and New Year's celebrations many families are keen to hold on to what money they have left. For the tourist who decides to visit after the New Year's celebration, this means businesses that rely on local spending maybe a little cheaper.

In March it's **Heroes and Benefactors Day**, formerly known as Baron Bliss Day—a national holiday commemorating Belize's great benefactor Baron Henry Edward Earnest Victor Bliss who willed his fortune to the country after choosing it for its favourable climate as a place for final slumber. Baron Bliss died on March 9th, 1926. A unique canoe race, La Ruta Maya (The Mayan Route) coincides to finish on Baron Bliss day and takes place from March 6th to the 9th. This demanding, 4-day, 274 km canoe race twists across an ancient route: along the Macal and Belize Rivers which, in their history, formed the only passage inland—from San Ignacio and other towns ensconced among the Maya Mountain foothills to the coastal port of Belize City.

In April during Easter holidays, there are horse races in the village of Burrell Boom and the highways are prepared for the Cross Country Cycling Classic from Belize City to San Ignacio and back for a total of some 225 km.

In May there are a number of local festivals in various districts; Caye Caulker holds its **Coconut Festival** and Toledo has a wonderful **Cacao Festival**, opening with wine and chocolate but probably the more famous festivals are the **Lobster Fests of Placencia and of San Pedro** and the **Cashew Festival of Crooked Tree Village**. At the Lobster Fests, in addition to sampling mouth-watering local seafood and lobster dishes amid general island partying, international fishing competitions take place with the catcher of the largest fish taking home a \$50,000 prize. Crooked Tree Village hosts the annual Cashew Festival in the first week of May to celebrate the delicious cashew fruit and nut. Villagers make cashew wine and roast cashew nuts in addition to sampling the sweet and potent fruit.

Crooked Tree also boasts a wetland Wildlife Sanctuary that is home to several hundred birds among other phyla. Belize's small population means that **much of the country's natural beauty remains unspoiled** and there is a concerted effort within and without the country to encourage **sustainable eco-tourism**; although tourism of all kinds is being looked upon as the main source of revenue for the country, including a recently developed cruise-ship industry.

Most cruise-ship passengers only have a few hours to explore the country and are quickly whisked away on a prepared tour of a Mayan temple ruin, or to float on an inner tube along rivers as they meander through underground cave systems.

These tours are more expensive than discovering similar sites on your own and have strict time limits. Therefore it is always better and more rewarding to visit the country as part of your own trip and not at the mercy of a cruise-ship schedule.

In May or early June, Belize holds an **Agriculture and Trade Show** in the Cayo District. The many products that Belize produces are put on display and usually offered at special discounts or promotional prices—these range from food items, including habanero pepper sauces, fruit jams and juices, beef and game meat (deer, peccary or agouti) to the products of skilled labor: hardwood clam chairs and chopping boards, traditional clothes, rugs, and jewelry.

Entering the Cayo District and the western part of the country, the visitor should note many fascinating temples, stelae, and other architectural wonders the ancestors of the indigenous **Mayan peoples** in Belize created over one thousand years past. Although innumerable structures await excavation—needing the fortuitous confluence of time, expertise and funding—those even partially re-discovered is a sight to behold. **Lamanai** is usually accessed by winding through the river inside the forest in a motorboat watched by crocodiles, turtles, howler monkeys, and herons. **Caracol is the largest Maya site in Belize**, rivaling Guatemala's Tikal in its day.

With a spectacular sea, the largest Barrier Reef in the Western Hemisphere and various coral atolls and islands, Belize is also famous for its **snorkeling and diving**. 100 kilometers from Belize City along the Caribbean Sea broods the **Great Blue Hole**—it is 300 meters across and 120 meters deep and home to innumerable fish—including large Jewfish Grouper and the striking Hammerhead Shark, coral such as the sea fan and brain coral, and sea life including sea turtles.

San Pedro Town on Ambergris Caye caters to tourists seeking sandy beaches and world-class resorts while Caye Caulker offers slightly more 'local' island living.

Water activities are also to be enjoyed inland. Belize is home to the **largest cave system in**

Central America and for the casual adventure-seeker, Cave Tubing is a delightful way to cool off and have fun inland. One popular Cave tubing locale is Caves Branch. In addition Jungle trekking activities, canopy walks, night walks to sample a glimpse at Belize's amazing biodiversity are also to be had. In the cockscomb wildlife Sanctuary, you may catch a glimpse of puma or even, the elusive Jaguar—in the **world's only Jaguar Reserve**.

The Belize Zoo is another popular destination, and for good reason, it boasts only native species, and of these animals, only those nursed back to health from injury. Many animals released to the wild after recovery. Here you can see the national animal—the Tapir, a cow-like creature with a curious prehensile snout and the national bird, the Keel-Billed Toucan in addition to many other fascinating species—the smelly Collard Peccary, and the beautiful curassow, or the loud and raucous Black Howler Monkey that can be heard a mile off!

In August the **Maya traditional Deer Dance** is held in villages of the south, most notably San Antonio. This dance spans over a period of several days and can be recognised by the deer and jaguar costumes and the erection of the 'greasy pole' which the men will try (and fail) to climb.

Of course, costumes are abundant in the Cities as well in hot September, the month of National celebration. **The Battle of St. George's Caye** is commemorated on the 10th and Independence Day on the 21st. On both these days, there are official parades, masquerading carnival, and revelry true to the spirit of Caribbean bacchanal.

And on November 19th Belize celebrates Garifuna Settlement Day to honor the great cultural contributions the Garifuna have gifted Belize and remember the time in the 1800's when the ancestors of the Garifuna first came from St. Vincent to settle on the Belizean coast. The late Andy Palacio, UNESCO artist for peace, produced the album Wátina before his untimely death which can serve as a partial testament to the continuing cultural legacy of the Garifuna.

Belize is a remarkably diverse and multi-ethnic country, with a friendly and relaxed heterogeneous race of persons being one of the unlikely results after decades of Colonialism.

The locals call Belize 'the jewel' and it is no wonder given its uncommon beauty, but it is better to set aside that sterile and polished image. Belize is precious but alive, a complex fruit in its heterogeneity and vibrancy, and it still needs ripening. This is a place to visit and from which one can learn but it is not a commodity to be bought. Belize is an experience to be shared and revered.

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