

BELIZE LGBT ISSUES

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The Central American nation of Belize is one of the smallest independent countries in the world, both in size and in population. Its population is a mixture of Maya Indians who are indigenous to southeastern Mexico and Central America, and people of African descent who were brought as slaves from West Africa to do agricultural work for English plantation owners. There is also a large mestizo population which is mixed Native American, African and European, as well as small minorities of Caucasians and Asians. The official language of Belize is English, which is part of the heritage of being a British colony, and English is taught in the schools. But Mayan is also spoken, as well as Spanish. In addition, a local lingo that is a mixture of African and English words and grammar is also common. Many people are trilingual, effortlessly switching from English to Spanish to Cajun {check the term used in Belize} , sometimes within the same sentence.

When discussing same-sexuality issues, it is important to keep in mind this triad of peoples who make up Belize's diverse population. Among those of Mayan descent, as is also true of many Native American peoples, same-sex relationships were traditionally commonly accepted. Especially notable are androgynous individuals who are considered to have both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman combined within one person. This "Two Spirit Person" was considered to be exceptionally spiritual, and was often a religious leader and healer. Transgender persons had a highly respected special role in Mayan culture.

Likewise, many cultures of Western and Central Africa, from which about half of Belize's population derives, also had traditions of acceptance of transgender people and of same-sex relationships. But the traditional acceptance of gender and sexual diversity was greatly suppressed by the British. As they did in all of their colonies around the globe, British missionaries and educators stressed the sinfulness of sodomy (anal intercourse), buggery (other assorted sexual acts between persons of the same sex), and self-pollution /self-abuse (masturbation). This British heritage is still reflected in the criminal code of Belize today, which criminalizes "sodomy." Sodomy is defined as the insertion of a penis into an anus. That is, the crime of sodomy is strictly defined as anal intercourse. Any other sexual behavior is not criminalized among consenting adults over the age of sixteen. So, any sexual interaction between two females is not a crime in Belize. And oral sex is not a crime, whether it is between a male and a female, a male and another male, or a female and another female. So, even though Belize retains a "sodomy law," the actual legal situation for same-sex couples is actually much more lenient than in many countries around the world. The only exception to this leniency is regarding children below age fourteen, where oral sex and even mutual masturbation is

criminalized. Even sex play between two children is theoretically against the law, though actual prosecution of minors for willing sex does not seem to occur. Accordingly, it is important to understand that Belize has the most lenient sex laws of almost any developing nation.

The potential for LGBT rights in Belize is consequently quite good, given that there is not a parcel of laws that would need to be repealed. Even the sodomy law is not enforced against same-sex couples alone, and is kept on the law books mainly as deterrence for rape and other non-consensual sexual activity. Actual prosecution of same-sex couples in Belize is rare. The only law that is discriminatory on its face is the restriction on the rights of children to engage in sex. But that law seems not to be of much deterrence in actual behavior, since a 1999 [check exact year] survey of Belize youth by a UCLA researcher, which is reported on the website of the Belize National AIDS Commission, indicates that the average age at first sexual intercourse for Belize youth is twelve years old. It might be argued that, given the early age of intercourse among Belize youth, a repeal of the law against oral sex for youth might help to reduce the high rate of HIV infection in Belize. Since oral sex is much safer than either penile-vaginal or penile-anal intercourse, it would behoove educators to encourage oral sex as a replacement for intercourse. Given the high rate of HIV infection (Belize has a higher rate of HIV-positive people than any other country in Central America) there has been some discussion about making this change in the Belize legal code.

Despite the leniency of Belize laws, or maybe because of this reality, the amount of organizing of LGBT people for equal rights has been almost non-existent. The most notable event in Belize history concerning LGBT rights occurred in 2002 when a gay cruise line based in the United States sailed in the Caribbean and attempted to dock at the Cayman Islands. When the government of the Caymans found out that it was a gay cruise, officials refused to let the ship dock at the harbor. The ship then headed back to sea, and there was a flurry of news reports. Hearing this news, government officials in Belize contacted the cruise company and offered Belize City as an alternative docking point. Of course their motive was to gain economic benefit by having the gay and lesbian tourists stay in Belize City, but their supportive attitude was dramatically different from many other Caribbean governments that refused outright to allow a gay cruise ship to dock on their shores. When the ship landed in Belize City, a small band of fundamentalist Christians organized a protest, and waved Bibles at the frightened LGBT tourists. But what is more significant is that the major media supported the government officials for trying to increase tourism in Belize, and criticized the Christian bigots for harming Belize's struggling tourist industry. Most people in Belize seemed to accept the same-sex couples from the cruise ship, or at least just ignored them, but some went out of their way to show a friendly welcome. Because of this positive response, several gay cruise ships have included Belize in their recent itineraries and there have been no negative incidences.

In the last few years a few individuals have attempted to organize the LGBT community for gaining equality, but progress has been slow. LGBT people are quite prominent in the nation's AIDS education efforts, and some of them have been trying to organize

LGBT people in various towns as well as Belize City. But there has not been much response among people beyond a desire to attend entertaining social events, or to use internet chat rooms to find friends or sexual partners. When I interviewed Belize's leading gay activists in 2005, in Belize City and in the northern section of the country, they did not seem particularly hopeful that much progress would be made. In a nation of little more than 250,000 people, it is difficult to gather a large core group of activists in one place. Many Belize young adults want to leave Belize to relocate in the United States and Europe in order to find better jobs and a more open atmosphere where they can live freely, and this is doubly true for LGBT people. While Belize may have more potential for gay rights than any other developing nation in Central and South America and the Caribbean, its potential at this point is largely unrealized. Only an infusion of queer activist immigrants would seem to offer a chance for much progress, but also appealing to the leaders of Belize's struggling tourist industry to attract more tourists (for example, by legalizing same-sex marriages) might also be a means of developing LGBT rights. Several hotels and guesthouses that cater to LGBT people are starting to organize to promote Belize as a tourist destination for same-sex couples. Only time will tell if their efforts will be successful.