

# Belize

## TRAVEL GUIDE



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## Introduction

Formerly known as British Honduras until its renaming in June 1973, soon succeeded by full independence from colonial rule in 1981, Belize offers a tropical paradise experience just a stone's throw from the United States.

Although Belize is the only Central American country without a western coastline, it compensates for its lack of a Pacific outlet with its own unique offerings. Visitors can take advantage of the placid blue waters, stunning sunsets, lush jungles, and

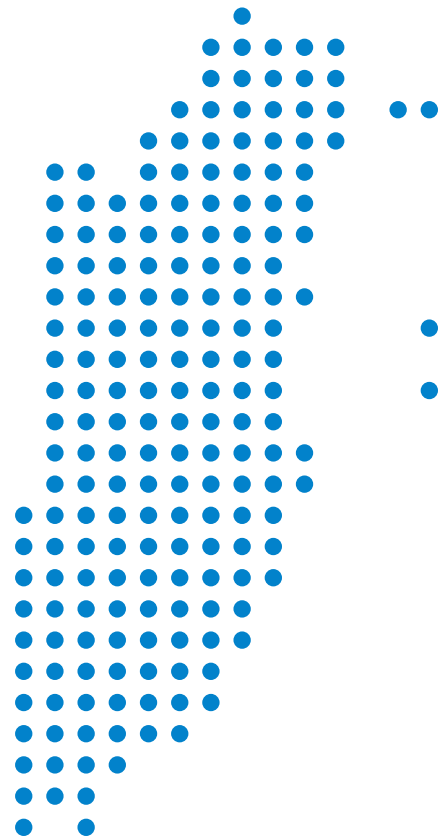
what Charles Darwin called “the most remarkable reef in the West Indies”. Whether simply relaxing in the sunshine or taking the plunge into a snorkeling or scuba diving adventure, any visitor can find something to love while vacationing in Belize.

Those whose Spanish speaking ability is shaky or nonexistent, fear not: Belize prides itself on being a multicultural society wherein English is the official language.

# Geography

Belize is the northernmost country in Central America, located along the Caribbean coast. On the north, it borders the Mexican state of Quintana Roo; on the west, the Guatemalan “department” (state or province) of Petén; and on the south, with the Guatemalan department of Izabal. The Belize Barrier Reef to the east spans approximately 190 miles; it is included within the greater Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System, the second largest in the world, behind only Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. In 1996, the Belize Barrier Reef was deemed a UNESCO World Heritage Site, worthy of international preservation based on its collective interest to humanity.

In total, Belize covers over 14,260 square miles – an area slightly larger than that of nearby El Salvador or Wales, and only slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts. The country is only 70 miles across and approximately 250 miles long from top to bottom.





## Language

Belize is the only country in Central America where English is the official language, thanks to their heritage as a former British colony. Although it is not necessarily a primary language, with only 5.6% of the population speaking it at home, over 62.9% of the Belizean population reports that they can speak English fluently, with another quarter demonstrating some knowledge of it. With the majority of the population considered bilingual or multilingual, communication should present no obstacles.

Visitors will also hear speakers using Spanish or Kriol (an English-based Creole language similar to Jamaican Patois), languages adopted from the populations who also settled in Belize. The country harbors a small percentage of speakers conversant in German (mainly Mennonites), as well as the three most predominant native Mayan languages: Q'eqchi, Mopan, and Yucatec Maya. Anywhere you go in Belize, you'll be sure to encounter a rich tapestry of interwoven culture and language.

## Government and Politics

Belize is a parliamentary democracy and is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, a constitutional monarchy that recognizes King Charles III of the United Kingdom as its sovereign.

Belize borrows both its governmental structure and its legal system from Britain. Its head of state is the reigning monarch, currently Queen Elizabeth II, represented in local government by a Governor General who must be Belizean. Belize also elects a local Prime Minister who, along with the Cabinet, exercises legal authority.

Belize practices universal adult suffrage. All Belizean citizens over the age of 18, or 51.32% of the population, are eligible to vote. Of these, over 91% of eligible voters are actually registered. A General Election takes place every five years.





## What to Wear

Belize's subtropical climate (average annual temperature: 80° Fahrenheit) necessitates light clothing, often fairly casual. T-shirts and shorts are common attire. Jeans are also acceptable. Informal dress extends even to local nightlife; bars rarely have a stringent dress code for entry. Long pants and long shirts in a breathable fabric such as cotton or linen are the most suitable for trekking through the jungle. Although the mountains are cooler than the surrounding areas, a "cold" day in Belize will rarely go lower than 65° F, so a light sweater or windbreaker will suffice. Of course, a swimsuit (or two) is a must!

## Visitor Information

### REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

Although visitors from most Caribbean countries, the United States, and the United Kingdom do not require a visa to enter Belize, all infants, children, and adults must provide valid passports and proof of return.

### Time Zone

Belize observes GMT-6:00 hours as its standard time. Belize does not observe Daylight Savings Time (DST). Standard time in Belize is therefore equivalent to U.S. Central Standard Time during non-DST periods, and U.S. Mountain Standard Time during DST periods.

### Phones

The international country code for Belize is 501, followed by a seven-digit telephone number. The area code for Belize City is 2 and the outgoing code is 00 followed by the country code.

Cell phone service is available throughout most of Belize through Belize Telemedia Limited, which was nationalized by the government in August 2009 and has the most subscribers to its services than any other provider.

## Gratuities

Tips are often included in the bill. If no service charge is listed, it is customary to pay an additional 10% - 15% of the bill's total.

Outside hotels and restaurants, taxi drivers should be tipped only if they take you on a guided tour or assist you with your luggage. Accompanying tour guides should be tipped a few dollars extra for their services.

## Payment Options

Cash and credit/debit cards are widely accepted. While some businesses may apply a 5% surcharge for using a card, this practice is growing less common. The most commonly accepted cards are MasterCard and VISA. A few restaurants, hotels, and shops may also accept American Express and Discover.

## Souvenirs

Be sure to pick up traditional Belizean crafts such as Maya jippi jappa baskets, mahogany sculptures, black slate carvings, hammocks, and pottery.

Other Belizean specialties include Hot Mama sauces, which allow any traveler to savor the taste of Belize's beloved hot pepper sauce in their own home. Mayan Secrets is a line of all-natural personal care products with an array of scented oils, lotions, and soaps, all derived from plants,



nuts, flowers, and herbs from the local rainforest and packaged in biodegradable boxes and refillable glass bottles.

Belizean shops sell a wide selection of jewelry made with precious stones. Jade, amber, and emeralds are common local luxuries.

## Departure Tax

Visitors exiting Belize by boat from San Pedro, Dangriga, or Punta Gorda are required to pay a fee of \$3.75 USD, which includes a Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT) fee.

At land borders, U.S. citizens are required to pay an exit fee of \$15 USD for stays less than 24 hours, and \$18.75 USD for stays over 24 hours.

If leaving through the Philip Goldson International Airport (PGIA), the departure fee is \$55.50 for non-Belizean residents (this must be paid in American dollars). Additionally, a security fee of \$0.75 is charged for domestic security screening.

If you are leaving Belize through the Guatemalan or Mexican border, the departure fee is \$20 (40 BZD), but when subdivided includes a 30 BZD border exit fee, a 7.50 BZD Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT) conservation fee, and a 2.50 BZD land border development fee.

All tourists and non-Belizean citizens are required to pay a \$39.25 USD departure tax when exiting Belize. This tax is often included in the cost of airline tickets; however, travelers should contact their airline in order to verify this. Belizean citizens carrying proof of residency are only required to pay a \$35 BZ departure tax.

## Travel Entry Requirements

All visitors to Belize must present a valid passport when entering the country. Driver's licenses and birth certificates are not approved travel documents and are not valid for entry. Passports must be valid for at least nine months following departure.

A Belize visitor visa is valid for 30 days. Any visitor who wishes to remain beyond the given 30-day period must request a visa extension, which is available for a certain fee:

- *Up to 6 months: \$25 USD*
- *After 6 months: \$50 USD per month*

Nationals of the following countries do not require visas for entry when carrying appropriate identification: Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, United States, Venezuela, and Carib-bean Community (CARICOM) member states.

Nationals of the following countries must secure a visa to enter Belize: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Bosnia, Brazil, Central African Republic, Chad, China, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Libya, Monaco, Mongolia, Morocco, Nicaragua, Panama, Poland, Russia, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia.

# Things To Do



## BIRDWATCHING

Avid birders will be delighted with the number and diversity of birds they'll have the chance to see in Belize. With nearly 600 species spotted around the country, there's not much work necessary to guarantee a successful birdwatching trip.

A good birding tour will take visitors all around to the different habitats where birds may be found. While the tropical forests harbor enough birds alone to make for a satisfying trip, there are also the open fields, scrubland, mountain habitats,

marshes, and riverbanks to explore. A single day's watching might include toucans, woodpeckers, swallows, and jays in one location, then grebes, boobies, herons, and pelicans in another.

In recognition of Belize's diverse and numerous bird population, six areas of the country have been designated as Important Bird Areas. These are subject to the same protections as other nationally recognized nature reserves, to ensure that future generations can have the same opportunity to appreciate nature.

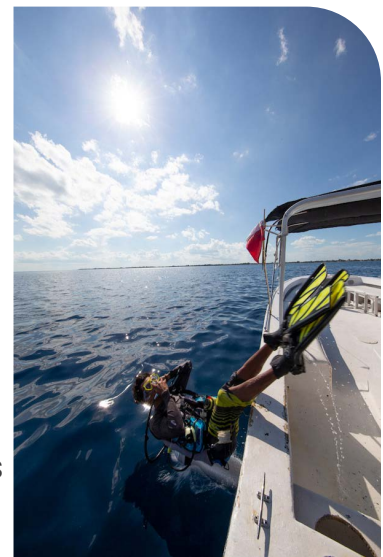
## HIKING

One of the best ways to get around Belize while appreciating its abundant natural beauty is on foot. Hikers will have plenty of opportunity anywhere in the country to trek through jungles, rainforests, savannas, wetlands, and beaches, each journey as exciting as the last.

## SCUBA DIVING

Belize's reputation as one of the world's premier destinations for divers is well earned. Its signature, bucket-list dive is at the Blue Hole, which reaches over 1,000 feet across and 450 feet deep. However, not all dives are quite so intimidating, and there's a site to suit divers of all levels and interests, whether they want to see fish or sharks, coral, sponges or stingrays.

At The Elbow in Turneffe Atoll, bigger fish are the draw, including barracuda, snapper, and several species of shark. Hol Chan Marine Reserve has grouper, coral, and countless species of smaller tropical fish. For some of the best views of coral, there's also Silk Cayes Canyon just south of Belize City.





## SNORKELING

For those who want to explore Belize's warm tropical waters without the hassle and expense of getting a scuba diving certification, snorkeling is always an option. All snorkeling trips take place offshore, right on the Belize Barrier Reef, in the shallower regions of the atolls.

Ambergris Caye is the most popular starting point for snorkelers, who can mix and match their destinations depending on what they'd like to see. Shark Ray Alley lives up to its name, harboring harmless nurse sharks as well as rays, while Hol Chan and Tres Cocos offer more variety in fish species.

Half Moon Caye in the Lighthouse Reef Atoll has a large shallow area perfect for snorkeling, as does Glover's Reef Atoll, which is the best spot to view coral up close.

## KAYAKING

Going sea kayaking in Belize is a unique experience, thanks to the calm, warm offshore waters and gentle trade winds. While there are knowledgeable guides available to accompany less experienced paddlers, seasoned kayakers will also be able to rent kayaks to explore on their own.



## MUSEUMS & GALLERIES

Cultural enrichment can be found among Belize's many outdoor attractions, if one only knows where to look.

Each major city in Belize hosts a handful of well-curated cultural institutions, from museums to art galleries to historic cathedrals.

The Museum of Belize, located in an old prison building in the heart of Belize City, is a small but must-see exhibition of the nation's history, culture, and environment. Friendly, well-informed museum guides are available for pre-booked tours or questions about any of the exhibits. Visitors will also appreciate the air-conditioned interior, complimentary Wi-Fi, and well-stocked gift shop.

St. John's Cathedral in Belize City is the oldest Anglican cathedral not only in Belize but in all of Central America, built by slaves from discarded bricks previously used as ballast in British colonial ships. Inside can be found many original features, including

pews carved from local mahogany, stained glass windows, and an antique organ. The adjacent graveyard, Yarborough Cemetery, is the oldest in Belize and was designated a protected archaeological reserve in 2009. Both are open to the public on select days of the week.

Other sites that may be worth visiting depending on your particular interests include the Gallery of San Pedro, the Maya Center Mayan Museum, the Gulisi Garifuna Museum, and the Maya House of Cacao.



## MAYAN TEMPLES

Remnants of ancient Mayan civilization can be found throughout Belize. Many of these sites are remarkable for how untouched they remain to this day, with some temples still unexcavated from layers of growth that have hidden them from view over centuries.

In the Orange Walk District, the ruins of Lamanai (from the Maya word for “submerged crocodile”) are buried within an overgrown jungle. Jaguars roam the area and illustrations of them are carved into the temple walls, a testament to how long they’ve been there. Howler monkeys’ screeches are an inescapable part of the local soundscape. Travelers who trust themselves to make the careful climb can ascend to the top of the High Temple, where the view from a hundred feet up is unlike any other in Belize.

Altun Ha is another popular Mayan site, due to its proximity to Belize City. Crocodiles can be found in the original Mayan reservoir, and the surrounding area is home to foxes, raccoons, tapirs, agouti, bats, armadillos, white-tailed deer, and around 200 species of birds. The Jade Head, the largest carved jade object yet discovered from the remains of Mayan civilization, was found at Altun Ha. However, the site may be known best to Belizeans as the illustration on a bottle of Belikin beer.

Caracol is the largest known Maya center in Belize, but one of the most difficult to access today, with only a single access road. It contains Canaa, or “Sky Palace,” the largest manmade structure in Belize, reaching 140 feet high. At its largest and most populous, Caracol covered an area larger than present-day Belize City and was inhabited by over two times the city’s current population.

# Cuisine

Traditional Belizean food incorporates a blend of Mayan, Mexican, Spanish, and Caribbean culinary traditions. The national cuisine in all its diversity reflects the same kind of cultural blending found among its people.

**RICE & BEANS** No Belizean diet is complete without rice and beans, one of the country's staple dishes, which can be consumed for every meal. Red kidney beans and rice are prepared with coconut milk, then served with meat, fish, or vegetables on the side. Potato salad, plantains, and coleslaw are also common accompaniments. Variations on the traditional rice and beans recipe may substitute black-eyed peas for the kidney beans. Rice and beans is not to be confused with beans and rice, in which the rice and beans are cooked separately but served together.

**STEW MEAT** Stewing is a popular preparation for chicken, beef, or fish. This technique makes use of recado, a locally beloved spice mix heavily reliant on achiote/annatto. The resulting stew is hearty, flavorful, and richly colored. Stew meat is usually served with rice and beans.

**COCONUT** Valued for its versatility the world over, the coconut is a staple of the Belizean diet. In Belize, every single part of the coconut gets put to use, whether for food or for alternative purposes. The most common commercial product to emerge from coconuts is coconut oil, which can be used as a cooking oil or for cosmetic purposes. Coconut water is an everyday beverage and alcoholic mixer, not to be confused with coconut milk, which is produced by squeezing and straining the coconut meat. If you like piña coladas, you can thank coconuts for their





invaluable contribution to the tropical cocktail.

The coconut fruit itself is a typical ingredient in many Belizean recipes, both entrees and desserts. Coconut shavings can be mixed into rice, cooked into curries, baked into pies and tarts, frozen into popsicles, or simply eaten fresh from the husk.

Young coconuts have a unique texture, described as soft and almost custardy, that is distinct from the experience of eating a matured coconut.

**JOHNNY CAKES** Also known as journey cakes, Belizean johnny cakes are a type of unsweetened bread made with flour and sometimes coconut milk. They are often served for breakfast, either with butter and marmalade or sliced in half and turned into a savory breakfast sandwich with eggs, cheese, and meat.

**FRY JACKS** Similar to johnny cakes, fry jacks are a fried dough served for breakfast, usually shaped into squares or triangles. They also bear some similarity to New Orleans beignets and Mexican sopapillas. Fry jacks can be served savory or sweet, topped with powdered sugar, jam, beans, or cheese.

**BOIL UP** The most common cultural dish from Belize's Kriol population is boil up, or bile up. This kitchen sink stew combines hard-boiled eggs, fish or pig tail, cassava, sweet potatoes, plantains, carrots, flour dumplings, tomatoes, and whatever other ingredients are on hand all get combined in a single pot. The result is a traditional Belizean dish that's different every time.

**SEAFOOD** Belize's proximity to the ocean and its historically strong fishing industry have both contributed to culinary traditions that commonly incorporate various forms of seafood. Lobsters, often considered a luxury food item, could easily become an everyday dinner, priced as low as \$10 for a full freshly caught lobster on Caye Caulker. Ceviche, made by marinating fresh fish, shrimp, octopus, lobster, or conch in lime juice, is readily available. Conch fritters, made of diced conch deep-fried with batter, are another common seafood dish sold and eaten casually.

**PEPPER SAUCE** Spice, at varying heat levels, is an important component in Belizean cooking. If peppers are not included in a dish, a kick of spice can be added with a local pepper sauce. The most popular brand in Belize is Marie Sharp's, which offers multiple varieties of hot sauce made with locally grown habanero peppers.

## INTERNATIONAL CUISINE

As the reputation of Belize as a must-see tourist destination rises, it is not uncommon to see international flavors from Europe and other parts of the Americas being incorporated into the local cuisine. In keeping with the foundation of Belizean cuisine as a melting pot of food traditions, elements of Chinese, Indian, and Nigerian cookery have infiltrated as international outsiders immigrate to Belize.

**BEVERAGES** The legal drinking age in Belize is 18. Belikin beer is the most popular alcoholic beverage in Belize, though Caribbean and other imported beers are also available in most bars. Decorated with a Mayan temple at Altun Ha on the label, Belikin beer, including Belikin stout and Lighthouse Lager, is a light-bodied beer rich in flavor and typically available for \$2 to \$3 USD.

Bowen & Bowen, the Belizean beverage bottling company, also produces popular Coca-Cola products (including Fanta, Coke Light, and the original Coca-Cola), as well as Guinness Stout.

Belize also manufactures its own rum. Travellers Rum is among the most popular labels, offering both white



and gold varieties made with crushed locally grown sugar cane. Bottles of local rum are available in grocery stores, usually priced around \$9 to \$16 USD each. Belizean vodka and gin are also available, but enjoy far less popularity among locals.

Rum punch is a common accompaniment to many casual Belizean meals, both for lunch and dinner. While recipes vary according to taste and whatever ingredients are available, the standard formula usually includes both white rum and coconut rum and some mixture of fruit juices (orange, pineapple, lime, grapefruit) with grenadine syrup.



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