

Belize



The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions, and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip. Be sure to check the reading listing included here for more information.

Belize City ~ Elevation: 16 feet / Latitude: 17 32N / Longitude: 088 18W

Average Temperature

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	75	76	79	81	83	83	83	83	82	80	78	76

Average Precipitation

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
in.	4.5	2.6	1.9	1.7	4	8.6	8.1	7	9.5	10	7	6.7

WEATHER

Climate: Belize is subtropical with a brisk prevailing wind from the Caribbean Sea with a dry and hot climate from January to April, and a rainy season from June to September. Belize is hot and humid year round, but respite from the weather can be found in the cooler mountains or from the tropical breezes which wafts in. Rainfall is a whopping 4m (13ft) a year, most of it falling between June and November.

TIME ZONE & FLIGHT TIME

Time Zone: GMT - 6.

Flight times (approximate): To Belize from London (via Miami) is 11 hours; from Los Angeles is 8 hours; from Miami is 2 hours; from Guatemala City is 2 hours; from Cancun is 1 hour and 30 minutes and from New York is 5 hours.

PASSPORTS / VISAS

Passports: For international travel, a U.S. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing **at least** two blank pages is necessary.

Visas: U.S. and Canadian citizens do not require visas in advance. Citizens from other countries, consult the nearest Belize consulate.

Important: Please look at your passport prior to travel to insure that:

- 1) Your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

Please note: Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

On Arrival: Upon arrival in Belize, proceed through Customs and Immigration. After obtaining your luggage, exit the airport. If you have booked a complete package with Big Five tours, a representative will be holding a sign identifying you or him/her. We recommend you change money at airports, hotels, or local banks.

If you have not made hotel and transfer arrangements in Buenos Aires with Big Five Tours & Expeditions, then please follow the instructions in your final itinerary.

Airport Taxes & International Departure Tax: US\$20 is levied on all passengers, apart from transit passengers traveling on within 48 hours and children under 12 years of age.

Belize Customs: The following goods may be taken into Belize without incurring customs duty: 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 250g of tobacco, 568ml of alcoholic beverages, 1 bottle of perfume for personal use.

Prohibited items: The following items may not be exported from Belize: pre-Columbian articles, marine products, Unprocessed coral or turtle shells.

U.S. Customs: Your personal exemption is \$800. There are limits on the amount of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products you may include in your duty-free personal exemption.

For more information, contact your nearest Customs office, write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044., or visit the Customs & Border Protection website at www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml.

LUGGAGE

Traveling light is always the first and best rule! We recommend passengers limit their luggage to one medium-sized soft bag per person or two small duffel bags. In this security conscious era, airline luggage restrictions may change without notice. Also, luggage limits vary depending on ticket class, plane size, destinations, etc. It is always best to confirm with airlines for specific limitations.

Generally speaking, from the US, economy class passengers are allowed to check in two (2) normal size pieces of luggage (each piece measuring no more than about 62 linear inches, which means length plus width plus height), and not exceeding 70 pounds per bag.

Scheduled flights from other countries and within foreign countries generally limit luggage to 44 pounds total, plus one carry-on personal item. Further restrictions apply for charter flights. We will advise you of those restrictions in your final documents.

Most airlines now allow only one carry-on bag in addition to one personal item such as a laptop or handbag. Most bags within the 22 x 14 x 9 (or, a total of 45 linear inches) size restriction will be considered legal carry-on size by major domestic U.S. airlines. Many US airlines check-in desks have sizing boxes within which your bag must fit.

All luggage should have identification inside as well as secure baggage tags on the outside. *Please note that the US National Transportation and Safety Board now suggests that you do not lock your checked luggage. If a screener has to open your bag, the locks may have to be broken. This applies to flights within the US and international flights originating in the US. This, however, does not address other international travel issues. We suggest that you lock your luggage and bring a couple of spare locks in the event one or more are cut off. But the choice is up to each individual traveler to make.*

CAMERAS & FILM

Photography: Always approach people with an attitude of respect and ask permission before taking photographs. Do not take anyone's picture without permission. Many times it is necessary to negotiate a fee beforehand. The same general rule about asking permission also applies to photographing places of worship, religious festivals, and rural homesteads. Never take any photos of airports, police or government buildings, military installations, or borders.

Equipment: *Bring cameras and lenses you are comfortable using.* If you get new equipment before you go, do so as far in advance as possible. Shoot and develop at least a dozen rolls before departure to work out problems. And, don't forget your camera operation manual, filters, and a flash unit. *Cameras should be packed with good cushioning.* The roads are sometimes rough, and vibration can do damage. Make sure you have lens caps for all your lenses. Clean your equipment frequently. Bring along a puffer brush and lens cleaning tissues.

Lenses: A combination of fixed and/or zoom lenses with focal lengths from 28 mm to 200 mm is a good for general travel photography, although you can take excellent photographs with only a 50 mm lens. Zoom lenses such as 35-80mm, 70-210 mm, or 100-300 mm will help you capture the sights in a variety of different settings. A macro lens is helpful for shooting close-ups, but a good set of extension tubes will work well. A 2x converter is also a handy. Point and shoot cameras are nice for a group or indoor shots, but leave something to be desired when photographing animals, scenics, and nature. Bring a small cleaning kit and blower brush to keep equipment clean.

Film: It is always best to bring whatever film you need with you. Film is generally more expensive abroad and it may be hard to locate. You'll be surprised at how much film you use when you are trying to capture all those special moments. Even those not all that interested in photography will probably shoot a couple of 36-exposure rolls per day, and enthusiastic shooters will easily double or triple that amount. Be sure film is fresh and, when possible, keep it refrigerated. A film speed of ASA/ISO 64 is an excellent choice for color slide film. Use this speed when possible rather than higher speed films. There is a noticeable difference in quality that it is worth the extra effort to keep your camera steady at a somewhat slower shutter speed than you would otherwise use. For color prints, there are several good choices, including Kodak and Fuji films (ASA/ISO 100 & 200) for daylight photography, ASA/ISO 400 & 1000 are good for lower light and nighttime situations.

It is helpful to set up a numbering system for your film, marking each roll with masking tape and numbers or letters, before leaving home. This way you can code the rolls of film and where they were shot. It's quite a job to sort through hundreds of pictures with no clue where or when they were taken.

Avoid airport x-ray machines whenever possible and request a hand search of your film. While security people are often obliging, some are not, so allow a little extra time. X-rays are cumulative on exposed and unexposed film so the more times film is x-rayed, the more risk of damage. This is especially true with older machines found in many countries. Lead bags for film are available for purchase and are worth the small investment. Do not have film in your camera because it may be opened for inspection.

NOTE: *Recent news reports warn that new explosive detectors used in more than 100 US airports to scan checked baggage will ruin unprotected, unexposed film. This technology will eventually be in place at all airports worldwide. Experts suggest carrying your film in your carry-on luggage and placing film in safety, lead-lined bags to prevent X-ray damage.*

Video: If you are planning to shoot video on a safari, be sure to bring plenty of tape and batteries with you. Do not plan to buy videotape in abroad. Videotape is not affected by airport x-ray - only magnetic fields or prolonged exposure to heat will damage videotape. Your battery charger should be capable of automatically adjusting to 240 volts. You will probably have no problem finding a plug in most of the lodges and larger tented camps, but be prepared with plenty of batteries.

Batteries: Put fresh photo-quality batteries in your camera and other electric equipment before you leave and bring at least two sets of spare batteries with you. Your camera will be useless without them, and batteries tend to be expensive

HEALTH

- Do not drink tap water at all.
- Do not drink your beverages with ice.
- Always drink bottled mineral water and soft drinks (diet soft drinks are not always available).
- Avoid any raw foods while traveling in the continent, except in recommended restaurants and hotels, where you may do so if you wish. Always choose cooked food.
- If you wear prescription glasses or contact lenses, it is advisable to bring an extra pair and cleaning fluid.
- In places of altitudes above 8,000 feet, you may suffer digestive problems, light dizziness or headache. We recommend that you only eat light foods the first day or two, and avoid alcohol.
- Sudden dietary changes, from your daily consumption at home to exotic dishes, especially on the first day or two, may result in digestive problems, often leading to headache, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Please be careful.

Current Risks:

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from all travelers coming from infected areas.

Following WHO guidelines issued in 1973, a cholera vaccination certificate is no longer a condition of entry into Belize. However, imported cases of cholera were reported in 1996 and precautions are essential. Up-to-date advice should be sought before deciding whether these precautions should include vaccination as medical opinion is divided over its effectiveness.

Typhoid fever is a risk and immunization is advised. Malaria risk exists throughout the year, excluding Belize district and urban areas. The risk is highest in the western and southern regions. A weekly dose of 300mg of chloroquine is the recommended prophylaxis.

Other risks: *Amoebic and bacillary dysenteries* and other *diarrhoeal* diseases are very common. *Hepatitis A, B* and *C* occur. *Dengue fever* may also be present. *Cutaneous and mucocutaneous leishmaniasis* can occur. Snakes may be a hazard. *Rabies* is present. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay.

Food & drink: While tap water is generally regarded as safe for consumption, purified water is readily available and is advised for the first few weeks of stay. Milk is unpasteurized and should be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid all dairy products. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled.

Health care: There are seven government hospitals – one in Belmopan, one in Belize City and one in each of the other five main district towns. Medical services in rural areas are provided by rural health care centers, and mobile clinics operate in remote areas. International travelers are strongly advised to take out medical insurance before departing for Belize.

Please Note: Keep in mind that these advisements change frequently. Tour members should consult their personal physicians and/or the Center of Disease Control in Atlanta, for any recommended general and/or specific health measures at the time of travel. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta has a fax information service with updated travel information. To receive these documents, call 404-332-4565 and follow the prompts. You can also visit the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/travel.

SAFETY

Common sense safety precautions you normally observe when traveling anywhere should be followed to minimize the risk of personal injury or property loss.

Leave jewelry at home! Do not leave cash, traveler checks, airline tickets, etc. in an unattended room, even in a locked suitcase. Most of the lodges, hotels, and camps have safe deposit facilities at the front desk for your valuables. Use them. Be careful when carrying purses or cameras. Do not carry large amounts of currency or valuables. Do not walk around unfamiliar cities alone at night. Be wary of entering into conversation with unknown people on the street. These are the same precautions a visitor would observe in North American cities. Common sense is the best defense.

Don't carry a lot of packages at once. Purses should be zippered and have short shoulder straps so you can protect them with your upper arm. Wallets and passports should not be carried in your back pocket, and expensive watches, chains and jewelry should not be worn. Don't leave cameras or binoculars in sight of any open window. Do not leave any valuables or money unattended in your hotel room. If you follow these precautions, you probably won't have any trouble. Common sense is the best deterrent to theft.

CARRY YOUR PASSPORT. Please ensure that you carry your passport or tourist card at all times. Never go anywhere (not even the Post Office) without your passport or tourist card. Should you ever be asked, you should be able to present your identification, your passport, tourist card, or visa. Not having it with you could mean a trip to the Police Station.

Pamphlets addressing safety issues abroad are available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, or Bureau of Consular Affairs' home page: <http://travel.state.gov>.

TRAVELER'S ETIQUETTE

In addition to looking out for one's own safety, the conscientious guest has the obligation of treating his hosts with respect and courtesy. An effort to speak the local language, no matter how rudimentary, is always appreciated as are good manners and discretion in the use of cameras. Above all, one must remember that the polite guest, in a country no less than in a private home, is obliged to learn from and adapt to the ways of his hosts, rather than expecting them to accept his customs.

Travel necessitates being a good-natured realist as well as a romantic, and requires an agreeable acceptance of situations as they exist, not as each of us might prefer them to be. A good attitude makes for an enjoyable travel experience. If you are this appreciative traveler, we want you with us because we know you'll be a wonderful companion and have the time of your life.

SMOKING

We suggest that passengers refrain from smoking in public areas, sightseeing vehicles, and when aboard any cruise vessel while in the cabins, the dining area, or community areas. There are designated areas for smoking on cruise vessels. Please dispose of cigarette butts in the appropriate receptacles / ashtrays. Do not throw cigarette butts on the ground or overboard.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks and Exchange Bureaus: Mon-Thurs 0800-1300, Fri 0800-1630.

Shops and Commerce: Mon-Sat 0800-1200, 1300-1630 and 1900-2100

Restaurants: Varies

CURRENCY / BANKING

Currency: Currency can be exchanged at most banks, hotels and travel agencies. Some businesses will even accept dollars. You can change money legally on the street or at border crossings (at a better rate than the banks will give you). ATMs in Belize generally do not accept foreign cards.

Belize Dollar (Bz\$) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of Bz\$100, 50, 20, 10, 5 and 2. Coins are in denominations of Bz\$1, and 100, 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 cents.

Currency restrictions: The import and export of local currency is limited to Bz\$100. The import of foreign currency is unlimited, provided declared on arrival. The export of foreign currency is limited to the equivalent of Bz\$400 for residents, and up to the amount imported and declared for non-residents. Visitors are advised to carry a minimum of Bz\$75 for each day they intend to stay.

Credit Cards: American Express, Visa, and MasterCard (limited) are accepted. Check with your credit or debit company for details of merchant acceptability and other services which may be available. Most establishments will add a five per cent service charge to the bills of customers using credit cards.

Traveler's Checks: These can be exchanged, commission will usually be charged. **Personal Checks:** Not accepted.

SHOPPING

Handicrafts, woodcarvings and straw items are on sale. 'In-Bond' stores carry watches, perfumes and other duty-free purchases, but Belize is not comparable in size to other free ports in the Caribbean.

FOOD & DRINK

Local Dishes: Belize has never really developed a national cuisine. Its cooking borrows elements from the UK, the USA, Mexico and the Caribbean. The traditional staples are rice and beans. These are often eaten with chicken, pork, beef, fish or vegetables. Coconut milk and fried plantain add a tropical flavor. Exotic traditional foods include armadillo, venison and fried *paca*, a controversial brown-spotted rodent (similar to a guinea pig) that conservationist-gourmets won't touch with a ten foot cassava.

There is a selection of restaurants which serve international, Chinese, Latin American and Creole food. Service and quality vary but the food is generally cheap. Bars are plentiful and local drinks include coconut rum mixed with pineapple juice. The local *Belikin* beer is worth sampling.

TIPPING

Few places add service charges, and ten per cent is normal. Taxi drivers are not tipped. Your professional, licensed guide and driver who accompany you, work very hard to ensure that you receive the best BIG FIVE service, tour quality, and satisfaction. If you wish to reward them for their work, we suggest the following: ***Tipping is solely at your discretion.***

- \$5-\$10 per person per day for services rendered by any licensed guide / naturalist.
- \$2-\$4 per person per day for services rendered by driver.

COMMUNICATIONS

Language: English is the official language, but Spanish is spoken to some extent by over half the population.

Post: Mail to Europe takes up to five days

Phone Service: IDD is available. Country code: 501. Outgoing international code: 00.

Internet: There is an e-mail service centre in the BTL office in central Belize City and Internet cafes in urban centers and popular tourist centers.

INTRODUCTION TO BELIZE

Location & Geography: Belize is situated at the base of the Yucatán Peninsula in Central America and borders Mexico and Guatemala, with the Caribbean Sea to the east. The coastal strip is swampy with mangroves, salt and freshwater lagoons and sandy beaches crossed by a number of rivers. To the south and west rises the forested Maya mountain range. Belmopan, the country's capital city, is carved out of the jungle in the centre of Belize, near the Maya Mountain foothills. The imposing National Assembly building on Independence Hill is patterned with an ancient Mayan motif. Near the town of San Antonio, located in the Toledo District, is the Mayan site of Lubaantum, where the famous crystal skull was discovered in a temple vault. Belize City, over 300 years old and the country's main commercial area and seaport, is the biggest city. It combines a mixture of colonial architecture, functional wooden buildings and historic

cathedrals. Chinese, Latin American and Creole food is widely available. Bars are plentiful and the local Belikin beer is worth sampling. The more popular Belize nightclubs feature local bands at the weekends.

Population: 266,440 (July 2003 est.)

Religion: The people of Belize are mainly Roman Catholic (approximately 60 per cent of the population). Other denominations include Anglican, Methodist, Mennonite, Seventh Day Adventist and Pentecostal.

Constitution And Government: Belize is formally a constitutional monarchy that gained independence from the UK in 1981. The British Monarch is Head of State, represented in Belize by a Governor General. The bicameral National Assembly is the legislature and consists of a nine-member Senate (appointed by the Governor General for a five-year term) and a 29-member House of Representatives (directly elected for a maximum five-year term). Executive power is in the hands of the Governor General, advised by the cabinet.

istory: The region was at the heart of the Mayan empire (circa AD300 to AD800), which subsequently migrated to Yucatán. The country's modern history really begins when Belize, formerly British Honduras, was occupied by the British in 1638-40, with settlements spreading as woodcutting became profitable. By the end of the 18th century, Africans were brought in as slaves, to cut the mahogany. Despite attacks from the Spanish, the settlers remained, although it was not until 1862 that the territory was recognized as a British colony.

The country achieved internal self-government in 1964. Elections in 1965 brought the leader of the People's United Party (PUP), George Price, to power. A bicameral legislature was then introduced. The PUP won every election held subsequently until 1984, when the United Democratic Party (UDP) took power for the first time. The new government remained committed to the mainstays of Belizean policy – growth through foreign investment, membership of CARICOM (the Caribbean Common Market) and a settlement of the long-running dispute with neighboring Guatemala. Price was returned to office in September 1989.

Tensions have long existed between Belize and Guatemala, because, even though the boundary between them was determined in 1859, Guatemala continued to claim sovereignty of Belize. Throughout the 1970s, British troops were sent over to deter Guatemalan invasion threats. Following lengthy negotiations, Britain agreed to grant Belize independence in 1981. However, the new Guatemalan president, Jorge Serrano, who took office in January 1991, declared his government's urgent desire to reach a settlement. An agreement was duly reached in September 1991 (including the establishment of diplomatic relations), under which Guatemala recognized Belizean sovereignty (although it maintains its territorial claim) in exchange for access to Belizean ports. In May 1993, the British garrison withdrew. Shortly afterwards, Premier George Price called a snap election. Despite expectations, his PUP was narrowly defeated by Manuel Esquivel, the new leader of the UDP.

The Guatemala problem emerged once again in 1994, when a formal sovereignty claim was lodged at the United Nations. The Belizean government responded by opening talks with Britain on future military assistance. Since then Belize and Guatemala have held a series of inconclusive bilateral negotiations under the auspices of the UN – as recently as 2000, the Guatemalans formally lodged a claim to

half of Belizean territory. In the same forum, the Belizean government has come under pressure from the USA for its alleged laxity in the 'war on drugs' – Washington believes that Belize has become a major transit point for shipments into the USA and for the laundering of drug profits through the country's banking system. Belize's present ambassador at the UN is a controversial figure; Michael Ashcroft, a wealthy British entrepreneur (and treasurer of the British Conservative party), was the driving force behind Belize's newly developed 'offshore' finance industry. He also controls a significant portion of the financial sector as well as key parts of Belize's economic infrastructure. Ashcroft has developed a very close relationship with the PUP government led by Said Musa, which took office after a landslide victory in the August 1998 election. The result was repeated at the most recent poll in March 2003

BELIZE'S REGIONS

Mainland Belize: Belmopan is the country's new capital city, carved out of the tropical jungle in the geographic centre of Belize, near the foothills of the Maya Mountains. Corozal was settled around 1850 by Mestizo refugees from Mexico; now it is a well-planned community and the centre of Belize's thriving sugar industry. Just outside Corozal are two interesting Mayan ruins: Santa Rita, just one mile north of Corozal with a view of the town and its waterfront; and Cerros, once a coastal trading centre which can be reached by a 20-minute boat ride across Corozal Bay.

South of Corozal is the agricultural centre of Orange Walk, where fresh fruit and vegetables can be bought at the markets. Also to the south is the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary where the jabiru stork (the largest bird in the western hemisphere) can be seen, along with howler monkeys, crocodiles and many indigenous birds. Day cruises of the New River, south of Orange Walk, are available with stops at the spectacular Mayan citadel ruin of Lamanai and the Temple of the Masks, where visitors can see the tremendous head of the sun god, Kinich Ahau, carved into the limestone. One of the most famous Mayan ruins in Belize is Altun Ha, located 50km (31 miles) north of Belize City on the Northern Highway. The site was a major ceremonial centre and trading centre in the Classic period (AD 250-900) and an extraordinary head of the sun god, ornately carved in jade, was found here and is now a national symbol of Belize. Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve is located south of the Western Highway about 115km (70 miles) from Belize City. It is an area of fine views and secluded streams, and contains the Hidden Valley Falls which plunge 500m (1600ft) into the valley. Inland from Belize City on the Belize River, is the Community Baboon Sanctuary with one of the few robust black howler monkey populations in Central America.

San Ignacio, surrounded by hills, is the administrative centre for the Cayo district. Not far from San Ignacio are several Mayan sites including El Pilar and the magnificent Xunantunich with its 1500-year-old El Castillo, the second-tallest building in Belize.

The canaa of the Caracol Mayan site in Cayo is the tallest Mayan building in Belize. This site has been claimed to rival such other famous sites as Tikal in neighboring Guatemala. Also in Cayo are the waters of Rio on Pools in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve.

Near the town of San Antonio, located in the Toledo District inland from Punta Gorda, is the Mayan site of Lubaantum, where the famous perfectly carved crystal skull was found in a temple vault.

Coastal Belize: Belize City is over 300 years old and serves as the main commercial area and seaport. It is the country's biggest city, and is a mixture of colonial architecture, functional wooden buildings and historic cathedrals. Sights include the oldest Anglican cathedral in Latin America, St John's, and Government House, the Belize City residence of the British Governor, built in 1814. Around 32km (20 miles) south of the city is Belize Zoo on the Western Highway, with more than 100 species of indigenous animals, including monkeys, jaguars and tapirs.

Cerros is located on the fringe of a beautiful expanse of blue-green water which is ideal for water sports. Across the bay is an archaeological site. Dangriga (Stann Creek) provides a good base for excursions to the offshore islands and nearby forests. Natural waterfalls can be seen at the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary situated at the foothills of the Maya Mountains. Close by lies the diving and snorkeling haven Southwater Caye.

Placencia is a village situated at the tip of the 20km-long (12 mile) Placencia peninsula. Its protected lagoon and sandy beaches make it an ideal place for fishing, swimming and sunbathing.

The fishing village of Punta Gorda is the southernmost outpost of Belize. Forty kilometers (25 miles) north of here off the Southern Highway is the Mayan ruin of Nim Li Punit, with the tallest carved stele in Belize.

The Belize Cayes: The cayes (pronounced 'keys') are islands and/or mangroves located between the mainland and the barrier reef, on the barrier reef, and on or within the barrier reef perimeters of the offshore atolls. Although the mangrove cayes are normally uninhabitable for humans, they do provide an ideal habitat for birds and marine life. The island cayes, which are distinguishable by their palm trees, have provided the foundation for the development of many fine resorts to serve water sports enthusiasts and marine naturalists.

Ambergris Caye, with its many beaches and the fishing village of San Pedro, is the most popular tourist destination. Along with the other Cayes it is a paradise for divers with access to one of the most unspoiled coral reefs in the world; Hoi Chan Marine Reserve is a popular dive site where southern stingray and nurse sharks can be observed in shark ray alley.. Caye Caulker has an extensive underwater cave system which has made it popular with divers, whilst those who wish to explore the reef without getting wet can see photographs of reef fish at the museum. On Half Moon Caye at Lighthouse Reef is the Red-Footed Booby Bird Sanctuary, founded in 1982 to protect the booby and other birds and animals.

National Parks: Belize has a rich natural geography, from jungle forests, karst terrain and swampy mangroves to tropical beaches. Consequently, the country is eager to promote ecotourism and there is a number of protected areas, including marine reserves and national parks.

Twelve miles southeast of Belmopan, the Blue Hole National Park pays tribute to the curious Blue Hole, a collapsed water sinkhole, 7.6m (25 feet) deep, of intense color. The park is a natural forest reserve that is home to an abundance of birds, animals, flora and St Herman's Cave, an ancient Mayan cave.

Five Blues Lake National Park is situated at the foot of the spectacular Maya Mountains and covers over 1619 hectares (4000 acres) of tropical forest. The eponymous lake is a collapsed cave system, known as a cenote or blue hole,

and appears in an array of aqua hues. There is an amazing wealth of wildlife and fauna to be seen here.

At the junction to the Cayo District from the Hummingbird and Western highways, lies Guanacaste National Park, taking its name from the giant Guanacaste trees at the edge of the reserve. With over a hundred species of bird and highlighted trails with information on the trees and plants within the forest, the park is popular as an introduction to the diverse environment of Belize.

Laughing Bird Caye National Park is a shelf atoll, ideal for diving, but is also a habitat for the unusual laughing gulls. The Caye is situated 21km (13 miles) southeast of Placencia Village in the Stann Creek District.

The Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area contains 81,745 hectares (202,000 acres) of preserved forests and marshlands which provides a home for a rich array of birds and endangered species, including Jaguars, Pumas, Black Howler Monkeys, Margays, Ocellated Turkeys and Brocket Deer. Over 40 Mayan ruins have also been discovered here. The conservation park is located near the Orange Walk district of Belize.

Mayan Archaeological Sites: Travelers wishing to follow 'La Ruta Maya' (the pathways into Mayan culture) will find some unspoiled and rarely visited Mayan ruins in and around Belize. Lamanai (Submerged Crocodile) is one of the largest Mayan centers, and as an archaeological reserve also contains a museum, the remains of two 16th-century Spanish churches and a 19th-century sugar mill. The site is situated on the banks of the New River Lagoon in the North of Belize and accommodation is available in local guest-houses and jungle lodges.

Altun Ha (Water of the Rock) has two main plazas, over 13 temples and a large jade head of the Sun God Ahau (one of the largest carved Mayan jade objects). Several tour operators run trips to the site which is located near the Belize district and is inaccessible by public transport. Situated in the Chiquibul Rain Forest of the Cayo District, Caracol (Snail) is home to the tallest man-made structure in Belize; Canaa (Sky Place) pyramid rises 43m (140ft) high. Although hard to get to during the rainy season, trips and the necessary entry permits can be organized with travel agents in Belize.

Cerros (Maya Hills) lies on a peninsula overlooking Corozal Bay and consists of three large acropolises dominated by pyramid structures. The impressive ruins of Xunantunich (Stone Woman) include six plazas, 25 temples and palaces, and the 43m-high (130 foot) 'El Castillo' (The Castle). To access the site requires taking a bus 8 miles west of San Ignacio town and a ferry over the Mopan River, before walking a further 1.6km (1 mile) to the grounds.

DEALING WITH JET LAG

With the joys and adventures of international travel come certain unavoidable inconveniences such as occasional lost luggage or bouts of jet lag. In fact, studies reveal that as much as 90% of long distance travelers experience a degree of jet lag.

Jet lag describes that out-of-sorts feeling associated with long flights, particularly those across time zones. Symptoms and severity vary but may include drowsiness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, headaches, insomnia, and swelling of the extremities.

The number of time zones crossed affects the severity of jet lag. The internal body clock follows circadian rhythm, which is controlled by the hypothalamus that processes nerve signals. That clock is designed for regular cycles of light and darkness. Depending on the number of time zones crossed, it may take several days for that rhythm to be restored. That is not the only influence. Other factors include cabin pressure, stale air, lack of humidity, and your overall physical condition at the beginning of your trip.

Although jet lag can not be completely avoided, there are some simple things you can do to help minimize its affects. Consider the following for your next scheduled trip:

- Start your trip rested with a good night's sleep prior to departure.
- Drink plenty of fluids -- water and juices will help you to stay well hydrated. Seasoned travelers recommend that you carry drinking water with you and drink eight ounces every hour.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine, however, just before and during flights. Both possess diuretic properties that promote dehydration. Alcohol also causes drowsiness and contributes to feeling sluggish.
- Once comfortably onboard, reset your watch to the time zone to which you are traveling. This small act helps you begin adjusting to your destination's local time.
- As much as possible, create a dark environment on the plane. Bright lights have been shown to have a strong effect on individuals' body clocks. If necessary, try eye shades and earplugs to help block distractions and convince your body that it is nighttime. Closing window shades and turning off overhead lights may also help. Sleep on the plane if your flight has an early morning arrival time.
- Loose-fitting clothing and comfortable shoes will help in the event you experience mild swelling. Experienced travelers often bring lightweight slippers to wear during flights.
- Get adequate rest before starting on your journey to help minimize the amount of catching up you'll have to do when you arrive at the destination. Once home, try to schedule a day of rest before returning to work.
- Although not always feasible, look for opportunities to walk around while in flight. Do simple isometric exercises (contracting and relaxing as many muscle groups as possible) in your seat. These will improve circulation, help promote increased alertness, and reduce chances of swelling.
- If you arrive in the morning, plan to stay awake. If possible, wait until the local bedtime to sleep. Many people swear that this is key in determining how quickly they adapt to local conditions. You will sleep better and will be less likely to suffer insomnia than if you nap upon arrival.
- During extended stopovers, showers are sometimes available. Trans-Pacific pilots report that taking a shower helps them recover more quickly from the general effects of jet lag after the flight.