

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys

Destination Information Guide

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.

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Welcome to the World of Big Five!

Big Five Tours & Expeditions is pleased to welcome you on this exciting adventure. We take great care to insure that your travel dreams and expectations are well met. Our distinctive journeys allow you to experience the finest aspects each destination has to offer. We also aim to provide you with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the places you'll visit and the people you'll meet.



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

Average Temperature

Years on Record: 14

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

Average High Temperature

Years on Record: 14

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	84	80	80	83	85	87	87	86	86	86	84	82	80

Average Low Temperature

Years on Record: 14

	YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	75	70	71	74	76	79	79	79	78	77	75	73	71

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WEATHER

Climate: Belize is subtropical, hot and humid year round.

- Tropical Storm Season: From July to Nov there is the possibility of tropical storms and hurricanes. The worst month on the coast is Oct., which is why some hotels close for maintenance.
- Dry season: March to May
- Best time to visit: Dec to April.
- Sand Flies – usually the worst months can be July and Aug, but it does depend on seasonal breezes
- Hottest months: June to Oct but may vary

TIME ZONE & FLIGHT TIME

Time Zone: GMT - 6.

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.

CARRY YOUR PASSPORT. Please ensure that you carry your passport or tourist card at all times. 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.

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

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. 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. All fees subject to change without notice.

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: These items may not be taken from Belize: pre-Columbian articles, marine products, unprocessed coral or turtle shells.

U.S. CUSTOMS

Returning U.S. residents are allowed to bring back \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. There are limits on some items. Regulations frequently change. For a list of exempt items and more information contact the nearest Customs office or write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044. Website: www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml.

HEALTH REQUIREMENTS

International travelers should be in generally good health. Talk with your personal physician about any shots or boosters recommended depending on your personal health profile and your itinerary. Tetanus-diphtheria, measles and polio vaccines should be up to date.

Yellow Fever: Yellow fever inoculation is required if one of the following applies:

- If you are coming from any area other than the United States, Europe, or Canada.
- If you plan on visiting more than one African country.

Yellow fever is present only in Panama in this region. A certificate of yellow fever vaccination may be required for entry into certain countries in the region if you have visited Panama, Trinidad & Tobago, or an endemic area in South America or sub-Saharan Africa.

The following vaccines may be recommended for travel in Central America.

Hepatitis A or immune globulin (IG), can occur through direct person-to-person contact; through

exposure to contaminated water, ice, or shellfish harvested in contaminated water; or from fruits, vegetables, or other foods that are eaten uncooked and that were contaminated during harvesting or subsequent handling.

Hepatitis B, especially if you might be exposed to blood or body fluids (for example, health-care workers), have sexual contact with the local population, or be exposed through medical treatment. Hepatitis B vaccine is now recommended for all infants and for children ages 11–12 years who did not receive them as infants.

Malaria: If you are traveling to a malaria-risk area in this region, see your health care provider for a prescription anti-malarial drug.

Rabies if you might have extensive unprotected outdoor exposure in rural areas, such as might occur during camping, hiking, or bicycling, or engaging in certain occupational activities.

Typhoid: Typhoid fever can be contracted through contaminated drinking water or food, or by eating food or drinking beverages that have been handled by a person who is infected. Large outbreaks are most often related to fecal contamination of water supplies or foods sold by street vendors

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.

Please note: If you are on medication, be sure to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Prescription medicines should always be carried in their original containers in your hand luggage.

Health insurance is strongly advised during any foreign travel. Please check the latest regulations with your local health office or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747); fax: 1-888-CDC-FAXX (1-888-232-3299), or their main telephone number in Atlanta, 404-332-4559. Or, visit the CDC Internet home page at <http://www.cdc.gov>.

CLOTHING

For general clothing information, please review the Travel Handbook in your pre-departure materials. See pre-departure information for general packing check list.

In general, lightweight, fast-drying clothing is preferable. Many people choose all cotton but cotton/synthetic blends are also cool to wear and don't wrinkle as much. Travelers should be prepared with rain gear and good hiking shoes. If going to remote areas, bring enough of each item to last at least half the trip because you can't count on laundry service and sometimes hand washing takes too long to dry in humid areas.

LUGGAGE

For general baggage information, please review the Travel Handbook in your pre-departure materials.

MONEY

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 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 can be exchanged, but commission will usually be charged. Personal checks: Not accepted.

LANGUAGE

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

ELECTRICITY

110/220V 60HZHZ

FOOD & DRINK

Do not drink tap water or use for ice, brushing teeth, or cleaning contacts. Always drink bottled water, mineral water and soft drinks (diet soft drinks are not always available). 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. 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. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk.

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, especially on the first day or two, may result in digestive problems, often leading to headache, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Please be careful.

Local Dishes: Belize has never really developed a national cuisine. Its cooking borrows elements from the UK, the US, China, Latin America and Creole. 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 that 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.

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.

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.

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.

OVERVIEW

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 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.

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 center of Orange Walk. 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 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 70 miles from Belize City. It is an area of fine views and secluded streams, and contains the Hidden Valley Falls which plunge 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 Caracol Mayan site in Cayo has 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 in the Toledo District is the Mayan site of Lubaantum, where the famous 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 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 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, and 25 miles north, 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

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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. 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 that is popular with divers. 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 are 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 at the foot of the spectacular Mayan Mountains and covers over 4000 acres of tropical forest. The 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 13 miles southeast of Placencia Village in the Stann Creek District. The Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area contains 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, Oscillated 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 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). The site is near the Belize district and is inaccessible by public transport. 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 is 140 feet high. Although hard to get to during the rainy season, trips and the necessary entry permits can be organized. 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 include six plazas, 25 temples and palaces, and the 43m-high (130-foot) 'El Castillo' (The Castle).

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc., many books relating to East Africa. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. Longitude Books at <http://www.longitudebooks.com> has an extensive collection of books, searchable by country.

TRAVELLER'S WILDLIFE GUIDES: BELIZE AND NORTHERN GUATEMALA By Les D. Beletsky, John Myers (Illustrator), David Beadle (Illustrator), David Dennis (Illustrator), Colin Newman (Illustrator)

Most travelers to Belize and Northern Guatemala want to experience lush tropical forests and other stunning habitats and catch glimpses of exotic wildlife: toucans and parrots, hummingbirds and hawks, monkeys and big cats, frogs and toads, crocodiles and snakes. In this book is all the information you need to find, identify, and learn about the region's magnificent animal life.

MAYA ATLAS: THE STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE MAYA LAND IN SOUTHERN BELIZE

By Toledo Maya Cultural Council, Toledo
Alcaldes Association

The Maya Atlas was made by the forty-two Ke'kchi and Mopan Maya communities of southern Belize. The maps, text, drawings, photographs and interviews were done by Maya village researchers and cartographers elected by the communities. In their own words and with their own maps, the Maya describe their land and life, the threats to their culture and rain forest, and their desire to protect and manage their own Homeland. The Maya researchers and cartographers made the atlas so that their communities, young people and leaders would have a comprehensive, village-by-village, regional understanding of the state of Maya natural and human resources and their traditions of living in harmony with nature - what is being lost, and what needs to be preserved and developed.

JAGUAR: ONE MAN'S STRUGGLE TO ESTABLISH THE WORLD'S FIRST JAGUAR PRESERVE

By Alan Rabinowitz

In 1983, zoologist Alan Rabinowitz ventured into the rain forest of Belize, determined to study the

little-known jaguar in its natural habitat and to establish the world's first jaguar preserve. Within two years, he had succeeded. Here, he provides the only first-hand account of a scientist's experience with jaguars in the wild. It presents an irresistible blend of natural history and adventure; intensely personal, it is a portrait of an elusive, solitary predator and the Mayas with which it shares the jungle. Strong and sensitive, the book describes the rewards and hardships of fighting to protect this almost mythical cat.

TIMBER, TOURISTS AND TEMPLES: CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE MAYA FOREST OF BELIZE GUATEMALA AND MEXICO

By Richard B. Primack (Editor), Bray,
Galletti, Ponciano (Eds.), David Bray (Editor)

Stretching across southern Mexico, northern Guatemala, and Belize, the Maya Forest, or Selva Maya, constitutes one of the last large blocks of tropical forest remaining in North and Central America. Home to Mayan-speaking people for more than 5,000 years, the region is also rich in cultural and archaeological resources. This book brings together the leading biologists, social scientists, and conservationists to present information on the intricate social and political issues, and the complex problems to be resolved.

UNDERSTANDING BELIZE: A HISTORICAL GUIDE

By Alan Twigg

Tiny, island-dotted Belize, perched on the Caribbean, south of Mexico and east of Guatemala, is a fascinating blend of Creole, Mestizo, Maya, Garifuna, English, East Indian, Menonnite, Lebanese and Chinese cultures. In Understanding Belize, Alan Twigg tells the story of the early days as a haven for pirates, through its colonial period as British Honduras, to its new status as an ecotourism Mecca and a hotspot for Mayan archaeology.

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