



Belize

South of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, north of Honduras and hemmed in by Guatemala to the west and the Caribbean to the east, Belize is only about the size of Wales (9,000 square miles). The English-speaking population are very friendly and welcoming (they also speak Spanish, Creole and several Mayan languages).

Flying over the seemingly endless and empty expanse of jungle of southern Belize, it is hard to believe that the whole country was once dominated and cleared by an industrious people with a population of about 2 million. These were the Maya, who are believed to have emerged around 1500 BC and reached their 'Classic' period from 250-900 AD: by 1540 the civilization had declined.

The main attractions are the spectacular Barrier Reef (the longest coral reef in the western hemisphere), Maya sites in all stages of discovery, and some of the best-preserved jungle in Central America. All of these, combined with excellent hotels and good roads, make Belize a marvellous place for nature and wildlife.

A visit to Belize can easily be combined with Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica or even South America.

Climate and when to go

High season is January to May, when prices are higher and hotels busier. May to December is the rainy season but the only months to avoid are October/November, when it can rain for several days in a row. Belize does suffer from hurricanes every decade or so, so the risk is small but present from September to November.



South Water Caye



Near Gallon Jug



The coastal lowlands

The north of the country, mainly low and flat, has Belize's most productive agricultural land, with many sugar cane and citrus plantations. South of Orange Walk, **Lamanai** is one of Belize's largest archaeological sites. There are approximately 720 Maya structures overlooking a lagoon, most still to be excavated, while the lagoon and forest contain over 400 bird species.

Belize City is the largest town in the country while Belmopan, the tiny capital, lies just inland. Between the two is a fine zoo, with as much wildlife outside the enclosures as within. Also nearby are the Crooked Tree Lagoons and Wildlife Sanctuary (particularly good for birds), the Shipstern Nature Reserve, and the Community Baboon Sanctuary (for black howler monkeys).

Heading south, one reaches **Dangriga**, a fishing village which is the departure point for the southern cayes. Further south is Hopkins, another small village, with sandy beaches. Just inland from here is the **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary**, which has a high concentration of jaguar, puma, ocelot, margay and jaguarundi.



Jaguar Paw

30 miles south of Dangriga lies **Placencia**. Brightly-coloured wooden houses set amongst palms are scattered around the village. Near Belize's southern border is **Punta Gorda**, the capital of the Toledo district. This is a fishing port with a diverse ethnic makeup, and the surrounding area offers spectacular waterfalls, forests and Maya sites. It is possible to cross from here to Livingston in Guatemala by boat, and on a clear day Honduras can be seen. Activities include fishing, canoeing, kayaking, mountain biking, hiking and swimming.



Turtle Inn



Jaguar



Lamanai

TURTLE INN



2 miles from the centre of Placencia, with beautifully decorated thatched cabins on a sandy beach, owned by the film director Francis Ford Coppola. Small pool on the beach with bar, spa, and restaurant serving Coppola's wine and Italian food. Activities include snorkelling, diving, mountain bikes, kayaks and tours to see wildlife and manatees.

CHAN CHICH



A 15 minute drive from Gallon Jug, this beautiful and remote lodge is constructed on the main plaza of a large Maya site. 12 cabañas, built using Mayan techniques, each with 2 double beds, electricity, ceiling fan and water cooler. Activities include jungle walks, canoeing and riding. The access road to the lodge is reputed to have the highest incidence of jaguar sightings in Belize.

CHAA CREEK



On the banks of the Macal River, a short drive from San Ignacio. Spacious cottages, with verandas, are spread through 330 acres of grounds, falling away to the river. Treetop suites, with a Jacuzzi, overlook the Macal River. Spa, riding, canoeing, walking, Morpho Butterfly centre, Natural History centre and visits to the nearby Maya site of Xunantunich.

VICTORIA HOUSE



 San Pedro, Ambergris Caye. Colonial-style hotel on the beach, just 2 miles from the centre of lively San Pedro. Lovely pool area, gardens and good restaurant. A range of room types, all beautifully styled and immaculately maintained. Activities include snorkelling, diving, fishing, or visits to mainland Mayan sites. A very well-run hotel, highly recommended.

The highlands

The Western Highway leads inland to San Ignacio, the main town in the Cayo District, on the Macal river and just 20 minutes from the Guatemalan border. The surrounding rainforest has a variety of wildlife and Mayan ruins, including the **Xunantunich** and **Caracol** sites (once more important than Tikal with 200,000 inhabitants, similar to Belize's entire present-day population). The **Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve** is a unique dry tropical ecosystem on Cretaceous limestone with rivers, waterfalls and some spectacular caves. There are a number of lodges to choose from in this area which all offer excursions into caves or to Maya sites.



San Ignacio river



San Pedro, Ambergris



Caracol

The cayes

The **Barrier Reef** stretches from the southern tip of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula in the north (where the Mayans cut a narrow channel to facilitate their trading routes) 185 miles to the south. Cayes (pronounced 'keys') are small islands at varying distances from the actual reef and include Ambergris, South Water, Tobacco, Caulker and Espanto. Some (such as Ambergris) are inhabited and have lively villages, while others are much smaller. Three atolls (Lighthouse, Glovers and Turneffe) just outside the Reef are the main attraction for divers, one of which includes the famous **Blue Hole**, a circular sinkhole formed in the last Ice Age. The crystal clear waters are a paradise for snorkellers and fisherman, and many parts of the reef are protected, such as the **Hol Chan Marine Park** where it is easy to see nurse sharks and manta rays.

Even if you are not staying on a caye, access from the mainland is easy by fast boat, with the closest points being Belize City, Dangriga and Placencia. It is also possible to charter a yacht to sail between cayes.



Hol Chan Marine Park, Ambergris



Ambergris Caye



Belize Itineraries

JUNGLE, MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE AND AMBERGRIS CAYE



A classic rainforest and reef itinerary staying in some of the best small properties.

Belize City

Day 1: Driven to Colton House, a charming guest house with just 6 rooms, all beautifully decorated, for a night.

Northern Highlands

Days 2-4: Charter flight to Gallon Jug, and driven to Chan Chich Lodge for 3 nights (see page 73).

Mountain Pine Ridge

Days 5-8: Charter flight to Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve and Blancaneaux Lodge for 4 nights. The lodge is owned by Francis Ford Coppola whose influence is evident throughout. Cabins and villas nestle into the slopes above a tumbling stream and the main building houses the restaurant, bar and sitting areas. The pretty grounds include a croquet lawn, and large organic kitchen garden. All rooms are very tastefully designed and stylishly decorated. Possible excursions include canoeing into local caves, trips into the Mountain Pine Ridge (waterfalls, caves and nature trails), the Maya site of Caracol and riding.

Ambergris Caye

Days 9-13: Driven to Belize airport, with a stop at Belize zoo, for a 20 minute flight to San Pedro. Spend 4 nights at Victoria House, an exceptional colonial-style hotel on the beach (see page 74). On the final day fly to Belize City for onward connections.



Colton House



Blancaneaux



Blancaneaux

LAMANAI, MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE AND SOUTH WATER CAYE



Simple but comfortable accommodation, nature, ruins and a peaceful caye at the end where you can dive or snorkel right off the beach. Ideal for honeymoons.

Mountain Pine Ridge

Days 1-4: Driven from Belize airport (2½ hours) to Five Sisters Lodge for 4 nights. The lodge has 14 thatched cabañas each with a veranda, hammock and views of the waterfalls below. A wide variety of excursions are offered from canoeing to riding. It is also possible to take a day trip over the border to Guatemala to visit the impressive Mayan site of Tikal.

Lamanai

Days 5-7: Driven back to Belize City and on to Shipyard, and continue by boat to Lamanai Outpost Lodge for 3 nights. Comfortable thatched cabañas are close to the famous ruins on the banks of the New River lagoon. A number of interesting excursions are included from fishing, a medicine trail, night safaris, jungle expeditions, sunrise canoe trip to water sports on the lagoon. A wonderful place to experience the local flora and fauna.

South Water Caye

Days 8-13: Return to Belize City and fly to Dangriga for a 40 minute boat trip to South Water Caye. Stay 5 nights at Heron's Hideaway, a one bedroom rustic yet comfortable cottage with composting toilets, gravity-fed showers and solar energy, all of which helps preserve this pristine environment. Activities include snorkelling, diving and kayaking. Return by boat to Dangriga and fly to Belize City for onward connections.

Note that if flying to Belize from Europe an overnight in the US on arrival is currently necessary.



Five Sisters Lodge



Lamanai Outpost



Heron's Hideaway



South Water Caye