



THE ROUGH GUIDE TO

# BELIZE

WITH TIKAL & FLORES



# INSIDE THIS BOOK

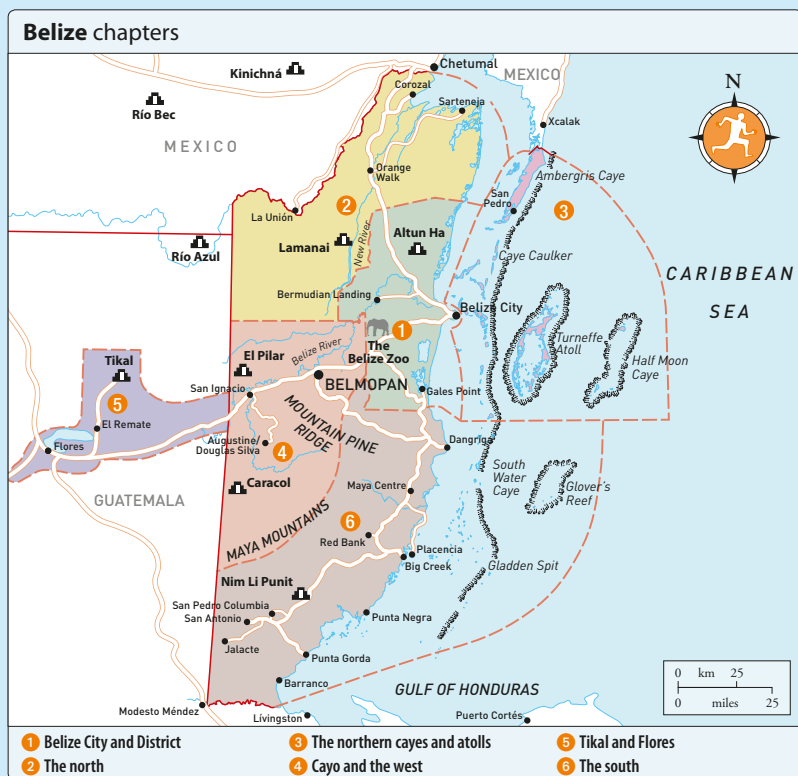
**INTRODUCTION** What to see, what not to miss, itineraries and more – everything you need to get started

**BASICS** Pre-departure tips and practical information

**THE GUIDE** Comprehensive, in-depth guide to Belize, with area highlights and full-colour maps throughout

**CONTEXTS** History, the Maya, nature, conservation and music, plus recommended books and a useful language section

We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide with the ★ symbol



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THE ROUGH GUIDE TO  
**BELIZE**  
WITH TIKAL & FLORES

This seventh edition updated by  
Todd Obolsky and AnneLise Sorensen





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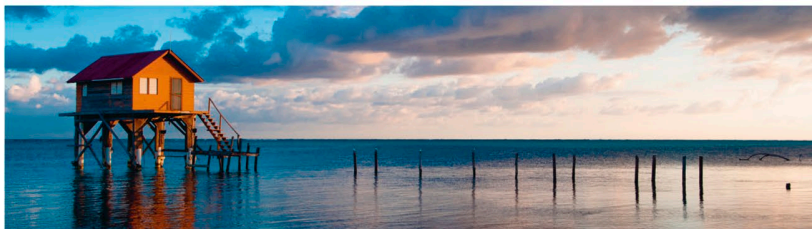
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## Introduction to Belize

Despite its small size, Belize offers a phenomenal range of experiences, whether you snorkel the longest barrier reef in the Americas, dive the inky depths of the Blue Hole or embark on thigh-aching treks up ancient, soaring pyramids. And while geographically it may belong to Central America, and has grown out of a historically Maya foundation, at heart Belize is Caribbean – and today thrives as a unique blend of all these cultures.

Wedged into the northeastern corner of Central America, Belize features some of the most breathtaking **coastal scenery** in the Caribbean. Throw in vast archeological sites and wildlife to rival any destination in the region, and it's easy to see why the number of visitors is steadily rising year upon year.

Belizean territory comprises marginally more sea than land, and for most visitors the sea is the main attraction. An astonishing natural wonder lies just offshore – the dazzling turquoise shallows and cobalt depths of the **barrier reef**. Beneath the surface, a brilliant technicolour world of fish and corals awaits divers and snorkellers, while a chain of islands known as **cayes**, scattered along the entire reef, protects the mainland from the ocean swell and holds more than a hint of tropical paradise. Beyond the reef lie the real jewels in Belize's natural crown – three of the only four **coral atolls** in the Caribbean.

Having long cherished its natural wonders, Belize holds the highest proportion of protected land in the hemisphere. As a result, its densely forested **interior** remains relatively untouched. The rich tropical forests support a tremendous range of **wildlife**, including howler and spider monkeys, tapirs and pumas, jabiru storks and scarlet macaws. Although it's the only Central American country without a volcano, Belize does have some rugged uplands – the Maya Mountains, situated in the south-central region, rise to over 3600ft. The country's main rivers start here, flowing north and east to the Caribbean, forming some of the largest **cave** systems in the Americas on the way.

Belize also boasts a wealth of archeological remains. The ruined cities of the **ancient Maya**, who dominated the area from 2000 BC until the arrival of the Spanish, emerge

## EXPLORING THE UNDERWORLD

For the ancient Maya, the **caves** that riddle the porous karst limestone of Belize were sacred. Approached via by dark, yawning holes deep in the rainforest, they were considered entrances to the underworld, which was known as **Xibalba**, the “place of fright”. Despite their fearsome aspect, however, they also provided privileged access to the supposed dwelling places of gods, ancestors and spirits. Almost every cave in Belize has revealed remarkable discoveries, including wall paintings, pottery shards and the remains of fires. Because the Maya gods had to be appeased with sacrifices, visitors who brave the likes of the **ATM** cave (see p.126) may see weapons, altars and skeletons, typically left as archeologists first discovered them.

The great majority of Belize’s caves can only be explored on **guided tours**, available from operators all over the country. Many also serve as venues for **adventure activities** that range from abseiling (or rappelling) and floating on inner tubes to canoeing along underground rivers.

mysteriously from the forests all over the country, while the caves too, once seen as the passageways to the underworld, conceal remarkable relics. Although only a few sites have been as extensively restored as the great Maya cities of Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula, many are at least as large, and in their forest settings you’ll see more wildlife and fewer tour buses.

Culturally, Belize is a cosmopolitan blend of races and cultures that includes Caribbean, Central American, Maya, mestizo, African and European. English is the official language – Belize only gained full independence from Britain in 1981 – and Spanish is equally common, but it’s the rich, lilting **Kriol**, based on English but essentially Caribbean, that’s spoken and understood by almost every Belizean.

## Where to go

Belize is an ideal country to explore independently; even a short visit can include trips both to the cays and to the heartland of the ancient Maya. Almost every visitor will have







## FACT FILE

- Belize has by far the **lowest population density** of any Central American country, at 42 people per square mile. The total population is around 368,000.
- **Folklore** advises Belizeans to avoid swimming on Good Friday, lest they turn into mermaids. Those living inland are taught to fear Tata Duende, a three-foot dwarf charged with protecting forest animals, who likes to bite off children's thumbs.
- The government is headed by the Prime Minister but Belize is a **constitutional monarchy** with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. She is represented in Belize by the Governor General.
- The **national animal** is the Baird's tapir, the national **bird** is the keel-billed toucan, the national **flower** is the black orchid, and the national **tree** is the mahogany tree.
- It's been rumoured that **Madonna's** 1987 hit *La Isla Bonita* with the line "Last night I dreamt of San Pedro" refers to Ambergris Caye, but the Material Girl has never confirmed it.

to spend at least some time in chaotic **Belize City**, even if only passing through, as it's the hub of the country's transport system. Nearby, the **Belize Zoo** is easily the best in Central America and well worth making a special effort to visit.

Northern Belize is relatively flat and swampy, with a large proportion of agricultural land. **Lamanai**, near Orange Walk, is a hugely impressive Maya site, while the lagoons, at **Shipstern Nature Reserve** on the northeast coast and inland at **Crooked Tree**, provide superb habitats for birds. The vast **Río Bravo Conservation and Management Area**, in the northwest, offers exceptional opportunities for getting up close with wildlife.

As the mainland coast consists almost entirely of low-lying marshes, anyone seeking swimming and underwater activities has to visit the cayes. The largest, **Ambergris Caye**, draws over half of all Belize's tourists, with the tiny resort town of **San Pedro** as the main destination; **Caye Caulker**, just south, is the most popular island for independent travellers. Organized diving and snorkelling day-trips head for the wonderful coral islands of **Turneffe Atoll** and **Lighthouse Reef**.

In the west, **San Ignacio** and its environs offer everything the ecotourist could want: Maya ruins and rainforest, rivers and caves and excellent,

low-impact accommodation in every price range. **Caracol**, the largest Maya site in Belize, is an adventurous day-trip from here, while the magnificent ruins of **Xunantunich** lie close to the Guatemalan border. Cross into Guatemala and you can quickly reach the stunning Maya city of **Tikal**, as well as little **Flores**, a gorgeous island town.

**Dangriga**, the main town of the south-central region, is a jumping-off point for visitors to the **Central Cayes** and **Glover's Reef**, Belize's remotest atoll. Further south, on the coast, the laidback Garifuna village of **Hopkins** is a popular destination for backpackers in particular, while **Placencia**, at the tip of a long, curving peninsula, is a relaxed resort that's home to some of the country's finest **beaches**. Inland, the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary offers superb **hiking** and the chance to spot a jaguar. The majority of visitors to the coastal community of **Punta Gorda**, the main town of Toledo District, are on their way by boat to or from Puerto Barrios in Guatemala. Venture inland, however, and you'll come across the villages of the Mopan and Kekchí Maya, set in lovely countryside and surrounded by the country's only true rainforest. Here are yet more caves, rivers and Maya sites, including **Lubaantun**.





## When to go

Thanks to its **subtropical** latitude, Belize's weather is always warm by European standards, and often hot and very humid. The climate in any one spot is largely determined by **altitude**: evenings in the forests of the Mountain Pine Ridge are generally pleasantly cool, while the lowland jungle is always steamy and humid. On the cayes, the sun's heat is tempered by all-but-constant ocean breezes.

Although Belize has its dry and rainy seasons, the sun shines most of the year. Rain can fall in any month, but it's rarely persistent enough to ruin a holiday. The **dry season** runs roughly from February to May, and the last couple of months before the rains can be stiflingly hot. During the **rainy season**, from June to November, mornings are generally clear while the afternoons see an hour or two of downpours. Especially heavy rains can render cave systems inaccessible and flood rural roads, particularly in the south. September and October, when the worst of the rains fall, is also the height of the **hurricane** season, though most severe storms pass well north of Belize. If you're out on the cayes or near the coast you'll need to leave, but rest assured that Belize has an efficient warning system and a network of shelters. The rain can continue into December, when cold fronts, known locally as "**northers**", can lower temperatures to 10°C for a couple of days.

The **best time** to visit Belize is thus between late December and March, which as the main tourist season is also the **priciest** time, when the vegetation is still lush and the skies are generally clear. Plenty of people come in summer, too, promoted as the "green season".

### AVERAGE TEMPERATURES IN BELIZE CITY

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max/min (°C)	29/19	29/20	30/21	31/24	31/24	31/23	32/23	32/22	32/22	31/22	28/20	28/20
Max/min (°F)	84/66	84/68	86/70	88/75	88/75	88/73	90/73	90/72	90/72	88/72	82/68	82/68

# Author picks

Over the years, our authors have explored Belize from the depths of the ocean to the peaks of the mountains, and the beaches of the Caribbean to the jaguar lairs of the jungle. Here are some of their favourite experiences:

**Lick lobster juice off your fingers** There's no better spot to feast on the fresh crustaceans than on Ambergris Caye, at the beachside *Blue Water Grill* (p.104).

**Cruise (safely) past lurking crocodiles** On a Lamanai River tour, it's the journey and the destination: float amid wildlife and tangled trees en route to the mighty Maya complex of Lamanai (p.76).

**The ultimate swim-up bar** Dangle your feet in the Caribbean off a sun-warmed pier while sipping a chilled Belikin beer at the *Lazy Lizard* (p.112).

**Throw on some beads and a feather headdress** Shimmy down the streets of Belize City during the rollicking September celebrations (p.48).

**Embrace the jungle** Discover one of the several secluded, relaxing nature lodges in the forests of the Cayo District like *Hidden Valley Inn* (p.133) or *Blancaneaux Lodge* (p.132).

**Spend sunrise at Tikal like the ancient Maya** Greet the sun amid the stately, atmospheric temple structures at Tikal (p.160) – one of the most thrilling sites in Central America.

**Imagine you could fly** The hundreds of native bird species are spectacular, from the tiny emerald-throated violet crowned hummingbird to the massive grey-and-white harpy eagle (p.248).

**Serene snorkelling** Get kitted up and dunk your head underwater. The Turneffe Atoll (p.113) and Lighthouse Reef (p.115) are among the most beautiful snorkelling spots in the country.

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.

**ABOVE LEFT** SATURDAY MARKET, SAN IGNACIO  
**RIGHT FROM TOP** BELIKIN BEER, CAYE CAULKER; LIGHTHOUSE REEF; BLANCANEUX LODGE



# 18

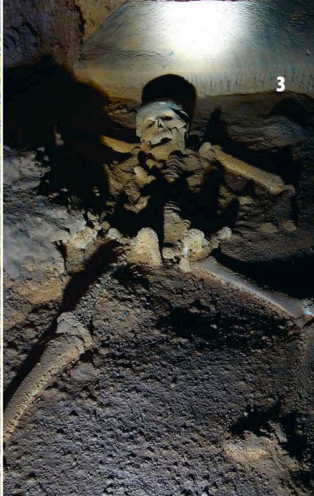
## things not to miss

It's not possible to see everything that Belize has to offer in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows is a selective and subjective taste of the country's highlights: outstanding natural attractions, underwater wonders, Maya ruins and distinctive cultural traditions. All highlights are colour-coded by chapter and have a page reference to take you straight into the Guide, where you can find out more.





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## 1 AMBERGRIS CAYE

Page 92

Enjoy the sun and surf on Belize's largest and most popular island; come nightfall, hit the lively beach bars in San Pedro.

## 2 MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE FOREST RESERVE

Page 130

Hike the hills, peaks and gorges of this vast forest reserve, taking in the tallest waterfall in Central America and perhaps staying in a luxurious riverside lodge.

## 3 ACTUNTUNICHIL MUKNAL

Page 126

Wade a mile along a subterranean river to reach an eerie chamber holding the calcified skeletons of Maya sacrificial victims.

## 4 TOUCANS

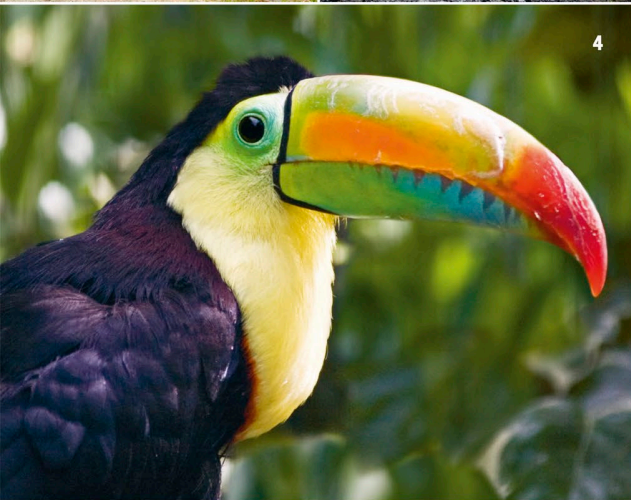
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The unmistakable keel-billed toucan is the national bird of Belize; found almost everywhere, it's best seen in the village of Sittee River.

## 5 TIKAL

Page 160

With its five majestic temples looming out of a magnificent protected rainforest, the Guatemalan city of Tikal may be the greatest achievement of the ancient Maya.



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## 6 COCKSCOMB BASIN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Page 193

For the best jungle hiking in Belize, visit this dedicated jaguar reserve.

## 7 THE MUSEUM OF BELIZE

Page 49

Excellent collections of painted Maya ceramics and jade jewellery make this museum a must-see in Belize City.

## 8 DIVING AT GLOVER'S REEF

Page 184

Rich in marine life, Glover's Reef offers some of the best diving and snorkelling in the Caribbean.

## 9 PLACENCIA

Page 196

A laidback resort to suit all budgets, Placencia holds the finest beaches on the Belizean mainland.

## 10 CHOCOLATE FARMS

Page 219

Central America is the original home of the cacao bean, and you can now visit Maya farmers in Toledo District who make their own chocolate.

## 11 CARACOL

Page 134

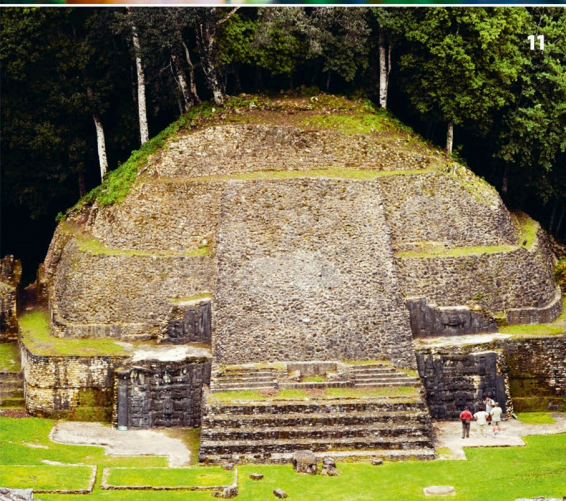
Belize's most stupendous ancient Maya city lies deep in the rainforest at the end of a treacherous road.

## 12 JUNGLE LODGES

Pages 132 &amp; 150

Remote, eco-conscious accommodation options, like Cayo's *Lodge at Chaa Creek* or *Blancaneaux*, offer a superb way to experience the rainforest.

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### 13 LAMANAI

Page 74

Over two thousand years ago Lamanai was the largest city in the Maya world; now you can take a thrilling riverboat journey to see its massive pyramids rising out of the jungle.

### 14 THE BELIZE ZOO

Page 59

Enjoy close encounters with the animals and birds of Central America at this charming and well-run little zoo.

### 15 GARIFUNA DRUMMING

Page 180

African rhythms and powerful call and response define the Garifuna's deep-rooted musical tradition.

### 16 LOBSTER FEST

Page 32

Ambergris Caye, Caye Caulker and Placencia celebrate the opening of the lobster season around June, with a festival featuring music and dancing – and of course sampling the catch.

### 17 BELIZE BARRIER REEF

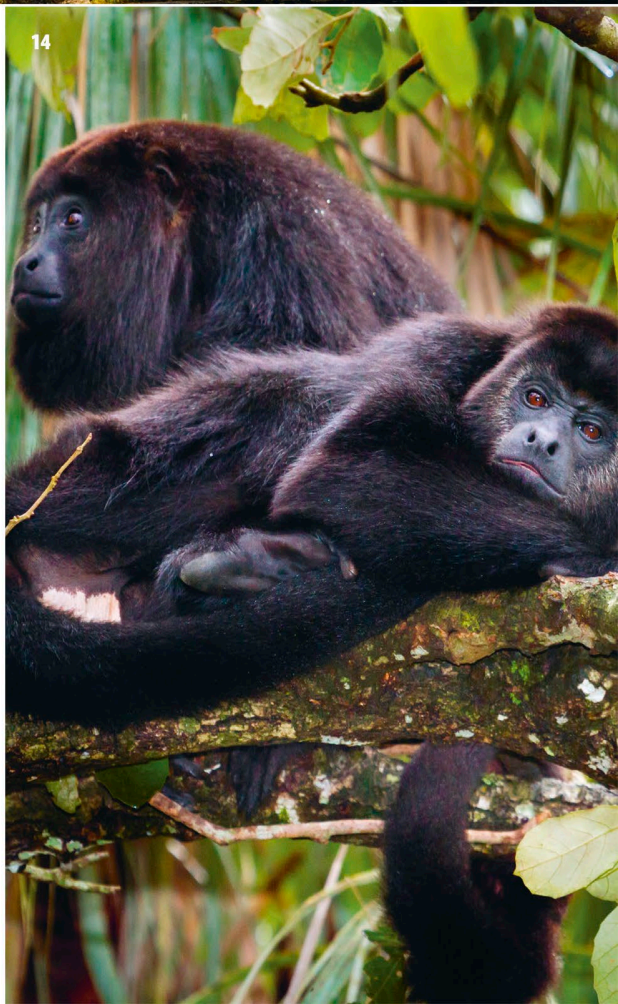
Page 249

From turtles to tropical fish, the western hemisphere's longest barrier reef has it all.

### 18 THE BLUE HOLE

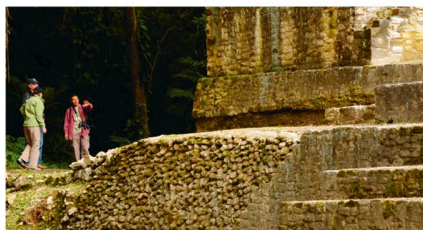
Page 114

Dive the inky depths of the coral-encrusted Blue Hole, an enormous circular cavern over 980ft across – or fly over it in a light plane or helicopter.



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# Itineraries

Belize is not a very complicated place to visit. There's just one main north-south highway, parallel to the coast, while another road sets off inland, running west to Guatemala. In addition you can either fly or take a boat out to the islands. Here are three basic itineraries of between a week and ten days each, which can be combined to create a longer trip.

## THE BARRIER REEF AND CAYES

The idyllic islands of the Barrier Reef are the most popular destinations in Belize. Give yourself at least four nights to enjoy Ambergris Caye and/or Caye Caulker, and a few more days to explore the sites and wildlife reserves on the mainland.

➊ **Belize City** Almost every visitor flies into and out from Belize City. Spend a night or two in this ramshackle colonial port to see the treasures in its museum and meet the local wildlife at its excellent zoo. **See p.42**

➋ **Ambergris Caye** Readily accessible by plane or boat from Belize City, the country's largest island faces the Barrier Reef, and is lined with beach resorts, outdoor adventure operations, and seaside bars and restaurants. **See p.92**

➌ **San Pedro** Still small enough to explore on foot, this lively former fishing village has superb seafood restaurants and nightlife. **See p.94**

➍ **Caye Caulker** A sunny, sleepy little island renowned for its fresh-caught lobsters, Caye Caulker abounds in well-priced hotels. **See p.106**

➎ **The Blue Hole** Dive down into this deep circular shaft to reach the labyrinth of caves beneath Lighthouse Reef, Belize's outermost atoll. **See p.114**

➏ **Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary** Belize is a magnet for birdwatchers, and there's no better place to see species like the enormous jabiru stork than this diminutive sanctuary. **See p.63**

➐ **Lamanai** Canoe down the river to reach this ancient Maya site, festooned with images of crocodiles. **See p.74**

➑ **Sarteneja** An attractive colonial fishing village, perfectly poised for spotting wildlife in the nearby swamps and lagoons. **See p.80**

## BEACHES AND WILDLIFE OF SOUTHERN BELIZE

In a ten-day trip to southern Belize, you can combine time on the beach with an island trip or two, enjoy jungle hikes with visits to ancient sites, and experience Garifuna fishing communities and Maya farming villages.

➊ **Mayflower Bocawina National Park** A delightful little reserve with great hiking and zip-lining as well as its own excellent overnight accommodation. **See p.187**

➋ **Dangriga** This appealing relic of colonial days is also the prime centre for Garifuna culture. **See p.178**

➌ **South Water Caye** Of the countless tiny islands off southern Belize, this palm-studded beauty has the best mix of upscale lodging and pristine sands. **See p.184**

➍ **Hopkins** Fishing village turned backpackers' idyll, Hopkins holds beachfront hotels to suit all budgets. **See p.187**

**5 Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary**

You'd be lucky to see any of the jaguars that roam the jungles here, but the wilderness trails are exhilarating in their own right. **See p.193**

**6 Placencia** This relaxed resort boasts the finest beaches on mainland Belize. **See p.196**

**7 Lubaantun** The most impressive ancient site in southern Belize is the supposed home of the legendary Crystal Skull. **See p.212**

**8 Maya villages** Many of the remote settlements where the Maya of rural Toledo still live now welcome overnight visitors. **See p.219**

**9 Punta Gorda** This sleepy port, served by regular boats to and from Guatemala and Honduras, boasts a vibrant market. **See p.204**

**THE WILD, WONDERFUL WEST**

Allow a week to explore the rivers and rainforests of western Belize, and you'll have time to visit remarkable ancient sites and sample Cayo District's renowned jungle eco-lodges.

**1 Caves Branch** To experience the natural splendour of the rainforest, spend a night or two at the riverside *Caves Branch Jungle Lodge*. **See p.125**

**2 ATM** Take an adventurous day-trip to this subterranean Maya site. **See p.126**

**3 Mountain Ridge Pine Forest Reserve** Home to luxurious eco-lodges, this vast wild area is a wonderland of rivers, mountains and waterfalls. **See p.130**

**4 Caracol** Standing atop the multi-tier temple of Caana, looking out over the endless jungle, is an unforgettable experience. **See p.134**

**5 San Ignacio** Bursting with hotels, restaurants and activity operators, this lively little town makes the perfect base in western Cayo. **See p.137**

**6 Macal River** Along the banks of this remote river lie rainforest lodges, fascinating nature trails and botanical gardens. **See p.144**

**7 Xunantunich** Reached via a hand-winch ferry across the Mopan River, this exquisite Maya site holds some amazing carved friezes. **See p.147**

**8 Tikal** Don't miss the chance to cross the border into Guatemala – even if it's just for a day – to see the magnificent Maya city of Tikal. **See p.160**

**9 Flores** It's well worth spending an extra night or two in Guatemala to visit this delightful little lakefront colonial town. **See p.168**





BELIZEAN BUS DRIVER

## Basics

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# Getting there

**Most visitors to Belize fly in to Philip Goldson International Airport (see p.52), about a twenty-minute drive from Belize City centre, but it's also possible to arrive by bus, boat or regional flights from neighbouring countries. Several domestic airlines facilitate transport around Belize once you arrive.**

Airfare prices from the US rise during the **high season** (December to early April, especially around Christmas and Easter) and also in July and August for flights originating in Europe. For cheaper prices, try flying midweek.

## Visas and red tape

Citizens of the US, Canada, the EU, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa do not need **visas** to enter Belize as tourists. Swiss, Japanese and Israeli citizens, as well as most other nationalities, do need a visa, for which they have to apply at a **Belizean embassy** or consulate in advance, as visas are not officially obtainable at the border. There is no charge to enter Belize – just fill out the immigration form on the plane or at the border. Even if you don't require a visa, keep your **passport** or a photocopy with you at all times in Belize, as you may be asked to show it at police checkpoints.

Non-US citizens passing through the US en route to Belize will possibly need a **US visa**. It's essential you confirm before you travel that your current passport will permit you to enter the US; allow at least two months if you need to obtain a US visa. For more on this, check the latest information on the US Department of Homeland Security website ([www.dhs.gov/us-visit](http://www.dhs.gov/us-visit)).

All visitors to Belize are generally allowed a maximum stay of **thirty days**, but entry stamps can be renewed for up to a year. Many foreign **embassies and consulates** are still in Belize City, though the US embassy (☎822 4011, [www.belizeusembassy.gov](http://www.belizeusembassy.gov)) is in Belmopan, which is

also the location of the UK High Commission (☎822 2146 [www.gov.uk/government/world/belize](http://www.gov.uk/government/world/belize)).

## Belizean embassies and consulates

These are just a few of the Belizean embassies and consulates around the world. In **New Zealand** and **South Africa**, contact the British High Commission ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)), which represents Belize in these countries.

**Australia** (Honorary Consul) 81 Highfield Rd, Lindfield, NSW  
☎02 8425 0805, [belizeconsul@optusnet.com.au](mailto:belizeconsul@optusnet.com.au).

**Canada** (Honorary Consul) Suite 3800, South Tower, Royal Bank Plaza, Toronto M5J 2J2 ☎416 865 7000, [mpeterson@mcbinch.com](mailto:mpeterson@mcbinch.com).

**Mexico** 215 Calle Bernardo de Gálvez, Col Lomas de Chapultepec, México DF 11000 ☎555 520 1274, [embelize@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:embelize@prodigy.net.mx); there is also a consulate in Cancún ☎988 78417, [nelbel@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:nelbel@prodigy.net.mx).

**UK** Belize High Commission, Third Floor, 45 Crawford Place, London W1H 4LP ☎020 7723 3603, [www.belizehighcommission.com](http://www.belizehighcommission.com).

**US** 2535 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC 20008 ☎202 332 9636, [www.embassyofbelize.org](http://www.embassyofbelize.org); also 5825 Sunset Blvd, Suite 206, Hollywood, CA 90028 ☎323 469 7343.

## Flights from the UK and Ireland

Flights from the UK and Ireland go via the US; round-trip fares from London, including on British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)), cost around £500–550 in low season and £700–1000 in high season. Another option is to fly to Mexico and continue **overland**. Several European airlines fly directly to Mexico City or Cancún, often a considerably cheaper route than flying through the US; fares from London to Cancún cost around £400. From Mexico City, you can fly directly to Chetumal for around £100, and continue by bus to Belize from there. Tropic Air also offers flights between Cancún and Belize City, while there are regular buses from Cancún to Chetumal (5hr).

Fares from Belfast or Dublin to Belize (via the US) are similar to those from London. Alternatively, you can also fly direct from Ireland to Mexico and continue overland or by getting another flight to Chetumal or Belize City.

### A BETTER KIND OF TRAVEL

At Rough Guides we are passionately committed to travel. We believe it helps us understand the world we live in and the people we share it with – and of course tourism is vital to many developing economies. But the scale of modern tourism has also damaged some places irreparably, and climate change is accelerated by most forms of transport, especially flying. All Rough Guides' flights are carbon-offset, and every year we donate money to a variety of environmental charities.

## Flights from the US and Canada

A wide variety of US airlines fly **nonstop** and/or direct to Belize, including American Airlines (🇺🇸aa.com), Delta (🇺🇸delta.com), United (🇺🇸united.com) and US Airways (🇺🇸usairways.com). El Salvador-based Avianca (🇨🇷avianca.com) and Southwest (🇺🇸southwest.com) have nonstop flights from Houston. Air Canada (🇨🇦aircanada.com) offers flights from Toronto and other main Canadian cities; WestJet (🇨🇦westjet.com) flies direct to Belize from Toronto. Average flight times are two hours from Miami to Belize, two hours thirty minutes from Houston, and five hours from Los Angeles.

Typical **prices from the US** are around US\$650 (low season)/700–900 (high season) from New York; US\$650/900–1200 from Seattle; US\$500/800–1000 from Houston; and US\$650/800–1200 from LA. **From Canada** (Toronto, Montréal and Ottawa) expect to pay around Can\$930 (low season)/1100 (high season) and from Vancouver Can\$850/940–1600.

## Flights from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa

From Australia and New Zealand, you'll have to fly via the US, generally and least expensively through Los Angeles. For most Australasian airlines, low season is mid-January to the end of February and October to the end of November; high season is mid-May to the end of August and December to mid-January.

From Australia, the cheapest fares (from Sydney and most of the eastern state capitals) via Los Angeles to Belize City, on Qantas (🇺🇸qantas.com) and Delta (🇺🇸delta.com), generally start at Aus\$2900 (low season) and Aus\$3700 (high season). Departing from Perth or Darwin can be Aus\$400–650 higher. From New Zealand (Auckland) the cheapest flights to Belize City are via Los Angeles, on Air New Zealand (🇺🇸airnewzealand.com) and Delta (🇺🇸delta.com), at around NZ\$2800/3500. Flying to Cancún or Mexico City from any of these cities is several hundred dollars **cheaper** than flying into Belize.

From **South Africa**, you can fly to the US or to the UK and continue your journey from there.

## Overland from Mexico

**Buses** travel between every Mexican city and the capital, Mexico City, and from there, regular buses connect to the town of **Chetumal** (around 22hr), close to the Belizean border. From Chetumal, several Belizean and Guatemalan bus companies depart from Orange Walk and onward to Belize City.

Buses leave generally throughout the morning, with fewer in the afternoon.

Travelling **overland from the US** through Mexico is a long, two- to three-day haul, but allows you to see some of the country on the way. Greyhound buses (🇺🇸800 229 9424, 🇺🇸greyhound.com) run regularly to all major US-Mexico border crossings, and some continue to main Mexican cities. **By car** gives you more freedom but involves a good deal of bureaucracy. Crossing the Belizean border with a car can entail **customs charges**, particularly if you plan to leave your vehicle in the country.

US, Canadian, EU, South African, Australian and New Zealand driving licences are valid in Mexico and Belize, but it's a good idea to arm yourself with an **International Driving Licence** as well; contact your local driving authority to obtain one. For details on driving in Belize, see p.25.

## INTERNATIONAL AGENTS AND OPERATORS

**Adventure Life US** 🇺🇸 800 344 6118, 🇺🇸adventure-life.com.

Specialists in small-group travel and customized itineraries to wilderness areas and nature reserves in Latin America and beyond.

**G Adventures US & Canada** 🇺🇸 888 800 4100, 🇺🇸gadventures

.com. Canadian company offering a wide range of group trips around the world, with snorkelling, diving, kayaking and visiting Maya sites in Yucatán, Belize, Guatemala and throughout Central America.

**Global Travel Club UK** 🇺🇸 01268 541363, 🇺🇸global-travel.co.uk.

Small company specializing, for over 25 years, in diving, adventure and cultural tours to Belize, Mexico and all of Central America.

**International Expeditions US** 🇺🇸 800 234 9620, 🇺🇸ietravel.com.

Natural history tours and individual itineraries throughout Latin America, including Belize and Tikal.

**Island Expeditions US & Canada** 🇺🇸 800 667 1630,

🇺🇸islandexpeditions.com. Sea- and river-kayaking expeditions to Belize and other destinations in Central America.

**Journeys International US** 🇺🇸 800 255 8735, 🇺🇸journeys.travel.

Long-running ecotourism company with tours to Belize and the rest of Central America.

**Journey Latin America UK** 🇺🇸 020 3582 8754, 🇺🇸journey

latinamerica.co.uk. One of the industry leaders for tours and flights to Latin America, as well as hotels.

**Latin American Escapes US** 🇺🇸 800 510 5999, 🇺🇸latinamerican

escapes.com. Adventure, culture, natural history and diving holidays in Belize, and the rest of Central and South America.

**Naturetrek UK** 🇺🇸 01962 733051, 🇺🇸naturetrek.co.uk. Superb

birding and wildlife trips led by expert naturalists.

**North South Travel UK** 🇺🇸 01245 608291, 🇺🇸northsouthtravel

.co.uk. Friendly, competitive travel agency, offering discounted fares worldwide. Profits are used to support projects in the developing world, especially the promotion of sustainable tourism.

**Reef and Rainforest Tours UK** 🇺🇸 01803 866965,

🇺🇸reefandrainforest.co.uk. Tours focusing on nature reserves, research

projects and diving in Belize, Panama and Costa Rica, as well as in South America and Africa.

**STA Travel** US ☎ 800 781 4040, UK ☎ 0871 230 0040, Australia ☎ 134 782, New Zealand ☎ 0800 474400, South Africa ☎ 0861 78 1781; 🌐 [statravel.com](http://statravel.com). Worldwide specialists in independent travel; also discount student fares.

**Travel CUTS** Canada ☎ 866 246 9762, US ☎ 800 592 2887; 🌐 [travelcuts.com](http://travelcuts.com). Canadian youth and student travel firm.

**USIT Ireland** ☎ 01 602 1906, Northern Ireland ☎ 028 9032 4073, Australia ☎ 1800 092 499; 🌐 [usit.ie](http://usit.ie). Ireland's main student and youth travel specialists, which also has a branch office in Sydney, Australia.

## Getting around

**Belize has a good public transport network, and buses on the three main highways – the Philip Goldson Highway (also sometimes called by its former name, Northern Highway), the George Price Highway (formerly Western Highway) and the Southern Highway – are cheap, generally frequent and fairly fast.**

Belize's **boat transport** infrastructure is also strong, with frequent routes between the mainland and the cayes, and also within the cayes. River transport is popular in Belize, too – it's the most convenient way to reach some Maya ruins and isolated field stations. One of the most popular river journeys is to the Maya site of Lamanai along the New River in northern Belize, where you can spy all manner of wildlife on its banks.

**Flying** between Belizean destinations is the fastest way to get around, though it's not particularly cheap. **Car rental** in Belize is not inexpensive, either: it generally costs US\$65–150 per day, but it does enable you to visit more places in a shorter time than you could by bus.

### By plane

The main towns and tourist destinations in Belize are linked by **domestic flights** operated by the country's two chief carriers: Maya Island Air (☎ 223 1140, 🌐 [mayaregional.com](http://mayaregional.com)) and Tropic Air (☎ 226 2012, 🌐 [tropicair.com](http://tropicair.com)). There are also several **charter airlines**. Together, Maya Island and Tropic Air provide numerous daily flights from Belize City to main destinations, including Dangriga, Placencia, Punta Gorda, San Ignacio, San Pedro and Caye Caulker. Trips are short – anywhere from 25 minutes to an hour, and rarely more than that.

One-way prices start at around Bz\$70–100; note that they often offer seasonal deals and discounts.

### DISTANCES FROM BELIZE CITY

Distances are based on transport routes, not as the crow flies.

Belize City to	Distance
Belmopan	52 miles (84km)
Caye Caulker	21 miles (34km)
Chetumal, Mexico	93 miles (149km)
Corozal	84 miles (135km)
Dangriga	106 miles (171km)
Guatemalan border	81 miles (130km)
Orange Walk	54 miles (87km)
Placencia	161 miles (259km)
Punta Gorda	213 miles (343km)
San Ignacio	72 miles (116km)
San Pedro	32 miles (51km)
Tikal, Guatemala	149 miles (240km)

In Belize City, airlines operate from the two airports: Philip Goldson International Airport and the smaller, domestic Belize City Municipal Airport (a few miles north of the city centre).

Flying is also the most convenient way to make **side-trips** out of Belize to neighbouring countries. Tropic Air operates flights to Guatemala City and Flores, Guatemala (for Tikal); to Roatan, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, Honduras; and to Merida, Cancún and Chetumal, Mexico. TACA also flies from Belize City to its main hub in San Salvador for connections throughout Central America.

### By bus

Buses in Belize fan out to all parts of the country, with regular departures throughout the day. That said, you'll hardly be travelling in luxury. Most are of the school bus variety, brightly painted, with worn interiors. Buses are managed by an ever-changing variety of different companies, few of which have websites or printed schedules, but the good news is you're rarely far from locals who know the schedule (ask at one of the many bus stops along the road) – and in fact, they may be a more accurate source of information anyway. Most of the bus companies are headquartered in Belize City (see p.52). Service usually begins in the very early morning and finishes some time in the evening. On Sundays and holidays, some services are reduced or, in the case of smaller, local ones, often nonexistent. You'll find some bus schedules and further information at 🌐 [guidetobelize.info](http://guidetobelize.info) or the blog 🌐 [belizebus.wordpress.com](http://belizebus.wordpress.com).

The faster “**express**” buses are occasionally the comfortable coach type; they operate along all main highways, stopping only in terminals in the towns. The more common non-express or “regular” buses will stop anywhere along their route on request. Tell the driver or conductor where you’re headed and they’ll usually know where to let you off. You’ll also often see people hailing a bus from the side of the road, even if they’re not at a bus stop.

Many of the buses that ply the Philip Goldson Highway (formerly the Northern Hwy) cross the Mexican border to serve the town of Chetumal. Others terminate in Corozal town, nine miles south of the border. From Belize City, numerous bus companies also fan out to the west and south, along the George Price (formerly the Western) and Southern highways.

Once you travel beyond the main highways, you’ll need to rely mostly on **local buses** operated by small agencies, which rarely have backup plans when breakdowns occur. Travelling this way is a fairly slow business, as it caters primarily to the needs of villagers – taking produce to market, and so on – but it has its rewards: you’re sharing a ride with people who know the area well, and by the time your ride’s over you may have made friends eager to show you around.

**Fares** are a true bargain compared to the cost of most things in Belize. Regular buses start at around Bz\$8–10 one way; tickets for express buses are just a few dollars more. Some bus terminals don’t have ticket offices; you pay the conductor directly.

## By boat

**Boats** travel regularly between Belize City and other mainland destinations out to the cayes. Two main water taxi companies connect Belize City with Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker (starting at Bz\$24 one way, or Bz\$44 round trip), each with eight to ten departures a day (see p.54). The water taxis are open speedboats that can generally hold forty to fifty passengers; some have covered areas, to protect from the rain. San Pedro Belize Express Water Taxi boats ([belizewatertaxi.com](http://belizewatertaxi.com)) leave from North Front Street near Tourist Village in Belize City. Ocean Ferry boats ([oceanferrybelize.com](http://oceanferrybelize.com)) depart from near the Swing Bridge. It’s a 45-minute ride to Caulker and 75 minutes to San Pedro. Some boats also stop on request at Caye Chapel. In addition, San Pedro Belize Express boats travel at least once daily to Chetumal from San Pedro (90min). *Thunderbolt* is another ferry that travels between Corozal and San Pedro (2hr; Bz\$50 one way), with a stop at Sarteneja, on request. In the south, Dangriga is the departure point for boats to the Central Cayes, as well as to Honduras (see p.181).

You can buy tickets online via the boat websites, or at the terminals and other select locations (hotels, travel agencies) either a few days before or on the day of travel. If the latter, it’s wise to show up at least fifteen minutes prior to departure; at busy times, one or two extra boats will be on hand for overflow, so it’s unlikely you won’t find space. Note that you need to buy tickets to Chetumal at least 72 hours prior to departure to guarantee a seat.

Many **tours** include boat transport in their itineraries, often to destinations public routes don’t serve,

## TOUR OPERATORS IN BELIZE

If there’s one thing Belize has no shortage of, it’s tour companies. A huge variety of them, based in cities and towns across the country, can plan trips, from Maya sites to wildlife refuges to zip-lining and diving. We list relevant, recommended tour companies individually throughout this Guide, but to get you started, here’s our pick of Belize’s top established companies running trips throughout the country.

### **Belize Trips in the US** ☎ 561 210 7015, [belize-trips.com](http://belize-trips.com).

This longtime company can develop itineraries throughout the country, and help arrange and connect you with tours around Belize.

**Dave’s Eco Tours** ☎ 205 5597, [davesecotours.com](http://davesecotours.com). Friendly, knowledgeable company, based in Belize City, that offers trips around the country, from the cayes to Cayo.

### **Destinations Belize** ☎ 523 4018, [destinationsbelize.com](http://destinationsbelize.com).

Full-service tour company based in Placencia, with customized itineraries around the country.

### **Discovery Expeditions** ☎ 671 0748, [discoverybelize.com](http://discoverybelize.com).

From jungle tours to scuba diving, this well-run company offers tours

on land and sea.

**Go Maya Belize Adventures** ☎ 824 2795, [gomayabelize.com](http://gomayabelize.com). Visit the country’s top Maya sites with this top-notch company with friendly, informative guides.

### **S & L Travel and Tours** ☎ 227 7593, [sltravelbelize.com](http://sltravelbelize.com).

Long-running tour operator with excellent tours, including canoeing and birding and trips to Maya sites.

**Slickrock Adventures in the US** ☎ 800 390 5715, [slickrock.com](http://slickrock.com). Adventure company offering sea-kayaking, windsurfing, snorkelling and river expeditions in Belize, from a base on Long Caye, Glover’s Reef.

such as outlying cayes and atolls. International boat routes include Punta Gorda to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala; Punta Gorda to Livingston, Guatemala; Dangriga and Placencia to Puerto Cortés, Honduras. It's best to book ahead for international departures by contacting the boat operator or its agents at least one day before. Also, Belize has a number of charter boat companies, including Tropic Ferry (📞tropicferry.com), which travels between the airport and your resort or hotel (Bz\$170), with the bonus of rum punch served on board.

## By car

Driving is a popular option with visitors, and Belize's **main roads** offer relatively easy motoring. If you plan to conduct further exploration, you'll need high clearance and probably four-wheel drive. Main roads, and even most unpaved side roads, are typically well maintained and passable except in the very worst rainstorms, though mud, dust and the occasional massive pothole can be a problem at any time. Distances in Belize are usually measured in miles. When planning your journey, bear in mind that petrol stations may be scarce outside towns.

Traffic is generally light outside Belize City, but driving standards are fairly poor and fatal accidents are high relative to traffic density. The busiest stretch of road is on the George Price Highway between Belize City and Belmopan. Road signs are becoming more noticeable along the main highways, but you'll have to watch out for **speed bumps** of variable height; these are occasionally signed, but every new driver in Belize is bound to be caught unaware at least once – with potentially disastrous consequences. Look for them on entering and leaving any settlement along the highways, as well as shortly before bus stops.

## Car rental

All the main rental companies offer cars, trucks and vans, including **four-wheel drive** options, for around US\$70–150 per day and another US\$13–18 per day for insurance, depending on the class of vehicle. Most companies have offices at the international airport and in Belize City (see p.54).

Avis (📞avis.com), Budget (📞budget.com), Hertz (📞hertz.com) and Thrifty (📞thrifty.com) have franchises in Belize. The local firm Crystal (📞crystal-belize.com) offers some of the best rental prices, can provide clients with mobile phones for use during their stay and is one of the few companies that allows you to take its vehicles to Tikal. **Reserving ahead** of time can save money and

guarantees that a car will be waiting for you on arrival. One-way rentals typically aren't available, but your rental company can provide a pick-up or drop-off at your Belize City hotel or the airport.

In most cases you'll need to be 25 to rent a vehicle (if you're aged between 21 and 25 you may be required to pay a premium), and you'll usually have to leave a credit card imprint as a damage deposit when you pick up the car. Before you belt up and drive off into the sunset, check exactly what the **insurance** covers, examine the car carefully for signs of existing damage (making sure it's marked on the rental contract) and check what spares and equipment are included. A good **spare wheel** (and the tools to put it on) is essential – if you do heavy driving on Belize's roads, a puncture is likely at least once, if not more.

## By taxi

All taxis in Belize are licensed and easily identifiable by their green licence plates. Drivers operate from ranks in the centres of towns and bus stations and, particularly in Belize City, will call out to anyone they suspect is a foreigner. There are **no meters**, so you'll need to establish a rate in advance, though within towns a fare of around Bz\$7–9 for one or two people usually applies. The set taxi fare from the international airport to Belize City is Bz\$50.

Many taxi drivers, particularly in Belize City, offer day-trip fares to the surrounding sights (like the Belize Zoo or the Maya site of Altun Ha) that are competitive with the local tour companies. Also, some drivers (particularly those at the Marine Terminal in Belize City) are also licensed tour guides and have been through tourism training.

## By bike

Touring Belize by bike is fairly straightforward, particularly in the north and west where the roads are well surfaced, and also along the Hummingbird Highway – if you can manage the hills. Some locals will be surprised to see you using this form of transport, but don't assume that you're always noticed – **stay alert** to traffic. Cycling on the highways after dark is not recommended.

Cycling is a popular sport in Belize: citizens compete internationally, and several annual races, in which visitors are welcome to take part, are heavily attended. You'll find cycle **repair shops** in many towns. Mountain or beach bikes are available for rent (from Bz\$15/half day) at an increasing number of shops and resorts (sometimes free for guests). Inspect rental bikes carefully since they deteriorate quickly in

coastal climes, and if you intend to cycle a lot, bring or buy your own lock, lights and a helmet, which can be difficult to find. Top places to **rent** a bike are San Ignacio, where you can ride along the forest roads in the Mountain Pine Ridge; Placencia, with a smooth, sandy resort road that makes for an enjoyable day's riding; and San Pedro, where you can leisurely pedal along the main roads, catching glimpses of beach along the way. Also, renting a mountain bike in Punta Gorda will give you the freedom to explore the Maya villages and hills of Toledo.

Bikes can only rarely be carried on top of buses; few Belizean buses have the **roof racks** so common in Guatemala. If you're lucky – and if there's room – the driver may let you put your bike in the back of the bus.

## Accommodation

**Accommodation in Belize ranges from world-renowned resorts to basic clapboard hotels, covering a wide range of prices and services.**

Towns in Belize are so small that you can usually walk to the majority of hotels to see what's on offer. For much of the year, **occupancy rates** are fairly low, and you should have little difficulty finding a room. The exceptions are Christmas and New Year, when you'll almost certainly need to **book ahead** in resort areas.

The **cost of accommodation** in Belize is notably higher than in surrounding countries, but you'll still find plenty of budget options. Average prices range from US\$30/Bz\$60 at a simple budget guesthouse to US\$75–125/Bz\$150–250 for a decent mid-range hotel to US\$200–250/Bz\$400–500 and up for the swanky resorts. We give prices in US\$, but you'll often see them in both currencies. The hotel tax is nine percent; it's sometimes included in the price but if not, this is usually noted in the hotel brochures/website and/or at the time of check-in. When in doubt, ask. Note that most hotels and

### ACCOMMODATION ALTERNATIVES

Belize has jumped on the wave of accommodation alternatives, with a wide range of residential apartments and homes for rent via these popular sites:  
 Airbnb [airbnb.com](https://www.airbnb.com)  
 CouchSurfing [couchsurfing.org](https://www.couchsurfing.org)  
 Vacation Rentals by Owner [vrbo.com](https://www.vrbo.com)

### STAY WITH THE MAYA

Many of the Maya in Belize live in the south, where villages are rich in tradition and some inhabitants still speak Maya dialects, such as Mopan, Kekchi and Yucatec. A number of these villages offer **homestay** or guesthouse programmes (see p.219), where you can stay (often in rustic lodgings) with the Maya, sample traditional food and drink, listen to music, stories and myths and even learn how to make chocolate the Maya way.

accommodation have wi-fi, which they offer to guests for free or a small fee. If a hotel does not offer wi-fi, we note this in the review.

In our accommodation reviews in this Guide, we quote prices for the cheapest double room in high season; we also include prices, where relevant, for other types of accommodation that a hotel offers (a hostel-style room with bunk beds, etc).

Belize Explorer ([🌐belizeexplorer.com](https://www.belizeexplorer.com)) is a cooperative marketing group of small, affordable hotels offering rooms for around US\$75/Bz\$150 or less; check the website for updated listings. The Belize Hotel Association ([🌐belizehotels.org](https://www.belizehotels.org)) is a local trade organization that features vetted member accommodation throughout the country, with updated information and deals and offers.

Arriving early at your destination gives you time to look around for the best room in your budget. A good idea, especially in cheaper places, is to ask to see the room before you accept it; check that the light and fan or air conditioning work, and if you've been told there's hot water, see just what that

### CELEBRITY HOTELS

Belize has long held a great appeal for vacationing celebrities, from Jennifer Lawrence to Tiger Woods. But for some stars, one visit isn't enough. Director Francis Ford Coppola put down roots in Belize in the 1980s, opening two top-notch hotels, *Blanquaneaux Lodge* in Mountain Pine Ridge (see p.132) and *Turtle Inn* in Placencia (see p.200). And, now there's another big name on the scene: actor Leonardo DiCaprio is launching a new luxurious eco-resort (see p.100) due to open in 2018 on Blackadore Caye, just west of Ambergris Caye, with this soothing name: *Blackadore Caye, a Restorative Island*.