



MORE OFFSHORE

Belize is well-known for its marine environment, which includes the longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere, three spectacular atolls, nearly 400 species of fish, and 70 types of hard corals. Spotted eagle rays, turtles and dolphins all inhabit these emerald waters. In March and April, enormous and elusive whale sharks visit the region. Along the coast, mangrove ecosystems support hundreds of species of birds, fish, mammals and reptiles.

One of the most famous dive locations is the Blue Hole which is located in the center of Lighthouse Reef Atoll, about 50 miles east of Belize City. Originally a cave, the roof fell some 10,000 years ago, as the land receded into the sea. It is almost perfectly circular, 1,000 feet in diameter and 412 feet deep. The reef can be visited as a day trip from Ambergris Caye or Belize City.

Approximately 25 miles due east of Belize City is the cluster of islands that make up the Turneffe Atoll. The waters surrounding the islands are a sport fishermen's dream, which get hooked on trophy fish such as tarpon, bonefish, wahoo, sailfish, blackfin tuna and marlin. Divers are attracted by coral formations, submerged caves, and the sunken wreck of the Sayonara. Famous dive spots include The Elbow, Gales Point, and Lefty's Ledge.

Half Moon Caye, located at the southeast corner of Lighthouse Reef Atoll, was the first reserve to be established by the National Parks System Act of 1981. Half Moon is home to a colony of red-footed boobies. In addition, magnificent frigate birds and nearly 100 bird species have been spotted at Half Moon Caye. The endangered hawksbill and loggerhead sea turtles lay their eggs on the southern beaches.

Four miles southeast of Ambergris Caye lay the Hol Chan Marine Reserve. Established in 1987, this five square mile haven makes a perfect snorkeling day trip from San Pedro and Caye Caulker. Hol Chan (Mayan for "Little Channel") is a cut in the barrier reef and also serves as home to Shark-Ray Alley, a renowned dive site popular for nurse sharks and southern stingrays.

Laughing Bird Caye, located twelve miles south of Placencia, is another favorite snorkel and dive spot. This UNESCO protected site is home several species of birds and plants. Schools of gray snapper and queen angelfish inhabit the coral formations boarding the cayes. It is now illegal to fish or collect coral within this reserve, and dive operators are required to anchor at buoys. Due in part to these measures, the island's spectacular marine life is recovering.

AMBERGRIS CAYE

Although it is the largest of Belize's cayes and atolls, Ambergris Caye retains a small town feel that compels travelers to relax and slow down. The island is 30 miles long, but only half a mile wide. It is a paradise of coconut palms, white sand and quiet getaways.



Located 36 miles north of Belize City, Ambergris can be reached via a 90-minute boat ride from Belize City or a 15-minute flight. Visitors arrive at the town of San Pedro, located on the island's southern end. Barrier Reef Drive, the main coastal road, is lined with colorful cafes and boutiques. This island is best explored by rented bicycle or golf cart. Ambergris' northern end is even more tranquil; there, you'll find retreats where the only sounds are rolling waves and occasional songbirds.

If you're interested a livelier environment, you'll find it offshore. The area is world-famous for its teeming coral reefs and warm, emerald waters. Diving day trips include Hol Chan Marine Reserve and the 412-foot deep Blue Hole. Sport fishermen are drawn to the flats by bonefish, permit and tarpon.

MAYAN TREASURES

Belize's territory contains nearly three dozen Mayan sites, many of which are easily visited. Some are among the largest sites anywhere in the Mayan world. Others are just beginning to be excavated, allowing visitors to observe the teams of archaeologists who painstakingly piece together the past.

Just 30 miles north of Belize City on the Northern Highway is Altun Ha, one of the Regions best excavated Mayan sites. Here, archaeologists have unearthed over 250 structures built between 900 BC and 900 AD. Farther north is one of Belize's largest ceremonial centers: Lamanai. Located 25 miles south of Orange Walk on the New River, Lamanai is believed to have been continuously occupied for over 3,000 years. Chief among its five dozen structures is a huge hillside pyramid—the largest Mayan structure in Belize—overlooking the river and surrounding countryside.

Near the western border, the Cayo District town of San Ignacio is the perfect base for visiting several other Mayan sites. To the north is El Pilar, the jungle-shrouded twin of another Mayan settlement found a few miles to the west in Guatemala. South of San Ignacio is Cahal Pech, a crowd-free outpost with over thirty structures and seven plazas. Farther south is Xunantunich, a large Classic Period ceremonial center, crowned by a 130-foot pyramid known as El Castillo.



Perhaps Belize's most impressive Mayan site is Caracol, located 40 miles south of San Ignacio on the Vaca Plateau. Discovered by local farmers in 1936, Caracol is larger than Guatemala's Tikal. Although not fully excavated, this magnificent city contains five plazas and extends for nearly a square mile. At its peak, Caracol is thought to have supported a population of nearly 250,000. Recent evidence also suggests that Caracol was a powerful military force; its army dominated much of the region and probably won a bloody victory over Tikal.

BELIZE CITY

Belize City, the country's commercial hub, is usually the entry point to this enchanting Central American nation; all international flights and sea cruises arrive here. Nestled on the eastern coast and divided by Haulover Creek, this small city is known for its contrasting northern and southern halves. The city's northern half serves as the residential area, while its southern side serves as the commercial zone. The two sides are connected by the Swing Bridge—the only manually operated bridge in all the Americas, cranked open twice daily for the passing of larger boats.

Landmarks and museums in Belize City merit the admiration of travelers. St. John's Cathedral, built in 1812, is the nation's oldest building and the only church outside England where Commonwealth royalty have been crowned. The National Handicraft Center promotes Belizean crafts, such as zericote and mahogany carvings.

The city is an excellent base for land and sea excursions. Day trips include diving, hiking, wildlife viewing, caving, and visits to the Altun Ha Maya site.



CAVES & CAVERNS

As you descend into any of Belize's subterranean caves, you will appreciate the Mayan belief that these were supernatural passageways. This is a world of cathedral-sized chambers, shimmering limestone formations, and haunting silence. Guided explorations will lead you to the skeletal remains of sacrificial victims, sculpted stone altars and ancient pottery. Experienced cavers can rappel into a 300-foot cave entrance and embark on a week-long expedition. Amateur explorers can canoe, kayak, or float along underground river systems.

Chumpiate Cave at Chechem Ha, south of San Ignacio, is noteworthy for its ceremonial significance to the Maya. The cave is a protected and can only be visited with a guide. Among its many chambers are clusters of large pots dating back two millennia.



East of San Ignacio is the 300-acre Mountain Pine Ridge. Here you can view the 1,000-foot Hidden Valley Falls, swim in natural riverside pools, and explore the half-mile long Rio Frio Cave.

Actun Tunichil Muknal, also known as the "Cave of the Crystal Maiden" is located near Teakettle Village in the Mountain Pine Ridge area. Licensed guides lead visitors on a 45-minute hike to the site, then swim across a pool to enter the cave. Inside, Mayan artifacts and the remains of fourteen human skeletons (including a complete female skeleton that shimmers with calcite) lie scattered among crystalline formations.

Nearby, the Barton Creek Cave is a seven-mile, vaulted cavern once used for human sacrifice. Visitors can float or canoe through the caves waters on guided excursions.

The Blue Hole National Park, located just twelve miles southeast of the capital, is a popular day trip destination. Like its famous offshore namesake, this "Blue Hole" is a submerged, collapsed cavern of exceptionally blue waters. The twenty-foot hole is surrounded by 575 acres of primary and secondary forest lined by nature trails and dotted with wildlife observation towers.

St. Herman's Cave, located within the Blue Hole National Park, was used ceremonially by Classical Period Maya. Dozens of artifact, including spears, torches and pots have been found here. Visitors can explore the first half-mile of the cave independently. Guided tours can be arranged at the Visitors' Center. Outside the park, Caves Branch offers cave tubing and rafting tours.

WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES

Thirty miles from the coastal town of Dangriga, the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary encompasses 100,000 acres of pristine tropical forest. The sanctuary was established in 1984 to protect the local jaguar population. Today, Cockscomb is home to approximately 30 of the shadowy cats—the world's largest jaguar population. The sanctuary also shelters ocelots, pumas, tapirs, peccaries and over 300 bird species (including toucans and scarlet macaws).

Farther inland, Guanacaste Park is a 52-acre tropical forest reserve at the T-junction of the Western and Hummingbird highways just west of Belmopan. This easily visited park provides an excellent introduction to Belize's tropical forests, with over 100 species of birds and mammals and numerous species of orchids and bromeliads.

Southwest of Guanacaste Park is the 300-acre Mountain Pine Ridge. Here you can view the 1,000-foot Hidden Valley Falls, swim in natural riverside pools, and explore the Rio Frio Caves and Nature Trail. Mountain Pine Ridge is a refreshing stop for travelers en route to the Maya site at Caracol.

The Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary is located 33 miles northwest of Belize City. This protected network of inland lagoons, swamps and waterways, provides a secure habitat for hundreds of bird species, black howler monkeys, crocodiles, turtles and iguanas.

Thirty miles west of Belize City is the oddly-named Community Baboon Sanctuary. This 20-mile section of the Belize River gives refuge to a population of approximately 1,000 black howler monkeys. Visitors can observe these animals, as well nearly 200 other native species—but no baboons, from a well-marked series of trails that traverse the park.

Zoos are not usually considered wildlife sanctuaries; however, the 30-acre Belize Zoo offers an excellent opportunity to observe local wildlife in a park-like setting. Here, visitors can observe more than 125 Belizean species, including jaguar, ocelot, puma and tapir. The zoo is located 30 miles west of Belize City, and is open daily from 9AM to 5PM. Nocturnal wildlife tours are offered through the Tropical Education Center, which is located adjacent to the zoo and provides overnight lodging.



Other noteworthy protected areas include the huge Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area in Orange Walk and the 4,000 acre Five Blues Lake Park in the forest-covered foothills of the Maya Mountains.

CAYO ESPANTO: YOUR PRIVATE ISLAND

Imagine an island paradise far from the madding crowd. Cayo Espanto is an island retreat just for you and your closest friends. Guests can choose from five separate villas, or the entire island can be taken under one reservation (with accommodations for up to fourteen guests).

Each villa has its own private dock and plunge pool, and each is assigned a private "houseman". Guests enjoy in-suite spa services and menus customized to their tastes.

Cayo Espanto is located just off the southern end of Ambergris Caye in a region well known for beautiful beaches and spectacular diving. At a moment's notice, Cayo Espanto guests can arrange private dive charters, sport fishing trips, and private picnics on deserted islands.



BLANCANEAUX LODGE

Located on the edge of Belize's lush Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, Blancaneaux Lodge is the original Francis Ford Coppola retreat. The property was purchased by Mr. Coppola in 1981 as a family vacation spot. Through the encouragement of visiting friends and collaboration with architect Monolo Meastre, Blancaneaux evolved into an eco-resort, opening to guests in December 1993.



Blancaneaux Lodge features 26 unique rooms, a spa, a restaurant, a gift store and horse stables. One villa, known as the "enchanted cottage", is located a short distance away and offers an additional level of privacy.

The gentle Privassion River runs along the property, creating a series of clear pools for swimming and soaking. Other lodge activities include horseback riding, nature hikes, biking, caving and day trips to the spectacular Mayan sites of Caracol and Tikal.

The success of Blancaneaux led to the development of Mr. Coppola's other resorts: Turtle Inn on the Belizean Coast near Placencia and La Lancha in Guatemala. Visits to these properties are easily combined with a stay at Blancaneaux.

BIRDING IN BELIZE

With its vibrant toucans and boisterous parrots, Belize transforms many travelers into enthusiastic birdwatchers. This tiny country is home to more than 540 avian species. While canoeing along the country's interior waterways, you may be intermittently escorted by kingfishers and egrets. Royal terns and brown pelicans glide over the coast beaches. Crested eagles and black catbirds still thrive in Belize's protected reserves.

Although bird watching is a year-round activity, many travelers plan their trips to coincide with the primary mating season, which coincides with the dry season and extends from March until late May. During those months The Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, located 33 miles northwest of Belize City, is an ideal observation point. Among the many species supported by the sanctuary are the jabiru storks the largest flying bird in North America (with a wingspan of up to nine feet). Other species here include snowy egrets, ospreys, black-collared hawks and five species of kingfisher.

Another excellent birding location is the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, located in the Maya Mountains, thirty miles from the coastal town of Dangriga. Well known for its jaguar population, the sanctuary also shelters over 300 bird species. From the excellent trail system, visitors can view keel-billed toucans, scarlet macaws, king vultures and black-collared hawks.



Offshore, Half Moon Caye was the first reserve to be established by the National Parks System Act of 1981. Located at the southeast corner of Lighthouse Reef Atoll, the caye is home to a colony of red-footed boobies. In addition, magnificent frigate birds and nearly 100 bird species have been spotted at Half Moon Caye.

FISHING THE ADVENTURE COAST

Belize is well internationally renowned for its excellent fishing. Here you can cast for bonefish along tidal flats and mangroves, troll the barrier reef for larger species, or fish jungle-lined rivers for snapper. Sport fishermen are drawn to the flats near Ambergris Caye by bonefish, permit and tarpon. Schools of tarpon roam the flats, and will take a fly year-round. Larger migratory tarpon arrive in late spring.

Yellowtail, mutton snapper and barracuda swim in the deeper waters outside the barrier reef. At shallower depths, three types of snapper (mutton, mangrove and yellowtail) can be caught all year. During tournament season (April and May) anglers can aim for marlin, wahoo, kingfish and tuna near Caye Caulker, Turneffe, Lighthouse Reef and Glover's Reef. International billfish tournaments are held in February, June and October.

Central and southern Belize provides the best river fishing opportunities in the region. The Sibun, Belize, Black, Deep, Macal, Manatee, Monkey, Temash, and Sarstoon rivers also offer excellent fishing opportunities. These include huge tarpon (up to 150 pounds), snook, jacks, cubera snapper (up to 30 pounds) and grouper (up to 100 pounds).

ORANGE WALK: ON THE WILD SIDE

Orange Walk, located one hour north of Belize City, is the second largest district in this sparsely-populated country. Much of the district's best wildlife habitat is protected within the 260,000 acre Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area. Located in the northwest corner of Orange Walk, this remote area shelters many endangered species, including the black howler monkey, jaguar, puma, ocelot, tapir and spider monkey. Rio Bravo is also a paradise for bird watchers; ornithologists have recorded over 340 species here.



In addition to its wealth of natural history, over 40 Maya sites have been identified within the Rio Bravo area. The largest, La Milpa, is Belize's third largest. Evidence suggests the Maya originally settled the Orange Walk territory in 3,400 BC. The district's most impressive site is Lamanai, a Maya ceremonial center accessible by boat via the New River. Guests often stay two nights at one of the area's comfortable jungle lodges, visiting the archaeological sites and observing wildlife.

COROZAL

Perched on the northern border with Mexico, picturesque Corozal district blends Mestizo, Maya and Mexican flavors with the allure of a serene haven away from the busier tourist track. The district's name is derived from the cohune palms that dominated the landscape when the first inhabitants arrived.

Traditionally the local economy has been primarily agricultural with sugarcane and papayas but tourism has been on the increase with the lure of a retirement community, the water side Maya temples of Cerros, the peaceful fishing villages of Consejo and Sarteneja and the attractions of Shipstern Nature Reserve.

Situated to attract visitors staying in the country as well as residents from across the border in Mexico, Corozal district is also home to the Corozal Free Zone with a hotel, casino and shopping.

Corozal Town

Corozal Town, the northernmost urban center in Belize is a scenic and peaceful town, nestled along the windswept waters of Corozal Bay. Located 85 miles northwest of Belize City and only 10 miles from the Mexican border and tucked in the rich blue-and-white-capped waters of windswept Corozal Bay the town has a population of 9,100. Charming resorts, comfortable homes and shady parks overlook the inviting waters. Visitors and retirees from Europe and North America mix easily with more deeply rooted locals, mostly descendants of Mestizo's who fled the 19th century Caste Wars in Yucatan.

