

Directory

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ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodations in Belize range from tents to palm-roofed shacks to guesthouses to luxury seaside resorts and jungle lodges. Many of the upscale places maintain a casual, relaxed atmosphere and a rustic (albeit very elegant) style with wood-and-thatch cabanas.

Belize is more costly than other Central American destinations, so the budget bracket in this book goes up to BZ\$90 for a double room. Within this range the best value is usually provided by small, often family-run guesthouses. Only the cheapest budget options have shared bathrooms or cold showers; a few places provide dorm accommodations.

Budget and lower midrange travelers will find the website **Toucan Trail** (www.toucantrail.com) useful. Put together by the Belize Tourism Board (BTB), this site details over 160 accommodations that have rooms for BZ\$120 or less.

Midrange prices range from BZ\$90 to BZ\$240 for a double room. This spectrum embraces many hotels, more-comfortable guesthouses and most of the small-scale lodges and resorts. Many places in this range have their own restaurants and bars, and offer arrangements for activities, tours and other services. The range of accommodation and service is wide within this category.

Above BZ\$240, top-end accommodations can be seriously sumptuous. (The fanciest rooms are upwards of BZ\$500 for a double.) These are resorts, lodges and classy hotels with large, well-appointed rooms and plenty of other facilities, from restaurants and bars to private beaches, spas, pools, horse stables, dive shops and walking trails. Many have their own unique style and atmosphere created with the help of architecture, decor, location and layout.

Peak tourist seasons in Belize are the couple of weeks each side of Christmas and Easter, while the period between these two holidays also sees a steady stream of tourists. Most establishments have high- and low-season prices, often with extra-high prices for the peak weeks. Prices in this book are high-season prices and include the 9% hotel room tax, as well as any obligatory service charges (some top-end places automatically add on 10% for service).

Cabanas & Cabins

These two terms are pretty well interchangeable and can refer to any kind of free-standing, individual accommodation structure. You'll find cabins in every class of accommodations: they can be made of wood, concrete or brick and be roofed with palm

BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

PRACTICALITIES

- The electrical current in Belize is 110V, 60Hz, with plugs of two flat prongs, the same as in the USA and Canada.
- Belize measures distance in miles.
- Gasoline is sold by the (US) gallon.
- Laundry is usually weighed and paid for by the pound.
- Occasionally a metric measurement might pop up – most likely kilometers on the odometers of some rental cars.
- Prerecorded videos normally use the NTSC image registration system, which is incompatible with PAL and Secam systems.

thatch, tin or tiles. They may be small, bare and cheap or super-luxurious and stylish, with Balinese screens, Japanese bathrooms and Maya wall-hangings. Locales vary from beachside, riverside, surrounded by jungle or on the grounds of a hotel along with other types of accommodations.

Camping

Belize does not have many dedicated campsites, but there are some (mainly budget) accommodations that provide camping space on their grounds, and just a few of those have gear for rent.

Guesthouses

Guesthouses are affordable, affable places to stay, with just a few rooms and usually plenty of personal attention from your hosts. Most are simply decorated but clean and comfortable. Rooms usually have a private bathroom with hot water. You'll find guesthouses in towns or on the coast or cayes. Some guesthouses (also called B&Bs) provide breakfast.

Located in the southern Toledo District, the Toledo Ecotourism Association (p255) runs an excellent village guesthouse program that enables travelers to stay in the area's Maya villages.

Hotels

A hotel is, more or less, any accommodation that doesn't give itself another name. A hotel might sit on a gorgeous beach and have lovely rooms, a great restaurant and its own

pool, or it may be a more functional place in town. Hotels generally don't offer a vast range of tours and activities to their guests, but every generalization has its exceptions. Some smaller hotels call themselves inns.

Lodges & Resorts

In Belize the term 'lodge' usually means a comfortable hotel in a remote location, be it in the Cayo jungles or the offshore cayes. Most lodges focus on activities such as diving, fishing, horseback riding, or jungle or river adventures, aiming to provide comfortable accommodations and good meals to sustain their guests between outings. Many lodges have gorgeous island, beach or forest settings, and they tend to be on the expensive side due mainly to their high standards, wide range of amenities and (often) remote locations.

Resorts have a great deal in common with lodges – again they tend to be among the more expensive options and can be found both inland and by the sea. If there is any real distinction, it's that the emphasis in resorts tends to be marginally less on activities and slightly more on relaxation.

Rental Accommodations

In main tourist destinations such as San Pedro, Caye Caulker and Placencia, there are houses and apartments for rent for short stays or by the week or month. If you plan a long stay you'll certainly cut costs by renting your own place. Plan ahead: these places can get booked up.

BUSINESS HOURS

Shops in Belize typically open from 9am to 5pm Monday to Saturday, sometimes with a one-hour closure for lunch from noon to 1pm or from 1pm to 2pm. Businesses dealing with the public, such as travel agencies and airline offices, have similar hours but are likely to be closed on Saturday afternoon. Banks have varied hours but most are open from 8am to 2pm or 3pm Monday to Thursday, and till 4pm or 4:30pm on Friday. A few banks also open from 8am or 9am to noon on Saturday.

For typical restaurant hours, see p284. Opening hours of bars are very diverse. Some open from about noon to midnight, others just for a few evening hours, and others from early evening to early morning.

CHILDREN

Children are highly regarded in Belize and can often break down barriers and open doors to local hospitality. Most hotels, lodges and resorts are child-friendly. Some of the more expensive places allow children to stay free, or at a big discount, and also offer discounts on meals. Additionally, there are plenty of self-catering accommodations that can help to keep down the cost of a family holiday. These self-catering options are referred to as condos, suites, villas or casitas, all available for short-term rentals; the main distinction between them being whether they have one or two bedrooms.

Belize has some special ingredients for a family holiday. You won't have to think too hard about entertaining your kids. Most of the attractions in the country – sea life, exploring caves and ruins, watching for birds, wildlife and bugs – are as delightful for kids as they are for grown-ups, and most activities are set up to accommodate children. See p29 for a tailored itinerary for the younger set. See also Top Picks for Kids, p79, for some of our favorite kid-size adventures.

A few places even have holidays set up for families, for example, the **Oceanic Society** (www.oceanic-society.org) has a family education program to help families get to know atoll ecosystems, such as that of Turneffe Atoll (p156), while **International Zoological Expeditions** (www.ize2belize.com) does eco-adventure and study packages for families, combining South Water Caye (p226) and Blue Creek (p254).

You'll find plenty of traveling families all over the country, especially during North American school breaks. Most do the rounds of the wildlife sanctuaries and major ruins, spend a little time on the cayes or in Placencia, and visit a jungle lodge. Ambergris Caye and

Caye Caulker are good spots for teenagers as there's a bit of town life to distract as well as the outdoor activities. English is spoken so there's no language barrier to mixing with local kids. Your children will probably experience a touch of culture shock, but they'll soon adapt to Belize's captivating ways.

Local bus journeys will amuse if they're not too long. Bus drivers in Belize often play their favorite music, and reggae and Latin rhythms can make even a tedious journey quite enjoyable. Teenagers whose minds are open to music will get into the variety of music they hear in Belize.

Food is no problem in Belize (see p88). Traveling with toddlers and young children can be challenging; you need to be organized. Be cautious concerning insect bites, sunburn and, of course, water and sanitation. If you're staying in good accommodations and not moving around too much, you should have no major difficulties. For tried and tested general advice, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan and Maureen Wheeler.

CLIMATE CHARTS

Belize is typically hot and humid day and night year-round. Temperatures vary by only about 4°C between the coolest part of the year (December to March) and the hottest (May to September). The daily temperature range is around 10°C from the hottest part of the day to the coolest part of the night. In the uplands (Mountain Pine Ridge and the Maya Mountains) you can expect temperatures to fall by about 3°C for every 1000ft rise in altitude, making things noticeably more comfortable.

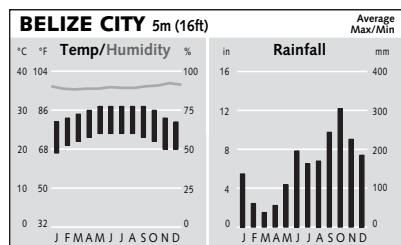
Belize has distinct wet and dry seasons. The wet season runs from mid-May to November

GREEN ACCOMMODATIONS

Ecotourism means big business in Belize, and sometimes it seems like every hotel, hostel, lodge, resort and guesthouse is a friend and protector of Mother Earth. But attaching 'eco' to the front of a name does not necessarily make it so. This prefix may mean that the enterprise is taking concrete steps to reduce its environmental impact, whether by practicing recycling, implementing alternative energy, participating in conservation programs or educating its guests. On the other hand, it may mean nothing more than a remote location or rustic accommodation. Most likely, the truth is somewhere in between.

Many lodges, resorts, hostels and guesthouses *are* implementing 'ecopolicies' (with varying degrees of effectiveness). These lodgings are included in the GreenDex (p316).

For a list of our favorite ecolodges, in the true sense of the word, see p68.



in the south and from mid-June to November in the north. November to February is a transitional period, with the year's coolest temperatures and a limited amount of rain. The true dry season is February to April. There's quite a large difference in rainfall between the north of the country (around 1500mm or 60in a year) and the south (about 4000mm or 160in). In the north and center of the country there's a dip in rainfall in August, between peaks in July and September.

For advice on the best times to visit Belize, see p20.

Hurricanes

While hurricane season officially lasts from June to November, Belize has traditionally been struck by its most damaging hurricanes in September and November. The worst hurricanes of the 20th century happened in 1931 (before hurricanes were named) and 1961 (Hurricane Hattie). In 2001 Hurricane Iris, with winds over 150mph, brought severe damage to Placencia, Monkey River and the Maya villages around Toledo, continuing the year-ending-in-1 bogey. Hurricane Dean threatened in 2007, but it made landfall north of the Mexican border thus sparing Belize the worst damage. For more information on Belize's history of hurricanes, see p58.

If you are in Belize when a hurricane threatens, the best advice is to head inland. There is usually plenty of warning as hurricanes are well reported as they make their way across the Caribbean. If it is not possible to get inland, you should shelter in the sturdiest concrete building you can find, as far as possible from the coast and away from windows. Most villages and towns now have official hurricane shelters.

Hurricanes are ranked from category 1 (with winds of at least 74mph) to category 5 (winds exceeding 155mph). A category 3 hurricane will blow down wooden houses and

take the tin roofs off concrete houses, and the rains and storm surges that hurricanes bring can do as much damage as the winds. The **Belize National Meteorological Service** (www.hydromet.gov.bz) provides copious information on weather.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

Duty-free allowances on entering Belize are 1L of wine or spirits and 200 cigarettes (or 250g of tobacco or 50 cigars). It is illegal to take firearms or ammunition into or out of Belize, and it is illegal to leave the country with fish (unless you have obtained a free export permit from the Fisheries Department), ancient Maya artifacts, turtle shells and unprocessed coral.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Belizeans on the whole are remarkably easy-going and travelers experience little hassle, though extra care should be taken when in Belize City. Local men can be very direct about making advances to women, and ganja peddlers in tourist spots can be over-persistent, but these guys do take 'no' for an answer.

Nationwide emergency numbers for the police are ☎ 90 and ☎ 911.

Belizean police are not always cooperative if you try to report a crime. They may try to discourage you with, for example, stories of how long you'll have to stay in the country to see a matter resolved. If you want to report a crime, be persistent and if necessary seek help from locals (eg your hotel) or from your embassy or consulate.

Some specific areas of concern:

Theft

Occasional incidents of armed robbery and rape of tourists happen in regularly visited but isolated spots; mostly in the west, not far from the Guatemalan border. In 2006 there was a spate of armed robberies against tourist buses on the road to Caracol. The national park service has since implemented a convoy system, whereby all tourist vehicles meet up at Douglas D'Silva (Augustine) ranger station and make the journey on the remote road together, accompanied by armed guards. These precautionary measures seem to be doing the trick. See p214 for more information.

Armed robberies have also been reported against vehicles on the Hummingbird Hwy and on country roads in the west of Belize.

Such incidents are the exception rather than the rule. The vast majority of visitors to Belize have trouble-free trips and it's impossible to tell where the next incident will crop up. What you should do is keep your ear to the ground, talk to other travelers and locals, check bulletin boards such as **Belize Forums** (www.belizeforum.com) and look at the travel advisories issued by your own and other governments (see below). A few foreign embassies in Belize maintain websites with useful information (see right).

The other main trouble spot is Belize City, where some tourists fall victim to muggers and hustlers. You can greatly reduce this risk by a few straightforward steps (see p94).

To avoid becoming a victim of petty theft, take normal travelers' precautions:

- Don't make a big display of obvious signs of wealth (such as an expensive camera, computer equipment or jewelry).
- Don't flash thick wallets or wads of cash.
- Don't leave valuables lying around your room or in a car, especially in plain view.
- Keep an eye on your bags when you're traveling by bus.

Drugs & Alcohol

All drugs are illegal in Belize, including marijuana. Signs bearing the northern cayes' celebrated catchphrase 'No Shirt, No Shoes – No Problem' have recently had a new line added, to read 'No Shirt, No Shoes, No Drugs – No Problem.' Police are enforcing this policy with fines and jailings. Possessing a small amount of marijuana is unlikely to get you into trouble but it is illegal, and getting off your head on drugs or alcohol will make you more vulnerable.

Outdoors Activities

Belize's jungles can be dangerous places. As obvious as this may sound, it's easy to forget

in one's enthusiasm for exploring the tropical environment. Apart from the possibility of getting lost, the country has its share of venomous snakes (see p60) and other possibly dangerous wildlife and some poisonous plants. Some parks, reserves and lodges have walking trails where you can wander off on your own (preferably with a map, water, hat, long sleeves and pants, bug spray and all of your common sense), but elsewhere you are better off going with a guide.

At sea, start snorkeling, diving, kayaking or sailing well within your ability limits and get acquainted with local conditions before taking on bigger challenges. See p75 for specific safety hints.

Belize has a system of licensed guides, whose licenses are granted by the Belize Tourism Board only after they have gained certain competencies in safety, first aid as well as other aspects of guiding. Undertake tours and activities only with a licensed guide.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

A few countries have embassies in Belize. Many others handle relations with Belize from their embassies in countries such as Mexico or Guatemala, but may have an honorary consul in Belize to whom travelers can turn as a first point of contact.

Australia Embassy (☎ 55-1101-2200; www.mexico.embassy.gov.au) The Australian Embassy in Mexico handles relations with Belize.

Canada Honorary consul (Map p93; ☎ 223-1060; cdn.con.bze@btl.net; 80 Princess Margaret Dr, Belize City)

France Honorary consul (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-2708; 109 New Rd, Belize City)

Germany Honorary consul (Map pp96-7; ☎ 222-4369; seni@cisco.com.bz; 57 Southern Foreshore, Belize City)

Guatemala Embassy (Map p93; ☎ 223-3150; emb.belize@minex.gob.gt; 8 A St, Belize City; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm Mon-Fri)

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL ADVICE

Official information can make Belize sound more dangerous than it actually is. But for a range of useful travel advice you should consult the travel advisories provided by your home country's foreign affairs department:

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (☎ 1300-139281; www.smarttraveller.gov.au)

British Foreign Office (☎ 0845-850-2829; www.fco.gov.uk)

Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs (☎ 800-267-6788; www.voyage.gc.ca)

German Foreign Office (☎ 03018-17-2000; www.auswaertiges-amt.de)

New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (☎ 04-439-8000; www.safetravel.govt.nz)

US State Department (☎ 888-407-4747; www.travel.state.gov)

Honduras Embassy (☎ 224-5889; embahonbe@yahoo.com; 114 Bella Vista, Belize City; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri)

Mexico Embassy (Map p189; ☎ 822-0406; www.sre.gob.mx/belize; Embassy Sq, Belmopan; 9am-12:30pm Mon-Fri); Consulate (Map pp96-7; ☎ 223-0193; cnr Wilson St & Newtown Barracks Rd, Belize City)

Netherlands Honorary consul (Map p93; ☎ 223-2953; mchulseca@btlnet.net; cnr Baymen Av & Calle Al Mar, Belize City)

UK High commission (Map p189; ☎ 822-2146; www.britishhighcommission.gov.uk; Embassy Sq, Belmopan; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Thu, 8am-2pm Fri)

USA Embassy (Map p189; ☎ 822-4011; usembassy.state.gov/belize; Floral Park Rd, Belmopan; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

January

Krem New Year's Cycling Classic (January 1) Cycle race from Corozal to Belize City.

Horse Races (January 1) Horse racing at Burrell Boom.

February, March & April

Fiesta de Carnaval (February or March; Sunday to Tuesday before the beginning of Lent, 49 to 47 days before Easter Sunday) Celebrated most in northern Belize.

Baron Bliss Day (March 9) Varied celebrations around the country honoring one of the country's great benefactors (see p98). Festivities include the four-day La Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge (see p195).

Holy Week (March or April) Various services and processions are held in the week leading up to Easter Sunday.

Holy Saturday Cycling Classic (Easter Saturday) Cycle race from Belize City to San Ignacio and back.

May

Labor Day (May 1) Parades.

Sovereign's Day (May 24) Celebrations include horse races in Belize City and Orange Walk Town.

June & July

Belize International Film Festival (Date varies) See p99.

Lobster Festivals (Date varies) Caye Caulker and San Pedro celebrate the opening of lobster season with weekend festivities featuring plenty of seafood. See p149 and p132.

August

Costa Maya Festival (Date varies) Celebration of Maya coastal culture at San Pedro, Ambergris Caye, with participants from Belize and the Yucatán. See p131.

September

National Day (September 10) Ceremonies and celebrations around the country.

September Celebrations (September 11 to 20) Festivities in Belize City during the 10 days between National Day and Independence Day (see p99).

Independence Day (September 21) Ceremonies, parades and celebrations.

November

Garifuna Settlement Day (November 19) Celebration of Garifuna culture, with lots of drumming, dancing and drinking, especially in Dangriga (see p222), Hopkins and Punta Gorda, where celebrations may last several days.

December

Christmas Day (December 25) Belizeans decorate their houses weeks ahead with colorful lights and get together to eat and drink with family and friends; in some places, festivities continue until January 6, when Garifuna *jonkonu* dancers (see p222) go from house to house.

FOOD

See the Food & Drink chapter (p83) for an introduction to what and where to eat in Belize. Eating sections for each town review a selection of eateries. Budget restaurants (often roadside eateries or fast food) include venues where you can eat for less than BZ\$10. Midrange eateries are usually simple cafés and restaurants where dishes cost between BZ\$10 and BZ\$30. Top-end eateries are rare, but there are some upscale restaurants and lodges (especially in San Pedro and Placencia) where dishes cost upwards of BZ\$30. Standard restaurant hours are 7am to 9:30am for breakfast, 11:30am to 2pm for lunch and 6pm to 8pm for dinner. In Belize City and main tourist destinations, many places don't close between meals and may stay open later at night.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Homosexuality for men and women is legal (since 1988) and the age of consent is 16. There isn't much of a gay scene in Belize; people aren't secretive or closeted, just low-key. While it's an incredibly tolerant society, and that Belizean attitude of 'live and let live' extends to homosexuality, the underlying Central American machismo and traditional religious beliefs make Belize a place where same-sex couples might want to be careful about displaying affection in public.

San Pedro is the place that has the most gay- and lesbian-friendly accommodations. **Purple Roofs** (www.purple.roofs.com) has some listings in San Pedro and Cayo District. Also try **Gay-Destinations** (www.gay-destinations.com) or

Gay.com (www.gay.com/travel), although at the time of research neither database included any Belize-specific listings.

Many gays and lesbians visit Belize from the USA, and businesses cater for them. **Maya Travel Services** (www.mayatravelservices.com) is a gay-friendly travel agent that organizes custom-designed itineraries. For dive trips to Belize (and other places), try **Undersea Expeditions** (www.underseax.com), the Gay & Lesbian Scuba Dive Travel Experts.

Further general information on gay and lesbian travel in Latin America can be obtained through the US and Australian offices of the **International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association** (www.iglta.org).

HOLIDAYS

Many of Belize's public holidays are moved to the Monday nearest the given date in order to make a long weekend. You'll find banks and most shops and businesses shut on these days. Belizeans travel most around Christmas, New Year's and Easter and it's worth booking ahead for transportation and accommodation at these times.

New Year's Day January 1

Baron Bliss Day March 9

Good Friday March or April

Holy Saturday March or April

Easter Monday March or April

Labor Day May 1

Sovereign's Day May 24

National Day September 10

Independence Day September 21

Day of the Americas October 12

Garifuna Settlement Day November 19

Christmas Day December 25

Boxing Day December 26

See opposite for information on how some of these holidays are celebrated.


INSURANCE

Cautious travelers may want to take out a travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities,' which can include scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. Check that the policy you are considering covers ambulances as well as emergency flights home. Worldwide travel insurance is available at www.lonelyplanet.com/bookings. You can buy, extend and claim online anytime – even if you're already on the road.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than requiring you to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. For further information on medical insurance see the Health chapter (p299). For information on motor insurance see p293 and p297.

INTERNET ACCESS

Belize has plenty of internet cafés with typical rates of around BZ\$6 per hour, and high-speed access is widely available. Some internet cafés can burn CDs with your digital photos, usually for around BZ\$5. If you have a USB cable for connecting your camera to a computer, you can't lose by taking it along. Many hotels and lodges also provide computers where their guests can access the internet.

For those traveling with a laptop, a growing number of accommodations have wireless access in the rooms or in common areas. This access is fairly reliable, but is easily overburdened if there are several people working simultaneously. For more information on traveling with a portable computer, see www.teleadapt.com. The listings in this book indicate internet or wireless access with the icon .

LANGUAGE

Travelers in Belize usually don't need to use anything other than English to get by, but the topic of language is an interesting one in Belize. In addition to English, there are three different Mayan languages (Yucatec, Mopan and Kekchi), Garifuna (which has roots in African and Caribbean languages), and Creole/Kriol. The last is the subject of a campaign to get it recognized as a language in its own right, rather than just an English dialect. For more information, see p42, and look for the *Bileez Kriol Glossary an Spellin Gide* in bookstores in Belize, or visit www.kriol.org.bz.

With the influx of immigrants from other Latin American countries, Spanish is also widely spoken in Belize. If you cross the border into Guatemala, Spanish is spoken almost exclusively (with the exception of tour operators and upscale hotels). See the boxed text, p262, for some useful words and phrases.

LEGAL MATTERS

Drug possession and use is officially illegal and, if caught, offenders will generally be

PREVENTING CHILD SEX TOURISM IN BELIZE

Tragically, the exploitation of local children by tourists is becoming more prevalent throughout Latin America, including Belize. Various socioeconomic factors make children susceptible to sexual exploitation, and some tourists choose to take advantage of their vulnerable position. Sexual exploitation has serious, lifelong effects on children. It is a crime and a violation of human rights.

Belize has laws against sexual exploitation of children. Many countries have enacted extraterritorial legislation that allows travelers to be charged as though the exploitation happened in their home country.

Responsible travelers can help stop child sex tourism by reporting it. The **CyberTipline** (www.cybertipline.com) is a website where sexual exploitation of children can be reported. You can also report the incident to local authorities and, if you know the nationality of the perpetrator, to their embassy.

Travelers interested in learning more about how to fight against sexual exploitation of children can find information through **ECPAT** International (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking; www.ecpat.org); US (☎ in New York 718-935-9192; www.ecpatusa.org). The Canadian affiliate of ECPAT is **Beyond Borders** (www.beyondborders.org).

arrested and prosecuted. In practice, possession of small amounts of marijuana for purely personal use is unlikely to lead to prosecution. You are likely to be arrested and prosecuted for possession of larger amounts of marijuana or possession or use of any other illicit drugs.

Persons found having sex with a minor will be prosecuted – the age of consent for both sexes is 16. For detailed information on the Belize legal code, check out the **Belize Legal Information Network** (www.belize-law.org).

You are not required to carry ID in Belize but it's advisable to do so. If arrested you have the right to make a phone call. The police force does not have a reputation for corruption as in many countries in Central America, and it is highly unlikely that you will be asked for a bribe. A special **tourist police force** (☎ 227-6082) patrols tourist areas, including central Belize City, San Pedro, Caye Caulker and Placencia. The tourist police wear a special badge on their left shoulder.

MAPS

The maps in this book will enable you to find your way to all of the listed destinations, but if you'd like a larger-scale, more detailed travel map, you cannot beat the 1:350,000 *Belize* map, published by International Travel Maps of Vancouver. It is widely sold in Belize.

You can buy high-class 1:50,000 topographic sheets for BZ\$40 each at the Ministry of Natural Resources in Belmopan (see p189). These maps cover the country, including the

cayes, in 70 different sheets. Most of them were last updated in the 1990s.

Drivers will find *Emory King's Driver's Guide to Beautiful Belize* useful. Sold in bookstores and gift shops in Belize City, it's a compilation of route diagrams and user-friendly tips about turnoffs you might miss and speed bumps you might hit. A new edition is published annually.

MONEY

Belize's currency, the Belizean dollar (BZ\$), has been fixed for many years at US\$0.50, although talk of a devaluation is never far beneath the surface. For exchange rates see the Quick Reference page on the inside front cover. The currency bears the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II and the dollar is divided into 100 cents. Coins come in denominations of one, five, 10, 25 and 50 cents and one dollar; bills come in denominations of two, five, 10, 20, 50 and 100 dollars. The 25-cent coin is sometimes called a shilling, and you may hear the 100-dollar bill referred to as a 'bluenote.'

Prices are usually quoted in Belizean dollars, though you will sometimes see prices quoted in US dollars, especially at tour companies and upscale resorts. If in any doubt, ask which type of dollars people are talking about. Many businesses are happy to accept cash payments in US dollars. US dollars are also widely accepted across the border in Guatemala. But the official unit of currency is the Guatemalan Quetzal (Q). For more information, see p260.

For information about costs in Belize, see p21.

ATMs

Atlantic Bank, Belize Bank, Scotia Bank and a few other banks' ATMs are on international networks, accepting Visa, MasterCard, Plus and Cirrus cards. There are internationally compatible ATMs in most major towns, including Belize City, Belmopan, Caye Caulker, Corozal Town, Dangriga, Orange Walk Town, Punta Gorda, San Ignacio and San Pedro. ATMs give only Belizean dollars. They are convenient but the exchange rate you get from ATMs is usually a cent or two under the BZ\$2 = US\$1 rate used for cash or traveler's-check exchanges. Belize Bank charges a fee for each use of an ATM (BZ\$2) and enforces a BZ\$500 per day withdrawal limit. Atlantic Bank and Scotia Bank do not charge fees and Scotia Bank has a higher withdrawal limit.

Cash

A few hundred US dollars in cash are handy to have. You can use them to pay for things in most places, and they are also easy to exchange informally, or in most banks, at the rate of BZ\$2 = US\$1. Canadian dollars, pounds sterling and euros can also be exchanged at many banks but are harder to use as cash than US dollars.

Credit Cards

Visa and MasterCard are accepted by airlines, car-rental companies and at the larger hotels, restaurants and shops; Amex is often accepted at top-end places and is becoming more common among the smaller establishments. Some places levy a surcharge of up to 5% if you pay by card.

You can also use a credit card to obtain an over-the-counter cash advance from most of the banks in Belize. The exchange rate is likely to be the same as the rate for ATM withdrawals, and again you face the commissions and handling charges imposed by your card issuer.

Taxes

Hotel room tax is 9%. Rates given in this guide also include the room tax. Restaurant meals are subject to an 8% sales tax. Prices given in this guide include all taxes to the best of our knowledge.

TOP PICKS – SOUVENIRS

- Marie Sharp's Hot Sauce (p222)
- Primitive-style painting by Debbie Cooper (p155)
- Garifuna drum (p224)
- Striped hardwood cutting board (p190)
- Bamboo furniture (p204)
- Jade jewelry (p140)

Tippling

Tippling is not obligatory but never goes amiss, especially if guides, drivers or waitstaff have provided you with genuinely good service. Rounding up the bill by somewhere between 5% and 10% is usually a suitable tip. Some hotels and restaurants add an obligatory service charge to your bill (usually 10%), in which case you definitely don't need to tip.

Traveler's Checks

You can exchange traveler's checks at most banks, especially if you carry a well-known brand such as Visa or Amex and they are denominated in US dollars. They usually attract the same advantageous exchange rate as cash, though there may be per-check fees to pay.

POST

There are post offices in most towns. By air-mail to Canada or the USA, a postcard costs BZ\$0.40, a letter BZ\$0.70. To Europe it's BZ\$0.50 for a postcard and BZ\$1 for a letter.

It is possible to receive incoming mail through the post offices of the major towns mentioned in this guide. Mail should be addressed to: your name, c/o General Delivery, town name, district name, Belize, Central America. It will be held for up to two months and must be claimed with a photo ID.

The courier services **DHL Express** (☎ 223-4350) and **Fedex Express** (☎ 224-5221) both have offices in Belize City.

SHOPPING

Belizeans do not trade in handicrafts at the level that Mexicans and Guatemalans do; instead, most gift shops in the country do a booming business in T-shirts, imported sarongs and beach gear, and Belikin beer

paraphernalia. Popular regional handicrafts include folding mahogany deck chairs, *zericote* (ironwood) carvings of various sizes, baskets woven by Maya women in southern Belize, carved rosewood bowls, and striped wooden breadboards. These make good souvenirs, but they tend to be expensive when compared with similar items purchased in Guatemala or Mexico. For good handicraft shops see p103, p140, and p190. Drummers should head south to Dangriga if they want to pick up a Garifuna drum (see p117).

Some Belizean-made consumables are popular as souvenirs and are also useful when you're traveling. Among these are Rainforest Remedies, a line of all-natural health products – digestive aids, insect repellents, salves etc – from the **Ix Chel Centre** (www.arvigomassage.com/rainforest_remedies) near San Ignacio (see the boxed text, p209); Marie Sharp's hot sauces (see the boxed text, p84); and Rasta Pasta Rainforest Café spice packets (p154) for creating traditional Belizean dishes at home.

Books by Belizeans and books about Belize can be bought in many bookstores in the country and from **Cubola Productions** (www.cubola.com). **Belizean Perfumes** (☎ 226-0350; belizeperfumes@hotmail.com) creates products that are concocted from natural essences at the Lazy Iguana (p153) on Caye Caulker.

Belize City has a wide range of imported goods. The central shopping district can cater for most of your needs and you'll even find some local art there. Ambergris Caye has some good boutiques with exotic clothing and furnishings imported from Asia, as well as a number of art galleries with paintings by local artists. Local products on Ambergris Caye that are worth buying include handmade jewelry and clothing, fine coconut and wooden serving spoons, notebooks made from handcrafted paper, and brightly painted fish made from sheaths of coconut fronds. Caye Caulker has its share of tourist shops and a few small but excellent craft shops and art galleries (see p155).

TELEPHONE

Belize has no regional, area or city codes. Every number has seven digits and you just dial those seven digits from anywhere in the country. Belize's country code is ☎ 501. When calling Belize from other countries, follow the country code with the full seven-digit local number. The international access

code for calling other countries from Belize is ☎ 00.

Public phones are fairly plentiful around the country – there are around 500 in all – and they're operated with cards that you can buy wherever you see the green signs announcing 'BTL's PrePaid Cards Sold Here.' (BTL is Belize Telecommunications Ltd.) The cards come in a range of denominations, from BZ\$2 to BZ\$50. You scratch the back of the card to reveal its PIN number, then to make a call you dial an access number given on the back of the card. Automated messages will ask you to key in your pin number, tell you how much credit is left on the card, then ask you to dial the number you want, followed by the pound (hash) key. Local calls are usually a flat rate of BZ\$0.25. Long-distance calls within Belize can cost between BZ\$0.10 and BZ\$1 per minute.

Useful numbers (which can all be dialed without phone cards from public phones):

Ambulance ☎ 90

Directory assistance ☎ 113

Fire ☎ 90

Operator assistance ☎ 115

Police ☎ 90, 911

Cell Phones

You can rent cell phones from BTL only at the Philip Goldson International Airport in Belize City. The cost is BZ\$12 per day, with a deposit of BZ\$300 (credit cards accepted), and you can buy prepaid DigiCell phone cards (available where you see green signs announcing 'BTL's PrePaid Cards Sold Here,' in denominations from BZ\$10 to BZ\$50) to pay for your calls.

International cell phones can be used in Belize if they are GSM 1900 and unlocked. You can buy a Sim pack for US\$25 from DigiCell distributors around the country.

International roaming is provided by T Mobil, Cingular and MexTel, but coverage is patchy – check with your service provider back home about coverage in Belize.

TIME

North American Central Standard Time (GMT/UTC minus six hours) is the basis of time in Belize, as in Guatemala and southern Mexico. Belize and Guatemala do not observe daylight saving, so there is never any time difference between them, but Mexico does observe daylight saving from the first Sunday in April to the last Sunday in October,

so Belize is one hour behind Mexico during that period.

When it's noon in Belize, it's 1pm in New York, 6pm in London, 10am in San Francisco and 4am the next day in Sydney (add one hour to those times during daylight saving periods in those cities).

For world time zones, see pp318-9.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Belize Tourism Board** (www.travelbelize.org) has tourist information offices in Belize City, Corozal Town and Punta Gorda and there are good local tourist information offices in San Pedro and Placencia.

The **Belize Tourism Industry Association** (www.btia.org) is an independent association of tourism businesses, with an office in Belize City (see p94) that can provide information about what is offered by its many members.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Belize lacks accessibility regulations and many buildings are on stilts or have uneven wooden steps. You won't see many ramps for wheelchair access. More difficulties for wheelchair users come from the lack of footpaths, as well as plentiful rough and sandy ground. With assistance, bus travel is feasible, but small planes and water taxis might be a problem.

Visitors with limited mobility do come to Belize. Accommodations suitable for wheelchair users include the Radisson Fort George Hotel (p100) in Belize City, Corona del Mar (p134) on Ambergris Caye; Mara's Place (p150) and Blue Wave (p150) on Caye Caulker; Orchid Palm Inn (p165) in Orange Walk; Hok'ol K'in Guest House (p175) in Corozal; El-Rey Inn (p189) and the Bull Frog Inn (p190) in Belmopan; Mama Noots Jungle Resort (p229) near the Mayflower Bocawina National Park; Jungle Huts Resort (p223) in Dangriga; and Turtle Inn (p242) in Placencia.

There are a number of useful organizations and websites for disabled travelers, though there's little information that is specific to Belize.

Access-Able Travel Source (www.access-able.com) Has good general information.

Allgohere Airline Directory (www.everybody.co.uk/air/index.htm) This site lists, by airline, services available to disabled passengers.

Global Access Disabled Travel Network (www.globalaccessnews.com) Good website with interesting general travel information.

Mobility International (www.miusa.org) US-based website that advises disabled travelers on mobility issues; you can organize a mentor and someone to help you plan your travels.

Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (Radar; www.radar.org.uk) A network of disability organizations and disabled people that lobbies for policy changes.

VISAS

Information on visa requirements is available from Belizean embassies and consulates and the **Belize Tourism Board** (www.travelbelize.org). At the time of writing, visas were not required for citizens of EU or Caricom (Caribbean Community) countries, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, the USA or Venezuela. A visitor's permit valid for 30 days will be stamped in your passport when you enter the country. This can be extended by further periods of one month (up to a maximum of six months) by applying at an immigration office (there's at least one in each of Belize's six districts). The fee for each extension is BZ\$25.

Visas for most other nationalities cost BZ\$100 from a Belizean embassy or consulate and are valid for a 90-day stay.

For further information you can contact the **Immigration & Nationality Department** (☎ 822-2423, fax 822-2662), in Belmopan.

VOLUNTEERING

There are a lot of opportunities for volunteer work in Belize, especially on environmental projects. In some cases, you may have to pay to participate (costs vary).

Asociación de Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre (p277) Located in El Petén, Guatemala, ARCAS silvestre volunteers to work with rescued and orphaned animals.

Belize Audubon Society (www.belizeaudubon.org) Volunteers assist in the main office or in education and field programs. Volunteer birders are always required for the Christmas bird count.

Cornerstone Foundation (www.peacecorner.org) This NGO based in San Ignacio hosts volunteers to help with AIDS education, community development and other programs. Volunteers commit to a minimum of three weeks and pay a fee to cover food and housing.

Earthwatch (www.earthwatch.org) Paying volunteers are teamed with professional scientific researchers. Most projects are 10 to 14 days.

Eco-Escuela de Español (p278) A Spanish-language school in El Petén, Guatemala, that also organizes

educational programs and environmentally related volunteer opportunities.

Elderhostel (www.elderhostel.org) One-week research assistance programs for seniors with Oceanic Society expeditions.

Global Vision International (www.gvi.co.uk) Volunteer placements of over two months in conservation, research and education projects.

Help for Progress (www.helpforprogress.interconnection.org) A Belizean NGO working with local community development organizations in fields such as education, gender issues, citizen participation and environment.

International Service Community (www.swarthmore.edu/go/isc) Catering to senior travelers, ISC takes volunteers for two weeks to two months, giving them the chance to work at local hospitals, schools, senior centers and other community NGOs.

International Volunteer Programs Association (www.volunteerinternational.org) A source for many volunteer positions such as working in clinics, building schools and helping conserve manatees.

Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (p114) Monkey Bay's programs provide opportunities in conservation and community service. It also has many links to other conservation organizations in Belize.

Nueva Juventud Spanish School (p278) A Spanish-language school in El Petén, Guatemala that organizes volunteer opportunities in the national parks.

Oceanic Society (p157) Paying participants in the society's expeditions assist scientists in marine research projects at the society's field station on Blackbird Caye and elsewhere.

One World Volunteer (www.volunteertravel.com) This organization places volunteers in wildlife rescue/rehabilitation centers, monkey sanctuaries and ecotourism projects.

Plenty International (www.plenty.org) Opportunities for working with grassroots organizations (such as handicraft cooperatives) and schools, mostly in Toledo District.

Programme for Belize (p169) Volunteer opportunities are sometimes available related to conservation or archaeology.

ProWorld Service Corps (www.proworldsc.org) Like a privately run Peace Corps, ProWorld organizes small-scale, sustainable projects in fields such as health care, education, conservation, technology and construction.

Spanish Creek Rainforest Reserve (p110) For BZ\$50 per day, interns/volunteers stay at this organic farm and study medicinal rainforest plants.

Teachers for a Better Belize (www.tfabb.com) US-based organization that sends volunteers to schools in Toledo District to help train local teachers.

Trekforce Worldwide (www.trekforce.org.uk) Offers one- to five-month programs that combine work such as

trail-cutting, visitor-center building in protected areas, rural teaching or archaeological work, with optional jungle treks, diving and Spanish courses.

Volunteer Abroad (www.volunteerabroad.com) Offers scores of volunteer, study-abroad and internship opportunities (listed on the website by country), plus many useful resources. Paid teaching jobs and opportunities for high-school students are also available.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women can have a great time in Belize, even traveling solo. You do need to keep your wits about you and be vigilant, as does any solo traveler.

Keep a clear head. Excessive alcohol will make you vulnerable. For support and company, head for places where you're likely to meet people, such as guesthouses that serve breakfast, backpacker lodgings or popular midrange or top-end hotels. Sign up for excursions and if you're using internet cafés you're likely to run into other travelers. Being in an English-speaking country, unlike elsewhere in Central America, can be a confidence booster.

If you don't want attention, try to wear long skirts or trousers and modest tops when you're using public transportation and when on solo explorations. You'll notice other savvy women travelers dressed like this. Some of them will be volunteers or other workers, and they are founts of information about the country and how to safely move about it.

In Belize, especially on the cayes, many men seem to think that unescorted women are on the lookout for a man, and some men in Belize, especially in the heavily touristed areas, can be quite forward with their advances or even aggressive with their comments about your appearance.

In most cases advances are made lightheartedly, although it can be disconcerting if you're from a culture where men are less overt in their attentions. Be direct, say no, then ignore them – they're likely to go away. A bicycle can be an asset in this scenario: you can just scoot. If you're feeling particularly hassled, seek out company. Avoid situations in which you might find yourself alone with unknown men at remote archaeological sites, on empty city streets, or on secluded stretches of beach.

Transportation

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

Travelers can get to Belize by land, sea or air. Overland, travelers might enter Belize from Guatemala or Mexico. Boats also bring travelers from Honduras and Guatemala. Air carriers service Belize from the United States and El Salvador. Flights and tours can be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Entering Belize is a simple, straightforward process. You must present a passport that will be valid until you leave the country. It's advisable to have at least six months of validity remaining. Officially, visitors are also required to be in possession of an onward or return ticket from Belize and funds worth BZ\$120 a day for their stay in the country, but it's rare for tourists to be required to show these.

Tourists are generally given a 30-day stay, extendable once you're in Belize. See p289 for information on visa requirements and extensions.

AIR

Airports & Airlines

Philip Goldson International Airport (BZE; ☎ 225-2014), at Ladyville, 11 miles northwest of Belize City center, handles all international flights. With Belize's short internal flying distances

it's often possible to make a same-day connection at Belize City to or from other airports in the country.

Four US airlines, as well as the Central American Grupo TACA, fly direct from the USA; Grupo TACA also flies from San Salvador (El Salvador), with connections from other Central American cities.

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM BELIZE

American Airlines (code AA; ☎ 223-2522; www.aa.com) Hubs Dallas Fort Worth & Miami.

Continental Airlines (code CO; ☎ 227-8309; www.continental.com) Hub Houston.

Delta Air Lines (code DL; ☎ 225-3429; www.delta.com) Hub Atlanta.

Grupo TACA (code TA; ☎ 227-7363/4, 225-2163; www.taca.com) Hub San Salvador.

Maya Island Air (code MW; ☎ 223-1140, 225-2219; www.mayaairways.com) Hub Belize City. Although Maya Island Air has long offered twice-daily flights between Belize City and Flores, Guatemala, the airline was forced to suspend its flights to Flores in November 2007, when Guatemala began enforcing new safety regulations. Flights are expected to resume when the Belizean airline is able to meet the new civil aviation standards.

Transportes Aeros Guatemaltecos (code TAG; ☎ 502-2360 3038; www.tag.com.gt) Hub Guatemala City. Regular flights between Guatemala and Flores only.

Tropic Air (code PM; ☎ 226-2012; www.tropicair.com) Hub Belize City. Normally operates twice-daily flights between Belize City and Flores, Guatemala. Like Maya Air, Tropic Air was forced to suspend these flights until it can upgrade its technical requirements.

US Airways (code US; ☎ 225-3589; www.usairways.com) Hub Charlotte, North Carolina.

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

AIR DEPARTURE TAX

Non-Belizeans must pay fees that total US\$35 (BZ\$70), in cash (US dollars only) or charge, when flying out of Belize City on international flights. Of this, US\$3.75 is the PACT (Protected Areas Conservation Trust) fee, which helps to fund Belize's network of protected natural areas. Also included in this total is a US\$15 service fee, a US\$15 airport development fee and a US\$1.25 security fee. Sometimes a portion of the tax is included in the price of the ticket.

Tickets

Airline websites and ticket-booking sites on the internet are the obvious places to start looking for a flight to Belize (see p294), but in the search for a good deal it can also be worth checking out a couple of travel agencies and flight adverts in the press. If you travel outside Belize's main tourist season of December to April, you may find cheaper fares. If you're planning to transfer onto a domestic flight on arrival in Belize City, you may well get a better deal by booking the domestic flight separately.

Australia & New Zealand

The cheapest way to get from Australia or New Zealand to Belize City is usually via the USA (normally Los Angeles). High-season roundtrip fares from Sydney start at around A\$3200.

Central America, South America & Cuba

Grupo TACA can fly you from all Central American capitals to Belize City via San Salvador, El Salvador; plus San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba and Roatán in Honduras; Havana, Cuba; and several South American cities. Sample high-season one-way/roundtrip fares are about US\$280/350 from Guatemala City, US\$300/350 from San Salvador, US\$275/295 from San Pedro Sula and US\$340/400 from San José, Costa Rica.

Both Grupo TACA and the Guatemalan carrier TAG fly between Guatemala City and Flores for about US\$200.

Continental Europe

From Europe, you need to fly to Belize via the USA (high-season roundtrip fares start at €800 to €900 but you may have to pay con-

siderably more), unless you want to fly to Cancún, Mexico, and then travel overland to Belize. Roundtrip fares to Cancún start at €600 to €700, but you're more likely to pay €800 to €900.

Mexico

There are currently no flights to Belize from anywhere in Mexico, but the domestic airport at Chetumal is just 8 miles from the Mexico-Belize border. You can fly from Mexico to Belize City via Guatemala City or San Salvador on a combination of Grupo TACA and Mexican airlines flights. Grupo TACA also flies from Cancún to Flores, Guatemala.

UK & Ireland

To get to Belize from the UK and Ireland, you have to fly via the USA – high-season roundtrip fares from London start at around UK£500 or UK£600. If you want to fly to Cancún, Mexico, and make your way to Belize overland, you can usually get a London-Cancún roundtrip ticket for between UK£400 and UK£500.

USA & Canada

Unless you're starting from a city with direct flights to Belize City (such as Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas, Houston and Miami), you'll be making a connection in one of those cities. Examples of typical high-season roundtrip fares to Belize City include US\$450 to US\$600 from Houston, US\$600 to US\$800 from New York and US\$700 to US\$900 from Los Angeles. From Canada, sample fares are C\$950 from Vancouver and C\$700 from Toronto.

LAND Border Crossings

There are two official crossing points on the Mexico-Belize border. The more frequently used is at Subteniente López-Santa Elena, 9 miles from Corozal Town in Belize and 7 miles from Chetumal in Mexico. The all-paved Northern Hwy runs from the border to Belize City. The other crossing is at La Unión-Blue Creek, 34 miles southwest of Orange Walk Town. If you happened to be driving in from Mexico straight to La Milpa Field Station (p171) or Chan Chich Lodge (p171), you might consider using this crossing, as the road is paved all the way from the border on the Mexican side, whereas you face

LAND DEPARTURE TAX

When departing Belize by land, non-Belizeans are required to pay fees that total BZ\$37.50 (US\$18.75), in cash (Belizean or US dollars). Of this, BZ\$7.50 is the PACT (Protected Areas Conservation Trust) fee, which helps to fund Belize's network of protected natural areas.

28 unpaved miles on the road to Orange Walk from Blue Creek.

The only land crossing between Belize and Guatemala is a mile west of the Belizean town of Benque Viejo del Carmen at the end of the all-paved Western Hwy from Belize City. The town of Melchor de Mencos is on the Guatemalan side of the crossing. The border is 44 miles from the Puente Ixlu junction (also called El Cruce) in Guatemala, where roads head north for Tikal (22 miles) and southwest to Flores (18 miles). The first 15 to 19 miles west from the border are unpaved.

Bus

Bus passengers crossing Belize's land borders have to disembark and carry their own luggage through immigration and customs. See p179 for further information on the border crossing to Mexico, and p210 for further information on the border crossing to Guatemala.

In Chetumal, Mexico, buses bound for Corozal Town (BZ\$2 to BZ\$4, one hour), Orange Walk Town (BZ\$6 to BZ\$8, two hours) and Belize City (BZ\$10 to BZ\$14, four hours) leave the north side of Nuevo Mercado, about 0.75 miles north of the city center, once or twice an hour from about 4:30am to 6pm. Both Línea Dorada and San Juan Travel run buses from Chetumal via Corozal to Flores, Guatemala (BZ\$40 to BZ\$50, eight or nine hours).

For details on long-distance buses from Belize City to Flores, see p105. You can also use local services to and from both sides of the border (from San Ignacio, see p201; from Flores, see p277). There are plenty of buses and minibuses that link Flores with Guatemala City and other destinations in Guatemala.

Car & Motorcycle

To bring a vehicle into Belize, you need to obtain a one-month importation permit at the border. This obliges you to take the vehicle

out of Belize again within the validity of the permit. To get the permit you must present proof of ownership (vehicle registration) and purchase Belizean motor insurance (available for a few US dollars per day from agents at the borders). Permit extensions can be obtained by applying to the **Customs Department** (Belize City ☎ 227-7092). In the unlikely event that a Mexican or Guatemalan car-rental agency permits you to take one of their vehicles into Belize, you will also have to show the rental documents at the border.

It's not unusual to see US license plates on cars in Belize, as driving from the USA through Mexico is pretty straightforward and car rental in Belize is expensive. The shortest route through Mexico to the crossing point between Chetumal and Corozal is from the US-Mexico border points at Brownsville-Matamoros (1257 miles from the Belize border) or McAllen-Reynosa (1267 miles), a solid three days' driving. The other main US-Mexico road borders are Laredo (Texas)-Nuevo Laredo (1413 miles); El Paso-Ciudad Juárez (1988 miles) and Nogales (Arizona)-Nogales (2219 miles).

You are required to obtain a temporary import permit for your vehicle at the border when you enter Mexico; as well as the vehicle registration document you'll need to show your driver's license and pay a fee of around BZ\$50 with a Visa, MasterCard or American Express credit card. And you'll have to buy Mexican motor insurance, also available at the border.

For information on driving within Belize, see p296.

SEA

The only scheduled boat services into Belize are: from Puerto Cortés, Honduras, to Placencia (p244; BZ\$100, three to four hours, weekly) and Dangriga (p225; BZ\$100, three to four hours, weekly); from Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, to Punta Gorda (p249; Q114/US\$15 to Q147/US\$18, one hour, daily); and from Livingston, Guatemala, to

SEA DEPARTURE TAX

The only fee you have to pay when leaving Belize by sea is the BZ\$7.50 (US\$3.75) PACT (Protected Areas Conservation Trust) fee. It's payable in cash (Belizean or US dollars).

SURFING FOR AIRFARES

You have a choice: talk to a live agent or tap the computer keys. Frankly, your odds are better doing it yourself if you can make the time. The following websites are recommended.

- **www.kayak.com** Searches hundreds of airline websites and other search-engine sites to give you a cost comparison. It's also possible to do a flexible search to compare dates and routes.
- **www.expedia.com** One of the original online search engines, this is a reliable stand-by.
- **www.cheaptickets.com** True to its name, this site often seems to come up with the cheapest fares.
- **www.statravel.com** Discounts for students and travelers under the age of 26.
- **www.priceline.com** Name your budget and Priceline will try to find you a ticket. Best for last-minute travel, when airlines are unloading empty seats and hotels are trying to fill empty rooms.
- **www.bestfares.com** Name your city and this site keeps track of the cheapest flights to destinations worldwide.

Punta Gorda (p249; Q114/US\$15, one hour, twice weekly). (Services from Guatemala do not accept Belizean dollars.)

GETTING AROUND

AIR

Belize's two domestic airlines, **Maya Island Air** (code MW; ☎ 223-1140; www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (code PM; ☎ 225-2012; www.tropicair.com), provide an efficient and reasonably priced service in small planes on the routes Belize City–Dangriga–Placencia–Punta Gorda, Belize City–Caye Caulker–San Pedro and San Pedro–Sarteneja–Corozal, with plenty of daily flights by both airlines on all three routes.

Many domestic flights departing and arriving in Belize City use the Philip Goldson International Airport; others use the Municipal Airstrip, about 12 miles from the international airport; and some stop at both. Flights using the Municipal Airstrip are usually BZ\$20 to BZ\$40 cheaper than those using the international airport.

According to the US Federal Aviation Administration, the civil aviation authority of Belize is not in compliance with international aviation safety standards. Belize has been assessed as a Category 2 country (which is why its airlines cannot fly into Category 1 countries such as Guatemala and Mexico). However, both Belizean airlines have decent safety records. There have

been about 10 crashes in just as many years; one person has died as a result.

BICYCLE

Most of Belize, including all three of the main highways, is pretty flat, which makes for pleasant cycling, but traffic on the main highways does tend to travel fairly fast; make sure you're visible if riding along these roads. Belizeans use bicycles – often beach cruiser–type bikes on which you brake by pedaling backwards – for getting around locally, but you don't see them doing much long-distance cycling unless they're into racing.

Bikes are available to rent in many of the main tourist destinations for around BZ\$20 per day. You don't usually have to give a deposit. See p141 for rental in San Pedro, p155 for rental in Caye Caulker and p244 for rental in Placencia. It may be possible to purchase a used bike from one of these rental companies for longer-term use.

BOAT

The **Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association** (☎ 223-5752, 226-0992; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com) operates speedy water taxis between Belize City, Caye Caulker and San Pedro (Ambergris Caye), with several daily services each way. It's one hour (BZ\$15) each way from Belize City to Caye Caulker and 1½ hours (BZ\$20) to San Pedro. The Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association also serves three smaller offshore islands: St George's Caye, Long Caye and Caye Chapel. Water taxis are open boats that can hold around 40 people each. Captains usually

do their best to avoid traveling during rainstorms; when they can't, passengers huddle together under large tarps to stay dry.

The **Thunderbolt service** (☎ 422-0026, 226-2904), with indoor seating, also operates the Belize City–Caye Caulker–San Pedro route and provides an additional daily service linking Corozal, Sarteneja and San Pedro (BZ\$45).

Otherwise, getting to and around Belize's islands and reefs is a matter of taking tours or dive-and-snorkel trips, using boats organized by island accommodations or chartering a launch. As a rough rule of thumb, launch charters cost around BZ\$200 per 10 miles. They're easy to arrange almost anywhere on the coast and on the main islands.

Another useful boat service is the **Hokey Pokey Water Taxi** (☎ 601-0271, 523-2376) between Placencia and Mango Creek (BZ\$10, 12 minutes) near Independence, which saves a long detour by road for travelers between Placencia and Punta Gorda. See p244 for further information.

BUS

Since the 2004 bankruptcy of Belize's main long-distance bus service, Novelo's, a dozen smaller companies have stepped up to fill the gaps in service. The break-up of the monopoly has caused some confusion, es-

pecially in smaller towns where several different companies may run the same route, but depart from different corners at random times throughout the day. But in general, there are still regular buses plying the regular routes, and they are charging – more or less – the same prices.

There are three main bus routes, all of which originate in Belize City:

- **Northern Hwy** From Belize City to Orange Walk and Corozal (and on to Chetumal, Mexico). At last count there were six companies servicing this route and between 25 and 30 buses a day going in each direction.
- **Western Hwy** From Belize City to Belmopan, San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen. Several companies service this route, resulting in a regular service that runs in both directions every half-hour throughout the day.
- **Hummingbird and Southern Hwys** From Belmopan to Dangriga, Independence and Punta Gorda (buses on this route use the Western Hwy between Belize City and Belmopan; from Dangriga there are separate buses to Hopkins and Placencia). Three main companies ply this route: James, National and Usher. See p250 for more details.

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor travel generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow jetsetters to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

MAIN DRIVING ROUTES

- **Northern Hwy** Belize City to Orange Walk Town (1½ hours, 57 miles), Corozal Town (2¼ hours, 86 miles) and Santa Elena (Mexican border; 95 miles, 2½ hours)
- **Western Hwy** Belize City to Belmopan (1¼ hours, 52 miles), San Ignacio (1¾ hours, 72 miles) and Benque Viejo del Carmen (Guatemalan border; 80 miles, two hours)
- **Hummingbird and Southern Hwys** Belmopan to Dangriga (1½ hours, 55 miles), Hopkins (two hours, 63 miles), Placencia (3½ hours, 98 miles) and Punta Gorda (4½ hours, 148 miles)

Most Belizean buses are old US school buses. Regular-service buses stop anywhere to drop and pick up passengers. Express buses, sometimes air-conditioned, have limited stops and as a result are quicker and usually less crowded. They cost a bit more but it's worth the extra few dollars, especially on longer trips. The 86-mile run from Belize City to Corozal, for example, takes about 2½ hours for BZ\$14 on an express, or 3¼ hours for BZ\$10 on a regular bus. In general, you pay about BZ\$5 per hour on express buses and BZ\$3 per hour on regular buses. If you're traveling at a busy time, it's worth buying your ticket a day or two in advance.

A variety of smaller bus companies serve villages around the country. They often run to local work and school schedules, with buses going into a larger town in the morning and returning in the afternoon.

Occasional breakdowns and accidents happen with Belizean buses but their track record is at least as good as those in other Central American countries. Luggage pilfering has been a problem on some buses in the past. Carry valuables with you on the bus and give your stored baggage to the bus driver or conductor only, and watch as it is stored. Be there when the bus is unloaded to retrieve your luggage.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Having a vehicle in Belize gives you maximum flexibility and enables you to reach off-the-main-road destinations and attractions

(of which there are many) without having to depend on tours and expensive transfers. Though car hire is costly in Belize (you're looking at about BZ\$160 per day or BZ\$900 per week, plus fuel), it doesn't look so exorbitant when you consider the alternatives, especially if there are three or four people to share the expenses.

Belize has four good, asphalt-paved two-lane roads: the Northern Hwy between Belize City and the Mexican border north of Corozal; the Western Hwy between Belize City and the Guatemalan border near Benque Viejo del Carmen; the Hummingbird Hwy from Belmopan to Dangriga; and the Southern Hwy, which branches off the Hummingbird Hwy a few miles from Dangriga and heads south to Punta Gorda (it's all paved except for a 10-mile stretch around Nim Li Punit).

Most other roads are one- or two-lane unpaved roads. The most oft-used roads are kept in fairly good condition, but heavy rains can make things challenging. Off the main roads you don't always need a 4WD vehicle but you do need one with high clearance, such as a Chevy Geo Tracker.

Driver's License

If you plan to drive in Belize, you'll need to bring a valid driver's license from your home country.

Fuel & Spare Parts

There are plenty of fuel stations in the larger towns and along the major roads. At last report, regular gasoline was going for just over BZ\$10 per US gallon, with prices on the rise. Premium (unleaded) is a few cents more. Spare parts and mechanics are most easily available in Belize City, although San Ignacio, Belmopan and Orange Walk Town also have parts suppliers. Check the Belize **Yellow Pages** (www.yellowpages.bz) under the categories 'Automobile Parts & Supplies' and 'Automobile Repairing & Service'.

Hire

Generally, renters must be at least 25 years old, have a valid driver's license and pay by credit card.

Most car-rental companies have offices at Philip Goldson International Airport as well as in Belize City (see p105 for recommended agencies); they will often also deliver or take return of cars at Belize City's Municipal

Airstrip or in downtown Belize City. Rental possibilities are few outside Belize City, but it is possible to rent cars in San Ignacio (p202) and Punta Gorda (p250).

Rental rates, including taxes, insurance and unlimited mileage, generally start at BZ\$160 a day for an economy vehicle with 4WD and air-con. If you keep the car for six days you'll often get the seventh day free.

Most rental agencies will not allow you to take a vehicle out of the country. One agency that allows cars to be taken in to Guatemala is Crystal Auto Rental (p106) in Belize City.

Insurance

Liability insurance is required in Belize, and there are occasional police checkpoints on the main highways, where you may be required to produce proof of it. You face possible arrest if you can't. Rental companies always organize the necessary insurance for you, and you won't be able to bring your own vehicle into Belize without buying Belizean insurance at the border.

Road Conditions & Hazards

Outside Belize City, traffic is wonderfully light throughout the country, but on the main roads you need to watch out for erratic and dangerously fast driving by others. Drive defensively. Also watch for speed bumps (sleeping policemen): these are sometimes well signed, but sometimes not signed at all.

Off the major highways, most roads are unpaved and you need to be careful of potholes, but most of the roads you're likely to travel on are fairly well maintained. After a lot of rain, some roads may become impassable; make inquiries before you set out, and if you're in doubt about whether you'll get through a stretch, don't risk it. Always have water and a spare tire, and always fill your tank before you head off into the back country (and turn back before you've used half of it!).

Note that Belizean signposts give distances in miles.

Road Rules

Driving in Belize is on the right-hand side of the road. Speed limits are 55mph on the open highway, and either 40mph or 25mph in villages and towns. Seat belts are compulsory for drivers and front-seat passengers. If you are caught not wearing one, the fine is BZ\$25.

Petty theft can be an issue – keep your vehicle locked at all times and do not leave valuables in it, especially not in plain view.

Mileposts and highway signs record distances in miles and speed limits in miles per hour, although many vehicles have odometers and speedometers that are calibrated in kilometers.

GOLF CARTS

If you're spending some time at the beach and you can't fathom being dependent on your own leg-power, you might consider renting a golf cart. It's relatively inexpensive (compared to a car) but it still gets you to the beach and back without causing you to break a sweat. The golf cart is a popular form of transportation in Placencia (p237), San Pedro (p141) and – to a lesser degree – Caye Caulker (p155). Both gas-powered and battery-powered golf carts are available: gas goes further and faster, but battery is better for the planet. Expect to pay about BZ\$130 per day for a four-seater.

HITCHHIKING

Hitchhiking is never entirely safe in any country and in Belize, like anywhere, it's imperative that you listen to your instincts and travel smart. Travelers who decide to hitchhike should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. You're far better off traveling with another person, and never hitchhike at night. Also keep in mind that buses in Belize are cheap and fairly efficient; you might decide that a bus is a safer and more comfortable bet.

Hitchhiking is a fairly common way for Belizeans to get around. In a country where vehicle owners are a minority and public transportation is infrequent to places off the main roads, it's common to see people trying to catch a lift at bus stops or at speed bumps, where traffic slows down. If you too are trying to get some place where there's no bus for the next three hours, it's likely that you'll soon get a ride if you hold out your hand and look friendly. Offering to pay a share of the fuel costs at the end of your ride never goes amiss. But always be aware of the potential risks. For more information, see p258.

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

All of Belize's towns, including the parts of Belize City that most visitors frequent, are

small enough to cover on foot, although for safety reasons you should take taxis for some trips within Belize City (see p94). Taxis are plentiful in all mainland towns and are also an option for getting to places out of town. Rates vary depending on where you are: the 7-mile ride from Corozal to Consejo costs BZ\$20, but the 6-mile trip from Maya Centre to Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary is BZ\$36.

Bicycle is an enjoyable way of getting around local areas and bikes can be rented at around BZ\$20 per day in many tourist haunts (and are free for guests at some accommodations).

On the cayes, of course, you get around by boat if you're going anywhere offshore. Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker have a mode of transportation all of their own for land trips: the golf-cart taxi (see p297).

Health

Dr David Goldberg

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Travelers to Central America need to be concerned about food- and mosquito-borne infections. While most infections are not life-threatening, they can certainly ruin your trip.

Besides getting the proper vaccinations, it's important that you pack a good insect repellent and exercise great care in what you eat and drink.

BEFORE YOU GO

INSURANCE

If your insurance doesn't cover medical expenses abroad, consider supplemental insurance. See the US State Department website (www.travel.state.gov/travel/tips/brochures/brochures_1215.html) for medical evacuation and travel-insurance companies.

Find out if your insurer will pay providers directly or reimburse you later for expenditures. You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than requiring you to pay up front and claim later. If you have to claim later, keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call collect to a center in your home country, where an assessment of your problem is made.

Check that the policy covers ambulances and an emergency flight home. Some policies

offer lower and higher medical-expense options; the higher ones are for countries such as the USA, which have extremely high medical costs. There is a wide variety of policies available, so check the small print.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

Since most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, visit a physician four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (also known as a yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. This is mandatory for countries that require proof of yellow-fever vaccination upon entry, but it's a good idea to carry it wherever you travel. Note that some of the recommended vaccines are not approved for use by children and pregnant women; check with your physician.

The only required vaccine for Belize is yellow fever, and that's only if you're arriving from a yellow fever-infected country in Africa or South America. However, a number of vaccines are recommended (see the boxed text, p300).

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

It is a very good idea to carry a medical and first-aid kit with you, in the case of minor illness or injury. Following is a list of items you should consider packing.

- antibiotics
- anti-diarrheal drugs (eg loperamide)
- acetaminophen/paracetamol (Tylenol) or aspirin
- anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- antihistamines (for hay fever and allergic reactions)
- antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions
- steroid cream or cortisone (for poison ivy and other allergic rashes)
- bandages, gauze, gauze rolls
- adhesive or paper tape
- scissors, safety pins and tweezers
- thermometer
- pocketknife
- insect repellent containing DEET for the skin

RECOMMENDED VACCINES

Vaccine	Recommended for	Dosage	Side effects
chickenpox	travelers who've never had chickenpox	2 doses 1 month apart	fever; mild case of chickenpox
hepatitis A	all travelers	1 dose before trip with booster 6-12 months later	soreness at injection site; headaches; body aches
hepatitis B	long-term travelers in close contact with the local population	3 doses over a 6-month period	soreness at injection site; low-grade fever
measles	travelers born after 1956 who've had only 1 measles vaccination	1 dose	fever; rash; joint pain; allergic reaction
tetanus-diphtheria	all travelers who haven't had a booster within 10 years	1 dose lasts 10 years	soreness at injection site
typhoid	all travelers	4 capsules by mouth, 1 taken every other day	abdominal pain; nausea; rash
yellow fever	required for travelers arriving from yellow fever-infected areas in Africa or South America	1 dose lasts 10 years	headaches; body aches; severe reactions are rare

- insect spray containing permethrin for clothing, tents and bed nets
- sunblock
- oral rehydration salts
- iodine tablets (for water purification)
- syringes and sterile needles

Bring medications in their original containers, clearly labeled. A signed, dated letter from your physician describing all medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel-health advice on the internet. The Lonely Planet website at lonelyplanet.com is a good place to start. The World Health Organization publishes a superb book, *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available free online at www.who.int/ith.

It's a good idea to consult your government's travel-health website before you depart:

Australia (www.smarttraveller.gov.au)

Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/travel-voyage/index_e.html)

UK (www.dh.gov.uk)

USA (wwwn.cdc.gov/travel)

FURTHER READING

For more information, see Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel Central & South America*. If you're traveling with children, Lonely

Planet's *Travel with Children* may be useful. *ABC of Healthy Travel*, by Eric Walker et al, and *Medicine for the Outdoors*, by Paul S Auerbach, are other valuable resources.

IN TRANSIT**DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)**

Blood clots may form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The main symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty breathing. Travelers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent DVT developing on long flights, you should walk about the cabin, contract your leg muscles while sitting, drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones and causes insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag, drink plenty of nonalcoholic fluids and eat light meals. Upon arrival, get exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating

motion sickness. The main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

IN BELIZE**AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE**

Most doctors and hospitals in Belize expect payment in cash, regardless of whether you have medical insurance. If you develop a life-threatening medical problem, you'll probably want to be evacuated to a country with state-of-the-art medical care. Since this may cost tens of thousands of dollars, be sure you have insurance to cover this before you depart.

Many pharmacies in Belize are well supplied, but important medications may not be consistently available. Be sure to bring along adequate supplies of all prescription drugs. While most prescription medications are available in Belize, they might be relatively expensive. You can obtain prescriptions from general practitioners, who will provide this service for a small fee. Some pharmacists, especially in smaller pharmacies, will dispense medications without a prescription.

Medical facilities in Belize are extremely limited and the number of doctors is quite small. Routine care is readily obtainable in Belize City and the larger towns, but facilities for complicated problems may be difficult to find. In rural areas, medical care may be unavailable. In Belize City the private hospital **Belize Medical Associates** (Map p93; ☎ 223-0302/3/4; 5791 St Thomas St, Belize City) provides generally good care. In San Ignacio, **La Loma Luz Hospital** (off Map p197; ☎ 804-2985, 824-2087; Western Hwy) offers primary care as well as 24-hour emergency services. For divers, there is a hyperbaric chamber on Ambergris Caye (p125).

In Belize, the phone number for an ambulance is ☎ 90 but this service is not available in many communities. For a private ambulance in Belize City, call ☎ 223-3292.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES
Chagas' Disease

Chagas' disease is a parasitic infection that is transmitted by triatomine insects (reduviid bugs), which inhabit crevices in the walls and roofs of traditional housing in South and Central America. In Belize, Chagas'

disease occurs in rural areas. The triatomine insect lays its feces on human skin as it bites, usually at night. A person becomes infected when he or she unknowingly rubs the feces into the bite wound or an open sore. Chagas' disease is extremely rare in travelers. If you sleep in a poorly constructed house, especially one made of mud, adobe or thatch, be sure to protect yourself with a bed net and a good insecticide.

Dengue

Though relatively uncommon in Belize, dengue fever is a viral infection found throughout Central America and transmitted by aedes mosquitoes, which bite mostly during the daytime and are usually found close to human habitations, often indoors. They breed primarily in artificial water containers such as jars, barrels, cans, cisterns, metal drums, plastic containers and discarded tires. As a result, dengue is especially common in densely populated, urban environments.

Dengue usually causes flu-like symptoms, including fever, muscle aches, joint pains, headaches, nausea and vomiting, often followed by a rash. The body aches may be quite uncomfortable, but most cases resolve uneventfully in a few days. Severe cases usually occur in children under the age of 15 who are experiencing their second dengue infection.

There is no treatment available for dengue fever except to take analgesics such as acetaminophen/paracetamol (Tylenol) and drink plenty of fluids. Severe cases may require hospitalization for intravenous fluids and supportive care. There is no vaccine. The cornerstone of prevention is protection against insect bites (see p304).

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A occurs throughout Belize. It's a viral infection of the liver that is usually acquired by ingestion of contaminated water, food or ice, though it may also be acquired by direct contact with infected persons. The illness occurs all over the world, but the incidence is higher in developing nations. Symptoms may include fever, malaise, jaundice, nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain. Most cases will resolve uneventfully, though hepatitis A occasionally causes severe liver damage. There is no treatment.

The vaccine for hepatitis A is extremely safe and highly effective. If you get a booster six to

12 months later, it lasts for at least 10 years. Vaccination is recommended for travelers visiting Belize. Because the safety of hepatitis A vaccine has not been established for pregnant women or children under age two, they should instead be given a gamma-globulin injection.

Hepatitis B

Like hepatitis A, hepatitis B is a liver infection that occurs worldwide but is more common in developing nations. Unlike hepatitis A, the disease is usually acquired by sexual contact or by exposure to infected blood, generally through blood transfusions or contaminated needles. The vaccine is recommended only for long-term travelers (on the road more than six months) who expect to live in rural areas or have close physical contact with the local population. Additionally, the vaccine is recommended for anyone who anticipates sexual contact with local people or the need for medical, dental or other treatments while abroad, especially transfusions or injections.

Hepatitis B vaccine is safe and highly effective. Three injections are necessary to establish full immunity. Several countries added hepatitis B vaccine to the list of routine childhood immunizations in the 1980s, so many young adults are already protected.

Leishmaniasis

Leishmaniasis occurs in the mountains and jungles of Belize. The infection is transmitted by sand flies. To protect yourself, follow the same precautions for mosquitoes (p304), except that netting must be finer (at least 18 holes to the linear inch) and you should stay indoors during the early evening. There is no vaccine.

In Belize, the disease is generally limited to the skin, causing slow-growing ulcers over exposed parts of the body; less commonly, it may disseminate to the bone marrow, liver and spleen.

Leptospirosis

Leptospirosis is acquired by exposure to water that has been contaminated by the urine of infected animals. Outbreaks may occur as a result of flooding, when sewage overflow contaminates water sources. The initial symptoms, which resemble a mild flu, usually subside uneventfully in a few days, with or without treatment, but a minority of cases are complicated by jaundice or meningitis. There is no vaccine. Minimize your risk by staying

out of bodies of fresh water that may be contaminated by animal urine. If you're engaging in high-risk activities in an area where an outbreak is in progress, you can take 200mg of doxycycline once weekly as a preventative measure. The treatment for leptospirosis is 100mg of doxycycline twice daily.

Malaria

Malaria occurs in every country in Central America. It's transmitted by mosquito bites, which usually occur between dusk and dawn. The main symptom is high, spiking fevers, which may be accompanied by chills, sweats, headache, body aches, weakness, vomiting or diarrhea. Severe cases may affect the central nervous system and lead to seizures, confusion, coma and death.

For Belize, malaria pills are recommended for travel to all areas except Belize City. The risk is highest in the western and southern regions.

The malaria pill of choice is chloroquine, taken once weekly in a dosage of 500mg, starting one to two weeks before arrival and continuing during the trip and for four weeks afterwards. Chloroquine is safe, inexpensive and highly effective. Side effects are typically mild and may include nausea, abdominal discomfort, headache, dizziness, blurred vision or itching. Severe reactions are uncommon.

Since no pills are 100% effective, protecting yourself against mosquito bites (p304) is just as important as taking malaria pills.

You may not have access to medical care while traveling, so you should bring along additional pills for emergency self-treatment, which you should take if you can't reach a doctor and you develop symptoms that suggest malaria, such as high, spiking fevers. One option is to take four tablets of Malarone once daily for three days. If you start self-medication, you should try to see a doctor at the earliest possible opportunity.

If you develop a fever after returning home, see a physician, as malaria symptoms may not occur for months.

Rabies

Rabies is a viral infection of the brain and spinal cord that is almost always fatal. The rabies virus is carried in the saliva of infected animals and is typically transmitted through an animal bite, though contamination of any break in the skin with infected saliva may result in rabies.

Rabies occurs in all Central American countries. The greatest risk is in the triangle where Belize, Guatemala and the Yucatán region meet. Most cases are related to bites from dogs or bats.

Rabies vaccine is safe, but requires three injections and is quite expensive. Those at high risk for rabies, such as spelunkers (cave explorers), should certainly be vaccinated. The treatment for a possibly rabid bite consists of vaccine with immune globulin. It's effective, but must be given promptly. Most travelers don't need to be vaccinated against rabies.

All animal bites and scratches must be promptly and thoroughly cleansed with large amounts of soap and water, and local health authorities should be contacted to determine whether or not further treatment is necessary (see right).

Typhoid

Typhoid fever is caused by the ingestion of contaminated food or water. Outbreaks sometimes occur at times of flooding, when sewage overflow may contaminate water sources. The initial symptoms, which resemble a mild flu, usually subside uneventfully in a few days, with or without treatment, but a minority of cases are complicated by jaundice or meningitis. Fever occurs in virtually all cases. Other symptoms may include headache, malaise, muscle aches, dizziness, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain, and either diarrhea or constipation.

Unless you expect to take all your meals in major hotels and restaurants, vaccination for typhoid is a good idea. It's usually given orally, but is also available as an injection. Neither vaccine is approved for use in children under the age of two.

The drug of choice for typhoid fever is usually a quinolone antibiotic such as ciprofloxacin (Cipro) or levofloxacin (Levaquin), which many travelers carry for treatment of traveler's diarrhea. If you self-treat for typhoid fever, you may also need to self-treat for malaria, since the symptoms of the two diseases may be indistinguishable.

Yellow Fever

Yellow fever no longer occurs in Central America. Belize, Guatemala and Mexico require yellow-fever vaccination before entry *only* if you're arriving from an infected country in Africa or South America. The vaccine

is given only in approved yellow-fever vaccination centers, which provide validated International Certificates of Vaccination ('yellow booklets'). The vaccine should be given at least 10 days before leaving and remains effective for about 10 years.

Reactions to the vaccine are generally mild and may include headaches, muscle aches, low-grade fevers or discomfort at the injection site. Severe, life-threatening reactions are extremely rare. Vaccination is not recommended for pregnant women or children less than nine months old.

TRAVELER'S DIARRHEA

To prevent diarrhea, avoid tap water unless it's been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected (with iodine tablets); only eat fresh fruit or vegetables if cooked or peeled; be wary of dairy products that might contain unpasteurized milk; and be highly selective when eating food from street vendors.

If you develop diarrhea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an antidiarrheal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS Animal Bites

Do not attempt to pet, handle or feed any animal, with the exception of domestic animals known to be free of infectious diseases. Most animal injuries occur when people try to touch or feed animals.

Any bite or scratch by a mammal, including bats, should be promptly and thoroughly cleansed with large amounts of soap and water, and an antiseptic such as iodine or alcohol applied. The local health authorities should be contacted immediately for possible post-exposure rabies treatment, whether or not you've been immunized against rabies. It may also be advisable to take antibiotics, since wounds caused by animal bites and scratches frequently become infected. One of the newer quinolones, such as levofloxacin (Levaquin), which many travelers carry in case of diarrhea, would be an appropriate choice.

Mosquito Bites

To avoid mosquito bites, wear long sleeves, long pants, hats and shoes (rather than sandals). Pack insect repellent, preferably one containing DEET, which should be applied to exposed skin and clothing, but not to eyes, mouth, cuts, wounds or irritated skin. Products containing lower concentrations of DEET are as effective, but for shorter periods of time. In general, adults and children over 12 should use preparations containing 25% to 35% DEET, which last about six hours. Children between two and 12 years of age should use preparations containing no more than 10% DEET, applied sparingly, which will usually last about three hours.

Neurologic toxicity has been reported from using DEET, especially in children, but is extremely uncommon and is generally related to overuse. DEET-containing compounds should not be used on children under age two.

Insect repellents containing certain botanical products, including eucalyptus and soybean oil, are effective but last only 1½ to two hours. DEET-containing repellents are preferable for areas where there is a high risk of malaria or yellow fever. Products based on citronella are not effective.

For additional protection, you can apply permethrin to clothing, shoes, tents and bed nets. Permethrin treatments are safe and remain effective for at least two weeks, even when items are laundered. Permethrin should not be applied directly to skin.

Don't sleep with windows open unless there is a screen. If sleeping outdoors or in accommodations that allow entry of mosquitoes, use a bed net, preferably treated with permethrin, with the edges tucked in under the mattress. The mesh size should be less than 1.5mm. If the sleeping area is not otherwise protected, use a mosquito coil, which will fill the room with insecticide through the night. Repellent-impregnated wristbands are not effective.

Snake Bites

Snakes are a hazard in Belize. The chief concern is *Bothrops asper*, the Central American or common lancehead, usually known in Belize as the yellow-jaw tomygoff and also called the fer-de-lance, *barba amarilla* (yellow beard) or *terciopelo* (velvet skin). This heavy-bodied snake reaches up to 6.5ft in length and is found mostly in the northern region. It is earth-toned and has a broadly

triangular head with a pattern of Xs and triangles on its back. Others snakes to watch out for are the brightly striped coral snake and the tropical rattlesnake. All three snakes are deadly, though the coral snake is shyer than the irritable rattlesnake.

In the event of a venomous snake bite, place the victim at rest, keep the bitten area immobilized, and move the victim immediately to the nearest medical facility. Avoid tourniquets, as they are no longer recommended.

Tick Bites

To protect yourself from tick bites, follow the same precautions as for mosquitoes (left), except that boots are preferable to shoes, with pants tucked in. Be sure to perform a thorough tick check at the end of each day. You'll generally need the assistance of a friend or a mirror for a full examination. Remove ticks with tweezers, grasping them firmly by the head. Insect repellents based on botanical products have not been adequately studied for insects other than mosquitoes and cannot be recommended to prevent tick bites.

Sun Exposure

To protect yourself from excessive exposure to the sun, you should stay out of the midday sun, wear sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat, and apply sunscreen with SPF 15 or higher, with both UVA and UVB protection. Sunscreen should be generously applied to all exposed parts of the body approximately 30 minutes before sun exposure and should be reapplied after swimming or vigorous activities. Travelers should also drink plenty of fluids and avoid strenuous exercise when it is hot. Dehydration and salt deficiency can cause heat exhaustion, which can then progress to heatstroke.

Symptoms of this serious condition include a general feeling of unwellness, not sweating very much (or not at all) and a high body temperature (39°C to 41°C, or 102°F to 106°F). Severe, throbbing headaches and lack of coordination can also occur. Hospitalization is essential, but in the interim get victims out of the sun, remove their clothing, cover them with a wet sheet or towel and fan continually. Give fluids if they are conscious.

Water

Tap water is not safe to drink in Belize. Vigorous boiling for one minute is the

most effective means of water purification. At altitudes greater than 3630ft, boil for three minutes.

Another option is to disinfect water with iodine pills. Follow the instructions carefully. Alternatively, you can add 2% tincture of iodine to one quart or liter of water (five drops to clear water, 10 drops to cloudy water) and let stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cold, longer times may be required. The taste of iodinated water may be improved by adding vitamin C (ascorbic acid). Iodinated water should not be consumed for more than a few weeks. Pregnant women, those with a history of thyroid disease and those allergic to iodine should not drink iodinated water.

Water filters with smaller pores (reverse osmosis filters) provide the broadest protection, but they are relatively large and are readily plugged by debris. Those with somewhat larger pores (microstrainer filters) are ineffective against viruses, although they remove other organisms. Follow manufacturers' instructions carefully.

Safe, inexpensive *agua pura* (purified water) is widely available in hotels, shops and restaurants.

CHILDREN & PREGNANT WOMEN

In general, it's safe for children and pregnant women to go to Belize. However, because some of the vaccines listed in this chapter are not approved for use in children and during pregnancy, these travelers should be particularly careful not to drink tap water or consume any questionable food or drink. Also, when traveling with children, make sure they're up to date on all routine immunizations. It's sometimes appropriate to give children some of their vaccines a little early before visiting a developing nation – discuss this with your pediatrician. If pregnant, bear in mind that should a complication, such as premature labor, develop while abroad, the quality of medical care may not be comparable to that in your home country.

Yellow-fever vaccine is not recommended for pregnant women or children less than nine months old. Therefore, these travelers, if arriving from a country with yellow fever, should obtain a waiver letter, preferably written on letterhead and bearing the stamp used by official immunization centers to validate the International Certificate of Vaccination.

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