

# Southern Belize



Southern Belize is where open savannah and citrus-filled farmland give way to forested hills dotted with Maya ruins and jungles, with many fine beaches and beautiful tropical islands thrown in for good measure. The area comprises two districts; Stann Creek, ancestral home of the Garifuna people, and Toledo, often referred to lovingly throughout Belize as the country's 'Deep South,' home to an eclectic mix of Maya, Garifuna and Creole people.

Diversity, both cultural and ecological, is the main hallmark of southern Belize, so it's natural that the area appeals to a wide variety of travelers. Adventurers will find no shortage of opportunities to get off the beaten path in the jungles of the Toledo District. Those who like their paths pre-beaten will find Placencia a tourist's paradise. Trekkers who wish to splurge have a number of five-star jungle lodges tucked away in remote corners from which to choose, while those of more modest means will be able to have a great time on the cheap in the small villages and communities of the Deep South.

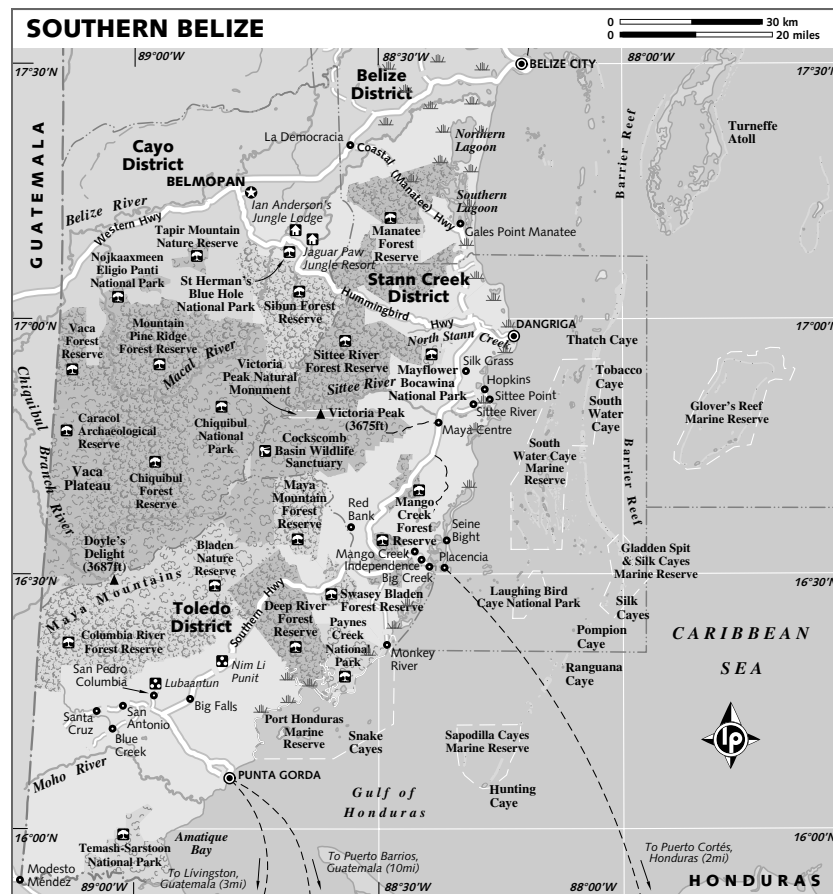
Lest we forget, the south also has cayes all its own, islands small and large boasting stunning coral reefs, where snorkeling, boating and diving enthusiasts can experience Belize's nautical wonders while avoiding the crowds (and significantly higher price tags) of the northern cayes. Walt Whitman once wrote of himself: 'I am vast; I contain multitudes.' Though not large in size, this region can claim the same: from Dangriga to Baranco and everywhere in between, southern Belize definitely has many sides. Both the land and those who call it home are as diverse as the nation itself.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Camping, chilling and zip-lining into rivers at **Crocodile Isle** (p228)
- Cave-tubing through Belize's dark underbelly at **Cave's Branch** (p219)
- Walking the jungle trails of **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary** (p235) and **Mayflower Bocawina National Park** (p229)
- Learning Garifuna beats and drum making with master drummers in **Hopkins** (p230) and **Dangriga** (p224)
- Exploring the ancient Maya ruins, modern Maya villages and remote rivers, lagoons and forests of the **Deep South** (p250)



■ POPULATION: 57,000	■ MONTHLY RAINFALL: Jan 6.5in, Jun 23.4in	■ HIGHEST ELEVATION: 3687ft
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## History

Ancient Maya sites in the Deep South such as Lubaantun and Nim Li Punit point to a flourishing Maya society that existed around AD 700–800. Centuries later, it was the Maya of southern Belize who most strongly resisted being conquered by the Spanish, though they eventually succumbed to European germs and diseases rather than bullets. The Maya who survived were driven out by the British to the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the late 19th century, Maya started moving back to Belize's far south where there are now more than 30 Maya villages.

English buccaners and North American puritans settled along the Belize coast in the

17th century, and the earliest Creole villages were established near river mouths in the 18th century. Garifuna people started arriving in southern Belize around the same time: the biggest single landing of Garifuna people came on November 19, 1832, when some 200 arrived at Dangriga from Honduras in dugout canoes.

Industries such as small-scale agriculture, fishing and some logging have long been mainstays of the region's economy. Today, the growing and processing of citrus fruit in the Stann Creek Valley, situated west of Dangriga, is a major agro-industry, as is shrimp farming. As in much of Belize, tourism is a major cash generator throughout the southern region.

**SOUTHERN BELIZE IN...****Two Days**

Spend a day soaking up Garifuna culture in **Dangriga** (p220) and another listening to the sounds of the jungle in **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary** (p235) or at **Crocodile Isle** (p228).

**Four Days**

Do the two-day itinerary, spending your extra two days soaking up the sunshine and enjoying ocean breezes at **Thatch Caye** (p228).

**One Week**

Base yourself in **Punta Gorda** (p245) and explore the jungles, Maya villages and ruins of Belize's **Deep South** (p250). Head to the Garifuna village of **Barranco** (p254) and take a jungle trek through **Temash-Sarstoon National Park** (p255).

**Language**

Come down south to experience the real linguistic gumbo that is Belize. While English is spoken almost everywhere, at home many Belizeans speak the languages of their own cultures. In Dangriga, Hopkins, Seine Bight and Punta Gorda, expect to hear lots of Garifuna, and, to a lesser extent, Creole. And in villages of the Deep South you're as likely to hear Kekchi or Mopan Mayan as you are English. Spanish is widely spoken as well, both by locals and first- and second-generation immigrants from around Central America. In addition, there's a fair bit of Chinese spoken, mostly Cantonese.

**Getting There & Around**

Two roads connect southern Belize to the Belize District and Northern Belize: the Hummingbird Hwy (which runs from Belmopan to the start of the Southern Hwy near Dangriga) and the Coastal (Manatee) Hwy, an unpaved road that stretches from the Belize District just south of the zoo to the Hummingbird Hwy west of Dangriga, along the way stretching the very definition of the term 'highway.' Though shorter in terms of miles, unless you're planning to visit Gales Point Manatee (p115) on your way down south, the Manatee isn't worth

the chiropractic trauma. The Southern Hwy meets the Hummingbird west of Dangriga then continues 100 miles south to Punta Gorda. Both the Hummingbird and Southern Hwys are well paved except for a 10-mile stretch of the Southern Hwy around Nim Li Punit.

Buses from Belize City and Belmopan head down the Hummingbird Hwy to Dangriga then on to the Southern Hwy to Independence and Punta Gorda. Other services run from Dangriga to Hopkins and Placencia, and from Punta Gorda to villages around the far south. See p250 and p104 for schedules. Placencia can also be accessed by water-taxi service from Mango Creek, which adjoins Independence.

Daily flights head from Belize City to Dangriga, Placencia and Punta Gorda. Scheduled boat services link Dangriga and Placencia with Puerto Cortés in Honduras, and Punta Gorda with Puerto Barrios and Livingston in Guatemala. Boats cross to Tobacco Caye from Dangriga daily; boats to the other islands can be organized through tour operators, dive shops, accommodations or boat owners.

Though there isn't officially a land border crossing between southern Belize and Guatemala, unofficial crossings – generally of locals – occur just west of the village of Jalacte. If you cross this way you risk being stuck on the other side without an entry stamp in your visa.

## THE HUMMINGBIRD HIGHWAY

Passing through jungle and citrus orchards as it skirts the northern edges of the Maya Mountain range, the Hummingbird offers a near constant procession of postcard-perfect vistas. There are also plenty of reasons to stop and spend a day or two before hitting the Southern Hwy.

Chief among these may well be a visit to some of Belize's most amazing caves, many of which are located in this neck of the jungle. The 575-acre **St Herman's Blue Hole National Park** (admission BZ\$10; ☎ 8am-4:30pm) contains one of the few caves in Belize that you can visit independently. The visitors center (where flashlights can be rented for BZ\$5) is 11

miles along the Hummingbird Hwy from Belmopan. From here a 500yd trail leads to **St Herman's Cave**. A path leads 300yd into the cave alongside an underground river. To explore deeper in the extensive cave system, with its huge caverns and classic Maya ceremonial chambers containing calcified skeletons and artifacts, you must have a guide.

Highly experienced Kekchi Maya guide **Marcos Cucul** (☎ 600-3116; www.mayaguide.bz) can sometimes be found at the visitors center (when he isn't leading jungle survival tours deep in the bush; see the boxed text, p80). With over a decade's experience as an area guide, Cucul enjoys an excellent reputation. A three-hour spelunk costs BZ\$100 per person. There's also a 1.5-mile above-ground **jungle loop trail** starting near the cave entrance, with a lookout tower at the area's highest point.

The **Blue Hole** for which the park is named is just off the highway, 1 mile east of the visitors center (an off-road trail connects the two). This is a 25ft-deep sapphire-blue swimming hole inside a 328ft-wide cenote that was formed when the roof caved in on one of the Sibun River's underground tributaries. A popular stop on the Hummingbird Hwy, the Blue Hole always makes for a refreshing dip, except after rain when it's murky and uninviting. An attendant at the Blue Hole parking area will collect your park fee if you don't have a ticket from the visitors center. Buses along the Hummingbird Hwy will drop you at the visitors center or Blue Hole entrance (BZ\$2, 20 minutes from Belmopan; BZ\$4.50, 1¼ hours from Dangriga).

Perhaps the most iconic of all Belizean caving experiences can be had at **Cave's Branch**, the main staging ground for what is quickly becoming Belize's most popular non-nautical activity, **cave-tubing**. You'll need a guide to go through the area's underground river and cave network. Highly recommended is **Vitalino Reyes** (☎ 602-8975; http://cavetubing.bz), a pioneer of the pursuit who begins his tubing trips with fascinating, information-filled jungle walks. During the walk, Vitalino will show you which plants are good to eat, which ones will hurt you, and which ones will help you if you confuse the first with the second. Vitalino is also an entomologist who delights in introducing his charges to tasty jungle bugs; he also has a penchant for handling tarantulas.

Also licensed for cave-tubing are **Marcos Cucul** (☎ 600-3116; www.mayaguide.bz) and **Ian Anderson's Adventure Company** (☎ 822-2800; www.cavesbranch.com; Mile 41½ Hummingbird Hwy).

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Ian Anderson's Jungle Lodge** (Map p217; ☎ 822-2800; www.cavesbranch.com; Mile 41½ Hummingbird Hwy; camping per person BZ\$10, dm BZ\$30, cabañas/bungalows d BZ\$196-390; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$24/24/36; 📍) With something for all budget ranges, Ian Anderson's is a 90-sq-mile private jungle estate that acts as both starting point and nerve center for a variety of jungle activities, including horseback riding, mountain biking, nocturnal jungle walks, and day, night (and overnight) cave, jungle and kayak expeditions. Check the website for a full description of what's on offer at the lodge. All employed tour leaders are highly trained, knowledgeable, attentive and enthusiastic. Accommodations are jungle-chic, and the restaurant serves excellent Belizean, Maya & Carribean cuisine.

**Jaguar Paw Jungle Resort** (Map p217; ☎ 820-2023, in USA 877-624-3770; www.jaguarpaw.com; Hummingbird Hwy; s/d BZ\$381/440, breakfast BZ\$10-16, lunch BZ\$16-20, dinner BZ\$30-50; 📍 📺 📺 📺) Adventure by day and comfort by night is the motto of Jaguar Paw, and with 16 gorgeous double rooms each done up in its own individual theme (Wild West, English Country Garden, Chinese), the resort certainly follows this motto in style. Jaguar Paw offers a variety of activities,

**DARK, WET FUN**

Picture yourself on a tube on a river, with tamarind trees and Belizean blue skies... Ah, but did we mention that within a few minutes of your trip's launch the sky will be replaced by total darkness as you and your erstwhile comrades are pulled down into the very bowels of the earth? No, this isn't an anti-LSD ad from the sixties. This is **cave-tubing**, possibly the coolest (and most family friendly) thing you can do in the dark. After entering the cave you'll float through bracingly cold water in an underground network and witness – through the light of your headlamp – wonders unseen in the world above, from schools of eyeless cave fish and stalactites to strange Maya paintings high on the cave ceilings. Welcome to the underground, Belizean style!

similar to Ian Anderson's Jungle Lodge, at prices roughly equivalent.

## STANN CREEK DISTRICT

Bordering the Belize District to the north, Cayo to the west and Toledo to the south, the Stann Creek District is home to a number of spots popular with visitors, from the coastal villages of Hopkins and Placencia, to amazing inland parks and jungle sanctuaries, to some of Belize's least visited cayes. Dangriga, Belize's second-largest town, is located on the district's northern coastal edge.

### DANGRIGA

pop 10,400

Dangriga is the largest town in southern Belize, and the spiritual capital of the country's Garifuna people. Stretching along the coast, Dangriga has a funky vibe about it – tumbledown and mildly untidy – and for this reason it isn't a major stopover point for most tourists. We think this is a shame: despite sharing a similar ramshackle exterior with Belize City, Dangriga exudes little of the larger city's menace. Though a bit rough around the edges (strangers may ask you for money), Dangriga is generally a safe place to explore and has a good deal of cultural cachet with which to entice visitors to stay an extra day. It's a proud, festive town, one that does its best to make the most of its vibrant Garifuna heritage.

The name Dangriga comes from a Garifuna word meaning 'sweet water,' the town's name having been changed from 'Stann Creek Town' in the 1980s. Dangriga is the birthplace of punta rock (a fusion of acoustic Garifuna and electric instruments; see p45), and is home to a number of notable Garifuna artists, artisans and festivals, not to mention Belize's only Garifuna museum. With good access to both the central cayes and the Southern and Hummingbird Hwys, Dangriga is also an excellent place from which to launch nautical or jungle excursions.

### Orientation

Dangriga stretches about 2.5 miles along the coast and up to 1000yd inland. North Stann Creek empties into the Caribbean roughly in the middle of town. The main street, stretching most of the length of the town, runs through the names Havana St, St Vincent

St and Commerce St. The main bus station is toward its south end (Havana St); most boats to the central cayes and other cayes dock on South Riverside Dr, near the bridge over North Stann Creek. Most accommodations are in the southern half of town, and the airstrip is at the north end.

### Information

**Belize Bank** (☎ 522-2903; 24 St Vincent St; 🕒 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, to 4:30pm Fri) Same as Scotia Bank, but with a BZ\$500 daily limit and BZ\$2 ATM fee for credit cards.

**First Caribbean International Bank** (☎ 522-2015; Commerce St; 🕒 8am-2:30pm Mon-Thu, to 4:30pm Fri) ATM accepts international Visa cards.

**Immigration Office** (☎ 522-3412; St Vincent Street; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 1-4:30pm Fri) Offers 30-day visa extension stamps for BZ\$50.

**Police** (☎ 90, 911, 522-2022; Commerce St) No longer handles visa extensions; for these, go to the Immigration Office.

**Post office** (☎ 522-2035; Mahogany Rd; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 1-4:30pm Fri)

**Scotia Bank** (☎ 522-2005; St Vincent St; 🕒 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, to 4:30pm Fri) The ATM accepts international Visa, MasterCard, Plus and Cirrus cards with no additional fee; daily limit is BZ\$800.

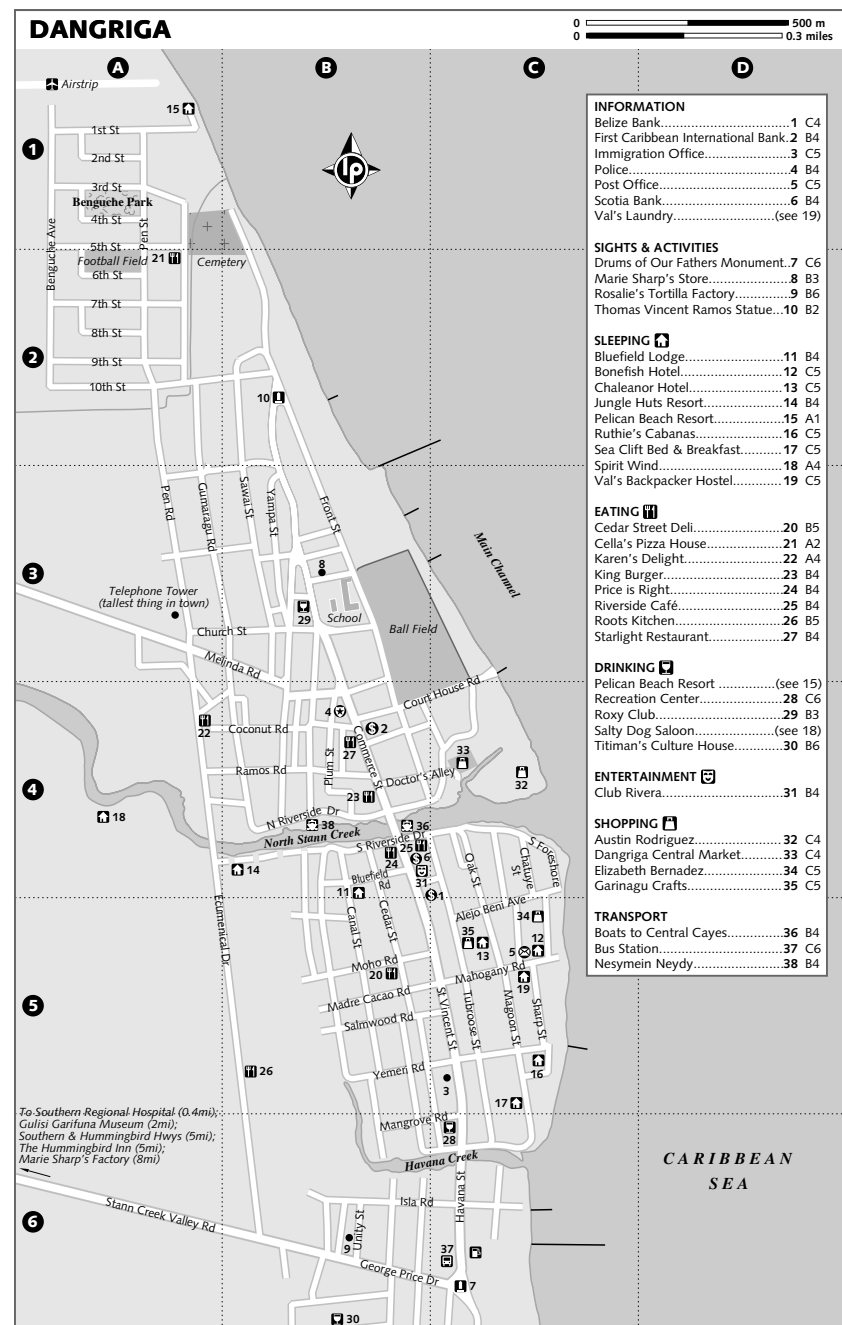
**Southern Regional Hospital** (☎ 522-2078; Stann Creek Valley Rd) Good-standard public hospital.

**Val's Laundry** (☎ 502-3324; cnr Mahogany Rd & Sharp St; internet per hr BZ\$4, laundry wash & dry per lb BZ\$2; 🕒 7:30am-7pm) Get your clothes cleaned, surf the Web (wireless available) and have some of Belize's best homemade ice cream all at the same time. Dana (Val's daughter) also runs the attached Val's Backpacker Hostel (p222).

### Sights & Activities

#### GULISI GARIFUNA MUSEUM

This **museum** (☎ 669-0639; www.ngcbelize.org; Chuluhadwiwa Park, Stann Creek Valley Rd; admission BZ\$10; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat), operated by the National Garifuna Council (NGC), is a must for anyone interested in the vibrant Garifuna people. The museum is 2 miles out of town, but is easily reached by bicycle (stop at Rosalie's, p222, for some tortillas on the way). It brings together artifacts, pictures and documents on Garifuna history and culture, including film of the original punta rockers, Pen Cayetano and the Turtle Shell Band, in Dangriga back in 1983. The museum hosts exhibitions, workshops and Garifuna language courses, schedules for which can be obtained at its musical website.



**MARIE SHARP'S FACTORY**

Habanero peppers, purchased from local farmers, are turned into the super-hot bottled sauces that adorn tables all over Belize and beyond at **Marie Sharp's Fine Foods** (☎ 520-2087; www.mariesharps-bz.com; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri), 8 miles northwest of town on Melinda Rd. Casual tours, often led by Marie herself, are offered during business hours, and the factory shop sells hot sauces and jams at outlet prices. If you can't make it to the factory but would still like to peruse the full line of sauces and jams, Marie Sharp's also has a **store** (☎ 522-2370; 3 Pier Rd; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) in Dangriga. See also the boxed text, p84.

**ROSALIE'S TORTILLA FACTORY**

Though there's no indoor seating, you can come to **Rosalie's Tortilla Factory** (☎ 520-2397; 765 Unity St; ☎ 6:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat), on the outskirts of Dangriga, to watch corn and flour tortillas being made and take a dozen of them to eat on the fly. The best time to get the freshest tortillas is between 9am and noon.

**MONUMENTS**

The **Drums of Our Fathers Monument**, in the traffic circle south of Dangriga's main bus station, underscores the importance of percussion in Garifuna (and Belizean) life, with its large bronze representations of ritual *diigü* drums and *sisira* (maracas). It was sculpted by Stephen Okeke, a Nigerian resident in Dangriga. Up at the other end of town, at the meeting of Commerce and Front Sts, stands a **statue of Thomas Vincent Ramos** (1887-1955), an early promoter of Garifuna culture who inaugurated Garifuna Settlement Day.

**Festivals & Events**

Dangriga explodes with celebrations to mark **Garifuna Settlement Day** (November 19), the Garifuna arrival date here in 1832. Dangrigans living elsewhere flock home, and drumming, dancing and drinking continue right through the night of the 18th to 19th, while canoes reenact the beach landing in the morning.

Dangrigans celebrate **Día de los Reyes** (Three Kings' Day; on the nearest weekend to January 6) with the *wanaragua* or *jonkonu* (John Canoe) dance: male dancers with bright feather-and-paper headdresses, painted masks representing European men and rattling bands of shells around their knees move from house to house dancing to Garifuna drums. It's the

culmination of two weeks of Christmas-season festivities and may also happen at other times between Christmas and January 6.

**Sleeping BUDGET**

**Val's Backpacker Hostel** (☎ 502-3324; cnr Mahogany Rd & Sharp St; dm/d BZ\$19/60; 📍) Quite a find for the budget traveler, Val's is located right on the beach, across from Alejo Beni Park. Val's dorm rooms are fan cooled with a large porch facing the park and ocean, and have bunk beds and separate bathrooms with hot showers. The double room is more like a studio apartment, with its own separate bathroom (with hot shower), two twin beds, comfortable couches and easy chairs, a full dining room set, dresser drawers and color TV with full cable hook-up. Both dorms and studio have windows facing the sea, so you can fall asleep to the sounds of the ocean. Wireless internet and luggage lockers are free for guests (lockers cost BZ\$2 per day if you want to leave stuff here while you go traveling). Dangriga native Dana (the eponymous Val's daughter) is a great source of local information. Bicycle rental, book exchange, fresh brewed coffee and more. Your home away from home in 'Griga.

**Bluefield Lodge** (☎ 522-2742; www.toucantrail.com/bluefield-lodge.html; 6 Bluefield Rd; d with shared/private bathroom BZ\$32/44, 2-bed d with shared/private bathroom BZ\$42/60) This well-run small guesthouse fills up fast, so book ahead. With good, clean rooms in a pristine colonial-style building, it gets plenty of return visitors. All rooms have fans, some have cable TV. Single occupants may get discounts. The owner has a wealth of information about Dangriga.

**Ruthie's Cabanas** (☎ 502-3148; 31 Southern Foreshore; cabanas s BZ\$54, each additional person BZ\$10) Ruthie's comprises four pleasant, seaside, thatched-roof huts on the north side of Havana Creek. It offers hot and cold showers, plenty of coconut tree shade and a chill and cheap place to stay in 'Griga. Ruthie also serves home-cooked meals for an additional charge.

**Sea Cliff Bed & Breakfast** (☎ 502-2350; www.seacliff.com; 15 Mahogany St; s/d incl breakfast BZ\$76/100; 📍 📺 📍) Looking like a Colorado ski chalet (it's the only place in this nation of homes on stilts that we've seen with a sunken living room), this nice little home-style hotel is clean and family owned. Smaller rooms have mahogany bunk beds, good for two, for BZ\$50. All rooms have TV, internet and great views.

There's a shared kitchen, and yes, the sunken living room is also communal.

**Chaleanor Hotel** (☎ 522-2587; www.toucantrail.com/chaleanor-hotel.html; 35 Magoon St; s/d/tr with shared bathroom BZ\$20/30/40, with private bathroom BZ\$50/86/108; 📍 📺 📍) Owned by Chad and Eleanor (hence the name) Usher, Chaleanor is a friendly hotel with a great location on a residential street two blocks from the ocean and Dangriga's main street. Rooms are clean and comfortable, with the ones upstairs having the best views. The owners will also be glad to help you arrange any trips or boat charters. Free coffee and bananas are available all day; ask Chad to see the pair of gibnuts in the backyard.

**Jungle Huts Resort** (☎ 522-0185; junglehutsresort@gmail.com; 4 Ecumenical Dr; s/d BZ\$58/78, with air-con BZ\$78/98; 📍 📺 📍 📍) This riverside resort has 16 rooms and three cabanas. Its secluded feel belies its central location, and its facilities – on-site laundry, restaurant and many hammocks for chilling out – make it a good budget spot.

**MIDRANGE**

**Bonefish Hotel** (☎ 522-2243; www.bluemarlinlodge.com; 15 Mahogany Rd; r BZ\$107-180; 📍) Located right on the beach, across from Alejo Beni Park. The rooms on the upper floors are clean and not without charm, but the ones on the lower floor are a bit darker. All rooms have two double beds (except for one room that has a king-size bed), fan, air-con and cable TV. Some rooms seem to lack screens in the windows. A decent place, but not the best deal for the money in Dangriga. This place is owned by the same people who run the Blue Marlin Lodge (p226) on South Water Caye, and you can arrange packages and boat trips to that cay from here.

**Hummingbird Inn** (☎ 522-0512; www.hummingbirdinnbelize.com; Mile 6 South Stann Creek Valley Road; d stand-ard/deluxe incl breakfast BZ\$140/220; 📍 📺 📍) Six miles out of Dangriga, this family owned plantation-style house has a charming B&B vibe about it. The doubles are more than comfortable, and the deluxe room (with its soaker tub) is positively decadent. Screened-in verandahs and porches wrapping around both stories of the house make excellent use of the setting, allowing guests to chill out and gaze at some of central Belize's gorgeous scenery. In addition to breakfast, lunch and dinner (prepared by the inn's excellent Maya chef) can also be

arranged. David Gobeil, the Hummingbird's manager, is a wealth of local information, offering tours to the many spots within striking distance of the inn.

**Spirit Wind** (☎ 522-0409; www.spiritwindbelize.com; cabanas incl breakfast BZ\$200; 📍) Spirit Wind is hands down the best spot for a romantic weekend getaway in Dangriga, with gorgeous cabanas on the south side of Stann Creek (about half a mile inland; call for directions). All four cabanas have hot and cold water, air-con and big double beds with mosquito nets. Decorations and the design are in a luscious Afro-Caribbean style that is delicately sensual without being over-the-top lewd. Meals are available, and the Spirit Wind is connected to the Salty Dog (p224).

**TOP END**

**Pelican Beach Resort** (☎ 522-2044; www.pelicanbeachbelize.com; 1st St; s/d BZ\$214/278, s/d with air-con BZ\$232/297; 📍 📺 📍) Set in beachside gardens (with a sandy beach) at the far north end of town, Dangriga's one upmarket hotel has good, spacious rooms and the best restaurant in town. All rooms have phones and many are decorated with colorful art by Dangriga's Pen Cayetano. The owners also run the Pelican's Pouch (p227) on South Water Caye.

**Eating**

There are several good fast-food shacks and stands along the main street serving beans, rice and chicken, and a number of Chinese restaurants scattered around town run by Cantonese immigrants.

**King Burger** (☎ 522-2476; 135 Commerce St; dishes BZ\$4-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) No relation to the chain restaurant of the reversed name, King Burger serves reliably fresh though somewhat mediocre breakfasts of eggs, beans and fryjacks for BZ\$6.50, as well as hamburgers and plates of fried shrimp. Coffee is instant, but juices are fresh.

**our pick** **Roots Kitchen** (☎ 601-2519; 2246 Ecumenical Dr; dishes BZ\$5-10; ☎ 6am-10pm) *The place in Dangriga to eat like the locals do.* In addition to the usual Belizean standards, such as beans and rice with stew beef or chicken, Roots is also known for its Wednesday, Friday and Saturday Garifuna feasts, when chef Delone cooks up fish stewed in coconut milk, served with *hudut*, a paste made from plantain. To read what Delone has to say about Garifuna cooking, see p85.

**Karen's Delight** (☎ 502-3952; 3 Stanley Dr; dishes BZ\$7-10; ☺ lunch & dinner) Another unassuming, small shack restaurant serving wonderfully prepared local dishes, such as fry fish (caught daily) and stew chicken and beef. Karen makes some of the meanest pickled peppers you'll find in town.

**Starlight Restaurant** (☎ 522-3398; Commerce St; mains BZ\$8-14; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best Chinese restaurant in Dangriga, and probably one of the better ones in Belize. Starlight has been in operation for decades, and serves a good variety of traditional Chinese dishes using local ingredients. For some real Sino-Belizean fusion, try the conch chow mein. Lobster noodles are a surprising bargain.

**Cedar Street Deli** (☎ 609-5664; Cedar St; mains BZ\$8-15; ☺ lunch) This is a sight for sore eyes in a country where heart-healthy food is hard to come by. Open for lunch only, it serves salads, homemade lasagna and other distinctly non-Belizean dishes. There wasn't a sign on the restaurant the last time we went, so look for the red and green doorway on the lower corner of a yellow house.

**Riverside Café** (☎ 502-3449; 5 Riverside Dr; mains BZ\$10-25; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Just east of the Stann Creek bridge, this café is the place to meet fishers and the folks who do boat tours to the outlying cayes. Food is good and the fish is always fresh. Don't expect a full lobster for BZ\$25 (the costliest item on the menu); it's only a Mars Bar-sized tail, tasty but expensive.

**Cella's Pizza House** (☎ 527-2536; 3 Cemetery Rd; pizzas BZ\$24-30; ☺ lunch & dinner) A cool-looking pizza joint in a private home at the north end of town, Cella's serves good pizza and bottled beer in a fairly untrodden section of Dangriga. A bit pricey, but understandable as all ingredients are imported. (Pizza is definitely not native to Belize!)

The supermarkets on the main street on both sides of North Stann Creek have bread, cheese and lunch-meat, not to mention a wide variety of snacks, both domestic and imported. The largest of these is Price is Right, just south of the bridge.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Club Rivera** (2 St Vincent St; ☺ from 9pm Tue-Thu & Sun, from 10pm Fri & Sat) Formerly called Club Griga, Club Rivera usually has live bands on Friday and Saturday night, featuring punta rock and other types of music. It gets a bit of a

crowd for midweek karaoke sessions, but things really start jumping at the Friday and Saturday dances.

**Roxy Club** (Commerce St; ☺ from 9pm Tue-Thu & Sun, from 10pm Fri & Sat) To quote a pair of Dangriga-based Peace Corps volunteers: 'The Roxy is a good place. Stumpy and Penny are very friendly, and Penny makes great *panatas* (small fish-filled fried tortillas), three for a dollar.' It's at the north end of the city, about three blocks north of the police station in Harlem Sq.

**Salty Dog Saloon** (☎ 522-0409; www.spiritwindbelize.com) This very chilled bar (at Spirit Wind, p223) has the most Jimmy Buffet vibe in Dangriga, though it is a bit out of town. To find it, call or follow the signs for the Salty Dog Saloon beginning on Ecumenical Dr around North Stann Creek.

**Titiman's Culture House** (☎ 602-2099; sailbelize@yahoo.com) Poots 'Titiman' Flores is a local Dangriga legend. His laid-back club – located on an unmarked country road two blocks southwest of the Drums of Our Fathers Monument – is a great place to chill out and get down with serious Garifuna culture.

Also recommended are the following: **Pelican Beach Resort** (☎ 522-2044; www.pelicanbeachbelize.com; 1st St) The Friday happy hour from 6pm to 8pm usually pulls in a crowd.

**Recreation Center** (St Vincent St; ☺ 4pm-midnight) This piece of earth with a thatched roof, no walls and a mainly local clientele can be a lot of fun.

## Shopping

**Austin Rodriguez** (☎ 502-3752) This master artisan carves Garifuna drums from mahogany, cedar and the mayflower tree in his thatched-roof workshop by the water's edge, southeast of Dangriga Central Market. Though Austin's drums are sold all over Belize, you can cut out the middleman by going straight to the maker himself. Mr Rodriguez will be happy to answer any questions you might have on the drum-making process.

**Elizabeth Bernadez** (13 Howard St; ☺ daylight hr) Granddaughter of Austin Rodriguez, Elizabeth sells handmade crafts from her home (next door to the Bonefish Hotel), including beautiful dolls dressed in traditional Garifuna outfits, and acrylic paintings featuring various cultural scenes of traditional Garifuna life. Elizabeth also makes jewelry from jadeite, tiger eye and other local materials. A native of Dangriga ('born here, grown here'), Elizabeth

has been doing artwork locally for over 15 years, and is happy to introduce visitors to Garifuna life and culture through the art of its people.

**Garinagu Crafts** (☎ 522-2596; grigaservices@yahoo.com; 46 Oak St) With the mission statement of 'keeping the black diaspora alive,' Dangriga native Francis M Swaso's shop is part crafts store, part museum. The shop sells a wide range of arts and handicrafts made by Garifuna artists, including drums, maracas, paintings and dolls, and displays a number of historical Garifuna artifacts as well. Garinagu Crafts also carries postcards made from prints by local artist Pen Cayetano.

**Dangriga Central Market** (Doctor's Alley; ☺ 6am-4pm) An old-school semi-enclosed market. You'll find traders selling shoes, clothing and crockery on the outskirts, while farmers and fishers sell their wares inside and around the main building. Naturally the market is busiest in the morning. You can also get cheap breakfasts here.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

From Dangriga airport (DGA), **Maya Island Air** (☎ 522-3475; www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 522-2129; www.tropicair.com) both fly several times daily to Belize City (one-way/return BZ\$114/218, 25 minutes) and less often to Punta Gorda via Placencia.

### BOAT

Dangriga is the jumping off point for trips to Belize's central cayes, as well as for chartered trips up and down the coast and regularly scheduled trips to Honduras. Boats to the cayes leave from opposite the Riverside Café on South Riverside Dr. Stop by around 9am to 10am, or the afternoon before, to check when boats will be leaving. Some lodges on the islands will organize a boat for you.

The water taxi **Nesymein Neydy** (☎ 522-0062, 522-3227) makes weekly trips from Dangriga to Puerto Cortés, Honduras, departing North Riverside Dr at 9am Saturday. The trip costs BZ\$100 and takes from three to four hours. Captain Reyes' boat also stops at Placencia and Big Creek to board passengers, so you can arrange for pick-up from those places as well. Be at the dock around 8am. The return trip from Puerto Cortés is on Tuesday; there are also trips on Saturday, though not every week.

## DRUMMED-OUT DANGRIGA?

In bygone days Dangriga was known for spontaneous explosions of Garifuna drumming, not merely around festivals such as Garifuna Settlement Day or Día de los Reyes (p222), but also ad hoc gatherings in parks, on the beach or on the street. This seems to be happening less and less outside of festival times, according to local drum-making legend Austin Rodriguez (opposite). 'Dangriga got kind of drummed out a few years back. Nowadays the kids seem lazier.' This might be the case, or it might be that today's kids are channeling their musical energies into punta rock, which mixes traditional drumming with heavy bass, electric guitar and slamming lyrics.

**Topsy's Boat Service** (☎ 623-9764, 522-0823) offers trips to all cayes reasonably accessible from Dangriga for decent prices on a sliding scale: the more people you can get for one trip (within reason), the less you can expect to pay per person. Day trips and longer to South Water Caye and Tobacco Caye can be arranged, as can trips to Glover's Reef. Mike, owner of Topsy's, can often be found in front of the Riverside Café when not on his boat.

## BUS

A major transit point for all bus companies servicing southern Belize, Dangriga's main bus station is across from the Drums of Our Fathers Monument. See p250 and p104 for schedules.

## CENTRAL CAYES

Less crowded (and often less costly) than those in the north, the cayes off Belize's central coast are smack in the middle of some of Belize's most amazing diving, snorkeling and fishing sites. Slackers take note: there's no shortage of tropical breezes and palm-tree-slung hammocks.

## Getting There & Away

Dangriga is the natural jumping off point for trips to Tobacco, Thatch and South Water Cayes. Most listed hotels and resorts will arrange your passage; some, such as Thatch Caye Resort, include pick-up from Dangriga airport, van to the dock and boat to the cayes in their vacation packages. You can also hire

a boat yourself in Dangriga at the dock across from the Riverside Café (Map p221); prices vary, so your best bet is to go in a group of four or more. If you're arranging your own trip, make sure to schedule your pick-up, or risk being at the fickle mercies of nautical travel. Glover's Reef can also be reached from Dangriga, though most travelers opt to get there from Glover's Guest House (p235).

### Tobacco Caye

Tiny Tobacco Caye, 200yd long, 100yd wide and mainly sandy, sits right on the barrier reef 12 miles off Dangriga. The caye is a great place for **snorkeling, diving, fishing** or slacking out on a hammock. With half a dozen places to stay, it's popular with travelers on a limited budget looking for the *Gilligan's Island* experience. The atmosphere is sociable and friendly. At most accommodations all guests eat at the same time, and three places have bars open to all. Just west is **Man-O-War Caye**, an important nesting site for the brown booby and magnificent frigate bird, which you will very likely pass on the way to Tobacco Caye. Both islands are among the dozens within the World Heritage-listed **South Water Caye Marine Reserve**.

Tobacco Caye is close to some of central Belize's premier dive spots. In the vicinity is **Shark Hole** (or Shark Cave), an underwater cave popular with fish, turtles and sharks. The entrance, 42ft down, is about 33ft wide but the cave opens up to about 150ft inside. In its center is a large sandhill around which the sharks circle. Dives can be organized through **Tobacco Caye Diving** (☎ 614-9907; www.tobaccocayediving.com), which is next to Reef's End Lodge. Local dives cost BZ\$60 per day. Various dive packages are available, as are equipment rental and certification. Two-tank outings to Belize's atolls (usually requiring four people) head to other popular spots. Call or check the website for current rates, which are highly sensitive to rising fuel prices.

Of course, if you're more into marine life for its culinary value, there's good fishing for tarpon, bonefish and snook very close to the island. Most accommodations have fishing equipment for rent.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Equipment rental and meal packages are available at most lodgings. The only restaurants are at the places to stay.

**Tobacco Caye Lodge** (☎ 520-5033, in Belize City 227-6247; www.tdodgebelize.com; s/d BZ\$90/160) This place on the east side of the island has six simple but clean and fairly spacious rooms with private bathrooms, fans and beautiful verandahs. The dining room serves good food and has a couple of useful marine life identification books. Snorkel gear rental is BZ\$20 per day for guests; canoes are free.

**Reef's End Lodge** (☎ 520-5037, in Dangriga 522-2419; www.reefsendlodge.com; r/cabanas per person BZ\$130/150) At the south end of the island, Reef's End has eight sizable rooms plus a couple of lovely cabanas. It also offers a wide variety of diving and snorkeling packages and equipment rental. Inquire about discounts in the off season.

Other recommendations include the following:

**Tobacco Caye Paradise** (☎ 520-5101; r/cabanas per person incl meals BZ\$50/55) At the northern tip, this has the cheapest, most basic rooms and meals, but also two cabanas, with private bathrooms, built over the water (call ahead to secure one of these).

**Lana's** (☎ 520-5036; s/d BZ\$80/120) On the west side of the island with four rather cramped rooms but good meals.

**Ocean's Edge Lodge** (☎ 601-8537; r per person incl/excl meals BZ\$100/50) On the island's southeast edge, the lodge has seven good rooms and a deck over the water. Snorkel gear and boat outings to nearby islands can be arranged through management.

### South Water Caye

Five miles south of Tobacco Caye, South Water Caye is three times as big, but home to just three more-expensive resorts. The 15-acre island, often called Water Caye by locals, has excellent **sandy beaches** and an interesting combination of palm and pine trees. Like Tobacco Caye, it is part of the South Water Caye Marine Reserve. A seemingly bottomless 8-mile-long underwater cliff on the ocean side of the reef makes for excellent **wall-diving**, with usually good visibility. Snorkelers will find healthy coral reefs in the lagoon. Trips to Belize's offshore atolls are possible, and there's excellent **fishing** here, too. Passage to South Water Caye is usually arranged through the resorts.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Blue Marlin Lodge** (☎ 520-5104, in USA 800-798-1558; www.bluemarlinlodge.com) At the northern end of the island, Blue Marlin has its own full-service PADI dive center and a restaurant serving particularly good seafood. The resort has a se-

ries of cabanas and rather odd (but cool looking) igloo-shaped 'dome cabanas.' Though the lodge offers single-night rates varying by room and season (from BZ\$337), the best deals are the packages including longer stays, meals, transit and diving. Check its website for more details (the rate sheet is rather complicated!), or visit its Dangriga office inside the Bonefish Hotel (p223).

**International Zoological Expeditions (IZE)** (☎ 520-5030, in USA 800-548-5843; www.ize2belize.com; packages per person per night from BZ\$320; ☎) Perhaps the best way to experience the island is through Massachusetts-based IZE, which has a site in the middle of the island with dorms for students and beautiful spacious wooden shoreline cottages for other guests. The main building incorporates a field station (with reference books and videos), an attractive wood-furnished dining room, internet access and a great bar. The basic package (minimum three nights) includes meals, transfers to/from Dangriga, snorkeling and sightseeing boat trips, and use of kayaks and sports equipment. IZE also offers two-site eco-adventure and study packages combining South Water Caye with its Blue Creek Rainforest Lodge in the Toledo District.

**Pelican's Pouch** (☎ 522-2044; www.southwatercaye.com; s/d BZ\$350/520, cottages BZ\$440/590, all incl meals) The solar-powered Pelican's eight comfortable wooden cottages at the south of the island are well spaced, giving a feeling of seclusion. Heron's Hideaway is probably the pick of the bunch, with a big porch and two hammocks overlooking the surf crashing onto the reef. The main building (once an island retreat for Belize's Sisters of Mercy) houses the dining room and five guest rooms opening onto long verandahs. If you want to dive from here, book at least a week ahead. Kayaks are available free of charge. Boat transfers to/from Dangriga are BZ\$110 per person.

### Glover's Reef

Named after 18th-century English pirate John Glover, who attacked Spanish merchant ships from here, Glover's Reef is the southernmost of Belize's three atolls, lying about 27 miles east-southeast of Dangriga and extending 16 miles north-south and up to 7 miles east-west. Half a dozen small cayes of white sand and palm trees are dotted along the atoll's southeastern rim, supporting a handful of low-key resorts and diving and kayaking bases.

The reef's unique position atop a submerged mountain ridge on the edge of the continental shelf makes it home to some of the world's finest **dive sites**. Divers at Glover's regularly see spotted eagle rays, southern stingrays, turtles, moray eels, dolphins, several shark species, large groupers, barracudas and many tropical reef fish. In the shallow central lagoon, 700 coral patches brim with marine life – brilliant for **snorkelers**. Turtles lay eggs on the beaches between June and August. Glover's Reef is included in the Belize Barrier Reef World Heritage listing, and it's also a **marine reserve** with a no-take zone covering most of the southern third of the atoll.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Glover's Atoll Resort** (☎ 520-5016, 614-8351; www.glovers.com.bz; per person per week camping BZ\$198, dm & on-site tents BZ\$298, cabins BZ\$398-438) This is a ramshackle backpackers' resort on Northeast Caye. If you like getting back to basics, as in no electricity or running water (although there is a well for washing), this could be for you. The weekly prices include cooking facilities and boat transfers on Sundays to/from the owners' mainland Glover's Guest House in the village of Sittee River (see p235), but you also need to think about the cost of water, food, equipment rentals and any excursions. Drinking water costs BZ\$2 per gallon on the island (though water from the many coconuts is free).

The open-air thatched restaurant serves breakfast/lunch/dinner for BZ\$18/14/24, or you can make your own meals – a few basic groceries plus fish, lobster and conch are available on the island, but the rest (including any alcohol) you must bring yourself. Snorkel gear rents for BZ\$60 a week, kayaks from BZ\$300 a week, and the resort has a PADI shop offering a range of courses and dives. There's a long list of rules to keep things running smoothly. If a Sunday-to-Sunday stay doesn't suit you, there are nightly accommodation rates but the boat trips there and back will push costs up. A one-way trip on the Sunday boat is BZ\$80 per person. The resort may close from September to November.

**Isla Marisol Resort** (☎ 520-2056, 615-1485; www.islamarisol.com; 1-week diving package per person BZ\$4200) The atoll's southernmost caye, Southwest Caye, was split in two by Hurricane Hattie in 1961. On its southern half, this small resort provides sturdy, comfortable cabins with hot showers, a highly recommended PADI dive

shop, excellent food and a bar on stilts over the water. During a week's diving you'll probably do around 17 dives, including some at other atolls. Prices include boat transfers to and from Dangriga.

Glover's Reef also houses camps/resorts for the excellent sea-kayak holidays of North American-based **Slickrock Adventures** (📞 in USA 800-390-5715; www.slickrock.com) and **Island Expeditions** (📞 in USA 800-667-1630; www.islandexpeditions.com), on Long Caye and the northern half of Southwest Caye respectively. See also the boxed text on p78.

### Thatch Caye

This privately owned tiny island 8 miles off the coast of Dangriga is home to the newly developed **ourpick Thatch Caye Resort** (📞 603-2414; www.thatchcaye.com; all-inclusive 3-day/4-night packages per person from BZ\$1650, camping per person BZ\$30). The collective brainchild of Travis Holub, Steven Hewitt and Nancy Engel, Thatch Caye may well be one of the loveliest island resorts in Belize.

What impressed us most about Thatch Caye is the way in which environmental sustainability has been built into every aspect of the resort's design. All structures are built around (in some cases in between) the island's mangroves, giving the place a lovely natural feel. The resort's 11 beautiful thatched-roof cabanas, all built from local hardwoods (hand-carved mahogany doors are a nice touch), are on stilts over the ocean, nicely eliminating the need for air conditioning. Nearly all power used on the island is generated from either solar or wind (a diesel generator is kept at one end for rare periods of neither sunshine nor wind), giving Thatch Caye a further thumbs-up from the very ecoconscious writers of this guide.

Activities range from swimming, snorkeling, fishing, fly-fishing and kayaking in the azure waters surrounding the island, or just hanging out on the island's white sands. Thatch Caye is a great base for nautical excursions to popular (and lesser-known spots) including **Gladden Spit**, Lighthouse Reef (including the Blue Hole) and Glover's Reef. Travis offers rates that are competitive with the resorts in Placencia. Snorkeling trips to Glover's Reef, **Silk Cayes**, **Pompion Caye**, and **Laughing Bird Caye** can be arranged for BZ\$170 per person, and two-tank diving trips to the same cayes will cost BZ\$300. Both include picnic lunch, and both require a minimum of

four people. Travis also leads midnight diving trips to swim with whale sharks on full-moon nights in March, April, and May for BZ\$500 per person, four person minimum.

Because of Thatch Caye's close proximity to Tobacco Caye and South Water Caye, snorkelling trips to these places can be done cheaper than out of Placencia. Snorkeling trips in either Tobacco Caye channel or South Water Caye channel go for BZ\$60 per person, and diving trips are twice that. A four-person minimum applies for all trips. Full day fly-fishing with guide, boat, and picnic lunch goes for BZ\$700 per person.

Visitors with children and animal lovers will especially enjoy interacting with Thatch Caye's resident animals: several families of tame long-nosed coatimundi, rabbits, gibbon, exotic birds, sea iguanas and two very friendly raccoons (usually found outside the resort's fantastic dining room).

### SILK GRASS

pop 550

In days of old, pirates and British sailors would stop and fill their casks with water from Fresh Water Creek in Silk Grass; nowadays, the community has another attraction for travelers.

**ourpick Crocodile Isle** (📞 661-1559, 614-3328; www.belizecrox.com; admission BZ\$10, tents per person BZ\$10; 🌅 8am-dusk) is a 100-acre solar-powered bird and crocodile sanctuary that also happens to be a backpacker's paradise, with one of the best little restaurant-bars in all of Belize.

The brainchild of an Australian adventurer and naturalist (who goes by the moniker Croc), Crocodile Isle was designed from the ground up with sustainability in mind. Everything on the grounds, from the restaurant to the zip-line, is built around the existing contours and conditions of the land. 'We built everything around the trees,' says Croc. 'Even the restaurant is made of locally grown wood, with a tied-on thatch roof made of thousands of palm leaves.'

Difficult to categorize, Crocodile Isle might best be described as an eco-adventure chill-out spot. On the grounds of the park, visitors will find some of southern Belize's best **bird-watching, fishing and jungle trails**, a fenced-in **crocodile sanctuary** and a lovely restaurant (surrounded by a croc-filled moat, naturally). Management offers various tours of the area, including all-day reef fishing and **snorkeling**,

night-time jungle walks, crocodile spotting and **canoeing**.

The park also has a one-of-a-kind 'zip 'n splash' line, a cable stretched across **Fresh Water Creek** on which visitors can zip from a 10m-high platform into the deepest part of the river (don't worry, it's free of crocs). No lifeguard is on duty; however, post-jump swimmers will be guided back to shore gently but firmly by Croc's very cool dog, Daisy May.

Though there are no cabanas yet, large tents – each stocked with a queen-size air mattress, sheets and pillows – are available. When the daytime visitors have left, the whole place sounds like an extended Brian Eno ambient track, as the still air fills with birdsong, the cries of nocturnal animals and the occasional sound of a crocodile, lizard or turtle splashing into a nearby pond.

Croc offers various packages ranging from drop-in **day trips** (incl unlimited zip-lining BZ\$10) and **canoe rentals** (per hr BZ\$10) to a tour he refers to as **The Five Bs** (Bus, Breakfast, Birding & Back by Boat; per person BZ\$80). The latter trip begins and ends in the town of Hopkins, just a few miles down the road.

Crocodile Isle's bar and restaurant is **Snap Jaws Restaurant Bar & Thrill** (📞 614-3328; meals BZ\$6-10; 🌅 11am-7pm Tue-Sun). Snap Jaws is worth the trip for its excellent burritos and hamburgers, which many in the know call 'the best in Belize.' It also serves typical Belizean cuisine such as beans and coleslaw, and spicy wings, along with a few dishes from Australia, including Mr Croc's 'Mighty Meaty Matey Beef Stew.' Snap Jaws is as environmentally friendly as you'd expect from a restaurant on the grounds of an ecopark, with much of its produce grown on site, fertilizer and chemical free. While traveling friends of Bill W sometimes gather here, drinkers will be happy to know that there's also a fully stocked bar.

Silk Grass is about 2 miles off the Southern Hwy and 5 miles north of Hopkins. Get off any highway bus at the Silk Grass turnoff and walk in, or call Croc to arrange transport.

### MAYFLOWER BOCAWINA NATIONAL PARK

This beautiful 11-sq-mile park of jungle, mountains, waterfalls, walking trails, swimming holes and small Maya sites lies about 16 miles southwest of Dangriga and 12 miles northwest of Hopkins. The walks are at least as good as the trails most people do at

Cockscomb Basin (p235), and you'll encounter far fewer tourists. You'll see lots of birds, and the park is home to two troops of black howler monkeys.

A 4-mile unpaved access road, leaving the Southern Hwy 2 miles north of Silk Grass village, brings you to a small **visitors center** (🌅 8am-4pm) where you pay a BZ\$10 park fee, and the partly excavated **Mayflower Maya site**, with two pyramids and nine other structures, occupied in the late 9th and early 10th centuries. **Antelope Trail** leads down over Silk Grass Creek to the larger, unexcavated, partly tree-covered **Maintzunun temple mound**, 250yd away (built around 800). Continue on a further 1.7 miles – steep and strenuous in places – up to the beautiful 100ft-high **Antelope Falls**, with great panoramas. The less demanding **Bocawina Hill Trail** (1.4 miles) leads to the lower and upper **Bocawina Falls**: there's a cool swimming pool at the foot of the 50ft upper falls. Branch trails, for which a guide is recommended, lead to **Peck Falls** and **Big Drop Falls**.

On a beautiful spacious plot 500yd past the visitors center along the Bocawina Hill Trail (drivable this far) is **Mama Noots Jungle Resort** (📞 606-4353; www.mamanoots.com; cabins from BZ\$300; breakfast/lunch/dinner BZ\$15/20/30; 📞 🌅 🌅). Some 238 bird species have been identified on this property, which is run entirely on renewable energy (24-hour power). Mama Noots offers some adventurous guided hikes in the national park, and excellent discounts for extended stays. Good Belizean and international food is served in the spacious, thatched-roof restaurant, which welcomes drop-in customers. The colorfully decorated rooms sport artful paintings and ceramics, are wheelchair accessible and have good bathrooms.

Day tours to the park from Hopkins or Maya Centre (p235) cost around BZ\$90 per person. A taxi from Dangriga is about BZ\$60. If you're staying at Mama Noots, staff there can often pick you up at the highway junction if you call ahead.

### HOPKINS

pop 1100

Located off the main southern highway (which can be irksome if you're traveling by bus), the coastal Garifuna village of Hopkins is a fairly popular spot for travelers looking to soak up some sun and culture. Smaller than Dangriga, Hopkins is a good place to meet other travelers and to base yourself for



explorations of the surrounding areas. The beaches in Hopkins are decent, though, outside the ones kept clean by the owners of the properties behind them, they aren't always free of trash. Dolphins and manatees are spotted regularly from the beach.

Founded in 1942 by people from Newtown, a nearby Garifuna settlement that was destroyed by a hurricane, the village is named for Frederick Charles Hopkins, a Catholic priest who drowned in the waters here in 1923. Hopkins is a friendly enough place, though some travelers may sense a bit of a hustle vibe from some of the locals (mostly young men engaged in the ganja trade).

Hopkins' emerging place on the tourism map is a mixed bag; an increasing trickle of North Americans have bought homes and plots in the area, and there is an increasing number of high-end resorts springing up to the north and south of town. Some of these have a distinctly gated-community, *Stepford Wives* vibe. The construction – bringing scores of big trucks laden with material and heavy machinery through the town on its one unpaved road – definitely detracts from the serenity. Whether Hopkins can avoid becoming Placencia North is anybody's guess.

### Orientation & Information

Hopkins stretches about 1.5 miles along the coast. The road in from the Southern Hwy reaches the village at King Cassava bar, roughly the village's mid-point. There are plenty of guesthouses south of this intersection, either on the beach or the town's single street (hence the lack of street addresses in our listings). The northern end of town is more densely populated, though there are fewer guesthouses and restaurants.

**Hopkins Internet** (☎ 523-7249; per hr BZ\$8; ☎ 1-9pm Fri-Wed) is on the beach 650yd south of King Cassava; internet service is a bit slow, but outside of the expensive resorts down in Sittee Point, this is the only place in Hopkins to check email.

### Activities

#### WATER SPORTS

Like Dangriga and Placencia, Hopkins is a fine place from which to access some of Belize's best **dive sites**. The barrier reef is less than a 40-minute boat ride away, and Glover's Reef is about 1½ hours away. Diving can be arranged at Hamanasi Dive & Adventure Resort

(p234). Hamanasi and Hopkins Inn (p232) offer reef snorkeling trips, as does **Noel's Fishing & Snorkeling** (☎ 523-7219, 609-1991), outside the Watering Hole Restaurant. Noel charges two people BZ\$250 for a day's outing. He also rents snorkel sets for BZ\$10 a day.

Hopkins also has some good spots for **windsurfing**; two places, Windschief (p232) and Jungle by the Sea (opposite), offer lessons and gear rental.

Several accommodations have **kayaks** available for their guests.

### DRUMMING

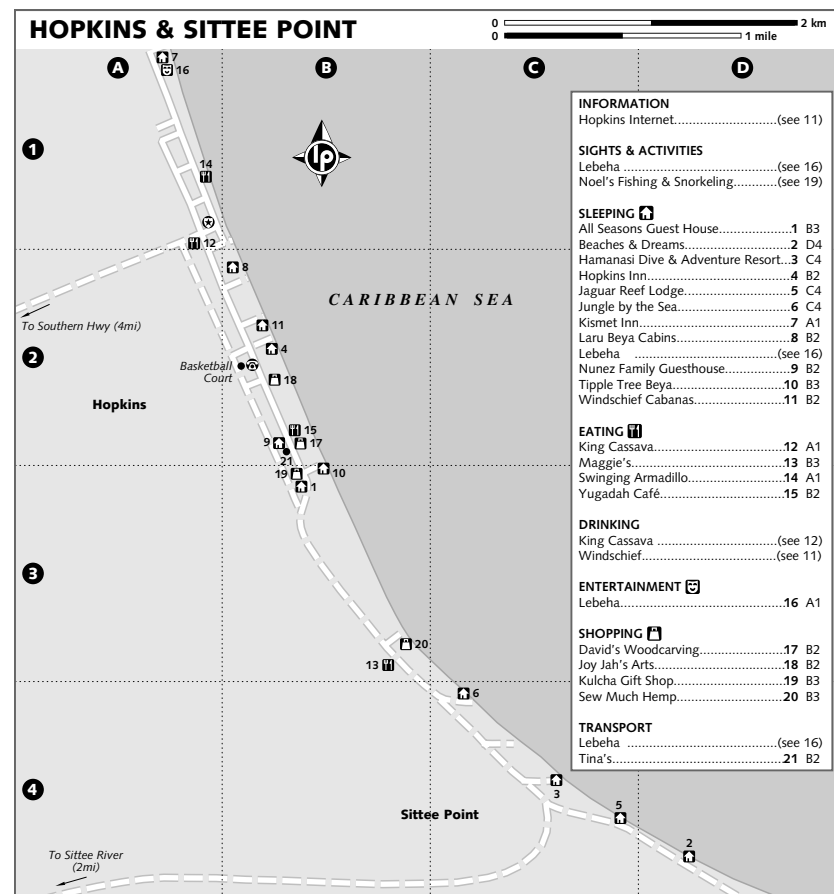
**Lebeha** (☎ 608-3143) is an excellent Garifuna drumming school on the north side of town set up by local drummer Jabbar Lambey. Lebeha functions both as an education and cultural center for local kids and as a general happening spot for travelers interested in Garifuna drumming. Drumming lessons for individuals and groups are available for reasonable prices, and there's drumming almost every night beginning at around 7pm. Most definitely Hopkins' 'in' spot, Lebeha is a place that nobody with an interest in Garifuna music and culture will want to miss (see also p233).

### Tours

Hopkins is handily placed for day trips to some of southern Belize's top natural attractions. Cockscomb Basin (p235) is the most popular inland trip: tours usually include early morning walks to see birds and nature, followed by a waterfall hike and a river-tube float. Other good trips are to Mayflower Bocawina National Park (p229) and Gales Point Manatee (p115). All these cost around BZ\$80 to BZ\$120 per person, usually with a three- or four-person minimum.

Two excellent local guides for boating trips are **Noel Nunez** (☎ 523-7219, 609-1991), who offers fishing and snorkeling tours at reasonable prices, and his cousin **Lloyd Nunez** (☎ 662-0873, 603-2970), a professional fly-fisherman who leads expeditions into both the inner and outer cayes (BZ\$500 to BZ\$600 for two people, depending on the tour). Lloyd also operates a homestay on the south side of town (p232).

Horace Andrews runs a service out of nearby Sittee River called **Belize by Horace** (☎ 603-8358; www.belizebyhorace.com). He has a 26ft skiff and does tours both out to the cayes and through the lagoons and rivers around



Sittee River. He also offers trips to Mayflower, Cockscomb and Red Bank. Also offering trips to Cockscomb Basin are the experienced guides from Maya Centre (see Tours, p236), who will be glad to pick you up in Hopkins.

### Sleeping

The following accommodations are listed from south to north.

**Jungle by the Sea** (☎ 523-7047; http://junglebythesea.com; cabanas BZ\$100, cabins BZ\$180) A 10-minute walk south of Hopkins takes you to Jungle by the Sea, also known as Jungle Jeanie's. Combining the best of both worlds, Jungle J's offers beautiful hardwood cabins nestled in the trees with lovely sea views. Each has a double bed, futon, bathroom, mosquito

screens and verandah. One has a loft with a second double bed. At the north end of the property are a few older, more basic wooden cabanas with similar amenities. Windsurfing equipment and kayaks are available for guests for a small charge.

**All Seasons Guest House** (☎ 523-7209; www.allseasonsbelize.com; s/d BZ\$86/150; ☎ ☎ ☎) All Seasons may be the prettiest guesthouse in town, with its octagonal, thatch-covered upstairs porch and its four uniquely decorated rooms with big private bathrooms and usually superfluous mosquito nets (the rooms are spotless and the windows screened). Our favorite is the zebra-striped room, which is great for a couple (and also the cheapest). All rooms have air-con and hot showers. There's a great



patio out front with a massive grill and picnic area. Ingrid (All Seasons' European owner) is a delightful person who also has the best bicycles in town – free, but only for guests.

**Tipple Tree Beya** (☎ 520-7006; www.tippletree.com; camping per person BZ\$10, r with cold-water shower BZ\$50, s/d/tr BZ\$86/100/120, d/q cabanas BZ\$108/140; (P)) This sturdy wooden beachside place rents three cozy, clean rooms sharing a sociable verandah beneath the owner's quarters upstairs. Two rooms have private hot-water bathrooms; the third (cheaper at BZ\$50 for two) has an unheated shower. The cabana, set a little further back, has a small kitchen. There are bikes (BZ\$15 per day) and kayaks (BZ\$40), and the owner can set up tours and activities with local guides.

**Nunez Family Guesthouse** (☎ 662-0873, 603-2970; r BZ\$100; (P) (Q)) Lloyd Nunez (p230) and his wife Clarice run a homestay at the south end of town that's really one of a kind. For BZ\$100 per day, you get a big, comfortable room with a queen-size bed, private bathroom and huge hot-water shower, and access to an upstairs living room with a full home entertainment system. But what makes this place truly unique is that your rent also gets you three meals a day with the Nunez family, and Clarice is rumored to be one of the best Garifuna chefs in town. There are three guest rooms; double occupancy costs a little more (to cover the cost of meals). There's no sign, but it's a two-story mauve house just across from Yugadah Café.

**Hopkins Inn** (☎ 523-7013; www.hopkinsinn.com; cabanas incl breakfast BZ\$99-199; (P) (X)) Four cabins right by the beach are on offer at this well-run establishment where breakfast is brought to you. Each cabin has a coffee maker, verandah, mosquito screens and a nice, clean, white-tiled bathroom. A catamaran, bicycles (for BZ\$40 and BZ\$15 per day, respectively) and free snorkeling gear are available, and owner Greg, a registered tour guide, takes snorkelers out in his boat. The town's only Indian restaurant (excellent, so we've heard, though it keeps irregular hours) is right next door.

**Windschief Cabanas** (☎ 523-7249; www.windschief.com; small/large r BZ\$50/80; (P) (Q)) Run by Oliver and Pamela Guthoff, the Windschief is Hopkins' primary hangout for windsurfers. In addition to renting out windsurfing gear (BZ\$20 for the first hour, BZ\$10 each hour thereafter), Oliver also offers private windsurfing lessons for BZ\$60 an hour, or BZ\$40

per person for groups of two to four. There are two cabanas with private bathrooms and cold showers, and Windschief also has the honor of being the only place in town with reliable internet (free for those with their own computer; see Hopkins Internet, p230, for more details).

**Laru Beya Cabins** (☎ 523-7229, 666-1973; cabins BZ\$109; (P) (X)) These are four log cabins right by the beach done up in an Afro-Caribbean style. Located in the center of town, all cabins have dark-wood furniture, coffee makers and soft beds. It's a lovely place, but the staff seem a bit on the snarky side.

**Lebeha** (☎ 608-3143; cabins s/d BZ\$30/50) The Garifuna drumming school set up by local drummer Jabbar Lambey and his wife Dorothy also has three cabanas for rent. The nicest of these is the honeymoon suite, which has a double bed, private bathroom and screened-in porch. The two smaller cabanas share a bathroom, and both have cold-water showers. A distinctly musical place, Lebeha may not always be the quietest place in town, but it's definitely popular with backpackers and music lovers. Dorothy is a warm and friendly woman who'll go out of her way to help make your stay in Hopkins memorable. She also makes excellent fresh-brewed coffee, and a mean breakfast of fryjack and eggs or granola, fruit and yogurt.

**Kismet Inn** (☎ 523-7280; www.kismetinn.com; s/d BZ\$25/50, f BZ\$125) The last guesthouse on the north side of Hopkins is the very pretty and funky Kismet Inn. Rooms are ramshackle and comfortable, and have a view of the ocean. There's a small organic garden in the back, and water is provided by a rainwater catchment system. Owner Tricia works hard to ensure all her guests have a genuine cultural experience, while her partner Elvis, a tall Rastafarian fisherman, fishes for the communal supper table. The rainbow-gathering, Grateful Dead–tour vibe will no doubt appeal to some travelers while deterring others, but as Tricia herself says, 'if it's kismet, it's meant to be.'

## Eating

The village has a number of straightforward, locally run eateries, several of them serving up a good variety of fare, but if you want anything fancy you need to head down to the hotels south of the village. Some families will prepare special Garifuna meals in their

homes: inquire at your lodging or at Tipple Tree Beya (opposite).

**Maggie's** (☎ 669-4463; mains BZ\$6-8; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Maggie's is a funky old shack on the side of the road south of town, but a shack serving the best burritos (chicken, beef and fish) and chocolate coconut pie around. It's open in the morning for pastries as well.

**King Cassava** (☎ 502-2277; mains BZ\$8-20; ☎ 11am-midnight) This great restaurant in the middle of Hopkins serves excellent meat and seafood dishes, from steaks to conch and lobster (in season); naturally, there's no shortage of Belizean standards such as stew chicken, fry fish, and rice and beans. King Cassava is also Hopkins' leading cool spot at night.

**Yugadah Café** (☎ 503-7255; mains BZ\$10-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) With a menu serving Belizean fare, burgers and burritos and a variety of world-class homemade sauces, this place is pretty packed most nights.

**Swinging Armadillo** (☎ 609-7434; meals from BZ\$12; ☎ lunch & dinner) This beachfront yellow shack two blocks south of Lebeha serves up impressively good Garifuna cuisine. Chef Digna Martinez has a small kitchen, so she generally only has a few specials going at any given time. Her fried snapper, rice and plantains is especially good, and folks are known to come from as far away as Dangriga for a bowl of her conch soup.

## Drinking & Entertainment

The more expensive resorts at Sittee Point have on-site bars and generally make their own evening fun. In humble Hopkins, people make due with a few local bars. Three of the most happening spots in town:

**Windschief** (☎ 523-7249) This local watering hole offers all kinds of cocktails, beer and stout. It's owned and operated by the same couple that runs Hopkins Internet, so why not have a drink or six then email your family to tell them how much fun you're having?

**King Cassava** (☎ 502-2277; ☎ 11am-midnight) In the middle of town, this is a beer, pool and reggae hub for both locals and travelers.

**Lebeha** (☎ 608-3143) The drumming center is one of the coolest spots in Hopkins to be on any given evening from about 7pm, when local Garifuna drummer Jabbar Lambey hosts drum-ins for friends, students and travelers alike. Lambey also teaches drumming in the day (see p230) and his wife Dorothy runs the attached guesthouse (opposite).

## Shopping

Hopkins is an especially good place to buy local crafts. Some restaurants and hotels carry items made by local craftspeople, but to get the real flavor, you'll want to go to the source. With the exception of Sew Much Hemp, all shops listed following are on Hopkins' main street, south of King Cassava.

**Joy Jah's Arts** (☎ 669-1744) This place is run by George Estrada and his wife Andrea, the artists who painted the huge mural that greets visitors as they arrive into town. It sells lovely paintings, hand-carved wooden statues and other Belizean-flavored curios. You can't miss this shop: it's fluorescent green and has a plaster dolphin and turtle.

**David's Woodcarving** (South of Joy Jah's) David makes exquisitely carved staffs, masks, canes, mortar-and-pestle sets and wooden jewelry in a workshop behind his shop by night, selling his creations at very reasonable prices during the day. Where he gets the time to sleep is anybody's guess. The shop is inside a little green building with a thatched roof just south of Joy Jah's.

**Kulcha Gift Shop** (☎ 523-7075) Creole for 'culture,' Kulcha sells drums made by Belizean artists, as well as other arts and crafts. Kulcha is also the place to go for Cuban cigars (BZ\$25).

**Sew Much Hemp** (sewmuchhemp@hotmail.com) This little shop about half a mile south of town (on a dirt road just across from Maggie's) sells all kinds of hemp products, from all-natural bug repellants to skin creams and lotions. Barbara, Sew Much's owner, is a true acolyte of hemp's qualities and is always happy to share her knowledge (and no, this isn't a double entendre; we mean *hemp*, not *ganja*).

## Getting There & Around

If there's no bus passing through Hopkins at a convenient time, it's quite common to hitch to the Southern Hwy junction and pick up a bus there. A taxi to Hopkins from Dangriga costs about BZ\$80.

You can rent bicycles at **Lebeha** (☎ 608-3143) for BZ\$15 a day, or at Tina's for BZ\$10/20 per half/full day. All Seasons Guest House (p231) has some of the nicest bikes in town, but they're only for guests.

## SITTEE POINT

About 1.5 miles south of Hopkins village sits Sittee Point. Where Hopkins ends and Sittee

Point begins is subject of mild debate, so we'll leave it to you to decide. The area itself (closer to Hopkins than to Sittee River, with which it should not be confused) has mostly high-end resorts and a few exceptionally pleasant midrange surprises. Too far to walk (for most), Sittee Point is about 20 minutes from Hopkins by bicycle.

### Sleeping & Eating

The following reviews are arranged geographically, from north to south.

**Hamanasi Dive & Adventure Resort** (Map p231; ☎ 520-7073; in USA 877-552-3483; www.hamanasi.com; r BZ\$644-878; 📶 📶 📶 📶) Easily the premier resort of the area, Hamanasi (Garifuna for 'almond tree') combines the amenities of a top-class dive resort with an array of inland tours and activities and a gorgeous 400ft beachfront. All of Hamanasi's 18 large, very comfortable rooms and suites face the sea, except the popular wood-floored tree houses, secluded among the foliage behind the beach. The best deals at this exclusively priced resort are available through packages including room, meals and tours. Hamanasi's professional PADI dive operation can carry divers out to all three of Belize's atolls (Lighthouse, Turneffe and Glover's), as well as the barrier reef's best dive spots, and is equipped with the latest in Nitrox dive technology. Kayaks and bikes are available free for guests, and the on-site bar and restaurant are excellent.

**Jaguar Reef Lodge** (Map p231; ☎ 520-7040, in USA 800-289-5756; www.jaguarreef.com; cabanas BZ\$460, beachfront/s/d BZ\$632/761; 📶 📶 📶 📶) A little further down the coast, Jaguar Reef is another luxury resort with a long, sandy beachfront and ample amenities and activities on land and water. It's good for families or wary adventurers with deep pockets. The cabanas are solidly built, with a conservative, familiar design that you would find in Hawaiian or Mexican resorts. As well as snorkeling, birding, diving, jungle hiking, fishing and river kayaking, guests can hang out at Jaguar Reef's day lodge on the nearby Sittee River or take a four-hour outing to its island lodge on Coco Plum Caye, 10 miles offshore. A wide variety of packages are available through the resort's website.

**Beaches & Dreams** (Map p231; ☎ 523-7259; www.beachesanddreams.com; r incl continental breakfast BZ\$262; 📶 📶) If it's a more personalized family atmosphere you're after, look no further. The

family-owned Beaches & Dreams is run by Tony and Angela Marsico, two professional chefs who traded catering in Alaska for running a high-quality inn on the Belizean shore. There are just four rooms in two solid, octagonal wooden cabanas, with king-size beds, tiled bathrooms and futons for lounging. Tony and Angela are renowned for their culinary skills, so even if you're not spending the night, stop in for a delicious Italian or Mediterranean meal (BZ\$15 to BZ\$40). Bikes and kayaks are available for guests, and discounts are available during the low season. Rum-flavored impromptu jam sessions featuring local musicians often happen on weekend evenings.

### SITTEE RIVER

The tranquil Creole village of Sittee River, with an increasing population of North American expats, straggles along the beautiful jungle-lined river of the same name about 3 miles by unpaved road southwest of Hopkins. It's a great bird-watching area, and a couple of good accommodations make excellent stress-free bases for a stay. Sittee River can be buggy, so make sure your accommodations are adequately screened or netted!

### Sights & Activities

Nearby **Boom Creek** (inhabited by otters, a few crocodiles and plenty of birds) and **Anderson's Lagoon** make for good canoeing. One good birding spot is the ruined (but under restoration) 19th-century **Serpon Sugar Mill**, 3 miles from the village toward the Southern Hwy.

### Sleeping

The following reviews are arranged geographically, from north to south.

**Toucan Sittee** (☎ 523-7039; www.toucanstitee.info; dm BZ\$25, d with shared bathroom per person BZ\$39, apt with private bathroom per person BZ\$50; breakfast/dinner BZ\$12/18; 📶) Popular with backpackers and families on a budget, Toucan Sittee sits in beautiful, tropical riverside gardens surrounded by tropical birds of all sorts. The family running Toucan Sittee is friendly and always eager to help vacationers plan trips around the area. Accommodations are cozy and traditionally built (most of the houses are on stilts) and meals are a good bargain as well, with vegetarian dishes available on request. Night trips up Boom Creek and to Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (opposite) are also offered.

**River House Lodge** (☎ 603-0298; www.riverhouselodge.net; r incl continental breakfast BZ\$118-178; 📶 📶 📶 📶) With another lovely riverside setting about 1400yd nearer Hopkins than Toucan Sittee, River House Lodge provides very comfortable air-con rooms with screened verandahs in two-story wooden houses, plus a restaurant, bar and inviting indoor pool. Bikes and kayaks are available free of charge to guests, and the owners also offer daily sailing tours on their 38ft catamaran for BZ\$172 per person (20% discounts available for groups of four or more).

**Glover's Guest House** (☎ 509-7099; www.glovers.com.bz; camping per person BZ\$6, dm BZ\$16, r with shared/private bathroom BZ\$40/56; 📶) The boat to Glover's Atoll Resort (p227) leaves from this guesthouse in Sittee River. The accommodations are cramped and basic, but at these prices, who's complaining?

### Getting There & Away

Buses that serve Hopkins also go through Sittee River at about 1pm and 6pm heading out to the Southern Hwy and on to Placencia, and at around 6:30am (7:45am Sunday) heading to Hopkins and Dangriga.

### COCKSCOMB BASIN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary** (admission BZ\$10) is Belize's most famous sanctuary; at 200 sq miles, it's also one of its biggest protected areas. On some maps the place appears simply as 'jaguar reserve,' though despite the moniker your chances of seeing a jaguar here are slight at best. This great swath of tropical forest became the world's first **jaguar sanctuary** in 1984, thanks to the efforts of American zoologist Alan Rabinowitz. Today, this critical biological corridor is home to an estimated 40 to 50 jaguars and a vast array of other animal, bird and botanical life.

The sanctuary is part of the eastern Maya Mountain range. Most visits are restricted to a small eastern pocket of the sanctuary, which contains a visitors center, the sanctuary's accommodations and a network of excellent walking trails (old timber roads from the time when the region was still being logged). The visitor sighting book does record instances of people spotting jaguars, so it is possible (but it's unlikely). What you can hope to spot are plenty of birds – egrets, toucans and hummingbirds are just a few that live in or pass through the

park. You can also expect to see iguanas, local rodents such as gibernuts, and maybe, with a little luck, some jaguar paw prints.

Mornings are the best time for wildlife watching, as most animals seek shelter in the heat of the day. Though many visitors come as part of large (and inevitably noisy) tours arranged through nearby lodges or travel agencies, your best bet for viewing more elusive wildlife is to come alone or in as small and quiet a group as possible. Regardless, the trails are still magnificent.

Despite its size, the sanctuary itself isn't big enough to support a healthy breeding population of jaguars; however, its position adjacent to other reserves and swaths of jungle make it part of a biological corridor that, many believe, offers promise for the jaguar's future in Central America. Belize's four other wild cats, the puma, ocelot, margay and jaguarundi, also reside in and pass through the sanctuary, as do tapirs, anteaters, armadillos (the jaguar's favorite prey – crunchy on the outside but soft and chewy on the inside), brocket deer, coati-mundis, kinkajous, otters, peccaries, tayras and other animals native to the area.

The sanctuary is also home to countless birds: over 290 feathered species have been spotted, including the keel-billed toucan, king vulture, great curassow and scarlet macaw. There's also a thriving community of black howler monkeys living close to the visitors center (these were reintroduced here from the Community Baboon Sanctuary, p108, in 1992). If you don't see them near the center, you'll definitely hear their eerie, cacophonous howling should you choose to spend the night. And herpetologists take note: large boa constrictors, small (and deadly poisonous) fer-de-lances and the tiny coffee snake are just some of the snakes that call the sanctuary home.

Cockscomb became a forest reserve and no-hunting area in 1984. A small part of it was given sanctuary status in 1986, and the rest followed in 1990. The people of the small Maya village of Quan Bank were compulsorily relocated as part of the creation of the sanctuary. Many of them now live in **Maya Centre village**, a few miles east, and make a living from the sanctuary, running tourist accommodations or tours, or working as park staff.

### Orientation & Information

The unpaved, 6-mile road to the sanctuary starts at the village of Maya Centre, on the

Southern Hwy 5 miles south of the Hopkins turnoff. The **sanctuary office** (☎ 7:30am-4:30pm), where you pay admission, is at the end of the road that begins at Maya Centre. The office has trail maps (BZ\$5) plus a few gifts, soft drinks and chocolate bars for sale. You can also rent binoculars (BZ\$5 per day).

## Activities

A well-maintained 12-mile network of trails fans out from the park office. Most of the walks are flat along the bottom of the basin, but the moderately strenuous **Ben's Bluff Trail** (1.25 miles and steep in parts) takes you up to a lookout point with fantastic views over the whole Cockscomb Basin and the Cockscomb Mountains. It's named for one of the original members of the Cockscomb Jaguar Sanctuary Project, who would make this climb daily to listen for signals from the radio transmitters attached to the jaguars.

An easy 1.4-mile **self-guided nature walk**, looping together the Curassow Trail, Rubber Tree Tail and River Path, can be followed with the trail map from the park office. The **River Path** (0.4 miles) and the **Wari Loop** (a 2.3-mile loop from the office) are good early morning bets for seeing a variety of birds. Jaguar tracks are often spotted on the Wari Loop and the **Victoria Peak Path**. The **Antelope Loop** (a 3.4-mile loop from the office) rises and falls through a variety of terrain and vegetation, and offers a good sample of the basin's geological features.

The office rents tubes (BZ\$5) for half-hour **river-tube floats** down South Stann Creek from the River Overlook on Wari Loop.

## Tours

Tours can be arranged in Maya Centre, and are usually conducted by Maya who were relocated there when the jaguar reserve was created. This is an interesting situation: not only do the guides show you the animals and the history of the park, they'll also show you where they lived just 20 years ago. Of course, they know the area pretty well and in general they're experienced and professional.

A typical day tour to the sanctuary from Maya Centre costs around BZ\$90 per person and includes transportation, a couple of guided walks (usually including a waterfall), lunch and maybe river-tubing. An exciting option is a night tour (BZ\$50 per person), which offers increased chances of seeing noc-

turnal animals such as kinkajous, anteaters, peccaries and possibly even a feline. Guides can also lead tours for people who are staying in the sanctuary. Check whether your fee includes the sanctuary admission cost and, at night, whether flashlights are provided.

## Sleeping & Eating IN THE SANCTUARY

Staying in the sanctuary gives you easy access to the trails, and enables you to experience the sounds of the jungle at night and be up at dawn when wildlife is most active. You'll have to bring all your food and drinks with you. Maya Centre has a couple of grocery stores selling basic supplies, so stock up before you come to the sanctuary (unless you want to live on chocolate bars and Pringles from the visitors center). The accommodation options, most close to the sanctuary office, range from camping under *palapas* (thatched-roof shelters; BZ\$10 per person, bring your own tent) through to a 'rustic cabin' with bunks and kerosene lamps (BZ\$16 per person). There's also a lovely (and solar powered) dorm with bunks and a compost toilet (BZ\$36 per person), and four cabins that sleep up to eight people that go for BZ\$96 to BZ\$108 each. Use of a communal kitchen is included with all options except camping, where grill pits are available. You can rent kitchen utensils for up to five people for BZ\$10 per day.

## IN MAYA CENTRE

**Nu'uk Che'il Cottages** (☎ 615-2091, 520-3033; www.mayacottages.com; camping per person BZ\$7, dm BZ\$20, d & tr with shared/private bathroom BZ\$46/50; dishes BZ\$8-16; ☎ restaurant 7am-8pm; ♻️) These accommodations, spread around a verdant garden about 500yd along the sanctuary road, are owned by Aurora Saqui (a niece and apprentice of the legendary Maya healer Eligio Panti) and her husband Ernesto, a former Quan Bank villager who was director of the Cockscomb sanctuary from 1988 to 2004. The rooms are simple but clean, with hot-water bathrooms. Also here are a medicinal plant trail (BZ\$5 per person with a self-guiding leaflet, BZ\$20 per group for 30-minute guided tours), a craft shop, and a large fan-cooled *palapa* restaurant with Maya dishes available (if ordered ahead), as well as more standard Belizean fare and lovely fresh fruit juices.

**Tutzil Nah Cottages** (☎ 520-3044; www.maya-center.com; s/d BZ\$34/45; meals BZ\$12-24; ♻️) On the

Southern Hwy 100yd north of the Maya Centre junction, the three Chun brothers, also originally from Quan Bank, provide four neat, clean rooms with shared bathrooms; those in the wooden-stilt building at the rear are airier.

**Cockscomb Diner** (☎ 520-3042; mains BZ\$8-12; ☎ 6:30am-9pm) Well-prepared Belizean and Maya dishes and good fresh juices are served here, plus lighter eats such as burgers and sandwiches. It adjoins a craft shop and the Maya Centre Women's Group.

## Getting There & Away

Any bus along the Southern Hwy will drop you at Maya Centre, but there is no public transportation into the sanctuary. A taxi from Hopkins to Maya Centre or the sanctuary costs around BZ\$80. Most of the Maya Centre tour guides offer taxi services to the sanctuary for around BZ\$36/60 one-way/return. To walk in takes about two hours (the terrain is relatively flat).

## PLACENCIA

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How you feel about Placencia depends on why you've come to Belize: if it's seaside pleasures and tourists you're after, you've come to the right place. But if you were hoping to get off the beaten path, forget it: the path to Placencia is not merely beaten, it is professionally flogged.

Placencia is where tourists – mostly North Americans – come to swim, snorkel, scuba dive, hang out on the beach and drive around in golf carts holding bottles of Belikin stout at 10 in the morning. There is little of the Garifuna/hippie vibe you'll find in communities such as Hopkins, nor any of the urban hustle of Dangriga. Instead, the village of Placencia feels like an upper crust New England village transported to the Caribbean coast.

The drive to Placencia village down the narrow 4-mile-long peninsula is quite pretty. There are some lovely resorts of varied price ranges on the east-facing beach, and mangrove swamp on the western side. But open land on either side is disappearing at a fast clip as lots are bought up for development, both for upper-end resorts, and for private homes being sold to Americans and Canadians looking for their own slices of heaven in tropical climes.

Like most tropical places existing primarily for tourists, Placencia has a different feel from season to season. In the dog days of summer, the town is quieter, hotels are cheaper (some even close) and the overall tourist vibe much mellower. Peak times for tourists are May, June and July.

## Orientation

Placencia village occupies the southernmost mile of the peninsula, with a sandy beach all along its eastern side. The road from the north runs down the western side of the village, ending at the Shell fuel station and the main boat dock (a handful of short piers). Parallel to the road and about 100yd east of it is the Sidewalk, a narrow pedestrian-only footway, with the beach about 100yd further east.

Placencia's airport is about 1 mile north of the village; 6 miles beyond that is the North American expat settlement of Maya Beach. Between the two lie an increasing number of accommodations, including some of the swankiest in Belize, not to mention a growing number of luxury housing units.

In between mainland Belize and the village of Placencia is the Garifuna village of Seine Bight. With its shacks, shanties, vegetable stands and cheap restaurants, Seine Bight sticks out on the resort peninsula like a Rastafarian at a GOP fundraiser.

## Information

There's no shortage of info on Placencia, both on the Web and around Belize. Check out a copy of the monthly *Placencia Breeze* (also on-line at www.placenciabreeze.com) or **Placencia Online** (www.placencia.com) before you get here.

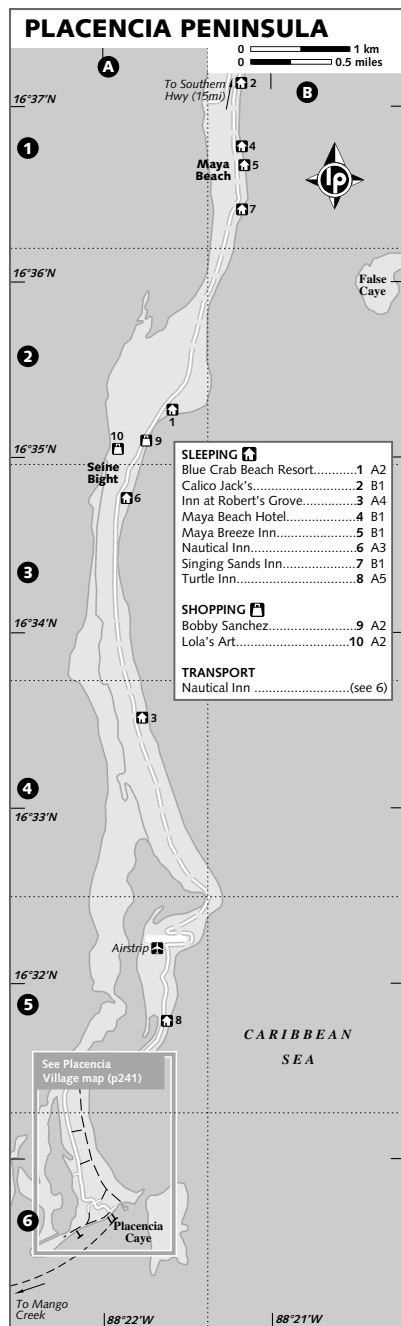
**Belize Bank** (Map p241; ☎ 8:30am-2:30pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri) All cards accepted.

**Book Shak** (Map p241; ☎ 606-8457; ☎ 10am-5pm) New and used books at reasonable prices.

**Bosun's Chair** (Map p241; laundry BZ\$8, internet per hr BZ\$8; ☎ 7am-7pm) A beachfront café across from the post office where you can do your laundry, have a beer and check your email. What could be finer?

**De-Tatch Café** (Map p241; ☎ 503-3385; internet per hr BZ\$10; ☎ 7am-9:30pm) Internet access, coffee and more.

**Julia's Laundry** (Map p241; ☎ 503-3478; laundry by weight, internet per hr BZ\$10; ☎ 7am-7pm) Located at the Julia & Lawrence Guesthouse in the heart of the popular beachfront, so you can head straight out for a swim when the laundry is done.



**Placencia Office Supply** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3205; internet per hr BZ\$10; 🕒 8:30am-7pm) High-speed internet, CD burning, digital card readers.

**Placencia Tourism Center** (Map p241; ☎ 523-4045; 🕒 9-11:30am & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Right by the bus stop and dock, friendly staff are ready to set travelers off on the right foot. Pick up a copy of *Placencia Breeze* to catch up on what's happening.

**Purple Space Monkey** (Map p241; ☎ 523-4094; internet per hr BZ\$10; 🕒 7am-2pm & 5-9:30pm) Wireless internet and computers for hire; 15 minutes free with meal purchase.

**Scotiabank** (Map p241; 🕒 8:30am-2:30pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri) All cards accepted.

## Activities

Placencia is close enough to a plethora of cayes, reefs and dive sites to make it a good base for **diving** and **snorkeling**. As fuel prices rise, however, so too do the prices of diving trips, especially to more distant areas. Most operators will charge around BZ\$200 per person for a two-tank dive trip to a nearby spot. Longer outings to Shark Hole (p226), Glover's Reef (p227) or the Sapodilla Cayes (p247) should be between BZ\$250 and BZ\$300. For some sites you may need to add admission fees of between BZ\$8 and BZ\$30. Advanced divers take note: March through June are especially good months to see whale sharks in the area. One of these trips should cost between BZ\$300 and BZ\$340.

There's no shortage of dive operators in town, and many of these also dabble in fishing, sailing or land tours (for a listing of tour operators, see opposite). Most dive operators also run snorkeling trips. A snorkeling day trip, often with a beach barbecue included, costs around BZ\$60 to BZ\$90 per person for nearby cayes, increasing in price the further out you go.

Opportunities for **fishing** are equally amazing, and in the waters off Placencia you can troll for barracuda, kingfish or tuna, spincast or fly-fish for tarpon, bonefish or snook, and bottom-fish for snapper or jack. **Sailing** is also popular in the waters around Placencia. As well as Belize's cayes and other ports, Río Dulce in Guatemala and Honduras' Bay Islands are close enough to sail to.

As the whole town is geared toward tourism and aquatic fun, any hotel in Placencia can arrange your tour for you. Most beachside accommodations, particularly the mid-priced ones north of the village, have free **kayaks** or

**canoes** for guests' use, and some will even provide fishing poles and bait to use on their private docks.

## Tours

Considering its peninsular nature, Placencia isn't too bad a spot to begin land journeys. Some of the more popular expeditions launched regularly from Placencia (in order of their proximity to the area itself) are listed following.

Tours of the **Placencia lagoon** can be arranged through any of the tour companies (right), and shouldn't set you back more than BZ\$70 per person. The half-day tours are good for exploring the mangrove ecosystems. Expect to see plenty of birds and, if you're lucky, manatees or dolphins.

A **Monkey River** trip is generally around BZ\$80 per person, and includes a short sea cruise to Monkey River Town (actually a village), 14 miles southwest of Placencia. From here, a short trip upriver takes visitors into howler monkey territory. We've heard that sometimes guides smack on the sides of trees to entice the monkeys to howl, which does strike us as a bit intrusive. Crocodile viewing and bird-watching are also on the agenda, as may be a couple of jungle walks and a swim or river-tube float, followed by a Creole lunch in the village. The forests here are still recovering from hurricane damage.

The forest fruits of **Red Bank** village, 14 miles west of Placencia as the crow flies, attract rare and beautiful scarlet macaws from January to March. On a good day you might see 30 of these spectacularly plumaged birds, plus plenty of other species. The trip costs around BZ\$130 per person, and takes the whole day.

Day trips to Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (p235) cost approximately BZ\$120,

and also take the whole day. However, the sanctuary is vast (not to mention interesting) enough to warrant its own separate trip, if you have the time.

## TOUR COMPANIES

Author and noted curmudgeon Robert Heinlein coined the phrase 'specialization is for insects.' He might have appreciated the generalist nature of Placencia's guide services, most of which do a little of everything.

Some reputable operators include the following:

**Advanced Diving** (Map p241; ☎ 523-4037, 615-1233) Does diving, snorkeling and fishing trips.

**Joy Tours** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3325, in USA 917-446-6610; www.belizewithjoy.com) Offers a variety of fishing, snorkeling and diving activities. Staff will also be glad to arrange hiking tours to Maya ruins around southern Belize.

**Next Wave Sailing** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3391, 610-5592; www.nextwavesailing.com) Does day sails on a 50ft catamaran out to sandy islands where you can snorkel, swim and lunch (adult/under 12s BZ\$176/88); also offers popular sunset cruises (BZ\$99/50). Kids under four are free of charge. Departures are from Placencia docks; you can book at the Purple Space Monkey (p243).

**Nite Wind Guide Service** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3487, 609-6845) Offers a variety of land and nautical tours.

**Ocean Motion Guide Service** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3162, 512-3363) Does fishing and snorkeling trips.

**Sailing Belize** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3138; http://sailingbelize.com) Day sails on a 50ft monohull (BZ\$240 per person).

**Sambur Jaguar Adventure Tours** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3040, 600-2481; Sidewalk) Friendly little operation with colorful blackboard listing trips.

**South Belize Reef & Jungle** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3330; southbelize@yahoo.com) A well-known dive operator that also dabbles in jungle tours.

**Toadal Adventure** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3207; www.toadaladventure.com; Deb & Dave's Last Resort) Led by

## SEINE BIGHT ART STOP

Most visitors to Placencia just breeze through Seine Bight, the Garifuna village in the center of the tourist peninsula where many who work in the surrounding resorts reside. But if you can, take the time to stop for a while at the shops of two of Seine Bight's resident artists. Painter and sculptor Lola Delgado is the mistress of **Lola's Art** (Map p238; ☎ 523-3342, 601-1913; lolasart@btlnet), where you'll find paintings, handcrafted jewelry, sculpture and assorted crafts. Many of Lola's pieces adorn the walls and grounds of Placencia's higher end hotels and resorts. Another local craftsman is **Bobby Sanchez** (Map p238; ☎ 601-5096), who builds beautiful Garifuna drums from locally harvested hardwoods and Belizean antelope skins. Lola's shop is in the center of Seine Bight; just follow the signs from the main road. Bobby's place is just north of Seine Bight, down the road from the Blue Crab (p242).

highly experienced local guide Dave Vernon, who does popular multiday sea-kayaking trips. Call or check the website for packages and pricing. It also rents kayaks for BZ\$70 per day.

## Festivals & Events

The **Sidewalk Art Festival** (mid-February, nearest weekend to Valentine's Day) features art, crafts and music, with scores of participants from all over Belize.

**Lobsterfest** (last weekend of June) celebrates the opening of the lobster-fishing season with music, boat races, a fishing contest, a huge variety of lobster dishes to eat and a lot of fun.

## Sleeping

Inside the village, lodgings range from budget to midrange; most of these are small and family-run, and there are plenty of beachside cabanas (though your neighbor may be just a few feet away). Out on the peninsula things range from mid-priced cabanas to some of the plushes, most top-end luxury resorts you're likely to see anywhere in Belize. Most places on the peninsula offer free airport pick-ups and a full range of tours and activities, usually at slightly higher prices than the agencies in town.

During the low season, almost all places offer discounts of 10% to 25%.

## PLACENCIA VILLAGE

### Budget

**On Da Beach Camping** (Map p241; ☎ 503-3068; camping per person BZ\$10) Camping on the beach. Look for a yellow house (but not *the* Yellow House, right) at the northern end of the Sidewalk.

**Omar's Guesthouse** (Map p241; ☎ 600-8421; dm/s/d BZ\$25/30/40) Small and unpretentious, Omar's is a perennial favorite with backpackers and others doing Belize on the cheap. Rooms are fan-cooled, bathrooms are shared and showers are cold. The downstairs café serves good cheap grub.

**Charro Hotel** (Map p241; ☎ 523-4078, 623-4779; s/d BZ\$40/60; P) No sign marks this square, two-story, gray-stone hacienda with wooden railings and cement columns. It's set on the west side of Placencia's main street, north of Tommy's Restaurant and south of the gas station. Half of the top floor is a private residence; the other half houses four fully furnished long-term apartments. The bottom floor contains six small rooms with private

bathrooms, hot showers and cable TV. Not the most luxurious place, but clean, serviceable and way affordable.

**Deb & Dave's Last Resort** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3207; debanddave@btl.net; r with shared bathroom BZ\$50) One of the cheaper options in town, D&D offers comfortable, compact rooms with fans, surrounded by a leafy garden. Rooms have their own coffee makers and share a screened porch.

**Yellow House** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3481; ctbe@btl.net; r BZ\$50-70; P) Located in a – you guessed it – yellow house, this budget hotel in the center of Placencia has clean and basic rooms with double beds, kitchenettes, bathrooms and ceiling fans.

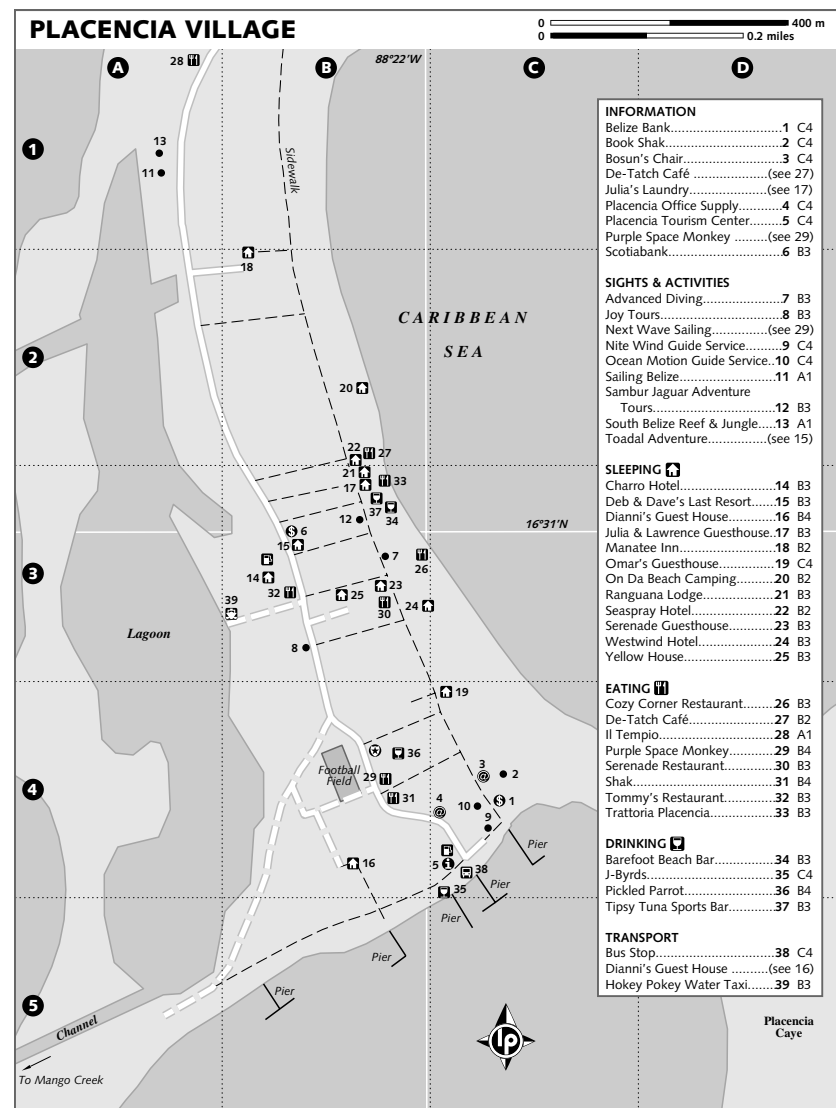
**Seaspray Hotel** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3148; www.seasprayhotel.com; r BZ\$50-130; P) Owned and operated by the Leslies (one of Placencia's most established families), this lovely hotel has seven grades of room (all with private hot-water bathroom) of varying degrees of luxury and proximity to the ocean. The best of these are the 'Seaside Cabanas,' which have a porch (with sea view), deck, kitchenette and coffee maker. Even the least expensive ones are quite nice (though without the sea view). Seaspray's website lays out all options nicely.

**Julia & Lawrence Guesthouse** (Map p241; ☎ 503-3478; r BZ\$75-140) A beachfront place on the tightest packed part of the shore, J&L's has a series of clean rooms with private bathrooms. The cheaper rooms, with shared facilities, are in a darker, older building toward the back (but closer to the beach).

**Manatee Inn** (Map p241; ☎ 523-4083; www.manateeinn.com; s/d/tr BZ\$88/99/110) Hardwood floors and furniture set this lovely budget guesthouse apart from others in its price category. All rooms have ceiling and standing fans, refrigerators and private bathrooms with hot-water showers.

### Midrange

**Dianni's Guest House** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3159; www.diannispacencia.com; s/d/tr/cabanas BZ\$85/118/130/190; P) Rooms in this lovely house, a stone's throw from Placencia's southern shore, are good value. Clean – if not a bit on the ascetic side – all have coffee makers, microwaves and refrigerators, and there's a wide, wood-floored verandah with chairs and hammocks for long-term lounging. Cabanas offer more space and full kitchenettes. An on-site gift shop, internet access, bicycle rentals and



tour and flight bookings make Dianni's a safe choice. Long-term rentals are available.

**Serenade Guesthouse** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3380; www.belizecayes.com; Sidewalk; r BZ\$100-120; P) Wind chimes serenade visitors and passers-by alike from the verandah of this big white wooden house just a block off the beach. Wood-floored rooms are cozy, and all have

air-con, private bathroom and cable TV. More expensive rooms have sea views and their own coffee makers. The friendly local owners also run the next-door Serenade Restaurant, which serves some of the finest gibnut stew you're likely to find in Belize.

**Westwind Hotel** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3255; www.westwindhotel.com; s/d/fste BZ\$131/164/327) Travelers

**AN OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE**

**Turtle Inn** (Map p238; ☎ 523-3244, 824-4912, in USA 800-746-3743; www.turtleinn.com; s/d/tr cottages from BZ\$630-850, villas from BZ\$1300; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This is it. The ultra-chic lodge owned by Mr Francis Ford Coppola, where the director himself maintains his own Belizean villa. It's the beachside complement to Coppola's hill-country Blancaneaux Lodge (p215). There is, of course, little need for a lengthy review of this Balinese themed, opulent-in-every-way resort; it is everything you'd expect from a place of both its price-tag range and Hollywood pedigree. (Its cinematic website – perhaps created with input from Coppola himself – paints an accurate picture.)

Yes, it is wonderful, combining luxury with a hint of the rustic, equipped with two beachfront pools, a fully equipped PADI dive shop, and spa complete with Thai masseurs. Would you expect anything less from the man who brought the world *Apocalypse Now*? Of course not. Instead, let's skip to the question you really want to ask, namely: 'How much to live in Mr Coppola's personal villa...the actual one he lives in when he's in town?'

To rent the fabulous Pavilion House, a two-bedroom, two-bathroom villa with private entrance, pool, dining pavilion and personal attendant, costs a mere \$2100 per night in the high season (that's in US currency, exclusive of tax or service charges). So, on to your second question: 'At that price, do I get full access to Mr Coppola's private DVD stash, including the *real* director's cut of the *Godfather* trilogy?'

No. While all accommodations at the Turtle come equipped with iHome units where you can plug in your iPod and enjoy your own music to your heart's content, neither the Pavilion House nor any of the villas have TV sets. This is, after all, where the director comes to get away from the movies. And at these prices, shouldn't you, too?

speak highly of George and Lisa Westby's Westwind Hotel, a funky two-story wooden place with large, clean rooms and a definite family-run feel. Most rooms face the sea and all have a balcony, terrace or patio and hot-water bathroom. The six-hammock *palapa* out front on the sand is a great place to eat, play board games and chill out in general.

**Ranguana Lodge** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3112, 610-2287; www.ranguanabelize.com; r with/without sea view BZ\$168/160; 📞) Five good-sized mahogany cabins on a small stretch of lovely beach. Two have kitchens; the others (smaller) have sea views and air-con. All have two double beds, hot-water bathroom, cable TV and micro-waves, not to mention lovely verandahs.

**PLACENCIA PENINSULA**

Accommodations on the peninsula range from mid-priced places such as Singing Sands to ultra-chic resorts such as the Turtle Inn (see boxed text, above). The following are arranged geographically along the peninsula, from south to north.

**Inn at Robert's Grove** (Map p238; ☎ 523-3565, in USA 800-565-9757; www.robertsgrove.com; r BZ\$430-1490, check website for full rates listing; 📞 📺 📺 📺) From the Grecian fountain in the front driveway to the beautiful beachfront patio bar and restaurant, Robert's Grove is classically all the way. The 51

air-con rooms and suites, set in blocks around the ample grounds, are all spacious, comfortable, terracotta-floored and brightly decorated with colorful art and fabrics. They're complemented by a vast array of amenities, including three pools, a PADI dive center employing three full-time instructors (this is the only place in Placencia offering Nitrox technology, allowing for longer dives), rooftop Jacuzzis, tennis, windsurfers, kayaks, Hobie Cats and a spa full of exotic body treatments.

**Nautical Inn** (Map p238; ☎ 523-3595; www.nauticalinnbelize.com; Seine Bight; s BZ\$232, d BZ\$292; 📞 📺 📺 📺) A pretty little blue-and-white, chalet-style hotel, the Nautical Inn does a good job of capturing the Margaritaville vibe with its maritime theme, laid-back staff and oceanfront pool and bar. Rooms are clean and breezy (air-con is available, but not usually necessary), come with their own coffee makers, and have views and verandahs galore. Wednesday night is beach BBQ night, with Garifuna drumming, all-you-can-eat grill food and everyone's favorite, coconut bowling. The Nautical Inn is a quick hop from the village of Seine Bight.

**Blue Crab Beach Resort** (Map p238; ☎ 523-3544; www.bluecrabbeach.com; Seine Bight; cabanas BZ\$180, r with air-con BZ\$200; 📞 📺 📺) Offering quaint and quiet cabanas and rooms away from the main

house and just a few feet from the sea, the Blue Crab is a great mid-priced place to relax on the peninsula. But what will make your stay at the Blue Crab unforgettable is the gentle fragrance of chocolate wafting in from the small factory across the street; in addition to running this excellent and tranquil family-style resort, Kerry Goss and Linn Wilson are proud proprietors of Goss Chocolate, which produces Belize's finest organic chocolate. The family also owns the patch of mangrove across the road, an excellent place to spot coatimundis, endangered hawksbill turtles and other local wildlife.

**Our pick Singing Sands Inn** (Map p238; ☎ 520-8022, 523-8017; www.singsands.com; Maya Beach; cabanas incl continental breakfast BZ\$150-250; 📞 📺 📺) Another wonderfully quirky mid-priced choice a bit further north on the peninsula, rooms at the Singing Sands are eclectically decorated with antique furniture and beautiful Maya carvings. The resort's exterior is even more beautiful, with vine-covered trestles connecting the front office to the central restaurant, and surrounded by superbly landscaped gardens, palm trees and driftwood sculptures. Inn proprietors Marti and Eldon have done an amazing job creating a magical space that's at once astonishing and comfortable: with its swimming pool, restaurant, library, beach and dock (fishing gear and kayaks available on request), Singing Sands may be one of the most family-friendly mid-priced resorts in Belize. Climb the exterior spiral staircase to the crow's nest atop the main building to get one of the best views in Placencia!

**Maya Beach Hotel** (Map p238; ☎ 520-8040, in USA 800-503-5124; www.mayabeachhotel.com; Maya Beach; r BZ\$196-218; 📞) restaurant 7am-noon & 5:30-9pm Wed-Mon; 📞 📺 📺) It offers good, fresh, clean air-con rooms with custom-made wooden furniture. The major selling point of this hotel is its highly popular bistro, offering excellent (and creative) international dishes using top local ingredients. Try the spicy 'sassy shrimp pot,' with tequila-flambé–caramelized pineapple tossed in coconut curry! Snacks and meals are also available all day at the bar. Kayaks and bikes are free for guests.

**Maya Breeze Inn** (Map p238; ☎ 523-8012, in USA 888-458-8581; www.mayabreezeinn.com; Maya Beach; s/d/tr incl continental breakfast BZ\$198/242/268; 📞 📺 📺) This is a great place for the adventurous, as owners Buddy and Tressa Olson offer a full range of land and sea tours as far afield as Actun

Tunichil Muknal (p191) in western Belize and Tikal (p263) in Guatemala. Activities with specially selected guides are also on offer. Beachside cabins come in a variety of sizes, and most have either full kitchens or kitchenettes. Kayaks and bikes are free for guests.

**Calico Jack's** (Map p238; ☎ 520-8103; www.calicojacksvillage.com; cabanas BZ\$210-260, villas BZ\$320; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Opened in 2003, Calico Jack's is right by the point where the peninsula meets the mainland. Thatched-roof cabanas are built using an environmentally friendly 'Euroblock' design that reduces the need for air-con, and are beautifully decorated inside. Jack's lovely outdoor bar, with its thatched roof and carved totem-pole-like beams, is a great place to sit and watch the sun go down while smelling the bougainvillea.

**Eating**

Restaurants are easy to come by in Placencia village, both cheap and expensive. All lodgings on the peninsula have on-site restaurants with prices commensurate to the resort's caliber. There are also some cheap Chinese restaurants and fry-shacks in Seine Bight.

**De-Tatch Café** (Map p241; ☎ 503-3385; Seaspray Hotel; breakfast & lunch dishes BZ\$5-12, dinner mains BZ\$12-26; 📞) 7am-9:30pm Thu-Tue) Head to this popular, thatched-roof, open-air beachside place for satisfying Caribbean, Belizean and North American dishes. Favorites include the coconut shrimp curry, charbroiled steaks and chicken in mango-rum sauce.

**The Shak** (Map p241; ☎ 622-1686; dishes BZ\$6-10; 📞) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Indian curries, healthy Mexican dishes and excellent smoothies all served with pride by the lovely Magda. With the exception of the occasional fish dish, all dishes are 100% meat free. For vegetarians, this must be the place.

**Purple Space Monkey** (Map p241; ☎ 523-4094; breakfast BZ\$9-12, dinner mains BZ\$10-18; 📞) breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) Under new management since our last write-up, this place is garish, done up in wild shades of hot pink, lemony yellows and key lime greens. But what do you expect from a place called Purple Space Monkey? Free internet, good cuisine (Belizean and Western) and a decent book-swap library. Portions aren't huge, but they'll refill your coffee mug (if you ask nicely). Be warned: Wednesday night is karaoke night.

**Tommy's Restaurant** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3662; dishes BZ\$10-20; 📞) lunch & dinner; 📞) A decent Chinese

restaurant, Tommy's serves up localized Chinese dishes such as conch fried rice and lobster chow mein. Try the fried stuffed crab claw (BZ\$30), expensive but tasty.

**Serenade Restaurant** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3380; lunch & dinner mains BZ\$12-26; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Even if you aren't staying at the hotel next door, you'll still be serenaded by its wind chimes at this patio restaurant serving Belizean seafood, chicken and meat dishes. Feeling adventurous? Try the gibnut stew, a specialty of the house.

**Cozy Corner Restaurant** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3540; mains BZ\$18-30; 🍷 11am-11pm) A popular open-air beachside *palapa*, Cozy Corner scores with generous portions of seafood, steaks, chicken and burgers – and several types of enormous burritos for BZ\$10 or less.

**Trattoria Placencia** (Map p241; ☎ 609-3143; mains BZ\$20-28; 🍷 from 5pm Mon-Sat) The trattoria serves great handmade pasta, seafood and salads in a cozy wooden cabin with a terrace opening onto the beach. The fettuccine with smoked chicken and broccoli is hard to beat. Located next to Julia & Lawrence Guesthouse, it is in the busy part of town. Get there by 6pm to 6:30pm to avoid a wait.

**Il Tempio** (Map p241; ☎ 600-3504; meals BZ\$35-40; 🍷 dinner) Multicultural is the first word that comes to mind with this place, built to resemble a cross between a Mexican hacienda and a Maya pyramid, with a set of antique redwood Chinese doors thrown in for good measure. Inside, however, the food is strictly Italian, served by the Roman owner Stefano Parisse. Prices are steep for the area, but meals are expertly prepared. It doesn't get more eclectic than this.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Tipsy Tuna Sports Bar** (Map p241; 🍷 7pm-midnight Sun-Wed, to 2am Thu-Sat) Occasional live bands spice up the program at Placencia's shiniest bar, with pool tables, big-screen TV and a concrete apron spreading onto the sands. A fun-loving crowd gathers most nights. Happy hour is 7pm to 8pm.

**Barefoot Beach Bar** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3515; 🍷 10am-8pm Thu-Tue) Stroll in for a cooler or light eats. Happy hour is 5pm to 6pm.

**J-Byrds** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3412; 🍷 10am-midnight or later; 🎸) This dockside bar can get pretty lively with locals and visitors, especially at the Friday dance party (9pm to 2am).

**Pickled Parrot** (Map p241; ☎ 604-0278; www.pickledparrotbelize.com; 🍷 noon-midnight or later) This

thatched-roof Caribbean-style bar and restaurant a block from the ocean has been a popular spot for locals and tourists alike for 15 years. Happy hour – with half-priced rum drinks – runs from 5pm to 6pm, and Tuesday night is darts night, with bar-tab credit being awarded to high scorers.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

From Placencia airport (PLJ), between them, **Maya Island Air** (☎ 523-3475; www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 523-3410; www.tropicair.com) fly around 16 times daily to Belize City (one-way/return BZ\$190/328, 35 minutes), 12 times to Dangriga (BZ\$90/180, 15 minutes) and eight times to Punta Gorda (BZ\$90/180, 15 to 20 minutes), offering big time savings over the much-longer bus rides. The airstrip is just north of town.

### BOAT

The **Hokey Pokey Water Taxi** (Map p241; ☎ 601-0271, 523-2376) runs skiffs between the southern tip of Placencia and the town of Independence (also called Mango Creek; one-way BZ\$10, 12 minutes, every half-hour from 6:30am to 6pm); from Independence you can connect with any of the buses that traverse the Southern Hwy.

The 45-passenger **Gulf Cruza** (☎ 202-4506, 523-4045, 601-4453) sails from Placencia dock to Puerto Cortés, Honduras (BZ\$100, 4½ hours) at 9:30am on Friday. Tickets are sold at the Placencia Tourism Center (p238). The return trip leaves Puerto Cortés at 11am on Monday.

### BUS

James bus line runs two daily buses to Belize City (see opposite), passing through Dangriga and Belmopan. Check at the tourist office for transfers to Sittee River and Hopkins. If you're heading south, your best bet is to take the boat to Independence (see above) and catch a south-going James bus from there.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The 24-mile road into Placencia from the Southern Hwy is smooth but mostly unpaved. Auto rentals are available at the **Nautical Inn** (Map p238; ☎ 523-3595; Seine Bight; per day BZ\$150-180).

## Getting Around

Many accommodations north of the village offer free airport transfers and free use of bicycles for guests.

### BUS TIMETABLE: PLACENCIA TO/FROM BELIZE CITY

Placencia	Dangriga	Belmopan	Belize City	Service
6am	7:30am	9:30am	10:30am	Regular
2pm	3:30pm	5pm	6:30pm	Regular
Belize City	Belmopan	Dangriga	Placencia	Service
8am	9:30am	11am	1:30pm	Regular
2pm	3:30pm	5pm	6:30pm	Regular

Taxis meet many flights. The ride to or from the village costs BZ\$5 per person (minimum BZ\$10). A taxi from the village costs around BZ\$7 per person to Seine Bight (minimum BZ\$20) or BZ\$10 per person to Maya Beach (minimum BZ\$30).

**Dianni's Guest House** (Map p241; ☎ 523-3159) rents good bicycles for BZ\$5/16/26 per hour/half day/day.

## TOLEDO DISTRICT

Bordering Guatemala to the south and west and the Stann Creek and Cayo Districts to the north, the 1669-sq-mile Toledo District encompasses an area most Belizeans refer to lovingly as 'The Deep South.' A bucolic place, until recently not even connected by paved road (it still isn't, at least not fully), only 27,000 people live in this huge area. About half the district is under protection as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves or nature reserves.

Toledo's attractions – jungle trails, lagoons, wetlands, rivers, caves, waterfalls, countless birds – and its archaeological heritage are much less trumpeted than those of Belize's other districts, which makes them all the more magnetic to those looking to get off the beaten path. Visitor facilities are increasing, and rural accommodations now range from a smattering of midrange and top-end lodges to an excellent guesthouse program. The people of the district, two-thirds of them Maya, are dedicated primarily to agriculture, and their traditional lifestyles provide a fascinating complement to the natural attractions. Toledo's capital, and only major town, is Punta Gorda.

## PUNTA GORDA

pop 5100

Most casual travelers in years past didn't make it as far as Punta Gorda (or PG as it's

called throughout Belize); if they did, they only used this low-key seaside town as a jumping-off point into Guatemala. Recently though, the worm seems to be turning (at a typically slow Belizean pace, naturally), with the number of visitors coming to chill out in this unpretentious southern town increasing. Some base themselves here for longer term trips out to the southern cays or for lengthy explorations of Belize's deep Maya south.

Though it lacks the beaches of Placencia, there are plenty of docks from which to take a long swim out in the Gulf of Honduras' blue waters. A pretty town, a good part of PG's charm lies in its unassuming character. Though hardly a hub of tourism (a plus to many travelers), PG boasts a good variety of mid-priced guesthouses, hotels and B&Bs, as well as a number of backpacker-budget accommodations. Rainfall and humidity are at their highest down here in the south. From June through February, be ready for at least a short downpour almost daily and some sultry weather in between.

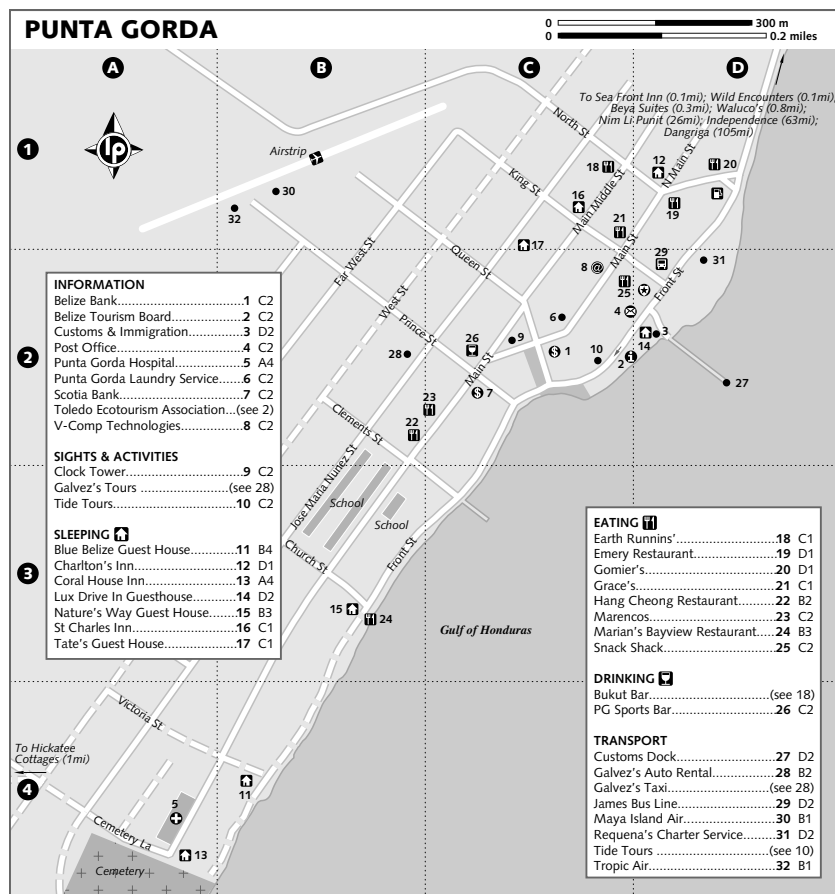
## History

PG was founded by Garifuna settlers from Honduras in 1832 and nearly half its population is still Garifuna today. The town once served as an R&R center for the British Army (always a mixed blessing, as anyone who's ever lived in a town favored by the military will attest). After this phase ended (for better or worse) in 1992, tourism in PG went into somewhat of a lull, though in recent years things have picked up significantly, thanks both to increasing interest in the region by casual travelers and a significant number of NGOs basing themselves in and around the town.

## Orientation & Information

PG spreads along the Gulf of Honduras, its downtown area stretching lazily for several blocks just in from the coast. The airport is on





the inland edge of town, and the town center is a triangular park with a distinctive blue-and-white clock tower. Wednesday, Saturday and, to a lesser extent, Monday and Friday are market mornings, when villagers from the mostly Maya settlements of southern Toledo come to town to buy, sell and barbecue around the central park and Front St. Two informative websites for the area are [www.southernbelize.com](http://www.southernbelize.com) and [www.howlermonkey.com](http://www.howlermonkey.com).

**Belize Bank** (☎ 722-2324; 30 Main St; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, to 4:30pm Fri) Exchanges cash and traveler's checks; ATM accepts most international cards, and is accessible after hours.

**Belize Tourism Board** (BTB; ☎ 722-2531; Front St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Staff are knowledgeable and keen to enthuse visitors. The Toledo

Ecotourism Association (TEA; see boxed text, p255) shares the premises.

**Emergency** (☎ 911, 922)

**Post office** (Front St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 1-4:30pm Fri)

**Punta Gorda Hospital** (☎ 722-2026; Main St)

**Punta Gorda Laundry Service** (☎ 702-2273; Main St; wash & dry per lb BZ\$1.75; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-5pm Mon-Sat)

**Scotia Bank** (☎ 722-0098; 1 Main St; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Thu, to 3:30pm Fri, 9am-11:30am Sat) PG's newest bank is a branch of this Canadian financial giant. Exchanges cash and traveler's checks; ATM accepts most international (Visa, MasterCard, Plus and Cirrus) cards, but is located inside the bank itself.

**V-Comp Technologies** (☎ 722-0093; 29 Main St; internet per hr BZ\$8; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Internet access.

**Customs & Immigration** (☎ 722-2022; Front St, next to dock; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) This is where you'll arrive if you're coming to Punta Gorda by boat from Guatemala or Honduras, or where you'll leave from if you're going to either place. There is a departure tax of BZ\$7.50 for leaving via ocean. This is also where you go to get your visa extension.

## Activities

Punta Gorda is a cool place to chill out for a few days, but outside of eating, lounging around the park and swimming off various docks, it isn't exactly activity central.

In the town's immediate environs, however, it's a different story: you can kayak on **Joe Taylor Creek**, which enters the sea at the eastern end of town, **hike** in the jungle around Hickatee Cottages (p248) or take **kayak trips** on other rivers, where you may see monkeys, crocodiles and even manatees or dolphins off the river mouths (a typical trip like this costs around BZ\$350 for up to four people).

Offshore, some of the islands of the **Port Honduras Marine Reserve**, northeast of Punta Gorda, present good snorkeling and diving, especially the **Snake Cayes** (named for their resident boa constrictors!), 16 miles out, with white-sand beaches. The beautiful **Sapodilla Cayes** on the barrier reef, some 38 miles east of Punta Gorda, are even better, with healthy coral reefs, abundant marine life and sandy beaches. A day trip for four costs around BZ\$500 to the Port Honduras Marine Reserve or BZ\$650 to Sapodilla Cayes.

**Fishing** for bonefish, tarpon, permit, snook, barracuda, kingfish, jacks and snapper is superb in the offshore waters and some coastal lagoons and inland rivers: fly- and spin-fishing and trolling can be practiced year-round. Any of the tour operators listed (below) can help you arrange fishing and sailing trips, as well as other activities.

## Tours

Ideally located for exploring Belize's Deep South, Punta Gorda has a number of certified tour guides who can arrange day trips to places such as Blue Creek (p254), Lubaantun (p252) and Nim Li Punif (p253), as well as rent out canoes and kayaks. The best of these are **Wild Encounters** (☎ 722-2300; [www.seafrontinn.com](http://www.seafrontinn.com); 14 Front St), **Tide Tours** (☎ 722-2129; [www.tidetours.org](http://www.tidetours.org); Front St) and **Galvez's Tours** (☎ 722-2402; 61 Jose Maria Nunez St). The BTB office can also direct you to recommended guides.

## Festivals & Events

Two days of fishing, beer drinking, punta dancing, kayaking and volleyball contests, plus music, drumming and plenty to eat and drink add up to a big weekend at the **Toledo Fish Fest**, held close to Garifuna Settlement Day (November 19). The **Toledo Cacao Festival**, organized by local organic Cacao businesses, happens at the end of May and beginning of June.

## Sleeping

Whether you're traveling on a tight budget or living off a trust fund, you'll have little problem finding suitable accommodations in Punta Gorda.

## BUDGET

**Nature's Way Guest House** (☎ 702-2119; [natureswayguesthouse@hotmail.com](mailto:natureswayguesthouse@hotmail.com); 82 Front St; s/d/tr/q BZ\$23/33/45/50; ☎) Clean, safe and affordable, with a terrific breakfast and ocean breezes to die for, Chet Schmidt's guesthouse has been a long-standing favorite of backpackers and students for years. Simple, screened-in, ocean-breeze-cooled wooden rooms are upstairs, and a large airy communal area with TV, music and internet is below. There's also one big communal sleeping area where a bunk with mosquito netting goes for BZ\$16. Chet also offers bicycle rental for BZ\$10 per day.

**Lux Drive In Guesthouse** (☎ 722-2080; [roosewoodstudio@hotmail.com](mailto:roosewoodstudio@hotmail.com); 47 Front St; r BZ\$30) They say in business it's all about location; if that's the case, this small seaside guesthouse has a definite advantage, located as it is practically on top of the pier where boats to Guatemala dock. Rooms are a bit on the grotty side, but the ocean views are stellar and the place isn't without its Bukowski-esque charm. Owner Oscar Burke is himself a local character, and runs the attached El Che café, serving breakfast in the morning, and beer, strong stout and music at night.

**Tate's Guest House** (☎ 722-0147; [tatesguesthouse@yahoo.com](mailto:tatesguesthouse@yahoo.com); 34 Jose Maria Nunez St; s/d BZ\$38/76, extra person BZ\$11; ☎) Mr Tate is Punta Gorda's postmaster and a man known to run a tight ship. The rooms in his quiet guesthouse are clean and safe, and all come with cable TV and hot showers. The costlier rooms have air-con and kitchenettes, the cheaper ones are fan-cooled. Long-term rental discounts are available.

**St Charles Inn** (☎ 722-2149; 23 King St; s/d/tr BZ\$40/50/65; ☎) Lilac colored walls, verandahs

with hammocks, and budget rooms are the main appeal at this aging guesthouse in the center of Punta Gorda (just down from Grace's Restaurant). The only complaint we've heard concerns noise: the inn's central location might not be overly conducive to a good night's rest. All rooms come with private bathrooms, coffee makers and cable TV.

**Charlton's Inn** (☎ 722-2197; [wagnerdm@btl.net](mailto:wagnerdm@btl.net); 9 Main St; s/d/tr BZ\$66/77/98; 🏠 📺) With 25 clean rooms with air-con and cable TV, not to mention a good location at the north end of town, Charlton's is a good choice for those looking for a place in the upper level of the budget category. Triples are more like suites, with two stand-alone bedrooms. Some rooms have their own bathtubs, a rarity in this area.

## MIDRANGE

**our pick Hickatee Cottages** (☎ 662-4475; [www.hickatee.com](http://www.hickatee.com); duplex cottages s/d BZ\$100/140, detached cottages s/d/tr BZ\$130/170/170; 🏠) In a world where an increasing number of businesses are flying a green flag to appeal to the ecoconscious crowd, Ian and Kate's Hickatee Cottages are a breath of fresh air. The British couple hasn't printed brochures with the words 'environmentally friendly' emblazoned across the top (they haven't printed brochures, period). Rather, they've gone out of their way to create a beautiful and unique space that leaves as light an ecological footprint as possible. Their three cottages are furnished with beautifully crafted items made of locally harvested wood, and designed for maximum air flow, making air-con superfluous. It's a good thing, too, as Hickatee is totally off the local electrical grid and powered primarily by the sun. The property itself, a mixture of intentional garden and wild jungle space, has a 1.5-mile trail network, home to a wide variety of bird and butterfly species. Ian and Kate encourage visitors to explore Toledo on their well-maintained bicycles, free for guests to use.

**Blue Belize Guest House** (☎ 722-2678; [www.bluebelize.com](http://www.bluebelize.com); 139 Front St; ste BZ\$110; 🏠) Taking up the 2nd story of the home of marine biologist Rachel Graham and her husband Dan Castellanos, Blue Belize leaves a light environmental footprint with its high ceilings (which, combined with the ocean-front location, nicely eliminate the need for air-con) and rainwater-fed plumbing system. Plans for switching to solar power are under way. BB's two breezy and beautifully decorated suites

are more like serviced apartments than hotel rooms, offering well-furnished living rooms and kitchenettes, in addition to a comfortable master bedroom. Dan and Rachel have a well-stocked book and DVD library for guests who'd rather lounge than explore. If you're looking for a home away from home in PG, then BB is the place.

**Sea Front Inn** (☎ 722-2300; [www.seafrontinn.com](http://www.seafrontinn.com); 4 Front St; s/d BZ\$120/150; 🏠 📺) A strong contender for the quirkiest-looking hotel in Belize, this four-story gabled construction in stone, wood and concrete was partly inspired by owner Larry Smith's travels in Europe. It's a comfortable and hospitable place, where each of the good-sized, air-con rooms (some boasting their own balconies) has a different theme (jaguar, blue morpho, manatee) – try for the emperor angelfish with its exotic sculptures! The top-floor restaurant serves excellent breakfasts of locally grown tropical fruits. The rear building – no less unusual looking – houses three apartments for medium and long-term visitors.

**Beya Suites** (☎ 722-2188; [www.beyasuites.com](http://www.beyasuites.com); 6 Hopeville; s/d/tr BZ\$120/150/180; 🏠) Awarded 'Best Small Hotel of the Year' in 2007 by the Belize Tourism Board, this hotel on the north side of PG is a good find for those looking to balance comfort and economy. The rooms are well appointed and comfortable, with wireless internet, air-con, hot-water bathrooms and private verandahs. It also has a restaurant, and is across the street from the beach.

**Coral House Inn** (☎ 722-2878; [www.coralhouseinn.net](http://www.coralhouseinn.net); 151 Main St; d incl continental breakfast BZ\$165-200; 🏠 📺) This excellent seaside inn at the southern end of town boasts a lovely garden and an oddly narrow, in-ground swimming pool (perfect for laps or one-on-one water volleyball matches). All rooms in this renovated house are clearly decorated by someone with an eye for style, giving the place a classic (but not at all pretentious) colonial feel. A spacious verandah overlooks the sea on one side and a quaintly picturesque old cemetery on the other. A full range of tours, quiet poolside bar and free bicycles are just some of the options available to guests.

## Eating

**Grace's Restaurant** (☎ 702-2414; 16 Main St; breakfast BZ\$5-10, mains BZ\$7-12; 🍽️ 📺) A longtime favorite of locals and travelers alike, Grace's offers a wide range of dishes, from Belizean

favorites such as stew chicken, fried fish, and rice and beans to more exotic fare, including Chinese food and even grilled lobster for those with deeper pockets. Breakfasts are especially good value.

**Marecos** (☎ 702-2572; 57 Main St; mains BZ\$7-13; 🍽️ 9:30am-2pm & 5-10pm Mon-Sat, 5-10pm Sun) For a place in southern Belize, Marecos serves up some suspiciously good American-style food, including fine double cheeseburgers, french fries and Coke floats with vanilla ice cream. If it weren't for the presence of some Belizean dishes on the menu, you might think you'd stepped into a scene from *American Graffiti*.

**Marian's Bayview Restaurant** (☎ 722-0129; 76 Front St; mains BZ\$8-14; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) A 3rd-floor outdoor eatery with an amazing view over the Gulf of Honduras, this place is worth visiting for the ambience alone. But add to the mix excellent East Indian cuisine dished up by Marian and her husband Hubert, and some of the wickedest homemade hot sauce south of the Rio Grande (you can bring a bottle home for BZ\$5; watch out, it's a slow burn!), and you've got one of the best little restaurants in Punta Gorda. Very popular with locals, visitors and Peace Corps recruits alike.

**our pick Earth Runnins'** (13 Main Middle St; dishes BZ\$9-20; 🍽️ 7am-2pm & 5-11pm Wed-Mon) Every now and then, you come across a restaurant run by someone for whom food preparation is a matter of 'artistry' first and 'business' second. Earth Runnins' is such a place. At this restaurant, a party of four can order four separate dishes, which, though nutritionally similar in composition (meat or fish, starch, vegetable), are completely different in presentation, texture and flavor; each one offers something worth raving about. The decor is also fabulous, with mahogany furniture and walls painted in rich earth tones, and there's a fine bar where you can have a few ice-cold Belikins while waiting for your meal.

Other recommendations:

**Gomier's** (☎ 722-2572; Main St; ice cream BZ\$2-6, meals BZ\$6-16; 🍽️ 11am-2pm & 5:30-10pm) Serves excellent vegetarian cuisine; the tofu-based ice cream is absolutely to die for.

**Hang Cheong Restaurant** (Main St; dishes BZ\$6-18; 🍽️ 10:30am-2:30pm & 5pm-midnight; 📺) One of the few Chinese restaurants in town, Hang Cheong seems to enjoy the best reputation (if lunchtime crowd sizes are anything to go by).

**The Snack Shack** (Main St; mains BZ\$10-20;

🍽️ 11:30am-2pm & 6-10pm Mon-Fri, 6-10pm Sat) A popular outdoor venue serving burgers, burritos, sandwiches and pastries.

## Drinking & Entertainment

PG has a fair number of bars, from small waterfront pubs located on Front St to larger places over on Main. The town is also home to some top performers, such as *paranda* (serenading music) maestro Paul Nabor, *bruk-down* (19th-century Creole music) queen Leela Vernon, and local punta rock favorites, the Coolie Rebels. Don't miss a chance to hear any of these on their home turf at one of the following bars in town.

**Bukut Bar** (13 Main Middle St; 🍽️ 5-11pm Wed-Mon) It's hard to say exactly when the transformation takes place – certainly well after sundown – but when PG is dark, its hippest new eatery Earth Runnins' becomes its coolest new bar, where homemade cocktails are served and local music (sometimes live) heard.

**PG Sports Bar** (☎ 722-2329; cnr Main & Prince St; 🍽️ 8pm-midnight Tue-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat) A good-sized, fairly standard bar, incongruously enhanced by a staggering collection of US sports photos and posters. There's usually a DJ or live music on Friday and Saturday.

**Waluco's** (☎ 702-0073; Front St) If you're wondering where everybody is on Saturday or Sunday afternoon, they're probably out at this big breezy *palapa* a mile northeast of town, swimming off the pier, eating barbecue and knocking back a few Belikins. It's normally open Tuesday to Saturday evenings, too, and Garifuna drummers often play here.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Tropic Air** (☎ 722-2008; [www.tropicair.com](http://www.tropicair.com)) has flights five times daily to Placencia (one-way/return BZ\$90/180, 20 minutes), Dangriga (BZ\$120/240, 40 minutes) and Belize City (BZ\$218/427, one hour). **Maya Island Air** (☎ 722-2856; [www.mayaairways.com](http://www.mayaairways.com)) does the same trips three times daily. Ticket offices are at the airstrip (airport code PND).

### BOAT

**Requena's Charter Service** (☎ 722-2070; 12 Front St) operates the *Mariestela*, departing Punta Gorda at 9am daily for Puerto Barrios, Guatemala (BZ\$30, one hour), returning at 2pm. Tickets are sold at the office and the

**BUS TIMETABLE: PUNTA GORDA TO BELIZE CITY**

Punta Gorda	Independence	Dangriga	Belmopan	Belize City	Service
-	-	5am	6:30am	8am	Regular
-	-	6am	7:30am	9am	Regular
-	-	7am	8:30am	10am	Regular
-	6am (Placencia)	7:30am	9am	10:30am	Regular
4am	6am	7:30am	9:30am	10am	Regular
5am	7am	8:30am	10:30am	11:30am	Regular
6am	7:30am	8:30am	10am	11am	Express
6am	8am	9:30am	11:30am	12:30pm	Regular
8am	10am	11:30am	1:30pm	2:30pm	Regular
10am	noon	1:30pm	3:30pm	4:30pm	Regular
noon	2pm	3:30pm	5:30pm	6:30pm	Regular
2pm	3:45pm	5pm	6:30pm	7:30pm	Regular
3pm	4pm	6pm	7:30pm	8:30pm	Regular

customs dock down the street. The Guatemalan **Pichilingo** (☎ 722-2870; one-way BZ\$36) sails from Puerto Barrios to Punta Gorda at 10am and returns from Punta Gorda at 2pm. From Puerto Barrios boats leave for Livingston (BZ\$3 to BZ\$7, 30 to 90 minutes) until about 5pm. A Guatemalan-operated direct boat to Livingston (BZ\$30, one hour) leaves the customs dock at about 10am Tuesday and Friday. The local Belize Tourism Board can help you buy tickets.

**BUS**

As with elsewhere in Belize, the slack left by the bankruptcy of Novelo's bus company has been taken up by a number of smaller companies (many of which have bought up old Novelo's buses). The largest of these servicing the south is **James Bus Line** (☎ 722-2625, 702-2049; King St), which runs nine times a day (see table, above) from Punta Gorda to Belize City (BZ\$22, seven hours), pulling into Independence (BZ\$9, two hours), Dangriga (BZ\$14, 3½ hours) and Belmopan (BZ\$20, 5½ hours) along the way. The only official express service leaves at 6am daily, and costs BZ\$2 more. While the express still stops at all three terminals prior to getting to Belize City, it tends not to pick up passengers at random spots along the road (except when it does), hence the 'express' status. All buses leave from the main bus station on King St and cruise around PG a bit before heading north. A few other companies also do the PG-BC run.

For bus services to the villages of Toledo, see p257.

**CAR & MOTORCYCLE**

**Galvez's Auto Rental** (☎ 722-2402; 61 Jose Maria Nunez St) rents Chevy Geo Trackers for around BZ\$160 a day.

**Getting Around**

**Tide Tours** (☎ 722-2129; Prince St; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 9am-noon Thu & Sat) rents bikes for BZ\$3/12/20 per hour/half day/day. **Galvez's Taxi** (☎ 722-2402; 61 Jose Maria Nunez St) is dependable.

**THE DEEP SOUTH**

Beautiful, remote and largely untrodden by travelers, Belize's Deep South is a hotbed of culture and history, nature and environmentalism. The region is also home to some of the countries swankest ecologies.

Visitors to Belize's Deep South have a unique opportunity to simultaneously experience both ancient and contemporary Maya culture. Over 60% of the population of Toledo District is Maya and these people, with more than 30 villages, have done a great deal to keep their culture alive and intact. Those Maya of southern Belize who survived European diseases were mostly driven into Guatemala by the British in the 18th and 19th centuries. But two groups crossed back from Guatemala to southern Belize in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fleeing taxes, forced labor and land grabs by German coffee growers. The Mopan Maya settled in the uplands of southern Belize, while the Kekchi Maya, from the Alta Verapaz area of Guatemala, settled in the lowlands. The Mopan and Kekchi speak distinct Mayan languages, as well as English and sometimes Spanish.

While Maya men generally adopt Western styles of dress, most women still wear plain, full-length dresses with bright trimmings, or calf-length skirts and embroidered blouses. Rituals and folklore continue to play an important role in Maya life, with masked dances such as the Cortés Dance and Deer Dance performed in some villages at festivals, including All Saints' and All Souls' Days (November 1 and 2) and Easter week. If your village visit coincides with one of these, it will be all the more memorable.

**Villages & Ruins****SAN PEDRO COLUMBIA**

Around 20 miles northwest of Punta Gorda is the village of San Pedro Columbia, the

largest Kekchi Maya community outside of Guatemala. Columbia (as locals call it) was established by Kekchi families who left Pueblo Viejo to look for new farmland around 1905. The village has seen boom and bust cycles with mahogany and cedar felling, chicle collection and, in the 1970s and 1980s, marijuana cultivation. There are currently around 1500 people in Columbia. The village has one restaurant, Maggie's, by the crossroads, which serves uninspired fare and cold beer, and there are several shops where handicrafts and food can be bought.

Two miles up the river is the source of the Columbia branch of the Rio Grande, where water bubbles out from beneath the rocks. Local guides can take you to see the source; it's



a 45-minute walk from the center of town (try floating down on a river-tube!). Behind the village, up into the hills, is the **Columbia Forest Reserve**, which has thousands of acres of forest, sinkholes, caves and ruins hidden in the valleys. There are also local guides who can take you there. One of the best is Alphonso Chee, who can be contacted either through Maggie's or the Toledo Ecotourism Association (see boxed text, p255).

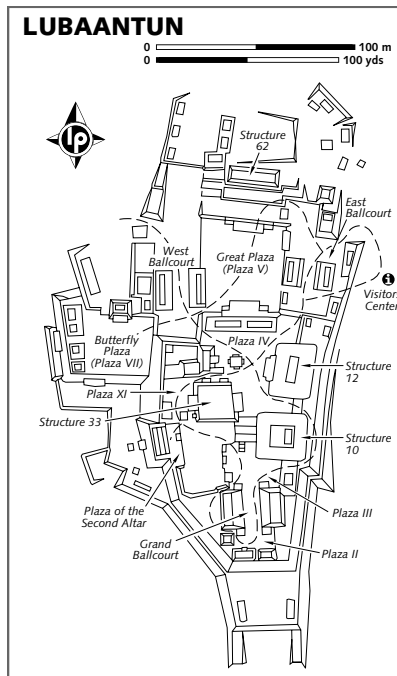
Maya Mountain Research Farm (opposite) is just a few miles upriver from the village. Columbia is also close to Lubaantun (below) and 20 minutes by bus from Nim Li Punit (opposite), making the village an ideal place from which to explore two of the area's most complex and amazing ruins.

### LUBAANTUN

The Maya ruins at **Lubaantun** (admission BZ\$10; ☞ 8am-5pm), 1.3 miles northwest of San Pedro Columbia, are built on a natural hilltop and display a construction method unusual in the ancient Maya world (though typical of southern Belize) of neatly cut small limestone blocks. Belize's then-chief medical officer, Thomas Gann, an amateur archaeologist, bestowed the name Lubaantun (Place of Fallen Stones) in 1924. History does not record whether Gann's naming of the site was inspired by his own practice of dynamiting temple tops to remove earth and rocks. More-professional work has taken place since 1970 and much of the site is now cleared and restored.

Archaeologists postulate that Lubaantun, which flourished between AD 730 and 860, may have been an administrative center regulating trade, while nearby Nim Li Punit (opposite) was the local religious and ceremonial center. The Maya site comprises a collection of five **plazas**, three **ball courts** and surrounding structures. Lubaantun is known for the numerous mold-made **ceramic figurines** found here, many of which represent ancient ball players.

If making your own way to Lubaantun, head along the Southern Hwy for 15 miles from Punta Gorda. Continue straight along an unpaved road where the Southern Hwy turns sharp east at Dump junction, then turn right at a 'Lubaantun' sign after 2 miles. Go right again after 2.5 miles in San Pedro Columbia and then left at another 'Lubaantun' sign after 0.6 miles.



### SAN MIGUEL

This Kekchi village of 400 people is on the road close to the Lubaantun ruins and the Southern Hwy. You can walk to Lubaantun or make a little expedition to **Tiger Cave**, 1½ hours' walk away, returning by canoe along the Rio Grande.

### LAGUNA

About 13 miles northwest of Punta Gorda, Laguna is just 2 miles off the Southern Hwy and quick and easy to get to. It's home to about 300 Kekchi Maya villagers. The lagoon the village is named for, about a two-hour walk away, is at the heart of the 8.6-sq-mile **Agua Caliente Wildlife Sanctuary**, an extensive wetland area. The area provides great bird-watching, with flocks of ibis and woodstork, many raptors including ospreys, plenty of kingfishers and herons and the odd jabiru stork. There's a visitor center on the trail from the village. The hike can be wet and muddy, and sometimes impassable at the height of the rains.

### SAN ANTONIO

The largest Mopan Maya community in Belize (population about 2500), San Antonio

was founded in the mid-19th century by farmers from San Luis Rey, in the Petén, Guatemala. A wooden idol (of San Luis) was taken from the church in San Luis Rey by settlers who returned to Guatemala to retrieve their saint. The idol remains in the beautiful **stone church** in San Antonio, which has wonderful stained-glass windows with Italian and Irish names on it belonging to the parishioners of the church in St Louis, (the glass was donated to the church in Belize by parishioners in Missouri, where the glass originated). The **Feast of San Luis**, a harvest festival where the famous Deer Dance is performed, is celebrated in town from about August 15 to 25. There is a TEA (see boxed text, p255) guesthouse in the village, and **Bol's Hilltop Hotel** (r with shared bathroom BZ\$15) has very basic rooms. (Meals can be obtained next door at Clara Bol's house.) San Antonio has a large concentration of cacao farmers, growing cacao for export and use in Belizean-made chocolate products.

### UXBENKA

Smaller in size and far less developed than Lubaantun and Nim Li Punit, the Maya ruins of Uxbenka are located close to Santa Cruz village on the road from San Antonio. The site is mostly undeveloped and the visible part is merely the center of a larger, yet-to-be excavated city. Archeologists believe

Uxbenka dates back to the Classic Period, with stelae erected in the 4th century. There is evidence that it had a close relationship with Tikal (p263) to the north. The open site has a large plaza with some excavated tombs and sweeping views to the sea. On a clear day it is possible to see the mountains of Honduras and Guatemala. At the time of writing, there were no entry fees for Uxbenka; a local guide can take you, or you can make your own way there.

### NIM LI PUNIT

The Maya ruins of **Nim Li Punit** (admission BZ\$10; ☞ 9am-5pm) stand atop a natural hill 0.5 miles north of the Southern Hwy, 26 miles from Punta Gorda. Buses along the highway will drop you off or pick you up at the turnoff. Only discovered in 1976 by oil prospectors, Nim Li Punit was inhabited from some time in the middle Classic Period (AD 400-700) until some time between AD 800 and 1000. It was probably a town of 5000 to 7000 people at its peak, a political and religious community of some importance in the region.

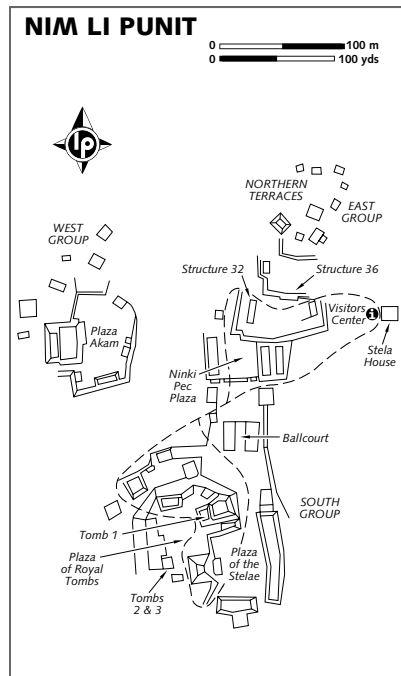
The site is notable for the 26 stelae found in its southern **Plaza of the Stelae**. Four of the finest are housed in the stela house beside the visitors center. **Stela 14**, at 33ft, is the second-longest stela found anywhere in the Maya world (after Stela E from Quirigua, Guatemala). It shows the ruler of Nim Li Punit

### INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITY: MAYA MOUNTAIN RESEARCH FARM

Those interested in learning about permaculture, Maya farming techniques and sustainable living should consider an internship at **Maya Mountain Research Farm** (MMRF; Map p251; www.mmrfbz.org). Located in a beautiful jungle valley 2 miles upriver from San Pedro Columbia, the 70-acre organic farm and registered NGO is run by Christopher Nesbitt and his wife Dawn. With the philosophy of promoting fully sustainable food production, the farm offers internships for those interested in learning about organic farming, biodiversity and alternative energy. Accommodations are simple and beautiful: students can choose from a series of rustic cabanas and thatched-roof *palapas*, all of which come equipped with beds, blankets and mosquito netting. Interns pay BZ\$300 for the week, or BZ\$1100 for the month, which includes everything.

All aspects of life at MMRF are geared toward environmental sustainability. Interns take part in every stage of meal preparation, from harvesting fruits, vegetables, nuts and herbs to cooking over a wood-burning stove inside the farm's outdoor kitchen (hand-built with stones from the river that marks the border between MMRF and the surrounding farms). Even the toilet – an outhouse with fantastic views of the valley – is set up to recycle nutrients back into the soil.

Rustic, beautiful in the extreme and completely off the grid (phone service, no; satellite internet, yes!), the farm is located in one of the least touristy sections of Belize. Applicants note: this is a tobacco- and drug-free space (with the exception of coffee, brewed in copious quantities). MMRF also offers short-term courses lasting between one and three weeks in both permaculture design and solar electricity management.



in an offering or incense-scattering ritual, wearing an enormous headdress, which is responsible for the name Nim Li Punit ('Big Hat' in Kekchi Maya).

The most interesting part of the Nim Li Punit site is the south end, comprising the Plaza of the Stelae and the **Plaza of Royal Tombs**. The Plaza of the Stelae is thought to have acted as a calendrical observatory: seen from its western mound, three of the small stones in front of the long eastern mound align with sunrise on the equinoxes and solstices. The Plaza of Royal Tombs, with three open, excavated tombs, was a residential area for the ruling family. Archaeologists uncovered four members of this family in Tomb 1, along with several jadeite items and 37 ceramic vessels.

#### SANTA ELENA

Santa Elena is another Mopan village, 6 miles west of San Antonio, with about 300 people. Just east is the little **Rio Blanco National Park**, containing the spectacular **Rio Blanco Falls** and one of the best swimming holes in the country.

#### PUEBLO VIEJO

Three miles beyond Santa Elena, the name Pueblo Viejo is Spanish for 'Old Town,' which is appropriate as this was the first settled Mopan village in Belize. Today it is home to about 550 people. It's still an isolated place, without electricity. There are beautiful **waterfalls** close by and you can take **jungle hikes** or **horseback riding**.

#### SAN JOSE

Also known as Hawaii (a Mopan word, pronounced ha-wee-ah), this Mopan village of 700, known for practicing organic farming, is located in the foothills of the Maya Mountains. The rainforest surrounding it is among the most pristine in Toledo. You can make jungle hikes to **Gibnut Cave** and a 200ft **sinkhole**. The village honors its patron saint with three days of eating and dancing to marimba and harp music around March 19.

#### BLUE CREEK

This village of some 250 people, part Kekchi and part Mopan, does indeed have a pretty, blue-tinted river running through the middle. Howler monkeys inhabit the surrounding hilly jungles, otters live along the creek and green iguanas are plentiful. Blue Creek is a tourist stop for the **Blue Creek Cave** (Hokeb Ha Cave; admission BZ\$2), a walk of about 0.75 miles along a marked jungle path from the bridge in the middle of the village. The cave has a 'wet side,' where you swim and wade up to an underground **waterfall** (about one hour in the cave), and a 'dry side' where you can try a more difficult venture involving some climbing and emerge at a different entrance. Guides are obligatory inside the cave. Another good hike here is the hill known as **Jungle Height** (about 1½ hours to the top), which affords great views.

Near Blue Creek is the **Tumul'kin School of Learning**, a Maya boarding school that hosts students from throughout Toledo and other parts of Belize, providing a learning venue that inculcates pride in being Maya and gives students an education that values traditional knowledge.

#### BARRANCO

Barranco is an anomaly indeed, a Garifuna community surrounded by Maya villages. It is both the oldest settlement in Toledo and, despite its distance from major Garifuna

population centers such as Dangriga and Hopkins, a major spiritual homeland of the Garifuna. Though the area was once heavily farmed, nowadays the village supports itself primarily through fishing, as its population has dwindled to about 150 (men of working age head for the cities and better economic opportunities). Still, many are working to revitalize Barranco, both because of its spiritual importance to the Garifuna and its proximity to **Temash-Sarstoon National Park**, an amazing and remote 64-sq-mile protected reserve of rainforest, wetlands, estuaries and rivers lined by towering mangroves and stretching all the way to Guatemala.

The park harbors a huge variety of wildlife, from jaguars, tapirs and ocelots on land to ospreys in the air, large snook and tarpon in the rivers and manatees in the estuaries. Walking trails, developed by the locally run **Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management** (SATIIM; www.satiim.org.bz), extend through parts of the park. Two Barranco natives deeply involved in both local tourism and park conservation are **Egbert Valencia** (egbert.valencio@yahoo.com) and **Alvin Loredo** (alvinloredo@yahoo.com); both lead land and river tours into the nearby park, and will be glad to help ar-

range tours for groups and individuals with a few days' notice.

Other activities available at Barranco include **drumming** and **dory building** (a dory is a traditional Belizean canoe).

Like the surrounding Maya communities, Barranco is connected with the TEA program (see boxed text, below); the Barranco guesthouse has a thatched roof (made from locally harvested comfra palm), electricity and outdoor toilets for BZ\$25 per person.

#### Sleeping & Eating

Tourism is still in its infancy in the area, and outside of the TEA program (see boxed text, below) and the fancy ecotourists, there aren't many hotels in the Deep South. This doesn't mean you'll wind up sleeping in the jungle (although that can be arranged), it just means that you'll have to look a bit harder to find a bed. Some of the larger villages – San Antonio and Columbia, for example – have small hotels not affiliated with the TEA program. In general, if you ask around at the village candy store they'll either find a place for you or direct you to the TEA guesthouse. Nearly every village has at least one small restaurant.

#### TRAVEL WITH TEA

A unique opportunity to be welcomed into local villages and experience village life firsthand is provided by the **Toledo Ecotourism Association** (TEA; Map p246; ☎ 722-2531, 722-2096; teabelize@yahoo.com; PO Box 157, Punta Gorda, Toledo District, Belize). TEA is a community organization that manages guesthouse programs in several picturesque Maya villages, offering travelers the chance to really get to know the families and faces that make up the area. Through TEA, travelers can arrange to stay in the homes of Maya families, taking meals with them and participating in a variety of local activities. The villages are gorgeous – simple, neat, clean, surrounded by lovely scenery and usually with a river or stream at their heart – and the villagers friendly without being overly so. Around the villages are waterfalls, caves and ancient Maya ruins that can be best experienced with a local guide. All of the villages listed in this section are affiliated with the TEA program.

Rates vary by village, but are generally around BZ\$25 per person per day, well within the budget/backpacker range. In addition to housing, meals prepared in local families' homes are available for around BZ\$8 each. Main meals usually consist of tortillas and *caldo* – a stew made from root vegetables and meat, usually chicken – although in Barranco (opposite) you might luck onto some traditional Garifuna food. If you're vegetarian, be sure to specify this clearly and in advance.

Most of the funds collected through the programs go directly to the villages themselves. Activity options range from guided hikes, caving, canoeing and bird-watching to classes in textiles, basket weaving or cooking, or village tours and after-dinner storytelling. Most of these cost around BZ\$8 per person per hour. Performances of traditional dance and music (using the harp in Kekchi villages, marimba among the Mopan) can also be arranged. TEA is the brainchild of Chet Schmidt, who runs Nature's Way Guest House in Punta Gorda (p247).

**LIFE ON A PERMACULTURE FARM: CHRISTOPHER NESBITT**

In 1985, New York City bicycle messenger Christopher Nesbitt swapped the urban jungle for the real thing, relocating to a mountainous patch of land in southern Belize's Toledo District. Since then, Christopher has spent two decades perfecting organic agricultural techniques and practicing sustainable living. In recent years, the farm (Maya Mountain Research Farm, or MMRF; see p253) has hosted scores of interns from North America, Central America and Europe, as well as local Belizean farmers who've come to Christopher to learn about biodiversity, organic farming, renewable energy and environmental sustainability.

**Your website describes MMRF as a farm using 'permaculture principles' – could you define the term?** Permaculture is an agricultural and social philosophy that values observation of natural processes, and uses biotic and community-based symbiotic relationships to create sustainable and productive farms and communities.

**Farming mountainous terrain seems challenging. What made you choose to start your farm in the mountains of Toledo as opposed to more level ground?** This was a working citrus and cattle farm in 1988, and since we had to rehabilitate it for permaculture I was able to get it very cheap. But I found the varied topography very appealing. I especially like the high hill behind most of the cultivated areas, from which you can see both Honduras and Guatemala on a clear day.

**What kind of crops grow at MMRF?** We have at least 600 types of plants we cultivate, eat, use, foster, encourage or monitor. We have gardens, and we have terraces where we grow vegetables such as corn, beans and squash. Most of what we do is agri-forestry, growing trees that produce food such as avocados, mangos, breadnut, breadfruit and bananas, as well as valuable timber, including cedar, mahogany and teak. We also grow coffee and cacao, pineapple and cassava, and

There is also a number of small, cheap hotels and bar-restaurants (often called 'cool spots') along the Southern Hwy. On the unpaved roads between villages you may find a few cool spots and/or small grocery stores (usually the same place).

Belize's southern lodges are the epitome of jungle swank; while most are cost-prohibitive to your average backpacker, some offer more reasonable multiday package tours, especially in the low season. Be sure to check the websites before booking.

**Tranquility Lodge** ([www.tranquility-lodge.com](http://www.tranquility-lodge.com); d/tr incl breakfast BZ\$100/140; (P) (☎) Just north of Jacintoville, 8 miles from PG, this little mid-priced lodge lives up to its name as a tranquil retreat, perfect for relaxing for a couple of days or more. Set amid pretty gardens, the clean, tidy air-conditioned rooms are equipped with hot water and colorful fabrics, and there's a spacious upstairs dining-hangout area where you can enjoy good three-course dinners for BZ\$30. Birds abound on the 20-acre grounds and there's a lovely swimming hole on the Jacinto River. Free rides are available to and from PG most days.

**Lodge at Big Falls** (☎ 614-2888; [www.thelodgeatbigfalls.com](http://www.thelodgeatbigfalls.com); s/d/tr BZ\$250/310/360; breakfast/packed lunch/dinner BZ\$10/20/30; (P) (☎) At the village of Big Falls on a loop of the jungle-clad Rio Grande,

18 miles from Punta Gorda (and out of telephone range), sits the eponymous Big Falls lodge, where tiled-floor, palm-thatched cabins are spread about beautifully tended gardens. Popular with birdwatchers (and rightly so, as over 200 species have been spotted here) and butterfly enthusiasts, the lodge is also a fine place from which to enjoy a host of activities, from snorkeling in the southern cays to caving, fly-fishing and kayaking. It's a good base for excursions into the wilds of southern Belize, too. Meticulously maintained by owners Rob and Marta Hiron (who have recently added an in-ground swimming pool), the Lodge at Big Falls is an island of Anglo-American aristocracy in the jungles of southern Belize. Transfers to or from PG are BZ\$100 for up to four people.

**Machaca Hill Lodge** (☎ 722-0050; [www.machacahill.com](http://www.machacahill.com); s/d BZ\$381/500) Formerly called 'El Pescador,' Machaca Hill Lodge is a marvelous rainforest and fishing lodge with a superb hilltop setting overlooking miles of protected jungle stretching down to the Gulf of Honduras. Surrounded by the Laughing Falcon Reserve, an 11,000-acre privately owned protected area, the lodge offers comfortable accommodations and access to unparalleled fishing. Experienced fishing guides take anglers out on eight-hour fishing trips and the lodge has

medicinal crops, with an ethnobotanical collection of plants used by our Kekchi Maya neighbors. In the last few years we have established hundreds of vines of vanilla as well.

**At any given time you've got a few interns living and working at the farm. What sort of person is a good candidate for internship at MMRF?** We like people who are easygoing, hard working and not afraid to get dirty. We like interns who use MMRF to augment their college education, or people taking a gap year before, in the middle of, or after their university studies. We've had interns as young as 16 and as old as 61.

**Could you describe a typical day for an MMRF intern?** We plant trees and other plants from July through November, our rainy season. During pineapple season we harvest and process pineapple. When we are conducting workshops or training, interns help in facilitating the training. Regardless of the season, much of the day is centered around the kitchen, where the food is processed, prepared or cooked, and eaten. What we do – and what our interns do – pretty much depends on what needs doing at the time.

**MMRF runs entirely off solar- and wind-generated electricity, and you've been active in helping others in Belize make the leap from fossil fuels to renewable resources. How would you rate Belize's tourism sector as a whole, as far as its commitment to switching to more sustainable practices goes?** Having helped install solar systems for five protected areas in Belize, I can definitely chart the growing interest in renewable energy, especially in the more remote parts of the country. I'm seeing more interest in renewable energy. More green tourism destinations are working to make their practices greener. Some of the hotels now use photovoltaics, wind or microhydro, compost their vegetable wastes and practice energy conservation. That is something I like to see.

a well-stocked fly shop, and fly-fishing gear for rent. On land, there's excellent birding, trails to walk and trips to southern Belize attractions. The 12 beautiful rooms boast solid wood furniture, ceramic-lined bathrooms, two queen-size beds and verandahs overlooking the jungle and sea. Packages include transfers to and from Belize City International Airport. The lodge is 2.4 miles off the Southern Hwy, from a turnoff 3 miles out of PG.

**Cotton Tree Lodge** (☎ 670-0557, in USA 866-489-4534; [www.cottontreelodge.com](http://www.cottontreelodge.com); luxury cabins incl meals from BZ\$400; (P) (☎) (☎) Luxury, environmentalism and intense beauty meet a few miles north of the village of San Felipe and 10 miles from PG. It's here you'll find Cotton Tree Lodge, 100 acres of the swankest jungle savannah you're likely to find anywhere. The property is outstandingly beautiful, with amazing views of the nearby Maya mountain range on the western horizon. All of Cotton Tree's thatched-roof cabins are luxuriously furnished in a superb jungle/hardwood motif, and all (including the remote 'jungle cabin,' nearly 0.25 miles away) are connected to the main restaurant-bar area via a network of elevated wooden boardwalks that spans the entire property. The resort's power (including heating for the Jacuzzi) is partially provided by 15 solar panels, and plans are in the works to commit even further

to alternative energy. Most of the food served in the lodge's excellent restaurant is bought locally, with some of the vegetables coming from the on-site organic garden. Activities include hiking, horseback riding, kayaking, canoeing and bird-watching.

**Belize Lodge & Excursions** (☎ 223-6324, in USA 888-292-2462; [www.belize lodge.com](http://www.belize lodge.com); packages from BZ\$570; (P) (☎) This fantastically expensive lodge is part of a chain of luxury vacation spots in Belize operated by Belize Lodge & Excursions. All of the beautiful and meticulously designed cabanas on the property (part of the privately owned, 51-sq-mile Boden Creek Ecological Reserve) have airy verandahs overlooking a pair of lakes, and there's a restaurant and beautiful rosewood bar on site. Packages (various ones are available) combine stays in the main lodge and Jungle Camp, tours and all meals, including five-course dinners.

**Getting Around**

**Chun's Bus Service** (☎ 016-4257; Punta Gorda airstrip) is the main transport provider connecting Punta Gorda to the surrounding villages. Its current route goes from Punta Gorda to the Guatemalan border at Jalacte, stopping in the villages of Eldridge, Dump, Mafredi, San Antonio, Santa Cruz, Santa Elena and

### HITCHHIKING IN BELIZE

Guidebook writers tend to err on the side of caution. Every travel writer dreads the day they get an email, perhaps months or years after the publication of a book they've worked on, telling the ghastly story of a reader who's been hurt (or worse) doing something that the writer had ostensibly suggested was 'safe.' For that reason, this guide – and most others – contains a boilerplate warning against hitchhiking. That said, it would be remiss of this book to not mention the fact that hitchhiking is a common mode of transportation, especially down south, where buses between villages and towns are few and far between.

During the course of researching this edition, I was lucky to have both pickup truck and driver (the amazing Christopher Nesbitt, who, behind the wheel of the green Maya Mountain Research Farm Toyota 4WD, proved nigh unstoppable by even the worst roads), and giving lifts to hitchhikers was a regular part of our trip. During the journey – which ranged from the furthest southern villages and back roads of Toledo to the Mexican border with Corozal – the pan of the truck served as ad hoc public transit for more people than I can recall, with us stopping to drop them off when they rapped on the back window. We gave rides to dozens of teenagers, university-aged students, Maya farmers, tourists, Mennonites, young mothers with babes in arms, and one rather gruff police constable (him we let ride up front; the baby-toting mothers, too).

'In rural Belize, if you're driving a pickup truck with room in the pan and you don't offer people lifts, it's considered very antisocial,' Christopher told me early on, and judging by the number of pickup trucks we saw with fully peopled pans, this seemed to be the case. There was only one time when we did not stop to offer a lift (to a group of three teenagers with an air of trouble about them).

Does this mean that hitchhiking in Belize is 100% safe? No. Hitchhiking carries an even greater element of risk than most activities that entail trusting complete strangers. But the fact remains that hitchhiking is a common way for Belizeans themselves to get around. If you do hitchhike in Belize, the best ways to minimize the risks are to travel in pairs if possible, ride in the backs of pickup trucks where possible, and never hitch at night. See also p297.

Pueblo Viejo. One bus a day passes by the Punta Gorda town square at 11:30am and gets to Jalacte two hours later. The return bus leaves Jalacte at 3am, getting to PG at 5:30am. Another bus leaves PG daily at noon, but only

goes as far as San Antonio. Periodically, other services emerge to and from the villages, but these tend to be unreliable. For this reason, many Maya villagers tend to get around by hitchhiking.

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