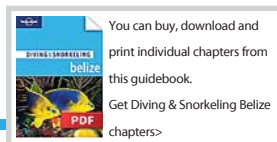


# Introduction



Colorful accommodation in Placencia

Belize is an eco-Mecca for those wanting to see nature, Mayan history and sun-drenched beaches. This very relaxed and informal country is situated between Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south, and is but a two-hour flight from the continental United States. Tourism is a large part of the economy and the people are friendly and accommodating (and speak English). Diving tourism makes up a big chunk of the tourism industry, and divers old and new can experience everything from shallow snorkels in protected marine parks to open ocean dives in search of whale sharks.

Phrases like 'No shirt, no shoes, no problem' and 'Belize is Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret' give you an idea of the verve and attractions here. Marine biologists (in fact, biologists of all kinds) flock here to perform various studies on reef and forest creatures, aid in reserve and conservation management and monitor the successes and failures of management programs. Belize boasts the second largest barrier reef in the world, similar to Ningaloo along Australia's west coast off Exmouth. Fed by an intricate mangrove system and broad inner reef flats where the country's rivers empty, it comes with all the

diversity one would expect of such a rich area. Dolphins, dugongs, manta rays and whale sharks take their place alongside tiny blennies, secretive sea horses and elusive toadfish in the estuarine waterways and out to the bottomless atoll drop-offs.

An independent country since the '60s, Belize has a unique flair courtesy of its rich Mayan history, settlement by an independent group of islanders and a period of British governance. It is a true melting pot of many island and Central American cultures in a country with a tiny population of 250,000 people who have adopted a progressive attitude toward protecting their resources. From the wild southern mountains to the tips of the sparsely populated atolls, Belize has adopted a high-end service industry that suits all traveling budgets and meets all expectations.

*Diving & Snorkeling Belize* introduces some of Belize's best and most popular dive sites. There are literally hundreds to choose from and some people return again and again to try to do them all. This guide starts in the north with the popular barrier reef dives and then

moves southwest to two of the special offshore atolls. It then covers the huge barrier reef, some middle cayes and sites off the less populated areas of the country's east coast. It also covers Glover's Atoll, the country's third atoll with clear waters and great diving.

Southern sites off Placencia, an area that is steadily gaining in popularity with beach seekers and divers alike are also covered, along with a sampling of the seasonal diving that attracts people looking for bull and whale sharks during the snapper and other fish spawns.

With the second largest barrier reef in the world, Belize certainly has more sites than those listed in this book. But if you manage to dive all of these, you'll get a good look at an amazing collection of marine residents. The country's unique wildlife – including big cats, wild toucans and howling monkeys – also make it a special place to spend some time above water. You'll discover why many divers return here year after year, enjoying familiar sites, favorite beach hangouts and discovering some new ones. 'No shirt, no shoes, no problem'... and wonderful diving is a reality here.





## Facts about Belize

### OVERVIEW

Belize is one of the world's most biologically diverse nations, with 93% of its land under forest covers and the largest coral reef in the western hemisphere off its coast. It is also a honeycomb of a nation with the largest cave system in Central America. Here you can find more than 500 species of birds, thousands of Mayan archaeological sites and the only jaguar reserve in the world. With an area of 8,867 square miles (22,960 sqkm) and only 250,000 people, the population density is the lowest in the Central American region and one of the lowest in the world. Belize also boasts a rich mix of ethnicities including Creole, Maya, Mestizo, East Indian, Chinese, Garifuna and Mennonite, and is the only country in Central America with English as its official language.

The people of Belize have monitored their country's rate of economic development, agricultural expansion and tourism growth, in particular, for years. A conservation consciousness has emerged that challenges the government, private sector, investors and the public at large to balance development with the conservation of natural resources. Consequently, to date Belize has 42% of its land and a good percentage of its reefs under some form of legal protected status.

Snuggled between Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the west, and Honduras to the south, Belize is only a two-hour flight from continental United States. Renowned for pristine waters, exotic marine and wildlife, its lush, unspoiled landscapes and superb diving, Belize claims to be 'Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret.' Judging by the country's booming condo development and constant flow of visiting divers and ecotourists, the secret is out.



*A small Belize toucan*

### HISTORY

One of the big attractions for tourists visiting Belize is the legacy of its early inhabitants. The Maya and Carib Indians lived here as part of the great Mayan empire, which encompassed Guatemala, southern Mexico, part of Honduras and El Salvador. The history of the Maya can be traced back 4000 years. What is considered the Classic period of more advanced Mayan civilization began around 300 AD and reached its height between the 6th and 8th centuries. By the 14th century it was in serious decline. When the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, many of the Mayan cities were deserted.

The Spanish considered Belize suitable only for cutting logwood to be used for dye and did little else. Due to the safety afforded by the reef, it became a pirate haven and attracted English and Scottish pirates during the 17th century. When piracy became passé, many of the pirates began working in the logging trade. Great Britain declared Belize to be the colony of British Honduras. The Spanish relented.



After WWII, Belize's economy weakened, and independence agitators got their wish partly fulfilled when in 1962 self-government was granted. In the 1980s, Belize remained stable and pro-US, thanks predominantly to large influxes of US aid. In 1992, a new Guatemalan government recognized Belize's territorial integrity.

Since 1998, service industries – especially tourism – have dominated the economy and have grown. Farming, logging and fishing are now taking a back seat.

## DIVING HISTORY

Belize's diving industry is fairly new. Explorers from the US and Great Britain dived here as spearfishermen from the '50s through to the '70s, when the ocean was considered a bottomless source of

sport and food. The unique offshore diversity of the atolls and the barrier reef really started to catch people's eye in the 1980s and sport diving came to the fore, with many local divers becoming instructors. (John Searle was among them and still teaches many Belize-born divers from his Sea Sports business in Belize City.) The late Hugh Parkey found many dive sites and was an anchor in the industry; his wife, Theresa, carries on his legacy. Intrepid journalists like Rick Freshee traveled to Belize frequently and kept Belize in the public eye through his superb photographs and articles in *Skin Diver* and other publications.

During the '90s, the government focused on ecotourism and diving in an attempt to stimulate the economy. Growth in the past 10 years has seen a number of new hotels, dive shops and live aboard operations pop up.

## Land of the Maya

The Maya are more than legend in Belize. The imposing monuments of this ancient mystical civilization are found throughout the country; some ruins are still under excavation today. Belize is believed to have been the heart of the Mayan civilization and was settled as early as 1500 BC. Although the civilization began its decline in 900 AD, some Mayan centers were occupied until contact with the Spanish in the 1500s. During the classic period (250 AD to 900 AD), there were a million Mayans in Belize, and their descendants remain an integral part of the Belizean population today.

Belize has joined with El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico to establish Mundo Maya (World of the Maya), a program dedicated to the preservation of Maya culture. A visit to Belize's Mayan ruins is a fascinating excursion to another time. Most sites are readily accessible, with guided tours available.

Top Belizean Maya Sites include:

- 1 **Altun Ha (Water of the Rock)** – A major ceremonial and coastal trade center and the most extensively excavated ruin in Belize. The ruin consists of two main plazas with some 13 temple and residential structures.
- 2 **Caracol (The Snail)** – This is the largest of Belize's Mayan ruins, reached by a spectacular scenic drive through the Chiquibul Rainforest. The largest pyramid in Caracol, 'Caana' (Sky Place), rises 140ft high, and is the tallest man-made structure in Belize.
- 3 **Cerro** – Located on a peninsula across from Corozal Town in the Bay of Chetumal. New forms of art and architecture crucial to the civilization were established here.
- 4 **Lamanai (Submerged Crocodile)** – This is among the largest of the Mayan ceremonial centers with one of the longest occupation spans, 1500 BC to the 19th century. The scenery around Lamanai is of particular beauty.

Children walk home from school in Placencia.



Anyone, from the uninitiated snorkeler to the expert scuba enthusiast, can enjoy the many wonders in these waters. What was once frontier diving is now blessed with certified guides and instructors as well as a selection of quality rental gear and seaworthy ships and boats. The industry now strives to meet the customer expectations that come with being a world-class diving destination. Sport divers and underwater photographers have taken the place of adventurous spearfishermen. This vast barrier reef and its ocean continue to present new sites to a new group of explorers, making Belize one of the world's most convenient and rewarding dive experiences.

## GEOGRAPHY

Belize is bordered by Guatemala, Mexico, the Gulf of Honduras and the Caribbean Sea. Of most interest to divers

is the 240-mile-long (386km) eastern coastline, a UNESCO World Heritage site. This diverse and rich marine environment includes numerous cayes, islands and lagoons fringing the Caribbean coastline. The much-ballyhooed, 175-mile-long (281km) barrier reef adds even more to the marine environment of the region. By far one of the world's most popular novelty dive sites is the **Blue Hole**, 58 miles directly east of Belize City; more than 1,000ft across and some 400ft deep, it is the opening to a former Ice Age cave.

The only atolls in the Caribbean are found in Belize. Formed through tectonic plate movement, these gems are at the center of the Belize diving industry.

The rest of Belize is divided into three other geographic regions: the relatively low southern Maya Mountains that dominate all but the narrow coastal plain; the northern lowlands and its many rivers and streams; and the flat and swampy coastal plain. Half of the country is covered by tropical rain forest and dissected by a network of rivers, mostly small in length. The largest is the navigable Belize River that stretches from the Guatemala border all the way to the Caribbean Sea.

The country's highest point, apart from the Maya ruins, is Victoria Peak at 3,805 ft (1,160m).

## CLIMATE

Belize has consistently warm and humid tropical weather with pronounced wet and dry seasons. The rainy season typically is considered to be August through December but can clear up from November. The occasional late season Norther, blowing down from the Gulf, can dampen things for a few days and make some dive sites too rough to visit, but it generally blows through quickly.

Rainfall is heaviest in the coastal areas of the far south and may start as early as June.

A Garifuna drummer on the beach in Hopkins



Average high temperatures in the coastal regions approach the mid 70s°F most of the year and a bit higher inland. Higher temperatures in the offshore islands are common, with cooler conditions the norm in the mountains of the south. The dry season from late January to May is somewhat hotter.

Water temperatures can range from a bathtub warm, rash guard 86°F to a 'three to five mil' 70°F degrees for a couple of months in the winter. On the whole, the water here is warm and only the acclimated need wear anything heavier than a dive skin or 2mm suit.

Belize is occasionally the victim of the Atlantic Ocean hurricane season, but this is not an annual occurrence.

## POPULATION, PEOPLE & CULTURE

Belize's people are as diverse as its ecology. Aside from language, Belize is such a melting pot of ethnicities that it's hard

to single out specific traits or characteristics that make a 'typical Belizean'. There really is no such thing, which makes it an even more fascinating country.

The country is small, as populations go, with less than 300,000 people spread out across the broad plains and into the jungle-covered mountains. Groups represented in this number include Mestizo (Spanish-Maya), Creole (African-European), Maya, Garifuna (also known as Garinagu or Black-Carib) and European.

Various festivals and holidays celebrate the customs of the individual groups in various districts of Belize. These colorful, and often very musical, experiences are worth attending if they coincide with your dive travel. There are also national holidays that celebrate the people of Belize as a whole. One such event, the February Carnival fiesta, which is held a week before Lent, offers exciting dance competitions that are hot, hot, hot!

## LANGUAGES

Hearing a Belizean talk is a soothing experience. English is spoken almost everywhere but there are many major languages to hear. And a bit of those languages slip into the English for a unique Belize slang. Although English is the most common language, Creole and Spanish are widely spoken. Creole is a bit like Pacific pidgin and is entertaining to see written. Hot is 'haat', for instance. Spanish is taught in primary and secondary schools to develop bilingualism. It is spoken as a mother tongue by the majority of the people in the Orange Walk and Corozal Districts, north of Belize and the Cayo District in the west. In the southern Districts like Stann Creek and Toledo, the first language is Garifuna or Maya. The Mennonites speak their own languages.



## GATEWAY CITY

### Belize City

Most people fly in to Belize and their first experience is in and around Belize City. The Belize River, with its crocodiles, runs right beside the road from the airport and snakes through the countryside to the outskirts of this town of 70,000. Belize City sits on a delta point with mangroves and small cayes just offshore.

The town is a bustling area of shops, schools and government buildings. Many are 200-year-old examples of classic wooden colonial architecture. There are others made of bricks brought in the holds of early timber ships.

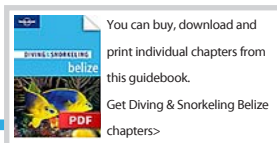
Cruise ships pull into the inner harbor and their ferries frequent the piers. Small stands of food and souvenirs pop up nearby when ships hit town. Pier-side restaurants and bars are also found along the long, wooden pier walk that is normally restricted to ship passengers but you can slip in to have a bite or buy a T-shirt.

Belize district offers a host of attractions including several sanctuaries, the world class little Belize Zoo, a new museum and the incredible Maya site at Altun Ha. If not in town, most are an hour's drive or less from the city. Belize isn't that big and the city can be a good base for a number of land excursions before or after you head out to the reefs. It's a great place to spend a day or two learning about Belize's history and its multi-cultural heritage while mingling with laid-back Belizeans. Local folks are generally friendly to tourists and will greet you with a smile.

As a precaution, use a reputable tour service or guide and be careful about traveling around, especially at night, as there are some rough neighborhoods where a tourist or even a Belizean isn't overly safe.

Most of the city is fine and fun, however. Use common sense.

# Author



## TIM ROCK

Tim Rock attended the journalism program at the University of Nebraska–Omaha and has been a professional broadcast and print photojournalist for over 30 years. The majority of those years has been spent in the Western and Indo Pacific region reporting on environmental and conservation issues.

His television series, *Aquaquest Micronesia*, was an Ace Award finalist. He has also produced six documentaries on the history and undersea fauna of the region. Tim won the prestigious Excellence in the Use of Photography award from the Society of Publishers in Asia, amongst many other awards for photography and writing. He publishes a magazine and works as a correspondent for numerous Pacific Rim magazines. Tim is the author of many Diving & Snorkeling series guides, including *Bonaire, Cayman Islands, Thailand, Chuuk Lagoon-Pohnpei-Kosrae, Bali & Lombok, Guam & Yap, Palau, South Africa-Mozambique* and *Papua New Guinea*, and is a major contributor to *Philippines*.

## FROM THE AUTHOR

A warm thank you to my wife Larie for her support and help in my travels and writing this guide. I would also like to thank Tori Kyler Steinmeier for sharing

her excellent insights into the habitats and behavior of the marine creatures of Belize's reefs. Thanks also go to Ryan Vernon, Peter Hughes, Mike Tougas, Bruno Hinst, Ferdie Arganda, Elsie Turia, John Garraway, Jerry Carmaco, Carlos Soler, Elia Daniels, Cheryl Arcot at Diveres.com, Larry Speaker, Emil, Cano, Carlos Santino, David Cal, Michael Cain, Jamani Balderamos, Evaristo 'Bundy' Lopez, Shakira Oxley, Karin van Zyl, Sherema Forman, Cordel Lozano, Dale Casimiro, Eric Miranda, Giovanni Gonzalez, Kamal-ley Norberto, Neal Ariola, Sam Noralez, Terrill Castillo, Domingo Pop, Quentin Espinoza, Anne Louise Tuke, Jerry Beatty and first edition author Mark Webster, who all shared some great insights about Belize. I would especially like to thank the people of Belize for their hospitality and dedication to the preservation of the marine world bordering their beautiful country.

## FROM THE PUBLISHER

Belize is one of diving's special places. The country and its people have dedicated themselves to setting up reserves that will aid in the conservation of its marine resources. We are happy to present this newly updated guide to the snorkel and dive sites of the eastern coast of Belize and hope you enjoy the bountiful Belizean natural resources found on the amazing barrier reef and the unique Caribbean atolls.

## PHOTO NOTES

Tim uses Nikon digital cameras, Aquatica underwater housings and Ikelite strobes. Tim's photographic work is represented by Lonely Planet Images ([www.lonelyplanetimages.com](http://www.lonelyplanetimages.com)), Double Blue Images ([www.doubleblue.com](http://www.doubleblue.com)) and other agents worldwide.

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