

Guide to Belize

By Alexandra Cheney

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Though the running joke for locals is that the country was once a prime vacation spot for pirates (think more Captain Jack Sparrow than Captain Phillips), Belize's greatest treasure is its intense natural beauty. The decor in even the most high-end of Belizean accommodations is simple and natural, deferring to the verdant surroundings. The extraordinary flora and fauna as well as the friendly English-speaking citizens will certainly overpower the intermittent wanting for the occasional extravagant amenity. Lush tropical forests hug the country's southern and western regions, unfolding inland toward the mist-ensconced, largely unpopulated Maya Mountains. Peppered throughout the country of 380,000 people are mazes of ancient Mayan ruins, which visitors are welcome to explore. Climb giant, steep steps to the tops of tall stone temples boasting 360-degree jungle views. Offshore, luminous turquoise waters, sand bars and sapphire shelves encircle the Belize Barrier Reef, the largest barrier reef in the northern hemisphere. Perhaps the nation's most cherished asset, the reef contains three of the four coral atolls in the Caribbean. Sunset cruises, fishing expeditions, diving excursions and swimming with marine animals are a few of the must-do activities here. Adventurous vacationers willing to get a little dirty and wet will be handsomely rewarded. But if that's not your thing, the resorts offer plenty of culinary wonders and magnificent spa treatments too. Unlike Mexico, its arid neighbor to the north, Belize has a tropical climate with dry and rainy seasons. Definitely pack the bug spray and the sunscreen.

Best places to have...

Freshly butchered meat

Trey's Barn & Grill

Whether it's a chop, burger, steak or wing, Trey's Barn & Grill has your meat of choice. Butchered down the road at proprietor Tre Roberson's uncle's cattle ranch, the Belizean meat hails from free-range animals and is grilled by Roberson himself. Ariadna, his wife and co-owner, serves lunch and is the mastermind of the Barn & Grill's catering, vegan options and mason jar salads, which are sold around the country. Beloved by both tourists and locals — and only open on weekends — it's a superb stop for both carnivores and herbivores.

+501 822 2276

Seafood with a twist

Bistro at Maya Beach Hotel

Australian-American couple John and Ellen Lee worked their way through nearly two dozen countries before landing in Belize. Together they've created an open-air restaurant with an experimental Belizean-French menu featuring tasty concoctions such as lobster bread pudding with a vanilla-brandy bisque, leek flan with grilled conch and bacon-syrup drizzle, as well as the popular cacao-spice-rubbed pork chop. The Bistro boasts a robust wine list including a crisp Gewürztraminer and a pair of very distinct Rieslings—one French, one German.

+501 533 8040, MAYABEACHHOTEL.COM

Fine dining in a casual space

Crave House of Flavour

Reservations don't really exist at Crave, chef Alejandro Mendez's playground of tastes. Set in a space with laid-back decor, the restaurant features an enlightened and delightful menu that changes every single day. Some standout dishes, like the in-season carrots and ginger soup and a very traditional Italian-sausage risotto, may make you question if the chef is of long-lost Italian descent. The baby-back pork ribs in honey-cola BBQ sauce are downright whimsical. And Mendez is more than happy—excited, in fact—to cater to any food allergies or dietary restrictions.

+501 602 0737

Breakfast with the birds

Running W Steakhouse and Restaurant

Keel-billed toucans, purple martins, yellow warblers, blue-gray tanagers and social flycatchers are often featured guests at Running W, in the San Ignacio Resort Hotel. A massive ivy-covered tree at least five stories tall grows near the outdoor dining area and is a favored perch for birds and iguanas alike, depending on the time of day. Each morning, for its Breakfast with the Birds, the restaurant lists its neotropical sightings so diners can keep an eye out while sipping their almond-milk lattes. Order the crispy fry jacks or fresh-baked johnnycakes, two Belizean breakfast specialties.

+501 824 2034, SANIGNACIOBELIZE.COM

Must-do activities



Great Blue Hole Helicopter Tour

Skip the tourists, cluster of boats and Dramamine and view the 984ft-wide Great Blue Hole and Lighthouse Reef from above. Allow your eyes to swim in the jewel tones of the Caribbean while your body takes flight. Soaring parallel to the shallow, sandy atolls, behold the 185-mile Belize Barrier Reef, second only in size to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, reaching to the horizon. Astrum is a full-service helicopter company that provides adventures, transfers, charters and wedding proposals. While in flight, hear about Belize's flourishing coral reefs and underwater topography.

+501 222 5100, ASTRUMHELICOPTERS.COM

Black Hole Drop

Release your inner Mayan warrior at Actun Loch Tunich, Mayan for 'mother of all caves.' Take a brisk, sweat-inducing guided hike to the base of the Maya Mountains, then approach the mouth of the 300ft forested sinkhole with caution. Step into your harness, strap on your helmet, and prepare to rappel down a 10ft rock wall before it edges away and you dangle 200ft above the rainforest canopy, lowering yourself into the jaw-dropping basin below. Reserve some energy: after a light lunch at the bottom, you'll need to hike your way out and back through the forest.

+501 610 3451, CAVESBRANCH.COM/BELIZE-BLACK-HOLE-DROP

Scuba diving, snorkeling and free diving

Entrust your submerged sightings to Warren Garbutt, dive master and local who has been fishing and exploring the atolls, reefs and underwater walls of Belize for over two decades. View regional delicacies such as Caribbean spiny lobster, invasive lionfish and conch in the wild, either via a two-tank dive or several-spot snorkel. Enjoy lunch on a tiny private cay, complete with hammock and shady palm tree, before heading out to free dive for fresh conch, which can only be kept if captured sans scuba gear. Both half- and full-day charters are available.

Contact Warren Garbutt, dive master, SUNNYSIDEBELIZE@YAHOO.COM, +501 610

Where to rest your head...

On the beach

Naïa Resort and Spa Oceanfront Beach House



Opened in January 2017, Naïa aims to showcase the breadth and depth of Belizean culture. The staff is 100 percent Belizean, and the majority of the decor and art hails from in-country designers. The generous 3,000-sq-ft, three-bedroom house features black poisonwood floors and a private plunge pool that gazes out onto a palm-lined white-sand beach and the Caribbean Sea. The master bedroom perches above the rest of the house, while the other two bedrooms have individual entrances and private indoor/outdoor showers. The eco-driven resort is available for full buyouts for extra-special celebrations.

Three-bedroom house from \$750 per night. Full resort buyout from \$12,615 per night. Contact Anne-Marie McNeil, guest experience manager, AMCNEIL@NAIARESORTANDSPA.COM, +501 523 4600, NAIARESORTANDSPA.COM

In the canopy

Blancaneaux Lodge Enchanted Cottage



Enveloped in the jungle, Francis Ford Coppola's Blancaneaux Lodge was a family hideaway for more than a decade before opening to the public in 1993. The lodge boasts a private

airstrip that ensures easy access by private jet and a specially curated wine selection from Coppola's California vineyards. An organic garden and naturally flowing streams meander through the 70-acre property, providing a lush landscape to explore on leisurely walks. Bed down in the Enchanted Cottage, which sits high on a forested bluff. Retire to the bathhouse for a soak in the Japanese tub or a steam with views of tumbling waterfalls. The stone-walled cottage includes a kitchen with a wine cooler, heated slate floors, an infinity pool and a full-time butler on hand to prepare breakfast, cocktails or light an open-hearth fire. From the on-site horse stables, embark on an equestrian sightseeing tour through the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve. A telescope for stargazing and a literal conch 'shellphone' to call reception are sure to make every guest grin.

From \$699 per night. Contact Genevieve Xavier, reservations manager, GENNY.XAVIER@THEFAMILYCOPPOLAHIDEAWAYS.COM, +501 880 4000, THEFAMILYCOPPOLAHIDEAWAYS.COM

In the garden

Victoria House Resort & Spa

Casa Azul



Overlook either private landscaped gardens or the azure Belize Barrier Reef in this 3,500-sq-ft villa. Relax on the wide veranda or sink into the king-size bamboo four-poster in the third-floor Tower Suite, one of the villa's five bedrooms. Grab a bicycle and explore Ambergris Caye—the lone main road makes it impossible to get lost. Looking for a water break? Borrow a kayak and go for a turtle- and fish-filled paddle. Don't worry if you trek a little sand back to the villa: one of the seven bathrooms will be suitable for a rinse.

From \$2,095 per night. Contact Donald Sater, reservations manager, DONALD@VICTORIA-HOUSE.COM, +1 713 344 2340, VICTORIA-HOUSE.COM

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