

Big Five Presents
Belize

Trek into the rainforest to discover Mayan ruins, canoe through ancient cave systems,
explore barrier reefs, swim with the largest fish in the world...
Belize is ripe with opportunities for adventure.

It's time to rediscover Belize. Long known as a premier destination among scuba divers around the world, this small Central American nation has grown into its own. It is bordered by Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the south and west, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. Culturally, the country's identity is both Caribbean and Central American. It is graced with culture, tropical jungles, spectacular scuba diving and friendly people. Journey into the Mayan city of Xunantunich on horseback; or, kayak in the largest cave system in Central America; or, encounter a minority culture, the Garifuna, who brought their distinct culture to Belize and Central America in the 19th century. It is the only nation in the region with a British colonial heritage, but as a part of the Western Caribbean Zone, it also shares a common heritage with the Caribbean communities in other Central American countries. The least inhabited Central American country, Belize combines the rarest wildlife of Central America, exceptional Caribbean beaches, and the most flamboyant marine life in the western hemisphere. Big Five's nonprofit arm, Spirit of Big Five Foundation, supports Southern Environmental Association, a community conservation organization aimed at protecting one of the largest barrier reef systems in the world. Belize has also given rise to some world class resorts. Although Kriol and Spanish are widely spoken, Belize is the only country in Central America where English is the official language. The combination of natural and man-made assets, including 127 offshore islands, excellent fishing, rivers for rafting, jungle, traditional villages and wildlife reserves, all add up to an irresistible destination.



Suggested Itinerary

Day 1: Belize City, Belize / San Ignacio, Cayo District

The largest district in Belize is home to the national capital, Belmopan, as well as excellent pre-Columbian Maya ruins.

Day 2: San Ignacio / Xunantunich

This beautiful Mayan site served as a civic ceremonial center as far back as 1,000 to 1,200 years ago.

Day 3: San Ignacio / Duende Or Actun Tunichil Muknal

These ancient caves, once used for Mayan rituals, are well off the beaten path.

Day 4: San Ignacio / Placencia

Placencia has lots of adventure options with 16 miles of sand beaches, coral-studded islands, jungle rivers, caves and rainforest.

Day 5: Placencia

Kayaking, snorkeling, diving, saltwater fly fishing, whale shark watching - there is never a shortage of activities.

Days 6/7: Placencia / Great Blue Hole / Ambergris Caye

Jacques-Yves Cousteau declared the Great Blue Hole to be one of the top ten scuba diving sites in the world.

Day 8: San Pedro / Belize City / Depart

Custom Options

Ambergris Caye (3 days)

The Belize Barrier Reef is just a quarter mile from the beach of Ambergris Caye making diving easily accessible.

Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve (2 days)

This reserve with its rolling pine forest, waterfalls, caves, rivers and Mayan ruins means opportunities for hiking, horseback riding, bird watching and rafting.

Orange Walk (3 days)

Remote lodge and Mayan ruins are set in the heart of this immaculate rainforest.

Punta Gorda (2 days)

It is a seaport and fishing town on the Caribbean Sea, and boasts some of the best fly-fishing in Belize.

Tikal, Guatemala (2 days)

Central America's most impressive and magnificent Mayan ruins were inhabited between 800 BC and 900.

About Belize

Ambergris Caye: This is the largest island in Belize, and San Pedro is the only town on the island. Ambergris Caye has been the hub of Belizean area maritime trade for centuries. Historically, fishing, coconuts and chicle have been the main stays of the economy. The history of the island goes back to the Maya, when Ambergris Caye was a trading post. Excavated sites in the area indicate that the historic Maya population may have numbered 10,000. Today tourism has replaced fishing as the major source of income for islanders although the mahogany skiffs are still in service for charter fishing and diving. The reef is only a quarter mile from the beach of Ambergris Caye making diving easily accessible. Hol Chan Marine Reserve is a ten-minute boat ride from town. The reef's richness reinforces Belize's reputation as one of the premier dive destinations.

Belize Barrier Reef & Great Blue Hole: The longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere and one of the longest in the world runs just off the Belize coast. It is part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System, which stretches 900 kilometers / 560 miles from the northeast tip of the Yucatán Peninsula to Honduras. The Great Blue Hole is a large submarine sinkhole off the coast of Belize. It is near the center of a small atoll and is circular in shape, over 300 meters / 984 feet across and 124 meters / 407 feet deep. In 1971, Jacques-Yves Cousteau brought his famous ship, the Calypso, here to chart its depths. The Great Blue Hole is a part of the larger barrier reserve, and both are a UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Cayo District & San Ignacio: Cayo is the largest district in Belize, and home to the national capital of Belmopan. San Ignacio is the district capital. The city sits on the banks of the Macal and Mopan River. A sizable Mennonite farming community resides near San Ignacio. Cayo has remarkable Mayan sites that include Caracol and Xunantunich, which occupies a ridge above the Mopan River just west of the Guatemala border. In Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve is Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM), part of an extensive cave system that requires visitors to hike through jungle, swim into a cave, and crawl through tunnels to reach a preserved Mayan site. Nearby ruins include Cahal Pech, El Pilar and Tikal. Activities include canoeing the cave systems, exploring ancient ruins on horseback and mountain biking.

Duende Cave: The Mayan ruins found in Duende Cave are far off the beaten path. These ruins are accessed via rough dirt roads, passing through two established Maya villages; followed by a hike along jungle trails. Entering this cave was, for ancient Mayans, a journey into their underworld, known as Xibalba. Visitors, with their expert guide, climb cave walls and squeeze through slim spaces to view extremely old Mayan pottery and skeletal remains as well as impressive stalagmite curtains.

Hopkins: On the east coast of Belize, this casual beachfront town is home to a distinctive cultural tradition - the Garifuna, who came from the Caribbean to Central America in the 1800s. The economy of this small but vibrant community is based on farming and fishing, and the growing tourist industry. At the Belufuna Women's Group Bakery, local Garifuna women share their history and way of life with visitors. Diving the barrier reef and fishing the clear turquoise waters are top activities here. During the week of the full moon in April, May and June, at Gladden Spit on barrier reef, divers can swim with thousands of whale sharks, the largest fish in the world today, during their annual migration. In the evening, Garifuna musicians offer up casual concerts on the beach.



Orange Walk: Orange Walk is a district in the northwest with its capital, Orange Walk Town. The ruins of Lamanai, “submerged crocodile,” feature the Temple of the Masks, with its ruler’s throne and an ancient ball court. It had one of the longest occupation spans, with evidence of Mayan life that dates from about 1500 BC through Postclassic (AD 950-1544) and Spanish colonial times (AD 1544-1700). Other Mayan sites include Cuello, Noh Mul and Chan Chich.

Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve: Rolling pine forest spreads over smooth granite hillsides. A huge fire in 1949 caused catastrophic damage, and the combination of this and logging means nearly all the trees are the same age. The reserve has waterfalls, Thousand Feet Valley Falls and King Vulture Falls as well as some unusual habitats such as Baldy Beacon, with soil that cannot support anything but grass so tough that introduced sheep died of indigestion. Rio Frio Caves is the largest accessible limestone cavern in the country. On the border of the reserve, the Mayan site of Caracol dates back to 1200 BC, and artifacts from Barton Creek Cave suggest that it was used as a ritual site.

Placencia: This small town located in the Stann Creek District is the most southern town on the largest peninsula in the Gulf of Mexico. In the 17th century, the area was settled by English Puritans from Nova but the settlement died out during the Central American wars of independence in the 1820s. In 2001, Hurricane Iris hit southern Belize with 145 mph winds causing major damage to nearly 95% of buildings. Now, the town boasts miles of beaches, restaurants, galleries, shops and spa.

Punta Gorda: Punta Gorda is in southern Belize. Although the town bears a Spanish name, its inhabitants are mostly English-speaking, primarily of Garifuna, East Indian,

and Kriol descent. It was settled by a number of Garifuna emigrants from Honduras in 1823. Activities include sea and river kayaking, fly and sport fishing, snorkeling, diving, swimming, caving and birding.

Tikal, Guatemala: Tikal is one of the largest archaeological sites and urban centers of the pre-Columbian Mayan civilization. Part of Guatemala’s Tikal National Park, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its ruins encompass over 3,000 structures within 54 square kilometers / 21 square miles. The epic architecture at the site dates back as far as the fourth century BC. Tikal reached its apogee during the Classic Period, 200 to 900. The site was deserted a millennium ago. Tikal, rather like Peru’s Inca Machu Picchu, possesses a special combination of magic, mystery and majesty.

Best Time To Go

Belize is subtropical with a brisk prevailing wind from the Caribbean Sea. It is dry and hot January-April; and the rainy season is June-September. It is hot and humid year round, but cooler in the mountains. Average daytime temperatures year round run in the mid to upper 26°C / 80°F range.

*\$300 - \$1000 per person per day
Land only, double occupancy*

*Consider enhancing your adventure
by including the following destinations:
Guatemala & Honduras (p119-122)*



