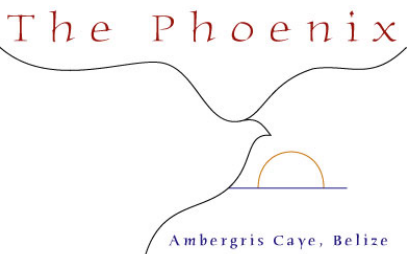


The Phoenix's Belize Primer

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Introduction

Belize is a peaceful, diverse, English-speaking democracy. The country is located along the northeastern coast of Central America and boasts more than 300 miles of Caribbean coastline. Due to its position as a crossroads between Central America and the Caribbean, and its British colonial lineage, modern-day Belizean society is a rich combination of ethnic and cultural influences. In large part due to Belize's Barrier Reef—the second longest barrier reef in the world after Australia's Great Barrier Reef—and the government's efforts to preserve the indigenous wildlife and forestry on the mainland, in the past twenty years Belize has become an increasingly popular destination for those adventurers seeking the charm and hospitality of this beautiful and less traveled country.

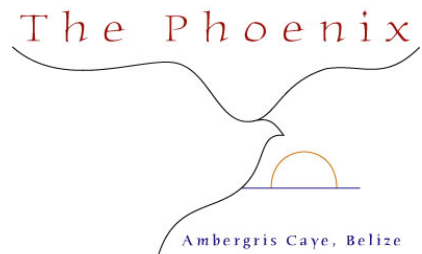
A Brief History of Belize

The Maya civilization flourished in Central America from about 2000 B.C. to 1000 A.D. and at that time Belize was one of the largest concentrations of Maya society. It is estimated that 2 million Mayas inhabited Belize at the civilization's peak, compared to the modern-day population of 270,000 living in Belize. The Maya are famed for their impressive temples, advanced artifacts, tools, and pottery, as well as their scholastic achievements, including astronomical charts, calendars, and sophisticated mathematical concepts and writing systems. Remnants of this great civilization, which went into decline for still unknown reasons, can be found at various excavated sites across Belize.

In the 1500s, Spanish explorers, in search of gold and silver, arrived at what is now called Belize and claimed the then sparsely populated area as part of the Spanish empire. In the 1600s, British pirates, tacitly encouraged by the British Empire, employed Belize and its many Cayes (pronounced "Keys") as hideaways and launching points from which to plunder Spanish ships carrying precious metals and goods from the New World back to Spain. Conflicts carried on for two hundred years, both on the water, and on the mainland and Cayes as British pirates settled in various parts of Belize and became fishermen, plantation owners, and loggers, to the ire of the Spanish.

Conflicts between the two nations continued until the battle of St. George's Caye in 1798, in which a smaller British fleet defeated the Spanish at sea, allowing the British to claim Belize, a nation slightly less than 9,000 sq miles, roughly the size of Massachusetts, as part of its empire.

Belize—during British rule known as British Honduras—grew in autonomy as a British colony over the next 150 years and eventually became self-governing in 1964. The



country changed its name to Belize in 1973, and in 1981 gained full independence from the U.K. Belize, like Canada and a handful of other countries, is now a member of the British Commonwealth, along with being a member of the United Nations and various international political and trade organizations.

Belize Today

Politics and Economics

Presently, Belize is a parliamentary democracy, in which two parties, the PUP (People's United Party) and the UDP (United Democratic Party), vie for control of the parliament and cabinet in nation-wide elections held every five years. Currently, the government is run by the PUP, which was elected to a second consecutive term in March 2003. The Prime Minister of Belize and leader of the PUP is Said Musa.

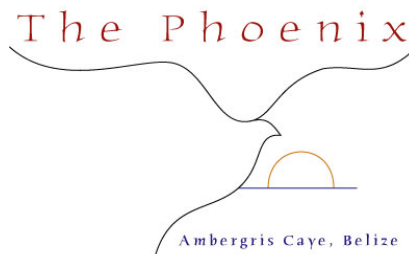
Belize is considered the most politically stable country in Central America, and has never gone to war. The country maintains a modest armed forces. The British military also maintains a small presence in the country, primarily to conduct jungle-training exercises and for emergency-relief purposes.

The legal system of Belize is modeled after the U.K. system, while the currency, formerly linked to the British Pound, is now fixed against the U.S. Dollar. Two Belizean dollars (BZE) equals one U.S. dollar (USD). Both currencies are accepted at most establishments, while most restaurants and shops also accept Traveler's Checks, Visa, MasterCard, and American Express.

The primary industries in Belize are tourism, agriculture, fishery, banking, and financial services. Belize produces large amounts of citrus fruits, bananas, sugar cane, and rum, and harvests large amounts of shrimp, lobster, and many species of fish.

Culture

Ethnically, Belize is one of the most diverse countries in the region. Most Belizeans are of multi-racial descent. About half of the population is Mestizo—mixed Mayan and European descent. Over a quarter of the population is Creole, who are primarily of African and Afro-European ancestry. Other prominent ethnic groups are the Maya, descendents of the great civilization, Garifunas, who descend from Africans and native Caribbeans who arrived in Belize the 1880s, and the Mennonites, who fled Europe in the 1920s and arrived in Belize and other nations to escape religious persecution at home. Other groups with sizable populations in Belize include immigrants from the East Indies, Lebanon, Taiwan, and South Asia. The country is also home to a smaller number of British, Canadian, and American expatriates.



As may be expected in such a diverse environment, there is a great deal of inter-marrying between ethnic groups, often blurring traditional ethnic lines and adding to the variety of the faces and personalities one will encounter in Belize.

Belize is the only English-speaking nation in Central and South America. All business and government affairs are conducted in English. Because of its diverse ethnic make-up, most Belizeans are bi- or tri-lingual, most commonly speaking English as well as Spanish and/or Creole. In the home, most Belizeans speak either Spanish or Creole.

Ambergris Caye Today

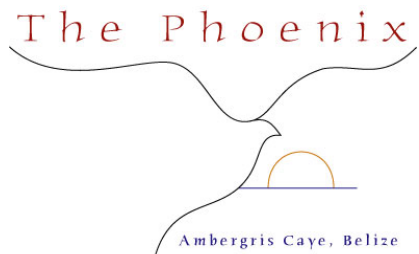
Ambergris Caye is the largest and most popular of the more than 200 Cayes off the coast of Belize. The island is located 25 miles northeast of Belize City, directly below the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. Ambergris Caye is 25 miles long, and between a couple hundred feet and four miles-wide at different points. The island is separated from the mainland of Mexico by the Bacalar Chico Channel, originally dug by the Maya over a thousand years ago as a means to shorten the trade route between Santa Rita, a large trading center on the northeastern coast of Belize, and the eastern coast of Mexico. The channel was later widened by the British and is now designated as a marine reserve, as well as being an enjoyable ride by boat.

Most people on Ambergris Caye live in or around San Pedro. The town's year-round population, while difficult to measure accurately, is approximately 8,000. The entire island's population is likely in excess of 10,000.

The Attraction of Ambergris Caye

The popularity of Ambergris Caye and San Pedro can be attributed to many factors. The proximity to Belize's Barrier Reef is often cited as the main reason the island is the country's most visited tourist destination. The Reef runs parallel to the east side of the island, less than a mile from shore at most points, and even meets the island in the north at Rocky Point. The Barrier Reef and the atolls to the South boast many of the top dive destinations in the Caribbean. The variety of dives available, the diversity of corals and sea life, and visibility of 100 feet or more on peaceful days are just some of the reasons people return year after year to experience Belize's Barrier Reef.

The Reef also creates the perfect setting for snorkeling, fishing for various types of game, windsurfing, sea kayaking, chartering of boats and catamarans, and other activities. The depth of the water between the island and the Reef averages between two and three meters, and the waves of the Caribbean break at the Reef, creating ideal conditions for water sports and swimming. In addition, dolphins, manatees, sea



turtles, sting rays, eagle rays, manta rays, and nurse sharks are drawn to these serene, shallow waters, making every dive, snorkel trip, or boat ride an opportunity to spot a wide range of sea life. Numerous dive shops and resorts offer boating, fishing, and dive trips to the marine reserves and other sites along the Reef.

While the Barrier Reef most often draws vacationers to Ambergris Caye, the beauty and atmosphere of the island keeps them coming back, often permanently. The beachfront of the island is lined with white sand and palm trees, and looks out onto the multi-colored Caribbean, a combination of turquoise and aquamarine waters. The setting simply invites relaxation and rejuvenation. Transport in San Pedro is mainly accomplished by bicycle, golf cart, or simply strolling barefoot along the beachfront. A small number of cars are allowed on the island, mainly for taxi service and the operation of various businesses. However, the relatively small number of cars allowed on Ambergris Caye's liberates the island from the pollution and traffic jams found elsewhere in the world.

Meanwhile, the sand streets of San Pedro are lined with craft shops, gift shops, boutiques, restaurants, bars, cafes, grocery stores, fruit markets, and various street vendors, often selling jewelry and hand-made wood carvings.

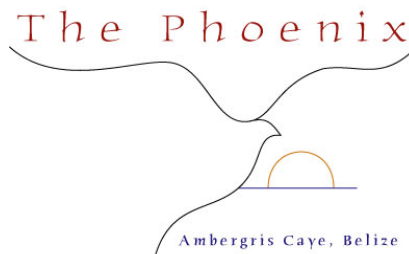
Also located on Ambergris Caye are multiple health and fitness facilities, tennis courts, and full-service spas. The island is also a 40-minute boat ride to Caye Chapel, which boasts a stunning 18-hole golf course.

While San Pedro has grown in popularity as more people have discovered the beauty of Ambergris Caye, the former quiet fishing village has not lost its tropical island charm. The hospitality and friendliness of Belizeans and San Pedranos is undeniable. Visitors are welcomed graciously, making the integration into the laid-back island lifestyle found on Ambergris Caye an easy transition for most people.

Eating on Ambergris Caye

Ambergris Caye is home to the best collection of restaurants in Belize, and offers visitors a variety of American, Caribbean, Jamaican, Chinese, and Middle Eastern options. Local food on Ambergris Caye is influenced a great deal by Spanish and Mexican cuisine, meaning that rice and beans, stewed chicken, burritos, quesadillas, tamales, garnaches, and other regional dishes are widely available.

Seafood is abundant on Ambergris Caye and most restaurants serve a variety of dishes incorporating lobster, conch, snook, grouper, tilapia, tuna, salmon, squid, mussels, scallops, and many other types of fish. Sushi is even available at a few select restaurants.



Tropical fruits are also in abundance on the island. Depending on the season, at various fruit markets on the island you can find pineapples, bananas, star fruit, cantaloupe, watermelon, papaya, oranges, mangoes, and much more.

Fishing off of Ambergris Caye

The waters off of Ambergris Caye offer challenges for any level of fisherman. Fly fishing, spincast, reef, and deep sea are the most common types available. The game fish you may encounter include barracudas, bonefish, grouper, jack, kingfish, mackerel, marlin, sailfish, snapper, snook, swordfish, tarpon, tuna, and yellow tail snapper. Boats and experienced guides can be hired from any of the many dive shops located in San Pedro and along the beachfront. There are also tournaments held at different times of the year.

Other Areas of Interest in Belize

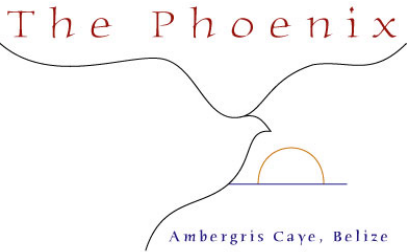
Cayo

Cayo is the largest district in Belize, located in the west of the country and bordering Guatemala. "Cayo" is the Spanish word for island, and the region is thought to have acquired that name because it is bounded by two rivers and was once accessible from the east only by boat. Now, the region is reachable from Belize City by an hour-long drive along Belize's Western highway.

In Cayo visitors can hike through lush jungle, ride horses or mountain bikes, discover extensive cave systems used by the Maya, relax at various waterfalls, tour Maya ruins, or take to the three main rivers in the district for canoeing, rafting, tubing, or kayaking. It is common for visitors to Cayo to encounter black howler monkeys, spider monkeys, iguanas, crocodiles, and hundreds of bird species during their jungle adventures.

Xunantunich, Cahal Pech, and Caracol are some of the most famous Maya sites worth visiting in the mountainous region. Caracol, discovered in the early 20th century but only seriously excavated beginning in the 1980s, is thought to be the largest Maya city discovered to date. The expansive Maya city of Tikal, regarded by many as the most significant archeological discovery in the 20th century, can be found across the border in Guatemala less than two hours from Cayo.

Cayo is also home to San Ignacio and Belmopan, Belize's second and third largest cities. San Ignacio, and its sister city, Santa Elena, located across the river, offer inexpensive and friendly home bases from which to explore Cayo. Belmopan, the capital of Belize since 1971, is the administrative center of the country.



Belize City

Belize City, the largest town in Belize with an estimated population of 70,000, was the seat of government for 200 years until 1971, when the capital was moved to the newly established city of Belmopan. Belize City is the major center in the country for business, government, and commerce.

Belize City offers many historical sites, including the Maritime Museum and Museum of Belize, which detail the history of Belize, including the country's Maya history, and the growth of the fishing and boat building industries. There is also a growing Tourism Village located in Belize City's main port full of restaurants and entertainment designed to cater to cruise line visitors and other tourists.

Just outside Belize City can be found the Belize Zoo, home to many of the unique indigenous birds and animals of the country, including the tapir, jabiru stork, and coatimundi. The Belize Zoo also houses spider monkeys, crocodiles, jaguars, and many species of birds. The Zoo is an experience unlike most western zoos. The animals are enclosed using wood fences and mesh in their natural jungle habitat, allowing visitors amazing access to an exotic collection of animals.

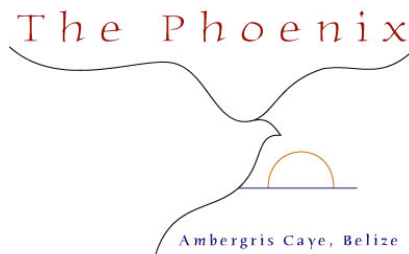
Northern Belize

Between Belize City and Mexico, 90 miles away along the Northern highway, can be found the two largest towns in the north of the country, Orange Walk and Corozal. These regions are responsible for a large portion of the sugar cane produced in Belize. The north of Belize is also home to two of the largest Maya temples, Lamanai and Altun Ha, which are also accessible via day trips from Ambergris Caye. Visitors to this region also have the opportunity to experience the Community Baboon Sanctuary and the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, full of many species of birds and black howler monkeys, locally known as "baboons."

Southern Belize

Placencia, located on the coast of Belize in the southern district of Toledo, is a quiet, quaint town on the water offering abundant seafood and diving opportunities. In the spring and early summer, the waters off the shore of Placencia are one of the few places in the world where whale sharks can be reliably spotted. Whale sharks are beautiful, enormous fish, many measuring over 20 feet long, and are peaceful and friendly when encountered in their tropical water habitat.

Dangriga and Punta Gorda are the two other larger towns in the south where the Garifuna culture thrives, and provide great starting points from which to explore the wildlife preserves and rivers of southern Belize, such as the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve, which is the only jaguar preserve in the world.



Another popular excursion in the region is to tour the Monkey River, where it is possible to see dolphins, manatees, iguanas, many species of birds, and beautiful tropical foliage.

Caye Caulker

Caye Caulker, five miles long, and half a mile wide, is located 20 minutes by boat from Ambergris Caye. The year round population is approximately 1200. The island is a quiet, peaceful place where visitors can enjoy a relaxing afternoon snorkeling off shore or spreading out on the beach.

The Atolls

Beyond Belize's Barrier Reef reside Belize's three large atolls, Turneffe, Glover's Reef, and Lighthouse Reef, where some of the best world-class diving in the Caribbean can be found.

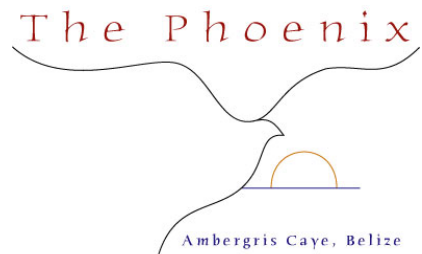
An atoll is a ring-shaped coral reef that resembles an island and encloses a lagoon. They are found in the open sea, such as in the Caribbean beyond Belize's Barrier Reef. In Belize are located three of the four atolls in the Western Hemisphere.

Turneffe is the largest atoll and the closest to Belize City. It is located a few hundred feet from the Reef. It is most famous for its wall dives, as well as a dive site nicknamed the "Elbow," which includes a steep drop-off, a shallow reef, and a wrecked ship. Some of the species of fish you are likely to see are grunt, grouper, snapper, and jack. Various dive shops on Ambergris Caye offer day trips to experience Turneffe.

Glover's Reef is located 15 miles outside of the Reef and 70 miles from Belize City and is another popular wall dive destination. Glover's Reef is ring of coral surrounding an 80 square-mile lagoon. It offers more than 40 miles of Reef to explore. Glover's Reef is most easily accessible via day-trips from Placencia.

Lighthouse Reef is probably most famous as the gateway to the Blue Hole, the world famous dive site explored by Jacques Cousteau in the 1970s. The Blue Hole is a former undersea cave that has collapsed upon itself, leaving a nearly perfect circular site 1,000 feet in diameter where the ocean floor plunges to a depth of 410 feet. Its name comes from the intense blue of the water in the former cave, in contrast to the lighter turquoise coloring of the neighboring and much more shallow waters. Still visible during dives here are the stalagmites and stalactites of the former undersea cave.

Lighthouse Reef also offers many other places to explore, including Half Moon Caye, which is an island formed of coral, shells, and calcareous algae fragments, creating



stunning beaches made of rock that contain numerous tide pools. Half Moon Caye is also home to 77 species of birds, including parrots, pigeons, ospreys, and the rare and humorously named red-footed booby. Lighthouse Reef and Half Moon Caye are most easily accessible by plane or by boat from Placencia.

Traveling to Belize

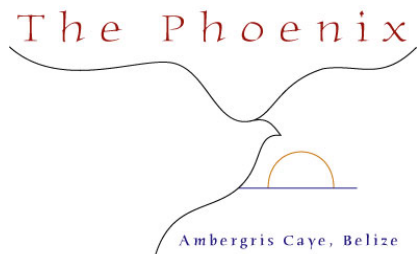
A large part of the appeal of Belize is the convenience and affordability of traveling there from the U.S. and Canada. Many U.S. carriers offer daily nonstop service to Belize, including Continental, American, US Air, Delta, and Air Taca. Flight times from Houston, Dallas, and Miami are approximately two hours, while flight times from Charlotte and Atlanta are approximately two and a half hours. Canadian, European, and other international visitors will connect through one of those U.S. cities.

All international arrivals land at Philip S.W. Goldson Belize International Airport (BZE), located eight miles north of Belize City. From there, San Pedro is a 15-minute plane ride serviced by two local carriers, Tropic Air and Maya Air. Both carriers offer hourly departures to San Pedro and less frequent flights to other destinations in Belize, such as Placencia and Corozal. Flights to San Pedro are approximately \$50.00 USD per person one-way. An hour long ferry-ride from Belize City to Ambergris Caye is another way to travel to the island, costing approximately \$15.00 USD per person one-way. Most ferries depart from the Belize Marine Terminal or the Maritime Museum. There is also a smaller municipal airport in Belize City, locally known as "The Airstrip," which services various domestic destinations.

For those people visiting the mainland, taxis are readily available at the airport and are a safe means of transportation. For visitors traveling to resorts on the mainland, arrangements can be made with that particular resort for transportation, or visitors can use Belize's reliable bus system to arrive safely at their destination. Belize's bus system offers transportation to all main towns in the country, as well as neighboring Guatemala and the Mexican cities of Chetumal and Cancun.

Additional Belize Facts and Figures

- Average year-round temperature is 80 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Electrical current is 110 volts. No adapter is necessary for U.S. visitors.
- U.S., Canadian, and British citizens do not require a visa to visit Belize, only a passport. Citizens of other countries should check with embassies in their country for regulations.
- Belize is the only country in Central America without a coastline on the North Pacific Ocean.
- Belize is the most sparsely populated nation in Central America.



- Because the number of daylight hours does not vary much during the year in the tropics, Belize, along with many other countries, does not observe Daylight Saving Time. Year round Belize is on GMT-06:00. This means that from April to October the clocks in Belize are the same as U.S. Mountain time, while from November through March clocks in Belize are the same as U.S. Central time.

Additional Ambergris Caye Facts and Figures

- Average water temperature off the coast is 82 degrees Fahrenheit.
- There are over 500 species of fish, sponges, marine worms, and crustaceans along the Reef, and over 65 species of coral and 350 species of mollusks.
- The Barrier Reef is home to the world's largest population of West Indian manatees.
- Three species of sea turtles nest in Belize—loggerhead, green, and hawksbill.
- The island was once home to an estimated 10,000 Mayas. After the decline of the Maya civilization, the island was uninhabited from 1000 A.D. to 1600 A.D. when British pirates arrived and settled Ambergris Caye.

If you have any other questions regarding Belize or Ambergris Caye, we encourage you to contact The Phoenix Sales Office via email at info@thephoenixbelize.com or by phone at 501-226-2083. From the U.S., first dial 011.