

A Time Machine to Belize

Belize, located on the Caribbean, offers a different atmosphere than the rest of Central America. Although more expensive than its neighbors, it offers a great opportunity to relax on a beach or a caye. Unlike the rest of Central America, English is the official language and there is a noticeable African influence as compared to the Spanish influence elsewhere.

Most international flights land in Belize City, which is unfortunate as this is an unattractive first look at Belize. The city is the dirtiest and most dangerous place in Belize, but it does serve as the unofficial capital. After the destruction of Hurricane Hattie, the official capital was moved to the inland city of Belmopan in 1961. Belize City is a good place to find transport to a series of cayes (pronounced "keys") located off the Belize coast.

Caye Caulker is an easy trip from Belize City and there is little hassle from its 600 permanent residents. There are no cars, but golf carts serve as unofficial taxis while walking the island north to south takes about thirty minutes. There are only three north-south roads, known as Front Street, Middle Street and Back Street. Even the most neurotic person will feel relaxed here. A private bungalow on the beach is one of the



numerous accommodation possibilities. As much of the island is a beach area, most people are casually laying around, getting a tan with a cold drink. The caye is actually two islands as Hurricane Hattie split the island in two, but most of the action is on the southern island. There are numerous restaurants to try Caribbean food and seafood such as barracuda. Many bars have live music on the weekends, with most musicians trying to imitate Bob Marley.

Belize is a good place to snorkel as it has the second-largest barrier reef in the world. The ride out on a sailboat may require passengers to sit in different spots in order to shift weight and thus not tip over. Arriving at the coral reef, it's time to spit in the goggle, put the flippers on, and jump into the water to explore the reef. In addition to snorkeling, there are many opportunities to scuba dive.

The captain will often dump dead fish in the water and when feeding time starts, many devil rays come towards the boat. Their felt-like bodies leave a tingling sensation. The feeding frenzy also attracts sharks, which are actually quite shy. They may not even come near the boat until all humans have exited the water.

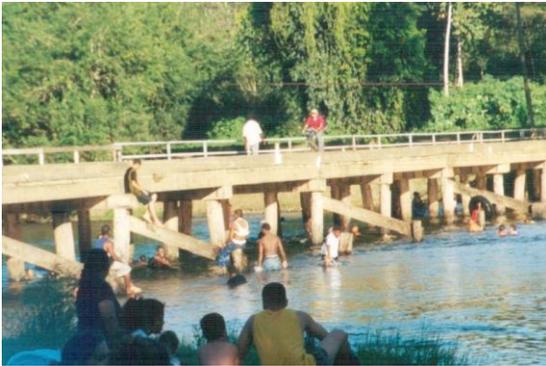
Boats are an important form of transportation and at times may be the



only option. Arriving in Belize from southeast Guatemala is made easier by a series of boat trips. The only way to reach Livingston, Guatemala is by boat along the Rio Dulce River. This allows view of various animals and gives an idea of how river people live. There is a hot springs that feeds into the river and passengers are allowed to feel the heat and smell the sulfur. It is a bit deceiving as one area is scorching hot while the next maybe very cool.

Arriving in Livingston, passengers are greeted by numerous pelicans and a colorful atmosphere. The Guatemalans here speak Spanish and English as well as their traditional Garifuna (Black Carib) language. The Garifuna are the descendants of the African slaves that were brought to the New World. Thus, this area has an Afro-Caribbean feel, with many brightly-colored buildings as well as Black Carib music and dance.

The second boat trip to get to Belize travels from Livingston to Puerto Barrios, which is actually further from Belize. However, the trip is needed as Puerto Barrios has a boat service to the southern tip of Belize and has passport control, thus it is considered a border town. The city was once important because the United Fruit Company had made it the country's most important port. The ports have now shifted to the Pacific side and Puerto Barrios is just a jumping off place. Though it is easy to navigate through, there is little to attract tourists and it has a less welcoming feel compared to Livingston.



The last part of the boat trip is from Puerto Barrios to Punta Gorda, Belize. Punta Gorda feels much more like Livingston than Puerto Barrios. Belize is predominately English-speaking but has a lively Creole dialect. Instead of "I can't here you" the locals would say, "I no here you, Auntie."

The trip north to Dangriga takes some time, as the roads in southern Belize are not good. There are bus stops but

anyone standing at the side of road will be picked up. In addition to transporting people, the bus serves as a traveling post office, restaurant and entertainment complex which slows travel time immensely.

Dangriga is dominated by the Garifuna and has the odd feel of the Antebellum American South. An African-story telling religion with churches that have revival-type ceremonies can be the liveliest form of entertainment because of the loud music and singing. The clothes worn by women look similar to 19th century clothes and the lack of street lighting gives the impression that one has traveled back in time a century or two. There is some adequate housing on the beach but inland there is little more than shacks which invite a comparison to the nineteenth-century American slave shacks.

Further north is Belize City, which can also be reached by the west from northeast Guatemala. The most popular land route here is from the Tikal area in Guatemala to San Ignacio (sometimes called Cayo) in Belize. There are numerous parks and archeological museums around San Ignacio including Cahal Pech (Palace of the Ticks), an old Mayan ruin. Staying away from the ticks, visitors can enjoy this mid-sized complex through a leisurely self-tour. The carvings in the stone of the main plaza appear to be stereo

speakers. They were actually used to amplify noise which is quite ingenious for the time; occupation of the area ranged from 1000 BC to 900 AD.

The city of San Ignacio doesn't offer many other sights but is a good place to relax. A small bridge in the city allows people to jump into the Macal River. Other activities in the area, many accessible only by canoe, include the Burton Creek Cave, Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve and the Rainforest Medicinal Trail. Heading east to Belize City is the Belize Zoo and the nondescript capital of Belmopan.

The country of Belize, minus Belize City, is a physically attractive place. The boat rides are enjoyable and the fantastic cayes along the coast are comfortable places to stay. Other areas of the country give the bizarre sense that one has traveled back a couple hundred years to a less complex time. Regardless of location, Belize is a great place for those who want to escape the complexity of modern existence.