

AN IMPORTANT AD SITE, A BIRD LODGE, BUILT IN THE MAYAN RUM, BIRDS WING TO MURRAY CAYE

FROMMER'S TRAVEL GUIDE UPDATE: BELIZE

Belize is the jewel of Central America. Nestled between Mexico and Guatemala on the Caribbean coast, this tiny, largely English-speaking nation is a haven of political and environmental stability in a tumultuous region. Forty percent of the country is protected as parkland and natural preserves, and 66 percent of the country is still forested. An ecologically aware government continues to make preservation and ecotourism national priorities. A subtropical climate with an annual mean temperature of 79 degrees Fahrenheit and one of the most welcoming populations in the world serve as the crowning touches on one of the finest destinations in the Americas for adventurers and eco-travelers.

Along the Coast: The largest living coral reef in the Western Hemisphere, the Belize Barrier Reef rivals Australia's Great Barrier Reef in diving opportunities and the astounding variety of marine life. Visibility commonly reaches 100 feet or more, the water temperature hovers around 80 degrees Fahrenheit and the protective reef makes for year-round calm conditions.

The reef boasts many dive sites, including Hol Chan Marine Reserve, established in 1987 as the first protected marine preserve in Central America. The deep valley that cuts through the barrier reef at Hol Chan (or little channel) forms a blue-green oasis that teems with colorful fish, to the delight of snorkelers and divers. Another notable site is Shark-Ray Alley, which offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to snorkel and dive with friendly nurse sharks and southern stingrays in a mere 8 feet of water.

Two hundred cayes (pronounced keys) dot the shoreline and function as platforms to the reef. The largest is Ambergris Caye, a well-developed island that serves as Belize's main water sports playground. In the quaint tropical village of San Pedro, a range of resorts and local dive shops offer professional dive boats captained by expert dive masters.



CANOES AT REST ON CHAA CREEK

Inland Belize: The Maya Mountains dominate the Cayo District in Belize's western interior and border Guatemala. They offer a wide range of outdoor adventures — from canoeing to caving, fishing to jungletrekking — plus a fantastic array of wildlife. Black Howler monkeys, iguanas, jaguars, tapirs and hundreds of other exotic and rare species populate the thick, waterfall-dotted jungle. Birders, in particular, will be delighted

with Belize's interior, where more than 500 winged species make their home.

South of San Ignacio and set on 330 private acres in the foothills of the mountains, the Chaa Creek Cottages resort (501/92-2037; www.chaacreek.com) serves two purposes: as a luxury jungle lodge for visitors and as a haven for one of the world's most beautiful butterflies, the Belizean

Blue Morpho. The resort's butterfly breeding farm offers guests the opportunity to witness the creature's full life cycle from hatching through metamorphosis — from fuzzy caterpillar to cobalt-blue butterfly. The on-site natural history center offers unparalleled insight into Belize's archaeological, cultural and natural wonders, and Chaa Creek Inland Expeditions offers a wide range of adventures, including guided excursions to 1,000-year-old Mayan temple sites.

A Note on Hurricane Keith: While Ambergris Caye, Caye Caulker and a few other areas of northern Belize felt the impact of Hurricane Keith in October 2000, 90 percent of the country was unaffected. At this writing, most tourism areas, including San Pedro on Ambergris Caye, were expected to be operational by December 2000. For the latest information, contact the Belize Tourism Board at 800/624-0686. ■

For more information, see Frommer's Adventure Guides: Central America, or visit Frommer's online at www.frommers.com.

GETTING THERE

Continental offers double daily service between its Houston hub and Belize City, Belize.

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