

Belize

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Northern cayes** The second-biggest reef in the world has plenty of places to strap on your flippers (p230)
- **Lamanai** Spot crocs, birds and turtles on the boat ride to impressive Maya ruins (p238)
- **Hopkins** It may be a one-street beach town with very little to do, but that's why we love it (p252)
- **Best journey** Fishing, snorkeling and camping your way south on an island-hopping sailing tour from Caye Caulker to Placencia (p232)
- **Off the beaten track** The Barton Creek Outpost is a little slice of Eden that won't stay undiscovered for too long (p248)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 22,966 sq km (slightly larger than Wales or the US state of Massachusetts)
- **ATMs** Foreign cards accepted at Belize Bank ATMs in major towns and cities
- **Budget** US\$40-60 per day
- **Capital** Belmopan
- **Costs** Budget hotel in Belize City US\$20, bottle of beer US\$2, 3hr bus ride US\$5, set lunch US\$5
- **Country Code** ☎ 501
- **Electricity** 110V AC, 60 Hz (same as the USA)
- **Famous for** Reef diving, that Madonna song (*La Isla Bonita*)
- **Head of State** Prime Minister Said Wilbert Musa
- **Languages** English, Spanish, Creole, Garifuna
- **Money** US\$1 = BZ\$2 (Belize dollars); US dollars accepted everywhere
- **Phrases** *Arrihgt?* (an all-purpose hello/how's it going type greeting), *ackin' up* (misbehaving), *fer real* (seriously)
- **Population** 312,200
- **Time** GMT minus 6 hours
- **Traveler's Checks** Cashed at major banks, some restaurants and hotels, and some exchange houses
- **Visas** Not required for citizens of North America, Australia, New Zealand and most EU countries

TRAVEL HINTS

Keep a Belizean dollar in a separate pocket – somebody might ask you for it. And stop walking so fast.

OVERLAND ROUTES

The Mexican border town of Chetumal has good connections into Belize. The other popular entry point is Benque Viejo del Carmen on the Guatemalan border on the road from Tikal.





Belize bumps and grinds to a whole different groove from the rest of Central America. Creole culture is dominant here and everybody knows the words to even the most obscure Bob Marley songs. Ever wanted to hear a policeman tell you that every little thing was going to be all right? Come to Belize.

Then there are the Garifuna. Master percussionists, proud 'cause they were never slaves, still eating and speaking how they did when they got here 200 years ago.

And there's the Maya, mestizos and Latinos. Some have 'always' been here, some came more recently, fleeing nasty situations in their homelands. Nearly everybody speaks English, but Spanish speakers outnumber the rest. In some of the Maya villages down south, there are people who only speak Mopan or Kekchi.

Throw in some caves to tube, the second-biggest reef in the world to dive, white sands and turquoise waters out on the cayes, some good eatin', a barefoot, beer-drinking, hammock-swinging lifestyle and much, much more trouble to get in, and you can see why you're coming to Belize.

CURRENT EVENTS

The privatization debate in Belize continues (the main topic of debate being what can we sell off now?). In one of the worst examples, when the water company was sold off, the legislation gave the new owners the right to *all* the water in Belize – including rainwater and rivers, meaning that people could theoretically be charged for rainwater collected in private tanks and water pumped from rivers. We're waiting on a test case to go through the courts.

Belize is a major transshipment point for the northbound drug trade, and gang violence is on the rise. A contributing factor is a recent US law which sees foreign-born nationals convicted of gang-related crimes deported to their country of origin. They come back, hook up with other members of the old gang and it's business as usual.

The government's much-lauded re-issue of bonds to finance the external debt will indeed free the country from burdensome interest payments until about 2012. Once they have to start repaying the new debt, though, interest repayments will be even higher. So the books aren't going to be balanced anytime soon.

The Chalillo Dam on the Macal River, a hydroelectric project that flooded wildlife habitat and Maya sites, sold to the populace as an easy way for cheaper electricity has turned out to be a massive disappointment at the very best. Electricity prices have actually gone up since the dam went into operation!

Possibly the biggest strain on the country's infrastructure comes from tour boat visitors. To give you an idea of the way things are heading, 14,183 people arrived by cruise ship in 1998. By 2005 that number had grown to 800,331. Compare this with the 236,573

people who arrived by other means in the same year and you will see that it's big business and big crowds that the country's main attractions have to deal with.

HISTORY

Belize certainly earns its place on the Ruta Maya – ruins are everywhere and the Maya population is still thriving, particularly in the southwest.

Pre-Columbian Belize

The Maya have been in Belize since the first human habitation. One of the earliest settlements in the Maya world, Cuello, was near present day Orange Walk. Maya trade routes ran all through the country, and the New River, Rio Hondo and Belize River all played an important role in early trade and commerce. The earliest known site in the Belize River Valley is Cahal Pech, near San Ignacio. It was settled between 1500 and 1000 BC. Lamanai (p238) surged in importance around 200 to 100 BC.

During the end of the pre-Classic period (from around AD 250 to 550), Belizean settlements waned in importance as political power shifted to Guatemalan cities such as Tikal. All this changed in AD 562 when Caracol in western Belize conquered Tikal. By 650 Caracol was at its peak, with a population of 150,000, over twice the size of modern-day Belize City. The city retained its regional importance even after defeat by Naranjo (from Guatemala) in 680.

The decline of the Maya around 750 has always been somewhat mysterious, but most theories center around droughts. Increased sacrificial activity (remains of which are to be seen in the Cayo District's caves) around

this time bears witness to these theories, as sacrifices were probably made to appease the rain god, Chac. For more on Maya history, see p31.

Pirate's Paradise

In the opinion of its 16th-century Spanish conquerors, Belize was a backwater, good only for its harvestable logwood, which was used to make dye. Far from being profitable, Belize was dangerous, because the barrier reef tended to tear the keels from ships attempting to approach the shore.

The lack of effective government and the onshore safety afforded by the barrier reef attracted English and Scottish pirates to Belizean waters during the 17th century. They operated freely, capturing booty-laden Spanish galleons. In 1670, however, Spain convinced the British government to clamp down on the pirates' activities. Most of the unemployed pirates went into the logwood business.

During the 1780s the British actively protected the loggers' interests, at the same time assuring Spain that Belize was indeed a Spanish possession. But this was a fiction. By this time, Belize was already British by tradition and sympathy, and it was with relief and jubilation that Belizeans received the news, on September 10, 1798, that a British force had defeated the Spanish armada off St George's Caye.

Into the 19th Century

Being British did not bring prosperity. Belize was still essentially one big logging camp. When the invention of synthetic dyes killed the logwood trade, the colony's economy crashed. It was revived by the trade in mahogany during the early 19th century, but this too collapsed when African sources of the wood brought fierce price competition.

Belize's next trade boom was in arms, ammunition and other supplies sold to the Maya rebels in the Yucatán who fought the War of the Castes during the mid-19th century. The war also brought a flood of refugees from both sides to Belize. The Maya brought farming skills that were of great value in expanding the horizons and economic viability of Belizean society.

Guatemala has never really accepted the idea of Belize – they've been claiming the land ever since the Spanish left. In 1859 Britain and Guatemala signed a treaty that gave Britain

rights to the land provided that the British built a road from Guatemala to the Caribbean coast. The treaty still stands, but the road has never been built, and many Guatemalan-made maps show Guatemala extending all the way through Belize to the coast.

20th Century & Modern Times

The Belizean economy worsened after the WWII, leading to agitation for independence from the UK. The country's first general election was held in 1954, and the People's United Party (PUP) won handsomely on leader George Price's pro-independence platform. On September 21, 1981, the colony of British Honduras officially became the independent nation of Belize.

Many educated (and especially older) Belizeans will tell you that the widespread corruption and nepotism in Belize today are a result of the country becoming independent too early, before democratic institutions had a chance to take hold. It's an argument that's likely to ruffle a few feathers if you decide to take it for a spin.

Since independence, the political landscape has been one of one-term governments (the United Democratic Party, or UDP, being the other player there), corruption scandals, power struggles and broken electoral promises. In 2003 PUP won an unprecedented second term, but stability was not at hand. In 2005 citizens threw off their normally easy-going demeanor and rioted in the streets of Belmopan over inflation, taxes and a wage freeze for public servants.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

Rule number one in Belize: give respect and you'll get respect. Belizeans are friendly and curious by nature, but often wait to see what you're like before deciding how they're going to be. Treat them well, they're bound to do the same for you. Walk around with a scowl and you aren't going to be making any friends.

Belize's long association with the UK has left some odd legacies. Perhaps because of this (and the language thing), the country is more closely aligned with the USA than with other Central American countries. US consumer imports are hugely popular (accounting for nearly half of the country's total imports) and much of the popular culture is imported directly from the States. You'll

SQUEEZE YOUR BELIZE

Everyone's always bitching about how expensive Belize is. Here's the bad news: it's true. Things cost more here, especially some essentials such as accommodation and beer. Here's the good news: it's not as bad as people make out, and there are some pain-free ways not to bust your budget. A few of our faves:

Do the legwork Most towns are small – pack light and you'll never need a taxi.

Cool it up with the air-con Take a shower, then crank the fan – you'll be freeeezing.

Camp it up There are good, cheap camping spots in San Ignacio, Caye Caulker, Bullet Tree Falls, Barton Creek, Monkey Bay, Hopkins, Glover's Reef, Altun Ha and Crooked Tree.

Buddy up Single room rates (if they exist) can be 90% of the price of a double. Get a triple with others and you're laughing.

Chicken, beans and rice Even some expensive restaurants keep it real by having this classic on the menu, often at a fraction of the price of other items. Learn to love this dish.

Get it to go Take-away food and groceries are available everywhere, as are good picnic spots.

Thirsty? Juices are expensive, and often disappointing. Green coconuts, on the other hand, are delicious, cheap and refreshing. Invest in a machete and serve yourself.

Buy in bulk They say you can drink the tap water. If you are buying purified, buy gallons (or more) depending on how long you're staying in town.

Get the party started right Hardly anybody goes out 'til 11 or midnight, and every corner store sells beer. You do the math.

Get picked up If you're going off the track, call the hotel you're planning to stay at – maybe they can arrange cheap/free transport.

Thumb it We haven't heard a Belizean hitching horror story in years. Use your common sense, particularly if you're female.

see a lot more Tupac T-shirts than you will Bellanova ones.

Widespread corruption in the middle and upper levels of government has left most Belizeans with a healthy cynicism when it comes to politicians. The woeful state of the economy and huge gap between rich and poor doesn't make them think much better of the private sector.

Lifestyle

With compulsory education and a relatively stable democracy, you would expect Belize to be doing alright by its citizens. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. The country has never been rich, and a reliance on agriculture, fishing and, lately, the tourism industry hasn't done much to change that. As a result, many Belizeans live in very basic circumstances. New houses are often made from cinder-block boxes; old ones from warped and rotting wood that has seen much better days. It is estimated that one-third of the population live below the poverty line. This should be grim, but it ain't that bad. Above all, the folk here know how to have a good time – check out any karaoke bar on a Friday night and you'll see enough Belikin beer consumption and smiling faces

to know that, for some at least, things either aren't as bad as they look on paper or the people get on with life regardless.

People

For such a tiny country, Belize enjoys a fabulous, improbable ethnic diversity. Creoles – descendants of the African slaves and British pirates who first settled here – make up the country's largest ethnic group. Racially mixed and proud of it, Creoles speak a fascinating, unique dialect of English that, though it sounds familiar at first, is not easily intelligible to a speaker of standard English.

One-third of Belize's people are mestizos (persons of mixed European and Central American indigenous ancestry), some of whose ancestors immigrated from the Yucatán during the 19th century.

The Maya people of Belize make up about 10% of the population and are divided into three linguistic groups. The Yucatec live in the north near the Yucatán border, the Mopan live in western Belize around the border town of Benque Viejo del Carmen, and the Kekchí inhabit far southern Belize in and around Punta Gorda. In recent years,

political refugees coming in from Guatemala and El Salvador have added to Belize's Maya population.

Southern Belize is the home of the Garifuna (or Garinagus, also called Black Caribs), who account for less than 10% of the population. The Garifuna are of South American indigenous and African descent. They look more African, but they speak a language that's much more indigenous and their unique culture combines aspects of both peoples.

Other ethnic groups in Belize include small populations of Europeans, North Americans, Chinese and people from east India.

**ARTS
Cinema**

Belize has been the location for many film shoots over the years, most notably *Mosquito Coast* (1986) starring Harrison Ford and River Phoenix, based on the novel by Paul Theroux; *Heart of Darkness* (1984) starring John Malkovich, from the novel by Joseph Conrad; and *Dogs of War* (1980) with Christopher Walken.

Music

Music is by far the most popular art form in Belize, from the ubiquitous karaoke bars to the reggae-soaked cayes and the ribcage-rattling tunes pumped out on every bus in the country. Styles are much more Caribbean than Latin – after a few weeks you'll be an expert on calypso, soca, steel drums and, quite possibly, reggae.

Punta rock is the official musical style of Belize. Its origins are from the music of the Garifuna – drum heavy with plenty of call and response. This music is designed to get your hips moving. Probably the most famous *punta* rockers are Pen Cayetano (who has collaborated with various artists) and the Punta Rebels.

The blending of Garifuna rhythms with reggae dancehall and soca has produced a new generation of *punta* rockers who often rely on electronic accompaniment as opposed to live musicians. If you want to catch one of these lively shows, keep an eye out for Super G and the Griga Boyz.

The Parranda style, which owes its roots to more traditional Garifuna arrangements with acoustic guitar, drums and shakers is most widely associated with artists such as Andy Palacio and Paul Nabor.

Brukdown, another Belizean style, was developed by Creoles working in logging camps during the 18th and 19th centuries. It involves an accordion, banjo, harmonica and a percussion instrument – traditionally a pig's jawbone is used, the teeth rattled with a stick. Wilfred Peters' Boom and Chime band is perhaps the best-known of the brukdown artists.

The Maya of Belize are off on their own tangent when it comes to music. Most notable here is the flute music of Pablo Collado and the traditional marimba (played with large wooden xylophones, double bass and drum kit) of Alma Beliceña.

SPORT

Like any Central American country worth its stripes, Belize is a soccer-playing nation, but you'll find that the sport of choice for many kids is basketball. If you're up for it, you can easily jump in on a game – it's a great way to meet locals and keep warm on those chilly Caribbean afternoons.

Like all good Commonwealthers, Belizeans enjoy a spot of cricket. The best place to catch a match is at the MCC grounds in Belize City.

RELIGION

Belize's mixture of religions follows its ethnic composition. Roman Catholics and Protestants (mainly Anglicans and Methodists, but also Mennonites, Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses) prevail, but Belize's tradition of tolerance has welcomed Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Maya communities continue to practice traditional Maya rites, usually blended with Catholicism.

**ENVIRONMENT
The Land**

Belize is mostly tropical lowland, typically hot and humid for most of the year. Rainfall is lightest in the north, heaviest in the south. The southern rain forests receive almost 4m of precipitation annually, making the south the country's most humid region.

An exception to Belize's low-lying topography and hot, sticky climate can be found in the Maya Mountains, which traverse western and southern Belize at elevations approaching 1000m. The mountains enjoy a more pleasant climate than the lowlands – comfortably warm during the day, cooling off a bit at night.

Victoria Peak, in Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, and Doyle's Delight, in Toledo near Belize's southern border, vie for highest peak status – both are around 3680ft (1104m). Doyle's Delight is said to be about 13ft (3.9m) taller, but Victoria Peak is more visible and the popular favorite for tallest mountain status.

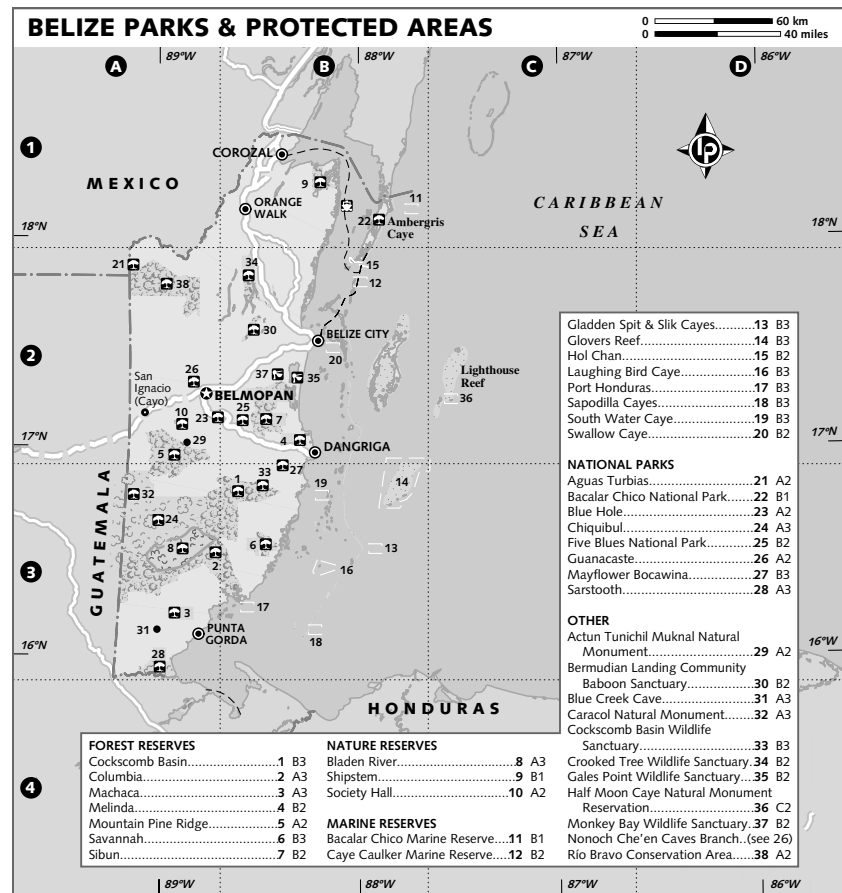
The country's coastline and northern coastal plain are largely covered in mangrove swamp, which indistinctly defines the line between land and sea. Offshore, the limestone bedrock extends eastward into the Caribbean for several kilometers at a depth of about 16.5ft (5m). At the eastern extent of this shelf is the second-longest barrier reef in the world (behind Australia's Great Barrier Reef).

Wildlife

The lush tropical forests contain huge ceiba trees as well as mahogany, guanacaste and co-hune palms, all festooned with orchids, bromeliads and other epiphytes and liana vines. Much of the shorelines of both the mainland and the islands are cloaked in dense mangrove.

Baird's tapir is Belize's national animal. The *gibnut* or *paca* (*tepezcuintle*), a rabbit-size burrowing rodent, is abundant. Other tropical animals include the jaguar, ocelot, howler monkey, spider monkey, peccary, vulture, stork and anteater.

There are 60 species of snake in the forests and waters of Belize, but only a handful are dangerous: the boa constrictor, the fer-de-lance, the coral snake and the tropical rattlesnake.



BELIZE

BELIZE

Two types of crocodile call Belize home – the American crocodile, which lives in fresh- and saltwater, and Morelet's croc, which only lives in freshwater and doesn't eat people.

Belize's birdlife is varied and abundant, with hummingbirds, keel-billed toucans, woodpeckers and many kinds of parrots and macaws.

In the seas there are turtles, lobsters, manatees and a great variety of fish.

National Parks & Protected Areas

Nearly 40% of land in Belize is protected, either by national organizations or private trusts. Much of the Maya Mountain forest south of San Ignacio is protected as the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve and Chiquibul National Park. There are smaller parks and reserves, including marine reserves, throughout the country.

Environmental Issues

Belize takes environmental issues quite seriously, and much has been done to protect the endangered species that live within its borders. Species under threat include the hawksbill, green and leatherback sea turtles, the Morlet's and American crocodiles, the scarlet macaw, the jabiru stork and the manatee. Deforestation for farmland is becoming a concern, leading to loss of habitat, soil erosion and salination of waterways. Small scale oil drilling in the Cayo district is a concern – there had only been one minor spill at the time of writing.

One major issue at the moment is the extension of the southern highway to the Guatemalan border. Independent engineers have looked at the plans, which cut through Maya villages and pristine wilderness and are predicting an environmental catastrophe.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Belize City has two airports. All international flights use Philip SW Goldson International Airport (BZE), 9 miles (16km) northwest of the city center.

Major airlines serving Belize include American (from Miami and Dallas), Continental (from Houston), Delta (from Atlanta) and Grupo TACA (from Los Angeles). Most in-

ternational air routes to Belize City go via these gateways.

Grupo TACA also offers direct flights between Belize City and Guatemala City (Guatemala), San Salvador (El Salvador), and San Pedro Sula (Honduras), as well as connecting flights from Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

Boat

The *Gulf Cruza* runs between Puerto Cortés and Placencia, with stops in Big Creek (see p255), every Friday, returning on Monday morning.

Scheduled boats and occasional small passenger boats ply the waters between Punta Gorda in southern Belize and Livingston and Puerto Barrios in eastern Guatemala. Refer to p257 for details. These boats can usually be hired for special trips between countries, and if enough passengers split the cost, the price can be reasonable.

Bus

Several companies operate direct buses from Chetumal (Mexico) to Belize City. National Bus runs between Belize City and Benque Viejo del Carmen on the Guatemalan border, connecting with Guatemalan buses headed for Flores.

GETTING AROUND

It's a small country, and most roads you are likely to be traveling on have now been paved, so even the most hellish chicken-bus experience isn't likely to last too long (patience, grasshopper). Bus is the mode of transportation for most Belizeans, so departures are frequent – there's no real need to book ahead, apart from around public holidays, but it is wise to turn up early and snag yourself a seat.

Air

People do fly within Belize, but then people do all sorts of crazy stuff. If you're going to the cays, it's a lot more fun (and a lot less scary) to grab a boat rather than a light plane, which takes about the same time.

Two airlines service two principal domestic air routes: Belize City–Caye Caulker–San Pedro–Corozal; and Belize City–Dangriga–Placencia–Punta Gorda. Sometimes planes will not stop at a particular airport if they have no passengers to drop off or pick up, so be sure to reserve your seat in advance

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure taxes and airport fees of US\$30 are levied on non-Belizean travelers departing Goldson International Airport in Belize City for foreign destinations. There is no departure tax if you are leaving by boat. The exit tax at Belizean land border crossing points is US\$15.

Regardless of how you leave the country, you'll be required to pay an additional US\$3.75, which is the PACT (Protected Areas Conservation Tax). Funds from this tax help to maintain Belize's impressive tracts of protected natural areas. For more information, see www.pactbelize.org.

whenever possible. Tickets for both airlines can be booked through most of the hotels and tour agencies within the country. See p229 for details.

Boat

Fast motor launches zoom between Belize City, Caye Caulker and Ambergris Caye frequently every day. Even faster boats run between Corozal and Ambergris Caye, and a handy ferry service runs between Placencia and Mango Creek.

Be sure to bring sunscreen, a hat and clothing to protect you from the sun and the spray. If you sit in the bow, there's less spray, but you bang down harder when the boat goes over a wave. Sitting in the stern will give you a smoother ride, but you may get soaked.

Bus

Most Belizean buses are used US school buses, although a few 1st-class (don't get excited) services are available. The larger companies operate frequent buses along the country's three major roads. Smaller village lines tend to be run along local work and school schedules: buses run from a smaller town to a larger town in the morning, and then they return in the afternoon. Fares average about US\$1.50/2.50 per hour's ride on a local/express bus.

Each major bus company has its own terminal. Outside Belize City, bus drivers will pick up and drop off passengers at undesignated stops – either tell the driver's helper where you want to get off or flag them down on the roadside to get on.

Pilferage of luggage has been a problem, particularly on the Punta Gorda route. Give your luggage only to the bus driver or conductor, and watch as it is stored. Be there when the bus is unloaded and retrieve your luggage at once.

Car & Motorcycle

If you plan to drive in Belize, you'll need to bring a valid driver's license from your home country. Hiring cars can be expensive, and you must be 25 years or older and pay with credit card. Depending on the season, rental rates can hit US\$80 per day, and hammering out a deal with a taxi driver can get you a much better deal.

Taxi

Except for in Belize City, you're never really going to need a taxi (unless you are incredibly drunk, or lazy, or both). The towns just aren't that big. In Belize City, the fixed fare is US\$3 in the daytime, within the city. At night, the price gets a bit more flexible (in an upwards direction). Offer what you think is fair, based on the day rates, and don't get too het up over a dollar's difference.

BELIZE CITY

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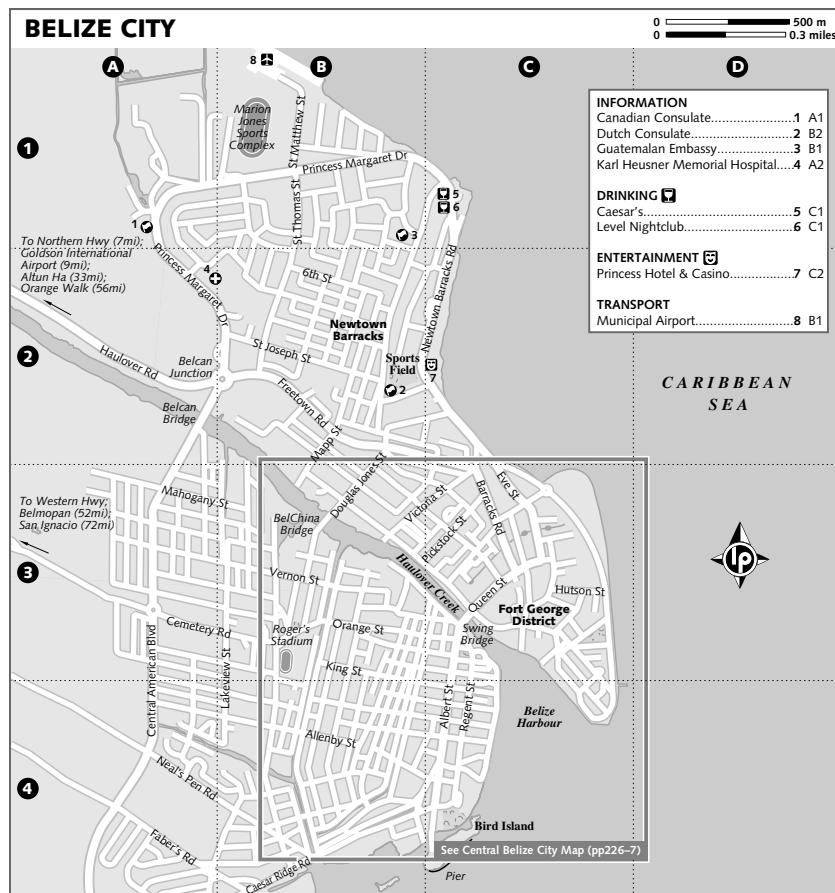
While it's no longer the capital, Belize City retains its importance. It's got the shops the schools and the population and there's a buzz on the streets unlike anywhere else in the country.

Sitting right on the coast and straddling the Haulover Creek, the city should be a picturesque place. It has its moments, but many of the old wooden houses have fallen victim to hurricanes or fire and the modern construction is of the fairly bland concrete-block style.

Still. There's no better place to see Belize in action. The bars and discos pack out almost nightly. Albert St comes alive during the day and the northern neighborhoods around Fort George and Newton Barracks boast kilometers of seaside parks, which fill up in the afternoons with locals catching a breeze.

ORIENTATION

Haulover Creek, a branch of the Belize River, runs through the middle of the city, separating the commercial center (bounded



by Albert, Regent, King and Orange Sts) from the slightly more genteel residential and hotel district of Fort George to the northeast.

Just south of the Swing Bridge and Haulover Creek is the old part of town, which can be slightly seedy, especially at night, and Belizeans (especially those from the northern suburbs) use the term 'southside' to refer to all things ghetto.

The Swing Bridge joins Albert St with Queen St, which runs through the Fort George district and its pleasant King's Park neighborhood. The bridge, a product of Liverpool's ironworks, was built in 1923 and is the only known working bridge of its type in the world. Its operators manually rotate

the bridge open at 5:30am and 5:30pm daily, just long enough to let tall boats pass and to bring most of the traffic in the city center to a halt.

At the bridge's northern end is the Belize Marine Terminal (Map pp226-7), which is used by motor launches traveling to Caye Caulker and Ambergris Caye.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Image Factory Art foundation (Map pp226-7; 91 N Front St; www.imagefactory.bz) The best selection of books by Belizean writers, plus many art-oriented titles.

Thrift & Book Town (Map pp226-7; 4 Church St, upstairs) An incredible jumble of new and used books on most subjects.

Emergency

Ambulance ☎ 90

Fire Department ☎ 90

General Emergency/Police ☎ 911

Tourist Police ☎ 227 6082

Internet Access

KGs Cyber Café (Map pp226-7; 60 King St; per hr US\$3; ☎ 9am-6pm) Unreliable connections, but not bad for the price.

Turton Library (Map pp226-7; 156 N Front St; per hr US\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat; ☎) Cheapest access in town, fast connections and air-con.

Laundry

G's Laundry (Map pp226-7; 22 Dean St) Charges US\$5 per load. Most hotels can arrange laundry service for you at similar prices.

Medical Services

Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital (Map p224; ☎ 223 1548; Princess Margaret Dr) In the northern part of town.

Money

Banks are mostly on Albert St, just south of the Swing Bridge. The following have ATMs that accept foreign cards.

First Caribbean International Bank (Map pp226-7; 21 Albert St; ☎ 8:30am-2:30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-4:30pm Fri)

Belize Bank (Map pp226-7; 60 Market Sq; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Post

Post office (Map pp226-7; N Front St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) Facing the Marine Terminal building.

Telephone

BTL (Map pp226-7; cnr Albert & Church Sts; ☎ Mon-Sat; ☎) Sells phonecards and has private cabins with air-con where you can make local and international calls.

Tourist Information

Belize Tourism Board (BTB; ☎ 223 1910; www.belize-tourism.org; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri; Tourist Village (☎ 223 5623); international airport (☎ 225 3412) At the time of writing, the main office was way out on the Northern Hwy, but a new central office should be running at the corner of Regent and South Sts by the time you get here. Ask for a copy of *Destination Belize* (free) for a run-down on many tourist services in the country.

Belize Audubon Society (Map pp226-7; ☎ 223 5004; www.belizeaudubon.org; 12 Fort St) Offers information on national parks and wildlife reserves throughout the country.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Yes, there is petty crime in Belize City, but it's not as bad as some doomsayers will tell you. Take the same commonsense precautions that you would in any major city. Don't flash wads of cash, expensive camera equipment or other signs of wealth. Don't leave valuables in your hotel room. Don't use or deal in illicit drugs. Don't walk alone at night, and avoid deserted streets, even in daylight.

It's always better to walk in pairs or groups and to stick to major streets in the city center, Fort George and King's Park. Especially avoid walking along Front St south and east of the Swing Bridge; this is a favorite area for muggers.

Report any incidents or hassles to the BTB or the Tourist Police so staff will be aware of trouble spots and patterns.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

In just a few hours it's possible to take in many of the city's major sights and sounds by foot, which are all in central Belize City (Map pp226-7).

GETTING INTO TOWN

From the Airport

The taxi fare to or from the international airport is US\$20. It's a half hour (3km) walk from the air terminal out along the access road to the Northern Hwy, where it's easy to catch a bus going either north or south.

From the Bus Station

The National bus station (Map p224) is on the west bank of the Collet canal, about five-minutes' walk from the Swing Bridge. As you exit the terminal, turn left, then take the first right along Orange St. This is a dodgy area – if you arrive at night, it's worth paying the US\$3 for a taxi to your hotel.

CENTRAL BELIZE CITY

INFORMATION

- Atlantic Bank Limited.....1 C4
- Belize Audubon Society.....2 E4
- Belize Bank.....3 D3
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- Mama Chen's Guest House.....28 E2
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0 200 m
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Central Belize City

Starting from the Swing Bridge, walk south along Regent St, one block inland from the shore. The large, modern **Commercial Center** to the left, just off the Swing Bridge, replaced a ramshackle market dating from 1820. The ground floor holds a food market; offices and shops are above.

As you continue down Regent St, you can't miss the prominent **Court House**, built in 1926 as the headquarters for Belize's colonial administrators. It still serves administrative and judicial functions.

Battlefield Park is on the right across from the Court House. Always busy with vendors, loungers, con artists and other slice-of-life segments of Belize City society, the park offers welcome shade in the midday heat.

Turn left just past the Court House and walk one block to the waterfront street, called Southern Foreshore, to find the **Bliss Institute**. Belize City's prime cultural institution, it's home to the National Institute for Culture and History, which stages periodic exhibits, concerts and theatrical works. Baron Bliss was an Englishman with a happy name and a Portuguese title who came here on his yacht to fish. When he died – without ever actually setting foot on the mainland – he left the bulk of his wealth in trust to the people of Belize. Income from the trust has paid for roads, market buildings, schools, cultural centers and many other worthwhile projects over the years.

Continue walking south to the end of Southern Foreshore, then south on Regent St to the **House of Culture** (☎ 227 3050; admission US\$5; 🕒 8:30am–4:30pm Mon–Fri), built in 1814. Formerly called Government House, this was the residence of the governor-general until Belize attained independence in 1981. Today it holds the tableware once used at the residence, along with exhibits of historic photographs and occasional special exhibits. The admission price is a bit steep to look at old crockery, but you can stroll around the pleasant grounds for free.

Down beyond the House of Culture you'll come to **Albert Park**, which gets nice sea breezes and has a well-maintained playground, and **Bird Island**, a recreation area with a basketball court and an open-air restaurant that serves snacks and cool drinks.

Inland from the House of Culture, at the corner of Albert and Regent Sts, is **St John's Cathedral**, the oldest Anglican church in Central America, dating from 1847.

A block southwest of the cathedral is **Yarborough Cemetery**, whose gravestones outline the turbulent history of Belize going back to 1781.

Walk back to the Swing Bridge northward along Albert St, the city's main commercial thoroughfare. Note the unlikely little **Hindu temple** between South and Dean Sts.

Northeastern Neighborhoods

Heading straight along Queen St from the Swing Bridge, you'll soon come to the city's quaint wooden central police headquarters. At the end of Queen St, look left to see the old Belize prison, now the **Museum of Belize** (admission US\$5, ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat). The top floor of the museum features rotating exhibitions on Maya life while the ground floor focuses on the history of different towns in Belize.

Turning right down Gabourel you'll pass the US embassy, set among some pretty Victorian houses. Continue on Gabourel La and take a left at Hutson St to get to the sea, where if you head south (a right turn) on Marine Pde you'll pass **Memorial Park**, the Chateau Caribbean Hotel and the Radisson Fort George Hotel. At the southern tip of the peninsula you'll reach the **Baron Bliss Tomb**, next to the Fort George lighthouse. A small park here offers good views of the water and the city.

Walk back to the Swing Bridge along Fort St (which eventually turns into Front St). The **Image Factory Art Foundation** (81 N Front St; ☎ 9am–noon & 2:30–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat), near the Marine Terminal, displays work by Belizean artists.

SLEEPING

Budget accommodations are mainly clustered around the Marine Terminal, and the area a little to the north. A 9% lodging tax will be added to the cost of your room. In addition, some hotels will tack on a service charge, often around 10%. Prices listed here (and throughout this chapter) include tax and service charge. In low season, you may be able to bargain your way out of paying either or both of these.

The following are in Central Belize City (Map pp226–7).

SEA Guest House (☎ 223 6798; 18 Gabourel La; r from US\$15) One of the old backpacker standbys, the SEA keeps it real with foam mattresses in breezy upstairs rooms.

Smokin' Balam Guest House (☎ 223 3969; smokinbalam2@yahoo.com; 129 N Front St; s/d US\$13/16, with bathroom US\$23; ☎) With a tiny deck overlooking the river, this hotel-giftshop–internet café has a range of spacious-enough, basic rooms.

Seaside Guest House (☎ 227 8339; 3 Prince St; dm US\$15, s/d US\$25/38, with bathroom US\$35/48) A long-time backpackers favorite it's set in a wooden Caribbean style house up on the 2nd floor, so there is plenty of breeze. The rooms aren't huge and the linoleum floors don't add much charm-wise, but the place attracts an interesting crowd.

Barracks Rd Guest House (☎ 223 6671; 12 Barracks Rd; r with/without bathroom US\$25/20) This guesthouse has some good-sized rooms in a quiet location. The shady sitting area is the best thing about this place. Enter from the lane beside the sign.

Mama Chen's Guest House (☎ 223 2057; 5 Eve St; r with/without bathroom US\$30/20) Formerly the Downtown Guest House, Mama has renovated the downstairs rooms, which are now modern and fresh, if a little cramped.

Belcove Hotel (☎ 227 3054; www.belcove.com; 9 Regent St W; s/d US\$21/28, with bathroom US\$32/36; ☎) The Belcove has simple, clean rooms with fan. It's not on the best street in town, but the rooms are better than most of the budget competition – big, clean and well ventilated. Out back, there's a lovely communal balcony overlooking the river. Pay an extra US\$10 for air-con and TV.

Three Sisters Guest House (☎ 203 5729; 36 Queen St; s/d with bathroom US\$27/30) In a new and improved location, this old favorite still has homey, spacious rooms and a friendly family atmosphere. Bathrooms are spotless and beds newish.

Isabel Guest House (☎ 207 3139; 3 Albert St; s/d with bathroom US\$28/33) This is a friendly, family-run place, offering three airy and spotless rooms with plenty of homey decoration. Enter from the stairway out back.

EATING

Belize City's restaurants present a well-rounded introduction to Belizean cuisine, as well as options for reasonable and tasty foreign meals.

Belizeans usually eat their main meal in the afternoon, so later in the day you may find that restaurants have run out of, or are no longer serving, their traditional menu items. The following are in Central Belize City (Map pp226–7).

Big Daddie's (2nd fl, Commercial Center; breakfast from US\$3.50, lunch US\$3–5) It's good for hearty meals at low prices. Lunch is served cafeteria-style from 11am and lasts until the food is gone. Breakfasts of fry jacks (fried tortilla dough), eggs, beans and bacon are US\$3.50, burgers about US\$2. Head upstairs for river views.

Dit's Restaurant (50 King St; mains US\$5, burgers US\$2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A homey place with a loyal local clientele, Dit's offers huge portions at low prices and serves up the stew chicken you'll be dreaming about long after you've returned home. Homemade cakes and pies make a good dessert at US\$1 per slice.

Bird's Isle Restaurant (Bird's Isle; mains US\$8–12; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon–Sat) Down at the south end of town, this place serves up good burgers and reasonably priced meals in a shady, open-air location.

Jambel's (2B King St; mains from US\$10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Jambel's specializes in Jamaican-Belizean food (Jam Bel, get it?). The leafy courtyard is a favorite with travelers, and the menu features plenty of funky seafood dishes, soups and salads. Draft beer is available.

Moon Clusters Coffee House (25 Daly St; ☎ 9am–6pm) The coolest café in town, serving up six types of espresso, frappuccino and donuts and pastries. The Attitude Adjuster (five shots of espresso) is not recommended for those with heart conditions.

Brodie's (Map pp226–7; 2 Albert St; ☎ 8:30am–7pm Mon–Fri, 8:30am–5pm Sat, 8:30am–1pm Sun) This department store has the best downtown grocery supplies for picnics and long bus trips.

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

Weekends are your best bet to party in Belize City. There are a few places to have a beer in the center, but the real action takes place 1.2 miles (2km) north, about a US\$3 taxi ride.

Big Apple 3K (Map pp226–7; Regent St W) This is the best bar in the center, with a breezy deck out back and live music Friday through Sunday.

King St Station (Map pp226–7; King St) Poolside out back of Bellevue Hotel is a good place to grab a few beers. Friday nights you can get your karaoke on.

Caesar's (Map p224; Newtown Barracks Rd) A good place to start your night, Caesar's caters to a mostly Latino crowd – the music and the action on the small dance floor testify to this. The crowd starts turning up at about 10:30pm.

Level Nightclub (Map p224; 190 Newtown Barracks Rd; admission US\$5) Just south of Caesar's, the Level

is a bigger place playing classic pop remixes and other commercial dance tracks. It's fairly empty until about 11:30pm.

ENTERTAINMENT

Princess Hotel & Casino (Map p224; Newtown Barracks Rd) This is the only cinema in Belize City; check daily papers for what's showing. Also here are a bowling alley–video arcade, a couple of upmarket bars and, of course, the casino.

The **Bliss Institute** (Map pp226–7; ☎ 227 2458; Southern Foreshore) Belize's fanciest entertainment venue hosts occasional concerts and plays. Stop by for their monthly program.

SHOPPING

Sings (Map pp226–7; Albert St; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat) This is the first place to check for inexpensive souvenirs and presents, including a full range of Belikin paraphernalia.

National Handicrafts Centre (Map pp226–7; 3 Fort St; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Sat) This has an excellent selection of Belizean crafts, from wood carvings to artwork, Maya textiles to tourist tat. Despite being on just about every bus tour's itinerary, prices are reasonable.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For information on international travel to Belize City, see p222. Belize City's Municipal Airport (TZA; Map p224) is 1.5 miles (2.5km) north of the city center, on the shore. You can take domestic flights from the international terminal, but it's always cheaper (sometimes way cheaper) to depart from the Municipal Airport.

Local Belizean airlines include the following two:

Maya Island Air (☎ 223 1140; www.mayaairways.com)
Tropic Air (☎ 223 5671; www.tropicair.com)

There are two main domestic air routes: Belize City–Caye Caulker–San Pedro–Corozal; and Belize City–Dangriga–Placencia–Punta Gorda. Fares and duration are similar on both airlines, and there are hourly departures on most routes during daylight hours.

Caye Caulker US\$26; 20min
Corozal US\$61; 45min flying time, but you have to connect with another flight in San Pedro
Dangriga US\$30; 15min
Placencia US\$59; 35min
Punta Gorda US\$76; 1hr
San Pedro US\$26; 20min

Boat

Fast motor launches zoom between Belize City, Caye Caulker and Ambergris Caye frequently every day.

The **Belize Marine Terminal** (Map pp226-7; ☎ 223 5752; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com; N Front St) at the north end of the Swing Bridge, is the main dock for boats to the northern cayes.

The efficient Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association operates fast, frequent launches between Belize City and Caye Caulker (US\$7.50) and San Pedro (US\$10) on Ambergris Caye, with stops on request at Caye Chapel (US\$7.50) and St George's Caye (US\$12.50). Boats leave roughly every hour from 8am to 5pm. Against the wind, the trip to Caulker takes 30 to 45 minutes. The San Pedro ride takes 45 minutes to an hour.

Bus

National Transportation (Map pp226-7; ☎ 227 2255; West Collet Canal) has a near monopoly on the Belizean bus scene, with **James Transportation** (☎ in Punta Gorda 702 2049) also running some of the routes heading south. National has their own terminal, while James buses leave from the street outside it. For information on getting to the terminal, see p225. Below is a list of popular destinations. Note that while local buses are marginally cheaper, express buses are generally much comfier and faster.

Belmopan local/express US\$2/3.50; 1hr; half-hourly departures

Benque Viejo del Carmen local/express US\$4/6; 3hr; half-hourly departures

Chetumal (Mexico) local/express US\$5/7; 4hr

Corozal local/express US\$4.50/6; 3hr; hourly departures

Dangriga local/express US\$5/7; 3-4hr; regular departures

Orange Walk local/express US\$2.50/3.50; 2hr; hourly departures

Placencia local/express US\$10/13; 4hr; regular departures

Punta Gorda local/express US\$11/13; 8-10hr; regular departures

San Ignacio local/express US\$3.50/5.50; 3hr; half-hourly departures

GETTING AROUND

Taxi

Trips by taxi within Belize City (including to/from Municipal Airport) cost US\$3 for one or two people and, oddly, US\$8 for three or four. If you phone for a cab instead of hailing one on the street, the price may go up. Secure the price in advance and perhaps check first with hotel staff about what's reasonable.

THE NORTHERN CAYES

Belize's go-to place for water-based fun are two tiny cayes to the northeast of Belize City. Diving, snorkeling, windsurfing, sailing – it's all here. Protected sea grass along the shoreline doesn't really encourage swimmers, and most people swim off docks that jut into deeper water. If you just want to laze around on the beach, southern towns such as Hopkins (p252) or Placencia (p253) might be a better bet.

Caye Caulker is commonly thought of as the low-budget island, where hotels and restaurants are less expensive than on the resort-conscious Ambergris Caye, though with Caulker's booming popularity its residents are fighting to keep the distinction.

See p252 for details on the cayes further south.

CAYE CAULKER

pop 1300

A short hop from Belize City, Caye Caulker remains a backpacker favorite. Prices here are reasonable by comparison and there's none of the exclusive air found on the other cayes.

For all practical purposes, Caulker's a tiny place. You could make a tour of it in less than two hours.

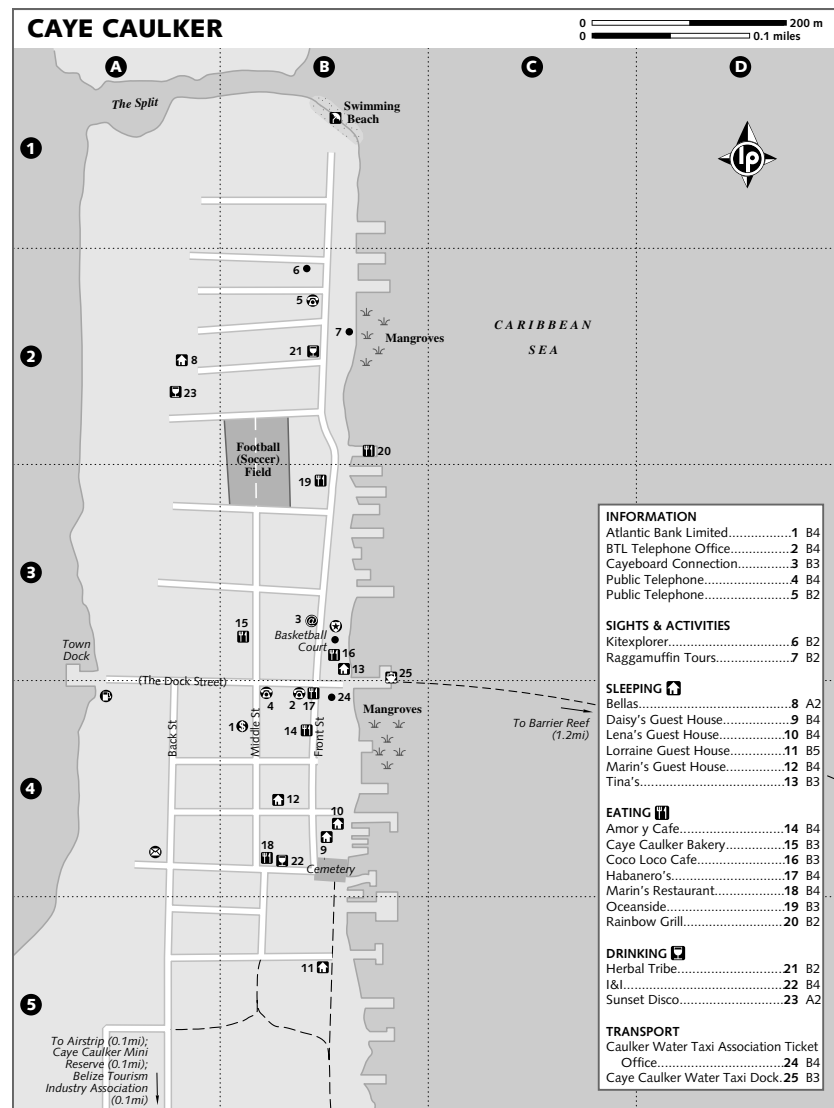
The village is located on the southern portion of the island. Actually, Caulker is two islands, since Hurricane Hattie split the island just north of the village. The split is called, simply, the Split (or the Cut). It has a tiny beach, with swift currents running through it. North of the Split is mostly undeveloped land, and part of it has been declared a nature reserve.

The water's good for swimming here, but sea grass is the problem. Jump off a dock, or head north to the Split.

Orientation & Information

The village has two principal streets: Front St to the east and Back St to the west. The distance from the Split in the north to the village's southern edge is little more than a half mile (0.8km).

South of the village is the **Belize Tourism Industry Association** (☎ 226 2251), on the site of the **Caye Caulker Mini Reserve**. Here you can get information on what to see and do on the island, then stroll an interpretive trail identifying the



island's flora and fauna. Call first, as hours are irregular. Caye Caulker has its own website (www.gocayecaulker.com).

Atlantic Bank Limited (Middle St; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) does cash advances on Visa card and has a Visa/MasterCard ATM.

Cayeboard Connection (Front St; per hr US\$6) provides internet access.

Activities

The surf breaks on the barrier reef, easily visible from the eastern shore of Caye Caulker. However, don't attempt to swim out to it – the local boaters speed their powerful craft through these waters and are completely heedless of swimmers. Swim only in protected areas.

A short boat ride takes you out to the reef to enjoy some of the world's most exciting **snorkeling, diving** (including the shark-filled Blue Hole) and **fishing**.

Boat trips are big business on the island. Virtually all of the island residents are trustworthy boaters, but it's still good to discuss price, number of people on the boat (which can become crowded), duration, areas to be visited and the seaworthiness of the boat. Boat and motor should be in good condition. Even sailboats should have motors as the weather can change quickly here.

Several places in town rent water-sports equipment. Snorkeling gear and beach floats each cost around US\$5 per day, sit-on sea kayaks US\$7.50 per hour, and a Hobie Cat sailboat US\$20 per hour.

With their calm waters protected by the reef, near constant onshore winds and sweet water temperature, the cayes are making a name for themselves as a kitesurfing location. **Kitexplorer** (☎ 623 8403; www.kitexplorer.com; off Front St; ☹ Nov-Jul) offers introductory, refresher and advanced courses, as well as renting equipment to licensed, experienced kitesurfers. Courses start from US\$130.

DIVING THE BLUE HOLE

If you've ever seen a tourism poster for Belize, you probably know what the Blue Hole looks like – a lot of people come to Belize just to dive it. Situated in the middle of Lighthouse Reef, it's a sinkhole of startling blue water about 400ft (122m) deep and 1000ft (305m) wide.

After a fast descent to 130ft (40m), you swim beneath a stalactite-laden overhang and among a variety of reef sharks (black tips, bulls, lemons and maybe hammerheads or tiger sharks).

The dive can be undertaken with an open-water diving license, and can be arranged with nearly every dive shop on the cayes. Prices are around US\$190 for a day trip (which involves three dives).

Tours

A variety of inland trips can be arranged from the cayes. The most popular is the Altun Ha river trip, which stops at Maruba Resort (about 20km north of Altun Ha) for lunch, swimming and horseback riding. The cost is US\$80.

One tour gaining in popularity is with **Raggamuffin Tours** (☎ 226 0348; www.raggamuffintours

.com), which offers a three-day, two-night sailing trip (US\$275), camping on Tobacco and Rendezvous Cayes. There are plenty of opportunities for snorkeling and fishing along the way to Placencia and you arrive in time to meet up with the *Gulf Cruza*, which heads to Honduras (see p255). If you're heading south, not interested in the mainland and want to see some more of the cayes, this is the trip for you.

Arrange bird-watching, nature and mangrove tours through the **Caye Caulker Mini Reserve** (☎ 226 2251). The cost is US\$15 per person in groups or US\$25 for one person.

Sleeping

Daisy's Guest House (☎ 226 0150; s/d US\$11/18) Has some of the cheapest rooms on the island, and not a bad deal, either – spacious and airy, but basic. Get one upstairs where the ventilation's better.

Bellas (☎ 226 0360; monkeybite38@yahoo.com; dm US\$8, s/d US\$11/22, with bathroom US\$19/22) It's a new, low-key little place with much more of a backpacker's vibe than the other budget joints on the island. Rooms are set in the main wooden building or rustic cabins in the yard. Camping is possible for US\$6 per person and there's free kitchen and kayak use for guests.

Tina's (☎ 226 0351; dm US\$9, r US\$20) Set in a classic old two-storey building right on the beachfront, the rooms and dorms provide just enough comfort without going over the top.

Marin's Guest House (☎ 226 0444; r US\$15, with bathroom US\$20) Not on the beach, but has some of the beachiest atmosphere in town. Simple wooden bungalows and rooms are arranged around a sandy garden. There are plenty of hammocks and shady deck chairs.

Lorraine Guest House (☎ 226 0002; d with/without bathroom US\$25/15) By far the cheapest beachside bungalows in town. They're in need of a paint-job, but they're a bargain for the location.

Lena's Guest House (☎ 226 0106; r with bathroom US\$30) Right down on the beachfront, Lena's offers a decent deal – big, clean rooms with newish beds and overhead fans. The wide communal balconies have excellent views.

Eating

You'll find prices higher here than on the mainland, though not as high as the restaurants in San Pedro. The seafood is good, but don't forget your old friend, stew chicken.

Do your part to avoid illegal fishing: don't order lobster outside its mid-June to mid-February season or conch outside of October to July.

Caye Caulker Bakery (Middle St) The place to pick up fresh bread, rolls and similar goodies.

Amor y Cafe (breakfast about US\$5; ☎ 6-11:30am) If it's breakfast you're after, this is one of the hot spots. There are only a few tables, but homemade bread, fresh fruit and excellent coffee hit the spot.

Marin's Restaurant (meals around US\$9; ☎ lunch & dinner) Up on the 2nd floor among the treetops, this place serves up hearty Belizean fare and seafood dishes.

Coco Loco Cafe (sandwiches US\$5; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) The best range of sandwiches, bagels and cakes come out of this friendly little café out the back of a gift shop-art gallery. There's good coffee, too.

Oceanside (meals US\$8-12; ☎ dinner) This place has the liveliest beach barbecue on the island. Staff put tables out across the street at night and serve good-value seafood such as blackened snapper fillets (US\$8). It's also a great place for live music.

Habanero's (mains US\$12-20; ☎ dinner) By far the most atmospheric place to eat in town. Dine by the light of a hurricane lamp and enjoy the seafood kebabs in coconut sauce (US\$20) while gazing through the extensive cocktail list.

Rainbow Grill (mains US\$10-25; ☎ lunch & dinner) Set out on a deck over the water, this is one of the more popular eating-drinking places in town. Prices are reasonable and daily specials (such as two big lobster tails for US\$23) are an excellent deal.

Drinking & Nightlife

Herbal Tribe (Front St) Of the multitude of happy hours, this bar has the best atmosphere. It's a breezy place with mellow grooves and two rum drinks for US\$2.50 from 6pm to 8pm.

Sunset Disco (US\$5; ☎ from midnight) On the west side of the island, this disco has weekend dances and a rooftop bar with snacks.

I&I is the happening reggae bar; the **Oceanside** (Front St) often hosts live bands.

Getting There & Away

Maya Island Air (☎ 226 0012; www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 226 0040; www.tropicair.com) offer regular flights between Caye Caulker, Ambergris Caye (US\$26) and the Belize City air-

ports (international terminal US\$47, domestic US\$26).

The **Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association** (☎ 226 0992; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com) runs boats to Belize City (US\$7.50) and Ambergris Caye (US\$7.50). The schedule is posted outside their office near the boat dock. Water taxis also run to St George's Caye and Caye Chapel.

Getting Around

Caulker is so small that most people walk. If need be, you can rent a bicycle (US\$10 per day) or golf cart (US\$50 per day) or use the golf-cart taxi service, which costs US\$5 for a one-way trip anywhere on the island.

AMBERGRIS CAYE & SAN PEDRO

pop 10,500
By far the most developed of the cayes, Ambergris is still fairly laid-back. San Pedro is a true town – more impressive in a lot of ways than the nation's capital, but there are enough sandy streets and beachside bars to maintain the impression of a tropical paradise.

Outside of town, mostly to the south, large resorts and gated retirement villages are springing up with frightening regularity. Even so, there are still a surprising amount of budget-friendly establishments in the downtown area.

Most of the island's population lives in the town of San Pedro, near the southern tip. The barrier reef is only a half mile (800m) east of San Pedro.

San Pedro started life as a fishing town but is now Belize's prime tourist destination. More than half of the tourists who visit Belize fly straight to San Pedro and use it as their base for excursions elsewhere.

Orientation

San Pedro has three main north-south streets, which used to be called Front St (to the east), Middle St and Back St (to the west). Now these streets have tourist names – Barrier Reef Dr, Pescador Dr and Angel Coral Dr – but some islanders still use the old names.

The river at the end of Pescador Dr is as far as you can go by car. From there, you can cross the river on a toll bridge (US\$5 return) to reach a bike and golf-cart trail that runs north for at least 13km. Most travelers take the road only as far as Sweet Basil for lunch, or the Palapa Bar for drinks, before heading back to San Pedro.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Barefoot Books (Pescador Dr; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) A good range of new and used books, including guide-books, birding and marine-life texts.

INTERNET ACCESS

Caribbean Connection (Barrier Reef Dr; per hr US\$4)

LAUNDRY

Several laundromats lie at the southern end of Pescador Dr, among them **Nellie's Laundromat** (per pound US\$1).

MEDICAL SERVICES

Lion's Club Medical Clinic (☎ 226 2851; Lion St)

Across the street from the Maya Island Air terminal at the airport.

San Carlos Medical Clinic (☎ 226 2918; Pescador Dr)

Just south of Caribeña St, it treats ailments and does blood tests. There's also a pharmacy and pathology lab on site.

MONEY

You can change money easily in San Pedro, and US dollars and traveler's checks are accepted in most establishments. Major banks are:

Atlantic Bank Limited (Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3pm Mon, Tue, Thu; 8am-1pm Wed, 8am-1pm & 3-6pm Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat)

Belize Bank (Barrier Reef Dr; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, 8am-1pm & 3-6pm Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) Has a Visa/MasterCard ATM.

POST

Post office (Buccaneer St; 8am-noon Mon-Fri, 1-5pm Mon-Thu, 1-4:30pm Fri) Off Barrier Reef Dr.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Various private roadside **tourist kiosks** (☎ 10am-9pm) are scattered around town – they're tour consolidators and make commissions by gathering groups together for tours. Otherwise they can be reasonably helpful with general enquiries. Tourist information is also available on the caye's own website (www.ambergis.com).

Activities

Ambergis is good for all water sports: scuba diving, snorkeling, sailboarding, boating, swimming, deep-sea fishing and sunbathing. Many island hotels have their own dive shops, which rent equipment, provide instruction and organize diving excursions.

In fact, just about any local can put you in touch with someone organizing water-sports trips.

Snorkeling and picnicking excursions cost from US\$30. The going rental rate for a snorkel, mask and fins is US\$8. Manatee-watching off Goff's Caye can be added to a snorkeling trip (US\$105).

Sailsports Belize (☎ 226 4488; www.sailsportsbelize.com) rents windsurfers for US\$22 per hour and sailboats for US\$22 to US\$48 per hour; lessons are available. Kitesurfing courses are available from US\$165.

All beaches are public, and most waterside hotels and resorts are generous with their lounge chairs on slow days. While sandy beaches are plentiful, protected sea grass at the waterline makes entry from the shore not terribly pleasant, so you'll be swimming from piers. Swimming is best off the pier at Ramon's Village, south of town.

Tours

The **Winnie Estelle**, a 66-ft (21m) island trader moored at the Paradise Resort Hotel pier, at the north end of Barrier Reef Dr, goes out on daily snorkeling trips to Caye Caulker (US\$30 to US\$75).

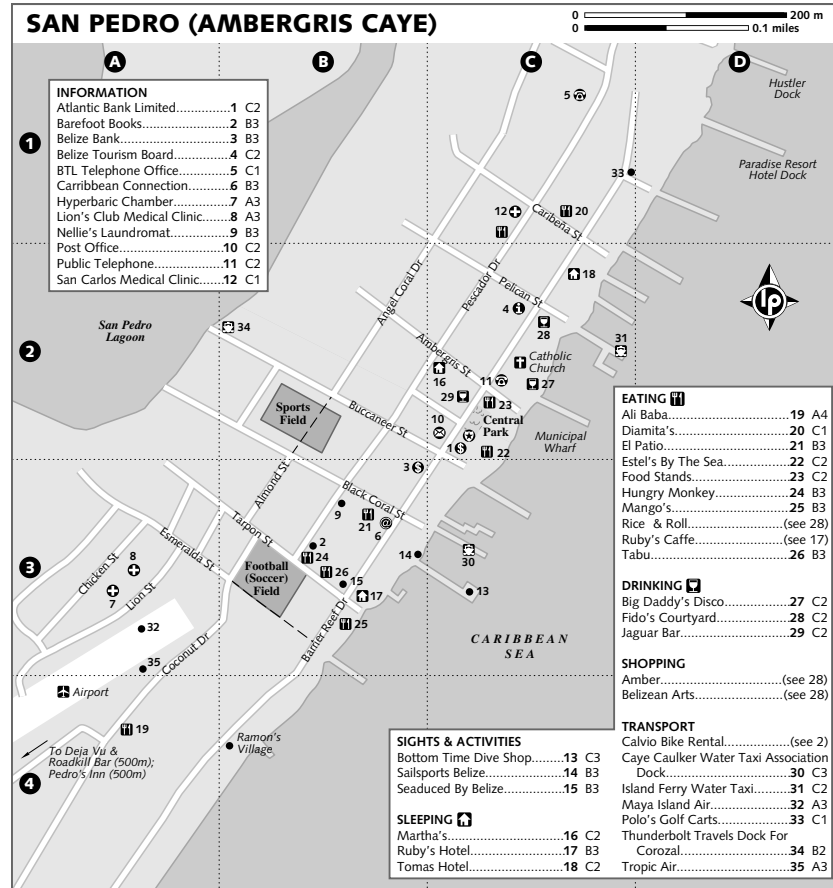
The **Reef Runner** glass-bottom boat, also found on Barrier Reef Dr, makes daily reef trips for US\$25 per person. The aptly named **Rum Punch II**, a wooden sailboat, runs sunset cocktail cruises for US\$25 (book at tour agents in town).

Tours are available to the Maya ruins at Altun Ha (US\$80) and Lamanai (US\$135) or beyond to the Belize Zoo, Xunantunich, Crooked Tree Bird Sanctuary, the Community Baboon Sanctuary, Mountain Pine Ridge and Tikal (Guatemala). Any hotel, travel agency or dive shop can fill you in on tours, or contact **Seaduced by Belize** (☎ 226 2254) or **Bottom Time Dive Shop** (☎ 226 2348).

Sleeping

Competition for guests on San Pedro is fierce, and taxi drivers are often rewarded commissions for bringing guests to hotels. Often this commission is tacked on to the cost of your room, so try to make reservations in advance or show up unescorted.

Pedro's Inn (☎ 226 3825; Coconut Dr; s/d US\$12.50/23, r with bathroom US\$50) Out on the residential side of the island, this has by far the cheapest single rooms in town. It's a simple place, lacking



in nearly every conceivable comfort, but the friendly vibe more than makes up for that.

Martha's (☎ 226 2778; miguelper@btl.net; Pescador Dr; s/d with bathroom US\$20/25) An excellent budget deal; it's not on the beach, but has spacious, well-appointed rooms. Don't get one at the back – you'll be listening to the party at Jaguar's Temple disco all night.

Tomas Hotel (☎ 226 2061; Barrier Reef Dr; r with bathroom US\$35) Anywhere else, these plain, functional rooms would be overpriced, but in the middle of San Pedro, big clean rooms like these tend to go for a whole lot more.

Ruby's Hotel (☎ 226 2063; Barrier Reef Dr; s/d with bathroom US\$20/40) Set in a classic wooden beachfront building, Ruby's has long been a backpacker favorite. Times have changed

since this was a hippy hangout, but the hotel hasn't much.

Eating

Several small cafés in the center of town serve cheap, simple meals. The best places for low-budget feasting are the stands in front of Central Park, where you can pick up a plate of stewed chicken with beans and rice, barbecue and other delicacies for about US\$2.

Ruby's Caffe (Barrier Reef Dr; snacks from US\$3) Next to Ruby's Hotel, this is a tiny place with good cakes and pastries but it opens at unpredictable hours.

Diamita's (meals US\$3.50; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Has a simple menu of well-priced items. Beware the large coffee – it's truly large.

Hungry Monkey (Pescador Dr; bread rolls from US\$5-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) If you're on the go, these rolls/subs hit the spot – made from fresh local ingredients on white or wholemeal bread.

Estel's by the Sea (Barrier Reef Dr; breakfast US\$6-8; ☎ breakfast & lunch) It's a rightly popular sandy-floored eatery right on the beach. Assemble your breakfast from the big menu inside, then chow down out front with views and breezes. Lunches (US\$8 to US\$20) aren't such a good deal, but breakfast is served all day.

El Patio (mains US\$6-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Not on the beach, but with a pleasant, beachy feel, this is some good eatin' at rock bottom (for San Pedro, anyway) prices.

Tabu (Vilma Linda Plaza, Tarpon St; burgers US\$8; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This hip little café serves up healthy breakfasts, bagels and burgers. There's a mouthwatering selection of homemade cakes and excellent coffee.

Ali Baba (Coconut Dr; mains US\$10-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) The Ali Baba serves some good Middle Eastern and Mediterranean food, although the jury's still out on the pickles in the falafel roll (US\$5).

Mango's (Barrier Reef Dr; mains US\$10-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) Offers creative, carefully prepared food by an award-winning chef. Lunches are gourmet sandwiches, dinner features international fare such as Argentine steaks and Guatemalan chicken and a range of seafood such as blackened snapper (US\$15) and coconut lobster (US\$18).

Rice & Roll (Upstairs, Fido's Courtyard, Barrier Reef Dr; meals US\$15-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) San Pedro's best sushi bar does an excellent job of it, with plenty of raw and cooked options served up by a real-deal sushi chef.

Drinking & Nightlife

Fido's Courtyard (Barrier Reef Dr) This bar, near Pelican St, is the landlubbers' favorite, with live music most nights.

Big Daddy's Disco (Barrier Reef Dr) Right next to San Pedro's church, this is a hot nightspot, often featuring live reggae, especially during winter.

Jaguar Bar (Barrier Reef Dr) Near Big Daddy's, this jungle-themed bar is often closed off-season, but it rocks in winter.

Deja Vu (Coconut Dr) A big air-conditioned disco south of town. Friday's the night to be here.

Roadkill Bar (Coconut Dr) Out front of the Deja Vu, this laid-back open-air bar often has live music.

Shopping

Belizean Arts (Fido's Courtyard) One of the best shopping spots, it sells ceramics, woodcarvings and paintings alongside affordable and tasteful knickknacks.

Amber (Fido's Courtyard) Sells handmade jewelry produced on the island.

Getting There & Away

Maya Island Air (☎ 226 2435; mayairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 226 2012; www.tropicair.com) offer several flights daily between San Pedro and the Belize City airports and to Corozal.

The **Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association** (☎ 226 0992; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com) runs boats between San Pedro, Caye Caulker and Belize City. Boats to Belize City (US\$10) via Caye Caulker (US\$7.50) leave from the public dock in San Pedro more or less hourly from 7am to 3:30pm.

Thunderbolt Travels (☎ 226 2904 in Belize City) has boats that depart San Pedro at 7am and 3pm daily for Corozal. One-way fares are US\$22.50.

Getting Around

You can walk to town from the airport in 10 minutes or less, and the walk from the boat docks is even shorter. A taxi from the airport costs US\$3 to any place in town, US\$6 to the hotels south of town.

Calvio Bike Rental (Pescador Dr) rents bikes for US\$8/38 per day/week.

Polo's Golf Carts (☎ 226 3542; Barrier Reef Dr) rents carts for US\$65/250 per day/week. You'll need a valid drivers' license.

Minivan taxis cost US\$2.50 for a one-way trip anywhere. The far north resorts are accessed by water taxi.

NORTHERN BELIZE

Much more Latin than the rest of the country, you'll find whatever Spanish you have useful here. The landscape is flat and lush, mostly given over to farming, although there are a couple of interesting and easily accessible wildlife reserves.

Some important Maya sites can be found here, too. The most popular, Lamanai, is reached by a riverboat ride which is a joy in itself, but the national favorite must be Altun Ha, whose image has been immortalized on banknotes and beer bottle labels.

BERMUDIEN LANDING COMMUNITY BABOON SANCTUARY

In 1985 local farmers organized to help preserve the endangered black howler monkey and its habitat. Care is taken to maintain the forests along the banks of the Belize River, where the black howler, found only in Belize, feeds, sleeps and – at dawn and dusk – howls (loudly and unmistakably).

At the **Community Baboon Sanctuary** (☎ 220 2181; www.howlermonkeys.org; admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm), in the village of Bermudian Landing, you can learn all about the black howler and the 200 other species of wildlife found in the reserve. A one-hour guided nature walk is included with your admission, arranged at the visitors center. Horseback riding is available for US\$25, as are three-hour canoe trips (US\$25) and 1½-hour night hikes (US\$10).

Sleeping & Eating

Rustic accommodations are available at the reserve but are best arranged in advance. There is a good basic restaurant in the visitors center. **Village homestays** (d with 2 meals US\$25) can be arranged here, too.

Nature Resort (☎ 223 3668; naturer@btl.net; d with/without bathroom US\$42/28) Adjacent to the visitors center, it rents well-maintained cabañas.

Howler Monkey Resort (☎ 220 2158; www.howlermonkeylodge.com; cabañas per person US\$15) Set on a bend in the river, this place has a curiously uncarved-for air, but it has a beautiful setting and accommodations are clean and good value.

Getting There & Away

The Community Baboon Sanctuary is in Bermudian Landing, 26 miles (42km) west of Belize City – an easy day trip from Belize City or the cays.

If you're driving, turn west off the Northern Hwy at the Burrell Boom turnoff (Mile 13). From there it's another 12 miles (20km) of dirt road to the sanctuary.

National operates buses to Bermudian Landing (US\$2, one hour). Some travelers catch one of the frequent Northern Hwy buses heading to the Mexican border, get off at Burrell Boom and hitch the 13 miles (8km) to the sanctuary. If you hitch, take the usual precautions.

ALTUN HA

Northern Belize's most famous Maya ruin is **Altun Ha** (admission US\$5; ☎ 9am-5pm), 34 miles (55km) north of Belize City along the Old

Northern Hwy. The site is near Rockstone Pond village, south of Maskall.

Altun Ha (Maya for 'Rockstone Pond') was undoubtedly a small but rich and important Maya trading town, with agriculture also playing an essential role in its economy. Altun Ha had formed as a community by at least 600 BC, perhaps several centuries earlier, and the town flourished until the mysterious collapse of classic Maya civilization around AD 900.

Of the grass-covered temples arranged around the two plazas here, the largest and most important is the **Temple of the Masonry Altars** (Structure B-4), in Plaza B. The restored structure you see dates from the first half of the 7th century and takes its name from altars on which copal was burned and beautifully carved jade pieces were smashed in sacrifice.

In Plaza A, Structure A-1 is sometimes called the **Temple of the Green Tomb**. Deep within it was discovered the tomb of a priest-king dating from around AD 600. Tropical humidity had destroyed the king's garments and the paper of the 'painted book' of the Maya that was buried with him, but many riches were intact: shell necklaces, pottery, pearls, stingray spines used in bloodletting rites, jade beads and pendants, and ceremonial flints.

Modern toilets and a drinks shop are on site.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping, though not strictly legal, is sometimes permitted; ask at the site.

Mayan Wells Restaurant (☎ 220 6039; cabin US\$30, camping per person US\$5, meals US\$6; ☎ restaurant breakfast & lunch; ☎) About 2km before reaching Altun Ha, this is a popular stop for lunch or refreshments. The one cabin is simple but adequate and camping is allowed on the premises; bathroom and shower facilities are available.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to visit Altun Ha is on one of the many tours running daily from Belize City (US\$40 half day including admission); most travel agents in town can line you up with one. You can also tour from San Pedro on Ambergris Caye (see p234).

To get here by public transportation, catch an afternoon bus departing the National Bus Terminal (Map pp226-7) for the town of Maskall, north of Altun Ha. Get off at Lucky Strike, from where it's a 3.5km walk/hitch (on a very lightly trafficked road) to Altun Ha.

CROOKED TREE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Midway between Belize City and Orange Walk, 3.5 miles (5.5km) west of the Northern Hwy, lies the fishing and farming village of Crooked Tree. In 1984 the Belize Audubon Society succeeded in having 5 sq miles (12 sq km) around the village declared a **wildlife sanctuary** (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-4pm) principally because of the area's wealth of birdlife. The best time of year for wildlife watching is in May, when the water in the lagoon drops to its lowest level and the animals must come further out into the open to reach their food.

Day trips to Crooked Tree are possible, but it's best to stay the night so you can be here at dawn, when the birds are most active. Trails weave through the villages and you can spot plenty of species on your own, but you'll get further and see more on a guided tour. In fact, for those interested in viewing birds and other wildlife, a guided nature tour of this sanctuary is among the most rewarding experiences in Belize.

Tours cost US\$70 to US\$80 for groups of four (less per person for larger groups) and usually include a boat trip through the lagoon, a walk along the elevated boardwalk and viewing time atop the observation towers. Arrangements can be made through the visitors center or your hotel. More information can be obtained from the **Belize Audubon Society** (Map pp226-7; ☎ 223 5004; www.belizeaudubon.org; 12 Fort St, Belize City).

Sleeping & Eating

Rhaburn's Rooms (☎ 225 7035; s/d US\$10/15) On the other side of the cricket field from the visitor center, these are four neat wooden rooms in a friendly family house. The shared bathroom has hot water and there's a comfy balcony out front.

More **rooms** (s/d US\$10/15) are available in private houses around town. The visitor center has a map – ask which ones are currently operating.

You can camp at **Bird's Eye View Lodge** (☎ 205 7027; per person US\$6) and **Paradise Inn** (☎ 225 7044; per tent US\$10), which also rents good-value cabins with lagoon views from US\$40 for two people. Both of these places have good restaurants serving reasonably priced meals.

Getting There & Away

The road to Crooked Tree village is 30 miles (48km) up the Northern Hwy from Belize

City, 25 miles (40km) south of Orange Walk. The village is 3.5 miles (5km) west of the highway via a causeway over Crooked Tree Lagoon.

If you want to take a bus round-trip to Crooked Tree, you'll have to spend the night there. Jex Bus offers daily services departing Belize City's National bus station for Crooked Tree village at 4:30pm and 5:30pm daily; return trips leave Crooked Tree at 5am, 6:30am and 7am.

If you start early from Belize City or Corozal, you can bus to Crooked Tree Junction and walk or hitch the 3.5 miles (5.5km) to the village.

RÍO BRAVO CONSERVATION AREA

Protecting 240,000 acres (97,000 hectares) of tropical forest and its inhabitants, the Río Bravo Conservation Area is the flagship project of the Programme for Belize (PFB).

In addition to the wealth of plant and animal life here (including all five of Belize's cats – jaguar, puma, ocelot, jaguarundi and margay, 200 tree species and over 390 bird species), more than 60 Maya sites have been discovered on the land. The preeminent site is **La Milpa**, the third-largest Maya site in Belize, believed to have been founded in the late pre-Classic period. Its 5-acre Great Plaza (one of the largest discovered in the Maya world) is surrounded by four 27m-high pyramids.

La Milpa Field Station is near Gallon Jug on the road to Chan Chich Lodge. Visiting and transportation arrangements must be made in advance through **Programme for Belize** (PFB; Map pp226-7; ☎ 227 5616; www.pfbelize.org; 1 Eyre St, Belize City). The cost of a dorm/cabaña is US\$44/55 per person. La Milpa is a little tricky to get to, but there are a variety of methods – contact the PFB for details.

LAMANAI

By far the most impressive site in this part of the country is Lamanai, in its own archaeological reserve on the New River Lagoon near the settlement of Indian Church. Though much of the site remains unexcavated and unrestored, the trip to Lamanai, by motorboat up the New River, is an adventure in itself.

Take along a sun hat, sunblock, insect repellent, shoes (rather than sandals), lunch and water.

As with most sites in northern Belize, Lamanai ('Submerged Crocodile,' the original

Maya name) was occupied as early as 1500 BC, with the first stone buildings appearing between 800 and 600 BC. Lamanai flourished in late pre-Classic times, growing into a major ceremonial center with immense temples long before most other Mayan sites.

Unlike at many other sites, the Maya lived here until the coming of the Spanish in the 16th century. British interests later built a sugar mill, now in ruins, at Indian Church. The archaeological site was excavated by Canadian David Pendergast in the 1970s and 1980s.

New River Voyage

Most visitors opt to reach Lamanai by taking a spectacular boat ride up the New River from the Tower Hill toll bridge south of Orange Walk. On this trip, you motor 1½ hours upriver, between riverbanks that are crowded with dense jungle vegetation. En route, your skipper-guide points out the many local birds and will almost certainly spot a crocodile or two. You will also pass the Mennonite community at **Shipyard**. Finally you come to New River Lagoon – a long, broad expanse of water that can be choppy during the frequent rain showers – and the boat dock at Lamanai.

Exploring the Site

A tour of the **ruins** (admission US\$5; ☎ 9am-5pm) takes 90 minutes minimum, more comfortably two or three hours. Of the 60 significant structures identified here, the grandest is **Structure N10-43**, a huge, late pre-Classic building rising more than 111ft (34m) above the jungle canopy. It's been partially uncovered and restored. Not far from N10-43 is Lamanai's ball court, a smallish one, partially uncovered.

To the north along a jungle path is **Structure P9-56**, built several centuries later, with a huge stylized mask of a man in a crocodile-mouth headdress 13ft (4m) high emblazoned on its southwest face.

Near this structure are a small **temple** and a ruined **stela** that once stood on the temple's front face. Apparently some worshipers built a fire at the base of the limestone stela and later doused the fire with water. The hot stone stela, cooled too quickly, fractured and toppled. The stela's bas-relief carving of a majestic figure is extremely fine.

A small **museum** near the boat landing exhibits some interesting figurative pottery and large flint tools.

Getting There & Away

The operators will tell you different, but most tours are roughly the same. One reliable outfit is **Jungle River Tours** (☎ 302 2293; lamanaimayatur@btlnet.net; 20 Lovers' Lane, Orange Walk). River trips to Lamanai generally run at around US\$45 per person for a tour including lunch, guide, fruit and admission fees.

If you're really keen, you may be able to get a good deal for the boat trip only by going down to the boat landing at the toll bridge and negotiating with the fishermen there.

Though the river voyage is much more convenient and enjoyable, Lamanai can be reached by road (36 miles/58km) from Orange Walk via Yo Creek and San Felipe. A bus service from Orange Walk is available but limited, making a day trip impossible.

ORANGE WALK

pop 15,900

Nestled on a bend in the New River (the old one seems to have gone missing), Orange Walk is a small, fairly unremarkable town surrounded by citrus, papaya and sugarcane plantations. The country's biggest rum distillery is here, but most tourists are in town for the fascinating boat trip to the ruins at Lamanai (see opposite).

The Northern Hwy, called Queen Victoria Ave in town, serves as the main road. The center of town is shady Central Park, on the east side of Queen Victoria Ave. The town hospital is in the northern outskirts, readily visible on the west side of Northern Hwy.

Sleeping

Akihito Hotel (☎ 302 0185; 22 Queen Victoria Ave; r US\$15-35; 📶) Offering the best budget deals in town, the Akihito's cheaper rooms are serviceable concrete boxes with spotless shared bathrooms (and scorching hot water). The more expensive rooms have air-con, private bathrooms and cable TV.

Lamanai Riverside Retreat (☎ 302 3955; Lamanai Alley; r US\$30) It offers good-value cabins in a lovely setting down by the river, a five-minute walk south of town. The restaurant here is deservedly popular. The boats to Lamanai will pick you up here.

Orchid Palm Inn (☎ 322 0719; www.orchidpalminn.com; Queen Victoria Ave; r with fan/air-con US\$40/45; 📶) This is a reasonably classy new hotel right across from the bus stop. Beds are big and some of the furnishings surprisingly hip.

Eating

Mercy's Place (52 Queen Victoria Ave; burritos US\$2) This is a hole-in-the-wall taco and burrito joint that's hugely popular with the locals. It could be a bit dodgy for those with unaccustomed stomachs, however.

Happy Valley (32 Main St; meals US\$3-6) The happy Valley is popular for drinks (it can't be the loud pop music...surely) and its standard range of Chinese meals. It also serves good-value breakfasts from 7:30am.

Juanita's (8 Santa Ana St; meals from US\$4; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the Shell fuel station, this is a simple place with tasty local fare at low prices.

Lamanai Riverside Retreat (Lamanai Alley; meals US\$6-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Hugely popular with locals for its laid-back, breezy location and excellent prices, this riverside restaurant gives the feeling of calm and isolation, even though it's only a short walk from town.

Getting There & Away

Buses run hourly for Belize City (US\$2.50, two hours) and Corozal (US\$2, one hour), and points in between, with additional southbound runs in the early morning and northbound runs in the late afternoon to accommodate work and school schedules. All services use the bus stop on the corner of Queen Victoria Ave and St Peter St.

COROZAL

pop 9000

This gateway to Mexico (and the northern cayes) is far enough from the border to have the best of both worlds – that fascinating mix of cultures that border towns have, without the associated sleaze and hassle.

Corozal is a pretty place, with many parks and seaside promenades. South of town, retirees from the USA are moving in fast, attracted by the climate and easy-going lifestyle.

Though Maya have been living around Corozal since 1500 BC, modern Corozal dates from only 1849. In that year, refugees from the War of the Castes in Yucatán fled across the border to this safe haven. They founded a town and named it after the cohune palm, a symbol of fertility. For years it had the look of a typical Caribbean town, until Hurricane Janet roared through in 1955 and blew away many of the old wooden buildings on stilts. Much of Corozal's cinderblock architecture dates from the late 1950s.

Orientation & Information

Corozal is arranged around a town square in the Mexican style. You can walk easily to any place in town.

The main road is 7th Ave, which briefly skirts the sea before veering inland through town. The old town market and custom house has recently been converted to house the **BTB office** (☺ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) and the **Corozal museum** (admission free; ☺ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat).

The **Belize Bank** (☺ 8am-1pm Mon-Fri, 3-6pm Fri) on the north side of the plaza has a Visa/MasterCard ATM and offers currency exchange, as do various *casas de cambio* (currency exchange offices) around town.

Internet services are provided at **Cyber Zone** (Park St N).

Cerros Archaeological Site

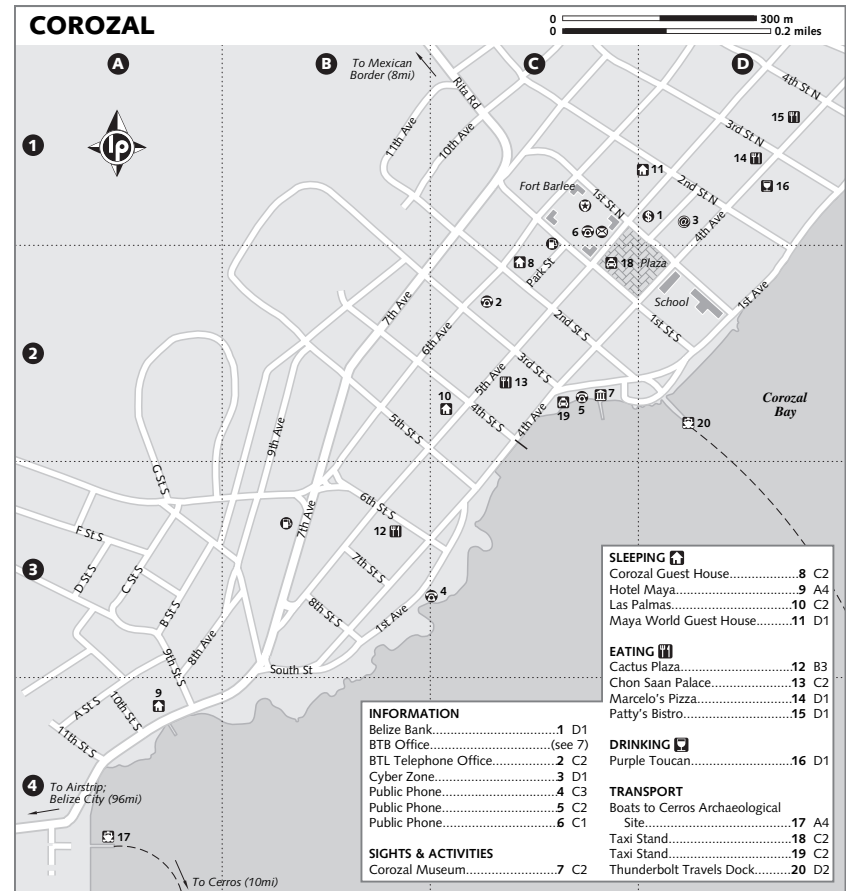
Cerros (also called Cerro Maya; admission US\$5; ☺ 8am-5pm) flourished as a coastal trading center in late pre-Classic times. Unlike at other Maya sites, little subsequent construction from the Classic and post-Classic periods covers the original structures here because, at around AD 150, Cerros reverted rapidly to a small, unimportant village. Thus the site has given archaeologists important insights into Maya pre-Classic architecture.

Climb **Structure 4**, a temple more than 65ft (20m) high, for stunning panoramic views. Though the site is still mostly a mass of grass-covered mounds, the center has been cleared and consolidated and it's easy to see how the plaza structures were designed to fit together. Also notable are the **canals** that ring the site,

GETTING TO CHETUMAL, MEXICO

Corozal is 8 miles (13km) south of the border crossing at Santa Elena–Subteniente López. Most of the frequent buses that travel between Chetumal (Mexico) and Belize City stop at Corozal. Otherwise, hitch a ride or hire a taxi (expensive at US\$12) to get to **Santa Elena**. Buses running between Corozal and Chetumal will wait for you to complete border formalities. You'll have to pay a tourist fee of around US\$19 to leave Belize.

See p56 for information on crossing the border from Mexico.



which have remained mysteriously clear of vegetation through the ages.

This small site is located on a peninsula 3.5 miles south of Corozal across the bay. Most people catch a boat to the site, but you can drive there on a rough dirt road. Tours (approximately US\$25 per person including guide) can be arranged through your hotel. You can also charter a boat (US\$50) or arrange for a fisherman to take you over to the site to explore independently. The boat trip takes about 15 minutes; then you walk 10 minutes to the site.

Sleeping

Corozal Guest House (☎ 402 0634; 22 6th Ave; r US\$22) There's a lot to be said for not staying in the

cheapest place in town, and this place says it all.

Maya World Guest House (☎ 624 4979; simple88 elegance@yahoo.ca; 16 2nd St N; s/d with bathroom US\$22/28) The big, simple rooms here are by far the best budget deal in town. Upstairs, there's a breeze and good sitting areas. Downstairs the rooms have bathrooms. All go for the same price.

Hotel Maya (☎ 422 2082; www.hotelmaya.net; 7th Ave; r with bathroom US\$32) On the main road between 9th and 10th Sts S, this is the long-time budget favorite. Breakfast is available and bikes rent for US\$10 per day.

Las Palmas (☎ 422 0196; www.hotellaspalmas.com; 123 5th Ave S; r with bathroom from US\$45) The old Nestor's, this place has been chintzed beyond recognition – floral bedspreads, big bathrooms

etc. The ground-floor rooms can get a little airless.

Eating

Marcelo's Pizza (25 4th Ave; mains US\$5-8; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) Marcelo's sells very cheesy pizzas (to match the décor, perhaps?), burgers (US\$2.50) and Belizean dishes in sweet air-con luxury.

Cactus Plaza (6 6th St S; mains US\$6-12; ☺ dinner Wed-Sun) This place serves some excellent, authentic Mexican dishes, such as tacos, *salbutes* (stuffed tortilla) and *panuchos* (fried tortilla spread with black bean paste and toppings) in a bright, clean environment.

Chon Saan Palace (5th Av; mains US\$6-15; ☺ lunch & dinner) It's the best Chinese restaurant in town, with a long menu and some pleasant decorations.

Patty's Bistro (13 4th Ave N; meals US\$8-12; ☺ lunch & dinner) Serves up some of the best home cooking in town, with walls covered in graffiti from satisfied diners.

Drinking & Nightlife

Cactus Plaza (6 6th St S) A lively spot for drinks. Most of the action happens on the sidewalk out front, but the disco inside gets pumping on weekends.

Purple Toucan (52 4th Ave) In the running for the title of seediest joint in town, this is mid-way between bar, disco and pool hall. The beer garden out the back is good for a drink or two.

Getting There & Away

Corozal has its own airstrip, about 1 mile (1.6km) south of the town center, reached by taxi (US\$5). It's only an airstrip, with no shelter or services. Taxis meet all incoming flights.

Maya Island Air (☎ 422 2333; mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 422 0356; www.tropicair.com) each have three flights daily between Corozal and San Pedro on Ambergris Caye (US\$39 one-way, 20 minutes). From San Pedro you connect with flights to Belize City and beyond.

Boats operated by **Thunderbolt Travels** (☎ 422 0026) departs Corozal at 7am and 3pm daily for San Pedro. One-way fares are US\$22.50.

Buses leave Corozal and head south via Orange Walk (US\$2.50, one hour) to Belize City (US\$6, three hours) at least every hour from 4am to 7:30pm, with extra buses in the morning.

WESTERN BELIZE

This region doesn't really jibe with your classic image of Belize. Out here, the largely unspoilt landscape is dotted with caves, mountain peaks rising to over 3000ft (900m), waterfalls and Maya sites. There are plenty of opportunities for exploration.

STARTING WEST ON THE WESTERN HIGHWAY

Heading west from Belize City along Cemetery Rd, you'll pass right through Lords Ridge Cemetery and soon find yourself on the Western Hwy. In 15 miles (25km) you'll pass Hattieville, founded in 1961 after Hurricane Hattie wreaked destruction on Belize City, and in another 13 miles (21km) you'll come to the Belize Zoo.

Belize Zoo & Tropical Education Centre

In natural surroundings on 29 acres (12 hectares), the **Belize Zoo & Tropical Education Centre** (☎ 220 8004; www.belizezoo.org; Mile 29, Western Hwy; adult/child US\$8/4; ☺ 8:30am-5pm except major holidays) displays native wildlife. On a self-guided tour (45 to 60 minutes) you'll see over 125 native animals, including jaguars, ocelots, howler monkeys, peccaries, vultures, storks, crocodiles, tapirs and *gibnuts*. The zoo is on the north side of the highway (a sign marks the turnoff).

Competing for customers just west of the zoo on the Western Hwy are **Cheers** (Km 50 Western Hwy) and **Amigo's** (Km 52 Western Hwy). Each serves Belizean, Mexican and American dishes accompanied by ice-cold Belikins, all at moderate prices.

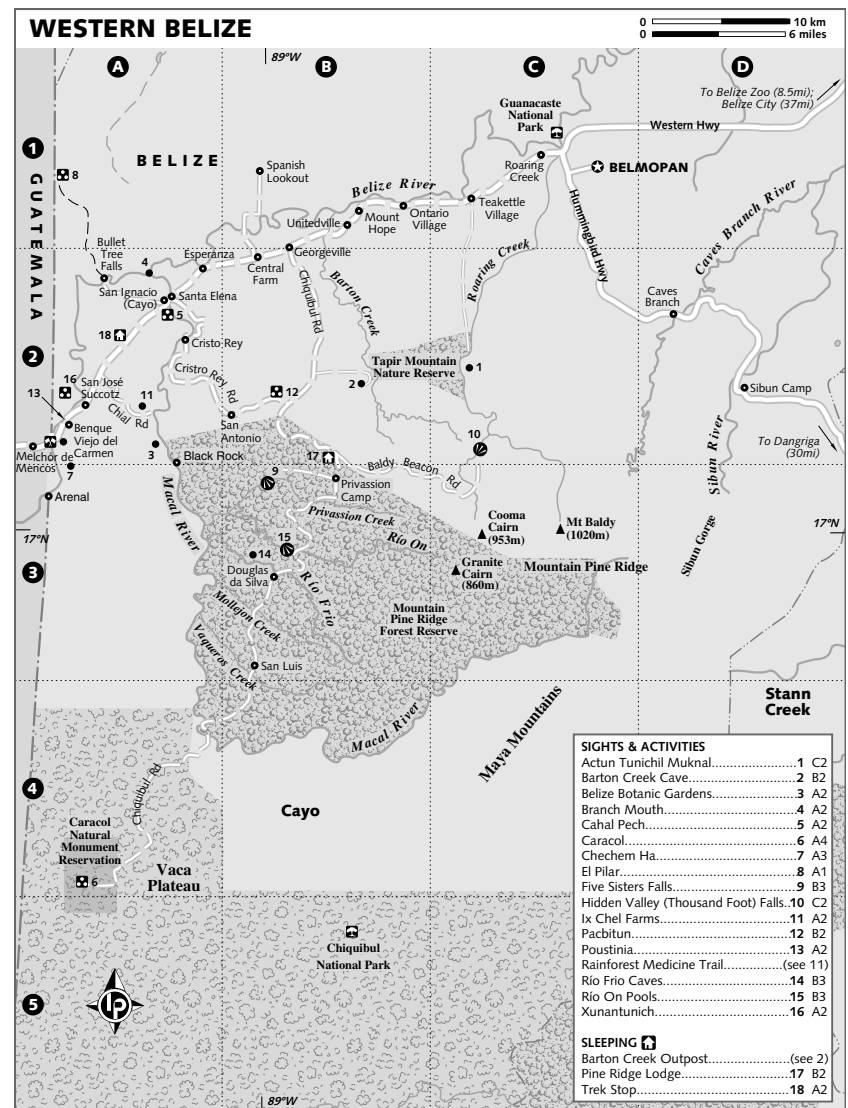
Guanacaste National Park

Further west down the highway, at the junction with Hummingbird Hwy, is **Guanacaste National Park** (admission US\$2.50; ☺ 8am-4:30pm), a small 52-acre (21-hectare) nature reserve at the confluence of Roaring Creek and the Belize River.

A hike along the park's 2 miles (3km) of trails will introduce you to the abundant and colorful local birdlife. After your hike, you can head down to the Belize River for a dip in the park's good, deep swimming hole.

Getting Around

Buses run at least hourly along the Western Hwy and upon request will drop you at the zoo,



by Guanacaste National Park, or anywhere else along the highway, and at Belmopan.

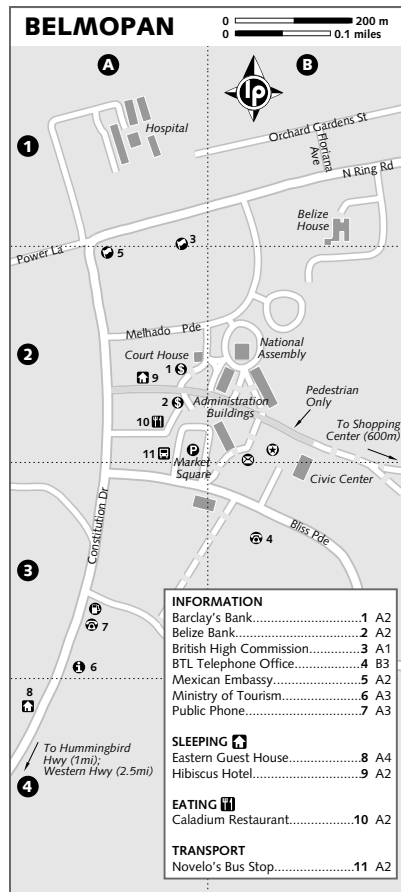
BELMOPAN

pop 15,900

Travelers arriving in Belize's capital are faced with that most basic of all existential questions: What am I doing here? Thankfully,

the town provides a ready answer: changing buses.

Founded in 1961 after Hurricane Hattie wiped out much of Belize City, the idea (hey – let's all pack up and move to the middle of nowhere with a bunch of public servants) hasn't really caught on yet. There are embassies, government buildings and, if you do get



Eastern Guest House (☎ 623 6066; Constitution Dr; s/d US\$23/35) This is the budget choice, in a very budget unfriendly town. Rooms are very basic, fan-cooled and tolerable for a night.

Hibiscus Hotel (☎ 822 1418; hibiscus@btlnet.net; off Constitution Dr; s/d from US\$30/45; 🏠) Its big, clean rooms are close to the bus terminal. There's nothing to get excited about here, so it matches the mood of the town pretty well.

Caladium Restaurant (Market Sq; mains US\$5-10) Just opposite the bus station, this restaurant offers daily special plates for US\$4, plus standard Belizean dishes and snacks.

Another option for food is the **market** (Market Sq), which features plenty of snack carts selling tasty, low-cost munchies.

Getting There & Away

Thanks to its location near a major highway intersection, Belmopan is a stop for virtually all buses operating along the Western and Hummingbird Hwys.

Buses to and from Belize City (local/express US\$3/4.50, one/1¼ hour) depart half hourly.

SAN IGNACIO (CAYO)

pop 18,300

Way out near the western border, San Ignacio would be little more than a stopover for Tikal-bound travelers if it weren't for the plethora of archaeological and natural attractions in the surrounding hills. You could just whiz through, but you should know that you're missing out. Big time.

Together with Santa Elena across the river, this is the chief population center of the Cayo District and the town has a prosperous, upbeat feel. That said, it's still small, and during the day, quiet. At night the quiet disappears and the jungle rocks to music from the town's bars and restaurants.

With a selection of hotels and restaurants, it's also the logical place to spend the night before or after you cross the Guatemalan border.

Orientation

San Ignacio is west of the river; Santa Elena is to the east. Two bridges join the towns and are usually both one-way – the newer, northernmost bridge leads traffic into San Ignacio, and Hawkesworth Bridge, San Ignacio's landmark suspension bridge, leads traffic out of town. During the rainy season, however, the new

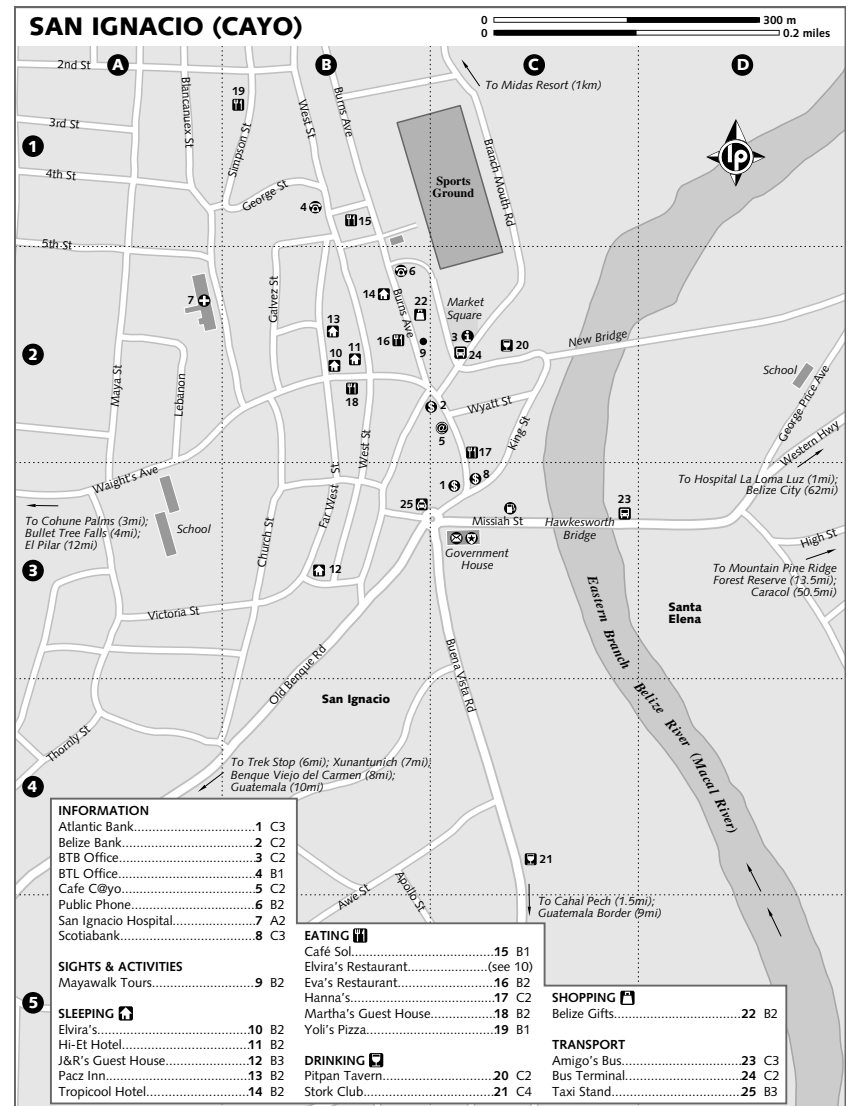
bridge often floods, and traffic is diverted to Hawkesworth Bridge. Burns Ave is the town's main street. Almost everything in town is accessible on foot.

Information

There is a small BTB office with irregular hours in the market square.

Belize Bank (Burns Ave; ☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Thu, 8am-1pm & 3-6pm Fri) has a Visa and MasterCard ATM and changes traveler's checks, as do restaurants and hotels. Atlantic Bank is also on Burns Ave.

The **post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) is on the upper floor of Government House, near the bridge.



stuck, enough services to satisfy your basic needs.

Belmopan, just under 2.5 miles (4km) south of the Western Hwy and about a mile east of Hummingbird Hwy, is a small place easily negotiated on foot. The regional bus lines all stop at Market Sq, which is near the post office, police station, market and telephone office.

Belize Bank (Constitution Dr) Has an ATM that accepts international cards.

Internet Café (☎ 8am-8pm; per hr US\$2.50) In the bus station, it's as good a place as any to while away your time.

Sleeping & Eating

Belmopan is a town for bureaucrats and diplomats, not one for budget travelers.

Cafe Cayo (4 Burns Ave; per hr US\$3) offers internet access, shows movies on Monday nights and serves up some yummy sandwiches and Italian food.

The basic San Ignacio Hospital is up the hill off Waight's Ave, west of the center. Across the river in Santa Elena is Hospital La Loma Luz.

Archaeological Sites

Two Maya sites make good excursions from San Ignacio. Cahal Pech is right on the edge of town, and El Pilar is a short distance to the northwest.

Maya for "Tick City," **Cahal Pech** (admission US\$5; ☎ 6am-6pm), not its original name, was a city of some importance from around 900 BC through AD 800. There are 34 buildings spread over 6 acres (2.4 hectares) and grouped around seven plazas. **Plaza B**, about 500ft (150m) from the museum building and parking area, is the site's largest plaza and also the most impressive. It's surrounded by some of the site's most significant buildings. Off Plaza A, **Structure A-1** is the site's tallest pyramid.

Cahal Pech is about a mile (1.6km) from Hawkesworth Bridge off Buena Vista Rd. You can walk or catch a taxi (about US\$3).

About 12 miles (19km) northwest of San Ignacio, beyond Bullet Tree Falls, **El Pilar** is perched almost 900ft (275m) above the Belize River. El Pilar has been left largely uncleared, and five archaeological and nature trails meander among the jungle-covered mounds.

Tours

Several operators offer a range of tours in the surrounding area and as far afield as the cayes and Tikal, Guatemala. **Mayawalk Tours** (☎ 824 3070; www.mayawalk.com; 19 Burns Ave, San Ignacio) has been recommended.

Sleeping

Elvira's (☎ 804 0243; 6 Far West St; s/d US\$11/13, with bathroom US\$14/17) It has clean, if rather stark white-tiled rooms. The beds are new and firm and, downstairs, the restaurant whips up some good local dishes.

Hi-Et Hotel (☎ 824 2828; 12 West St; s/d US\$10/15, with bathroom US\$20/25; ☒) The one saving grace of the little rooms with a shared bathroom upstairs here are their small balconies – otherwise things would get very close. Rooms with bathroom are much better.

Tropicool Hotel (☎ 824 3052; 30A Burns Ave; s/d US\$12/15, cabins US\$30) The rooms in the main building are nothing special – clean enough, with good beds (and, for some reason, dart board), but the wooden cabins out back are a good deal.

J&R's Guest House (☎ 824 2502; 20 Far West St; s/d US\$12.50/20) A modern home with a family atmosphere, the porch out front is a great place for breakfast and to watch the hummingbirds flit.

Pacz Inn (☎ 824 4538; www.paczguesthouse.com; 4 Far West St; s/d US\$15/20, with bathroom US\$20/25) The big, clean rooms here are a refreshing sight in San Ignacio's budget-hotel scene. There's plenty of tilework, but a good atmosphere regardless.

Midas Resort (☎ 824 3172; www.midasbelize.com; Branch Mouth Rd; camping per person US\$4, cabins US\$43) A little slice of nature right on the edge of town, this is the best central option for camping. Cabins are available if you want a few steps up in comfort; there's a restaurant and bar, and you can swim in the river at the back of the property.

Trek Stop (☎ 823 2265; www.thetrekstop.com; Km 114 Western Hwy; camping US\$5/7.50, cabins s/d US\$12/20) Laid out on a jungly hillside about 6 miles (10km) west of San Ignacio, this place is ideal for backpackers. Cabins are simple but well spaced, giving you the feeling of seclusion. There's a butterfly house and frisbee golf course on site. Kitchen facilities are available. From town, catch the bus to Melchor or Benque and ask the driver to let you off at Trek Stop.

Cohune Palms (☎ 600 7508; www.cohunepalms.com; cabins US\$35-55) About 3 miles (5km) northwest of San Ignacio, near Bullet Tree Falls, Cohune Palms is set on riverbank grounds and offers kitchen access. The site is beautiful. Bicycles and inner tubes are available and staff can usually pick you up in San Ignacio.

Eating

Elvira's Restaurant (6 Far West St; mains US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Every Belizean town has a place like Elvira's – nothing to look at, but serving up such irresistible food at good prices that it's always packed with locals. If the pork chops and mash are on, tuck in – they're a treat.

Eva's Restaurant (22 Burns Ave; mains US\$4-7; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Pretty much a Cayo institution, Eva's is the informal information exchange center in town. It's also where ex-

pats gather to bitch about Belize, their own country and lots of other things.

Hanna's (5 Burns Ave; meals US\$4-7; ☎ lunch, dinner) Hanna's menu just keeps on growing, and cooks serve consistently good food at reasonable prices. Most of your Belizean faves are here, plus a good range of Asian and vegetarian dishes.

Café Sol (West St; meals from US\$5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Sol has the most imaginative menu in town, with plenty of vegetarian options and excellent coffee. Grab a table on the balcony out front and watch the world go by.

Yoli's Pizza (Simpson St; pizzas US\$10-15, slices US\$1.50-2; ☎ lunch & dinner) With a mellow little courtyard eating area out front, this neighborhood pizzeria gets the thumbs up from expats as the best pizza in town.

Drinking & Nightlife

Pitpan Tavern (10 Savannah St) The name may have changed, but the deal remains the same – a happy hour from 5 to 7pm, reggae bands, drunk locals and drunker foreigners.

Stork Club (18 Buena Vista St; admission US\$2.50-7.50; ☎ Thu-Sat) Inside the supersnazy San Ignacio Resort Hotel, this disco consistently comes to life when the bars empty out. Wear something nice – but not too nice.

Getting There & Away

Buses from San Ignacio's Market Sq run to and from Belize City (local/express US\$5/7, two/three hours) and Belmopan (local/express US\$2/3, 1½ hours/45 mins) nearly every half hour.

See the boxed text (p249) for travel to Benque Viejo del Carmen and onwards to Guatemala.

Amigo's Bus (☎ 622 0283; 1 Western Hwy, Santa Elena) has 1st-class buses running to Chetumal, Mexico (US\$20, four hours), Belize City (US\$10, two hours) and Flores, Guatemala (US\$15, three hours). Staff can also book 1st-class bus tickets from Flores to Guatemala City.

The taxi stand is located on the traffic circle opposite Government House. Rates can be surprisingly high for short trips (a trip of a few miles can easily cost US\$5 to US\$10).

MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE AREA

South of the Western Hwy, between Belmopan and the Guatemalan border, the land begins to climb toward the heights of the Maya Mountains, which separate the Cayo District

from the Stann Creek District to the east and the Toledo District to the south.

In the heart of this highland area – a land of macaws, mahogany, mangoes and jaguars – over 300 sq miles (777 sq km) of tropical pine forest has been set aside as the **Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve**. The reserve and its surrounding area are full of rivers, pools, waterfalls and caves to explore.

Rainforest Medicine Trail

This herbal-cure research center is at **Ix Chel Farms** (admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm), 8 miles (13km) southwest of San Ignacio up Chial Rd.

Dr Eligio Pantí, who died in 1996 at age 103, was a healer in San Antonio village who used traditional Maya herb cures. Dr Rosita Arvigo, an American, studied medicinal plants with Dr Pantí, then began several projects to spread the wisdom of traditional healing methods and to preserve the rain-forest habitats, which harbor an incredible 4000 plant species.

One of her projects was the establishment of the **Rainforest Medicine Trail**, a self-guiding path among the jungle's natural cures.

Caves

If you want to visit any of the following caves you'll have to join a tour. Ask at your hotel or **Mayawalk Tours** (opposite).

The **Río Frio Caves** are the region's most-visited and famous caverns, but gaining in popularity is **Barton Creek Cave** (tours around US\$35 per person). One of the more popular day trips offered out of San Ignacio, the cave holds spooky skulls and bones, and pottery shards from the ancient Maya. To see them you'll have to negotiate some very narrow passages.

Attracting the most raving recommendations is **Actun Tunichil Muknal** (around US\$80 per person). In an effort to prevent looting of the Maya bones and artifacts within, and to keep general wear and tear to a minimum, only a couple of tour operators are allowed to run tours here at this point.

Pools & Waterfalls

At **Rio On Pools**, small waterfalls connect a series of pools that the river has carved out of granite boulders. Some of the falls double as water slides. The pools at tranquil **Five Sisters Falls**, accessible by an outdoor-elevator ride (small charge, usually US\$2) at Five Sisters Lodge,

are connected by five falls cascading over a short drop-off.

The region's aquatic highlight is **Hidden Valley (or Thousand Foot) Falls**, southeast of San Antonio. Hiking trails surround the falls and a viewing platform at the top of the cascade is a great spot for catching a Mountain Pine Ridge vista. The falls actually are around 1500ft (450m) high, but they aren't spectacular in the dry season.

Archaeological Sites

The highlands here hold two Maya ruins of interest, one small and one huge.

Pacbitun, a small site, 12 miles (20km) south of San Ignacio via Cristo Rey Rd, near San Antonio, seems to have been occupied continuously through most of Maya history, from 900 BC to AD 900. Today only lofty **Plaza A** has been uncovered and partially consolidated. **Structures 1 and 2**, on the east and west sides of the plaza, respectively, are worth a look. Within them, archaeologists discovered the graves of noble Maya women buried with a variety of musical instruments, perhaps played at their funerals.

Some 53 miles (86km) south of San Ignacio via Chiquibul Rd lies **Caracol** (admission US\$8; ☎ 8am-5pm) a vast Maya city hidden in the jungle. The site encompasses some 35 sq miles (88 sq km), with 36,000 structures marked so far.

Caracol was occupied in the post-Classic period from around 300 BC until AD 1150. At its height, between AD 650 and 700, Caracol is thought to have had a population of 150,000 –

not much less than the entire population of Belize today.

Highlights of the site include **Caana** (Sky-Palace) in Plaza B, Caracol's tallest structure at 138ft (42m; reportedly still Belize's tallest building); the **Temple of the Wooden Lintel**, dating from AD 50, in Plaza A; the **ball court** with a marker commemorating Caracol's defeat of rivals Tikal in AD 562 and Naranjo in AD 631; and the central acropolis, containing a royal **tomb**.

Sleeping

The forests and mountains of the greater Mountain Pine Ridge area are dotted with small inns, lodges and ranches offering accommodations, meals, hiking, horseback trips, caving, swimming, bird-watching and similar outdoor activities.

Barton Creek Outpost (☎ 662 4797; www.bartoncreekoutpost.com; per person US\$5, camping free) In a country full of gorgeous places, this one shines. Nestled in a riverbend about 200m from the Barton Creek Cave (see p247), it's the sort of place you come for a day and stay for a week. Accommodation is basic – a mattress on the floor or a hammock, but a little discomfort is definitely worthwhile. Good simple meals are available. For transport here, get in touch with Cafe C@yo in San Ignacio (p245).

There's very little else on offer for the budget traveler; if you've got a group together, **Pine Ridge Lodge** (☎ 600 4557; www.pineridgelodge.com; 4-person cottages US\$104) is about your best bet. The cottages have no electricity, but have hot-water bathrooms, screened porches and romantic, kerosene lamp lighting.

To get to this area, either join a tour or get the hotel you are staying at to pick you up. Otherwise, you'll need to organize your own transport.

WEST TO GUATEMALA

From San Ignacio it's another 10 miles (16km) southwest down Western Hwy to the Guatemalan border.

Xunantunich

Belize's most accessible Maya site of significance, **Xunantunich** (admission US\$5; ☎ 7:30am-4pm), pronounced soo-nahn-too-neechee, is reached via a free ferry crossing at San José Succotz, about 7 miles (12km) west of San Ignacio. From the ferry it's a 1-mile walk (2km) uphill to the ruins.

GETTING TO TIKAL, GUATEMALA

Buses run from San Ignacio to **Benque Viejo del Carmen**, the border town for crossing into Guatemala, nearly every half hour. From the bus station, it's another 3km to the border. A taxi will cost US\$5.

Cross early in the morning to have the best chance of catching buses onward. Get your passport (and, if applicable, your car papers) stamped at the Belizean station, then cross into Guatemala. The border station is supposedly open 24 hours a day, but try to cross during daylight hours. If you need a Guatemalan visa or tourist card (see p212), obtain it before you reach the border.

A bank at either side of the border changes money, but the itinerant moneychangers often give you a better deal – for US cash. The rates for exchanging Belizean dollars to Guatemalan quetzals and vice versa are sometimes poor.

Both Transportes Pinita and Transportes Rosalita buses westward to **Santa Elena-Flores (Guatemala)** depart town the Guatemalan side early in the morning. Sometimes available are more comfortable – and more expensive – minibuses (US\$6 per person); many travelers feel this is money well spent.

To go on to **Tikal**, get off the bus at El Cruce (Puente Ixlu'), 22 miles (36km) east of Flores, and wait for another bus, minibus or obliging car or truck to take you the final 21 miles (35km) north to Tikal.

See p201 for information on crossing the border from Guatemala.

The site's dominant structure, **El Castillo** (Structure A-6), rises 130ft (40m) above the jungle floor. The stairway on its northern side – the side you approach from the courtyard – goes only as far as the temple building. To climb to the **roof comb** you must go around to the southern side and use a separate set of steps. On the temple's east side, a few of the masks that once surrounded the structure have been restored. Structure A-11 and Plaza A-3, formed a residential 'palace' area for the ruling family.

Guides can be hired for a one-hour tour for US\$13, but the site can easily be navigated independently.

Buses on their way between San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen will drop you at the ferry. Ferry hours are 8am to noon and 1pm to 5pm; crossing is on demand and free for both foot passengers and cars.

Benque Viejo del Carmen

A sleepy town 2 miles (3km) east of the Guatemalan border, Benque Viejo del Carmen has few services for travelers, and you're better off staying in San Ignacio (p244). The town stirs from its normal tropical somnolence in mid-July, when the **Benque Viejo Festival** brings three days of revelry. Buses run to and from Belize City nearly every 30 minutes (local/express US\$4/6, 2½/three hours).

Chechem Ha

This **Maya cave** (☎ 820 4063; US\$20 per person; ☎ tours 9:30am & 1:30pm) comes complete with ancient cer-

emonial pots. Members of the Morales family, who discovered the cave, act as guides, leading you up the steep slope to the cave mouth, then down inside to see what the Maya left. Call ahead to reserve a space and enquire about getting a ride here from San Ignacio. Bring strong shoes, take water and a flashlight.

You can camp at Chechem Ha or sleep in one of the simple **bunks** (per person incl meals US\$40).

SOUTHERN BELIZE

Often overlooked by travelers, the south has its fair share of charms. Well worth a look are the Garifuna towns of Dangriga and Hopkins, as are the remote but budget-friendly cayes at Tobacco Caye and Glover's Reef, which is great for diving and snorkeling.

Down south, Placencia draws the crowds, but remains low-key in all but absolute peak season. Punta Gorda is the jumping off point for the little visited Toledo district, home of unrestored ruins, natural wonders and traditional villages.

HUMMINGBIRD HIGHWAY

Heading southeast from Belmopan, the Hummingbird Hwy stretches 49 miles (79km) to the junction of the Southern Hwy and the turnoff to Dangriga. It is almost entirely paved, but be prepared to slow for roadwork or sudden transitions to dirt road.

EXPLORE MORE OF WESTERN BELIZE

Western Belize has plenty of opportunities for getting off the beaten track. Here's just a few:

- **Branch Mouth** is a local swimming spot 20 minutes walk from San Ignacio where the Macal and Mopan Rivers meet
- Take a mellow canoe ride from San Ignacio to the **Belize Botanic Gardens**, a sanctuary, boasting 400 tree species and over 160 types of orchid
- The outdoor sculpture park of **Poussinia** has works by international and local artists

LOCAL VOICES – AUSTIN RODRIGUEZ, GARÍFUNA DRUM MAKER

The drum is at the center of Garífuna music and music is at the center of their culture. Who better, then, to give us the lowdown on the Garífuna than the man who makes the drums?

- **When did you start making drums?** I've been doing this for 35 years. Nobody taught me. I just started looking at drums, seeing how they were made. Then I started making them.
- **Garífuna music seems to be growing...** Out in the world, yes. We've always had our music, our musicians, but yes, internationally it's becoming more known. Punta Rock is well known now, and that's a modern expression of our rhythms, even though other Central Americans are taking credit for it.
- **Garífuna culture was in trouble for a while. Is it making a comeback?** It never went anywhere. Some parts of the culture have always been strong – the music, the food. When we came from St Vincent's we brought the seeds. Whenever we moved, we took seeds so we could eat our food. What we *are* losing is the language. For a long time the Creoles banned kids from speaking Garífuna in school, so the only way to learn was to speak it at home. Now it's not so open, but that attitude's still there. The Creoles want us to disappear, or assimilate.
- **Traditional cultures sometimes have trouble adapting to modern times...** The Garífuna were always fishers and farmers, but that's changing. When everybody produced, everybody traded. It produced a caring attitude. When somebody died, the whole village grieved. When somebody needed help on their farm, everybody helped. When a child was misbehaving, the village took care of it. There was a culture of respect. Now it's different – we're all individuals. Nobody has time for each other, and we're losing the unity.
- **If you could say one thing to your people?** I'd say to stay strong. Keep singing the songs and keep the language alive. If we lose that we lose everything.

As told to Lucas Vidgen

Blue Hole National Park

The **Blue Hole** – focus of the like-named **national park** (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am–4pm) – is a cenote (*se-noh-tay*); water-filled limestone sinkhole) some 328ft (100m) in diameter and 108ft (33m) deep. Fed by underground tributaries of the Sibun River, it's deliciously cool on the hottest days and makes an excellent swimming hole.

The park visitors center is about 11 miles (18km) south of Belmopan on Hummingbird Hwy. At the center is the trailhead to **St Herman's Cave**, a large cavern once used by the Maya during the Classic period. This is one of the few caves in Belize you can visit independently, although a guide is required if you wish to venture in further than 150 yards. Also here are a series of nature trails and an observation tower.

The trail to the Blue Hole itself starts at a parking area about a mile further down the highway. (Car break-ins have been reported here, so be careful with your belongings.) You don't have to stop at the visitors center if you're just going for a swim; an attendant is posted at the trail to the Blue Hole to collect your money.

DANGRIGA

pop 11,500

Dangriga is the largest town in southern Belize. Much smaller than Belize City, it's friendlier and quieter and a great place to get amid the Garífuna culture. The best time to do this is November 19, which is **Garífuna Settlement Day**, a frenzy of dancing, drinking and celebration of the Garífuna's heritage. For the rest of the year you'll find the folks here a bit more laid-back, but equally welcoming. As the sun goes down and the Belikins come out, the air fills with the sounds of Garífuna drumming and the lilting tones of the Garífuna language.

Orientation & Information

Stann Creek empties into the Gulf of Honduras at the center of town. Dangriga's main street is called St Vincent St south of the creek and Commerce St to the north. The bus station is at the southern end of Havana St just north of the Shell fuel station. The airstrip is a mile (2km) north of the center, near the Pelican Beach Resort. The Riverside Café serves as the unofficial water-taxi terminal where you

can arrange trips out to the southern cayes with local fishermen or tradespeople. It's best to stop in by 10am to find out when boats will be leaving.

Belize Bank (24 St Vincent St; ☎ 8am–1pm Mon–Thu, 8am–4:30pm Fri) has a Visa and MasterCard ATM.

You can get your clothes washed and check your email at the same time at **Val's Laundry** (1 Sharp St). A load costs US\$1 per pound, an hour on the internet costs US\$2.

Sights

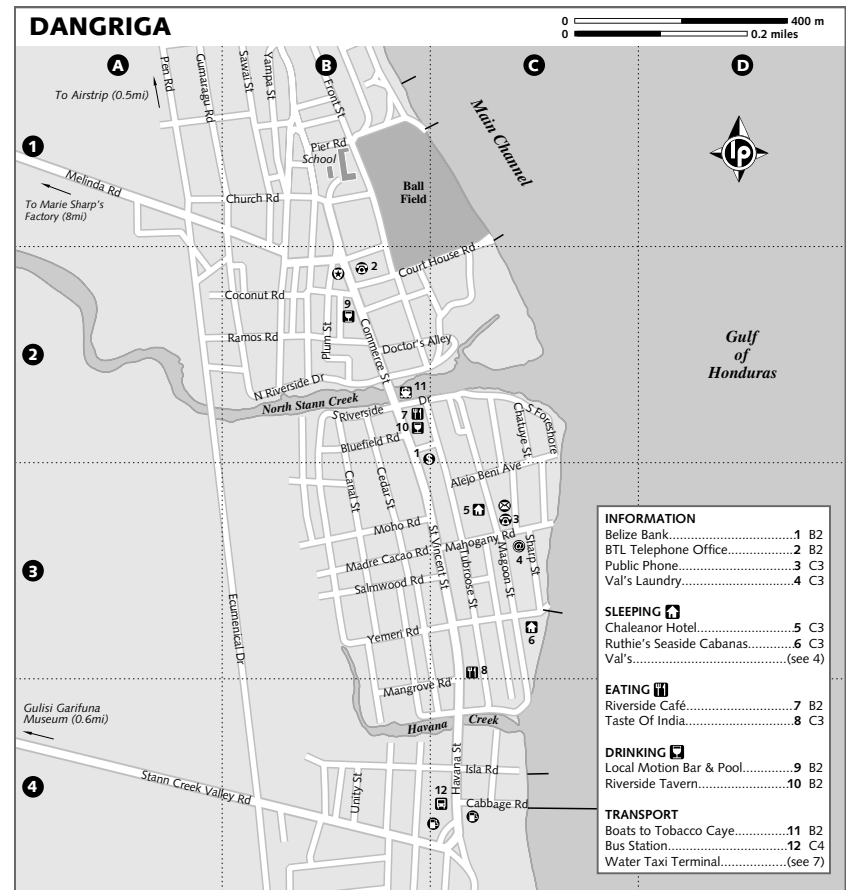
Eight miles (13km) northwest of town on Melinda Rd is **Marie Sharp's Factory** (☎ 520 2087; ☎ 7am–noon & 1–4pm), the source of Belize's beloved hot sauce. Casual tours, often led by

Marie herself, are offered during business hours.

The **Gulisi Garífuna Museum** (Stann Creek Valley Rd; admission US\$5; ☎ noon–7pm Tue–Fri, 8am–2pm Sat) provides an excellent overview of the vibrant Garífuna culture in photographs, film and music. Workshops and language courses are held here. It's about 1.2 miles inland from the bus station – any bus leaving town can drop you here.

Sleeping & Eating

Val's (☎ 623 1949; valsbelize@yahoo.com; 1 Sharp St; dm US\$7.50, apt US\$25; ☎) Val had fans from all over the world back when she just had a laundry. Then she put in internet access. Then dorm rooms. Then a mini-apartment. Go Val. The



TOBACCO CAYE, SOUTH WATER CAYE & GLOVER'S REEF

Tobacco Caye, South Water Caye and the resorts of Glover's Reef are all accessed by boat from Dangriga. Their distance from Belize City has kept casual visitors away, protecting the reef from much human impact. Dolphins, manta rays and manatees are commonly sighted, and the quantity and variety of coral that is on display is incredible. Good snorkeling and diving can be had right off the shore from the cayes.

Tobacco Caye is a 5-acre (2-hectare) island catering to travelers on a low-to-moderate budget. Diving, fishing, snorkeling and hammocking are the favorite pastimes here. Lodging possibilities include **Lana's** (☎ 520 5036; d with shared bathroom incl 3 meals per person US\$30), which has 10 spartan rooms; and **Gaviota's** (☎ 509 5032) with rooms for about the same price.

Passage to Tobacco Caye can be arranged along the river near the Riverside Café in Dangriga. The cost is around US\$18 one-way.

Glover's Atoll Resort (☎ 520 5016; www.glovers.com.bz; camping/dm/cabins per week US\$106/160/213), on Glover Reef's Northeast Caye, offers budget accommodations on a 9-acre (3.6-hectare) atoll about 20 miles (32km) from the mainland. Facilities at the resort are rustic, but the 360-degree Caribbean view can't be beat. It's a good deal for budget travelers, but extras – water, food, equipment – can add up. Meals cost US\$9 to US\$12, but you can bring food and use the kitchen. Call ahead or email to arrange a boat ride, which is included in the price of the accommodation.

dorm rooms are good, with lockers, fans galore and big clean shared bathrooms. The apartment has a sofa, sink, double bed and balcony overlooking the ocean.

Chaleanor Hotel (☎ 522 2587; www.toucantrail.com/chaleanor-hotel.html; 35 Magoon St; s/d US\$11/18, with bathroom US\$30/50) The budget rooms here are pretty much wooden boxes (with window!). The saving grace being the shady rooftop terrace, strung with hammocks and offering sea views. Rooms with bathrooms are about 10 steps up in comfort.

Ruthie's Seaside Cabanas (☎ 522 3184; cnr Magoon St & Yemeri Rd; s/d with bathroom US\$23/28) Clean and comfy cabins, right by the seaside. There's cable TV and hot showers.

Riverside Café (S Riverside Dr; mains US\$5-8; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Just east of the North Stann Creek Bridge, this café serves tasty meals at budget to moderate prices. This is a good place to ask about fishing and snorkeling trips out to the cayes or treks inland.

Taste of India (28 St Vincent St; mains US\$5-10; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) A huge selection of South Indian favorites awaits here, along with some Belizean classics. Heaps of vegetarian options, tasty lassis and a reasonable chai.

Drinking

Local Motion Bar & Pool (Commerce St) Loud music, cold beer, dodgy characters...what more could you want?

Riverside Tavern (St Vincent St) Just south of the bridge, this club (known locally as 'the club')

gets a bit of a crowd for midweek karaoke sessions, but things really start jumping on weekends.

Getting There & Away

Maya Island Air (☎ 522 2659) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 226 2012) serve Dangriga on flights also stopping at Placencia, Punta Gorda and Belize City.

Boats service the local cayes (see above).

Buses to Belize City (local/express US\$5/7, 4½ hours) via Belmopan leave regularly.

SOUTHERN HIGHWAY

South of Dangriga are some great opportunities for experiencing off-the-beaten-track Belize.

Hopkins

pop 1800

The words 'hi' and 'hello' fly thick and fast as you walk along the one street of this mainly Garífuna fishing village. The village itself stretches a mile or two along the coast and is dotted with accommodation and eating options, but the pace is leisurely (in the extreme) – this is not a resort town. Many places offering beachside cabins close in the off season. If you have your heart set on staying beachside, your best bet is to ask around.

Yagudah Inn (☎ 503 7089; s/d US\$10/15) It's one of the few places in town to be open year-round, with a good restaurant at the side, serving tasty seafood dishes. Rooms are spacious and airy, in a block set back from the beach. You

can set up your tent on the beachfront for US\$7.50 a person.

Ransom's (www.members.tripod.com/~cabanabelize; s/d US\$15/30) Oozing with charm and bursting with plant life, this little beachfront place has a few well-decorated rooms and a fully equipped cabin out back.

Windschief (☎ 523 7249; www.windschief.com; big/small cabin US\$25/45) It has big, wooden cabin-style rooms with sea views. There's a cocktail bar, hammocks, discount for long stays, wind-surfers for rent and Hopkins' only (so far) full-moon parties.

Most restaurants serve good, inexpensive seafood and Belizean dishes, including *gibnut* (small rodent similar to a guinea pig) from around US\$5. Try Iris's, the Watering Hole or Innie's.

King Kassava at the north end of town is the place to go for beer, play pool and reggae music.

Buses pass four times a day in either direction to Placencia (US\$3, two hours) and Dangriga (US\$3, one hour).

Sittee River

Another small coastal village where you can get away from it all is Sittee River. **Glover's Atoll Bunkhouse** (☎ 509 7099; dm US\$10, d with bathroom US\$30) is where the boat to Glover's Reef picks up passengers. Next door is the more gracious, good-value **Toucan Sittee** (☎ 523 7039; www.toucan.sittee.info; d/r US\$13/24), offering riverside rooms as well as two apartments. A couple of buses a day that travel the Dangriga–Hopkins–Placencia route stop at Sittee River.

Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary

Almost halfway between Dangriga and Independence is the village of Maya Centre, where a track goes 6 miles (10km) west to the **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary** (admission US\$5; ☎ 7:30am-4:30pm). Sometimes called the Jaguar Reserve, this is a prime place for wildlife-watching. The varied topography and lush tropical forest within the 98,000-acre (39,000-hectare) sanctuary make it an ideal habitat for a wide variety of native Belizean fauna.

Visitor facilities at the reserve include a campsite (US\$2.50 per person), several dorm-style rental cabins with solar electricity (US\$18 per person, kitchen use US\$1 per person), a visitors center and numerous hiking trails. The walk through the lush forest is a pretty one, and though you cannot be

assured of seeing a jaguar, you will certainly enjoy seeing many of the hundreds of other species of birds, plants and animals in this rich environment. No public transportation to the reserve is available. A taxi from Maya Centre will cost about US\$12.

For information, or to book a cabin, contact the **Belize Audubon Society** (Map pp226-7; ☎ 223 5004; www.belizeaudubon.org; 12 Fort St, Belize City).

PLACENCIA

pop 900

Perched at the southern tip of a long, narrow, sandy peninsula, Placencia is 'the caye you can drive to.' Not too long ago, the only practical way to get here was by boat from the mainland. Now a road runs all the way down the peninsula and an airstrip lies just north of town. But Placencia still has the wonderful laid-back ambience of the cayes, along with varied accommodations and friendly locals. The palm-lined beaches on its east side attract an international crowd looking for sun and sand, and they make low-key pastimes such as swimming, sunbathing and lazing about the preferred 'activities' for many visitors.

Orientation & Information

The village's main north–south 'street' is actually a narrow concrete footpath that threads its way among simple wood-frame houses (some on stilts) and beachfront lodges. An unpaved road skirts the town to the west, ending at the peninsula's southern tip, which is the bus stop.

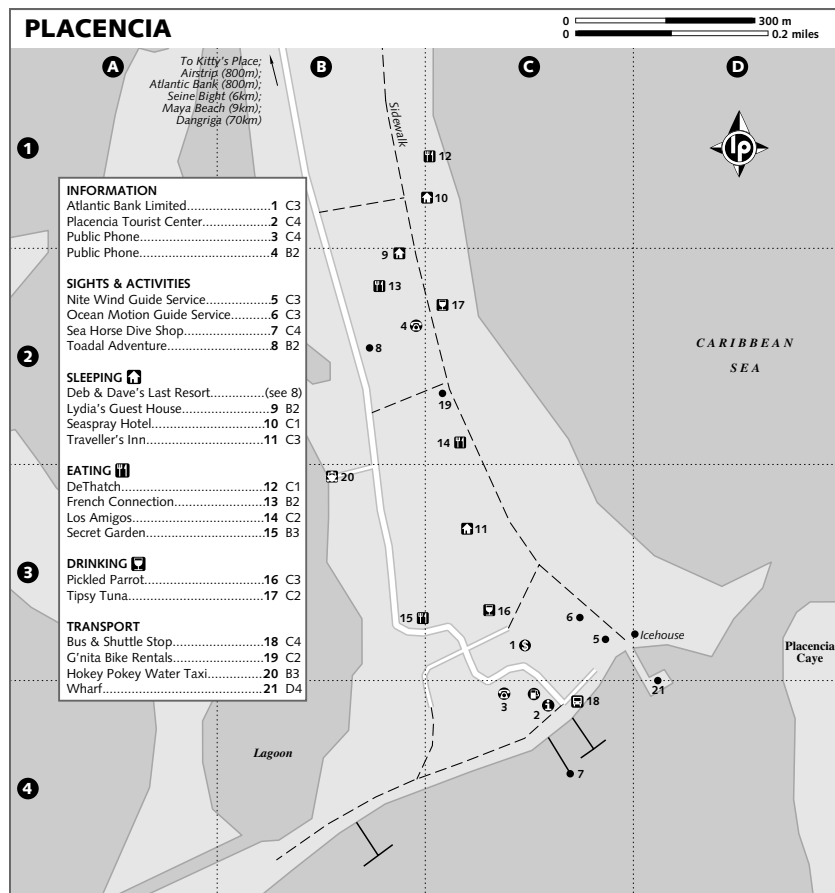
An easy walk takes you anywhere in town. The airstrip is about half a mile (0.8km) from the start of the village.

At the south end of town you'll find the wharf, fuel station, bus stop and icehouse. Nearby, Atlantic Bank Limited has an ATM, which often snatches cards, and a slightly more reliable one 2km north. Check your email at **De Thatch Café** (see p255; per hr US\$5; ☎ 7am-midnight).

The tourist information center, opposite the main bus stop, keeps irregular hours, but staff are helpful and have plenty of printed material on hand. Laundry service is available from most of the hotels and guesthouses on the peninsula for US\$5 a load.

Tours

Vying to sign up customers for tours of the region are **Ocean Motion Guide Service**



(☎ 523 3162) and **Nite Wind Guide Service** (☎ 523 3487), both operating out of small offices near the wharf.

On a pier in the main part of the village is **Sea Horse Dive Shop** (☎ 523 3166; www.belizescuba.com), doing certification courses and dives for certified divers.

For inland tours, including kayaking and canoeing expeditions, check what's on offer with **Toadal Adventure** (☎ 523 3207; www.toadaladventure.com), which operates out of Deb and Dave's Last Resort.

Sleeping

Placencia has lodgings in all price ranges. Budget and midrange accommodations are in the village.

Traveler's Inn (☎ 523 3190; s/d US\$10/12.50, with bathroom US\$15/17) A classic beachside no-frills joint, the Inn keeps it real with linoleum floors, mostly mosquito-proof windows and creaky fans.

Lydia's Guest House (☎ 523 3117; lydias@btl.net; s/d US\$15/20) Lydia's has spacious, clean rooms in a quiet part of the village. Views from the upstairs balcony are worth the price alone and there's kitchen access.

Deb & Dave's Last Resort (☎ 523 3207; www.toadaladventure.com; r US\$22) Basic wooden rooms are set around a leafy garden and there are good screened sitting areas. It's in a quiet but central location.

Seaspray Hotel (☎ 523 3148; www.seasprayhotel.com; r US\$27-64) The 'economy' rooms are fairly

ordinary, but they have bathroom, fan and fridge. The more expensive rooms are larger and have porches and sea views.

Eating

Los Amigos (mains US\$6-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Amigos' policy of undercutting the competition's price and serving delicious food in an open walled thatch hut keeps staff busy every night.

De Thatch (mains US\$9-13; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☑) Food here is pricey for this part of town, but the setting – in a wood floored *palapa* (palm-leafed shelter) right on the beach – and the mounds of fresh seafood on the menu make it worthwhile. Burritos, burgers and other snacks are more reasonably priced.

Secret Garden (breakfast US\$4.50, mains US\$10-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tucked away in a lush little corner of the village, there's no sea view here, but plenty of fresh and imaginative seafood and Creole dishes. Excellent coffee, too.

French Connection (☎ 523 3656; mains from US\$15; ☎ dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun) This is the place for a romantic splurge. Modern French cuisine and Belize fusion is the go here, with a big emphasis on seafood. Reservations are recommended.

Drinking

Most bars and many restaurants have sun-down happy hours, usually featuring rum and juice for US\$1. The Pickled Parrot always has a good crowd and the Tipsy Tuna, a towering 'sports bar' with occasional live music and the happening little beachfront bar is usually more hit than miss.

Getting There & Around

Maya Island Air (☎ 523 3475; www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 523 3410; www.tropicair.com) offer daily flights linking Placencia with Belize City and Dangriga to the north and Punta Gorda to the south. Taxis meet most flights.

There are regular buses from Belize City to Placencia (local/express US\$10/13, four hours) via Dangriga.

Being that most buses *leave* Placencia ridiculously early (5am or 6am), the quickest (and most enjoyable) way out of town is on the **Hokey Pokey Water Taxi** (US\$5), which departs Placencia five times between at 10am and 6pm for **Mango Creek**. It's a 15-minute zip

through the mangroves. At Mango Creek, walk five minutes up the main street, turn left at the gas station and wait in front of Sherl's Restaurant. Buses to Punta Gorda (US\$4.50, two hours) and Belize City (US\$9, 4½ hours) roll in every hour or so. Many boats will do a charter run to and from Mango Creek for US\$20 for up to six people.

The **Gulf Cruza** (☎ 523 4045) makes a Placencia–Big Creek–Puerto Cortés (Honduras) run on Friday, leaving Placencia at 9:30am, arriving at Puerto Cortés at 2pm. Cost to Puerto Cortés is US\$50. The boat takes passengers only, no vehicles.

G'nita bike rentals rents bicycles for US\$2.50/12.50 per hour/day.

NIM LI PUNIT

About 24 miles (38km) northwest of Punta Gorda, just west of the Southern Hwy, stand the ruins of **Nim Li Punit** (Big Hat; admission US\$5; ☎ 9am-5pm). Named after the headgear worn by the richly clad figure on Stela 14, Nim Li Punit may have been a tributary city to the larger, more powerful Lubaantun (see p257).

The **South Group** of structures was the city's ceremonial center and is of the most interest. Although the plaza has been cleared, the structures surrounding it are largely un-restored. Have a look at the stelae, especially **Stela 14**, at 33ft (10m) the longest Maya stela yet discovered, and **Stela 15**, which dates from AD 721 and is the oldest work recovered here so far.

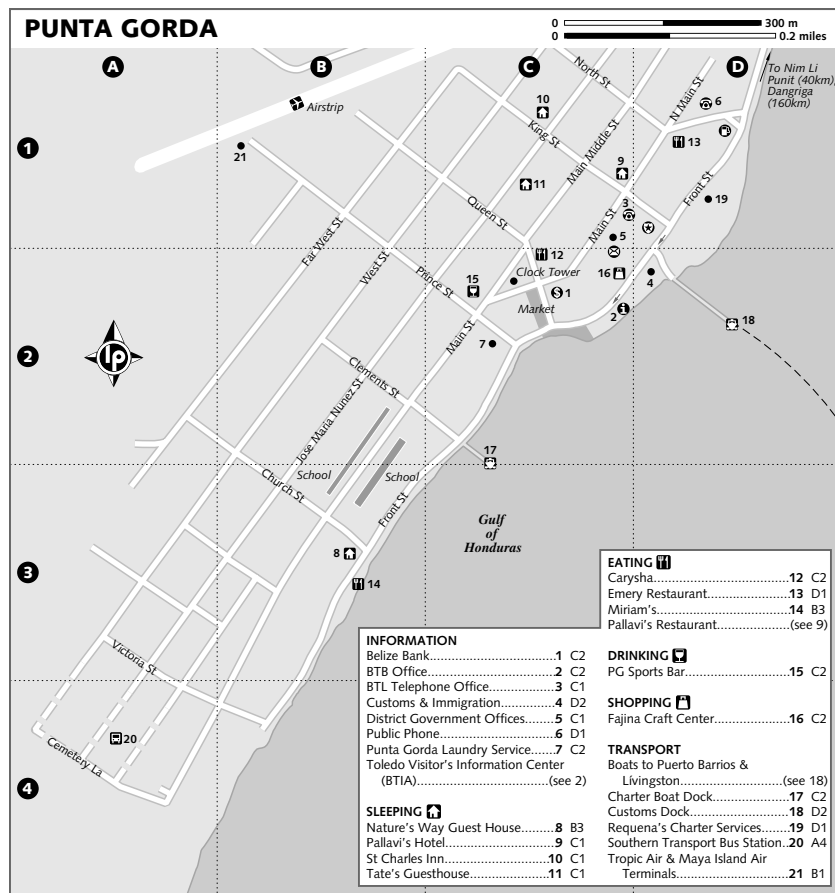
PUNTA GORDA

pop 5300

'Sleepy' is an understatement for this southern seafront town. People here are so laid-back they can't even be bothered calling the town by its full name – all over Belize it's known simply as PG.

Rainfall and humidity are at their highest, and the jungle at its lushest, here in Toledo District. Prepare yourself for at least a short downpour almost daily and some sultry weather in-between.

PG was founded for the Garífuna who emigrated from Honduras in 1832. Though it's still predominantly Garífuna, it's also home to the usual bewildering variety of Belizean citizenry: Creoles, Kekchi Maya, expat Americans, Brits, Canadians, Chinese and people from eastern India.



Orientation & Information

The town center is a triangular park with a bandstand and a distinctive blue-and-white clock tower. Saturday is market day, when area villagers come to town to buy, sell and barbecue. It's a fascinating and colorful mix-up.

The **BTB office** and **Toledo Visitors' Information Center** (☎ 722 2531; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) share office space. There's usually somebody around.

Belize Bank (cnr Main & Queen Sts; ☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Thu, 8am-4:30pm Fri) is across from the town square. It has both a MasterCard and Visa ATM.

The **Punta Gorda Laundry Service** (2 Prince St) charges US\$1 per pound.

Carysha (Queen St; per hr US\$2.50; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) provides internet access.

Sleeping

Nature's Way Guest House (☎ 722 2119; 65 Front St; s/d US\$10/15) One of the better budget hotels in Belize. There's a shady courtyard with plenty of hammock action and excellent breakfasts (tofu available) for US\$3.50.

St Charles Inn (☎ 722 2149; 23 King St; s/d with bathroom US\$15/22) One of the spiffiest budget deals in town, the rooms may be a bit heavy on the brown for some, but they're spacious, come with cable TV and have some good balcony areas for hanging out.

Tate's Guesthouse (☎ 722 0007; 34 Jose Maria Nunez St; s/d US\$15/22; ☎ ☎) Tate's has tidy little rooms

in a family-run guesthouse. Coffee is free, internet is US\$2.50 per hour and there's a microwave for guest use.

Pallavi's Hotel (☎ 722 2414; 19 Main St; s/d with bathroom US\$16/21) Has reasonable rooms with a recommended restaurant downstairs.

Eating & Drinking

Carysha (Queen St; snacks US\$2-3; ☎ ☎) Offers excellent, locally grown coffee, good snacks, a two-for-one book exchange and internet access, all on the central square.

Pallavi's Restaurant (19 Main St; meals from US\$4) Has standard Belizean family cooking and good breakfasts.

Emercy Restaurant (Main St; meals US\$6-8) Serves fresh-fish specials daily, good Mexican food and quite possibly the best fried chicken to be had in all of Belize.

Miriam's (Front St; ☎ ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; mains US\$7-10) An excellent blend of east Indian and Caribbean flavors awaits at this seaside place with breathtaking views over the bay.

PG Sports Bar (cnr Main & Prince Sts) A good bet for live music on weekends. It's a good-sized, fairly standard bar, incongruously enhanced by a staggering collection of US sports photos and posters.

Getting There & Away

Punta Gorda is served daily by **Maya Island Air** (☎ 722 2856; www.mayaairways.com) and **Tropic Air** (☎ 722 2008; www.tropicair.com). Ticket offices are located at the airport.

Requena's Charter Services (☎ 722 2070; 12 Front St) operates the *Mariestela*, with boats departing Punta Gorda at 9am daily for Puerto Barrios (Guatemala). Tickets cost US\$18 one-way. Guatemalan-operated **Transportes El Chato** (☎ 502-9948 5525; 1a Av btwn 10a & 11a Calle, Puerto Barrios) has one departure daily at 4pm (US\$18, one hour). Buy your tickets on the boat.

One boat goes to Livingston, Guatemala (US\$15) at 10am daily.

Buses depart regularly for Belize City (local/express US\$11/13, seven/six hours).

AROUND PUNTA GORDA Local Villages

The **Toledo Ecotourism Association** (TEA; ☎ 722 2096; www.plenty.org/mayan-ecotours; Front St, Punta Gorda), at the Punta Gorda BTB, runs a Village Guesthouse and Ecotrail Program that takes participants to any of 13 traditional Mopan Maya, Kekchi Maya, Creole and Garifuna villages.

Accommodation is offered in specially built, rustic but comfortable guesthouses and costs US\$9 per person per night. A one-off US\$5 fee is also charged per visit. Meals in family homes cost US\$5 and activities on offer such as nature tours, music, dancing and storytelling cost around US\$4 per hour. The tours don't include transportation; check with the TEA for village bus schedules. Local buses run between the villages and Punta Gorda most days for US\$5; special charter trips are very expensive – around US\$80 – so plan accordingly, although hitching in this part of the world isn't very difficult or dangerous.

More than 85% of the tour fee stays in the village with the villagers, helping them achieve a sustainable, ecofriendly economy as an alternative to traditional slash-and-burn agriculture.

Lubaantun

The Maya ruins at **Lubaantun** (Fallen Stones; admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm), 1 mile (1.6km) northwest of the village of San Pedro Columbia, have been excavated to some extent but not restored. The many temples are still mostly covered with jungle, so you will have to use your imagination to envisage the great city that once thrived here.

Archaeologists have found evidence that Lubaantun flourished until the late 8th century AD, after which little was built. The site covers a square mile (3 sq km) and holds the only ruins in Belize with curved stone corners. Of its 18 plazas, only the three most important

EXPLORE MORE OF SOUTHERN BELIZE

Southern Belize is off the beaten track, but if you'd like to go even further, there are plenty of good options.

- Spot manatees, turtles or birds, or grab some Creole drumming classes at **Gale's Point Manatee**
- Hike along jungle trails past caves and waterfalls in the home of the largest concentration of scarlet macaws in Central America at **Red bank**
- **Bladen River Field Station**, set on 1100 acres of private reserve, has 50km of trails to hike and jaguars, tapirs, howler monkeys and crocodiles to spot

(Plazas III through V) have been cleared. **Plaza IV**, the most important of all, is built along a ridge of hills and surrounded by the site's most impressive buildings: Structures 10, 12 and 33. A visitors center on the site exhibits Maya pottery and other artifacts.

San Antonio & Blue Creek

The Mopan Maya of San Antonio are descended from former inhabitants of the Guatemalan village of San Luis, Petén, just across the border. The San Antonians fled oppression in their home country to find freedom in Belize. They brought their ancient customs with them, however, and you can observe a traditional lowland Mayan village on a short visit here.

About 4 miles (6km) west of San Antonio, near the village of Santa Cruz, is the archaeological site of **Uxbenka**, which has numerous carved stelae.

About 12 miles (20km) south of San Antonio lies the village of Blue Creek, and beyond it the **nature reserve** (admission US\$1) of Blue Creek Cave. Hike into the site along the marked trail (less than 1.6km) and enjoy the rain forest around you and the pools, channels, caves and refreshingly cool waters of the creek system.

Guided nature walks – which include a canopy walk and a climb to an observation deck accessed by rope ladder (you must wear helmet and harness for your protection) – are available from the site for about US\$15 per hour.

BELIZE DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Lodgings in Belize are generally more expensive and of lower comfort than in neighboring countries. Some have great charm and are well worth the cost; most are just places to stay.

BOOK ACCOMMODATIONS ONLINE

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

On the coast there are plenty of cabins to choose from, although they are nearly always more expensive than staying in hotels. Many hotels offer single rooms (from US\$15), but a lot charge simply for the room (starting at US\$20), so if you really want to save money it's a good idea to hook up with other travelers.

The HI (Hosteling International) is non-existent in Belize, but there are a few places around offering dorm-style accommodations costing from around US\$10. This is a good way to save money and meet people.

During the peak seasons (mid-December to April, and June through August) prices can be higher and lodging harder to find.

ACTIVITIES

Snorkeling and diving are best on the cayes. Boats depart Ambergris (p233) and Caulker (p230) cayes on day and overnight voyages to the best spots. Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Belize* provides detailed descriptions of dive sites and extensive photos of underwater wildlife.

Horseback riding, canoeing and kayaking, hiking, bird-watching and archaeology are all possibilities in the Cayo District of western Belize (p248 and p242).

BOOKS

Belizean historian Assad Shoman's *13 Chapters in the History of Belize* is a detailed account of the history of the country and tends not to glamorize the colonial past as some other studies do.

Warlords and Maize Men: A Guide to the Maya Sites of Belize, by Byron Foster, is recommended for its descriptions of the lives of the Maya.

Snapshots of Belize: An Anthology of Short Fiction, published in Belize by Cubola Productions, features short stories of past and present Belize.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banking hours vary, but most banks are open 8am to 1:30pm Monday to Thursday and 8am to 4:30pm Friday. Most banks and many businesses and shops close on Wednesday afternoon. Shops are usually open 8am to noon Monday to Saturday and 1pm to 4pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. Some shops have evening hours from 7pm to 9pm on those days as well.

Most businesses, offices and city restaurants close on Sunday. Note that in smaller towns, the popular Belizean restaurants usually close before 6pm.

CLIMATE

The busy winter season runs from mid-December to April, and a second peak occurs June through August. The dry season (November to May) is the best time to travel (although prices can be higher and lodging can be harder to find). If you do visit in summer (July to November), be aware that this is hurricane season. Belize City was badly damaged by hurricanes, with heavy loss of life, in 1931, 1961 and 1978.

For climate charts, see p723.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Petty theft is the greatest danger (and annoyance) to travelers in Belize. Take care not to show obvious signs of wealth. Keep a close eye on camera equipment, don't leave valuables in plain view in cars and try to watch your bags when you're on a bus. Belize City has a bad reputation, mostly a hangover from the past, but you should still exercise normal precautions.

If you're driving, be extra careful – Belize is renowned for road accidents. Wear your seat belt, and be aware of what's going on in front and behind you.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

Unfortunately, Belize's infrastructure for travelers with a disability is virtually nonexistent. See p726 for general advice about traveling in the region.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Embassies & Consulates in Belize

Canada (Map p224; ☎ 223 1060; cdncon.bze@btl.net; 80 Princess Margaret Dr, Belize City)

Germany (Map pp226-7; ☎ 222 4369; seni@cisco.com.bz; 57 Southern Foreshore, Belize City)

Guatemala (Map p224; ☎ 223 3150; 8 A St, Belize City)

Honduras (☎ 224 5889; 114 Bella Vista, Belize City)

Mexico (Map pp226-7; ☎ 223 0193/0194; 18 North Park St, Belize City) embassy (☎ 822 0497; Embassy Sq, Belmopan)

Netherlands (Map p224; ☎ 223 2953; mchulsec@btl.net; cnr Baymen Av & Calle Al Mar, Belize City)

UK (☎ 822 2146; Embassy Sq, Belmopan)

USA (Map pp226-7; ☎ 227 7161; Gabourel La & Hutsun St, Belize City)

Belizean Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Belize's overseas diplomatic affairs are generally handled by British embassies and consulates. Belize has embassies in the following countries. For Belizean embassies in other Central American cities please refer to the relevant country chapter in this book.

Canada consulate (☎ 604-687 6459; Suite 1120, 595 Howe St, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6C 2T5)

Mexico embassy (☎ 525-520 1274; embelize@prodigy.net.mx; 215 Calle Bernardo de Galvez, Col Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico DF 11000)

UK high commission (☎ 44 20-7723 3603; bzch-lon@btconnect.com; 3rd fl, 45 Crawford Pl, London, W1H 4LP)

USA embassy (☎ 202-332 9636; www.embassyofbelize.org; 2535 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

On major holidays, banks, offices and other services are closed. National holidays are denoted with an asterisk.

The following list describes the major holidays and festivals; they may well be celebrated for several days around the actual date:

New Year's Day* (January 1)

Fiesta de Carnival (February; Sunday to Tuesday before the beginning of Lent) Celebrated in northern Belize.

Baron Bliss Day* (March 9) Honors the memory of one of the great benefactors of Belize.

Holy Week (April; held in the week leading up to Easter Sunday) Various services and processions.

Labor Day* (May 1)

Commonwealth Day* (May 25)

Feast of San Pedro (June; date varies) San Pedro, Ambergris Caye.

Lobster Season opens (successive weekends in June and early July, after the season officially opens, usually early June) Placencia, Caye Caulker and San Pedro.

Costa Maya Festival (August; dates vary) San Pedro, Ambergris Caye – a celebration of Maya coastal culture with participants from Belize and the Yucatán.

National Day* (St George's Caye Day; September 10)

Independence Day* (September 21)

Pan American Day* (Columbus Day; October 12)

Garifuna Settlement Day* (November 19) Hopkins and particularly in Dangriga (p250).

Christmas Day* (December 25)

Boxing Day* (December 26)

FOOD & DRINK Food

Belize has never developed an elaborate native cuisine. Recipes are mostly borrowed – from the UK, the Caribbean, Mexico and the USA.

Each community has its own local favorites, but Garifuna and Maya dishes and traditional favorites such as boil-up rarely appear on restaurant menus. Even so, there is some good food to be had, especially the fresh fish options near the sea.

Rice and beans prevail on Belizean menus and plates. They're usually served with other ingredients – chicken, pork, beef, fish, vegetables, even lobster – plus some spices and condiments such as coconut milk. 'Stew beans with rice' is stewed beans on one side of the plate, boiled rice on the other side and chicken, beef or pork on top.

Meals are not usually spicy, but the popular Marie Sharp's hot sauces are on virtually every table to liven things up if you need it.

Garifuna dishes sometimes appear on restaurant menus, but there are very few Garifuna restaurants in the country. If you have a chance to try a Garifuna meal you shouldn't pass it up. The dish you may see on some menus is 'boil-up,' a stew made of root vegetables and beef or chicken. Less common is *alabundinga*, a dish of grated green bananas, coconut cream, spices, boiled potato and peppers served with fried fish fillet (often snapper) and rice.

Some restaurants serve wild game such as armadillo, venison and the guinea pig-like *gibnut* (also called 'paca'). Conservationists frown on this practice. Lobsters are in season from mid-June to mid-February (to discourage poaching, don't order them the rest of the year), and conch season begins when lobster season ends.

Alcoholic Drinks

Local beer is good and inexpensive. Belikin is about the only brand you're ever likely to see (except in fancy bars), so get used to it. It comes in regular, light, stout and premium. Ask for a beer, you'll get a regular. Penny-pinchers should note that, while the stout is stronger, it costs the same.

You'll see plenty of rum drinking going on. One Barrel has won a few prizes for best rum in the Caribbean (quite an honor). Coconut rum is also popular, often with pineapple juice, in the drink known as the 'panty-ripper.'

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Bottled drinks are cheap, and all the usual soft drinks are available. Juices are available everywhere, but often made from concen-

trate. Specify if you want a fresh juice – staff may be able to help you out. Opinion is divided on whether tap water is safe to drink – bottled water is cheap and readily available, anyway. Coffee is widely available but often disappointing. Instant is the most common. Espresso is available in better restaurants and cafés.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Unfortunately, the rules for gay and lesbian travelers in Belize seem to be the same as those in most Central American countries – keep it low key, and look but don't touch. While it's an incredibly tolerant society, underlying Latino machismo and traditional religious beliefs combine to make public displays of same-sex affection a pretty bad idea. **Maya Travel Services** (www.mayatravelservices.com) has more Belize-specific information.

See p727 for general information about traveling in the region.

INTERNET ACCESS

All but the smallest of towns have cybercafés. The smaller the town, however, the higher the rates (up to about US\$8 per hour out on the cayes) and the slower the service.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Belize by Naturalight (www.belizenet.com) Covers just about everything visitors might want to know.

Belize First Magazine (www.belizefirst.com) Information of interest to travelers and expats. Especially helpful are reader recommendations on lodgings, restaurants and tours.

Belize Forums (www.belizeforum.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi) An excellent bulletin board with mostly reliable information.

Belize Tourism Board (www.travelbelize.org) Has comprehensive tourist information.

LANGUAGE

Belize is officially English-speaking, and most of its citizens, with the exception of new arrivals from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, read and speak English fluently. Creole people speak their own colorful dialect (arguably a language) as well as standard English, flavored with the Caribbean's musical lilt. You'll hear Garifuna in the south. Spanish is the first language in the north and in some towns in the west. Other languages in the mix are Maya, Chinese, Mennonite German and Hindi.

MAPS

If you're driving, pick up a copy of Emory King's annual *Driver's Guide to Beautiful Belize*, sold in bookstores and gift shops in Belize City. The guide has basic maps and detailed route descriptions – which is helpful since road markers in Belize are few and far between.

For more detail, the 1:350,000 *Belize*, published by International Travel Maps and Books of Vancouver is widely available throughout the country.

MEDIA

Newspapers & Magazines

Most Belizean newspapers are supported by one political party or another, and as a consequence, much space is devoted to political diatribe. The left-leaning *Amandala* (www.amandala.com.bz) has the largest circulation in the country. The *Belize Times* (www.belizetimes.bz) represents the PUP perspective, while the *Guardian* (www.guardian.bz) goes in to bat for the UDP. The *Reporter* (www.reporter.bz) appears to present the most neutral coverage.

Belize News (www.belize news.com) has links to most of the country's media.

Radio

LOVE-FM (spreading the love etc) is the most widely broadcast radio station in Belize, with spots at 95.1 and 98.1 on the dial. It's a beguiling mix of local news, public-service announcements ('Belizeans! Be kind to tourists!') and the world's best (and worst) love songs. KREM at 96.5 plays a more modern selection of music.

MONEY

The Belizean dollar (BZ\$) is divided into 100 cents. Coins come in denominations of one, five, 10, 25 and 50 cents, and one dollar; bills (notes) are all of the same size but differ in color and come in denominations of two, five, 10, 20, 50 and 100 dollars. Be sure to carry small denominations if you're heading off the tourist trail.

Prices in the country are generally quoted in Belizean dollars, written as '\$30 BZE,' though you will also occasionally see '\$15 US.' To avoid surprises, be sure to confirm with service providers whether they are quoting prices in US or Belizean dollars.

For general information on costs and money in Central America see p20.

ATMs

ATMs are the easiest way of getting cash. Belize Bank seems to have the least temperamental machines. There are ATMs in all major towns and some small ones.

Credit Cards

Credit cards are useful, particularly when buying cash from a bank. Visa and MasterCard are the most widely accepted. Some tour operators and higher-end hotels and restaurants accept cards (sometimes charging 5% for the service), but it's always best to have a good supply of the folding stuff on hand.

Exchange Rates

The value of the Belizean dollar has been pegged to the US dollar at a rate of 2:1 for some years now. The table shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

Country	Unit	Belize Dollar (BZ\$)
Australia	A\$1	1.70
Canada	C\$1	1.90
euro zone	€1	2.80
Japan	¥100	1.64
New Zealand	NZ\$1	1.60
UK	UK£1	4.10
USA	US\$1	2

Exchanging Money

Most businesses accept US currency in cash without question. They usually give change in Belizean dollars, though they may return US change if you ask for it. Many also accept US-dollar traveler's checks.

Canadian dollars and UK pounds sterling are exchangeable at any bank, although non-US-dollar traveler's checks are not consistently accepted by Belizean banks. It is difficult if not impossible to exchange other foreign currencies in Belize.

Moneychangers at border-crossing points will change your US cash for Belizean dollars legally at the standard rate of US\$1=BZ\$2. If you change money or traveler's checks at a bank, you may get only US\$1=BZ\$1.97; they may also charge a fee of BZ\$5 (US\$2.50) to change a traveler's check.

International Transfers

The fastest way to have money transferred from abroad is with Western Union. It has

offices all over the country and charges US\$85 for a US\$1000 transfer.

POST

A postcard sent by airmail to Canada or the USA costs US\$0.15; a letter US\$0.30. To Europe it's US\$0.20 for a postcard and US\$0.40 for a letter. Address poste restante (general delivery) mail to: (name), c/o General Delivery, (town), (district), Belize, Central America. To claim poste restante mail, present a passport or other identification; there's no charge.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Many people come to Belize to appreciate the natural beauty of the country. Belizeans are quite conscientious about maintaining their environment, and visitors should show the same respect.

Don't remove coral or shells from the sea, and mind your fins when snorkeling or diving; coral is fragile and endangered. Avoid buying items made from turtle shell or coral. Don't swim with manatees or attempt to piggyback a sea turtle. You may like it, but they find it very stressful.

Don't take or buy Maya artifacts – it's illegal, and some say you'll be hexed!

Use air-con sparingly. It's expensive and places an enormous strain on local energy reserves. Instead, move more slowly than normal and use fans (or hang out in the lobby of fancy hotels); you'll find that you adjust to the heat after a few days.

When in the jungle, stay on trails to avoid trampling plants. Appreciate wildlife from a distance. Never feed wild animals, including those in the sea.

STUDYING

Educational opportunities are scarce in Belize – a shame, because there is no language barrier to deal with. You can, however, learn Creole drumming at the **Maroon Creole Drum School** (methos_drums@hotmail.com; US\$8 per hr) in Gale's Point Manatee, a charming little village 1½ hours south of Belize City.

Archaeology students may be able to pick up some field work credits by working on one of the many digs around the country (see right).

TELEPHONE

The country's telephone system is operated by **Belize Telecommunications Ltd** (BTL; www.btl.net), with offices in major cities. Telephones are

generally very reliable (and inexpensive) when calling within the country. International calls are sometimes a different story. BTL has an online directory.

Local calls cost BZ\$0.25 (US\$0.13). Telephone debit cards are sold in denominations of BZ\$10, BZ\$20 and BZ\$50. In some stores you can choose your amount and they just print out a docket with your pin number on it.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The government-run **BTB** (www.travelbelize.org) maintains tourist offices in Belize City, Punta Gorda and Corozal. They're generally underfunded, but staffed by friendly folks who usually do what they can to answer your questions.

TOURS

Organized tourism isn't all that big in Belize yet, but you will find yourself on tour if you're heading out on dive trips on the cayes (p230) or Placencia (p253) or exploring around the Cayo district (p247).

VISAS & DOCUMENTS

Citizens of the EU and many countries (among them Australia, Canada, Mexico, New Zealand, the USA and many Caribbean nations) do not need to obtain a Belizean visa in advance, provided you have a valid passport and an onward or round-trip airline ticket (with a departure from Belize, or any other country in the region). A visitor's permit valid for 30 days will be stamped in your passport at a border crossing or at the airport. One month extensions are easily obtainable from any immigration office for US\$12.50. Details on visa requirements for other visitors are available from any Belizean embassy (see p259) or ask your travel agent.

VOLUNTEERING

Belize is full of volunteer opportunities; not surprisingly, many of them are environmentally based. Most programs expect volunteers to pay, and costs can vary wildly.

Help for Progress (progress@btl.net) Belizean NGO that works with grass-roots organizations in fields such as education, gender issues, citizen participation and environment.

Teachers for a Better Belize (www.tfabb.org) US-based organization that sends volunteers to schools in the Toledo district to train local teachers.

Plenty International (www.plenty.org) Has opportunities to work with community groups and cooperatives in the Toledo district.

There are a number of organizations that run volunteer expeditions in Belize. Among them are **Explorations in Travel** (www.volunteertravel.com) and **Trekforce Expeditions** (www.trekforceworldwide.com). The other big opportunity that exists is helping out at the various archaeological sites around the country. These positions can be expensive, though, and you'll definitely be doing more digging and wheel barrowing than brushing dust off crystal skulls, but they can be rewarding and fascinating, if that's what you're into. Check www.famsi.org, www.mesoweb.com or www.archaeology.org for more details.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Men in Belize can be forward and at times aggressive with comments about women's appearance. This can be uncomfortable and embarrassing, but shouldn't be considered threatening (although commonsense rules for women should be followed). Do as your mother told you in elementary school: ignore them, and they'll go away. And (you may have heard this from mom, too), the more modestly you're dressed, the less attention you'll receive.

WORKING

Officially you need a resident's visa to get a job in Belize. You might, however, pick up some work on the cayes or in Placencia working in bars, but the pay won't be anything to get excited about.

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