



Tony Rath/Tony Rath Photography

The interior ruins and rain forest draw the eco-adventurers. And its Caribbean waters are a haven for divers. No matter how you look at it, **BELIZE** is absolutely stunning.

By Steve Larese

# Green GO! All Greens GO!



The New River, once a major Mayan highway, provides a habitat for scores of exotic birds and the occasional submerged crocodile.



Eco-adventures and tours are available throughout Belize. Enthusiasts will find activities geared toward archeology, birding, caving, and more.

“Look, over there, by the bank!” Our guide Ruben points to a mat of lily pads bobbing in the New River, where we’re traveling by motorboat to the Mayan ruins of Lamanai. He shuts down the engine and deftly circles back to a spot that has him speaking in hushed tones. “It’s a crocodile, see him?”

I don’t. I do see a jacana, also known as the “Jesus Christ” bird because it appears to walk on water. The jacana must see the croc, because suddenly he begins flapping his wings and jumping up and down like an irate cartoon. Then I see in the water what looks like a log with two marbles resting on top. My first wild crocodile, and we’ve only been in Belize for an hour.

### CRASH COURSE

And here’s how we got to Belize: After deciding that a vacation would be a good idea, we came up with quite divergent criteria. Close but exotic, adventurous but relaxing, wild but refined. Discovering Belize, we all excitedly began packing our bags. Now, I’m

sure you have read plenty about certain destinations having something for everyone, but Belize is the real deal. It offers the education and adventure of eco-tourism, and the sun-drenched luxury of the finest beach resort stay. You can go spelunking in limestone caves that were sacred to the ancient Mayans, and laze in a hammock by the azure ocean with a margarita in hand — all in the same day.

Belize is a Central American democracy on the Yucatán Peninsula, with a population of only 300,000. The country boasts plenty of Caribbean coastline rimmed with white beaches,



Don’t fence me in: More than 40 percent of Belize is protected terrain, safe haven for howler monkeys and other creatures.

swaying palms, and crystal-clear turquoise waters; and its inland is blessed with spring-fed rivers, pine-covered mountains, lush rain forests, and limestone caves. More than 40 percent of the terrain is protected, making it a wildlife and archeological haven. And the diversity of its landscape is reflected in the wildlife that thrives here, including howler monkeys and whale sharks.

If this isn’t enough to entice visitors, consider that Belize City is only a two-hour-and-15-minute flight from Houston or Miami; that the Belizean dollar is pegged at 2 to 1 to the U.S. dollar; and that the country’s official language is English, due to Great Britain’s colonization of what it originally called British Honduras. Belize was granted full independence in 1981.

### IT’S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

Long before European interest in Belize, the land was the epicenter of the great Mayan Empire. Throughout Belize, there are 35 major sites containing temples and

other ruins of this complex civilization, with probably more yet to be discovered in the jungle. We note that the Mayan calendar predicts the world will end in 2012, and while we do follow the Gregorian calendar, we figure we’d better see the remnants of the incredible kingdom now — just in case.

So we’ve divided our trip into two parts: Later, we’ll soak in the Caribbean at our oceanside resort in Ambergris Caye (pronounced am-BER-gris key), but first, we’re exploring the inland jungles and Mayan ruins on this 8-hour excursion with Ruben of Belize Expeditions.

Lamanai is a partially excavated city in northern Belize most easily accessed by boat via the New River. As we weave along this waterway that once served as a major Mayan highway, Ruben points out scores of the 500-plus species of birds that call Belize home and make it a worldwide birding mecca. As he steers, Ruben casually notes blue herons, sungrebes, kingfishers, and yellow-headed parrots, with the skill of an experienced ornithologist. A huge

jabiru stork soars over our heads with its eight-foot wingspan. Several of these species are endangered in the U.S. due to habitat loss, but they thrive here. Around a bend, I’m surprised to greet a group of Mennonites fishing from a rowboat. Belize granted members of the Anabaptist Christian denomination a home here in exchange for their farming prowess. Today, Mennonites produce the majority of Belize’s crops.

The hour-long boat ride south from the town of Orange Walk is a beautifully surreal introduction to Belize, and my excitement grows as we dock at Lamanai, which in Mayan means “submerged crocodile.” Lamanai was occupied from roughly 1600 B.C. until as late as the 1800s by Mayan farmers. Its zenith was around the first century A.D. Three ziggurats tower in the jungle: the Mask Temple, Temple of the Jaguar Masks, and the High Temple, which rises 108 feet above the jungle floor and provides a hawk’s view of the river valley and lagoon.

Mauricio, our guide here, tells us there are signs of Olmec influence in

the 9-foot-high carved face at the Mask Temple, and in the rounded edges of the Temple of the Jaguar. Unable to resist the permitted opportunity, I begin climbing the steep steps of the High Temple, a thigh-burning endeavor. Summiting, I imagine what this might have looked like two millennia ago, when priests would climb on their hands and knees to this sacred site soaring above the jungle floor.

Back on *terra firma* and walking the jungle trail, Mauricio points out various trees, including allspice, bay leaf, and the strangler tree, which often brings a viney death to its host tree. He also shows us a rubber tree.

“We used to pour the sap into moulds and make slingshots,” he tells us. Then, he stops and has us crush and smell some small leaves he’s picked. The aroma is delicious.

“This is the copal tree,” he says. “The Mayans would burn the sap for their incense.”

Having worked up an appetite, we hike to nearby Lamanai Outpost for a lunch of chicken in a coconut broth seasoned with *recado rojo* (a paste that typically includes annatto, clove, cumin, cinnamon, allspice, garlic, and Mexican oregano). The aroma alone is intoxicating, and the taste, while reminding me a bit of East Indian cuisine, is unlike anything I’ve ever had before. Our waitress, Marvy, graciously lists the ingredients so I can stock up on spices at home.

## fastFACTS

**RESORT DIRECTORY:** IntervalWorld.com or pages 304 and 309

**CLIMATE:** Belize has a tropical climate, with a rainy season from June through December.

January through May is relatively dry. High temperatures throughout the year average from 80°F to 87°F, and low temperatures don't usually fall below 70°F. It's cooler at higher elevations.

**DON'T MISS:** If you don't get a chance to see the wildlife in their natural habitats, there's always the Belize Zoo in Belize City.

**CURRENCY:** Belizean dollar, but the U.S. dollar is also accepted.

**TIPPING:** 10 to 15 percent to restaurant wait staff and tour guides.

**INTERVAL TRAVEL:** IntervalWorld.com

**RENTAL CAR:** Recommended if you want to explore the mainland on your own.

**CONTACT:** Belize Expeditions, bzexpeditions.com; Lamanai Outpost Tours, lamanai.com; Seaduced by Belize tours, seaducedbybelize.com; Hol Chan Marine Reserve and Shark Ray Alley, holchanbelize.org; Caye Caulker, gocayecaulker.com; Belize Zoo, belizezoo.org

**VISITOR INFORMATION:**

Belize Tourism Board  
800.624.0686  
travelbelize.org

[belizetourism.org](http://belizetourism.org)  
[ambergriscaye.com](http://ambergriscaye.com)

After lunch, we take a birding hike, where we glimpse Belize's national bird, the keel-billed toucan, as a troupe of curious howler monkeys shadows us. The menu of other available tours has us wondering if we can add another week to our stay. One that catches my eye is night-time crocodile tagging. In this, guides trained by the University of Florida find, measure, weigh, tag, and release Morelet's crocodiles, which call inland Belize home. The data help protect the crocodile, and the activity is an eco-tourism adventure. And adventures



The postcard-perfect Caribbean Sea, as seen from Ambergris Caye.

for all skill levels and interests are available throughout the country, including archeology, birding, and caving, in addition to the more expected scuba diving and snorkeling, hiking, mountain biking, fishing, and sailing.

### ISLAND HIDEAWAY

Part two: It's time to trade our hiking boots for beach towels. A 15-minute Maya Island flight from Belize City takes us to Ambergris Caye, which, at a length of 25 miles, is Belize's largest island. Flying into San Pedro, the only town on the island, the scene below reminds me of a child's fanciful crayon drawing of what Caribbean paradise should look like. Every shade of blue stretches to the horizon from the water, the land is emerald green with palm trees, and the beaches that rim Ambergris Caye are pure white. The barrier reef, the second largest in the world, creates a white line a half-mile from shore. When a tiny boat cuts through the water, it looks as if it were sailing across a painting.

There are shops, restaurants, and a bit of nightlife in San Pedro (where golf carts have replaced cars), but most people come here for the uninterrupted beaches and bath-like water. Ambergris Caye was traditionally a fishing village and coconut plantation until tourists began discovering this utopia in the 1980s.

When it's said there's little to do here, that's meant as a good thing. Hours slip by as visitors sway in hammocks dozing, reading, or just contemplating the unbelievable ocean scene in front of them while frigate birds sail above. Honeymooners stroll hand-in-hand, children play in the water, parents remember what it is to be stress-free.

At the south end of Ambergris Caye is Hol Chan Marine Reserve and Shark Ray Alley, a diver's dream of rays, sea turtles, harmless nurse sharks, tropical fish, and hundreds of other species thriving in the sea grass beds. Santa Cruz ruins, once the site of a Mayan trading center, is 15 miles north



A visit to Ambergris Caye's Sundari Spa relaxes kinked muscles.

of San Pedro and can be reached by a hike through the mangrove.

After a blissful relaxation break, we opt for a snorkeling tour. We meet Sylvan Forman of Seaduced by Belize tours, and motor off to a prime part of the reef. A dive master, Sylvan tells us that the warm water is a shallow 8 feet on average, perfect for snorkeling. As with all the guides we've had, his knowledge is encyclopedic. We float above the coral, and he points out brilliant buck-toothed parrot fish, black

triggerfish, sergeant majors, and a host of other species that I'd only seen in pet shops before. We let a stingray glide past, and then Sylvan begins gesturing at a pile of coral. I look, but see no fish. He points to the middle, and suddenly I see an eerily intelligent eye looking back at me. It's an octopus, squeezed into a space and perfectly camouflaged.

Back at our resort, we begin to realize how tired we are from all of this adventure. Fortunately, there are plenty of spas here to work out tired

muscles. I opt for a deep-tissue massage at Sundari Spa, a palm-thatched hut on the beach with an open wall to the lapping ocean and warm sea breeze. Melting under my therapist Rosie's hands, I start to drift off, thinking about tomorrow, when we're due to take a water taxi to the charming island of Caye Caulker, with its manatees, parasailing, and deep-sea fishing. Then again, considering how relaxed I feel now as Rosie works her magic, maybe we'll just take in the talcum-white beach, green palms, and sapphire sea. Whatever strikes our fancy, I'm sure Belize has it. ■

Albuquerque-based writer and photographer Steve Larese wrote about Puerto Vallarta in the Spring 2009 issue of *Interval World*.

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