

Belize Fast Facts



Area: 22,806 square kilometers (8,908 square miles)

Population: 287,730 (July 2005, estimated)

Population density: 12.6 per square kilometer

Capital: Belmopan

Population: 8,000 (as of 2000, estimated).

Geography: Topographical features divide the Belizean landscape into two main physiographic regions. The most visually striking of these regions is distinguished by the Maya Mountains and the associated basins and plateaus that dominate all but the narrow coastal plain in the southern half of the country. The mountains rise to heights of about 1,100 meters, with the highest point being Victoria Peak (1,120 meters) in the Cockscomb Mountains. Covered with shallow,

(Continued on page 2)



(Continued from page 1)

highly erodible soils of low fertility, these heavily forested highlands are very sparsely inhabited.

The second region comprises the northern lowlands, along with the southern coastal plain. Eighteen major rivers and many perennial streams drain these low-lying areas. The coastline is flat and swampy, with many lagoons, especially in the northern and central parts of the country. Westward from the northern coastal areas, the terrain changes from mangrove swamp to tropical pine savannah and hardwood forest.

The interlocking networks of rivers, creeks, and lagoons have played a key role in the historical geography of Belize. The largest and most historically important river is the Belize, which drains more than one-quarter of the country as it winds along the northern edge of the Maya Mountains across the center of the country to the sea near Belize City. Also known as the Old River, the Belize River is navigable up to the Guatemalan border and served as the main artery of commerce and communication between the interior and the coast until well into the 20th century. Other historically important rivers include the Sibun, which drains the northeastern edge of the Maya Mountains, and the New River, which flows through the northern sugar-growing areas before emptying into Chetumal Bay. Both of these river valleys possess fertile alluvial soils and have supported considerable cultivation and human settlement.

Climate: Belize has a tropical climate with pronounced wet and dry seasons, although there are significant variations in weather patterns by region. Temperatures vary according to elevation, proximity to the coast, and the moderating effects

of the northeast trade winds off the Caribbean. Average temperatures in the coastal regions range from 75° F in January to 80° C in July. Temperatures are slightly higher inland, except for the southern highland plateaus, such as the Mountain Pine Ridge, where it is noticeably cooler year round. Overall, the seasons are marked more by differences in humidity and rainfall than in temperature.



Ambergris Caye in Belize.

Average rainfall varies considerably, ranging from 1,350 millimeters in the north and west to over 4,500 millimeters in the extreme south. Seasonal differences in rainfall are greatest in the northern and central regions of the country where, between January and April or May, fewer than 100 millimeters of

rain fall per month. The dry season is shorter in the south, normally only lasting from February to April. A shorter, less rainy period, known locally as the "little dry," usually occurs in late July or August, after the initial onset of the rainy season. Hurricanes have played key--and devastating--roles in Belizean history. In 1931 an unnamed hurricane destroyed over two-thirds of the buildings in Belize City and killed more than 1,000 people. In 1955 Hurricane Janet leveled the northern town of Corozal. Only six years later, Hurricane Hattie struck the central coastal area of the country, with winds in excess of 300 kilometers per hour and four-meter storm tides. The devastation of Belize City for the second time in 30 years prompted the relocation of the capital some 80 kilometers inland to the planned city of Belmopan. The most recent hurricane to devastate Belize was Hurricane Greta, which caused more than US\$25 million in damages along the southern coast in 1978.

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

Government: Parliamentary Democracy

Head of State & Government: Prime Minister Said Musa since 1998

Language: English (official), Spanish, Mayan, Garifuna (Carib), Creole

Religion: Roman Catholic 49.6%, Protestant 27% (Pentecostal 7.4%, Anglican 5.3%, Seventh-Day Adventist 5.2%, Mennonite 4.1%, Methodist 3.5%, Jehovah's Witnesses 1.5%), other 14%, none 9.4%

Electricity: 110 volts AC, 60Hz. American-style two-pin plugs.

Currency and exchange: Belize Dollar (BZ\$) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of BZ\$100, 50, 20, 10, 5 and 2. Coins are in de-

nominations of BZ\$1, and 100, 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 cents.

The Belize Dollar is tied to the US Dollar at US\$1 = BZ\$2.

Currency can be exchanged at most banks, hotels and travel agencies. Some businesses will even accept dollars.

Banks are generally open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. However, in many small towns, villages, and tourist destinations, bank hours may be limited. In very few instances, banks have begun opening on Saturday. Belizean businesses tend to be open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to noon, and from 1 to 5 p.m. Some businesses do not close for lunch, and some open on Saturday.

(Continued on page 4)



The “Blue Hole” of Belize, in the center of the Lighthouse Reef Atoll, is one of the world’s most intriguing dive destinations.

(Continued from page 3)

American Express, MasterCard (limited), and Visa are accepted. Check with your credit or debit card company for details of merchant acceptability and other services which may be available. Most establishments will add a 5% service charge to the bills of customers using credit cards.

The easiest and best way to get cash away from home is from an ATM (automated teller machine). Belize Bank ATMs were finally connected to the Cirrus and PLUS networks in 2004. It is expected that Scotiabank and Atlantic Bank will soon follow suit. The Cirrus (tel. 800/424-7787; www.mastercard.com) and PLUS (tel. 800/843-7587; www.visa.com) networks span the globe; look at the back of your bank card to see which network you're on, then call or check online for ATM locations at your destination. Currently, in Belize, you will only find internationally accessible ATMs in Belize City, San Pedro, Placencia, San Ignacio, Belmopan, Dangriga, and Corozal Town, although this may change and increase soon. Given the limited number of internationally enabled ATMs in Belize and the relatively recent nature of their connection to the Cirrus and PLUS systems, I still advise you to think of your ATM as a backup measure. It's wise to bring enough spending cash, and charge the rest of your bills. Try not to rely on your ATM card for an emergency cash bailout. **Tip:** Be careful to note whether or not the price you are being quoted is in Belize or U.S. dollars. Many hotels, restaurants, and tour operators actually quote in U.S. dollars. If in doubt, ask. At a two-to-one ratio, the difference can be substantial.

Traveler's checks: These can be exchanged, commission will usually be charged.

Sales tax: 9%

Communications:

Telephone IDD is available. Country code: 501. Outgoing international code: 00.

Mobile telephone Coverage is available in all six

districts. Belize Telecommunications Ltd has a GSM 1900 network. Handsets can be hired from Belize Telecommunications Ltd (BTL).

Fax BTL public booth in Belize City and some government and company offices have facilities available.

Internet/E-mail Cybercafés are becoming more and more common in Belize. You'll find cybercafés in most of the major towns and tourist destinations. Rates run between BZ\$4 (US\$2) and BZ\$10 (US\$5) per hour. Alternatively, BTL (tel. 0-800-112-4636; www.btl.net), the state Internet monopoly, sells pre-paid cards in BZ\$10 (US\$5), BZ\$25 (US\$13), BZ\$50 (US\$25), and BZ\$100 (US\$50) denominations for connecting your laptop to the Web via a local phone call. Some knowledge of configuring your computer's dial-up connection is necessary, and be sure to factor in the phone call charge if calling from a hotel.

Press The major weeklies include Amandala, The Belize Times, Government Gazette, The Reporter and The San Pedro Sun. Belize Today is a monthly official paper published in English.

Mail Most hotels will post a letter for you, and there are post offices in the major towns. It costs BZ\$.60 (30 U.S. cents) to send a letter to the United States, and BZ\$.75 (38 U.S. cents) to send a letter to Europe. Postcards to the same destinations cost BZ\$.30 (5 U.S. cents) and BZ\$.40 (20 U.S. cents) respectively.

If your postal needs are urgent, or you want to send anything of value, several international courier and express-mail services have offices in Belize City, including DHL, 38 New Rd. (tel. 223-4350; www.dhl.com); FedEx, 1 Mapp St. (tel. 224-5221; www.fedex.com); and Mail Boxes Etc., 166 North Front St. (tel. 227-6046; www.mbe.com). All can arrange pick up and delivery services to any hotel in town, and sometimes in the different outlying districts. Beware: Despite what you may be told, packages sent overnight to U.S. addresses tend to take three to four days to reach their destination.

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

More about telephone/fax Belize has a unified seven-digit phone numbering system. There are no city or area codes to dial from within Belize; use the country code, 501 (not to be confused with the area code for the state of Arkansas), only when dialing a Belizean number from outside Belize.

For directory assistance: Dial tel. 113 if you're looking for a number inside Belize, and for numbers to all other countries dial tel. 114 or 115 and (for a charge) an operator will connect you to an international directory assistance operator.

For operator assistance: If you need operator assistance in making a call, dial tel. 114 or 115, whether you're trying to make a local or an international call.

Toll-free numbers: Numbers beginning with 0800 and 800 within Belize country are toll-free, but calling a 1-800 number in the States from Belize is not toll-free. In fact, it costs the same as an overseas call.

Time zone: Belize is on Central Standard Time, six hours behind Greenwich mean time. Belize does not observe daylight saving time.

Pets: The importing of pets falls under the jurisdiction of the Belize Agricultural Health Authority (tel. 822-0197; baha@btl.net). In general, pet owners must provide a valid rabies certificate and international veterinary certificate, and the pet must pass an on-the-spot examination by a quarantine officer to be allowed into the country. Fees are BZ\$50 (US\$25).

Police: The police in Belize are generally rather helpful; there is a dedicated tourism police force in Belize City.

Emergency numbers: In case of any emergency, dial tel. 90 from anywhere in Belize. This will connect you to the police. You can also dial tel. 227-2222.

Tipping: Few places add service charges, and a 10% tip is normal. Taxi drivers are not tipped.

Siesta time: Shopping hours are Mon-Sat 8 am – 12 noon, 1 – 4:30 pm, and 7- 9 pm.

Toilets: There are very few public restrooms in Belize. About the only ones are located at the little cruise-ship tourist village on Fort Street in the Fort George section of Belize City. However, most hotels and restaurants will let tourists use their facilities.

Smoking: Belize has yet to pass any no-smoking legislation, and aside from a handful of hotels that are entirely non-smoking, few others have true non-smoking rooms or floors. Similarly, many restaurants don't have a nonsmoking section. Luckily, so much dining in Belize is alfresco that this may not be a problem, especially if you can snag an upwind seat.

Drugs: Despite a seemingly relaxed and open drug culture at some of the popular beach and caye destinations, visitors should be very careful, as drugs, including marijuana, are strictly illegal, even in small quantities, and the laws are applied firmly to foreigners.