

Small is BEAUTIFUL

Joanne Soddy explores Belize, the diminutive Central American country with a huge capacity for surprise.



Belize is the small chunk of land wedged between the southeastern jungles of Mexico and the mountains of Guatemala, sharing the same barrier reef as Honduras. Its name may conjure up images of white, sandy beaches, the clear crystalline waters of the Caribbean or colourful tropical fish darting in and out of delicate coral reefs, but it has so much more to offer. In under 14,000 square kilometres of land, Belize crams in dense jungle-clad mountains, vast cave systems, turquoise pools and streams, tropical hardwood forests, lagoons, swamps, ocelots and jaguars, magnificent harpy eagles, Mayan relics and a plethora of cultures and languages. I couldn't wait to explore it!

My journey through Belize started in Benque Viejo, the hometown of my guide José. We had driven over the Guatemalan border from the steamy jungles around Tikal, so the fresh scent

of Caribbean pine that filled the air was a pleasant welcome. We headed straight to one of the district's major Mayan sites, Xunantunich. Once we had crossed the Mopan River by way of a hand-cranked ferry, spotting green iguanas on the banks, the glorious Mayan temples soon came into view. Apart from the stunning frieze work and glorious open plazas, where ancient civilisations once sacrificed and celebrated, it was the peace and silence that stunned me most of all. Not a soul could be seen from the tops of the temples overlooking the lush green forests that spread out over Cayo District, the largest region in Belize.

I was later to learn that the Xunantunich site was to be overshadowed by the lost world of the Caracol ruins. Hidden in the lower jungle this archaeological marvel consists of 36,000 palaces, pyramids, ball courts and other ceremonial buildings. It is the largest ancient Maya site in Belize. I soon

realised that climbing the temples and wandering through caves was hot work, so the Rio On Pools (natural pools) were a welcome relief to cool down and soak up the scenery.

My journey continued southwards to the Stann Creek district and the home of the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Reserve. I was so excited at the thought of spending a night in the reserve. I couldn't wait to experience the jungle at night and perhaps, maybe, have the chance to encounter the most elusive of all jungle creatures, the jaguar. As soon as the sun went down, José and I left the safety of our very basic jungle dormitory, donned our head lamps, covered up to avoid the persistent mosquitoes that hung languidly above our heads, and made our way down a dark and ominous trail. Every single rustle and crunch in the undergrowth set the pulse racing faster. Occasionally a nocturnal bird would startle and flap its wings above our heads, silhouetted by the

moonlight that came through the chinks in the forest canopy. Then came the sound I will never forget: the low, steady and unmistakable rhythm of breathing. My body paralysed and I strained to hear anything above my heartbeat. José whispered urgently, "turn out your light". We were plunged into utter darkness, even the mosquitoes seeming to hush. We waited for what seemed like an eternity, then José, with one swift movement, shone his torch light directly into the eyes of a fully grown magnificent jaguar. He took a couple of seconds to look us both over and then turned and sauntered off into the darkness of the forest. I felt utterly honoured and very fortunate to have been so close to one of these beautiful and graceful beasts.

Venturing further south, passing the beaches of Placencia on my left and cruising through open savannah, orange groves and on dusty tracks, my journey continued into Toledo



Jaguar
10



Billed toucan



Xunantunich ruins



Canoeing,
Lamanai Outpost

district. Often overlooked by visitors to Belize, this southernmost region is a melting pot of cultures, Kekchi and Mopan Maya, Garifunas, Creoles, Hispanics, East Indians, Chinese, Europeans and sparse communities of Mennonites, who live side by side in this idyllic area. With fifteen national parks and reserves littering the area, wildlife lovers will feel at home, as will adventure seekers, history buffs and chocolate lovers! This area is home to Maya Gold, river tubing and kayaking through deep and ancient caves.

Belize is teeming with alternative experiences, and I haven't even touched on the northern pristine jungles of Orange Walk District where you can enjoy the wilderness from lovely comfortable lodges. I'll just have to make sure I return.

Joanne Soddy
Belize Specialist



Howler monkey



Scarlet macaws, Copan



Caracol ruins



Xunantunich ruins



Honey bear

FACT FILE

A two-week trip to Belize including return flights costs from £3,300 per person. This would include visits to the Mountain Pine region, Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, the Toledo district and a five-night stay on the beach. Please contact Joanne for further details on 01993 838 690.