
BELIZE

more than just the reef

by PAULA KIRBY Belize Specialist

Belize is well-known for its superb reefs and sparkling turquoise sea but as I discovered on a recent research trip, there is so much more to the country than the reef alone. It is overflowing with vast expanses of wild untouched rainforest, over 900 fascinating ancient Mayan ruins, raucous wildlife, thriving tropical fruit and cacao plantations, over 500 species of beautiful birds and is a cultural melting pot that makes the very nature of the Belizean people both intriguing and unique.

Bordered by both Guatemala and Mexico, Belize is the second smallest country in Central America and the least populated. Its spectacular reef stretches 185 miles in length and is second only in size to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. It is dotted with around 200 cayes (sandy islands formed on the surface of the coral reef) providing some undoubtedly fantastic snorkelling and diving spots. However, for such a small country, Belize is also surprisingly diverse, appealing to a variety of tastes and not just admirers of the beach and the underwater-world. It will delight nature enthusiasts, historians and anyone intrigued by

different cultures. It is also full of opportunities for adventurous activities such as river-tubing, caving and canoeing.

I flew to Belize's main hub – Belize City – from London via the USA. Upon arrival, I was met by my entertaining and thoroughly knowledgeable guide, José. He drove me in the direction of the western border, to the Cayo District. Here, I found the Belizeans to be more from Spanish or Mestizo origin; however the area is also popular with the Mennonites, who occasionally trundled past on their horse-drawn carts. The Cayo District contains some of the most important Mayan archaeological sites in the country, such as the largest - Caracol and Xunantunich - which have stunning views over the jungle from the top of its temples.

The most unique part of this region though are the hundreds of extraordinary cave systems that can be explored, ranging from the gentle canoeing through Barton Creek Cave to the considerably more adventurous caving “Indiana Jones style” in Actun Tunichil Muknal. Having never been caving before I thought ‘lets see how hard it can

get’ and chose to be brave and opt for the latter. It was well-worth it! I spent the day clambering, swimming and wading through parts of the cave and looking at ancient Mayan pottery - preserved intact as it was originally discovered. We also saw the skeletons of those sacrificed in past Mayan rituals (or potentially the remains of previous visitors that entered the cave, I’ll never know), fortunately, I made it out in one piece!

I then headed back via Belize City and travelled to Lamanai Lodge by road and then upriver into the Orange Walk District and my abode for the next two nights. In this area you find isolated jungle lodges, most of which can only be accessed by boat or by plane. They afford wonderful wildlife experiences, particularly around the archaeological site at Lamanai, which is a favoured hang-out for howler monkeys. At the even more remote Chan Chich Lodge there are even regular sightings of the elusive jaguar. I spent my time here enchanted by life along the river – spotting caiman, snail-kites, spoonbills and other water-birds and of course watching the entertaining howler monkeys, as well as learning about the medicinal properties of the native plants from the local guides.



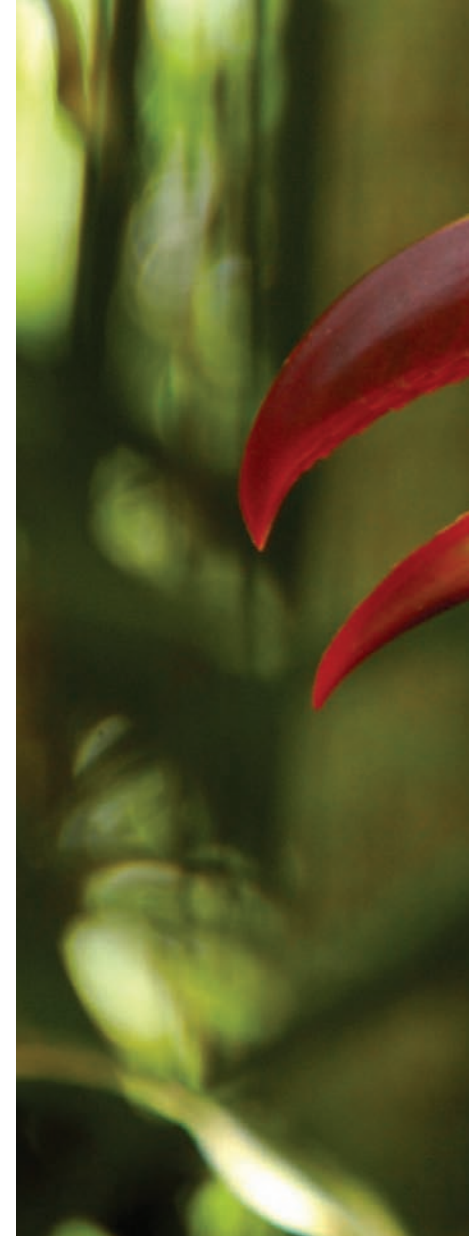
Cave tubing, Cayo district



Garifuna children



Caracol ruins



Keel-billed toucan



After travelling back to Belize City, I was driven south through the charming laid back coastal fishing villages of Hopkins, Dangriga and then onto Placencia. I found the Garifuna people, a mix of Caribbean Indians and former African slaves, to be delightfully friendly with a deep-seated cultural heritage. Their music is vibrant and their traditions strong. These were wonderful spots for a few days of relaxation after the adventure and humidity of the jungle I had experienced thus far, although be warned, although clean, the beaches are not of the white sand variety you find on the cayes and outer atolls.

Moving on to my last stop and one of the true hidden gems of Belize I took the 'hokey pokey' ferry to Independence where I was met and driven into the heart of the Toledo District, right in the far south of this magnificent country. I discovered a pristine area comprised of untouched stunning rainforest and rich in Maya culture. The locals refer to their home here as "The Forgotten Land", and in the 1980s it came close to being exactly that when it was nearly given away to Guatemala in exchange for relinquishing its claim on Belizean territory

This is the land of the Maya – over half the population belongs to either the Mopan or Kekchi Maya groups who live in thatched roof buildings and survive mainly from subsistence farming. It is a part of the country where you truly feel as if you have stepped back in time; dotted with Mayan sites, beautiful national parks, a great variety of birdlife and cayes all waiting to be explored. During my time here, I stayed at The Lodge at Big Falls, which was an extremely comfortable base for exploring the surrounding area with fantastic hosts in the form of Marta and Rob. Jumping in an inflatable tube and floating down the river around the lodge and past the local Mayan laundry – a series of washing stones and a natural hot spring used as the rinse – reinforced my opinion that there really is more to Belize than just the reef and this small country's wonders deserve considerable time and attention to be fully explored.

FACT file



To follow the route taken by Paula would cost from **£2,950 per person**. This includes return flights; three nights in Cayo and a tour to Actun Tunichil Muknal; three nights in Lamanai including all meals and selected touring; three nights in Placencia and three nights at Big Rock Falls Lodge, including cacao tour and dinner. For more information please call our Belize specialists on **01993 838 690**.

www.audleytravel.com/belize