



INTERACT BELIZE TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE

Practicalities

Documentation

Air visitors to Belize must present a valid passport before entering the country. Visitors to Belize must be in possession of a passport valid for at least 6 months after the date of arrival and a return ticket with sufficient funds to cover their stay.

See the [Belize & Guatemala supplemental planning guide](#) if you are entering by land to Belize from Guatemala.

Electricity

Belize provides electricity on the same cycle as the United States, 110V, with standard two and three prong sockets.

Time Difference

Belize is on Central Standard Time but they do not observe daylight-saving time.

WiFi & Phone Use

The easiest and quickest way to prepare for phone use while in Belize is by contacting your provider to review the packages they offer for international travel. Many companies have plans that begin at \$10 USD per travel day. WiFi will be available in some establishments, hotels, and families, but cannot be guaranteed, and the signal can vary greatly. Purchasing an international SIM card is also an option, but will likely be difficult to purchase after arrival.



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Practicalities cont.

Currency

The official currency of Belize is the Belizean dollar. The fixed rate of exchange between the Belizean dollar (BZ) and the U.S. dollar (USD) is 2 to 1. Establishments accept U.S. dollars, but not U.S. coins. Around the country, most tourist-driven businesses, including hotels, quote prices in U.S. dollars, but local merchants are more likely to quote prices in Belizean dollars. Change may be given in either currency.

Coins are in denominations of BZ\$.05, .10, .25, .50, and \$1. Bills themselves are in denominations of BZ\$1, \$2, \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50, and \$100.

Credit, Debit, Prepaid Bank Cards—Many hotels, stores, and restaurants accept payment with credit or debit card; rarely are prepaid bank cards accepted. Be sure to let your card carrier know before your departure that you will be travelling to Belize and ask them for any service or exchange rate fees. In addition to these fees, it is common and legal for individual establishments to charge their own credit card use fees for purchases.

Cards should always be in the name of the participant themselves. Debit cards work well for cash withdrawals, but typically must be run as credit for any purchases.



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Climate

The climate is distinctly divided into two seasons: wet and dry. The rainy season in Belize is between June and November, with the highest amount of precipitation from August through November. This is very variable from year to year though. The coolest month is in January, while the hottest time of year is May. Temperatures average around 81°F (27°C) along the coast and about 70°F (21°C) in the hills of the interior.

Location is a big factor for temperature. A sweater or light jacket may be needed in the Cayo District (San Ignacio).

Education

The Belize school system is based on British education, which is broken into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Rather than use the US grade system, Belizean children begin their eight years of primary education with two years of "Infant" classes, followed by six "Standards."

Public Education in Belize is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 14 years for primary education. The Education Act subjects parents to a fine of up to US\$100 if their children of compulsory school age fail to attend school regularly. Primary education is free, but related expenses, such as uniforms and books, are a financial strain on poor families.

Secondary Level is the High School which is divided into four "Forms". Secondary schools and apprenticeship and vocational programs can only accommodate half of the children who complete primary school.

Schools in Belize are stricter than those in the US; students are expected to adhere to a dress and grooming code and most wear uniforms daily. Most of the public schools in Belize have a religious affiliation and charge a minimal monthly fee. Some private schools are also available at varying costs. A number of ex-pat families home-school their children.



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Religious

The Belizeans are extremely religious minded people and thus give great importance to religion. Belize religion had influenced the culture and ideas of the people living in Belize.

The most significant religion is Roman Catholicism. Belize has a great number of Protestants as well.

Sports

Belizeans are fun loving and like to indulge into many kinds of sports. The most popular sports include basketball, cricket, softball, cross country cycling classic and soccer. The Belize national soccer team, nicknamed "The Jaguars," is a member of the CONCACAF (North America) confederation.

With an array of beautiful sandy beaches, Belizeans enjoy beach sports and water sports in their holiday schedules. Cave tubing as well as snorkeling and diving in the Belize Barrier reef are popular activities.

HOLIDAYS & FESTIVALS

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Monday, Labor Day (May 1), Christmas, and Boxing Day (December 26).

Baron Bliss Day, March 9. This day honors the Englishman Sir Henry Edward Ernest Victor Bliss, who left his entire fortune to the city of Belize for no known reason.

St. George's Cay Day, September 10. The area was originally settled by the Spanish, and in the seventeenth century British settlers arrived who were interested in the mahogany. After many conflicts between the Spanish and the British, war broke out in 1796, and a Spanish expedition was sent to drive out the British. The Battle of St. George's Cay in 1798 was won by a handful of locals over a superior Spanish force.



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Holidays & Festivals cont.

National Day, September 10. Commemorates the Battle of Saint George's Cay in 1798 in which a few locals defeated the superior Spanish forces.

Independence Day, September 21. Belize was known as British Honduras prior to their independence from the United Kingdom on September 21, 1981.

Garifuna Day, November 19. The first Carib settlement in Belize was in 1823, when Black Caribs came from St. Vincent [and Rotan]. The Garifuna ethnic group makes up 7.6% of the population.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

Belize was one of the British colonies, so parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy exist side by side in the country. Belize is one of the members of the British Commonwealth. In Belize, the head of the government is the Prime Minister and the head of the state is Queen Elizabeth II, who is represented by the governor general in the country.

The governor general of Belize acts according to the advice of the Cabinet and the Prime Minister. Cabinet ministers of Belize are the members of majority party, which comprises the National Assembly or the Parliament. The National assembly of Belize consists of two houses: Senate and House of Representative. The Senate comprises of 8 members and the House of Representatives consists of 29 members.

Political Parties

Multi party system is followed in the country. There are two main parties in Belize, the People's United Party founded in 1950, and the United Democratic Party, formed in 1974.

Prime Minister of Belize

According to the Constitution, the Prime Minister of Belize is the head of the majority party in the House of Representative. He is appointed by the governor general of the country. The Prime Minister appoints the cabinet ministers and they are collectively responsible for the proper functioning of the government.



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HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT

The history of Belize dates back thousands of years. The area now comprising Belize was originally inhabited by Amerindian groups (Caribs, Arawaks, and Mayas). The Maya civilization rose in the Yucatán Peninsula to the north, spreading to Belize between the 16th century BC and the 4th century AD.

The Classic period sites flourished until about the 13th century, and suggest that the area had a much denser population in that period than it has had since. Post-Classic sites continued until contact with Europeans. Belize contains the archeological remains of cities such as Altun Ha, Caracol, Cahal Pech, Lamanai, Lubaantun, Nim Li Punit, Santa Rita, and Xunantunich.

European Contact

In 1511, the first Europeans set foot on what is now Belize: a small crew of shipwrecked Spanish sailors, who landed in what is now northern Belize. The group's galleon had run aground on the Alacranes reef near Cabo Catoche. Twenty people were washed ashore, and most of those were immediately captured by the Mayas and later sacrificed or taken as slaves. One of the prisoners, Gonzalo Guerrero, later defected to the Mayas, and married into a noble Maya family. Guerrero married the daughter of Nachankan, the chief of Chetumal, and assumed the Maya way of life. He and his wife had three children, who were the first Mestizos (mixed Amerindian-European ethnicity).

Though tradition has it that European settlement began in 1638, there are no historical records of Europeans staying year-round in the area until the 1670s. These early Baymen were drawn by the large stands of logwood, a valuable tree whose sapwood was widely used in Europe to dye clothing. In the early 1700s, mahogany also became a valuable export. Over the next 150 years, more English settlements were established. This period also was marked by piracy, indiscriminate logging, and sporadic attacks by Indians and neighboring Spanish settlements.



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HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT cont:

The British Arrive

The Spanish Empire granted the United Kingdom rights to establish logging camps in the area, but not to set up a colony on this land, which the Spanish Crown wished to maintain theoretical sovereignty over. While not an official British colony, British use and occupation of the area increased. In 1798, the United Kingdom and Spain went to war, and the Spanish Governor-General of Yucatán sent a fleet of 32 ships to seize the British settlements. From September 3 through September 10 a series of battles was fought around the islands and reefs off the Belizean coast, after which the Spanish forces withdrew. This is known as The Battle of St. Georges Caye, and is celebrated as a national holiday each September 10.

The United Kingdom first sent an official representative to the area in the late 18th century but Belize was not formally termed the Colony of British Honduras until 1840. It became a Crown Colony in 1862.

In second half of the 19th century many refugees from the Caste War of Yucatán settled in the northern part of the colony.

In the 20th century, several constitutional changes were enacted to expand representative government. Full internal self-government under a ministerial system was granted in January 1964. The official name of the territory was changed from British Honduras to Belize in June 1973.

Independence

The government of Guatemala long claimed that Belize was rightfully Guatemalan territory, supposedly inheriting rights to the land from the Spanish Crown. Fear of invasion by Guatemala long delayed the independence of Belize. Finally the United Kingdom agreed to defend Belize from invasion if necessary after independence; this agreement led to full official independence granted on September 21, 1981, under the leadership of long time Prime Minister and independence advocate George Price. Guatemala refused to recognize the new nation until 1992.



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HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT cont:

Belize City was hit badly by a hurricane in 1931, and suffered even more severe damage from Hurricane Hattie in 1961. This resulted in the creation of two new towns. The first was Hattieville, just inland from Belize City, which was originally intended as a temporary shelter for those made homeless by the hurricane, but which grew into a permanent town. The second was Belmopan, a community planned as the new capital of Belize, well inland and near the center of the country. The building of Belmopan began in 1962, and in 1971 the Belizean House of Representatives began meeting there. Although no longer the capital, Belize City remains the nation's largest city and port. In the 1990s a new sea port was built at Big Creek, which soon became the second most important port after Belize City.



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FOOD

The eclectic fusion of nationalities in Belize can also be seen in the country's diverse cuisine.

Traditional Cuisine

The staple of Belizean cuisine is the classic white rice and red kidney beans. It is interesting to note the difference between 'rice and beans' and 'beans and rice'. 'Rice and beans' refers to the two being cooked together in coconut milk. On the other hand, 'beans and rice' refers to the dishes being cooked and served separately. A truly authentic Belizean dinner would pair either of these varieties with stewed or fried chicken, beef or fish.

Stewed Chicken is one of the most traditional Belizean dishes. The secret to this delectable dish is to brown the chicken that's been rubbed with an anato paste called "recado" and sprinkled with salt, pepper and garlic before adding water, a dash of vinegar and chopped onions and sweet peppers. This method helps to bring out the greatest flavor. Traditionally, the stewed chicken is accompanied by rice and beans, potato salad and fried ripe plantains.

Cultural Favorites

One Garifuna favorite in Belize is *serre la sus*. This rich and tasty soup contains fish lightly simmered in coconut milk with onions and spices and served with a mixture of beaten, boiled green and ripe plantains and wafers of cassava bread. Several Belizean dishes also expertly combine flavors from Mestizo, Spanish and Maya cultures such as, Chicken Escabeche with corn tortillas. This meal is a spicy combination of chicken smothered with onions in a base of vinegar, peppers and other spices. The fresh tortillas corn tortillas that complement the dish are prepared with a mixture of ground whole corn with white lime and water.



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Food cont.

Seafood Lovers

Due to Belize's excellent geographical location, the seafood is plentiful, of high quality and available almost anywhere in the country. Conch, shrimp, squid, red snapper and grouper are just a few of the seafood selections found on Belizean menus; with fish being the most common and lobster the most celebrated. There are Lobster-fests on several islands and coastal towns at the beginning of Lobster season in June.

Health Watchers

Fresh fruits and local vegetables are plentiful all year round. May and June is mango season, with over 20 varieties available. Other tropical delights include water melons, coconuts, pineapples, cantaloupes, green plums, and craboo (nance). And as every Belizean knows, there are several different varieties of craboo: some fruit are tiny and bitter while others are large and sweet.

CULTURE

Nowhere on earth will you find a friendlier people than the people of Belize. From the moment you arrive, you will feel as comfortable in this small Caribbean country as you do in your own hometown.

The people of Belize have an array of traditions and customs that represent more than 10 diverse cultures. This is truly a melting pot of colorful personalities, making the 314,000 residents of Belize the country's greatest resource for tourism. Belizeans are comprised of a harmonious combination of Maya, Mestizo, Creole, Garifuna, East Indian, Mennonite, Arab and Chinese, as well as a number of European, American and other expatriates. This combination has resulted in one of the happiest and most peaceful countries in the region and a widespread reputation as one of the friendliest tourist destinations in the world.



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LANGUAGES

Although English is the official language, Spanish is widely spoken. Yet, *Kriol* is the language that all Belizeans speak.

This Caribbean lilt encompassing shortened English words, emphasized phrases and manual gestures will likely be your first introduction to communicating in Belize. It will also start you on a bit of a linguistic adventure. Spanish, African-based Garifuna, Maya, Kekchi, Mandarin, German – these are just a few of the tongues you will encounter on your Belize experience.

Kriol is recognized by linguists as having all the distinctive rules and lexicon of the contact languages found in many parts of the world which were colonized by European powers. It borrows words from English, African languages, Mosquito Indian and a smattering of Spanish and Maya. No doubt it will also pick up terms from Chinese and other newly arrived immigrant groups as it evolves.

MUSIC & DANCE

Music is a key element of Belizean life. Belizeans enjoy Caribbean and Latin beats as well as contemporary American recordings but are equally proud of their own creations. For many Belizeans, music is a part of the national identity, a way of connecting with ancestors while preserving traditional and cultural practices. You will hear an assortment of sounds on the radio, at a party or street-side barbeque stand, during a live performance at a club or café, or the rhythmic drums at a Garifuna wake.

Belizeans do not only listen to music, they have to move to it — everywhere and anywhere. It is not uncommon to see people dancing in the street outside a shop where music is blasting or to emphasize a conversation point with a little dance.

As you travel throughout Belize, the musical soundtrack in each destination will vary. Let your body move to the “*Brukdown*” — a distinctive, original Belizean *Kriol* musical genre using percussion instruments such as the accordion and “jawbone” of a cow. “Punta Rock” is an infusion of traditional Garifuna rhythms accompanied by the electric guitar, or travel north and south and listen to the Mestizo and Maya play melodious Marimba music.



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GEOGRAPHY

Belize is divided into six districts connected by a paved, two-lane highway system and a well-organized network of local airline and boat services. On your Interact program, you'll travel to Western Belize, stay in the San Ignacio, Cayo District, and experience Ambergris Caye.

Cayo District

Rivers, waterfalls, caves and mountains surround a tiny national capital and ancient Maya cities. The largest district in the country and home of the capital city is Belmopan. The Cayo district offers a plethora of ecotourism adventures. With an astonishing 880,000 acres of protected land in the form of nature reserves and national parks, this district is truly a nature-lover's dream.

The twin towns of San Ignacio and Santa Elena and the quiet border town of Benque Viejo del Carmen provide a glimpse into the lives of the friendly residents. They also serve as a base from which to explore pine forests, clear rivers, rocky plateaus, ceremonial caves, towering mountains, cascading waterfalls and grand Maya temples.

San Ignacio/Santa Elena Towns

Together, San Ignacio and sister town Santa Elena, boast a combined population of about 20,000. The cities are located along the Western Highway, about 70 miles from Belize City.

Alive with archaeologists, volunteer workers, retirees, adventurers and traffic between Belize and Guatemala, these small towns have the diversity generally reserved for a metropolis. The architecture of San Ignacio is a unique blend of America's Old West mixed with tropical wooden shops on narrow streets.



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Geography cont.

Ambergris Caye

There is no separate definition to differentiate between an island and a caye. A caye is generally referred to as an island with sand and vegetation. Located only a 25-minute plane flight or 80-minute water taxi ride from Belize's mainland, Ambergris Caye's swaying palms, white sandy beaches and warm waters entice travelers from around the world.

Ambergris Caye is the largest island in Belize, and the main destination for travelers to this western Caribbean nation. San Pedro is the only town on the island. Ambergris Caye has been the hub of Belizean area maritime trade for centuries. Fishing, coconuts, and chicle were historic means of islanders support, but the last thirty years have led to a large growth in both the Belize dive and scuba trade, and ecotourism. The rich variety of things to do in San Pedro Town makes Ambergris Caye the gateway to Belize.



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PLACES TO VISIT

Barton Creek Cave

Tucked within the small Mennonite community of Barton Creek, along the Cayo District's Chiquibul Road, are the cool, dark caverns of Barton Creek Cave.

This is one of the easiest caves to reach as travelers won't have to climb steep hills or walk far to get to the cave's beckoning mouth. With the help of an experienced local guide, you'll canoe or gently tube between room-size boulders and be transformed by the large glittering stalactites that cast a bewildering glow. You'll need powerful lanterns to light your way from Barton Creek Cave's entrance to the stopping point, a journey that can range from 1 to 2 miles in the wet season to as much as 4.5 miles long when water levels are lower.

It is believed that this cave was used by the ancient Maya for ritualistic activities such as human sacrifices, bloodletting rituals and fertility rites. Today, explorers feel privileged to see the remains of ancient Mayan pottery as well as the human bones that line the cave's floors. *This cave tour is suitable for guests of varying strengths, ages and abilities.*

Tikal

Tikal, city of echoes, is among the world's travel wonders. Many believe that Tikal is one of the most spiritually powerful spots on earth. The monumental site with its towering pyramids looms out of the thick jungle canopy like stoic sentinels of ancient mysteries.

Tikal was once a wealthy metropolis of 100,000 inhabitants and the seat of power for the great Jaguar clan lords. Today, Tikal attracts archeologists from all around the globe and the wild-life surrounding the ruins makes it a naturalist's dream. Because of its importance and magnificent combination of nature and archaeological remains, Tikal has been declared a Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.



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Tikal cont.

The ruins of Tikal include more than 3,000 structures extending over six square miles and including palaces, temples, ceremonial platforms, ball courts, terraces, plazas, avenues and steam baths. The ancient Maya began building Tikal around 600 B.C., and for the next 1500 years the area was an important religious, scientific, and political center.

The Tikal National Park is not only home to an ancient Mayan City. Screeching howler monkeys and squawking parrots provide nature's soundtrack to all visitors in the area. From monkeys to white lipped peccary, brocket deer, coati-mundis, toucans, scarlet macaws, parrots, ocelots; even the seldom jaguar can occasionally be spotted. Along with many vegetation spices there is also an abundance of tropical flowers.

Xunantunich

Xunantunich, Maiden of the Rock, sits atop a hill overlooking the Mopan River and the Cayo District. Xunantunich was a major ceremonial site, built on a natural limestone ridge during the Classic Period. The site is composed of six major plazas with more than twenty five temples and palaces.

El Castillo, the largest pyramid at 130 feet above the plaza, has carved friezes on the east and west sides. The frieze on the east has been preserved and covered with a fiberglass replica of the central mask, representing the sun god.

Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave (ATM)

Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave requires a full day. Following a 45-minute drive from San Ignacio and a 45-minute hike through the beautiful Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve, with numerous jungle stream crossings, visitors find a crystal-clear stream flowing from the cave opening. A short, cold swim into the cave and a guided hike through the underground realm is rewarded by one of the most impressive Maya sites in Belize, including massive pots, ceremonial chambers and human skeletal remains cemented in limestone.



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ATM cont.

Amazingly, while valuable artifacts are always in danger of being taken from inside any cave, at Actun Tunichil Muknal, nearly all of the culturally significant artifacts remain in place just as they were when they were discovered in 1989. Belize's Department of Archaeology has granted permission for only a handful of approved guides to lead tourists – maximum of eight per guide-through the terrain in order to control the loss of valuable artifacts while giving the public access to this superb piece of Belize's culture and heritage. *Exploring this cave requires strenuous activity and confident swimming skills.*

Cahal Pech

Cahal Pech, place of ticks, is located within the San Ignacio city limits. Cahal Pech was a ceremonial center with temples, palaces and a ball court. It offers visitors a spectacular view of San Ignacio and the Belize River Valley. This site is located adjacent to the Cahal Pech Resort. Allow one to two hours.

San Pedro (Cayes Ambergris)

Hol Chan Marine Reserve is the most popular snorkeling destination in Belize located off the shores of the cayes. The words hol chan mean 'little channel' in the Maya language and therefore the location is a natural hang out spot for marine life. The reserve covers about five square miles and about nine miles North East of Caye Caulker. The channel is about 30 feet deep, and since no fishing is permitted in the reserve, it is rich with sea life of every description. Snorkelers can expect to see abundant angelfish, blue-stripped grunts, schoolmaster snappers and hundreds of other varieties. It is also known for the green moray eels living in tiny caves along the wall.

The Shark and Ray Alley is another of our stops within the Hol Chan Marine Reserve. Locally known as the Aquarium, this spot is known as the shark and stingray city of Belize. This gives the snorkelers a prime opportunity to swim with the harmless Nurse Sharks and Southern Stingrays and the chance to get acquainted.



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San Pedro (Cayes Amber Gris) cont.

The Coral Gardens are located two and a half miles southwest of Shark and Ray Alley. The Belize Reef has such extraordinary clear water that looking through a diving mask brings you into a world of color. The myriad hues of coral are rainbow-like. Between the months of June to September there are varying chances of snorkeling with manatees which makes this spot extremely special.