



nileGUIDE

ALL YOU NEED TO PLAN YOUR PERFECT TRIP



roger4336

Top 10 Restaurants in Belize

Belize City, Dangriga, San Ignacio, 7 Days

Table of contents:

Guide Description 2

My List 3

Belize City Snapshot 6

Dangriga Snapshot 10

San Ignacio Snapshot 13

Guide Description



AUTHOR NOTE: In between relaxing on the beach and touring the Mayan ruins of Belize, you have to stop to enjoy the savory local eateries. In such a small country, small restaurants flourish. Spots like the Riverside Cafe do well with both tourists and in-the-know locals. Menus tend to be eclectic, like the jerk chicken, Thai noodles, sandwiches, and focaccia of Cafe Sol. Seafood dishes feature prominently at many locations. The Smokey Mermaid, for example, offers a daily catch crusted with yuca. We also suggest you leave your mark at the Wet Lizard, a happening spot overlooking Belize City's Swinging Bridge. For those adventurous visitors who enjoy testing their mettle against the extremes of spicy foods, sample the vindaloos of Hannah's (but don't say we didn't warn you). For a taste of local Belize game in a small, comfy venue, check out Macy's chalkboard specials. Belize delivers a diverse selection of flavors for every palate, try some from our top ten to find your favorite.

My List

contact:
tel: 523-3499

location:
Dangriga

hours:
Daily 7am-9pm

1 Riverside Café

DESCRIPTION: This simple cafe and bar is funky and perennially pretty run-down. Still, it's popular with the local boatmen and one of the best places to get travel information in Dangriga. It opens early and serves food throughout the day. You can get a full meal of fried chicken, beans, and rice for BZ\$8 (US\$4/£2.10). Breakfasts are hearty and inexpensive. This is the place to ask about rides out to one of the nearby cayes, to set up a tour around the region, and to pick up some brochures from the wall-mounted racks. You'll find the cafe just east of St. Vincent Street on the south side of North Stann Creek. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 824-3014

location:
5 Burns Avenue
San Ignacio

hours:
Daily 6am-9pm

2 Hannah's

DESCRIPTION: Don't be put off by the humble state of this small restaurant, with simple furniture and half walls with steel grating substituting for windows. The menu is massive, with a host of curries and vindaloes and other Indian staples, mixed with a hefty dose of Chinese and Thai cuisine. Heck, you can even get burgers, burritos, Belizean fare, and big breakfasts here. Still, I recommend you come for the Indian and Thai cooking. The chef here is not shy to spice things up. The vindaloes and other spicy dishes can blow your head off if you're not accustomed to authentic cooking. This is a great restaurant for vegetarians, with ample options to choose from. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 824-2034

location:
18 Buena Vista St
San Ignacio

hours:
Daily 7am-11pm

3 Running W Steak House & Restaurant

DESCRIPTION: This restaurant is located in the San Ignacio Resort Hotel and is affiliated with Belize's largest beef and cattle operation, its namesake. Try the Mayan Steak, marinated strips of tenderloin grilled and served with fresh tortillas. If you want something more traditional, order the 16-ounce porterhouse. There are also fish and chicken dishes, as well as some Belizean standards. The dining room is large and comfortable, with plenty of varnished wood. A few wrought-iron tables line an outdoor patio and make a great place to have lunch with a jungle view, or dinner under the stars. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 824-2166

location:
San Ignacio

hours:
Tues-Sat 7am-9pm; Sun
7am-2:30pm

4 Café Sol

DESCRIPTION: This simple, downtown restaurant and coffeehouse features an eclectic menu ranging from a Thai noodle salad to jerk chicken to soy burgers. You can also get burritos and quesadillas, and a range of pasta dishes, as well as hearty sandwiches on freshly baked focaccia. Be sure to check the chalkboard for the daily specials. I like the tables on the covered front porch. You can also head inside, where you'll also find a small Internet cafe and a helpful corkboard with a variety of tour and hotel brochures and information. This is a great place for everything from breakfast to a coffee break to a filling meal. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 223-6420

location:
Belize City

hours:

5 Harbour View

DESCRIPTION: This is probably the most expensive and creative restaurant in town. The menu here features some fusion touches you won't find at other Belize City restaurants. I like the Parasol of Reddened Shrimp, which are coated in an Asian-style sweet and pungent glaze and served

Mon-Fri 11:30am-3pm; daily
5-11pm

atop a rice palau. Another excellent choice is the Picasso Pork Tenderloin, which comes with a delicious jalapeño relish. You can also get thick cuts of steak and a host of other dishes. The main dining room is a second-floor space with large picture windows opening onto Belize Harbour. However, when the weather's right, I recommend grabbing one of the outdoor tables on the wooden wraparound veranda, which will put you even closer to the water. There's often live jazz music in the evenings. During the day, they feature a more modest menu with a selection of salads and sandwiches. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 223-4722

6 The Smokey Mermaid

location:
13 Cork St
Belize City

DESCRIPTION: I love the open-air brick courtyard setting of this semi-elegant yet relaxed restaurant. There are a couple of raised decks and gazebos and a few fountains, spread out amongst heavy wooden tables and chairs under broad canvas umbrellas in the shade of large seagrape and mango trees and a wealth of other lushly planted ferns and flowers. An equally pleasant choice for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, the menu here ranges from Jamaican jerk pork to shrimp thermidor to chicken Kiev. I recommend the yuca-cruste catch of the day. The desserts here are excellent, with their signature sweet being the Decadent Ecstasy, a chocolate-coconut pie swimming in ice cream, nuts, and chocolate sauce. © Frommer's

hours:
Daily 6:30am-10pm

contact:
tel: 223-5973

7 Wet Lizard

location:
1 Fort St
Belize City

DESCRIPTION: Boasting a prime setting on a second-floor covered deck overlooking the Swing Bridge and Belize City's little harbor, this raucous restaurant is one of the most popular spots in town. The menu here is simple, with an emphasis on sandwiches, burgers, and American-style bar food. Start things off with some coconut shrimp, conch fritters, or fried calamari, before tackling one of the hearty sandwiches or wraps. You can also get tacos, nachos, fajitas, and quesadillas, as well as a daily special or two. If you like sweets, save room for the banana chimichanga. The best seats here are the small tables and high stools ringing the railing and overlooking the water. Everything is painted in bright primary colors, and the walls are quickly being covered with graffiti and signatures from guests. The practice is actually encouraged, so be sure to ask for a magic marker and add to the wall art. When the cruise ships are in town, this place is overrun and even serves a separate menu, so be sure to ask for their full menu. © Frommer's

hours:
Tues-Sat 11am-9:30pm

contact:
tel: 223-5640

8 Riverside Tavern

location:
2 Mapp St
Belize City

DESCRIPTION: One of the most popular spots in Belize City, this large place has both indoor and outdoor seating on a spot overlooking Haulover Creek. The restaurant also specializes in hefty steaks and delicious ribs. But you can also get seared tuna, grilled snapper, coconut shrimp, or jerk shrimp. The lunch menu features pizzas, pastas, sandwiches, and rolls. The burgers here are rightly famous and served for both lunch and dinner. There are TVs showing sporting events, and at times this place can get quite boisterous. There's actually a bit of a dress code here: Shorts, sleeveless shirts, and sandals are discouraged after dark. © Frommer's

hours:
Tues-Wed 11am-midnight;
Thurs-Fri 11am-2am; Sat
noon-2am; Sun noon-
midnight

contact:
tel: 223-1966

9 Jambel's Jerk Pit Too

location:
164 Newtown Barracks Rd

DESCRIPTION: With a new location, on Barracks Road, this simple, long-standing restaurant continues to serve up spicy curries and jerk concoctions, alongside local specialties. The coconut

Belize City

hours:

Daily 10am-10pm

curry chicken is excellent, and there are several vegetarian options. Still, the spicy Jamaican jerk is the signature here, and you can get it served over fish, shrimp, chicken, or conch. The restaurant is housed in a two-story converted home located across the street from the water just a little way north of the Princess Hotel. The walls are painted lavender, and there are large picture windows overlooking the BTL park and harbor. When the weather's cooperative, try to grab a seat on their outdoor patio-balcony. © Frommer's

contact:

tel: 207-3419

location:

18 Bishop St
Belize City

hours:

Mon-Sat 11:30am-9pm

10 Macy's

DESCRIPTION: For authentic Belizean cooking and a down-home funky vibe, you can't beat this tiny local place. The food is good, the service is friendly, the prices are right, and the dining room is cool and cozy. Order a fish filet with rice and beans, or curried chicken, or be more daring and try one of their daily wild-game chalkboard specials, which could feature anything from armadillo and deer to wild pig or gibbon. Macy's no longer serves turtle or other endangered species, and there seem to be fewer wild game options than there were in the past. There are only five tables, and each is set with a plastic tablecloth and plastic place mat, under a strategically placed overhead fan. © Frommer's

Belize City Snapshot

Local Info

Introduction

Long ago stripped of its status as the country's capital, Belize City remains Belize's business, transportation, and cultural hub. Sooner or later you'll probably have to spend some time here, unless you do all your in-country traveling by air or have a very precisely planned itinerary. In fact, since the country itself is so small, Belize City makes a good base for a host of interesting day trips to most of the country's major destinations and attractions.

With a population of some 71,000, Belize City is surrounded on three sides by water, and at high tide it is nearly swamped. It's a strange, dense warren of narrow streets and canals (the latter being little more than open sewers, and pretty pungent in hot weather), modern stores, dilapidated shacks, and quaint wooden mansions, coexisting in a seemingly chaotic jumble.

The city was originally settled by the ancient Mayans, who lived up and down the coast here. By the mid-1600s, pirates were using the current site of Belize City as a hideout and provisioning spot. Soon after, the British arrived and set up a logging base here, fueled by slave labor. Logs were harvested inland and floated down the Belize River for milling and shipping. This logging base soon became a colonial settlement and the seat of Britain's colonial empire on the Central American isthmus. Belize City itself is said to sit on a foundation of wood chips, discarded ship's ballast, and empty rum bottles.

Belize City has historically been beset by tragedy. The entire population abandoned the city and moved to St. George's Caye in 1779 following a Spanish attack. The Baymen, as the British settlers called themselves, returned and resettled the city in 1784. Massive fires razed much of the city in 1804, 1806, and 1856. Deadly hurricanes inflicted heavy damage in 1931 and 1961. Between these events, the residents endured smallpox, yellow fever, and cholera epidemics. Belize City had been declared the capital of British

Honduras in 1892, but after Hurricane Hattie struck in 1961, the country's capital was relocated inland to Belmopan.

Despite a reputation for crime and violence, periodic devastation from passing hurricanes, and the loss of its capital status, Belize City remains the urban heart and soul of Belize. Most visitors treat Belize City merely as a transition point and transportation hub. This is probably what you'll want to do too. But if you've got a day or two to burn on a layover here, Belize City is a good place to walk around, admire the fleet of working wooden fish sloops, do some craft and souvenir shopping, and stock up on Marie Sharp's Hot Sauce to bring home with you.

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Hotel Insights

Hotels

Belize City is small, and your options on where to stay are limited, especially for a capital city. The most picturesque and safest neighborhood by far is the area around the Fort George Lighthouse. Here you'll find most of the city's best shopping, dining, and accommodations. Still, since the city is so compact, and it's not really recommended to walk around anywhere at night, you're best off choosing a hotel that best meets your needs, style, and budget. There are really only three large, modern hotels in town, and they're all listed below. If your tastes tend towards smaller, more intimate lodgings, there are several good options in different price ranges to choose from.

When getting a price quote from or negotiating with a hotel in Belize, be careful to be clear whether or not you are being quoted a price in Belize or U.S. dollars. There is a 9% tax on all hotel stays in Belize, which isn't included in the rates listed here.

Around Town

In addition to the places listed here, **D'Nest Inn** (tel. **223-5416**; www.dnestinn.com) is a cute, well-run little bed-and-breakfast

located about 4.8km (3 miles) outside of downtown, just off the Northern Highway.

Near the Airport

The airport is located just 16km (10 miles) north of downtown Belize City, a 15- to 20-minute drive, depending on traffic. The area around the airport is decidedly undeveloped and of little interest to visitors. Few international flights arrive late enough or leave early enough to necessitate a stay near the airport. If you really want to stay just a stone's throw away from the airport, try the **Global Village Hotel** (tel. **225-2555**; fax 220-3000; globalhotel@btl.net). While large and modern, this place has virtually no atmosphere or life of its own, and there's not much else nearby either. I really recommend you take the short taxi ride into Belize City, or stay at one of the places listed here.

In addition to the place listed here, the **Belize River Lodge** (tel. **888/275-4843** in the U.S. and Canada, or 225-2002 in Belize; www.belizeriverlodge.com) is an upscale fishing lodge located on the banks of the Belize River, just a few miles from the airport, while the **Black Orchid Resort** (tel. **866/437-1301** in the U.S. and Canada, or 225-9158 in Belize; www.blackorchidresort.com) is a small resort hotel, also on the banks of the Belize River near the town of Burrell Boom. © 2000-2010 by Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Restaurants Insights

Restaurants

Despite its small size, Belize City actually has an excellent and varied selection of dining options open to visitors. While Belizean cuisine and fresh seafood are most common, you can also get excellent Chinese, Indian, and other international fare at restaurants around the city.

Note: When the cruise ships are in town, the restaurants in the Fort George area can get extremely crowded, especially for lunch.

Fort George

In addition to the places listed here, you can get good burgers and bar food at the

Belize City Snapshot continued

Bayman's Tavern at the Radisson Fort George Hotel.

Business District

In addition to the places listed here, **Nerie's**, which has two locations (124 Freetown Rd., tel. **224-5199**; and at the corner of Queen and Daly sts., tel. **223-4028**) is another simple restaurant specializing in Belizean cuisine, and it's very popular with locals.

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Nightlife Insights

Nightlife

Again, Belize City is a small, provincial city in an underdeveloped country, so don't expect to find a raging nightlife scene. The most popular nightspots-- for both locals and visitors alike-- are the bars at the few high-end hotels in town.

The Performing Arts

It's really the luck of the draw as to whether or not you can catch a concert, theater piece, or dance performance-- they are the exception, not the norm. To find out if anything is happening, ask at your hotel, read the local papers, or check in with the **Bliss Institute** (tel. **227-2110**).

The Bar Scene

The bar and club scene in Belize City is rather lackluster. The most happening bar in town is the **Riverside Tavern**. This is especially true on weekends, and whenever there's an important soccer, basketball, or cricket match on.

Travelers and locals alike also tend to frequent the bars at the major hotels and tourist traps. The liveliest of these are the bars at the **Radisson Fort George Hotel & Marina**, the **Best Western Belize Biltmore Plaza**, and the **Princess Hotel & Casino**, all of which often have a live band on weekend nights. Of these, I prefer the **Club Calypso** (tel. **223-2670**), an open-air affair built over the water at the Princess Hotel & Casino, although it's sort of a crapshoot as to which bar will be hopping on any given night.

Casinos

For gaming, the **Princess Hotel & Casino** is the only game in town, and the casino here is large, modern, and well equipped. While it's not on the scale of Vegas or Atlantic City, the casino is certainly respectable, with enough gaming tables, slots, and other attractions to make most casual gamblers quite happy to drop a few dollars.

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Things to Do Insights

Attractions

There really isn't much reason to take a guided tour of Belize City. The downtown center is extremely compact and lends itself very easily to self-directed exploration. There are only a handful of interesting attractions, and all are within easy walking distance of the central Swing Bridge. Below you'll find reviews of the most interesting attractions, as well as a walking tour of the city.

If you really feel the need for a guided tour of the city, ask at your hotel desk for a recommendation, or call **Discovery Expeditions** (tel. **223-0748**; www.discoverybelize.com) or **S&L Travel and Tours** (tel. **227-7593**; www.sltravelbelize.com). A half-day city tour should cost around BZ\$80 to BZ\$100 (US\$40-US\$50/£21-£27) per person, but can easily be combined with a visit to one of the several popular nearby attractions. All the above companies offer a whole range of day trips and combinations to the attractions close to the city and even further afield.

The Top Attractions

Belize City is very light on true attractions. The museums mentioned here are quite quaint and provincial by most international standards, although they are worth a visit if you are spending a day getting to know the city, residents, and local history.

Attractions Outside Belize City

The attractions listed below are within an hour of Belize City; both can be reached by public transportation. In addition, the Mayan ruins of **Altun Ha** and **Lamanai** and the

Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary are all easily accessible from Belize City. All are popularly sold as day tours, often in various mix-and-match combinations. If you're interested in visiting one or more of these attractions as part of an organized tour, ask at your hotel, or call **Action Belize** (tel. 223-2987; www.actionbelize.com), **Discovery Expeditions** (tel. 223-0748; www.discoverybelize.com), or **S&L Travel and Tours** (tel. 227-7593; www.sltravelbelize.com). Prices range from about BZ\$100 to BZ\$280 (US\$50-US\$140/£27-£74) per person, depending on the tour, means of transportation, and the attraction(s) visited. Tours, especially those to Altun Ha and Crooked Tree, are often combined with lunch and an optional spa treatment at Maruba Resort Jungle Spa.

Belize Zoo-- Founded in 1983 as part of a last-ditch and improvised effort to keep and care for a host of wild animals that were being used in a documentary film shoot, the **Belize Zoo**, Western Highway, Mile Marker 29 (tel. **220-8003**; www.belizezoo.org), is a national treasure. Gentle paths wind through some 12 hectares (29 acres) of land, where the zoo houses over 125 animals, all native Belizean species. According to their own promotional materials, "The zoo keeps animals which were either orphaned, born at the zoo, rehabilitated animals, or sent to the Belize Zoo as gifts from other zoological institutions."

Walking around the zoo, you'll see several species of Belizean cats, April the tapir, and other wild animals in idealized natural surroundings. The animals here are some of the liveliest and happiest looking that I've ever seen in a zoo. It's obvious that they're well cared for. All the exhibits have informative hand-painted signs accompanying them. It's best to visit early in the morning or close to closing time, when the animals are at their most active and the Belizean sun is at its least oppressive.

The entrance is a couple of hundred yards in from the Western Highway. Any bus traveling between Belize City and Belmopan or San Ignacio will drop you off at the zoo entrance. Admission is BZ

Belize City Snapshot continued

\$16(US\$8/£4.25) for adults and BZ\$8(US\$4/£2.10) for children, and the zoo is open daily from 8am to 5pm.

Adjacent to the zoo is a sister project, the **Belize Zoo Jungle Lodge**(tel. **220-8003**). Set on 34 hectares(84 acres) of untouched savannah, the center has a nature trail, observation platform, classroom, and some simple guest rooms. An overnight stay here costs between BZ\$60 and BZ\$144(US\$30-US\$72/£16-£38) per person, including hotel taxes, breakfast, and dinner. While most of the beds here are in dormitory-style rooms, a couple of private cabins are definitely worth the extra dollars. Folks who stay here can take a nocturnal tour of the zoo for BZ\$30(US\$15/£7.95).

Community Baboon Sanctuary-- There aren't really baboons in Belize; this is just the local name for the black howler monkeys who reside in this innovative sanctuary. The sanctuary is a community program run by local landowners in eight villages to preserve the local population of these vociferous primates. The howlers found here are an endangered endemic subspecies found only in Belize. There's a visitor's center(tel. **220-2181**) and natural history museum in the village of Bermudian Landing, and it is here that you pay your BZ\$10(US\$5/£2.65) admission fee, which includes a short guided hike. If you want a longer guided hike, you should hire one of the many local guides for a modest fee. The preserve stretches for some 32km(20 miles) along the Belize River, and there are several trails that wind through farmland and secondary forest. You will undoubtedly hear the whooping and barking of the howler monkeys as they make their way through the treetops feeding on fruits, flowers, and leaves. In addition to the nearly 1,500 howler monkeys that make their home in the sanctuary, there are also numerous other bird and mammal species to be spotted here. With your guide's help, you should be able to spot the monkeys and, if you're lucky, any combination of peccaries, anteaters, pacas, and coatimundi. Bring binoculars if you have them. At the visitor's center, you can also hire a canoe for a leisurely paddle and float on the Belize River. The cost is around

BZ\$50(US\$25/£13) per person. Finally, the several small villages that comprise the conservation project are wonderful examples of rural Creole villages. Be sure to visit one or two, stroll around, talk to the residents, and see what kind of craftwork and food you can find. In each village, there are families that rent out simple rooms. Ask at the museum and information center, or reserve in advance via their website at www.howlermonkeys.org.

Bermudian Landing village, site of the sanctuary's visitor center, is about 32km(20 miles) west of Belize City. If you are driving, head north on the Northern Highway and watch for the Burrel Boom Road turnoff. Buses to Bermudian Landing leave Belize City several times a day. Call the sanctuary's visitor's center for current schedule and departure point. The one-way fare is BZ\$5(US\$2.50/£1.35).

Shopping

You won't be bowled over by shopping options here in Belize City, and very few people come to Belize specifically to shop. You will find a modest handicraft industry, with different specialties produced by the country's various ethnic communities. The Creole populations of the coastal area and outer cayes specialize in coral and shell jewelry, as well as woodcarvings with maritime(dolphins, turtles, and ships) themes. The Belizean Mayan population produces replicas of ancient petroglyphs and different modern designs on varying sized pieces of slate. Finally, the Garifuna peoples of the southern coastal villages are known for their small dolls.

My favorite gift item in Belize continues to be **Marie Sharp's Hot Sauce**, which comes in several heat gradations, as well as some new flavors. The original blend of habanero peppers, carrots, and vinegar is one of my all-time favorite hot sauces. The company also produces mango chutney and an assortment of pepper jams. You can pick up Marie Sharp products at any supermarket and most gift shops; I recommend you stick to the supermarkets, though, to avoid price gouging. In addition to Marie Sharp's, Lizette's brand of hot sauces is also a good bet.

Please do not buy any kind of sea-turtle products(including jewelry); wild birds; lizard, snake, or cat skins; corals; or orchids(except those grown commercially). No matter how unique, beautiful, insignificant, or inexpensive it may seem, your purchase will directly contribute to the further hunting of endangered species.

The Shopping Scene

Most shops in the downtown district are open Monday through Saturday from about 8am to 6pm. Some shops close for lunch, while others remain open(it's just the luck of the draw for shoppers). Since the cruise ships are such a big market for local merchants, many adjust their hours to specifically coincide with cruise-ship traffic and their particular shore times.

Handicrafts& Souvenirs

By far the largest selection of gift shops and souvenir stands can be found at the **Belize Tourism Village**(8 Fort St.; tel. **223-2767**).

In addition to housing the best collections of fine art for sale in the city, **Fine Arts** and **The Image Factory Shop** also feature some of the best handicrafts and handmade jewelry. The quality and selection are a definite step above what you'll find at most other gift shops and tourist traps in town, and around the country.

Jewelry

Coral is a very delicate, rapidly disappearing living organism that grows very slowly; please avoid buying coral jewelry, as it just feeds demand and inevitably leads to the destruction of the spectacular Belizean reefs.

Liquor

Your best bet for liquor shopping is at local supermarkets, or the duty-free shop at the airport. There are several brands of Belizean rum available; the most popular is **One Barrel**, which has a hint of coconut and vanilla. Other brands produce some more heavily flavored coconut rums. The **Prestige** brand aged rum is pretty good, if you're looking for a straight, dry rum. Belize doesn't produce any wines or other spirits of note, although you may want to pick up a

Belize City Snapshot continued

bottle of locally produced wine, or cashew wine, for the sake of novelty.

Markets

The only real market of note is the **Commercial Center** located just over the Swing Bridge, on the southern side of the city. This two-story modern concrete structure houses a mix of stalls and enclosed storefronts. The first floor is predominantly devoted to fresh produce, fish stalls, and butcher shops, but you'll also find stands selling flowers, fresh herbs, and some souvenir shops. There are more souvenir shops and some restaurants, including Big Daddy's, on the second floor. The Commercial Center is open daily from 7:30am to 5pm.

Music

Punta Rock is the most Belizean of music styles. A close cousin to soca and calypso, Punta is upbeat dance music. Popular proponents include Andy Palacios, Chico Ramos, Pen Cayetano, the Garifuna Kids, Travesia Band, and Peter Flores (aka Titiman). For a taste of traditional Creole folk music, try to track down a copy of Mr. Peters' Boom & Chime. You also might be able to find some traditional Garifuna music, which tends to be ceremonial dance music, very similar to traditional West African music.

The best place to find Belizean music is a gift shop. Still, these are very hit or miss. Check at the **Belize Tourism Village**. You might also try online music stores; two good sources are www.stonetreerecords.com and www.calabashmusic.com. I'd avoid the various vendors selling bootleg cassettes and CDs on the side of the road, since the quality can be sketchy, and the artists don't receive a dime.

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Travel Tips

Planning a Trip

Visitor Information

The **Belize Tourist Board** (tel. 800/624-0686 toll-free in the U.S.

and Canada, or 227-2430 in Belize; www.travelbelize.org) has its main office at 64 Regent Street, in the heart of the business district of Belize City. If you missed their desk at the airport, they have another information desk here with regional brochures, basic maps, and a score of hotel and tour fliers; the office is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm. Local travel agencies are another good source of information. Two in Belize City to try are **Discovery Expeditions**, 5916 Manatee Dr., Buttonwood Bay (tel. 223-0748; www.discoverybelize.com) and **S&L Travel and Tours**, 91 N. Front St. (tel. 227-7593; www.sltravelbelize.com).

City Layout

Belize City is surrounded on three sides by water, with Haulover Creek dividing the city in two. The Swing Bridge, near the mouth of Haulover Creek, is the main route between the two halves of the city, as well as the city's principal landmark. At the south end of the bridge is Market Square and the start of Regent Street and Albert Street. This is where you'll find most of Belize City's shops and offices. To the west and east of these two major roads is a grid of smaller roads lined with dilapidated wooden houses. On the north side of the bridge and to the right is the Fort George area. From the southern side of the city, Cemetery Road heads out of town to the west and becomes the Western Highway, while from the northern side of the city, Freetown Road becomes Haulover Road and then the Northern Highway.

Getting There

By Plane

All international flights into Belize land at the **Philip S. W. Goldson International Airport** (tel. 225-2045; www.pgiabelize.com; airport code BZE), which is located 16km (10 miles) northwest of the city on the Northern Highway.

In the baggage claim area, there's an information booth maintained by the **Belize**

Tourist Board. This booth supplies maps and brochures, and will often make a call for you if you need a hotel or car-rental reservation. Inside the international departure terminal is a branch of **Belize Bank** (tel. 225-2107), open daily from 8:30am to 4pm. Across the parking lot, you'll find car-rental and tour-agency desks, open daily from 8am to 9:30pm. A taxi into town will cost BZ\$50 to BZ\$60 (US\$25-US\$30/£13-£16).

If you fly in from somewhere else in Belize, you'll probably land at the **Municipal Airport** (airport code TZA), which is on the edge of town. A taxi from here costs just BZ\$10 (US\$5/£2.65). There's no bank or any other services at the Municipal Airport, although most car-rental agencies can arrange to have a car there for you.

There is no direct bus service to either airport.

By Car

There are only two highways into Belize City: the Northern Highway, which leads to the Mexican border (166km/103 miles away), and the Western Highway, which leads to the Guatemalan border (132km/82 miles away). Both are well marked and in good driving condition. If you arrive by car from the north, stay on the road into town, paying close attention to one-way streets, and you'll end up at the Swing Bridge. If you're arriving on the Western Highway, stay on it after it becomes Cemetery Road, and you'll end up at the intersection with Albert Street, a block away from the Swing Bridge.

By Bus

If you arrive in town by bus, you'll probably end up at the main **bus terminal** on West Collet Canal Street. This is an easy walk to downtown, but it is not recommended after dark. A taxi from the bus station to any hotel in town will cost around BZ\$8 (US\$4/£2).

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Dangriga Snapshot

Local Info

Introduction

116km(72 miles) S of Belize City; 103km(64 miles) SE of Belmopan; 77km(48 miles) N of Placencia

Dangriga, which means "sweet water" in the Garifuna language, was originally called Stann Creek, and you may still hear it referred to as such. The name Stann Creek comes from the Creole version of "Standing Creek," a description of the river's slow-moving waters. As the capital of the Stann Creek District, which is one of the main citrus-growing regions of Belize, Dangriga is an important and vibrant agricultural and fishing community. However, despite its size and almost urban feel, it lacks the seaminess that characterizes Belize City. The town fronts right on the Caribbean and has several waterfront parks, which are surrounded by simple yet attractive residential neighborhoods.

Still, Dangriga is of little interest to travelers. There are no good beaches, few good hotels, and the town can feel stiflingly hot and desolate on most days. Most travelers head farther south to either Hopkins Village, Placencia, or Punta Gorda, or out to one of the nearby offshore cayes. Dangriga is the main maritime transportation hub for trips out to Tobacco Caye, South Water Caye, and Glover's Reef Atoll.

Dangriga is the largest city in southern Belize and the seat of the country's Garifuna culture. The Garifunas are a proud and independent people, who have managed to maintain their unique language and culture, which dates to the 16th-century intermingling of free Africans and Carib Indians. The only time Dangriga becomes a major tourist attraction is around Garifuna Settlement Day.

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Restaurants Insights

Restaurants

When you're in Dangriga, be sure to sample some of the local Garifuna cooking. One staple you'll find at many restaurants is a

bread made from cassava, also known as yuca. The best place in town to look for traditional Garifuna cooking is the down-home **Roots Kitchen** (no phone) on the north side of Havana Creek, just in from St. Vincent Street. Be sure to try the *thudut*, a dish featuring fresh fish cooked in coconut milk, accompanied by pieces of plantain and cassava.

Up and down the main street through town-- St. Vincent Street and Commerce Street-- you'll find numerous very basic restaurants. In addition to the restaurant listed here, **The King Burger Restaurant**, 135 Commerce St. (tel. **522-2476**), which is not affiliated with the Burger King fast-food chain, is a local favorite serving simple Belizean meals heavy on the grease. There are also several very basic Chinese restaurants along the main street.

If you're looking for a bit of a splurge and somewhat slightly more elegant ambience, the restaurant at the **Pelican Beach Resort** (tel. **522-2044**) serves well-prepared local dishes and fresh seafood.

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Nightlife Insights

Nightlife

There's not much happening in Dangriga after dark. Your best bets would be to see what's happening at the Pelican Beach Resort.

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Things to Do Insights

Attractions

The main activity in Dangriga is a slow walk up and down the main north-south thoroughfare. If you tire of watching the endless procession of people and listening to the colorful mix of English, Creole, and Garifuna, head a block or two over towards the sea and cop a seat in one of the town's oceanfront parks. If you're looking for a more active adventure, you'll have to head out of Dangriga, but your options are plentiful.

The only true attraction in the area is the quaint little **Gulisi Garifuna Museum** (tel. **502-0639**). Although small, this is worth a visit. Spread around several rooms here you'll find interpretive displays of Garifuna history, culture, and daily life. Three separate documentaries are shown continually on televisions in the different rooms. There's a gift shop here, as well as paintings by prominent Garifuna artists like Benjamin Nicholas and Pen Cayetano. The museum is located 1.6km(1 mile) west of town, on the road out to the Hummingbird Highway. It is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 5pm and Saturday from 8am till noon. Admission is BZ\$10(US\$5/£2.65).

If you're staying in Dangriga for any period of time, you may also want to visit any number of the relatively nearby attractions, including Guanacaste National Park, Blue Hole National Park, Caves Branch, Hopkins Village, and Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary.

If your hotel can't arrange it for you, contact **C & G Tours and Charters** (tel. **522-3641**; www.cgstourcharter.com) to set up any number of tours and activities around Dangriga and environs.

Attractions on the Hummingbird Highway

Located just off the highway in the tiny settlement of Pomona Village is one of the most important and renowned factories in all of Belize, **Marie Sharp's**. The factory is small and simple, and depending on the time of year and demand, they may be making any number of their various hot sauces, jams, and chutneys. It's best to call in advance to arrange a tour (tel. **522-2370**; www.mariesharps-bz.com). If you're lucky, you'll get to meet Marie herself. The tour is free, but you'll want to bring some money to stock up on the sauces.

Tucked a few miles off the highway is **Five Blues Lake National Park**. The main feature of this park is a large cenote, whose various hues of blue originally gave the park its name. However, in July 2006, the cenote suddenly and rather inexplicably drained almost completely. By early 2008, the lake had recovered about 75% of

Dangriga Snapshot continued

its original level, and much of its former beauty. All around the park are forested lands and distinct karst hill formations, with a series of trails leading through them. The park is run by the folks from the local community of Saint Margaret's Village. The park and small village are located on Lagoon Road, just off the Hummingbird Highway around Mile Marker 32. There are about 4.8km(3 miles) of well-marked trails in the park. You can also take a refreshing dip in the lake, or rent a canoe for a leisurely paddle. Admission is BZ \$8(US\$4/£2.10). Camping is allowed inside the park for BZ\$6(US\$3/£1.60) per person. Some simple accommodations and restaurants are also available in Saint Margaret's Village.

Special Moment: On the Road--As you drive the Hummingbird Highway, there are two interesting phenomena to be aware of. Locals swear a local mountain formation looks like a Sleeping Giant. There are several good views of the Sleeping Giant, which is best seen just slightly left of dead ahead as you drive south from Belize City, especially around the Sibun River bridge. Even more mystical and illusive-- I've never been able to make it work-- is the "anti-gravity" spot. Stop your car on the gentle hill around Mile Marker 26 and put it in neutral. Locals claim it is ancient earth energy that makes vehicles roll seemingly uphill. I'm guessing it's an optical illusion.

Garifuna Settlement Day

Each year on November 19, Garifuna Settlement Day is celebrated in Dangriga, with Garifunas coming from around Belize and as far away as Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and New York. The celebration is a riot of street music and colorful parades. Eating, drinking, and dancing go on well into the night. The Garifuna have their own traditional music, which is based on wooden drums and choral singing. The rhythms and songs have strong African roots, and have given birth to a hybrid pop music called Punta Rock, which is probably the country's most popular music and dance form. If you plan to partake in the festivities, be sure to book far in advance, as every hotel room in Dangriga and the nearby towns and villages sells out early.

For more information, contact the **National Garifuna Council of Belize**(tel. 522-3781; www.ngcbelize.org).

Tip: Garifuna Settlement Day isn't the only opportunity to experience the full color and vitality of traditional Garifuna culture. At the end of the Christmas and New Year season, on the weekend closest to January 6, the local Garifuna community takes to the streets to enjoy the Wanaragua or John Kunnu dancers. Wearing masks, elaborate costumes, colorful headdresses topped with macaw feathers, and vibrating arrangements of shells and vedas, Wanaragua or John Kunnu dance troupes parade through the streets of Dangriga, accompanied by the beat of traditional drummers.

Shopping

As the cultural seat of the Garifuna culture, Dangriga is a great place to pick up, or just admire, local arts and crafts.

If you'd like to have a look at some Garifuna paintings, visit the studio of **Benjamin Nicholas**(tel. 522-2785). Using a Caribbean naïve style, Nicholas paints scenes of traditional Garifuna village life. You'll find his studio on the seafront, just north of Mahogany Street.

If the beat really gets to you, you can buy a handmade wooden drum from **Austin Rodriguez**(tel. 502-3752), at the **Dangriga Cultural Center** on the oceanfront on the north bank of North Stann Creek. Drums vary in size and cost between BZ\$80 and BZ\$300(US\$40-US\$150/£21-£80). Austin's daughter runs a separate drum shop at 32 Tubroose St.

Finally, **Mercy Sabal**, 22 Magoon St.(no phone), has become quite famous for her handcrafted Garifuna dolls. These small dolls are predominantly of female figures in traditional dress, and cost between BZ\$30 and BZ\$80(US\$15-US\$40/£7.95-£21). © 2000-2010 by Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Travel Tips

Planning a Trip

Getting There& Departing

By Plane-- There are numerous flights into and out of little Dangriga Airport(DGA) from Belize City. **Maya Island Air**(tel. 223-1140 in Belize City, or 522-2659 in Dangriga; www.mayaairways.com) has 10 flights daily between the Philip S. W. Goldson International Airport and Dangriga. The first flight leaves at 8:10am and the last flight is at 5pm. Flight time is 15 minutes; the fare is BZ\$109(US\$55/£29) each way. Maya Island Air also has seven daily flights between Belize City's Municipal Airport and Dangriga at 8, 9, 10, and 11am, noon, and 2:30 and 4:30pm. The fare is BZ\$72(US \$36/£19) each way. These flights take 30 minutes, because they stop en route to pick up passengers at the international airport. Maya Island Air flights from Dangriga to Belize City leave between 7:25am and 4:50pm. Most of these flights stop first at the international airport and continue on to Municipal Airport.

Tropic Air(tel. 800/422-3435 in the U.S. or Canada, 226-2012 in Belize City, or 522-2129 in Dangriga; www.tropicair.com) has nine flights daily between Goldson International Airport and Dangriga, with the first flight leaving at 8:15am and the last flight at 5pm. The fare is BZ\$114(US \$57/£30) each way. They also have five daily flights between Municipal Airport and Dangriga, leaving at 8:30 and 10:30am, and at 12:30, 2:30, and 4:50pm. The fare is BZ\$75(US\$38/£20) each way. Tropic Air flights depart Dangriga for both of Belize City's airports daily between 7:45am and 4:45pm. Flight time runs between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on whether there is an intermediate stop.

Flights to and from Punta Gorda and Placencia on Maya Island Air and Tropic Air stop in Dangriga to pick up and drop off passengers. You can also easily book a flight from Dangriga to either of these onward southern destinations. On both airlines, flights are sometimes added during the high season or suspended during the low season, so check in advance.

By Car-- From Belize City, head west on Cemetery Road, which becomes the Western Highway. Take this all the way to Belmopan, where you will connect with the

Dangriga Snapshot continued

Hummingbird Highway heading south. Ten kilometers (6 miles) before Dangriga, the Hummingbird Highway connects with the Southern Highway. Follow the signs into Dangriga; you'll be entering from the south end of town.

Alternatively, you can take the unpaved New Belize or Manatee Road, which turns off the Western Highway just past the Belize Zoo, at around Mile Marker 30. The Manatee Road passes by the entrance road to the small Creole village of Gales Point, and rejoins the Hummingbird Highway about 17km (8 1/2 miles) outside of Dangriga. This route is shorter as the crow flies, but in worse shape physically, so the going is slower. Either route should take around 2 to 2 1/2 hours from Belize City.

Special Moment: Welcome-- As you enter Dangriga you'll come to a traffic circle. Be sure to take a moment to check out the **Drums of My Father** monument here, a larger-than-life bronze casting of three ceremonial *dügü* drums, and the maraca-like shaker *orsísira*. This simple sculpture lets you know right away that you are entering the heartland of Garífuna society and culture.

By Bus-- James Bus Line (tel. 702-2049) and **National Transport** (tel. 227-2255) have regular service throughout the day between Belize City and Dangriga, roughly every half-hour between 6:30am and 5:30pm from either the main bus terminal on West Collet Canal Street (National Transport), or the nearby Shell gas station on Cemetery Road (James). The fare is BZ \$20 (US\$10/£5.30). The ride takes about 3 hours.

Tip: Most of the buses take the Hummingbird Highway. A few take the coastal Manatee Road. Unless you are heading to Gales Point, I'd try to take the much more comfortable ride on the Hummingbird Highway.

By Boat-- There are no regularly scheduled boats from Belize City to Dangriga, but aside from flying, water is the most direct means of covering the 58km (36

miles) between the two cities. If you want to come by boat, head to the Marine Terminal or ask around the docks in Belize City. Expect to pay from BZ\$300 to BZ\$500 (US \$150-US\$250/£80-£133) for a boat that can carry four to eight passengers.

If You Come to a Fork in the Road, Take Both-- Given the unique sights offered by the two possible routes down to Dangriga, you might want to consider taking one route on your way south, and the other on your way back. The **Hummingbird Highway** passes through some of Belize's most picturesque countryside. The road weaves through jungle mountains and crosses clear streams and small rivers. Admire the forest-covered karst hillsides to the west, as you wind your way through mostly uninhabited country. The **Manatee Road** is a red-dirt affair, passing through the forests, lowland swamps, and mangroves that border Belize's large southern lagoon. Still, this route is not for the faint of heart. In the rainy season it can get quite muddy and slick, while in the dry season the dirt can form a hard, jarring washboard and dust can be a problem. In some places you'll have to cross single-lane, rail-less wooden plank bridges that give some drivers vertigo, even though they're not very high.

Getting Around

There are no official car rental agencies, but if you really search, you might be able to find an enterprising local willing to rent you a vehicle. If this is absolutely necessary, your best bet is to have your hotel try and arrange this for you.

For a taxi in Dangriga, call **Star Line Taxi Service** (tel. 621-9956) or **Tzul's Taxi Service** (tel. 522-2438).

Boats to Tobacco Caye leave from the Gumagurugu River or North Stann Creek in front of the Riverside Café, just below the bridge. The going rate is around BZ \$30 to BZ\$50 (US\$15-US\$25/£7.95-£13) per person one-way. Most of the boats hold between 8 and 10 people, and they leave whenever they fill up. If you already have a

group together, you can hire one privately, and set a definite return trip pickup time. Alternatively, you can catch a ride with the folks from **Pelican Beach Resort** (tel. 522-2044), who run to Tobacco Caye daily and charge BZ\$136 (US\$68/£36) per person each way.

Orientation

The main street through Dangriga is called St. Vincent Street south of the main bridge over North Stann Creek, and Commerce Street north of it. Most of the town's businesses and attractions lie within a few blocks of this bridge in either direction. The airstrip is on the north end of town, near the Pelican Beach Resort.

Fast Facts

For the **police**, dial tel. 911 or 522-2022; for the **fire department**, call tel. 522-2091. The **Dangriga Hospital** (tel. 522-2078) is located on Courthouse Road, 4 blocks north and 2 blocks east of the main bridge. The **post office** (tel. 522-2035) is in the southern section of town next to the Bonefish Hotel.

Both of the principal banks in town are on St. Vincent Street: **Belize Bank**, 24 St. Vincent St. (tel. 522-2903), and **Scotiabank**, 10 St. Vincent St. (tel. 522-2031). If you need some film or developing, try either **Dangriga Photo Plus**, 64 Commerce St. (tel. 522-2394), or **Gem's Photo**, 81 St. Vincent St. (tel. 522-3859). For any contact lens or eyeglass problems, head to **Hoy Eye Center**, 18 St. Vincent St. (tel. 522-0628).

Finally, if your hotel can't or won't do it for you, take your dirty clothes to **Val's Laundry**, 1 Sharp St. (tel. 502-3324). They charge around BZ\$12 (US\$6/£3.20) per load.

FYI

North Stann Creek is also known as the Gumagurugu River in the local Garífuna language.

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San Ignacio Snapshot

Local Info

Introduction

116km(72 miles) W of Belize City; 32km(20 miles) W of Belmopan; 13km(9 miles) E of the Guatemalan border

In the foothills of the mountains close to the Guatemalan border lie the sister towns of Santa Elena and San Ignacio, which are set on either side of the beautiful Macal River. For all intents and purposes, San Ignacio is the more important town, both in general terms and particularly for travelers. Just north of town, the Macal and Mopan rivers converge to form the Belize River. San Ignacio is the business and administrative center for the Cayo District, a region of cattle ranches and dense forests, of clear rivers and Mayan ruins. It is also the second largest metropolitan center in the country. Still, you won't find any urban blight here. If you've come from Guatemala, you'll sense immediately that you are now in a Caribbean country. If you've come up from the coast, you might be surprised by how cool it can get up here in the mountains. Despite the similarity in the sound of their names, the Cayo District and the cayes are worlds apart. While the cayes cater to those looking for fun in the sun, Cayo caters to those interested in nature, outdoor adventures, and Mayan ruins. This area makes a great first stop in Belize; you can get in a lot of activity before heading to the beach to relax.

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Hotel Insights

Hotels

Moderate-- **The Rolson Hotel**(tel. 824-2730; www.rolsons.com) offers clean, business-class-style rooms, with televisions, air-conditioning, and free Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive-- San Ignacio is a very popular budget travel destination, and there are plenty of good options in town. During the high season, reservations are recommended for the more popular places. At other times, backpackers might prefer to arrive in town early enough to

visit a few places, and see which place gives the best bang for the buck. Of the backpacker-gear options, I like the **Hi-Et**, 12 West St.(tel. 824-2828), with its hostel-like vibe and playful name. Those looking for accommodations with the trappings of a business-class hotel but at budget prices could also check out the **New Balmoral Hotel**, 17 Burns Ave.(tel. 804-3502), or the **Plaza Hotel**, 4A Burns Ave.(tel. 824-3332).

Cosmos Camping

(tel. 824-2116; cosmoscamping@btl.net) is a campground on the road leading out toward Branch Mouth and Las Casitas, where you can pitch your tent for BZ\$10(US\$5/£2.65) per day. There are showers and communal bathrooms that are kept clean, and the river is just across a field. This place is about a 15-minute hike from downtown San Ignacio, doable for a backpacker. They also have some simple cabins here as well. Still, I prefer the camping options farther outside of town, including Clarissa Falls Cottages and the Trek Stop, or Midas Tropical Resort, which is on the same road before Cosmos.

On the Road to Benque Viejo & the Guatemalan Border

While San Ignacio is the regional hub and does make a good base for side trips, the real attractions in western Belize are up the rivers and in the forests. Within a few miles of San Ignacio are several lodges set somewhat off the beaten path, where you can canoe down clear rivers past 1.2m(4-ft.) iguanas sunning themselves on the rocks; ride horses to Mayan ruins; hike jungle trails, and spot scores of beautiful birds and, occasionally, other wild animals. Out on the road to Caracol and Mountain Pine Ridge, there are more of these lodges. Except for the true budget traveler, I highly recommend that you stay at one of the lodges listed below while you're in the area. A few of the lodges can be reached by public bus from San Ignacio, though you may have up to a 20-minute walk after getting off the bus, so consider taking a taxi or arranging pickup in town. All the lodges offer a wide range of active adventures and tours to all the principal sites in the area.

Very Expensive-- **Ka'ana**(tel. 824-3350; www.kaanabelize.com) is a new, high-end resort hotel, with a series of rooms and private cottages with modern perks like flatscreen televisions and iPod docking stations. While **Ek' Tun**(tel. 820-3002; www.ektunbelize.com) is a unique, isolated, and gorgeous retreat with just two individual cottages set on the banks of the Macal River, it can only be reached by boat.

On the Road to Bullet Tree Falls

El Pilar(tel. 824-3612; www.marc.ucsb.edu/el Pilar) was discovered in the 1970s, but real excavation and exploration didn't begin for another 20 years, and in fact it's still in its nascent stages. The site sits on a high hill some 274m(900 ft.) above the Mopan River and is one of the largest Mayan settlements in Belize. Some say it even rivals Caracol. This ancient ceremonial city featured over 25 known plazas and covered some 40 hectares(100 acres), straddling the Belize and Guatemala border. The site is quite large, but most visitors concentrate on Xaman Pilar(North Pilar) and Nohol Pilar(South Pilar). Pilar Poniente(West Pilar) is in Guatemala, a little less than a mile away. There are several well-marked and well-maintained trails through the site. While you can explore El Pilar by yourself-- you can even download a very informative trail map from the above website-- I still recommend hiring a local guide. Plan on spending at least 3 hours here, though you could easily spend a full day or two exploring this site. The sunsets from Plaza Ixim looking west to Pilar Poniente and the forested hills of Guatemala are spectacular. El Pilar is located about 19km(12 miles) north of San Ignacio, past the village of Bullet Tree Falls. In addition to driving your own vehicle, several tour agencies in San Ignacio offer horseback or mountain-bike tours out to El Pilar.

A Place to Stay in Bullet Tree Falls

Folks love **Cohune Palms River Cabanas**(tel. 824-0166; www.cohunepalms.com), which has a collection of thatch-roofed cabins on the banks of the Mopan River. **Casa del**

San Ignacio Snapshot continued

Caballo Blanco(tel. 707/974-4942 in the U.S.; www.casacaballoblanco.com) is the new kid in town, with neat, cozy rooms, just on the outskirts of downtown.
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Restaurants Insights

Restaurants

Inexpensive-- Maxim's Chinese

Restaurant, 23 Far West St.(tel. 824-2283), is the place to go for Chinese food. You might also want to take the adventure of finding **Sanny's Grill**, 23rd Street(tel. 824-2988), which is tucked away in a residential neighborhood, but serves up excellent seafood and grilled meats. For inexpensive eats in a large outdoor setting, you can try **Hode's Place Bar & Grill**(tel. 804-2522), located out on the northern end of town.
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Nightlife Insights

Nightlife

San Ignacio is a pretty sleepy town. Many travelers end up at **Eva's Restaurant & Bar**, trading tales and planning adventures with new friends. Several bars are around the downtown area, though. Most nights, but especially on weekends, the most happening spot in town can be found up the hill at **The Stork Club**(tel. 824-2034), which is located in the San Ignacio Resort Hotel. This place has karaoke on Thursday nights, and live bands often on the weekends. Another raucous place for late-night revelry and dancing is the **Rhumba Room**(no phone), which is on the outskirts of town, on the road heading to Benque. On the north end of town, **Hode's Place Bar & Grill**(tel. 804-2522) is a massive spot that is very popular with locals. They have a tiny casino, as well as a large video arcade, and a pool and foosball tables. Alternatively, you can find out if there's live music at **Caesar's Place**(tel. 824-2341), which is the home turf of the Mango Jam band, a local jazz outfit. Caesar's is located out on the Western Highway, about 11km(7 miles) east of San Ignacio.

If you're the gambling type, you'll want to head to the **Princess Casino**(tel. 824-4099), which is also located at the San Ignacio Resort Hotel. I'd definitely choose this one over the very little casino at **Hode's Place**(tel. 804-2522).
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Things to Do Insights

Attractions

The Cayo District is Belize's prime inland tourist destination. There's a lot to see and do in this area, from visiting Mayan ruins and caves to engaging in a broad range of adventure activities. In addition to the tours, activities, and attractions listed below, all of the listings in the Mountain Pine Ridge section, and in the Belmopan section are easily accessible from San Ignacio.

Some of the tours, activities, and attractions listed below can be done on your own, but others will require a guide or adventure tour operator. Most hotels in the area either have their own tour operations or can arrange to hook you up with a reputable local operator. In addition, there are several long-standing tour agencies based in San Ignacio. Some of the best of these include **Belize Eco Tours**(tel. 824-4290; www.belize-ecotours.com), **Cayo Adventure Tours**(tel. 824-3246; www.cyoadventure.com), **Pacz Tours**(tel. 824-2477; www.pacztours.net), and **Yute Expeditions**(tel. 824-2076; www.inlandbelize.com). All of these companies offer virtually all of the options and more, including multiday tours, treks, and adventures.

In addition, serious bird-watchers might want to give a call to **Birds Without Borders**(tel. 824-4416), or sign up for a tour with **Birding in Belize**(tel. 610-5593; www.birdinginbelize.com).

Mayan Ruins

The Cayo District is in the heart of the Mayan highlands, with several major ruins and cave systems used by the ancient residents of this region. The most impressive are **Xunantunich**(on Benque Viejo Rd.), **El Pilar**(near Bullet Tree Falls Village), and **Caracol**(deep in the Mountain

Pine Ridge area), but true Maya-philes can keep busy visiting a host of sites in this area. Close by, in Guatemala, lies **Tikal**, perhaps one of the best excavated and most impressive Mayan cities in Mesoamerica.

Cahal Pech-- High on a hill to the southwest of downtown San Ignacio are the Mayan ruins of **Cahal Pech**. Although compact, there are actually seven plazas here, as well as numerous residences, temples, and a couple of ball courts. Formerly the home of Mayan royals, this site has received some meticulous restoration. The restoration created a bit of controversy in town because parts of the ruins were restored to an approximation of the way they were supposed to have looked when they were first built, which is a bit more polished and modern-looking than most people like their ruins. However, the setting is beautiful, with tall old trees shading the site's main plaza and pyramid. **Tip:** Be sure to climb the small B4 pyramid, on your left near the entrance to the site. Though diminutive, it offers excellent views of the Macal River.

The name Cahal Pech means the "Place of the Family of Pech"(Pech means "tick" in Mayan). The name was given to the site in the 1950s when there were quite a few ticks in the area. The ruins date back to between 650 and 900, though many think that the site was used prior to this time as well.

At the entrance, you'll find a small museum that displays a collection of artifacts recovered from the site and provides insight into the Cahal Pech social structure. It also has a small model of the old city, as well as a skeleton recovered from one of the graves here.

Admission to the museum and ruins is BZ \$10(US\$5/£2.65), and the site is open daily from 8am to 5pm. Be sure to ask for a copy of the informative guide to the site. To reach Cahal Pech, walk or drive up toward the San Ignacio Resort Hotel, continuing on around the curve for a few hundred yards until you pass the soccer field. Turn left here and climb the hill towards the ruins. The entrance to the ruins is beyond a large

San Ignacio Snapshot continued

thatched building that houses the Cahal Pech disco. It's about a 20-minute walk.

Xunantunich-- Although you may have trouble pronouncing it (say "Zoo-nahn-too-neetch"), Xunantunich is an impressive, well excavated, and easily accessible Mayan site. The name translates as "Maiden of the Rocks." The main pyramid here, El Castillo, rises to 39m (127 ft.) and is clearly visible from the Western Highway as you approach. It's a steep climb, but the view from the top is amazing-- don't miss it. You'll be able to make out the twin border towns of Benque Viejo, Belize, and Melchor de Menchos, Guatemala. On the east side of the pyramid, near the top, is a remarkably well-preserved stucco frieze.

Down below in the temple forecourt, archaeologists found three magnificent stelae portraying rulers of the region. These have been moved to the protection of the small, on-site museum, yet the years and ravages of weather have made most of the carvings difficult to decipher. Xunantunich was a thriving Mayan city about the same time as Altun Ha, in the Classic Period, about 600 to 900.

The visitor center at the entrance contains a beautiful scale model of the old city, as well as a replica of the original frieze. Open daily from 8am to 4pm, the site charges an admission of BZ\$10 (US\$5/£2.65). Xunantunich is located 10km (6 1/2 miles) past San Ignacio on the road to Benque Viejo. To reach the ruins, you must cross the Mopan River aboard a tiny hand-cranked car-ferry in the village of San José Succotz. You may be able to watch colorfully dressed women washing clothes in the river as you are cranked across by the ferryman. After crossing the river, it is a short, but dusty and vigorous, uphill walk to the ruins. If you've got your own vehicle, you can take it across on the ferry and drive right to the ruins. To get here by bus, take any bus bound for Benque Viejo and get off in San José Succotz.

Chechem Ha-- This ancient Mayan burial cave was discovered by accident when a local hunter, Antonio Morales, went chasing after his errant dog. When the cave was explored, a cache of Mayan artifacts,

including many large, fully preserved pots, was discovered. Archaeologists estimate the relics could have been placed here over 2,000 years ago. This cave is one of only two in the area with an elaborate altar used for ceremonial purposes by the religious and ruling classes.

The cave is located 16km (10 miles) south of Benque Viejo, on a dirt road that is recommended only for four-wheel-drive vehicles. Chechem Ha, which means "Cave of Poisonwood Water," is privately owned by the Morales family, and admission is only allowed with a prearranged guided tour. Ideally, you should make a reservation in advance, although it's often hard to contact and confirm with the Morales family; their phone number is tel. **820-4063**. If you receive no response, you can usually drive out to the entrance any morning and arrange the tour directly with the Morales family beforehand. The cost of a 45-minute tour is BZ\$60 (US\$30/£16) for up to three people, if you book directly. Local hotels and tour companies also offer this trip, but charge a little bit more. You can also visit Chechem Ha on an organized tour with one of the local agencies working with the Morales family. Almost every hotel and tour agency in the area can arrange this for you, although they tend to charge a little bit more for their efforts.

A short hike from the entrance, the Chechem Ha Falls make a refreshing spot to wash and cool off after clambering around inside the caves. Also close to Chechem Ha is **Vaca Falls**, a beautiful and remote waterfall that's often combined with a visit to the cave, though it's a destination in its own right.

River Tours

For much of Belize's history, the rivers were the main highways. The Maya used them for trading, and British loggers used them to move mahogany and logwood. If you're interested, you can explore the Cayo District's two rivers-- the Macal and Mopan-- by canoe, kayak, and inner tube. Throughout most of the year, the waters in these rivers are easily navigable both up- and downstream. However, during the rainy season, things can change drastically-- and

fast. I've heard of a few flash floods, and even one story of water nearly reaching the road on the Hawksworth Bridge.

Still, for the most part, trips are leisurely, with plenty of places to stop for a quick swim or land excursion. During the rainy season (July-Sept), white-water kayaking is available, although it's not very consistent. Inflatable kayaks are a much more common and dependable option, not requiring nearly as much technical proficiency or water.

Most tours put in upstream on the Macal River somewhere around Chaa Creek or duPlooy's and then float leisurely downstream. The trip can take anywhere from 1 to 3 hours, depending on how much time you spend paddling, floating, or stopping to hike or swim. Both of these hotels offer this service, as well as a host of operators in San Ignacio. For its part, the Mopan River is more easily accessible in many ways, since Benque Viejo Road borders it in many places. The Mopan is well suited for inflatable kayaks and inner tubes.

In addition to most of the tour operators listed above, you can contact **Toni's River Adventures** (tel. **824-3292**) or **David's Adventure Tours** (tel. **824-3674**). If you want to go inner tubing, contact the folks at the **Trek Stop** (tel. **823-2265**; www.thetrekstop.com).

Both of Cayo's principal rivers are great for swimming. On the Macal River you can join the locals right in town where the river is treated as a free laundry, car wash, horse and dog wash, and swimming hole. However, you'll do better to head upstream. The farther upstream you head, the more isolated and clear the swimming holes become.

Another alternative is to head downriver about 2.4km (1 1/2 miles) to a spot called **Branch Mouth**, where the different-colored waters of the Macal and Mopan rivers converge. Branch Mouth is a favorite picnic spot, with shady old trees clinging to the riverbanks. There's even a rope swing from one of the trees. The road is dusty, so you'll be especially happy to go for a swim here. Farther upstream, on both the Macal and

San Ignacio Snapshot continued

Mopan rivers, are numerous swimming holes.

River Race-- While it's still possible to navigate the Belize River all the way to Belize City-- the Macal and Mopan rivers join and become the Belize River-- this is not generally something tourists get to do. Still, each year in early March, scores of three-person canoe teams undertake the long 290km(180-mile) paddle from San Ignacio to Belize City in the **Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge**. Teams gather in San Ignacio below the Hawksworth Bridge on March 5, and thousands of people line the banks of the river for the start. The finish line, fittingly enough, is the Swing Bridge in Belize City. It takes between 3 and 4 days to complete the course, with the teams scheduled to arrive in Belize City on or around Baron Bliss Day, on March 9.

Belize Botanic Gardens

Located next to duPlooy's and run by the same family, the Belize Botanic Gardens(tel. **824-3101**; www.belizebotanic.org) is a sprawling collection of local and imported tropical fauna. They have an excellent mix of fruit trees, palms, bromeliads, and bamboos, all well laid out whether you are taking a self-guided or guided tour. The orchid house is not to be missed, with its beautiful collection of orchids and sculpted waterfall wall. The gardens are open daily from 7am to 5pm. Admission is BZ\$10(US\$5/£2.65). Guided tours cost BZ\$20(US\$10/£5.30) per person, including the entrance fee. You can also buy a helpful self-guided tour booklet for BZ\$15(US\$7.50/£4), and even take a leisurely horse and buggy ride through the lovely gardens for BZ\$20(US\$10/£5.30) per person.

Barton Creek Cave

This is one of the area's easier and more relaxing caves to explore. The trip is conducted entirely by canoe, and while there are a few tight squeezes and areas with low ceilings, in general you won't get as wet(you'll stay dry, in fact) or claustrophobic here as you will at many of the other caves in Belize. Located beside a small Mennonite community, Barton Creek is navigable for nearly a mile inside

the cave. Along the way, by the light of headlamps and strong flashlights, you'll see wonderful natural formations, a large gallery, and numerous Mayan artifacts, including several skeletons, believed to be the remains of ritual sacrifices. One skull sits so prominently atop a natural bridge that it's likely that a local tour operator moved it there to heighten the dramatic effect. You can climb along the dry edges of the cave in certain parts.

There's a BZ\$10(US\$5/£2.65) fee to visit the site, but that doesn't include the canoe trip or transportation. If you drive there yourself, you can hire a canoe that holds two passengers, plus the guide, for around BZ\$30 to BZ\$40(US\$15-US\$20/£7.95-£11). Tours out of San Ignacio average around BZ\$60 to BZ\$120(US\$30-US\$60/£16-£32) per person, not including the entrance fee. Barton Creek Cave is located just off the Pine Ridge Road, about 6.4km(4 miles) from the Western Highway. Visits to Barton Creek Cave are often combined with a stop at the Green Hills Butterfly Ranch.

The Rainforest Medicine Trail

Located directly between the Chaa Creek and the Macal River Jungle Camp, this is the former Ix Chel Farm, which was set up by Drs. Rosita Arvigo and Greg Shropshire. Rosita studied traditional herbal medicine with Don Eljio Panti, a local Mayan medicine man and a folk hero in Belize. Panti died in February 1996 at the estimated age of 104. Here on the farm, they built a trail through the forest to share with visitors the fascinating medicinal values of many of the tropical forest's plants.

The farm boasts a small gift shop that features local crafts, T-shirts, and several relevant books, including a couple by Arvigo. You'll also find Ix Chel's line of herbal concentrates, salves, and teas called Rainforest Remedies.

Self-guided visits to the Medicine Trail, along with a tour of Chaa Creek's Natural History Museum, and a visit to their Blue Morpho Butterfly Breeding project cost BZ\$18(US\$9/£4.75). You can easily spend 3 hours visiting all three attractions. Guided tours of the Medicine trail are

also available. Call tel. **824-2037** for reservations.

Tropical Wings Nature Center

Located just off the main road, at Mile Marker 71 1/2 near the village of San José Succotz, is this small attraction. You'll find an enclosed butterfly garden with scores of brightly colored and varied species flitting about. There's also a butterfly breeding center, as well as an open-air medicinal plant nature trail. Hummingbird feeders ensure that you'll be buzzed by these frenetic, flighty creatures. This place is open daily from 9am to 5pm; admission is BZ\$6(US\$3/£1.60). Call tel. **823-2265** for more information.

Shopping

Orange Gift Shop & Gallery is probably the best-stocked gift shop in this region, if not the whole country, and can be found at **Caesar's Place**(tel. **824-2341**; www.orangegifts.com) about 11km(7 miles) east of San Ignacio. However, I find the prices a bit high, and similar goods can be found less expensively at other shops. A good alternative in town is **Arts & Crafts of Central America**, 24 Burns Ave.(tel. **824-2253**).

Throughout Belize, and especially in Cayo, you will see slate carvings of Mayan hieroglyphs. If you're in the area, it's worth a visit to one of the sources, the **García Sisters**. This family of artisans runs an interesting little museum-cum-craft shop. It's located outside of San Antonio village on the road to Mountain Pine Ridge.
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Travel Tips

Planning a Trip

Getting There & Departing

By Plane-- While there is an airstrip in San Ignacio(SQS), none of the local commuter airlines has regular service here.

By Car-- Take the Western Highway from Belize City. It's a straight shot all the way to San Ignacio. You'll come to the small town of Santa Elena first. Across the Macal River lies San Ignacio. If you're heading to San Ignacio and points west, a well-

San Ignacio Snapshot continued

marked detour will lead you through the town of Santa Elena to a Balley bridge that enters San Ignacio towards the north end of town. The more prominent and impressive Hawksworth Bridge is solely for traffic heading east out of San Ignacio towards Santa Elena, Belmopan, and Belize City.

By Bus-- San Ignacio has very frequent bus service from Belize City. Buses to San Ignacio leave roughly every half-hour from the main bus station on West Collet Canal Street between 5am and 8pm. Return buses to Belize City leave the main bus station in San Ignacio roughly every half-hour between 4am and 6pm. The fare is BZ\$10(US\$5/£2.65). The trip takes 2 1/2 hours. Most of the western-bound buses continue on beyond San Ignacio to Benque Viejo and the Guatemalan border.

Getting Around

The downtown center of San Ignacio is quite compact and easily navigated by foot. If you want to visit any of the major attractions listed below, you'll probably have to find transportation. Frequent buses will take you to the entrances to most of the hotels listed below on Benque Viejo Road, as well as within walking distance of the Xunantunich ruins. Infrequent buses(ask around town or at the bus station; tel. **824-3360**) do service the Mountain Pine Ridge area. However, if you don't have your own vehicle, you will probably need to take some taxis or go on organized tours.

As in the rest of Belize, roads are minimal, and almost everything can be found on or just off the Western Highway, or the road through Mountain Pine Ridge. Numerous

buses ply the main road between Belmopan and San Ignacio, continuing on to the border town of Benque Viejo del Carmen. If you want to drive yourself, particularly anywhere off the main highway, a four-wheel-drive vehicle is recommended.

You can rent a car from **Cayo Rentals**(tel. **824-2222**; www.cayoautorentals.com) or **Matus Car Rental**(tel. **824-2005**; www.matuscarrental.com). A small four-wheel-drive vehicle here should run you around BZ\$150-BZ\$200(US\$75-US\$100/£40-£53) per day.

If you need a cab, call the **Cayo Taxi Association**(tel. **824-2196**) or **San Ignacio Taxi Stand**(tel. **824-2155**). Taxi fares around the Cayo District should run you as follows: BZ\$6(US\$3/£1.60) around town, BZ\$18(US\$9/£4.75) between San Ignacio and Bullet Tree Falls, and BZ\$55(US\$23/£12) between San Ignacio and Chaa Creek or duPlooy's. Collective taxis run regularly between downtown San Ignacio and the border at Benque Viejo; the fare is BZ \$6(US\$3.20) per person.

Orientation

San Ignacio is on the banks of the Macal River, on the western side of an old metal bridge across from its sister city of Santa Elena. Across the single-lane Hawksworth Bridge is a traffic circle and a Shell gas station. Downtown San Ignacio is to the north on Burns Avenue, and the San Ignacio Hotel is located south up a steep hill on Buena Vista Road. Most of the hotels and restaurants in town are on or within a block of Burns Avenue. The road to Benque Viejo del Carmen, Xunantunich ruins, and the Guatemalan border branches off Buena

Vista Road. This is actually a continuation of the Western Highway.

Fast Facts-- There are several banks located right in the heart of downtown San Ignacio: **Atlantic Bank**, at Burns Avenue and Columbus Park(tel. **824-2347**); **Scotiabank**, at Burns Avenue and Riverside Street(tel. **824-4190**); and **Belize Bank**, 16 Burns Ave.(tel. **824-2031**).

To reach the **police**, dial tel. **911** or **824-2022**; for the **fire department**, dial tel. **824-2095**. The **San Ignacio Hospital** is located on Simpson Street, on the western side of town(tel. **824-2066**). The **post office**(tel. **824-2049**) is located on Hudson Street, near the corner of Waight's Avenue.

For film or developing, head to **Belicolor Photo Service** on Hudson Street(tel. **824-3549**). If you need eyeglass repair or help, head to the **Hoy Eye Center**, 4 Far West St.(tel. **824-4101**). The succinctly named **The Pharmacy**(tel. **824-2510**) is located on West Street. If you need laundry done and your hotel doesn't offer the service or charges too much, you can drop off your dirty clothes at **Martha's Guesthouse**, 10 West St.(tel. **804-3647**), for same-day service at about BZ\$12(US \$6/£3.20) per load.

If you need to log on, head to **Eva's Restaurant**, 22 Burns Ave.(tel. **804-2267**); or the **Café Sol**, Far West St.(tel. **824-2166**). Both offer a few computers with high-speed Internet connections. Eva's is one of the most popular restaurants and meeting places in town, while the Café Sol also offers free Wi-Fi.

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