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## Destination of the week: Belize

Strap on your flippers, get your hiking shoes ready and set out to take in some eye-popping views.

By Josh Lew

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Photo: ZUMA Press

Belize, a tiny nation on Central America's Caribbean coastline, is at once accessible and remote. The country boasts a low population density (330,000 people live in an area of nearly 9,000 square miles). Large swaths of the countryside are covered by jungle and accessible only by dirt road. The coastline feels more Caribbean than Central American, making it a good, relatively inexpensive alternative to the West Indies' resort islands. Also, since English is the national language (as opposed to Spanish in most of the rest of Central America), travelers from the U.S. won't have to worry about a language barrier for the most part.

Like other heavily forested areas in the Americas, Belize has had problems with deforestation. However, there have been great strides made to protect the nation's natural landscapes. In all, 18.5 percent of the land and the portions of the Caribbean Sea belonging to Belize are protected from destruction and damage. This means that there are plenty of eco-tourism opportunities in Belize: in interior jungle, along the mangrove-heavy coastline and on the nearby Caribbean islands that belong to Belize. In addition, the coral reefs and the warm waters of the Caribbean make an excellent water-sports scene, with sailing, kayaking, scuba diving, fishing and snorkeling keeping water-enthusiasts entertained. Unfortunately, Belize is far from idyllic. Some of its reefs are damaged (Budget Travel recently named the Belize

Barrier Reef one of the world's [top ten endangered attractions](#)), infrastructure is poor in certain areas and smuggling-related crime is on the rise. All that said, Belize has plenty of eco-tourism opportunities. The industry is still young, giving hope that sustainable tourism can gain a significant foothold in the country.

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### Sleep green

Numerous well-run [eco-resorts](#) are located in the western part of the country in an area known as the Cayo District. Many of the places are inside extensive natural areas. One of these green vacation spots, the [Macaw Bank Jungle Lodge](#), uses [solar power](#) and has other eco-friendly features to keep visitors' stays Earth-friendly. Another similar Cayo District resort is the [Black Rock Lodge](#), situated in an idyllic jungle setting. The area surrounding the resort is crisscrossed with hiking trails. Most Cayo District resorts offer tours to Mayan ruins in the region.

Some resorts, such as the [Hamanasi Dive and Adventure Resort](#), are nearer to the coast and offer both inland and water-based adventures. Hamanasi is a [Green Globe](#) certified resort that facilitates jungle treks, scuba diving adventures and birding tours.

Though most of the tourism focuses on the coast and the Cayo District, there are other options. Small places like the [Cotton Tree Lodge](#) (in Southern Belize's Toledo District) offer an "off-the-map" feel and are eco-friendly by necessity (on-site gardens to grow food, basic amenities powered by Earth-friendly energy).

The [Orchid Garden Eco-Village](#) in Belize City is a centrally located inn that offers nature-themed vacations and natural/organic foods to those who want to base their Belize vacation in the country's main hub.

### See green

Package eco-tours, which include guided excursions as well as room and board (and usually transport), are widely offered in Belize. Many [resorts](#) have optional tours and adventures or can arrange them for guests on demand. This level of convenience is welcome, especially for green-minded Belize novices. Generally, those resorts that have sustainable, low impact practices on-site (see Sleep green above) also have eco-friendly tours and adventure opportunities.

Diving is a hugely popular pastime amongst adventure-seekers in Belize. One of the more popular spots in the [Great Blue Hole](#), a deep hole off the coast not too far from Belize City. The hole, surrounded by coral, seems almost perfectly round when seen from the air. Day trips from the mainland usually include several dives in and around the hole itself. The Hole is a favorite hangout for different species of sharks and large [fish](#). The Great Blue Hole is not to be confused with another "great" natural attraction, [Blue Hole National Park](#). This freshwater sinkhole is in the rainforest and draws trekkers instead of divers. St. Herman's Cave, one of several worthwhile [underground attractions](#) in Belize, is nearby.

The barrier reefs and atolls of Belize draw lots of divers because of the underwater wildlife, warm waters and clear visibility. It is possible to be based on the mainland, even in Belize City, during a [diving-centered vacation](#). However, places like [Ambergris Caye](#) and the [Turneffe Islands](#) have all the outfitters, guides and dive shops necessary to explore the reefs extensively. It is also possible to dive from the mainland, with places like [Punta Gorda](#), in the relatively remote Toledo District, offering a chance to explore both inland and underwater attractions.

[Guanacaste National Park](#) is a 50-acre section of protected forest in southern Belize that is known for its great birding opportunities. The tall, wide Guanacaste trees are home to tropical [birds](#) and provide cover for other forest plants and mammals, including pacas, jaguars and Central American deer.

One of the more convenient preserves to visit is [Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary](#), a 1,000-plus-acre site near the Belize Zoo. This education-oriented wildlife sanctuary features forests, but also has examples of the other landscapes found in Belize: savannah grasslands, wetlands and lagoons.

There are a many other [national parks and wildlife sanctuaries](#) around the country and on the cayes in the Caribbean. Other standouts include the [Community Baboon Sanctuary](#), a parcel of land that is home to one of the most impressive grassroots conservation efforts in the country. The sanctuary is dedicated to preserving the endangered howler monkey. There is also a museum and a strong focus on environmental education, both for those who are serious about studying conservation and those who are simply curious.

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### Go green

Getting around Belize is relatively simple. The country is only 70 miles wide, so no trip takes very long. Renting a car is possible, although there are only a few main roads. These roads pass through major towns, but many eco-tourism places can be reached only by four-by-four. Taking [the bus](#) is a cheaper option. Buses are old and used mostly by locals, but the network covers all major towns (from which you can get local transport to whatever site you plan to visit).

[Maya Island Air](#) and [Tropic Air](#) are two airlines that fly commuter flights to major destinations within the country. This is a convenient, if not totally green, way to travel. Fares are reasonable.

It is possible to fly to some of the more popular island destinations, although it is easier and arguably greener to [travel by ferry](#). Water taxis travel between major coastal towns and the islands. Fares are cheap and the trip can be seen as an informal sightseeing cruise as well as a method for getting from A to B.

### Eat green

The [restaurant](#) at the Orchid Garden Eco-Village in Belize City (see Sleep green above) offers a mainly organic, mainly vegetarian menu that includes dishes from all the major cooking styles found in Belize. Most of the other resorts mentioned above also serve locally grown food that is mostly organic and often grown on-site or sourced from local farmers.

Belize's cuisine has a host of different cooking styles. Local fruits are particularly easy to come by, as are staples like cassava, corn and plantain. Beans are also a staple, especially in Mayan, Kriol and Mestizo cooking. Therefore, it is pretty easy for vegetarians in Belize. A locally grown and [organic movement](#) in Belize is based as much in practicality (saving money on imports) as it is on eco-friendliness. [Local markets](#) are a good place to find fresh, locally farmed foods.

Belize is a solid eco-tourism destination that has made efforts to conserve its natural areas as much as possible. Despite an increase in cruise ship passengers and other mainstream travelers visiting the country, there are still plenty of venues suitable for travelers in search of Earth-friendly attractions and nature.

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