Belize

Location

Belize is located on the eastern coast of Central America and consists of more than 22,000 square kilometers (8866 sq. mi.). It is bordered by Mexico to the north-northwest and by Guatemala to the west and southwest. It is bordered by the Caribbean Sea on the east. Belize lies approximately 17 degrees North latitude and 89 degrees West longitude. It is the only country in Central America that does not have a border on the Pacific Ocean. The largest city is Belize City with approximately 48,000 people.

Geography

The coast of Belize has numerous bays and also has the world's second longest barrier reef, the longest in the western Hemisphere. The coastal plain is flat and swampy, while the inland area is more fertile and has large forests consisting of Savannah pines and tropical forests. The Belize River dissect the country from west to east. There are seventeen rivers draining the land. Due to the forests, only a small portion is suitable for farming. Unpaved roads and lack of infrastructure make it a difficult country for travel. The terrain rises gradually below the Maya Mountains which has the highest peak of 1,160 meters. The country is slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts. Belize has often been damaged by many hurricanes. Due to the risk of hurricanes, the capital of Belize was moved inland 50 miles from Belize City to Belmopan where the new capital was established.

Climate

Belize has a subtropical climate that is uniformly hot and humid, but is tempered by the trade winds. There is a dry season from February to May, with a brief dry spell in August. The devastating hurricane season is from June to November. The average precipitation varies from 50
inches in the North to 100 inches in the South. The average temperature ranges from 19 to 27 degrees Celsius (66 to 81 degrees Fahrenheit) in January and from 24 to 31 degrees Celsius (75 to 88 degrees Fahrenheit) in August.

**History**

This country was originally known as Belize, changed to British Honduras, and then later changed back to Belize on June 1, 1978. The first people to visit the country were British log cutters followed soon by British settlers. The country became a part of the British Colony of Jamaica in 1862 and later became a separate colony in 1884. Disputes between Guatemala and the UK delayed its independence until 1981. There are still international disputes with Guatemala claiming half of southern Belize. Squatters settle along the borders even though there was a 2000 agreement enacted. Around 2000 BC, the country was populated with about a million Mayans, but no one really knows what happened to them. In the early years, from approximately 300 AD to 2000 AD, there may have been 200,000 Mayan Indians living in this country as well as parts of Mexico and Guatemala. Much of the remains of the pyramids built by the Indians are in ruins, but these ruins help us to know how the Mayans lived. The large amount of rain is wearing away the stones, and tree roots are forcing the stones apart.

**Important Dates**

The important dates on Belize's calander are New Years Day, Baron Bliss Day (March 9), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Labour Day (May 1), Common Wealth Day (May 24), Belize National Day (Sept 10), Independence Day (Sept 21), Columbus Day (October 12), Garifuna Settlement Day (Nov 19), which is celebrating the coming of the Garinagus (Black Caribs) on canoes from Hondorus in 1823, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day.

**Population**
Belize is a sparsely populated country of an estimated 266,440 people. There is a mixture of racial decent. Many are descendents of the Maya Indians still in the area. Black Africans total about 40% of the population, followed by the Mestizos, mixed European and AmerIndians of 33%. The estimate for an increase in population for 2025 is 410,987, which will increase to 558,121 by 2050. About 50% of the people live in six main urban areas: Belize, Cayo, Corozal, Orange Walk, Stann Creek, and Toledo. Approximately 25% of the people live in the former capital of Belize City.

**Currency**

The official currency is the dollar. A dollar can be divided into 100 cents. Currently (Feb. 2004), two Belize dollars equal approximately one U.S. dollar.

**Education**

Nine years of schooling is compulsory and free. There are generally 23 students per teacher. Literacy rate of those over the age of 15 is greater than 92%. There are eight post-secondary institutions within Belize, including Corozal Community College and Belize College of Agriculture which is part of the University of West Indies. Less than 3% of high school graduates continue on to obtain a college education.

**Language**

The official language of Belize is English, spoken by most of the population. Spanish is the native tongue spoken as a second language. The AmerIndian tribes speak their own original native languages. Other languages such as Chinese, Lebanese, Arabic, and Hindi can be heard.

**Religion**

The religion of Belize is mostly Roman Catholic (~60%), but also Protestant or Anglican can be found. German and Swiss Mennonites can also be found as well. There were some
churches built by the Spanish, but the modern buildings mostly show the British Caribbean architecture style.

**Agriculture**

Agriculture accounted for about 15% of the GDP in 1990. Around 30% of the work force is employed in agriculture. The country has two major agricultural zones. The one in the north is relatively flat and the soils are suitable for a variety of crops. The southern zone is mainly mountainous and the soil is not suitable for crops. Only about 16% of the land is used for sustained agricultural production without using extensive farming techniques. Agricultural activities are commonly restricted in November and December due to high water saturation levels in the soil during the rainy season. The main agricultural products of Belize are corn, rice, cacao, bananas, citrus fruits, cane sugar and coconuts. Because of trade agreements with Europe and the United States, the production of sugar cane, citrus, and bananas has steadily risen since the mid 1980’s. Belizeans also produce fish and cultured shrimp.

**Trade**

Belize does their major trading of exports with the United States, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Jamaica, and Japan. The three major exports are sugar cane, citrus, and bananas. Most of the importing is from the USA, Mexico, The Netherlands, Netherland Antilles, and Cuba. They import machinery, transport equipment, manufactured goods, fuel, chemicals, food, beverages, tobacco, and pharmaceuticals.

**Food**

Local food is mainly rice and beans, along with chicken, beef, pork, and vegetables. For a tropical flavor, they use coconut and fried plantain. Exotic foods are armadillo, venison, and
fried paca (a brown rodent like a guinea pig). The country has never really developed a food style of its own.

**Landmarks**

There are many sites to tour while in Belize. A swing bridge spans the Belize River. South of the bridge, attractions include Battlefield Park, including all its vendors, St. John’s Cathedral, built in 1847, is the oldest Anglican Church in Central America, and the city’s cultural center is Bliss Institute. North of the bridge visitors can find the Image Factory Art Foundation that displays art work of native Belizeans. Close to the Guatemalan border is the Stone Maiden or Xunantunich, an archaeological treasure. In 1984, the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary was established to protect the jaguars, the only such reserve in the world. The sanctuary covers about 100,000 acres in a tropical forest. This area is also home to pumas, ocelots, margays, snakes, and various species of birds. The people of Bermudian Landing established a reserve for the endangered black howler monkey.

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