



▶ CENTRAL AMERICA

Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Covering 8,866 square miles (22,963 square kilometers), Belize is about the size of Massachusetts. Located in Central America, it is bordered by Mexico, Guatemala, and the Caribbean Sea. The landscape is diverse for such a small area. The northern half of Belize is flat with marshes and lagoons, while coastal areas are covered by mangrove swamps. The land rises to the south and west, reaching an elevation of 3,688 feet (915 meters) in the Maya Mountains. More than 60 percent of the country is forested. Belize has the world's second largest barrier reef with hundreds of small islands called *cayes* (pronounced "keys"). Beautiful rivers, forests, reefs, and *cayes* are home to thousands of plant and animal species, from giant, fast-growing *guanacasta* trees to crocodiles and manatees.

Belize has two seasons: dry (February–July) and wet (August–January). Humidity is high year-round. The south receives the most rain. Temperatures average between 80 and 85°F (27–29°C), although it is cooler in the mountains. In Belmopan, the capital, days are hot and nights are cool. Belize is subject to coastal flooding and hurricanes between June and October.

History. The Maya thrived in the area between the third and ninth centuries AD as part of a civilization that covered Guatemala, Honduras, Southern Mexico, and El Salvador. Numerous city-states existed throughout Mayan lands, and these were often at odds with each other. Mayan ruins are still evident all over Belize. Little is known of the period after the

decline of the Mayan people until the arrival of the first Europeans in the 16th century. The Spanish came in search of gold but found none. British pirates arrived during the 17th century and took advantage of the islands and reefs to lure ships onto the rocks for looting. British woodcutters soon followed and brought slaves to help in logging the huge forests. The pirates also turned to woodcutting. The logwood and later the mahogany trade became very lucrative for these British, who were known as the Baymen.

The Spanish tried to claim the region, but at the decisive Battle of St. George's Caye in 1798, the Baymen and their slaves fought back Spanish invaders. With the Spanish Empire all around them, the Baymen asked Britain for protection. Spain and Britain signed a treaty to allow Belize to become a crown colony in 1862. England had promised to build a road between Belize City and Guatemala City as part of that treaty. The fact that the road was never built led to a long-term dispute between the two neighbors. Guatemala claimed all of Belize as its own territory because of the treaty's failure.

The British granted internal self-rule in 1964, but Belize was called British Honduras until 1973. In 1981, with support from the United Nations and a strong independence movement, Belize became a sovereign country within the Commonwealth of Nations. British troops remained to protect the borders, but after a 1991 agreement in which Guatemala recognized Belize's sovereignty, Britain decided (in 1993) to withdraw most of its troops. However, Guatemala still lays claim to a large

portion of Belize. Negotiations between the two countries are continuing and look hopeful.

THE PEOPLE

Population. The population of Belize is roughly 287,700 and is growing at about 2.3 percent. About one-fourth of the population lives in Belize City. Orange Walk is the next largest city. Each of the country's six districts has a main town where the bulk of that district's population lives. Many Belizeans live and work abroad, especially in the United States.

Belize has a diverse blend of peoples. Mestizos, or people with mixed European and indigenous ancestry, represent 49 percent of the population. Creoles, people with some degree of African ancestry, account for about 25 percent. People of full Mayan blood comprise 10.5 percent of the population. The Garinagu, people who share a Caribbean and African background, comprise 6 percent.

Mestizos are primarily descendants of 19th-century immigrants from Mexico, although the group includes immigrants from other Latin American countries. Refugees from neighboring countries (mainly El Salvador and Guatemala) have added significantly to the mestizo population. Creoles dominate in Belize City. Many are descendants of early European (mostly English or Scottish) settlers and African slaves. Creoles were once the largest group but now lose many people to emigration. Most rural villages in Belize are comprised of mestizos, Mayas (Kek'chi, Mopan, and Yucatan), or Garinagu—who live mostly in the south. A small minority of East Indians have lived in Belize for generations. Other groups include Mennonites, Chinese, Arabs, and North Americans.

Language. English is the country's official language, and with the exception of people in remote areas, everyone speaks it. Most people also speak Creole, and everyday speech is often a combination of Creole and English. Creole is a melodic English-based language with roots in the days of slavery. Although it is traditionally an oral language, efforts are under way to establish grammar and spelling standards for a written form. Spanish is spoken by mestizos throughout the country (especially in the Cayo, Corozal, and Orange Walk districts) but not necessarily by all mestizos. Still, it has overtaken English as the first language of many Belizeans. While school instruction must be in English, Creole or Spanish may be used in the first few years to clarify instruction for children who do not speak English. Mayan groups speak their native languages. The Garinagu usually speak both Garifuna and English.

Religion. Freedom of religion is valued and respected in Belize. Most major Western Christian denominations are represented, but the Roman Catholic (62 percent) and Anglican (12 percent) churches dominate. Most mestizos and Maya are Catholic. Creoles generally belong to Protestant churches, but many are Catholic. A number of other Christian faiths are practiced. Schools generally are run by churches, so most people are affiliated with a religion. Some indigenous religious practices are found among the Maya and Garinagu.

General Attitudes. Belizeans are fun-loving, friendly, and generally laid-back. They appreciate honesty and value a sense of humor. The pace of life is not regulated by the clock so much as by events or people. Punctuality may be admired but generally is not expected. Men commonly practice *machismo*, demonstrating their manhood through overtly masculine acts or sexually oriented language. Women usually ignore such behavior and accept it as part of life. More egalitarian relationships are also developing as women move into the workforce.

Although Belize is located in Central America, its history, culture, and government structure are closely linked to the Caribbean, which gives Belizeans great pride. Belizeans value their diverse ancestries and linguistic abilities. For a small nation of so many ethnic groups and cultures, Belize is relatively free of racial tension. Equality and coexistence are important concepts. Prejudices exist but do not usually extend to hatred. A neighborhood in Belize City might consist of every possible ethnic group and have few racial problems. One reason is that the people do not often mix; they coexist. But another more powerful reason is that most ethnic groups subscribe in some degree to Creole cultural practices, and Belizean Creoles have adopted aspects of the cultures around them. Most people can speak Belizean Creole, which further enhances harmony.

Personal Appearance. In Belize, the way a person is dressed is considered a mark of taste and status. Even those who cannot afford new or expensive fashions take pride in wearing clean, pressed clothing, particularly in the workplace and on weekend outings. Office, bank, hotel, and school employees commonly wear uniforms. Many men, especially professionals, wear *guayaberas*, loosely worn cotton shirts that are sometimes embroidered. While women traditionally wear dresses or skirts at work, pants are becoming more common. Agricultural workers generally wear older clothing with rubber boots or flip-flops. U.S. fashions are popular almost everywhere in Belize. Casual wear is the norm for leisure activities, while evening and religious events generally call for best dress. In rural areas, clothing tends to be casual.

The Maya often wear traditional clothing. This might include long, heavy, brightly colored skirts with white, embroidered blouses for women, and work clothes and straw hats for men. Garinagu women also commonly wear traditional clothing, which could consist of a simple, colorful blouse, a matching knee-length skirt, and a head scarf. The Mennonites, a group originally from Germany, maintain conservative, simple clothing and do not follow modern fashions.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Belizeans are informal and friendly in *hailing* (greeting) one another. It is rude not to *hail* even a slight acquaintance or not to return a *hail*. *Hailing* strangers is not uncommon in Belize City or in the districts. When entering a place of business, one also *hails* the clerk or receptionist. When strangers pass on the street, a simple nod or wave is acceptable; acquaintances might add *Hey, how?* or *Y'aright?*

When greetings precede conversation, a handshake is common. Friends (particularly men) might shake hands by clasping the palms and locking thumbs or all fingers, or by exchanging a *knock-it* (lightly touching closed fists). Men often pat each other on the back when they shake hands. Women generally reserve hugs for close friends and relatives. Spanish speakers greet by saying *Buenos días* (Good morning), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), *Buenas noches* (Good evening), or just *Buenas* any time of day. In Creole, one might use *Wa di gwan?* (What's happening?) or a number of other phrases.

In formal settings, people address others by title. Children usually address their elders by adding *Miss* or *Mister* before the name, and they often answer questions by saying *Yes, ma'am* or *No, sir*.

Gestures. Mestizos are very reserved among people unfamiliar to them. Nonverbal communication is prevalent in Belize; both hand and facial gestures can be varied and complicated.

Garinagu and Creoles are especially animated. Belizeans might indicate direction with the head or lips. Staring or pointing at someone is rude. Sucking air through the teeth can mean “Give me a break.” People might hiss to get one’s attention, but this is offensive to many (especially women). To hail a taxi or bus, people move the hand up and down before the vehicle passes.

Visiting. Belizeans are very hospitable. Unannounced visitors are welcomed and made to feel at home. Arranged visits most often occur on weekends. Before television was introduced in 1980, visiting was an integral part of everyday life. It has since diminished in cities but is still important in villages. When visiting a home, it is polite to *hail* the occupants from the gate or street until they come out. A lengthy conversation might take place over the fence before one is invited into the yard or home. Offering a guest refreshments, usually at least a drink, is considered good manners. In areas without refrigeration, people might offer fresh coconut. Though not expected, it is polite for the guest to bring the host a small gift, such as sweets.

Eating. Families generally spend mealtime together, although women may eat after or separately from the men in some Mayan and mestizo families. Conversation is usually limited and mainly carried out between adults. For most, the main meal of the day is *dinner*, which is eaten at midday. Schools and businesses close so people can eat at home. In cities, people also frequent restaurants. The evening meal, called *supper* or *tea*, is lighter than *dinner*. For some groups (such as the Kek’chi Maya), the main meal is in the evening.

Meals in rural areas usually are less varied than in cities; rice, beans, tortillas, fresh fruit, and chicken are often the only available foods. Urban people might eat these foods in addition to burgers, *tamales*, fish, and a variety of other dishes.

LIFESTYLE

Family. Families tend to be large and often include the extended family. It is common for grandparents to raise grandchildren after their own children have left Belize for economic or other reasons. Leaving children behind has created problems in Belize, as minors now form a majority of the population in Belize City. Adult children usually remain at home until they marry or have a child. Single-parent families are abundant among the Creole population, and women have become the leading family figure in that group. In a Creole village, it is common for households to have a female head and several generations living together without any adult men.

In most other homes, the father takes the leading role. Younger mothers are more inclined to work outside the home than older women, but women are generally expected to take care of the home and family.

Housing. Apartment living is not popular. Most families own or rent homes. Because of the small population, the government can allot land to Belizeans who apply for it, making land and home ownership feasible. Belizean houses are painted in different shades of pastels, and security bars over windows are sometimes designed in a highly elegant fashion. Plastic floral arrangements are popular decorations. Traditional homes may be simple thatched huts. Children and babies often sleep in hammocks. In coastal areas, homes are generally built out of wood or cement and put on stilts to protect against hurricane flooding. Almost all are one storey, and most have front porches and hammocks. In recent years, the government has created communities of track housing—entire neighborhoods

of identical one-storey cement bungalows. However, these communities remain largely unoccupied because they are expensive, utilities are in short supply, and nearby schools and stores are lacking.

Dating and Marriage. Urban dating follows a similar pattern as in North America. However, schools may prohibit their students from going to popular dating destinations, such as discos, so private parties and school dances are the primary way young people meet. Village dating revolves around church activities. Among the Maya and some mestizos, boys may only be allowed to meet with a girl in her home.

Many Belizean young women become single mothers early and never marry. Likewise, many young men father a number of children by several women and never formally marry. Some couples enter into common-law marriage relationships. For those who do marry formally, a church ceremony is usually followed by a lively reception that includes food, music, and dancing.

Life Cycle. Most Belizean children are baptized in a church up to a year after their birth. To ward off harm from *mal de ojo* (the evil eye), mothers sometimes tie a red ribbon around the baby’s wrist or ankle. The *quinciñera* (fifteenth-birthday celebration) marks a girl’s passage into womanhood. It is celebrated by a mass and a party. This party lasts into the early hours of the next morning. *Quinciñeras* can be as elaborate and expensive as formal weddings, but even in the poorest communities, they are celebrated.

Funerals can last a long time in Belize. After a burial, mourners may remain in the cemetery for hours, praying, singing, and placing flowers on top of the grave. Nine days after the funeral itself, a *novena* will be held. During this all-night ceremony, family and friends sing, light candles, recite scriptures, and often play drums and dance.

The *diügü* is a traditional Garifuna religious ceremony involving the extended family. Its purpose is to appease ancestors, heal illness, and generally resolve problems experienced by the living. Preparations for a *diügü* are made only when several tragedies have befallen a family. The ceremony opens with a mass and culminates in 48 hours of continuous traditional dancing, singing and drumming.

Diet. The most common staple is white rice and kidney beans. This dish may be accompanied by stewed chicken, beef, or fish. A staple among the Maya is corn, which is usually present in some form (such as tortillas) at every meal. Fish and seafood are common on the coast. Other popular foods include *tamales* (cornmeal dough stuffed with filling and steamed in banana leaves), *panades* (fried corn shells with beans or fish), meat pies, *escabeche* (onion soup), *chirmole* (soup), and *garnaches* (fried tortillas with beans, cheese, and sauce). Fruits (such as bananas, oranges, mangoes, papaya, and limes) are abundant and part of the daily diet. Vegetables are more limited and often imported.

Recreation. The most popular sports are *football* (soccer) and basketball. Organized leagues receive great local support. Softball is popular with men and women. National championships are held for both men’s and women’s teams. Volleyball, track-and-field, cricket, and boxing are enjoyed in many areas. Cycling is popular; the largest athletic event is the annual cross-country race held Easter weekend. It is a source of pride and a national tradition that attracts an international group of cyclists. Urban people like to go to the *caves* for recreation. Belizeans also enjoy attending concerts and school fairs or watching the latest movies at home on cable and video.

Belize

The Arts. Native arts include a wide variety of wood and stone carving, textiles, baskets, and pottery. These are produced for tourists, used in many homes, and given as gifts.

Belizeans appreciate many kinds of music: reggae, calypso, *soca* (a mixture of U.S. soul and calypso), and various types of music from the United States. A local favorite is *punta-rock*, music with fast rhythms that is a mixture of synthesized sounds and traditional Garifuna drumming. The *punta-rock* dance style is among the most popular forms and is thought of as a Belizean creation. Traditional drums made of hollow tree trunks are often used in performances.

Holidays. The largest and most celebrated national holidays occur in September. A street parade/party takes place on St. George's Caye Day (10 Sept.) and on Independence Day (21 Sept.). Various "September celebrations" take place between these two holidays. Baron Bliss Day (9 Mar.) honors a Portuguese noble who donated his fortune to the country and its people. Garifuna Settlement Day (19 Nov.) marks the arrival of the Garinagu to Belize. They originally came from Saint Vincent and settled in Honduras before migrating to Belize.

Belizeans celebrate Christmas with religious parades and services as well as with feasts, visits to friends and relatives, and lively parties. Easter weekend is popular for vacations; religious ceremonies are limited. Belize also celebrates Labor Day (1 May) and a number of other holidays.

SOCIETY

Government. Belize is a parliamentary democracy. Queen Elizabeth II of Britain is head of state but is represented in Belize by a governor-general (currently Sir Colville Young). The head of government is the prime minister (currently Said Musa), who is the leader of the National Assembly's dominant party. The country has a bicameral legislature. The House of Representatives has 29 members, and the Senate has 12 members. Representatives are directly elected and senators are appointed. The nation is divided into six districts. Belize has two political parties—the People's United Party (PUP) and the United Democratic Party (UDP). General elections are held at least every five years. The voting age is 18.

Economy. Belize's economy, fueled by large amounts of foreign aid, has been expanding since independence. Belize is a member of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), a regional economic association. Nearly 40 percent of the labor force is employed in agricultural production. The country's main exports are sugar, citrus fruits, molasses, bananas, wood and wood products, and clothing. Sugar traditionally has been the primary cash crop, but citrus fruits are now nearly as strong. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Mexico are Belize's major trading partners. Tourism, including adventure tours and ecotourism, is a fast-growing source of income. Construction is becoming increasingly important to the economy. Belize has also started developing its oil reserves and has established an offshore financial sector.

Inflation is low, but unemployment remains a problem, especially among the youth. Although the country has experienced economic progress, that progress has not yet benefited the majority of the population. Poverty affects roughly one-third of the total population and around two-thirds of all rural people. The currency is the Belizean dollar (BZD), which is pegged to the U.S. dollar using a 2–1 ratio.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	287,730 (rank=178)
Area, sq. mi.	8,866 (rank=149)
Area, sq. km.	22,963

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	95 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$6,747
Adult literacy rate	94% (male); 94% (female)
Infant mortality rate	32 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	70 (male); 74 (female)

Transportation and Communications. The Northern, Western, and Hummingbird highways are paved and link most cities. Roads leading to remote areas are rough. The national network of private bus systems is widely used, but a monopoly has allowed for sharp increases in fares. In cities and towns, most people get around by walking or riding bikes. The number of private cars is growing. Several small private domestic airlines provide commuter and tourist travel.

In major towns, most people have telephones; villages usually have at least one phone. Radio and television broadcasts together reach nearly all Belizeans, who remain well-informed on local, regional, and international news.

Education. The majority of primary and secondary schools are church operated but receive large government subsidies. Students pay fees, buy their own books and supplies, and usually must wear uniforms. A few government schools exist for children of families that cannot afford these costs, but generally there are not enough spaces to accommodate all. Children are required to attend school until the equivalent of the eighth grade in the United States but not beyond. Many students are unable to complete their primary education due to cost, family obligation, or other factors.

Space in secondary schools is limited, and acceptance depends on one's passing the Belize National Selection Exam. Those who complete a secondary education can attend junior college, teacher's college, or the University College of Belize. The government is focusing reform efforts on standardizing curriculum in all schools, dealing with educational inequities, and providing more vocational education in each district.

Health. Health care is accessible to many citizens, particularly those in the towns and in Belize City. Each district has a small hospital, and there is a large hospital in Belize City. A health worker is assigned to each village but might not always be present. Clinics and private doctors serve those who can afford to pay. Preventable diseases still afflict the country. Many Belizeans seek treatment from local "bush" doctors knowledgeable about natural and herbal remedies. Rainwater tanks and municipal water systems are used widely although some concern for water safety exists.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information. Embassy of Belize, 2535 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 332-9636; web site www.embassyofbelize.org. Belize Tourist Board, Lower Flat, New Horizon Investment Building, 3 1/2 Miles Northern Highway, PO Box 325, Belize City, Belize; phone (800) 624-0686; web site www.travelbelize.org.

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