



Three  
Perfect  
Days

# Belize

Belize is a place that evades stereotypes. It's neither completely Central American (the national language is English) nor entirely Caribbean (it seems as though there are no all-inclusives in sight). Rather, this tiny country of 400,000 people finds its footing in its diversity, blending the customs, cuisines, and communities of people from Maya, Kriol, Garifuna, and mestizo backgrounds, to name just a few. Even the landscape eludes uniformity, with island-flecked cerulean seas contrasted by the dense rainforest, its jade canopy obscuring countless stone ruins and networks of caves, where the entrance to Xibalba (the Maya underworld) is said to be. And, thanks to an unshakable commitment to conservation, wildlife is found everywhere, which is why Belize is home to the largest concentration of jaguars in the world. While crisscrossing from happening Ambergris Caye to adventurous San Ignacio to gentle Placencia, you may pick up on the spirit of individuality left over from the original pirate settlers—and end up finding yourself as well.



By Ali Wunderman • Photography by Aaron Colussi



DAY

# 1

## Snorkeling, painting, and vibing in San Pedro

country over the past few years, but early 2020 was the last time I was able to visit, so I'm beyond excited to be back. Gazing at the waves, I almost feel as if I'm dreaming.

Most travelers to Belize begin their journey on Ambergris Caye; many never leave the island that is the alleged inspiration for Madonna's "La Isla Bonita" at all. Twenty-five miles long and a mile across at its widest, trimmed in mangrove trees and flanked by a lagoon to the west and the Caribbean to the east, the island is just a 15-minute flight from the international airport. It's a colorful, golf-cart-packed hot spot, with the town of San Pedro at the heart of its vibrancy, and it sets the mood for Belize's characteristic relaxed vibe.

The day is already marching toward the average temperature of 81 degrees, and I intend to soak up every second of it. I stop on the resort's sandy pathway to play with twin potlicker puppies Coco and Taco before enjoying a mixed-fruit smoothie in the open-air restaurant facing the sea. At the front desk, I grab the keys to a golf cart, the main mode of transportation on the island—most roads aren't wide enough to accommodate two full-size vehicles—and zip five miles south to San Pedro Town.

My intention is to wander around and poke my head into a few shops, but, as usual,



Belize has its own plan for me. While I'm admiring the works inside **Belizean Melody Art Gallery**, the sales clerk, Aylin, suggests I go a few blocks over, to their North Gallery, where owner Melody Sanchez Wolfe is teaching painting classes today. The classes typically need to be scheduled in advance, but it's a slow day, and stranger-inspired spontaneity is part of Belize's charm, so I head that way.

Wolfe greets me warmly, a paint-flecked apron in one hand and a glass of fresh coconut water in the other. She shows me how to paint a scarlet macaw, and it turns out much better than I expected. We talk about the magical nature of this country, how it draws people in and brings out their best—or at least their truest—selves. "I've not met one person who walks off that plane and feels like they don't belong here," she tells

The sun is just beginning to rise over the Caribbean Sea as I wake up, a daily coincidence that happens only when I'm in Belize, as if the celestial bodies conspire to ensure I don't miss the brilliant sight by sleeping in, the way I would at home. The first orange rays of the day burst through the glass doors of my room at **Matachica Resort & Spa** on Ambergris Caye, illuminating the mural by Montreal illustrator Cécile Gariépy behind my bed. I've had the good fortune of spending a lot of time in this



Opening spread, from left: Francis Ford Coppola's Turtle Inn; a mushroom dish at Matachica Resort; this page, from top: tacos at Matachica Resort; paddleboarding at Matachica Resort; opposite page: snorkeling with nurse sharks and a school of fish at Mexico Rocks





*“Most travelers to Belize begin their journey on Ambergris Caye; many never leave the island that is the alleged inspiration for Madonna’s ‘La Isla Bonita’ at all.”*





Clockwise from above: outside Elvi's Kitchen; ceviche at Lily's Treasure Chest; a food vendor in San Pedro



me, describing me without even knowing it.

Next, I walk down Front Street to **Central Park**, with its benches and tables and playground painted every color of the rainbow. I spot my **Belize Food Tours** guide, Felipe Paz, across from Jaguar's Temple Club, the entrance of which is decorated to resemble the great maw of the big cat. "Food in Belize describes the culture here," he tells me, emphasizing the importance of experiencing authentic cuisine. "Through food, we get to taste each one of the many different ethnic groups that make Belize today."

Over the next two hours, we feast on classic Belizean dishes at six restaurants, starting with *pibil* tacos at **Elvi's Kitchen** and wending our way to **Lily's Treasure Chest** for ceviche, **Briana's Deli** for rice and beans, **El Fogon** for *salbutes*, **Saul's Cigar & Coffee House** for rum cream, and finally **Belize Chocolate Company** for a banana chocolate

*"Through food, we get to taste each one of the many different ethnic groups that make Belize today."*

truffle. I'm grateful both that I had a light breakfast and that it's a walking tour, because there's no way I could refuse a single thing.

Full to bursting, I cart un hurriedly back to Matachica to join up with Captain Charlie for a snorkeling session at **Mexico Rocks**, a shallow patch of protected reef that is remarkably underrated, and therefore sparsely visited, relative to other snorkel sites. It would almost be enough to bob in the boat on the gentle waves, but the Caribbean heat makes the water all too tempting.

As if to prove its worth, the marine wildlife of Mexico Rocks seems determined to put on a show. Three green sea turtles eye me curiously, insufficiently accustomed to human interference to regard me as a threat. A nurse shark rests next to a boulder-like coral, unperturbed by my splashing, while a dragon-toothed barracuda reminds me that sharks aren't the scariest creatures in these waters. A remora keeps close to me for the duration of my swim, checking to see if I'm worth fastening onto. A pair of massive spotted eagle rays circle me languorously, in no rush to get wherever they're going. It seems that the telltale vibe of Belize isn't restricted to the land.

For dinner, I pick up a dear friend of mine, local writer Mary Gonzalez, at the bridge separating San Pedro from the northern part of the island. We snatch the last parking spot at **The Truck Stop**, the country's first shipping container

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Communal dining at The Truck Stop

food park, where we dine on **Rasa's** Malaysian chicken wings, **Sol Fresca's** fish tacos, and **Slice of Haven's** Honey Pie pizza, a thin-crust pie with caramelized onions, jalapeños, deep-fried red onions, mozzarella, and shaved fresh Romano, finished with a drizzle of honey.

Truck Stop owner Ben Popik, a former New York City comedian, is one of many familiar faces who come by to greet us throughout the night—it feels like being at a family reunion or a community center. "There are a ton of amazing things to do on Ambergris Caye during the

*"Familiar faces come by to greet us throughout the night—it feels like being at a family reunion."*

day," he tells me when I ask how The Truck Stop came to be, "but we realized that what was missing was nighttime entertainment." Before we leave, I buy a branded trucker hat, because have you really been if you don't show it off to your friends at home?

Mary and I end the night as we often do, drinking entirely too much rum at **Havana Cigars** with the Cuban-born owner, Carlos Utrera. Somehow, we manage to sneak a bit of conversation in between our peals of laughter and glasses of Havana Club and Belizean Copalli Rum. "We love people," Mary responds when I ask how this country manages to make visitors feel at home. "When someone is nice and friendly back, it's only natural to want to be their new best friend." I toast to that, letting that inherent niceness and friendliness take hold.

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DAY

# 2

## ► Going back in time and getting off the grid on the mainland

islands coated in dense mangrove forest. I even spot a few manatees and a bull shark.

Zhawn Poot, a guide with tour and shuttle provider **Belizing**, picks me up for the almost two-hour drive to western Belize's Cayo District, home to archaeological ruins, caves, and all manner of wildlife. There is a flight to San Ignacio, the rustic town that serves as the region's adventure hub, but watching the landscape shift from lowland savannah to dense jungle is worth the additional time in the car.

Plus, driving allows for a visit to the **Belize Zoo**, about an hour from the airport. The small operation serves as a sanctuary for animals saved from the illegal pet trade, jaguars that have come into conflict with farmers, and other creatures that are too injured to return to the wild. I'm especially entranced by Da Queen and Panama, a pair of massive harpy eagles that look like holdouts from the Jurassic period. The intimidating species was reintroduced to the Belizean wilderness in 2005, but sightings remain elusive.

Back on the road, I spy the familiar visage of the Sleeping Giant, a series of peaks in the far off Maya Mountains that forms a silhouette not unlike a man lying on his back. Here the trees grow taller, the vines thicker, and the sense of being

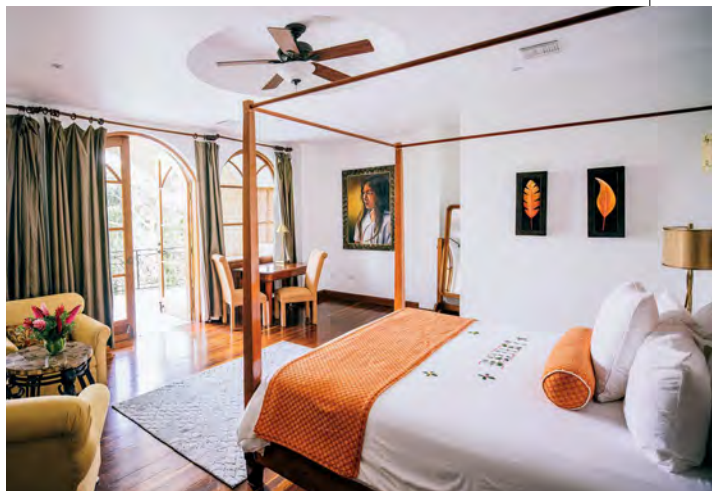
in the Caribbean gives way to a decidedly more Central American feeling.

Poot drops me off at **San Ignacio Resort Hotel**, an upscale boutique property with vintage charm perched on a hill overlooking San Ignacio. I've been given a room facing the on-site jungle, allowing me to nestle into the rainforest without going off the grid. Two aracari—a species of small toucan—watch me unpack from their perch just beyond the deck.

For lunch, I head over to **Pop's Restaurant** for fry jacks—fried dough pockets filled with refried beans and a generous serving of Marie Sharp's fiery habanero pepper sauce. I would happily eat these for every meal if I could.

It's Saturday, and the booths at the **San Ignacio Market** are bustling, the open-air stalls cooled by a breeze coming off the Macal River. The diversity of produce astounds me—locals casually pick up various fruits that I couldn't even begin to name. "This is called sourpop," the daughter of a vendor informs me when I inquire about a spiky green fruit larger than my hand. Belize is an English-speaking country, but the language diversity is profound, with some folks speaking only Spanish or one of several Mayan languages.

**A**n impossibly clear sky greets me for an early flight to the mainland and a drive to San Ignacio, where Maya ruins and wilderness adventure await. I've come to Belize at the tail end of the wet season, and the rain storms can be copious, so I'm grateful to the weather for both the unimpeded travel and the view from the copilot's seat on my island-hopper plane: a panorama of turquoise water stretching to the horizon, dappled with tiny uninhabited



This page: a guest room at San Ignacio Resort Hotel; opposite page: climbing Maya ruins at Cahal Pech







From top: Big Rock Falls; iguanas making a human friend at San Ignacio Resort Hotel

Belize was at the center of the ancient Maya world, as evidenced by the vast network of ruins and ceremonial caves found throughout the country. Despite attempts to colonize and wipe out these civilizations, Maya culture survived, with some 11 percent of the population here made up of indigenous Maya. This afternoon, I'm exploring a nearby Maya ruin, **Cahal Pech**, with the help of Edgar, a guide from the hotel. The central plaza has a languid air, the grass alive with small yellow butterflies, the peacefulness palpable. It's like passing through a portal to a thousand years in the past—although there was nothing primitive about this society. Edgar shows me the ingenious ways the ancient



*“We scramble down to a beach of gigantic boulders at the base of the 150-foot waterfall.”*

Maya designed their buildings to indicate the seasons, the sophistication in their architectural techniques. “I am mestizo,” he tells me, meaning a blend of Spanish and Indigenous. “To have these archaeological treasures here makes me take great pride in my country’s heritage.”

I wish I could stay in this restful ruin forever, but I need

a respite from the oppressive inland heat. After picking up my friend Steph, who works for the San Ignacio Resort Hotel, we point the car toward **Big Rock Falls**, in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve. I brace for rain-carved off-road driving, but we find tightly packed dirt instead; the notoriously bumpy road is in the early stages of being paved.

As we climb into the mountains, the jungle gives way to a sparse pine forest, another example of Belize’s bewildering ecological diversity. “I love the unexpectedness of it all,” Steph remarks after we’ve scrambled down the rickety handmade staircase to a beach of gigantic boulders at the base of the 150-foot waterfall. I have to agree: It’s

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From left: the pizza oven at Guava Limb; the restaurant's trademark Rum-a-Rita

hard to believe we were in the rainforest less than an hour ago. Luckily, I'm wearing my swimsuit under my sundress, as Steph shows me how to get a back massage from the cascade, leaving me soothed and invigorated all at once.

After a long day, I'm ready to relax with a cocktail (or two)

at **Guava Limb**, a restaurant and bar in downtown San Ignacio, next to the Macal River Park and its massive, wizened trees. I start with Guava Limb's signature bright blue Rum-a-Rita, taking advantage of the rum infusions for which the place is known (guava and



kiwi, in this case). The smell from the wood-fired oven is similarly intoxicating, and I'm soon feasting on a pepperoni pizza smothered in Marie Sharp's.

Back in my room, I practically fall into bed, where I find the rainforest symphony makes for a perfect lullaby.

### KEYS TO THE CAYES



A tiny island at Silk Cayes Marine Reserve

Peppering the coast along the Belize Barrier Reef are more than 100 cayes (pronounced keys). Ranging in size, price, and minimum stay, the options are nearly endless

when it comes to picking the perfect island to visit.

**Day Trip**  
Some islands, like **Laughing Bird Caye** and the **Silk Cayes**,

constitute their own national parks and serve as destinations for daytime visitors only. Booked as a one-off visit or as part of an extended tour, a stop at one of these cayes usually involves lunch and a leisurely snorkel through protected waters. *Book with Nite Wind Tours via [placenciadtourz.com](http://placenciadtourz.com)*

**Overnight**  
Taking a boat out to a caye can be a time-consuming process, so if one or two nights is all you can spend, look for an island closer to the mainland. **St. George's Caye Resort** is just 20 minutes from Belize City and offers the private-island experience

without an extensive commitment. Of course, you'll wish you could stay longer. [belizeislandparadise.com](http://belizeislandparadise.com)

**Long-Term Stay**  
There's no reason to rush back from a caye that takes an hour's boat ride to reach (in good weather). Some resorts, such as **Ray Caye**, require a three-night minimum during high season, while even more remote options, such as those at **Glover's Atoll**, deploy their boat only once a week. The accommodations at these places can be anything from rustic to modern to ultra-luxe. [raycaye.com](http://raycaye.com)

Danita Delimont/Alamy Stock Photo (Silk Cayes)

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DAY

# 3

► Searching for rare birds, devouring roadside ice cream, and savoring the sunset



From top: at Black Rock Lodge, guests can bird-watch on horseback in the rainforest; a black-cheeked woodpecker

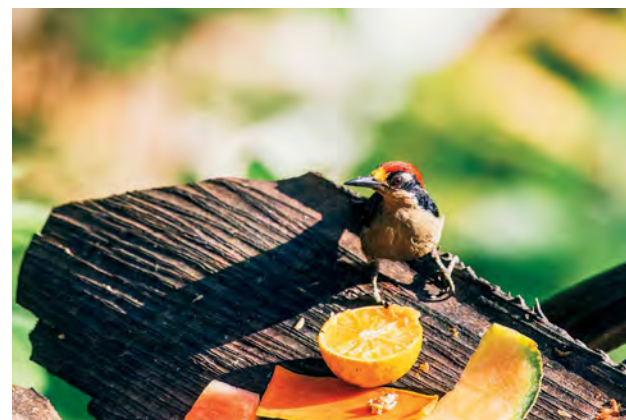
The black-and-white hawk-eagle is at the top of my must-see list when I meet up with renowned bird-watching guide Roni Martinez before the sun rises. We're headed to eco-outpost **Black Rock Lodge**, a 30-minute drive toward the Guatemala border, to look for the rare raptor, among other avian species. Martinez has dedicated his career to expanding birding in Belize, from educating guides to

protecting birds from poachers. He is, in short, a legend.

Of course, he downplays his status as we bounce along the dirt road through farms neighboring the lodge. "It's not about just one birder, or this birding club, or just one district of birders," Martinez says. "It's about being part of the birding nation that is Belize." As if on

cue, two keel-billed toucans—Belize's national bird—swoop in front of the car, through the early morning jungle mist.

At the lodge's restaurant, we order a breakfast of fry jacks and coffee, enjoying the view of the lush limestone cliffs of Elijio Panti National Park, the 13,000-acre wilderness reserve across the Macal River.



Suddenly, Martinez jumps up and runs for the spotting scope: The black-and-white hawk-eagle has arrived. As we focus our lens on the impressive bird, the jungle surges to life. A red-capped manakin dances on a bush below us, while a flock of aracari bounce around in a tree to our left. Martinez fires off the names of each

and every bird that zips by, identifying them by song when they're out of sight.

Back in San Ignacio, I reunite with Zhawn Poot, my guide from Belizing, for the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Placencia, a peninsula on the southern coast that's lined with white-sand beaches, dotted with elegant hotels, and





Clockwise from above: the Macal River; ice cream at The Country Barn; a scarlet macaw in flight



capped off by a low-key fishing village. To get there, we're taking the **Hummingbird Highway**, 53 stunningly scenic miles that wind east from the capital city of Belmopan,

skirting the Maya Mountains. Along the way, we pass multicolored Blue Bird buses, retired American school buses that shuttle Belizeans around. In keeping with the casual nature of the country, bus stops are both established and wherever someone who happens to need a ride is standing.

The jungle around the Hummingbird Highway engulfs us only briefly before Poot turns into the driveway of **The Country Barn**. "This is my favorite stop after a long drive," he says. "The atmosphere is calming, and who doesn't love homemade ice cream?" The quaint pit stop is operated by Mennonites, a

*"On a downhill stretch, he pulls to the side and throws the vehicle into neutral, only to have it begin to roll uphill."*

group that migrated to Belize in the late 1950s, bringing with them a strong farming tradition. Some Mennonite communities retain their conservative traditions, while others have adopted more modern practices. Whichever is the case of the folks here, the chocolate chip ice cream is excellent.

At mile 29, Poot shows me something inexplicable. On a downhill stretch, he pulls to the side and throws the vehicle into neutral, only to have it begin to slowly roll backward, *uphill*. There is no explanation for **Magnetic Hill**, where this

David Havel/Alamy Stock Photo (macaw)



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anomaly against natural law takes place; in fact, the road recently had some S-curves removed, but the releveling did nothing to stop the phenomenon from occurring. Some say it's an optical illusion, but I choose to believe it's a manifestation of Belize's unique magic.

After Poot mentions that the sweetest pineapples in the country are grown in this valley, I ask to stop at a roadside stand to test his theory. He's deliciously correct. Still hungry, we have lunch at **Miss Bertha's Best Belizean "Fyah Haat" Tamales**, an iconic red-and-white shack where Bertha's daughter carries on her mother's legacy, serving pillowy chicken tamales derived from Bertha's grandmother's recipe.

It pains me to pass by the Marie Sharp's hot sauce factory without so much as a glance through the gift shop, but the scarlet macaws won't wait for my sake. I have just enough time to gawk at the intricate, Indonesian-inspired interior design of my room at Francis Ford Coppola's Placencia beachside resort, **Turtle Inn** (and to briefly play with the Shellphone, a front desk communication device that could only come from the imagination of a filmmaker of Coppola's caliber), before hitting the road with the hotel's ornithologist, Melvin Arevalo.

Even though I already went birding this morning, I'm desperate to see Belize's scarlet macaws, which spend November through March in a Maya village called Red Bank, close to Placencia. Arevalo and I crawl over a pockmarked dirt road to a jungle trail that leads to a lookout where visitors can see them. It's obviously called **Scarlet Macaw Paradise** for a reason: We make it just halfway through the 15-minute hike before encountering at least 30 of the jaunty parrots screeching and playing just above us, flashes of ruby in the emerald canopy. From the

lookout, I watch as pairs of them soar majestically across the valley.

The sun is just beginning its dazzling descent as I return to Placencia, joining Turtle Inn general manager

Martin Krediet and a few hotel guests on Coppola's restored 1951 wooden Chris-Craft boat, *La Dolce Vita*, for a tour of the lagoon. I sip a glass of Sofia rosé, a wine created as a tribute to Coppola's talented daughter, as we skip across the calm, glassy seawater. We tie off on a wooden dock across from the village's southernmost point and grab seats at the bar of the newly opened **Placencia Yacht Club**, ideally situated to observe the last rays of the day.

That familiar Belizean magic, a relaxing detachment from the past and future that's

*"At least 30 of the jaunty parrots screech and play above us, flashes of ruby in the emerald canopy."*

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From right: Turtle Inn's La Dolce Vita; fresh-caught fish set to be prepared at one of Turtle Inn's restaurants



*"I sip a glass of Sofia rosé as we skip across the calm, glassy seawater."*

so hard to hold onto back home, is all-encompassing. The sunshine, wildlife, and good vibes of the past few days have brought out the best in me. Between shared stories and mirthful jokes, we clink

our bottles of Belikin beer together, toasting to another beautiful day. As the sun sets over the Caribbean, we agree that the boat that carried us here is aptly named: What a sweet life it is.

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#### WHERE TO STAY

##### Matachica Resort & Spa

Considered one of Central America's top resorts, Matachica is located five miles north of San Pedro, which gives it a secluded feeling without sacrificing access to town. Spacious, thoughtfully decorated thatch-roofed casitas fan out around the open-air restaurant, Mambo, which deliciously blends Caribbean and Italian flavors. From \$225, [matachica.com](http://matachica.com)

##### San Ignacio Resort Hotel

Perfectly situated to take advantage of Belize's most adventurous activities, the family-owned San Ignacio Resort Hotel offers elegant luxury with modern rooms and high-end service. A pool, jungle trails, and tennis courts are just a few of the amenities that keep guests entertained after they return from their outdoor excursions. From \$225, [sanignaciobelize.com](http://sanignaciobelize.com)

##### Turtle Inn

Francis Ford Coppola's seaside property packages the Oscar-winning director's creativity in a luxurious hotel experience. Guests can choose from individual thatched cabanas or a cottage on the resort's private island, Coral Caye. A range of cuisines are available at the property's various bars and restaurants, but the pizzas at the main eatery, Mare, are a must. From \$549, [thefamilycoppolahideaways.com](http://thefamilycoppolahideaways.com)

##### Grand Caribe Belize

The 800 feet of beachfront and six pools ensure that you won't want to leave this Ambergris Caye resort. Families especially will love the spacious condos, which range in size from one to four bedrooms and are equipped with full kitchens. There's a grocery store on-site if you want to cook, but don't miss dinner at Rain, the island's only rooftop restaurant. (Babysitting services are available.) From \$209, [grandcaribebelize.com](http://grandcaribebelize.com)



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