

Explore Belize

Hike through the western jungle, snorkel pristine Caribbean cays, and explore Mayan ruins and artifacts above and below ground.

Belize is only slightly larger than Massachusetts, but its varied terrain—from jungle to pine forest to tropical cays (pronounced ‘keys’)—and its mix of cultures makes it feel far larger. It has protected an amazing 40% of its land—even more than Costa Rica. Belize’s mix of Caribbean, British, African, and Latino culture is unmatched in Latin America.

Join us on this adventure exploring the wonders and hidden treasures of Belize. From hiking through lowland rainforest, exploring the ruins of ancient Mayan civilizations and the artifacts they left behind in the region’s caves, and snorkeling the Great Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, this trip offers adventure for everyone. Our fast-paced itinerary takes us from the remote western border with Guatemala to the remote cays at the tip of the world’s 2nd longest barrier reef. Join local guides and naturalists as they share their knowledge of this fascinating country.

This trip is offered as a private trip in which your group (minimum two people) will be met at the airport in Belize City and transported to the two lodges that will serve as your bases: Black Rock Lodge in the Cayo District of western Belize, and Cotton Tree Lodge near Punta Gorda in southern Belize. On the day that you transfer between the two lodges you will be driven to the airport in Belize City to board your flight, and picked up in Punta Gorda when you get off the flight from Belize City to Punta Gorda. All transfers, and the domestic flight, are included in the itinerary and trip price. Because this is a private trip, you can adjust activities; the ones explained in this itinerary are our suggestions.

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Day 1: Arrive in Belize City and transfer to Black Rock Lodge in the Maya Mountains

You will be greeted upon your arrival at Philip Goldson International Airport and whisked away to western Belize and Black Rock Lodge, located near the Mountain Pine Ridge Nature Reserve. The region's mixture of granite and limestone karst geology has created extensive waterfalls and cave systems. Black Rock Lodge is on the Macal River, providing plenty of swimming and tubing opportunities. There are also extensive nature trails that you can enjoy over the next two days. Upon arrival at the lodge you'll have dinner and get oriented to the lodge and tropical jungle. If you arrive early in the afternoon there are plenty of trails to enjoy on your own, as well as other options.

- Transfer from Belize City to Black Rock Lodge (2.5 hours)
- Dinner and overnight at Black Rock Lodge (www.blackrocklodge.com)

Day 2: Hike or horseback ride to Flour Camp Cave and Vaca Falls

For your first full day in Belize begins with a guided horseback ride or guided hike to Flour Camp Cave. Flour Camp Cave is actually a number of caves with several entrances and exits and is filled with Mayan artifacts and beautiful stalagmites (the ones that rise from the cave floor) and stalactites (the ones that drop from the cave ceiling). Discover caverns, chambers, and Maya pottery. After the tour of the Cave, either hike or ride to a fascinating unexcavated Mayan Temple and explore rainforest-covered ruins.

After the caves, you may choose to spend some time at Vaca Falls and the surrounding series of cascades on the Macal River. With deep pools, and huge granite rocks to sunbathe on, Vaca Falls is a great place to spend three or four hours exploring and relaxing in complete solace. The falls and pools are located about 1.5 miles upstream from the Lodge.

Depending on whether you enjoy both the caves and the pools, or just one of them, you may be back at the lodge by mid-afternoon. You'll have the opportunity to tube in the river if the water level allows, leaving you time to relax, enjoy your own personal yoga practice in the recently constructed yoga palapa, and have a drink on the open air dining area high above the river before dinner.

- Breakfast at Black Rock Lodge
- Dinner and overnight at Black Rock Lodge (www.blackrocklodge.com)

Day 3: Belize's premier cave adventure: Actun Tunichil Muknal

This morning after an optional birding walk (no additional cost) or swim and breakfast, you'll leave around 7:30 am for the hour and a quarter drive to another of our favorite caves in Belize, with even more impressive Mayan artifacts. Yesterday you went into a dry cave and then enjoyed the river; today you'll combine the two and go into a cave with a river running through it. After the drive you'll have about a 45 minute hike on a jungle trail, crossing three rivers along the way (water will be up to your waists). When you reach the outside of the cave you'll leave your day packs, and stop for a snack while you put on



your helmets and head lamps. To enter the cave you'll need to swim for a short distance, about 25 feet— probably the only time where you'll need to swim (there may be very short sections above shoulder level later on). Once you cross the river you'll get out on the rocks on the other side, inside the cave.

From here you'll walk through the river for the first half of the cave, seeing Mayan pottery along the sides. The river will range from shin-deep to neck-deep, although most of the time it will be waist-deep or lower. You'll be instructed where you can touch the cave walls and where you can't; the cave is very well protected and cared for by the Belizean government and your guides.

About an hour into the cave you'll climb out of the water and into a dry passage. You'll change from river shoes to socks (no shoes) and proceed for the next 45 minutes through large, dry chambers with scattered pots, bones, and skulls. Your guides will explain the ways in which the Mayans used the cave for ceremonial purposes, and to express their beliefs and culture.

After making your way back out of the cave you'll stop for our box lunch outside the cave, walk the 45 minutes back to your van, and drive back to the lodge for dinner and a well deserved night's rest.

- Early morning birdwalk (if you want to get up at 5 am)
- Breakfast at the lodge
- Drive to the trailhead (1 ¼ hours)
- Hike to the cave (45 minutes, flat)
- Cave tour (2-3 hours)
- Picnic lunch outside the cave or at the trailhead
- Dinner at the lodge
- Overnight at Black Rock Lodge (www.blackrocklodge.com)
- Clothes and equipment for the day: Shoes for hiking a dirt and possibly muddy but flat trail, including areas with rocks and roots. For inside the cave, shoes or closed-toe sandals for wading through the water, socks for the dry portion of the cave; also sunscreen, water, bug spray. Headlamps, tubes, helmets, and pfd's are provided.

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Additional optional activities and excursions from Black Rock Lodge

These may replace activities described during the days above, or may be added as additional days. The trip price may change if these activities are substituted for the ones described, especially for long tours such as visiting Tikal, Yaxha, or Caracol.

Half-day trips at or near Black Rock Lodge

☞ Canoeing the Macal River

The half-day trip meanders along 6 miles of the Macal River through moderate rapids and verdant rainforest. Guests often see large green female iguanas and even bigger orange male iguanas, or "garobos," as well as toucans, king fishers, and hummingbirds, and other birds. Guests dock at Chaa Creek Lodge and can choose to visit the Blue Morpho Butterfly Center and Natural History Museum. We then pick up the guests and drive them back to Black Rock Lodge. Does not include lunch nor entry fees to Butterfly and Natural History Museums.

☞ Mountain biking

Explore miles of jungle trails and dirt roads on Cannondale mountain bikes. Take a bathing suit and stop for a swim along the way.

☞ Guided Night Hike

Many of Belize's animals are nocturnal. Although there can be no guarantee that certain wildlife will appear for each hike, typically guests see tarantulas, kinkajous, snakes, owls, tyras, quatumundis and more. 2-3 hours.

☞ Xunatunich Maya Site

From Black Rock Lodge travel to the Mayan village of San Jose Succotz located on the banks of the Mopan River. Board a small hand-cranked pontoon ferry to cross the Mopan river to Xunatunich (shoo-nan-too-nitch) which means *Maiden of the Rock*. Explore the Mayan Site together with our experienced and knowledgeable guide. Stops at the Belize Botanical Gardens and the ruins of Cahal Pech (ka-hall pet-ch) can be added as well.

Day-long trips. These require several hours of driving to reach.

☞ Tikal Day Tour

You will drive across the Belize-Guatemala border to the largest Mayan Site in Guatemala and the surrounding region. Discovered in 1848, Tikal underwent minor excavations beginning in 1877. Today, extensive excavations make it possible for guests to imagine what the majestic city was like during its peak period from 550AD to 900AD. Truly one of the wonders of the world, Tikal is a special experience which guests will never forget. Due to the location of Tikal, only certified Guatemalan tour guides are authorized to conduct tours of the Tikal site.

☞ Yaxhá Day Tour

Rapidly gaining in popularity and now second behind Tikal as the most popular archaeological site in the region, Yaxhá is situated on the shores of the beautiful Yaxhá lagoon, home of crocodiles, and halfway between Flores and the Belize-Guatemalan

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Border. Yaxhá, which translates to Blue Green Water, sits between two beautiful lakes. The climb up many of its Temples yields beautiful views of both lakes and the Rio Azul River that feeds them. What makes Yaxhá so interesting is, that unlike Tikal, restoration of this site is still ongoing. As a visitor, being able to see the archeologists work and to talk with them about the site gives one a greater appreciation of the accomplishments of the ancient Maya. After an afternoon of exploring the ruins, walk down to nearby Lake Yaxhá for a swim.

Caracol Maya Ruin and Mountain Pine Ridge

Journey through mountains, pine forest, across the Guacamallo (gua-ka-maa-yo) River and into dense jungle. Caracol is the largest Mayan ruin in Belize and believed to be one of the largest in Central America. Discovered in the 1930's by a log hunter, it was not explored until the 1950's when Linton Satherwaite of the University of Pennsylvania began to uncover its splendor. Because it was very difficult to access, excavations were delayed until 1985, when Drs. Arlen and Diane Chase of Central Florida University took on the challenging task. At over 145 feet high, Caana (sky palace) towers above the rainforest. Caracol is famous for conquering the megalopolis Tikal when Tikal was at its peak. After exploring the main area of Caracol, enjoy your pack lunch and then drive to the Rio Frío (cold river) Cave. Hike through the cave alongside the Rio Frío River. Then drive to the Rio On pools and cascades where guests can swim and cool off.

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Day 4: Transfer to Cotton Tree Lodge near Punta Gorda in the Toledo District

After breakfast you will transfer from the mountains in western Belize to your lodge near the coast. You'll first have a 2.5 hour drive back to the airport in Belize City, then a short flight (less than an hour) to Punta Gorda in southern Belize, and then a short 30-minute drive to Cotton Tree Lodge.

There are several flights that you can take from Belize City to Punta Gorda, which allows guests to enjoy a leisurely morning at Black Rock Lodge, perhaps including a birding walk, before leaving the lodge around 8:30 or 9 for a mid-day flight. This will give you some time to enjoy Cotton Tree Lodge in the afternoon, or perhaps some time in the town of Punta Gorda. Alternatively, guests may choose to take an earlier or a later flight, to have time for a longer activity before or after the flight. Activities at Cotton Tree include visiting the town of Punta Gorda for lunch, horseback riding, swimming in the river, or a tortilla making workshop.

- Breakfast at Black Rock Lodge
- Ground transfer from Black Rock to the airport in Belize City (2.5 hours)
- Flight from Belize City to Punta Gorda (less than one hour)
- Ground transfer to Cotton Tree Lodge (30 minutes)
- Optional morning and/or activities at either of the lodges
- Dinner and overnight at Cotton Tree Lodge

Day 5: Snorkel the pristine cayes of the Port Honduras Marine Reserve

You've arrived close to the blue-green waters of the Caribbean, and today is your day to enjoy it with a day of snorkeling. After breakfast you'll meet at the lodge's dock on the Moho River, where you will board a small boat and head out to the Port Honduras Marine Reserve. The trip down the river is about 11 miles through jungle and along small farms where you'll see birds and other wildlife, after which you'll reach the open ocean (although within the reef, so it won't be too rough). Your guides will choose your snorkeling locations, but you are likely to make two snorkeling stops, perhaps at two of the Snake Cayes. You may also stop for a visit to the Marine Reserve headquarters to meet some of the rangers and learn about their efforts to protect the reef and cayes. At one of the stops you'll enjoy a picnic lunch on a beach, and around mid-afternoon you'll climb back into our boat for the trip back to the lodge.

- Breakfast at Cotton Tree Lodge
- Boat ride down the Moho River to the Caribbean
- Snorkel the Great Mesoamerican Barrier Reef
- Dinner and overnight at Cotton Tree Lodge (www.cottontreelodge.com)
- Clothes and equipment for the day: swimsuit, towel, sunscreen, and hat. Snorkeling mask, snorkel, and fins are provided.

Days 6: Explore Mayan ruins and villages

On your final full day in Belize you'll enjoy a day of exploring Mayan ruins, enjoying local Belizean food, and either hiking along a river, swimming into a cave, or visiting a Mayan

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village. The Mayan ruins of Lubaantun are situated above a tributary to the Columbia River, near the village of San Pedro Columbia. Leaving from Punta Gorda, you'll head west along the Southern Highway for about 45 minutes.

Lubaantun is the largest Mayan ceremonial center in Southern Belize, built in the Late Classic Period around 700-900 AD, and is well known for its unusual style of construction. It consists of 11 structures, grouped around five main plazas, all built with limestone blocks. While exploring Mayan ruins we often hear the question, "Where did the Mayans go?" The answer is clear as you drive through present-day Mayan villages in this isolated area of Belize. You may stop in these villages along the way either before or after your visit to the ruins. After lunch in a local restaurant you'll spend the afternoon in a Mayan village, or go for a hike in the lush jungle along Blue Creek. After walking for about 45 minutes you'll have the option to don head lamps and swim into Blue Creek Cave. How far you'll be able to go into the cave depends on the water level—we can't guarantee how far you'll go, but we're sure you'll enjoy the adventure!

- Tour of Mayan ruins of Lubaantun
- Hiking along a jungle river
- Optional swim into Blue Creek Cave
- Dinner and overnight at Cotton Tree Lodge (www.cottontreelodge.com)

Day 7: Transfer to Belize City

You will depart Cotton Tree Lodge for the half hour ride to the airstrip in Punta Gorda, where you'll catch your hour-long flight to Belize City International Airport. Guests with afternoon flights will be able to enjoy the lodge before leaving for the Punta Gorda airport in the early afternoon. Guests should not book their international flight home before noon on the final day of the trip, to give enough time for the flight back to Belize City.

Additional optional activities and excursions from Cotton Tree Lodge

These may replace activities described during the days above, or may be added as additional days. The trip price may change if these activities are substituted for the ones described.

✂ **Nim Li Punit Mayan Ruins--** The Maya Ruins of Nim Li Punit are situated on a beautiful hilltop site near the village of Indian Creek, affording views of Belize, Guatemala, and the Caribbean. This site was only fairly recently discovered by oil prospectors in 1976, and has been well cleared and excavated to offer tourists beautiful grounds with a small, informative visitor's center.

✂ **Pusilha Mayan Ruins--**These remote Mayan ruins are just a few miles from the Guatemalan border, and archaeologists believe they were occupied during the Classic period from 150 to 1000 AD. The ruins were originally found in the 1920s, partially excavated, and then abandoned. The site features several stelae in a main plaza, and an unusual stone bridge, but most of the mounds and artifacts are still buried under corn fields. A strenuous hike is required to reach these ruins, and getting to Pusil Ha is part of the adventure. This trip is only recommended for more physically active guests.

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🌀 **Rosewood Carving in Crique Sarco**--Forty miles from Punta Gorda, Crique Sarco is one of the more remote villages of the region. Its homes are scattered along the Temash River and dugout dories are still used to reach certain parts of the village, though a footbridge over the river now makes things more accessible. Most of the residents here are Kekchi Mayan subsistence farmers, though some also raise cattle, rice and cacao for sale. Crique Sarco has also become known for its beautiful rosewood carvings, which are sold in the market in Punta Gorda and in local gift shops. Rosewood is a dark tropical hardwood, which you may see utilized in many of the buildings around Cotton Tree Lodge. It is extremely durable as well as beautiful, but is becoming harder to find. On this tour, you will visit the workshop of a Crique Sarco rosewood carver. He will show you how he harvests his wood (sustainably whenever possible, from tree stumps and storm-felled trees), uses a variety of hand tools to shape his work, and finally finishes and polishes each item for market.

🌀 **Chocolate Tours**—There are a number of different chocolate activities available: Cacao farm tours to San Felipe village and San Pedro Columbia village are regular favorites with our guests. See how cacao is grown, learn to process chocolate, and enjoy lunch with a Mayan family in their home.

Cotton Tree Lodge is associated with a Fair Trade, organic chocolate company, Cotton Tree Chocolate, and tours of the Cotton Tree Chocolate factory in Punta Gorda are offered frequently. Those who are truly interested in chocolate might consider joining one of our Chocolate Weeks in February or May. Participants visit cacao farms, meet with the TCGA, participate in chocolate making workshops, and leave with chocolate bars they made themselves.

The Toledo Cacao Festival in May is an annual celebration of chocolate in the Toledo District, as well as a showcase for the music, food, and art of the Mayan, Garifuna, East Indian, and Creole cultures of the region.

🌀 **Medicinal Plants near Cotton Tree Lodge**

Medicinal plants still flourish in the old growth rainforests around Cotton Tree Lodge, and some are growing in the gardens between the cabanas and Main Lodge. As you circle the boardwalk, you may see hand-painted signs pointing to the gumbo limbo tree (the bark is good for skin irritations) or cowsfoot (the leaf makes a tea good for indigestion), among others. Santiago Chub, a knowledgeable healer from Santa Anna village, regularly offers medicinal plant walks to our guests. Some tours stay on the property and trek into the dense jungle surrounding Cotton Tree. Other trips head to Santiago's home, where he has cut a medicinal plant trail into the hills behind his house and transplanted certain species to show you. Walks can last from 30 minutes up to an hour, depending on the interest of guests.

The medicinal plant walk at Santiago's home may be reached by horseback, horse-drawn buggy, or bicycle, or guests may arrange to kayak back to Cotton Tree from Santa Anna village.

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About Explore Belize lodging

We use two lodges on our Explore Belize trip:

- [Black Rock Lodge](#) is a perfect escape for eco-tourists and nature lovers. The lodge is located in the hilly western part of Belize about six miles down a rough dirt road, about a 40 minute drive from the main town in the area, San Ignacio. It has extensive trails on its property for hiking or horseback riding, and is situated along the Macal River—perfect for a quick swim! The lodge has separate cabins and an open-air central dining area with a view over the river below and to the cliffs high above. Its grounds are a mix of jungle and farm fields in which the lodge grows much of the food served in its restaurant.
- [Cotton Tree Lodge](#) is also in a remote area of jungle, fields, and Mayan villages, on a dirt road about a half hour outside Punta Gorda, the largest town in the southern end of Belize (but still with fewer than 10,000 residents). Cotton Tree is on the Mojo River, and has eleven cabins around a central thatch-roofed dining area. Because the area is so wet, the cabins are connected by elevated wooden walkways.

What's included?

Almost everything, so it's easier to list what's not included:

- Personal expenses such as telephone bills, laundry expenses, bottled water and alcoholic beverages
- Airport departure taxes of \$35.50 USD for your return flight (this is sometimes included in the price of your airline ticket and may not need to be paid separately)
- Insurance against illness, accident, and/or theft
- Standard clothes for the activities listed (e.g., hiking boots; we provide the specialty items necessary for activities such as biking and kayaking)
- Any additional costs incurred due to circumstances beyond our control, such as delayed flights

And here is a list of what is included:

- Six nights accommodations as listed above, double occupancy with a single supplement optional
- All meals starting with dinner on the first night and ending with breakfast on the last day
- English-speaking tour guides for all activities throughout the trip
- All in-country transportation, including two domestic flights, and ground transfers to and from the airport, between lodges, and to activities
- All excursions and activities included above, including gear and local expert guides
- A detailed pre-trip departure packet with packing suggestions, background reading, and other trip-specific information

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Tour Details

Trip length

7 days/6 nights

Cost

All-inclusive pricing: \$2,198

Group size

This is run as a private trip with a minimum of 2 people.

Gateway city meeting time and place

Belize City - Philip Goldson International Airport. Please plan to arrive no later than 3pm on the arrival date.

You will be greeted as you leave customs and immigration. Check-in for international flights to and from Belize is usually three hours before departure. Valuable items such as camera equipment and essentials such as prescription medications should always be hand carried on all flights to avoid loss or damage. Checked luggage should be properly labeled.

Gateway city transfer

Airport transfers on the first and last days of the tour are included in trip costs.

Trip conclusion

Philip Goldson International Airport. We will be flying into Belize City from Punta Gorda that morning, and your international return flight should not be scheduled until noon or later.

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The Next Step...

How do I join this trip?

Call Aventouras at 800-930-2846 and a trip consultant will reserve your space(s) or register online at www.aventouras.com.

Special requests

If you have any special dietary needs or any special request that will make your trip more enjoyable, please be sure to notify your trip consultant or travel agent upon booking.

Leave the rest to us...

Before you go, we will send you a pre-departure package, including your reservation payment receipt and confirmation, detailed information about the area, a daily trip itinerary, a packing list, suggestions for preparing for your trip, a guest questionnaire, information on pre/post trip arrangements, and a liability release agreement.

Unsurpassed value

We offer the highest quality trips at the best value period. If you find a trip of equal quality that matches our itinerary and inclusions at a lower fare within 30 days of booking with us, we'll refund the difference. A simple guarantee that assures you the best trip at the best fare!

Travel protection

To make your trip with Aventouras even more carefree, we strongly recommend the purchase of a travel insurance plan. Offering comprehensive coverage and peace of mind, travel insurance is designed to protect you in case of trip cancellation for medical reasons, travel delays, medical expenses, accidental death, lost baggage and medical evacuation. We're happy to provide information about travel insurance coverage to you, so please contact us at 800-930-2846.

How do I book airfare for this trip?

Book online, call your travel agent or call us at 800-930-2846 for assistance and suggestions. We are familiar with most flight options from the U.S. and can give you suggestions as well as an idea of usual fares. Aventouras partner Exito Travel (www.exitotravel.com) are experts in finding and arranging flights to Belize and other Latin American destinations; we can have Exito arrange your flight if you wish. We can also help you with pre- and post-trip lodging ideas if you wish to arrive early or stay longer.

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General Information, Questions & Answers

What weather conditions can I expect?

We can expect generally warm temperatures with day time highs in the mid 80s to low 90s. Rain showers are possible any day, even in the dry season.

Tour operator

Aventouras operates this adventure through partnerships with Black Rock and Cotton Tree Lodges.

Passport and visa information

A US passport valid 90 days beyond your anticipated arrival date in Belize and a tourist card (available upon arrival) is required. Currently no visas or immunization certificates are required, but we suggest consulting your physician, a travel health clinic, or the travel website of the Centers for Disease Control for information on health issues in Belize. Those with foreign passports should contact the Embassy of Belize for details.

We're always improving!

This itinerary details this trip's planned activities, routes, accommodations, departure and conclusion times. However, we're constantly seeking new opportunities to enhance this program and your experience. Our actual activities and sites may vary due to season, special events, or weather. Therefore, we reserve the right to alter the itinerary since unforeseen circumstances that mandate change may arise. Naturally, we will keep you up-to-date on any changes that may affect your arrival or departure times.

Cancellation policy

If you must cancel your trip, you're required to notify us in writing. We will calculate your refund on the day we receive your written cancellation. For all cancellations, we will refund you the cost of your trip less the following per person charges:

- 121 or more days before trip departure: The deposit less \$350 is refundable.
- 91-120 days before trip departure: None of the deposit is refunded.
- 61-90 days before trip departure: 50% of the trip payment is refunded.
- 0-60 days before trip departure: No refund is given.

Exceptions to these policies cannot be made for any reason, including weather or personal emergencies. We recommend that you purchase travel insurance for your trip. We will provide you with information about travel insurance upon registration for the trip.

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