

What can you tell me about shore excursions from cruise ships to Belize?

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Where You're Docked

All ships anchor in Belize City harbor and passengers are whizzed from ship to shore via speedy Belizean tenders; takes around 20 minutes to tender ashore. All passengers disembark at docks in Belize's Tourism Village.

What's Nearby

The Tourism Village is the city's main shopping area with a variety of stores, shops and restaurants. The city's downtown area and the Marine Terminal are about five minutes away on foot, and there's always a line of taxis waiting adjacent to the Tourism Village.

In a Nutshell

Belize City is made up of many wooden buildings and exudes some colonial charm, but the downtown area also has many seedy neighborhoods, and tourists should beware of walking around the city after dark. For cruise passengers, Belize City is primarily a jumping off point for tours and excursions to its many natural and historical attractions.

Getting Around

Taxis are readily available at the Tourism Village as well as in the city and at hotels. Taxis do not have meters and although most drivers charge a standard fare, make sure you determine the fare before getting in so as to avoid being burned upon arriving at your destination. There are also water taxis and ferries that depart from the Marine Terminal to the outlying cayes, including the larger resort cayes such as Caye Caulker and Ambergris Caye. A trip from Belize City to San Pedro, the largest town on Ambergris Caye, takes around 80 minutes and costs \$45 roundtrip.

Do It Yourself Driving: It's also possible to rent a car although this is not recommended due to the poor condition of many roads. Rental agencies in Belize City include Safari/Hertz(011-501- 2-235395) and AvisBelize(800-331-1084) have downtown and airport locations and there are other agencies with offices at the Tourism Village.

Flights: Tropic Air; 800-422-3435 (www.tropicair.com) and Maya Island Air; 800-225-6732 (www.mayaislandair.com) both offer a regular schedule of flights from Belize City to Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker. Flights to San Pedro on Ambergris Caye leave approximately every 90 minutes until 5 p.m. and take just 20 minutes; cost is \$94 roundtrip. These are indeed "very small" planes with some carrying a maximum of five passengers and the pilot.

Shore Excursions

Best nature lover/history buff combo: An ideal tour for those who want to view creatures in the wild and also explore Mayan ruins. Travel first up Belize's Wallace River (also known as the Olde Belize River),

inhabited by a host of creatures including manatees, crocodiles, iguanas and many species of tropical birds. The second half of the tour is spent at Altun Ha, one of the most important Mayan sites in the country. Duration: 6 hours; Price: \$65

Best soft adventurer excursion: Tubing along Belize's Sibun River in a flotation tube provides a unique look at limestone caves formed before the dawn of mankind. Duration: 6-7 hours; Price:\$85

Best for snorkelers: Travel in a snorkel boat to Goff's Caye, a tiny caye 12 miles offshore where there is abundant reef life and magnificent coral formations. Here it's possible to snorkel either from the beautiful beach or directly off the snorkel boat. Duration: 4 hours; Price: \$55

Best "interactive" shark excursion: Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get up close and personal with some of Belize's most "people-friendly" underwater creatures. Speedboats transport passengers directly from the ship to area of coral reef known as "shark ray alley" where they can snorkel amidst nurse sharks and stingrays; excursion also includes lunch s in San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. Duration: 7 hours; Price: \$70

Don't Miss

Diving and Snorkeling: Number one on the hit parade of favorite outdoor activities due to the astounding sites along the barrier reef. Some of the best dive sites lie just off Ambergris Caye (see Getting There above). Charter operators listed on the Belize Tourism's Web site also offer day trips that include transportation. However you get to Ambergris Caye, head for the main town of San Pedro, where many of the dive operators are clustered. A favorite snorkeling area is known as "Shark Ray Alley" (one hour by speedboat from San Pedro) where it's possible to get "up close and personal" (petting is permitted) with nurse sharks and sting rays. Hol Chan Marine Reserve is a five square mile underground water park.

Mayan Heritage: Among the best of Belize's Mayan sites is Altun Ha, a heavily excavated site that is a convenient day trip out of the city. Once a major trading and ceremonial center, it consists of several impressive temples and tombs highlighted by the Temple of the Masonry Altars. Another important site is Xunantunich, located near the Guatemalan border that can only be reached by crossing the Mopan River on a hand-cranked ferry. Situated here are six major plazas ringed by more than 25 temples and palaces; largest of the remaining temples is Il Castillo which is worth climbing for the spectacular panoramic view one gets from the .

Wildlife Lovers: Belize City's three major sites containing wild creatures are all located fairly close together. Those who would rather not venture very far from the city can check out the Belize City Zoo and Tropical Center (Western Highway mile marker 29, open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily). A little farther out is the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (Western Highway mile marker 30.8) and the Community Baboon Sanctuary (across the street), which is home to a substantial number of black howler monkeys.

Birders: Belize is a birder's delight as it is home to more than 500 different species from toucans to egrets. Two highly recommended ways to encounter birdlife is on a guided boat trip to the Bird Caye Bird Sanctuary and/or a visit to the aforementioned Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary.

Been There, Done That

For the ultimate in R&R at the beach, head to Ambergris Caye or Caye Caulker, either are a 45 minute ferry ride from the Marine Terminal. Just a few miles long and one mile wide, both islands are ideal for sun worshipping on one of their gorgeous beaches. There are no cars here so everyone rides around either

in golf carts or on bicycles which can be rented by the hour or for the day. Divers can hop boats that go out to the barrier reef just 10 minutes away.

Explore Belize's caves. In ancient times, the Mayans believed that caves were the "underworld" and were revered as sacred places. Options for exploring the network of caves include tubing or by kayak or canoe. Some of the tubing is at a place known as "Jungle Paw," where the float through a series of caves in an inner tube lasts about two hours.

Best Souvenir

The best buys are wooden and slate carvings. The National Handicrafts Sales Centre in Belize City sells an assortment of locally produced mahogany bowls and various carvings and artwork.

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