

A photograph of a resort building with orange walls and a swimming pool. In the foreground, there are several wooden lounge chairs on a wooden deck. The building has multiple windows and a balcony with a thatched roof. The text "BELIZE'S BEST HOTELS & RESTAURANTS" is overlaid in large white letters.

BELIZE'S BEST HOTELS & RESTAURANTS

**150+ Hotels Inspected and Rated!
75+ Restaurants Reviewed!**

LAN SLUDER

Belize's Best Hotels & Restaurants, by Lan Sluder

Published as an eBook by Equator Publications, Asheville, NC

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Maps by Robert O'Hair, New Orleans, LA

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Rates and prices in this guide were checked for accuracy at time of publication, but travel information changes constantly. Please use your good common sense, check with hotels and restaurants directly on current rates and offerings and do not rely solely on this or any other guidebook.

Ratings and reviews are the opinion of the author. If you find any errors, or disagree with any rating or review, or want to suggest an addition, please contact Lan Sluder at BZEFIRST@aol.com or lan@lansluder.com.

Discover Belize's Best Hotels and Restaurants

Now you can confidently make decisions about the best places to stay and eat in Belize. This new eBook, *Belize's Best Hotels & Restaurants*, rates and reviews more than 150 of the best hotels, lodges, inns, resorts and guesthouses in Belize. It also reviews more than 75 of the country's best restaurants.



Lan Sluder

Award-winning travel writer Lan Sluder – the author of more than half a dozen books on Belize including *Fodor's Belize 2008* and *Living Abroad in Belize* — has been banging around Belize since 1991. Lan has stayed in most of these hotels, often on several occasions, and has personally dined at nearly all of the restaurants in this book. He has inspected and rated these lodging and dining choices.

Each hotel gets a specific star rating – from one to five stars. Every property is reviewed in detail, with room rates for high and low seasons clearly shown.

Whether you're going to San Pedro, Caye Caulker, Placencia, Cayo, Corozal, Hopkins, Punta Gorda or anywhere else in Belize, no longer will you worry about booking a dump or an overpriced hotel based on a misleading web site or an ill-informed recommendation.. You'll get unbiased information, based on first-hand experience.

This easy-to-use guidebook focuses specifically on accommodations and restaurants. You don't have to wade through pages and pages to find the lodging and dining information you need.

Use this handy *Belize's Best Hotels & Restaurants* to plan and book your Belize vacation with complete confidence.

Belize's Best Hotels & Restaurants

Lan Sluder

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The Best of the Best

Here are our picks for Belize's best accommodations and dining establishments, in several categories. Remember, your mileage may vary.

Belize's Best Jungle Lodges

Blancaneaux Lodge, Mountain Pine Ridge
Chan Chich Lodge, Gallon Jug, Orange Walk District
duPlooy's Lodge, Cayo
Hidden Valley Inn, Mountain Pine Ridge
Lamanai Outpost Lodge, Indian Church
The Lodge at Big Falls, Toledo
The Lodge at Chaa Creek, Cayo

Belize's Best Lodges for Not a Ton of Money

Cohune Palms, Bullet Tree, Cayo
Crystal Paradise, Cayo
Macal River Jungle Camp, Cayo
Hickatee Cottages Lodge, Punta Gorda
Sun Creek Lodge, Toledo

Belize's Other Notable Jungle Lodges

Black Rock Lodge, Cayo
Caves Branch Adventure Camp, Belmopan
Ek'tun Lodge, Cayo
Five Sisters Lodge, Mountain Pine Ridge
Jaguar Paw, Belmopan
Machaca Hill Lodge, Punta Gorda
Pook's Hill Lodge, Belmopan

Belize's Best Deluxe Beach Resorts

Caye Chapel Island Resort, Caye Chapel
Cayo Espanto, off Ambergris Caye

Hamanasi, Hopkins
Inn at Robert's Grove, Placencia
Turtle Inn, Placencia
Turneffe Island Lodge, Turneffe Atoll
Victoria House, Ambergris Caye

Belize's Best Barefoot Beach Hotels

Barnacle Bill's, Maya Beach (Placencia)
Beaches and Dreams, Hopkins
Maya Beach Hotel, Maya Beach (Placencia)
Pelican's Pouch (Pelican Beach), South Water Caye
Tradewinds, Placencia

Belize's Best Value-Priced Beach Resorts

Banana Beach, Ambergris Caye
Corona del Mar, Ambergris Caye
Mata Rocks, Ambergris Caye
The Tides, Ambergris Caye
San Pedro Holiday Hotel, Ambergris Caye
Seaside Cabañas, Caye Caulker
Westwind, Placencia

Belize's Most Romantic Hotels

Blancaneaux Lodge, Mountain Pine Ridge
Mata Chica, North Ambergris Caye
Maruba Spa, Belize District
Portofino, North Ambergris Caye
Turtle Inn, Placencia
Victoria House, Ambergris Caye

Belize's Best All-Inclusives

Cotton Tree Lodge, Punta Gorda
Kanantik, Hopkins
Mopan River Resort, Benque Viejo del Carmen

Belize's Best Condotels

Belizean Dreams, Hopkins
Belizean Shores, North Ambergris Caye
Blue Island Reef Resort, North Ambergris Caye
Chabil Mar Villas, Placencia
Grand Colony, Ambergris Caye
The Palms, Ambergris Caye
The Phoenix, Ambergris Caye
Xanadu, Ambergris Caye

Belize's Best Most-for-Your-Money Lodging

Cahal Pech Village, Cayo
Casa Blanca Guest House, San Ignacio
Clarissa Falls, Cayo
Copa Banana, Corozal Town
Hotel de la Fuente, Orange Walk Town
Jungle Jeanie's, Hopkins
Lydia's Guest House, Placencia
Martha's Guest House, San Ignacio
Rubie's, San Pedro
Tipple Tree Beya, Hopkins
Tobacco Caye Paradise, Tobacco Caye
Tree Tops, Caye Caulker
The Trek Stop, Cayo
Yim Saan, Belmopan

Belize's Best Small Inns

Casa Blanca by the Sea, Consejo
Coral House Inn, Punta Gorda
Great House, Belize City
Iguana Reef Inn, Caye Caulker
Seaside Cabanas, Caye Caulker

Belize's Best Deluxe Beach Houses

Azul Resort, North Ambergris Caye
La Perla del Caribe, North Ambergris Caye
Seascape Villas, North Ambergris Caye
Caye Chapel Island Resort (villas), Caye Chapel
Cayo Espanto, near Ambergris Caye

Belize's Best Deluxe Inland Accommodations

Blancaneaux Lodge, Mountain Pine Ridge
Ka'ana Boutique Resort & Spa, Cayo
The Lodge at Chaa Creek, Cayo

Belize's Best B&Bs

Changes in Latitudes, Ambergris Caye
D'Nest Inn, Belize City
Lazy Iguana B&B, Caye Caulker

Belize's Best-Run Hotels

Banana Beach, Ambergris Caye
Inn at Robert's Grove, Placencia
Lodge at Chaa Creek, Cayo
Ramon's Village, Ambergris Caye

Belize's Best Fishing Lodges

El Pescador, North Ambergris Caye
Machaca Hill Lodge, Punta Gorda
Turneffe Flats, Turneffe Atoll

Belize's Best Restaurants

Blue Water Grill, Ambergris Caye
The Bistro at Maya Beach Hotel, Maya Beach (Placencia)
Harbour View, Belize City
Rendezvous, North Ambergris Caye
Rojo Lounge, North Ambergris Caye
Palmilla, Victoria House, Ambergris Caye

Belize's Other Notable Restaurants

Barracuda Bar & Grill, Beaches and Dreams, Hopkins
Casa Picasso, Ambergris Caye
Chon Saan Palace, Belize City
Cerros Beach Resort, Cerros, Corozal
French Connection, Placencia
Habaneros, Caye Caulker
Inn at Robert's Grove, Placencia
Mambo, Mata Chica, North Ambergris Caye
Papi's, Ambergris Caye
Patti's Bistro, Corozal Town
Rainbow Grill & Bar, Caye Caulker
Rasta Pasta, Caye Caulker
Riverside Tavern, Belize City
Running W Steak House, San Ignacio Resort Hotel, Cayo
The Smokey Mermaid, Belize City
Tony's Inn, Corozal Town
Tutti Frutti, Placencia (gelati)
Wendy's, Placencia
Wild Mangos, Ambergris Caye

Belize's Most Romantic Restaurants

Capricorn, North Ambergris Caye
Harbour View, Belize City
Rojo Lounge, North Ambergris Caye
Rendezvous, North Ambergris Caye

Belize's Most Atmospheric Watering Holes

BC's, Ambergris Caye
I&I, Caye Caulker
King Kassava, Hopkins
Lazy Lizard, Caye Caulker

Palapa Bar, North Ambergris Caye
 Putt-Putt, Belize City
 Rojo Lounge, North Ambergris Caye
 Sugar Reef, Placencia
 Yoli's, Placencia



Accommodations: What to Expect

Belize has more than 450 hotels, resorts, inns, lodges and guesthouses, with about 5,000 total rooms. Most of these hotels are small, owner-operated places; about 70% have 10 or fewer rooms. Only two hotels have more than 100 rooms: the 180-room Princess Hotel & Casino and the 102-room Radisson Fort George. Both are in Belize City.

Travelers to Belize today can expect to find a variety of accommodations to fit almost any budget or preference. Among the uniquely Belizean accommodations are the **jungle lodges**. These are mostly in remote areas, but despite the remote locations you don't have to forego life's little luxuries, such as cold beer, hot showers and comfortable mattresses. The best of these places, including Chaa Creek and duPlooy's in Cayo, Jaguar Paw near Belmopan, Hidden Valley Inn and Blancaneaux in the Mountain Pine Ridge, Lodge at Big Falls in Toledo, and Chan Chich and Lamanai Outpost in rural Orange Walk, are as good as any bush lodge in the world. Usually, the birding and wildlife spotting around the lodges are excellent, and they offer all the amenities you enjoy after the day's adventures are done. Most, though not all, have bay thatch cabañas built with a nod to Maya-style construction, but done up in much more luxury and style than traditional Maya cottages. While the top places are first-class in every way, with rates to match — often US\$200 to \$300 or more a night in season — you don't have to pay much to get an authentic jungle lodge experience. Places like Clarissa Falls, Crystal Paradise and Parrot's Nest, all in Cayo, or Hickatee Cottages near Punta Gorda, are bargains for US\$75 or less double.

Another delightful type of lodging in Belize is the casual and **small seaside resort**. The best of these, places like Mariposa or Maya Beach Hotel in Placencia, or, on the budget level, Tradewinds in Placencia village, are sandy barefoot spots, with a friendly Belizean feel you won't find in other parts of the Caribbean. A couple can spend a night at the beach for US\$50 to \$150 dollars.

All around Belize you can find **small guesthouses** with clean, safe rooms at budget prices. The Trek Stop, Aguada Hotel, Casa Blanca Guesthouse and Martha's Guesthouse in Cayo or Tipple Tree Beya Inn in Hopkins, are examples. At these places you can get a nice little room for US\$40 or less.

At the other end of the scale, for those who demand luxury, a whole wave of **upmarket hotels** hit Belize starting in the 1990s. No longer is it necessary to stay in a hotel with linoleum floors and mismatched furniture. On Ambergris Caye and other cayes, places like Mata Chica, Victoria House, Cayo Espanto and Caye Chapel Island Resort have rooms that could earn a spot in *Architectural Digest*, with rates from US\$200 to \$1,500 a night. On the mainland, Blancaneaux's villas are luxurious, as are the seafront villas (with furnishings imported from Bali) of Turtle Inn in Placencia. Jaguar Paw's and Maruba's jungle cabins are air-conditioned, and the Inn at Robert's Grove offers all the amenities from tennis courts to rooftop jacuzzis.

In a few areas, mainly San Pedro, you can enjoy the extra space of a condo-style unit at a regular hotel-style price. Villas at Banyan Bay, Grand Colony The Palms, Belizean Shores, Xanadu and Banana Beach are great versions of the **condotels**.

In between are all shapes and sizes of **personality inns**, mostly run by their owners. Many owners are struggling to earn a decent income, and they can't always afford to have the softest sheets or new TVs in the room. But, whether the owners are Belizean, American, British or Canadian, they're almost always friendly and helpful, willing to sit down with you and help you plan your day.

Occupancy Rates Hotels in Belize generally do not enjoy high annual occupancy rates. In recent years, the country-wide occupancy rate has been in the low 40% range. In 2004, the last year for which statistics from the Belize Tourism Board are available, it was 40.6%. This is about 20 to 30 percentage points lower than annual occupancy rates in the U.S., Europe and the main Caribbean. A 2006 study by the Belize Hotel Association put the annual occupancy rate nationally at around 29%.

Ambergris Caye enjoys the highest hotel occupancy rate of any area of Belize. In 2004, it had annual occupancy of 46.8%. Some of the most popular properties have occupancy rates of over 70%, and near 100% at the height of the season. Many properties are virtually completely booked at Christmas, New Years, Easter and at times during the high season, especially March.

Belize District	43.8%
Ambergris Caye	46.8
Caye Caulker	34.1
Cayo	33.5

Corozal	25.9
Orange Walk	46.5
Stann Creek	37.8
Placencia	41.2
Toledo	23.0
Offshore Islands	35.6
Average	40.7

Do You Need to Book Ahead? Can you wing it in Belize? Or do you need to book hotels in advance? The answer, except around busy holidays such as Christmas and Easter, used to be that you could just wing it. Average annual occupancy at Belize hotels was low, and rooms in all price levels were plentiful most of the time. However, beginning in the late 1990s, tourism grew to record levels. Quite a few hotels, especially those offering the best value or top service and location, are now heavily booked in-season. Despite relatively low average occupancies (*see above*), if visiting Belize in-season, roughly Thanksgiving through Easter, it's a good idea to book ahead for at least the first night or two. This doesn't mean that if you arrive without reservations you'll have to sleep on the beach with the sand flies — you'll be able to find a room somewhere — but your first choices may well be booked and you may have to spend valuable vacation time hunting for a room. Tours and dive trips can easily be booked after you arrive.

Using the Internet to Find and Book Rooms: Belize is wired. Most hotels in Belize have Web sites and e-mail. You can use their Web sites (listings in this book include Internet addresses) to help you choose your accommodations, but remember that these Web sites are advertising and naturally put the best face on things. Nearly all hotels in Belize are small, and though most won't admit it for fear of alienating travel agents and travel wholesalers, they would prefer you book direct, preferably via the Internet. That saves them 10 to 25% in agent commissions, plus the cost and trouble of faxing, mailing brochures and telephoning back and forth. In many cases, booking direct also will save you money. Some, but not all, hotels offer 10 to 15% discounts for direct bookings via the Internet. Many don't advertise this, but it won't hurt to ask. The cheapest way to communicate with hotels in Belize is via e-mail. Unfortunately, not all hotels in Belize check their e-mail regularly and respond to messages in a timely way. Also, BTL's e-mail may be down, sometimes for several days at a time. You may have to follow up with a telephone call or fax.

The star system I use to rate hotels is as follows:

- ★★★★★ One of the top hotels in the Caribbean, well-run with striking location and/or facilities.
- ★★★★ One of the best hotels in Belize, with a dependably high level of hospitality.

- ★★★ Excellent accommodations, with above-average amenities, service and/or hospitality.
- ★★ Good accommodations and often a very good value.
- ★ Functional accommodations, meeting basic needs, and often a good value

Eating Well in Belize

We don't know who started the rumor that you can't get a good meal in Belize. The fact is, you can eat gloriously well, at modest prices.

Rice and beans is the quintessential Belizean dish, but this are not the rice and beans your momma used to fix — unless she's from Belize or perhaps New Orleans. Beans and rice in Belize means spicy and smoky, with plenty of recado (also known as achiote) and other seasonings, perhaps flavored with salt pork and some onions and peppers and cooked in coconut milk. Usually these are served with a chunk of stew chicken, fish or pork. The whole thing might cost just US\$5 in a pleasant restaurant. If you're not happy in Belize, you're probably not getting enough rice and beans.

Along the coast and on the cayes, seafood is as fresh as the salt air. In-season (mid-June to mid-February) spiny lobster — grilled, broiled, steamed, even fried — is fairly inexpensive and good. But a big filet of snapper or grouper, prepared over a grill with lime juice, is just as tasty and even cheaper. Conch, in season October to June, is delicious grilled or stewed in lime juice as ceviche, but we like it best in fritters, chopped and fried in a light batter.

Every ethnic group in multicultural Belize has its own taste treats. Among them: Serre and hoodut, one of the best-known Garifuna dishes, which is fish cooked in coconut milk with plantains. Boil up is a Creole favorite, fish boiled with plantains, yams and potatoes, and served with a tomato sauce and boiled bread. The Maya dish most popular with tourists is pibil, pork and other meats seasoned, wrapped in banana leaf and cooked slowly in an underground oven. Of course, with Mexico next door, Belize has a wide variety of Mexican dishes, including tamales, burritos, garnaches (corn tortillas fried and topped with beans, salsa and cheese) and panades (deep-fried tortillas filled with fish).

A few restaurants such as Macy's in Belize City serve local game, including iguana, venison and gibbon, a rabbit-like rodent dubbed "the Royal Rat" because it was once

served to Queen Elizabeth II.

We find most of the beef in Belize to be poor, although you can get an excellent steak in Belize at El Divino in San Pedro and elsewhere. But the pork — it's heavenly. The pork chops are tender and flavorful, the bacon a little different from most we've had, but delicious with fresh farm eggs. Only brown eggs are legal in Belize, by the way, to protect Belize's chicken farmers — if you see a white egg it's an illegal alien.

For breakfast, fruit is the thing — fresh pineapple, mango, papaya, watermelon, orange. With fry jacks (a sort of fried biscuit, the Belizean version of beignets) and a cup of Guatemalan or Gallon Jug Estates Belizean coffee, we're set for the day.

For the most part, Belize dining isn't fancy, but even Belize is branching out in some of the newer worlds of cuisine. Placencia has French (French Connection), Cayo has Sri Lankan (Serendib) and on Ambergris Caye you'll find excellent French-Thai fusion (Rendezvous) and even sushi (available at several restaurants including Blue Water Grill). Italian is tasty at Francis Ford Copolla's places in the Pine Ridge (at Blancaneaux) and in Placencia (Turtle Inn), as well as at other restaurants in Placencia, Caye Caulker and elsewhere.

To drink, there's nothing more refreshing than a fresh lime juice or watermelon juice. Belikin beer may not be up to the high standards of some of the beers of Mexico and Costa Rica, but it's good enough for us, and the Belikin stout will make you strong as an ox.

The pricing system I use for restaurants in all areas is, for one person:

Inexpensive:	Under US\$7 for most meals, not including drinks or tip
Moderate:	US\$8-\$15 for most meals, not including drinks or tip
Expensive:	US\$16-\$29 for dinner, not including drinks or tip
Very Expensive:	US\$30 and up for dinner, not including drinks or tips

In each area of Belize, I've made recommendations on the best places to stay and eat and a little about what to expect. I've tried to select options in each price range, from budget to deluxe.

Belize City

Many Belize travelers will tell you the best way to see Belize City is through your rear view window. However, with an open mind to its peculiarities, and with a little caution (the city has a crack and crime problem, though this rarely affects visitors, and the areas usually frequented by visitors are watched by tourist police), you may decide Belize City has a raffish, atmospheric charm. You might even see the ghost of Aldous Huxley or Graham Greene at a hotel bar.

City Centre Area

★★★★+ **Great House**, 13 Cork St.; tel. 501-223-3400, fax 223-3444;

www.greathousebelize.com. This small jewel offers spacious and well-equipped air-conditioned rooms in a modernized and expanded private house, originally built in 1927. All 12 rooms, half on the second and half on the third floor, have a balcony, private bathroom, mini-fridge, safe, TV, phone and dedicated fax line. There is also a good, if somewhat pricey, restaurant in the courtyard, the **Smoky Mermaid**. Owner Steve Maestre, one of Belize's most experienced hotel proprietors, takes great pride in the personal service here. Doubles around US\$110-\$130.

★★★★ **Radisson Fort George**, 2 Marine Parade; tel. 501-223-3333, fax 227-3829;

www.radissonbelize.com. This is the flagship of the city's hotels, and the most expensive, though you can often get substantial reductions from the rack rates. All rooms have cable TV, fridge and minibar, and those in the Club Wing, reached by the only glass elevator in Belize, have unbeatable sea views. Most of the rooms, including those in the villa wing across the street, have been remodeled recently. There's a good restaurant (you may see Emory King, Belize's most famous expat, there at breakfast), and the grounds are an oasis of calm on the edge of the sea. The hotel has two pools and a private dock. The marina can take large boats of up to 250 feet in length with a 10-foot draft. The staff is usually friendly and helpful. Rates US\$169-189 double, Dec.

20-Apr. 30, about US\$10 less the rest of year. But as noted, rates are often heavily discounted – ask.

★★+ **Hotel Mopan.** 55 Regent St., Belize City; tel. 501-227-7351, fax 227-5383; www.hotelmopan.com. Character is the Hotel Mopan's middle name. This hotel in an old wooden Colonial house on the South Side became a well-known meeting place for naturalists, archeologists and backpackers under pioneering tourism operator Jean Shaw, who died in 1999. Her daughter and son, Jeannie and Tomy, operate the hotel today. Don't expect luxury here, and the neighborhood isn't exactly grand (walking around at night is iffy at best), but the rooms are bigger than average, they've been upgraded, and there's still lots of atmosphere. All rooms have private baths with plenty of hot water, and A/C is available. Construction next door (mid-2006) may mean some noise. Rates US\$50 to \$70 double.

Near International Airport

★★★+ **D'Nest Inn.** 475 Cedar St. tel. 501/223-5416; www.dnestinn.com. (Directions: from the Northern Hwy., turn west on Chetumal St., turn right at the police station, go 1 block and turn left, then turn right on Cedar St.) D'Nest Inn is a B&B run by Gaby and Oty Ake. Gaby is a retired Belize banker, and Oty is originally from Chetumal. The two-story, Caribbean-style house is on a canal 50 feet from the Belize River. It's in an area called Belama Phase 2, a safe, middle-class section between the international airport and downtown. Oty's gardens around the house are filled with hibiscus, roses, and other blossoming plants. The four guest rooms (the fourth was renovated and added to the roster in mid-2006) are furnished with antiques such as a hand-carved, four-poster bed, but they also have modcons like wireless internet, air-conditioning, and cable TV. With a private entrance and your own key, you come and go as you like. Rates are US\$60 to \$70 double and include a delicious full breakfast. *Highly recommended.*

★★ **Global Village Hotel.** Mile 8 1/2, Northern Hwy.; tel. 501/225-2555; www.globalhotel-bz.com. If you have an early morning flight out or you're overnighing en route somewhere else, the Global Village Hotel (actually it's more of a motel than a hotel) is a good new choice near the international airport. The 40 rooms are sparkling clean and modern and are only US\$50 double. This Chinese-owned place is located just south of the turnoff to the international airport, and the hotel has a free shuttle to and from the airport. You can also arrange to leave your car in the hotel's fenced parking lot with 24-hour security.

Dining in Belize City

In addition to the better choices listed below, greasy fried chicken is available as takeaway from small restaurants all over the city — a Belizean favorite known as “dollah chicken” whatever the price. If you're really in a hurry, HL's Burger, Belize City's

answer to McDonald's, has several outlets, serving standard but safe fast food. The big hotels have their own restaurants, quite expensive but with varied menus and good service.

If you're shopping for food while in the city centre, the main supermarket, Brodies, is worth a look. It's on Albert Street, just past the park, and their selection of food is good if expensive, reflecting the fact that much is imported. Milk and dairy products, produced locally by Mennonite farmers, are delicious and good quality. Naturally enough, local fruit is cheap and plentiful, though highly seasonal — Belizean citrus fruits are among the best in the world. Two modern supermarkets, a branch of Brodies (expanded in 2006) and Save-U, are on the Northern Highway on the way to the international airport.

Most restaurants in Belize City are closed for lunch on Sunday, and many are closed all day. Some are also closed for lunch on Saturday.

Expensive:

The Smokey Mermaid at The Great House. One of the best restaurants in the city, though not cheap. Try the coconut shrimp and banana chimichanga. 13 Cork Street in the Fort George area across from the Radisson, tel. 223-4759.

Harbour View. On the Belize River, this is Belize City's most romantic restaurant. Fort St. next to the Tourist Village, tel. 501-223-6452.

Bob's Bar & Grill. Chef Bob's is popular with the upmarket crowd, who come for drinks and hearty North American dishes. 164 Newtown Barracks Rd., tel. 223-6908.

Moderate:

Riverside Tavern: New in 2006, this Bowen family-owned restaurant has become very popular. It has the biggest and best burgers in Belize, with a variety of other well-prepared dishes, including steaks. Parking is very safe, in a fenced, guarded lot right in front of the restaurant. 2 Mapp St. at N. Front St., tel. 223-5640

Wet Lizard. Fun place with pretty good food. Gets quite a few daytrippers from the cruise ships. 1 Fort St., next to Tourist Village, tel. 501-223-5973.

Chon Saan Palace. This has been the best Chinese restaurant in Belize City for 30 years. It serves fresh seafood and is Hong Kong style. 1 Kelly St., tel. 223-3008.

Inexpensive:

Neries. Very popular joint, serving Creole favorites. Corner of Queen and Daly streets, with another location at 124 Freetown Rd.

Mar's Belizean Restaurant. Clean place serving (as the name suggests) tasty Belizean food at easy prices. 118 N. Front St.; tel. 501-223-9046.

Dit's. Great pastries and inexpensive Creole food such as cowfoot soup. 50 King St.; tel. 501-227-3330.

Macy's. Long-established, reasonably priced Creole restaurant is popular with locals and very busy at lunch. It also serves traditional game such as armadillo, deer and gibnut ("the Royal Rat") but no longer turtle. 18 Bishop St.; tel. 501-227-3419.

Rural Belize District

BURRELL BOOM

★★★ **Black Orchid**, Burrell Boom, tel. 501- 523-3481, www.blackorchidresort.com. Formerly called Belize 'R Us, Black Orchid has a lovely location on the Belize River, with pleasant modern rooms, a good restaurant, and a swimming pool. Rates US\$40 to \$120 in-season, US\$30 to \$100 in summer.

CROOKED TREE

Crooked Tree is famous for the number and variety of birds that flock here, especially in the dry season (February to early June). You may even see the jabiru stork, the largest bird in the Americas. It stands nearly as tall as a human, with a wingspan of up to 12 feet. Even if you're not a birder, you'll appreciate the beauty of the Crooked Tree lagoon. Coming from the Northern Highway across the causeway toward Crooked Tree village, a predominantly Creole settlement, you'll see cattle cooling themselves in the lagoon, with their egret pals. Check in at the visitor center at the end of the causeway. You'll get a map and can walk or drive around the village, nearby bush trails and the lagoon front. Or ask about a local guide. Canoes are available for rent, too. Admission: US\$4.

★★ **Birds Eye View Lodge**, Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, tel. 501-203-2040, fax 222-4869; e-mail belizeinfo@birdseyeviewlodge.com www.birdseyeviewlodge.com Most of the other lodging in Crooked Tree consists of thatch cabañas or rooms in old frame houses, but this is a modern two-story concrete hotel, just a few steps from the lagoon, covered with climbing vines and flowers. Rooms are clean as a pin, and the Belizean management is friendly. Choose from a private room or one of eight beds in a dorm-style room. The hotel's dining room serves no-frills but tasty Creole fare. Doubles US\$60 to \$80 Nov. 1-May 14, US\$40 to \$60 rest of year. Beds in the dorm are US\$15 per person. Rates are plus hotel tax and 10% service. Continental breakfast is US\$3.50, lunch is US\$10, dinner US\$12. The hotel can arrange birding, local tours, canoe rentals and such. Transfer from the International Airport is US\$50 for up to four people.

GALES POINT AREA

The Northern and Southern lagoons near Gales Point are excellent places to spot West

Indian manatees. There is a “manatee hole” fed by warm under-water springs, about 200 yards off the peninsula point northeast, where manatees are commonly seen. Some of the manatees have been tagged with radio transmitters, which permit researchers to track their movements. Tours from hotels in Gales Point will take you on manatee watching trips, or you can arrange with someone in the Creole village of Gales Point to take you out. The village has a manatee guides association. When out manatee spotting, please be respectful of your fellow mammals. Responsible guides (and visitors) don’t get too close to these huge, gentle creatures, nor do they try to swim with them or touch them. Gales Point is off the regular tourist track in Belize, and most of the few hotels in the area close during the off-season. Very basic accommodations are available in local homes in Gales Point village. Near Gales Point are several miles of beach — not so good for swimming, but hawksbill turtles nest here.

★★ **Manatee Lodge**, Gales Point (Mail: P.O. Box 1242, Belize City); tel./fax 501-220-8040; e-mail: belizejq@tekstar.com www.manateelodge.com If you like the British Honduras colonial atmosphere, with a truly lovely setting on a lagoon, this might be your cup of tea. There are eight rooms with polished hardwood floors, private baths, 24-hour electricity and jalousie windows in a white frame building beside the Southern Lagoon. Manatee Lodge is no longer associated with Hidden Valley Inn in the Mountain Pine Ridge. Doubles about US\$100, though they are sometimes discounted to around US\$75. Meals are available: Breakfast and lunch are US\$7.50, dinner US\$13.50. The hotel offers a half-day boat tour, which includes manatee watching and a visit to Ben Loman cave, US\$120 for up to four persons.

Corozal Town

There's not much to do in Corozal, but it's a great place not to do anything. These hotels will let you relax, for not much money.

★★★ **Casablanca by the Sea.** Consejo Village; tel. 501/423-1018; www.casablanca-bythesea.com. This little inn out Consejo way doesn't get as many guests as it deserves, but it's a fine little getaway. It's a great place to just relax and do nothing. The views of Chetumal across Corozal Bay are terrific. The young women from Eastern Europe — employed as dancers at the casinos in the Commercial Free Zone — who come here to sunbathe are also a nice addition to the scenery. Rooms are around US\$75 double, less in summer.

★★★ **Corozal Bay Inn.** Almond Dr., South end of Corozal Town, next to Tony's Inn; tel. 501/422-2691; www.corozalbayinn.com. Doug and Maria — she's originally from Mexico, and he's a Canadian by birth of German heritage who moved to Belize with his family when he was a youngster — have built 10 attractive cabañas on the water. The cabañas, painted in colorful tropical pastels, are surprisingly spacious and have bay thatch roofs. While most of them are situated to catch the breeze from the bay, they do have air-conditioning (though on a hot day the A/C units may struggle to cool all that open space under the thatch), tile baths, two comfortable beds in each cabaña, and 27" TVs with cable. Two units at the back connect, making them ideal for families. Doug had several hundred dump truck loads of sand brought in and created a tropical beach on the bay. There is a seawall, but you'll love the water view and the concrete pier. You can sit by the pool, sip something cold in the redone outdoor restaurant and bar and, if you have a wireless laptop, check your e-mail, as Corozal Bay Inn is a wireless hotspot. Although we still like this place, we have to say we've had a few comments recently from guests who complained of poor service and rooms and pool in less than perfect condition. Rates are US\$80 to \$90 double.

★★★ **Copa Banana Guesthouse.** 409 Bay Shore Drive., P.O. Box 226, Corozal Town, tel. 501-422-0284, fax 422-2710; www.copabanana.bz. Whether you're just passing through or in town shopping for property around Corozal, you couldn't do much better than this guesthouse, new in 2004. The rates are affordable, you can cook meals in the common kitchen, complete with dishware, stove, coffeemaker, microwave and fridge, and the owners even run a real estate business, Belize North Real Estate Ltd. Connie and her partner, Gregg, have done up two banana-yellow one-story, ranch-style concrete houses, with a total of five guestrooms (some with queen beds, some with two twins) across the street from their expansive home on the water. Guests have private bedrooms but share the common space. The owners have added a long-term rental apartment with a view of the bay. Rates: US\$55 double/US\$350 week.

★★+ **Tony's Inn.** South End, Corozal Town; tel. 501-422-2055 or 800-447-2931; fax 422-2829; www.tonysinn.com. A long-time favorite of travelers to Corozal, Tony's has 24 motel-like rooms with tile floors, cable TV and A/C. The breezy bayside palapa restaurant, Y Not Grill, is one of the best in town -- try the fajitas. Rates: US\$80 double January-April, US\$70 rest of the year.



★★+ **Las Palmas.** 123 5th Ave., Corozal Town; tel. 501-422-0196; www.laspalmashotelbelize.com. This was formerly the budget-level Nestor's Hotel. It has been totally renovated and rebuilt, moving the whole property upmarket. Rooms go for about US\$40 to \$50 a night, double.

★★+ **Mirador Hotel.** 4th Ave. at 1st St., tel. 501-422-0189; email miradorhotelcorol@hotmail.com. Owned by a prominent local family, this new four-story hotel (with a fifth floor deck, but no elevator) is on a prominent corner with great water views, near the old market. Parking is limited in this area. Rates start at around US\$40.

Dining in Corozal Town

Tony's. The restaurant in the new palapa at Tony's is still very good. I recommend the fajitas. Dinner for four with a few drinks here came to a little over US\$45, pricey for Corozal but still affordable. South End, Corozal Town, tel. 501-422-2055. Moderate.

At **Patti's Bistro**, you can enjoy a huge, filling dinner with multiple appetizers, drinks and main dishes for almost nothing. Rice and beans with chicken or pork is US\$3 and a fried chicken dinner with mashed potatoes is US\$3.25. It's located next to the undertakers. But don't worry -- the food is good and a real bargain. 4th Avenue, Corozal, tel. 501/607-1417. Inexpensive.

Cactus Plaza. Service here is friendly, the tacos, salbutes, tostadas and other Mexican dishes are absolutely delicious, and the prices are right — from US 25 cents for a small salbute. Most menu items are under a dollar. Four of us ate a big meal, with beers and soft drinks for under US\$15. # 6 6th Street South, tel. 501-422-0394. Inexpensive.

CERROS AREA LODGING

★★ **Cerros Beach Resort**, near Copper Bank village and Cerros Maya, e-mail bellerjeau1@msn.com, www.cerrosbeachresort.com. This new place near the Cerros Maya site is winning friends for its excellent food and drink. If you want to stay longer than for just a meal, there are four thatch cabañas. Rates around US\$40 to \$60.

SARTENEJA LODGING

Fernando's Seaside Guest House (★★ tel. 501-423-2085) and **Krisami's Bayview Lodge** (★, tel. 501-423-2283 offer clean, low-frills accommodations at low-moderate prices. Cabins at the Shipstern reserve may be available for US\$10 per night — to reserve contact the Belize Audubon Society in Belize City at 501-223-4533, e-mail base@btl.net

Orange Walk District

Your first introduction to Orange Walk District likely will be the sugar cane fields — and concomitant hulking sugar cane trucks — near Orange Walk Town on the Northern Highway. Orange Walk Town itself is a somewhat scruffy, bustling place with more of a Mexican than Belizean ambiance, having not a great deal of interest for the visitor. There's a formal plaza, and the town hall is called the Palacio Municipal. The businesses and houses along the main drag — Queen Victoria Avenue or the Belize-Corozal Road — have barred windows, and some of the hotels and bars are in fact brothels.

The real Orange Walk is the big, wide and lightly populated area to the southwest of Orange Walk Town, up against the Guatemala border. Here you'll find large tracts of public and private land, teeming with deer, ocellated turkey, toucans and all manner of other wildlife. A handful of remote jungle lodges offers you the chance to see crocodiles, howler monkeys and even the illusive jaguar. Maya sites, discovered and undiscovered, are everywhere, including one of the most impressive and beautifully situated ones in the region, Lamanai. Mennonites are a potent agricultural and economic force in Orange Walk, especially in the Shipyard area.

★★★★★ **Chan Chich Lodge**, Gallon Jug (Mail: P.O. Box 37, Belize City); tel./fax 501-223-4419; or P.O. Box 1088, Vineyard Haven, MA 02568, tel. 800-343-8009, fax 508-693-6311; www.chanchich.com Very simply, this is one of the classic jungle lodges of the world. It's owned by Barry Bowen, a fifth-generation Belizean who also has the Coca-Cola bottling franchise in Belize and who brews Belikin beer, among many other endeavors. The trip here by car from Orange Walk Town is an incredible experience, although if you want to get here more quickly, you can come by charter plane. The drive takes you through deep bush, including the 262,000 acres of Programme for Belize lands next door, and around every curve you might encounter anything but another vehicle — deer, a quash, a snake sliding across the road, one of Belize's cats, a flock of ocellated turkeys, a dense shower of butterflies. Closer to the lodge, which is on a quarter million acres of private land, you'll spy the neatly fenced fields of

Bowen's 2,500-acre Gallon Jug farm, which raises cattle, corn, soybeans, cacao, cardamon and coffee. Gallon Jug is the only place in Belize that produces coffee in any commercial amount. The lodge, across a suspension bridge at the end of a short paved road, enjoys an astounding setting. It was built literally on top of a Maya plaza. Around the lodge are tall, unexcavated mounds. There are 12 thatch-roof cabañas, recently upgraded, comfortable rather than luxurious, each with two queen beds, 24-hour electricity (but not air-conditioning), bath with hot and cold water shower, and a wrap-around verandah. The cabins farthest from the restaurant kitchen and on the edge of the lodge grounds, such as number 2 and 9, are most desirable. There also is a two-bedroom cottage with A/C. Americans Tom and Josie Harding supervised the construction of the lodge in the early 90s and stayed on as managers until 2001, when they moved on. New management appears to be doing a very good job. Meals are served in a large thatch cabaña, which also houses a gift shop, and the bar is next door — guests congregate there for a social hour before dinner. A beautiful swimming pool, located at the edge of the jungle and screened to keep out bugs, opened in 1998. Around the lodge grounds is a series of cut and raked trails, ideal for wildlife spotting and birding. You can enjoy the jungle setting without having to wrestle snakes and briars. Will you see a jaguar? There's a better chance here than at most other places in Belize. The lodge has been averaging about one jaguar sighting a week. Even if you don't see the elusive big cat, you'll definitely see plenty of other wildlife including howler monkeys, whether you walk the trails on your own or go on one of the nature tours offered by the lodge. Guides at Chan Chich are extraordinarily knowledgeable, and you should take at least one guided nature tour while at the lodge. Birding is terrific here, with more than 350 species identified; often 40% or more of guests are birders. Canoeing, horseback riding, birdwatching and nature tours, and trips to Maya sites are available. Rates: Doubles, room only, are US\$250 to \$300 Nov. 1-Apr. 30, US\$205 to \$235 the rest of the year. Meal packages, which are necessary since there are no other dining choices nearby, are US\$70 adults, US\$30 for children under 12. The lodge offers an all-inclusive package (room, meals, taxes, most tours and activities, Belikin beer and soft drinks) for US\$520 to \$550 double in-season and US\$445 to off-season. Rates are plus the usual 9% hotel tax and 10% GST on meals but do not include a service charge. Chan Chich's approach, which we like, is to tip what you feel is fair (tips are divided among all staff) and only once, at the end of your stay.

★★★★ **Lamanai Outpost Lodge**, Indian Church Village; tel. 888-733-7864 or 501-223-3578, fax 220-9061; www.lamanai.com. Lamanai Outpost is another extraordinary jungle lodge. One of the reasons it's so special is the setting. Built by the late Colin Howells, a legend in hospitality circles in Belize, Lamanai Outpost perches on a low hillside with a view of the beautiful New River Lagoon. The lodge has 17 rooms, recently refurbished, in thatch cabañas set among hillside gardens. The lodge is closely involved with archeological and nature study programs through the Lamanai Field Research Center. The center has resident naturalists, archeologists, ornithologists and biologists. On one visit here, my children enjoyed meeting grad students from the University of Texas who were doing crocodile research in the New

River Lagoon. We went along on a night trip to catch crocs (fortunately, that night they didn't catch any.) Manager Mark Howells, Colin Howells' son, does a good job with the lodge, in everything from supervising the housekeeping to providing security. Kids love Lamanai, as there always seem to be monkeys, parrots and other creatures around. For adults, next to the new open-air dining room, in what was the former restaurant, there's now a bar and lounge, The Digger's Roost, with archaeological memorabilia and a full-size reproduction of a Lamanai stela showing Lord Smoking Shell. A dock extends 130 feet into the lagoon and is good place for stargazing and swimming — just keep an eye out for Ol' Mister Croc. Birding is superb in this area, with at least 375 species identified nearby. Winners of a recent one-day "bird-a-thon" at Lamamai spotted 172 species in 24 hours. The Lamanai ruins and archeological reserve are within walking distance, as is a small community butterfly education center, Xochil Ku. Indian Church village is also within walking distance, and near the village are the ruins of two Spanish churches. Don't miss taking a night-spotting tour — the



Hillside B&B has five rooms and these two cabañas overlooking Blue Creek

New River Lagoon and New River are fascinating at night. Package rates include lodging, meals and tours and are not cheap. They start at over US\$500 a night. Per person. Room only rates are more affordable.

★★★ **Lamanai South Lodge**, Indian Church Village; tel. 501-615-1892; www.lamanaisouth.com. Lamanai South is somewhat less expensive alternative to Lamanai Outpost Lodge. Situated on 52 acres adjoining the New River Lagoon, the lodge has four rooms in a coral-colored building at the edge of the water. Motel-like rooms have verandas with views of the lagoon. Above the rooms is a thatch restaurant and bar. Rates: US\$150 double in-season, US\$135 off-season. Meal plan is around US\$45 per person.

BLUE CREEK VILLAGE LODGING

★★ **Hillside Bed and Breakfast**, Blue Creek village, Orange Walk District; tel. 501-323-0155, fax 323-0158. This is not really a B&B, but it is a clean simple place to stay in the Blue Creek Mennonite area. Run by Mennonites John and Judy Klassen, Hillside has 5 motel-like rooms on a hill overlooking a beautiful valley, with two larger thatch cabañas down long, steep steps. Rates around US\$40 double. Breakfast is US\$5.

ORANGE WALK TOWN AREA LODGING

Few tourists linger in Orange Walk Town, and hotels cater mostly to visiting Belizeans and Mexicans.

★★★ **Hotel de la Fuente**, 14 Main St., Orange Walk Town; tel. 501/322-2290; www.hoteldelafuente.com. Orlando de la Fuente's and his wife have opened this nice addition to the very limited hotel scene in Orange Walk Town. The low rates (around US\$25 to \$40) put it among the best values in Northern Belize. All 8 rooms have air-conditioning and DSL broadband, and there are also 2 suites with kitchenettes.

★★ **St. Christopher's**, 10 Main St., Orange Walk Town; tel. 501-322-2420, fax 302-1064; e-mail rowbze@btl.net This hotel on the New River has attractive rooms, some air-conditioned. Rates for double ceiling fan, cable TV and private bath, around US\$30 year-round; with A/C the rate is about US\$45.

Dining in Orange Walk

El Establo Bar & Grill. Family-run eatery just off the north end of the Orange Walk bypass is a good place to break up the trip between Belize City and Corozal Town. Excellent *escabeche*. Indian Hill, Northern Hwy., tel. 501-322-0094. Inexpensive to Moderate.

Cayo District

Cayo has a lot going for it: wide open spaces, few bugs and friendly people. The major towns are San Ignacio/Santa Elena, with a population of nearly 18,000, about 10 miles from the Guatemala border, and Belmopan City, the sleepy capital of Belize, with a population of around 13,000.

Agriculture, ranching and, increasingly, tourism are the major industries here. About 20 years ago, the first small jungle lodges began operation around San Ignacio. Now there is a flourishing mix of hotels, cottages and jungle lodges near San Ignacio and in the Mountain Pine Ridge, along with a lot of natural attractions and outdoor activities – canoeing, caving, hiking, horseback riding, to name a few. The country's most accessible Maya ruins are here, as well as Caracol, in its heyday a larger city-state than Tikal.

Between Belize City and San Ignacio, Belmopan is the downsized capital of Belize, but the attractions are in the surrounding countryside. The Belize Zoo is nearby, as are several excellent jungle lodges. Along the scenic Hummingbird Highway are barely explored caves, wild rivers and national park areas.

BELMOPAN AREA HOTELS

The only lodging choices in Belmopan proper are small motels and hotels, geared more toward the needs of government bureaucrats than of tourists. Jungle lodges and other more interesting lodging choices are located outside of Belmopan along the Western and Hummingbird highways.

★★ + **Yim Saan Hotel & Restaurant**, 4253 Hummingbird Hwy., Belmopan City; tel. 501-822-1356. This Chinese-owned property is the nicest lodging in Belmopan. Rooms are modern and clean. There's a good restaurant on the first floor. Rates around US\$50 double.

★★ - **Bull Frog Inn**, 25 Half Moon Ave. (P.O. Box 28), Belmopan; tel. 501-822-2111,

fax 822-3155; e-mail bullfrog@btl.net www.bullfroginn.com This will remind you of a small mom 'n pop motel in the U.S. or Canada. The 25 rooms have air-conditioning, cable TV and are clean and comfortable enough, though your bed may not be quite as new as you'd like and the TV picture may roll. Rates, geared to the business people and government officials who make up 70% of the guests here, are US\$75 double.

BELMOPAN AREA JUNGLE LODGES

★★★ + **Pook's Hill**, Off Mile 52 1/2, Teakettle Village (Mail: P.O. Box 14, Belmopan); tel. 501-820-2017, fax 822-3361; e-mail pookshill@btl.net www.pookshillbelize.com
Directions: Turn south off the Western Hwy. at Mile 52 1/2 at Teakettle village. Go about 4 miles on a dirt road, then turn right and go another 1 1/2 miles to the lodge (the route is well-signed.) How about a remote lodge in deep jungle, next to a river, near Actun Tunichil Muknal and on the site of a Maya plaza, run by an engaging international couple where meals are by lantern-light and you're totally isolated from the cares of civilization? That pretty much describes Pook's Hill, a collection of thatched, Maya-style cabañas on 300 acres next to Tapir Mountain Reserve and the Roaring River. We like the rustic touches here, like hot water for showers from cohune nut fires. At times you may also see excavation by an archeological group underway on the Maya site at Pook's Hill. Owners Ray and Vikki Snaddon, long-time Belize residents though they're both from other outposts of the British Commonwealth, are friendly and knowledgeable hosts. There's horseback riding (US\$40) and tubing on the river (free) and excellent birding. Rates US\$185 double in high season, US\$150 May to October. Meals are tasty and filling -- US\$11 breakfast, \$11 lunch and \$22 dinner. Transfers for up to four persons from the international airport are US\$110. Pook's Hill, by the way, is named after Rudyard Kipling's Puck of Pook's Hill.

★★★ + **Belize Jungle Dome**, Off Mile 47, Western Hwy., Belmopan, tel. 501-822-2124, fax 822-2155, www.belizejungledome.com. Directions: From Western Hwy., turn north at Mile 49 and cross bridge over Belize River. Follow gravel road 3 miles until you see Banana Bank sign. Turn right and follow dirt road 2 miles. The owners, Andrew, a former pro soccer player with Newcastle in England, and Simone, Dutch and formerly a veejay for MTV Europe, moved to Belize in 2001 and built this inn in the bush, topped with a geodesic dome, next door to Banana Bank Lodge. The four suites and standard room here have tile floors, lots of windows, and an uncluttered look. You can check your email at the wireless hotspot by the swimming pool, take a yoga or Pilates class (group classes, US\$15 an hour) or eat an organic meal on the terrace. Rates: US\$105 to \$200 in-season, double; US\$95 to \$160 off-season.

★★★ + **Banana Bank**, P.O. Box 48, Belmopan; tel. 501-820-2020, fax 820-2026; e-mail bbl@starband.net, www.bananabank.com Directions: From Western Hwy., turn north at Mile 49 and cross bridge over Belize River. Follow gravel road 3 miles until you see Banana Bank sign. Turn right and follow dirt road 2 miles. You're guaranteed to see a jaguar at this lodge, because Tika has lived here since 1982. It's okay — the Belize government has granted permission for the lodge to have the jaguar. If you're



Cowboy John Carr at Banana Bank

brave, you can step into the cage and get an up-close and personal picture of a jaguar. John Carr, who in his youth was a real Montana cowboy and rodeo star, in 1973 with a partner bought Banana Bank, then a 4,000-acre ranch with 1,500 head of cattle. At one time the ranch was headquarters for Belize Estates, one of the large companies that in colonial days logged huge tracts of land granted them by the Crown. John Carr and his wife, Carolyn, have lived on the ranch since 1977, one of a small group of pioneering American expats who adopted Belize as their home. Carolyn is a noted artist; her paintings of Belize street scenes and wild creatures (sometimes both in the same scene) have been widely exhibited, and she has a studio at the lodge. Our favorite is her painting titled "Jimmy Hines," which shows the old market in Belize City where fishermen are cleaning lobster, snapper and jimmy hines, the local name for a type of sea bass or grouper. Anyway, back to the lodge. It's a family-oriented spot, a great place for kids.

The lodge has five cabañas, with bay leaf thatch, on a bank above the Belize River. The cabañas are spacious, with curving internal walls and 24-hour electricity. Rooms are also available in the Gallery, Chateau Brio and Chalet building. Some rooms have air-conditioned. You can hear howler monkeys calling, and besides Tika, on the grounds of the lodge are toucans, parrots and a spider monkey named Simon. The food is filling and tasty, served family-style. Banana Bank is especially good for those who like to ride, as the lodge keeps about 50 horses. The horses are mixed breeds, mostly quarter horses. There's a large stable, a round pen to hone your riding skills and a larger arena. New in 2006 was an on-site swimming pool. Rates: US\$77 to \$145 double, breakfast included. Lunch is US\$10 and dinner, US\$15. Meals are well prepared and served family style. Note that there is something of a Christian atmosphere here, with prayers offered at meals. The lodge also offers many packages, including tours, all meals and horseback riding. Transfers from Belize City are US\$40 per person one-way.

★★★ + **Ian Anderson's Caves Branch Jungle Camp**, Hummingbird Hwy. (P.O. Box 356), Belmopan; tel. (radio phone) 501-822-2800; www.cavesbranch.com Directions: About 14 miles from Belmopan at Mile 41 1/2 of the Hummingbird Hwy. (mile markers on the Hummingbird from Belmopan run backwards, starting at Mile 55 at the Western

Hwy.), turn left and follow a dirt road less than a mile to the lodge grounds. Get ready to sweat! Set in a 58,000-acre chunk of private land on the Caves Branch river, this is Belize's premier jungle lodge for travelers who like to do things outdoors. Ian Anderson, a Canadian, and his teams run fairly strenuous caving, hiking and river trips, and they do a top-flight job. They call them adventure trips, not sightseeing. In short, this is not a place for couch potatoes. More than a dozen adventure tours are offered, open to non-guests as well as guests. Each Caves Branch guide has been trained in first aid and in cave and wilderness rescue. The lodge has six types of accommodations: Rates: The new hillside, split-level treehouse suites are the most upmarket, at US\$195 double. The cabaña suites are also fairly luxe, with a master bedroom with king-size bed, inside bathroom with hot and cold shower and toilet, wicker-furnished living room with pull out bed, at US\$158 double. Three jungle bungalows with queen beds are US\$138 double. Six jungle cabañas are more basic, with outside washroom facilities, for US\$98 double. The camp also has budget accommodations in a co-ed bunkhouse, for US\$15 per person; camping is available for US\$5 per person (camp cooking, however, is not allowed.) Buffet meals are delicious and healthful, though not bargain-priced, at US\$12 for breakfast or lunch, US\$18 for dinner. Caves Branch also has a variety of packages, including a one-week "Bad Ass" trip which takes you to some of Belize's least visited caves, waterfalls and cenotes, for around US\$1,200 a person. Cave tubing is US\$95 per person, and an overnight caving expedition is US\$250 per person. Transfer from Belize City are US\$130 for up to four persons. Ian Anderson's usually closes during September.

SAN IGNACIO AND SANTA ELENA LODGING: IN OR NEAR TOWN

[Too new to rate - anticipate ★★★★★] **Ka'ana Boutique Resort**, Mile 69 1/4, Western Hwy., San Ignacio; tel. 501-824-3350; www.kaanabelize.com. New in 2007, this small hotel with 15 cottages and rooms is gaining early raves for its food, accommodations and amenities such as I-pod docks and LCD TVs in the rooms. Most suites and rooms open into garden areas, and all have air-conditioning. This is a hotel, not a jungle lodge, at it is situated by the side of the highway. Rates US\$195 to \$275 in-season, US\$175 to \$240 off, plus 9% hotel tax and 10% service. Summer packages available.

★★★ + **San Ignacio Resort Hotel**, 18 Buena Vista St., (P.O. Box 33), San Ignacio; tel. 501-824-2034, fax 824-2134; e-mail sanight@btl.net www.sanignaciobelize.com This is the closest thing to an international-style hotel in San Ignacio Town. But, in Belize, that can mean anything, and in this case it means cinderblock walls in the hall and a green iguana project out back, with 14 acres of bush, and a casino next door. The location is convenient, the deluxe rooms are comfortable, the pool relaxing, the Running W Steakhouse satisfying, the Stork Club bar a good place to grab a cool one and watch a big-screen TV, and the management and staff accommodating. A second-floor suite was added in 2006. A branch of the Princess Casino adjoins the hotel. Rates: Deluxe rooms with air-conditioning and TV, US\$150 double in-season, US\$130 off, plus 9% hotel tax and 5% service. Off-season specials often available. The hotel

is for sale.

★★★ **Cahal Pech Village**, Cahal Pech Rd., 1 mi west of town off Western Hwy., San Ignacio; tel. 501-824-3740, fax 824-2225; www.cahalvillageresort.com. This resort is set on a high hill at the western edge of San Ignacio, near the Cahal Pech Maya site. Ever-growing and improving, the latest additions are new cottages and rooms and a two-level swimming pool, guarded by a giant statue of a pterylodactl. The restaurant serves good Belizean and American fare such as grilled fish, pork chops, spaghetti, and steaks in an open-air space with views of the valley below. Dinner is around US\$12. Rates US\$89 to \$119 double.

★★ + **Casa Blanca Guest House**, 10 Burns Ave., San Ignacio; tel. 501-824-2080; www.casablancaguesthouse.com. While it's in the center of busy San Ignacio, this small hotel, winner of the Belize Tourism Board's "best small hotel award" a few years ago, is quiet and a great choice if you want to save money. The rooms, with white walls trimmed in mahogany and locally made wood furniture, are a big step above typical budget lodging. Some rooms have air-conditioning. You can prepare snacks or full meals in the shared kitchen. Casa Blanca is often fully booked. Rates: US\$20 to \$50.

★★ + **Maya Mountain Lodge**, Cristo Rey Rd., (Mail: P.O. Box 174, San Ignacio, Cayo); tel. 501-824-2164; www.mayamountain.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, take the Cristo Rey Rd. about 3/4 miles to Maya Mountain, on the right. Can't decide whether to stay in town or out in the bush? If you're confused about where to stay and how much to pay, Maya Mountain might be the answer. Maya Mountain is in a quiet area, but it's less than a mile from San Ignacio, on a paved road. Want comfortable, family-friendly accommodations with several rate options, lots of tours available, and extras like a swimming pool? That's also Maya Mountain. Bart and Suzi Mickler, Americans who have lived in Belize since the 1980s, have done a good job putting together something for just about everyone except those wanting the top-of-the-line jungle lodge experience or a party-hardy spot (there's no bar). In summer the lodge runs educational programs. The restaurant serves healthful meals at moderate prices. Cottages and rooms are now air-conditioned. Rates: Cottages and a two-room suite are US\$119 double (\$99 off-season), rooms are US\$99 and modest rooms with private baths \$59 double in-season (449 to \$79 off-season). Rates don't include 10% service charge or 9% hotel tax. There also is a selection of discount deals and package plans.

★★ **Aguada Hotel & Restaurant**, Aguada St., (P.O. Box 133), San Ignacio; tel. 501-804-3609; e-mail aguada@btl.net www.aguadahotel.com Across the highway from La Loma Luz hospital. This little motel — just east of San Ignacio in Santa Elena — is a real find. You can stay here in a clean, modern room with air-conditioning for around US\$40 to \$50 double. The 15 rooms — some new ones were added on the second floor back — are not large, but it has a swimming pool. The café is a friendly, casual place serving Belizean and American dishes at US\$4 to \$8 for a full meal. The Aguada is for sale for US\$880,000.

★ **Falconview Hostel**, 2964 Pluto St. (off Mile 66 1/2 Western Hwy.), Hillview, Santa Elena; tel. 501-663-5580; e-mail hillviewhacienda@yahoo.com. Email or call for directions. This is one of Belize's few true hostels. It's run by Ray Auxillou, a Canadian by birth and a pioneer of tourism on Caye Caulker, who is one of the real characters in Belize. Rates US\$9 per person.

BENQUE VIEJO AREA

★★★★ **Mopan River Resort**, Benque Viejo del Carmen, Cayo; tel. 501-823-2047, fax 823-3272, e-mail mopanriver@btl.net www.mopanriverresort.com Closed July-October. The valu-o-meter got turned up to wow in Cayo when this all-inclusive opened in 1999. Some visitors complain that Belize hotel rates seem reasonable enough, but at checkout the total tab is lot higher than expected, after adding the price of meals, drinks, transfers, tours, tax, and service charges. But here, owners Jay and Pamela Picon deliver almost everything for one price: transfers from your arrival flight in Belize City, room, all meals, daily tours (including trips to Tikal, Caracol and Barton Creek cave, plus kayaking on the Macal River, though not admission fees), local beer and drinks, and even tips and taxes. And that one price isn't a budget-breaker, either, starting at less than US\$209 per person per day (based on a 7-day stay.) No tipping is allowed. Guests are responsible only for site admission fees, visa/border fees,



Jay and Pam Picon of Mopan River

departure taxes, usually adding up to about US\$70 a week. Fact is, it may be the best upmarket deal on the mainland. The location is a bit, well, unexpected, across the Mopan River from the back streets of old Benque, but once you've taken the short ferry ride to the resort's coconut palm-studded grounds, you're in your own private paradise. The 12 thatch cabañas are done up in high Belizean style, with cabbage bark wood floors and mahogany cabinets, and they come with most of the modcons, including cable TV, VCR, 24-hour electricity, A/C, some of the best beds in Belize and refrigerators stocked with complimentary soft drinks and Belikin. Three of the cabañas are larger suites, with full kitchens. Dinners usually have a theme such as Thai night, with recipes Pam Picon picked up from cooking courses at the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. Over drinks Jay, who admits to his share of

serious tax problems in the U.S., will regale you with tales of his days as a pilot and head of large U.S. aviation companies. The resort has good security: Guards with Rottweilers patrol after dark. So what's the down side? The location will be a turn-off for those expecting to be in the jungle — this is NOT a jungle lodge. And it's not for those who want to do things entirely on their own, trying different restaurants, heading out on a whim, and staying up late to sample local nightlife. As at many small lodges, the particular mix of guests when you're there has a lot to do with your total experience. There's a swimming pool and a wedding chapel (Pamella is a licensed minister). We recommend you do not swim in the Mopan River here, as it is polluted by discharges from Benque and nearby Guatemala. The resort is for sale for US\$2.8 million.

★★ **Trek Stop**, Benque Rd., San José Succotz Village, Cayo; tel. 501-823-2265; e-mail susa@btl.net, www.thetrekstop.com. 6 miles west of San Ignacio, on the south side of Western Hwy (Benque Rd.). American expats Judy and John Yaeger and their Belizean partners opened this spot in 1998. They own 22 acres, perched beside the highway on a hillside near San José Succotz Village and the Xunantunich Maya ruins. Budget travelers will find cheap sleeps in six cozy, neat-as-a-pin cabins (US\$12 single, US\$20 double), with screened windows, outdoor composting toilets and solar-heated showers. Larger cabins run US\$24 to US\$35, plus additional charges for occupant over two in a cabin. A small butterfly farm and nature center, Tropical Wings, a disc golf course and a restaurant with inexpensive Mexican and Belizean dishes are also here. Camping is permitted; US\$5 per night per person. There's also a common kitchen, and free Wi-Fi. Bikes, kayaks and innertubes are available for rent. Highly recommended for those seeking quality budget accommodations.

JUNGLE LODGES: MACAL AND MOPAN RIVERS

Most of Cayo's lodges are on either the Macal or Mopan rivers. In general, the lodges on the Macal are more upmarket. With some exceptions (Ek 'Tun is one) don't expect to be in a "movie jungle" or rainforest. Most lodges share their locations with cattle ranches or citrus farms and second-growth bush, though the jungle is seldom far away.

★★★★★ **The Lodge at Chaa Creek**, Chial Rd., (P.O. Box 53, San Ignacio, Cayo); tel. 501-824-2037, fax 824-2501; www.chaacreek.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, go 4 3/4 miles west on Benque Rd. (Western Hwy.) and turn left on Chial Rd. (look for signs to Chaa Creek, duPlooy's and Black Rock lodges). Follow signs on this unpaved road 3 1/2 miles to Chaa Creek. Mick and Lucy Fleming started Chaa Creek in 1980 when tourists were almost unknown in Cayo. Over the years, they've expanded, improved and fine-tuned their operation until it has become one of the best run, most-professional operations in all of Central America. Everything works here: The grounds, comprising a total of 365 acres on the Macal River, are beautifully planted and maintained. The 23 large rooms and suites are in thatch cottages, and all have high-quality furnishings set off with Guatemalan wall hangings and bedspreads, the perfect marriage of comfort and exoticism. The honeymoon Treetop Suites, Garden Suites,

Orchid Villa, Spa Villa, Macal Cottage and Sky Room offer more privacy and extra room. A new chef has upped the quality of meals at Chaa Creek. Staffers are friendly, not fawning, and move quickly to solve any problem. There's electricity, plenty of hot water and cold beer, and, if you like, Chaa Creek will sell you a Cuban cigar to enjoy after dinner with your cognac. Recent additions are a fully equipped, modern spa, by far the best in Belize, offering everything from aromatherapy to seaweed wraps, and a new conference and meeting center. You won't run out of things to do here, either. You can visit the Chaa Creek Natural History Centre and Blue Morpho Butterfly Breeding Centre, tour the Rainforest Medicine Trail (formerly Panti Trail) next door, now owned by Chaa Creek, visit a Maya-style cacao plantation and other farming projects, go horseback riding or canoeing, or take one of the many top-notch tours offered by Chaa Creek Expeditions. Chaa Creek helped reintroduce howler monkeys to the Macal River Valley. Birding is excellent, with some 250 species spotted on the grounds. Chaa Creek has won a number of environmental and other awards. Rates: Rooms US\$230 to \$300 double in-season, US\$ 350 to \$575, with small reductions off-season. Rates include breakfast and are plus 9% tax and 10% service. Meals are extra: US\$32 dinner year-round, plus 10% tax and 10% service. Packages and summer specials are available. Transfers from the international airport are US\$135 one-way for up to four persons. For those who want the Chaa Creek experience at a Filene's Basement price (US\$110 double including breakfast and dinner, plus 20% service and tax), the Macal River Safari Camp has 10 small "cabinettes" on platforms, and Belizean-style meals.

★★★★ **duPlooy's Lodge**, San Ignacio, Cayo; tel. 501-824-3101, fax 824-3301; www.duplooy.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, go 4 3/4 miles west on Benque Rd. (Western Hwy.) and turn left on Chial Rd. (look for signs to Chaa Creek, duPlooy's and Black Rock lodges). Follow signs on this unpaved road about 4 miles to duPlooy's. Since it opened in the late 1980s, duPlooy's has been seen by some to play second fiddle to its Macal River neighbor, Chaa Creek. But that's unfair, because duPlooy's has its own style — a little more casual, a little more oriented to birders and tree-huggers and nature lovers. On part of the lodge's 60 acres about 10 miles from San Ignacio, Judy and the late Ken duPlooy created something very special: the Belize Botanic Gardens, with plantings of some 2,500 trees from all over Belize and Central America. An orchid house, with some 120 species of orchids from all over Belize, is also on the grounds. For most guests, the focus of the lodge is the remarkable deck, which rambles 200 feet off from the bar. From vantage points on the long walkway beside the Macal River, you're sure to see a variety of birds, iguanas and other wildlife. Bring your camera and binoculars. About 300 species of birds have been identified within five miles of the lodge. In accommodations, duPlooy's offers something for anyone. For the top-of-the-market segment, duPlooy's has three large detached bungalows, each with king-size bed, fridge and delicious hammock with a view down the hill to the Macal River, for US\$185 double. Also for families or groups, there's the casita, a two-story house for US\$275. There are also nice lodge rooms with two queen-sized beds, US\$145 double. The River House has three and four bedroom family suites for US\$225 to \$275; the entire seven-bedroom house is US\$450. Rates

are plus 9% tax and 10% service. Regardless of lodging, a full meal plan is an extra US\$40 per person. Note that duPlooy's does not serve beef, due to what the owners consider is rainforest deforestation associated with cattle ranching, but it does serve pork, chicken and seafood, along with vegetarian dishes. The lodge also has a good selection of tours to Cayo and Petén sites. Package plans of from three to seven nights including meals, transfers from Belize City and tours are available. Off-season specials also are available.

★★★ + **Ek'Tun Lodge**, Macal River, tel. 501-820-3002; e-mail ektun@hughes.net, www.ektunbelize.com Directions: From San Ignacio, go 4 3/4 miles west on Benque Rd. (Western Hwy.) and turn left on Chial Rd. (look for signs to Chaa Creek, duPlooy's and Black Rock lodges). Follow signs toward Black Rock for about 6 miles. You cannot get all the way to Ek 'Tun by road, as there is no bridge across the Macal River. Ek 'Tun meets guests in San Ignacio or at the international airport, bringing them by car to the river, where they cross to the lodge on a skiff. Make arrangements in advance. Do you want a deluxe bed-and-breakfast type experience, but with cabaña accommodations and personalized attention and home-cooked meals? Prefer a remote setting that really looks like you're in the jungle? Like to swim in one of the most beautiful natural swimming pools in Belize, with little but howler monkeys to keep you company? Want to hike and explore nearby caves, rivers and rainforest? Then Ek 'Tun may be for you. Over several years, owner Phyllis Dart helped create a beautiful small lodge along the far reaches of the Macal River, about 12 miles upstream from San Ignacio. The two "rustically elegant" cottages can each sleep up to five. Hand built in the thatch Mayan style, with lots of mahogany and custom furniture, each cottage has a large main room with a bed and bath with hot and cold water on the main floor, plus a loft with two beds on the second floor. Although the cottages have electrical wiring and the lodge has a generator, there is no electricity in the cottages; kerosene lamps provide light. Nearby are miles of hiking and horseback trails, river beaches and a stunning mineral water natural swimming pool. Birding here is excellent, and the serious birder is almost sure to add a number of rare species to the life list. Howler monkeys also frequent the area. Phyllis, who can be a little eccentric, calls the cooking at Ek 'Tun "guerrilla gourmet" featuring healthful Belize and international dishes with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. Rates: US\$246 double including breakfast and dinner, plus 9% hotel tax and 10% service. There is a three-night minimum. Transportation (up to four people) from San Ignacio is US\$50 and US\$90 from the international airport near Belize City. Various tours are offered, starting at US\$30, and package plans are available. With the lodge having only two cabañas, advance reservations of up to six months may be needed, especially during peak periods. And do keep in mind that this is indeed an intimate lodge. Your experience here may partly depend on how you relate to the few other guests, and also to Phyllis. No children under 18.

★★ **Crystal Paradise**, Crysto Rey Village (Mail: P.O. Box 126, San Ignacio, Cayo); tel./fax 501-824-2772; e-mail cparadise@btl.net www.crystalparadise.com Directions: From San Ignacio, take the Cristo Rey Rd. about 4 miles to Crystal

Paradise. The lodge also has an office in San Ignacio, on Savannah St. This is one of the few lodges in Cayo owned and operated by native-born Belizeans, in this case by the Tut family (pronounced Toot). Many of the numerous Tut family pitch in and help at the lodge, which is located near the village of Cristo Rey on the Macal River. You likely will be greeted by one of the junior Tuts. Mama and daughters do the cooking. Several of the sons are guides. With, or without? That's the question: Do you want a cabaña with a thatch roof, or a simpler and cheaper room without? Either way, you get a private bath with hot and cold water, ceiling fan and 24-hour electricity. The Tuts offer horseback riding (US\$35 per person for a half day), mountain bikes to rent, and a variety of tours. Rates: thatch cabañas, US\$105 to \$125 double; regular roof cabañas, US\$85 double, all including breakfast and dinner. Rates are plus 9% hotel tax. Off-season specials and packages are available.

★★ **Cohune Palms River Cabanas**, Bullet Tree Falls; tel. 501-824-0166; www.cohunepalms.com. This moderately priced lodge has six thatched cabañas set among palms on the Mopan River. We get very positive reports about it. Have your questions about El Pilar and other nearby Maya sites answered by the co-owner, Bevin Waight, an American anthropologist who originally came to Belize on an archeological dig. The open-air restaurant serves Belizean dishes using local ingredients (dinner US\$12). Rates US\$79 double in-season, US\$69 off-season, plus 9% tax. Free transport from San Ignacio.

Camping/RV Campgrounds

Cayo has more camping options than any other area of Belize. Here is a sampling. For other places that allow camping, ask locally. A number of the hotels and lodges in the area will permit overnight camping or RV parking. (We do not rate campgrounds on our star system.)

Caesar's Place, Mile 60, Western Hwy., Cayo; tel. 501-824-2341, fax 824-3449; e-mail guesthouse@belizegifts.com. Tent and RV camping available. Caesar's Place also has hotel rooms.

Clarissa Falls, Mile 70 1/2, Western Hwy. (Mail: P.O. Box 44, San Ignacio, Cayo); tel. 501-824-3916; e-mail clarifalls@btl.net; www.clarissafalls.com. This popular Belizean-owned cabaña colony on the Mopan River (see above) also allows camping, at US\$7.50 per person. RVs and trailers permitted, too.

Inglewood Camping Grounds, Mile 68 1/4, Western Hwy. (Benque Rd.), tel. 501-824-3555; www.inglewoodcampinggrounds.com. A newer, more complete camping option with water and electric hook-ups and a dump station is on the Western Highway just west of San Ignacio. Inglewood offers tent camping with hot and cold showers, rustic cabañas and hook-ups for RVs. US\$7 per person for tent camping space, US\$15 for RV camping with water, plus BZ\$0.50 per kilowatt for electricity. Hot showers and sanitary dumping, no charge.

MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE LODGING

★★★★★ **Blancaneaux Lodge**, Mountain Pine Ridge (Mail: P.O. Box B, Central Farm, Cayo); tel. 501- 824-3878, fax 824-3919, or in the U.S., tel. 800-746-3743; e-mail info@blancaneaux.com www.blancaneauxlodge.com Directions: From San Ignacio, go 12 1/2 miles to the entrance to the Mountain Pine Ridge reserve or go by way of the Pine Ridge Rd. from Georgeville, then 4 1/2 miles (watch for sign) and turn on dirt road, approx. 1/2 mile to the lodge. You also can fly here via Blancaneaux's private plane, as the lodge has an airstrip. Francis Ford Coppola ought to win a sixth Oscar for his incredible lodge, to add to the collection he won for the Godfather movies and other parts of his oeuvre. Coppola has said Belize reminds him of the verdant jungles of the Philippines, where he filmed *Apocalypse Now*, the movie that best caught the crazed atmosphere of the Vietnam war. In 1981, he bought an abandoned lodge, spent a fortune on fixing it up and reopened it in 1993. Mexican architect Manolo Mestre created the jungle chic look, and Francis and Eleanor Coppola themselves chose the Mexican and Guatemalan furnishings for the villas and cabañas. The result is simply one of the most extraordinary lodges in the world. It seems impossible, but Blancaneaux looks better and better each time we visit, even considering the loss of a number of pine trees due to Southern Pine Beetle blight. The grounds are beautifully maintained, with native flowers accenting pathways, grass areas are manicured to the point you could play croquet on them (and indeed there is a croquet lawn.) On our last two stopovers, we stayed in the villas, where we dreamed about selling that screenplay to Hollywood. The villas have two huge bedrooms. They look even larger than they are, because the thatch roofs soar more than two stories high. Each has a screen deck area with views of the Privassion River. The tiled Japanese-style baths are large and special soaps and lotions are complimentary. Between the two bedrooms is a great room with kitchen and an unscreened deck (mosquitoes are only rarely a problem in the Pine Ridge.) Note that getting about Blancaneaux's hilly grounds requires climbing many steps up and down. The regular cabañas, though far less spacious and luxurious than the villas, are pleasant for a couple, especially with their new decks and recently remodeled bathrooms. They're also less of a burden on your credit card, at US\$250 to \$325 in-season (US\$215 to \$225 May 1-Nov. 1) as opposed to US\$450, double occupancy, or US\$575 for four people, for the villas in-season (US\$550 off-season). Mr. Coppola's personal villa is US\$650 double (US\$600 off-season). All rates are plus 9% hotel tax and 10% service. Included is a continental breakfast. The lodge has 24-hour electricity provided by a hydroelectric plant. Staffers can enjoy satellite TV in their rooms, but nothing so pedestrian is available in the guest lodging. The dining room in the main lodge building is comfortably upscale. The Italian dishes in the restaurant are excellent, if a little pricey, and gradually a wider variety of choices has been added, a boon to those staying for more than a few days. You can even get real espresso and pizza from a wood-burning pizza oven. Most of the fruits and vegetables served are grown in the lodge's organic gardens. Wines from the Niebaum Coppola Estate Winery in Napa Valley are available. When you're in the bar, just off the lobby, note the slate bar top carved by the Garcia sisters. In the winter, the fireplace in the bar adds a cozy touch when nights drop into the low 50s. The hotel and restaurant service is excellent. Many tours are available. Coppola also operates the Turtle Inn in

Placencia and La Lancha near Tikal in Guatemala.

★★★★ **Hidden Valley Inn**, Mountain Pine Ridge, P.O. Box 170, Belmopan; tel. 501-822-3320, fax 822-3334; www.hiddenvalleynn.com Directions: From San Ignacio, go 12 1/2 miles on Cristo Rey Rd. to the entrance to the Mountain Pine Ridge reserve, (or go by way of the Pine Ridge Rd. from Georgeville), then 4 miles (watch for sign to Hidden Valley Falls and Inn) and turn left on dirt road to the lodge. With its thousands of acres of surrounding property, private waterfalls and great birding, Hidden Valley Inn always has had the potential to be one of the best lodges in Belize. But, lacking attention, Hidden Valley had been in a decline for years. Now, with new ownership (the Roe family, who also are involved in the SunBreeze in San Pedro, the Biltmore in Belize City and who have many other interests in Belize) and new management, Hidden Valley is moving back to top form. The 12 private cottages, each with a bedroom (queens or two doubles), living room and tiled bath, are not your traditional thatch but marl daub with zinc roofs. They've been spruced up a bit. All have salt tile floors and comfortable furnishings, and the fireplaces come in handy in the winter. There's a beautiful swimming pool and a hot tub, in a grand setting by the side of the main lodge building. On a recent visit, we had several delicious meals in the comfortable lodge dining room. It's wonderful to wake up early in the invigorating air of the Pine Ridge and walk some of the trails around the lodge. I'm told there are 90 miles of trails, several leading to waterfalls that are open only to Hidden Valley guests. Honeymooners or even old married folks can reserve Butterfly Falls or other falls for your own private day at a waterfall, complete with champagne. You can also walk through a small coffee finca — the lodge grows and roasts its own coffee. Yes, many of the Mountain Pines in this area have succumbed to the beetle infestation, but the pines are quickly regenerating. I saw many that are already eight or ten feet tall. The birding is actually better than ever here, as it's now much easier to spot the little feathered friends. A sizable percentage of Hidden Valley Inn guests are birders, who want to add to their life lists rare birds such as the Orange-breasted Falcon, King Vulture and Keel-billed Motmot. Rates at Hidden Valley: US\$185 double Nov.-April, US\$150 rest of year (higher rates during Christmas), plus 9% tax and 10% service. The meal plan is US\$45 per day per person. Transfers for up to four from Belize City are US\$175, or US\$81 from San Ignacio. Packages are available, and the hotel offers many tours and trips.

★★★ + **Five Sisters Lodge**, Mountain Pine Ridge (Mail: P.O. Box 173, San Ignacio, Cayo); tel. 501-820-4005, fax 820-4024; or in U.S. tel. 800-447-2931; e-mail fivesisterslodge@hughes.net; www.fivesisterslodge.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, go 12 1/2 miles on Cristo Rey Rd. to the entrance to the Mountain Pine Ridge reserve, (or go by way of the Pine Ridge Rd. from Georgeville), then 4 1/2 miles (watch for sign) and turn right on dirt road, approx. 1 mile to Five Sisters. This lodge is on same spur road as Blancaneaux. Some say Five Sisters plays second banana to its neighbor, Blancaneaux, and in a few ways it does, but if you're looking for a romantic spot at a reasonable price, rather than a splurge at an extraordinary lodge, you may prefer Five Sisters. It's less luxe than Blancaneaux, true, but then its rates for lodging

and meals are considerably lower. The setting, above the five small waterfalls in the Privassion River which give the lodge its name, is certainly as beautiful as Blancaneaux's, though the grounds may not be quite as painstakingly cared for. There are 14 cabañas in the pine woods, all with bay-thatch roofs and mahogany interiors. There's also a lovely riverside house, owned separately, available for guest stays. The food is tasty Belizean fare, with casually friendly service. The restaurant and bar are in the main building, with a deck featuring great river views. Rates: regular cabañas, US\$105 double Dec. 1-Apr. 30, US\$85 rest of year. Rates are plus 9% tax. Suites and larger cabañas are priced higher. The riverside villa is US\$250 in winter, US\$200 in summer. Meals US\$4 to \$8 for breakfast or lunch, US\$10 to \$17 dinner. Packages, including lodging, meals, transfers, tours and gratuities, are available.

Dining in Cayo

If you're staying at jungle lodge, you'll probably take most of your meals there. Chaa Creek, Blancaneaux, Hidden Valley Inn, duPlooy's, Caves Branch and other lodges have excellent, if somewhat pricey, meals. San Ignacio is the center for dining in Cayo, with a host of small, generally inexpensive restaurants.

Sanny's Grill. On a good night, this is one of the best restaurants in Cayo. With a hot grill and sizzling spices, this restaurant transforms Belizean basics, like chicken or pork chops, beyond standard fare. Try the lime-thyme red snapper, along with the tastiest, spiciest rice and beans in the Cayo. Eat them in the casual dining room or out on the covered deck. In a residential area off Benque Road, the place can be hard to find after dark. 23rd St., heading west of San Ignacio, look for sign just beyond the Texaco station. Tel. 501-824-2988. Moderate to Expensive. Open for dinner only.

Hannah's. Hannah's is one of the most popular restaurants in town. The facilities aren't fancy - you eat on simple tables in what is essentially a large shed with the front open to the street - but service is cheerful, and the food cheap and well-prepared. It serves excellent salads, tasty burritos and delicious Indian curries for around US\$4 to \$12. 5 Burns Ave., San Ignacio, tel. 501-824-3014. Inexpensive to Moderate.

Serendib. In 2006 Belize's only Sri Lankan restaurant changed owners, but you can still get authentic curries. 27 Burns Ave. Closed Sunday. Inexpensive to Moderate.

Eva's. Long-time owner Bob Jones has sold Eva's, but he is staying on to help the new owner for a while. This Cayo institution serves as a restaurant (food is pretty good), internet café, information center, trading post, tour office and meeting hall. 22 Burns Ave., tel. 501-824-2267. Inexpensive.

Hode's Place Bar & Grill. Bigger than it looks from the outside, with a large shaded patio and swings and slides for the kids at the back, Hode's is popular for cold beers, karaoke, and billiards. It has good food in large portions and at modest prices.

Savannah Rd., next to soccer stadium. Inexpensive to Moderate.

Benny's Kitchen. This little open-air restaurant near Xunantunich is a local find. Most items on the menu are US\$5 or less, including *chilimole* (chicken with mole sauce) and *escabeche* (onion soup with chicken). San José Succotz Village, across Benque Rd., from ferry to Xunantunich, tel. 501-823-2541. Inexpensive.

Ambergris Caye

Where to Stay -- North, South, In-Town?

Probably the biggest decision you'll make about Ambergris Caye is where to stay. We're not talking about a specific hotel but about the general area. The area you choose will determine to a great degree the experience you have on the island. You have four basic options:

- 1) in the town of San Pedro
- 2) just to the south of San Pedro near the airstrip, within walking distance of town
- 3) on the south end, beyond easy walking distance to town
- 4) on the north end of the island above the channel.

There is no one "best" place to stay. Each of these four areas has advantages and disadvantages. Which area you choose depends on what you want from your vacation. If you're looking for privacy and the feeling of being away from it all, consider the south end or the north end of the island. If you prefer easy access to restaurants, nightlife, shops and other activities, you'll likely be happier in San Pedro town or just to the south. There's little or no advantage to any one area in terms of beaches, although the beaches in town tend to be more crowded with boats than those outside of town.

HEART OF TOWN: Hotels in the town of San Pedro, with a few notable exceptions, are older spots, among them the original tourist hotels on the island. They are, again with a few exceptions, less expensive digs. If you're looking to save a buck or two, this may be the place for you. You also will be right in the heart of things, no more than a few sandy blocks from some of the best restaurants, bars, shops and dive operations on the island. Party animals will want to stay here or just the south of town. Accommodations here include **Rubie's, Holiday Hotel, Spindrift, Lily's, Martha's, San Pedrano, Mayan Princess, Hotel del Rio** and **The Tides**. More expensive options in town include **The Phoenix, Aqua Marina Suites** and **Paradise Villas**.

AIRSTRIP SOUTH: If you want a larger variety of moderate and upscale lodging but still want to be within walking distance of the attractions of San Pedro Town, think about staying at the south edge of town and the area just to the south of town. The San Pedro airstrip is here, but you should have few or no problems with airport noise, since the planes are small one- and two-engine prop jobs, and there are no flights after dark. This is a good compromise between the activity of town and the remoteness of the north end and far south end. Among the hotels here are **SunBreeze, The Palms, Belizean Reef Suites, Ramon’s Village, Steve & Becky’s Cute Little Hotel, Exotic Caye, Coconuts, Coral Bay Villas, Caribbean Villas, Belize Yacht Club and Changes in Latitudes.**

SOUTH BEACH: Although most of this area is beyond a quick walk to town, this a major growth area for tourism on the island. Some of the nicer upmarket hotels are located here, and more are on the way. An increasing number of restaurants and amenities also are located here. At the far end, you’re two to three miles from San Pedro, so for visits to town you’ll need to rent a golf cart (US\$60 or \$65 for 24 hours), ride a bike (some hotels offer them free to guests), take a taxi (about US\$5 to town) or take a hotel shuttle, if available. Among the choices here are **Villas at Banyan Bay, Grand Colony, Banana Beach, Mata Rocks, Royal Palm, Victoria House, Caribe Island Resort, Royal Caribbean and Sunset Beach.**

NORTH AMBERGRIS: By all accounts, the area north of “the River” – a narrow channel of water separating the south and north ends of the island – is where much of Ambergris Caye’s growth will occur over the next decade or two. Houses, hotels, and even a restaurant or two are going up here. At present, though, access is limited by the fact that there are only two ways to get to the north end: One is by boat, usually a water taxi, either scheduled or on-demand. The other is via a bridge, new in early 2006, open only to pedestrians, bikes and golf carts, and then via a hike or ride on a narrow path to the various resorts and villas. Bring plenty of bug spray for use when you’re away from the water. Crossing the bridge costs US\$2.50 each way for a golf cart, US\$1 for a pedestrian. Water taxis are US\$5 to \$20 per person for most destinations.

Accommodations on the north end include **White Sands Cove, El Pescador, Capricorn, Captain Morgan’s, Belizean Shores, Seascape Villas, Journey’s End, Azul Resort, Mata Chica, Xamen Ek, La Perla del Caribe, Portofino, Costa Maya, Blue Reef, Salamander, Sueño del Mar and Tranquility Bay.**

Not on Ambergris but close by, off the back side of the island, is **Cayo Espanto** and on Caye Chapel, the **Caye Chapel Island Resort.**



Barrier Reef Drive in San Pedro Town

Here are approximate distances, in miles, of hotels and resorts from Central Park in San Pedro Town, roughly the center of town.

SOUTH END

Sunset Beach Resort	2.5 miles south
Caribe Island Resort	2.3 miles south
Victoria House	1.8 miles south
Royal Palm	1.5 miles south
Mata Rocks	1.4 miles south
Banana Beach Resort	1.4 miles south
Grand Colony	1.3 miles south
The Villas at Banyan Bay	1.2 miles south

AIRSTRIP SOUTH

Xanadu	1 mile south
Caribbean Villas	1 mile south
Coral Bay Villas	1 mile south
Coconuts Caribbean	.9 miles south
Corona del Mar	.9 miles south
Exotic Caye Beach Resort	.8 miles south
Belize Yacht Club	.7 miles south
Changes in Latitudes	.6 miles south
Pedro's Backpacker's Inn	.6 miles south
Ramon's Village	.4 miles south
Steve & Becky's	.4 miles south
The Palms	.4 miles south
Belizean Reef Suites	.3 miles south
Sunbreeze Hotel	.3 miles south

IN TOWN

Ruby's	.2 miles south
Holiday Hotel	.2 miles south
Coral Beach Hotel	.2 miles south
Spendrift Hotel	.1 miles south
Martha's Hotel	.1 miles south
Mayan Princess	.0 miles
Hotel SanPedrano	.0 miles
Lily's	.0 miles
Tomas Hotel	.0 miles

Conch Shell	.1 miles north
Aqua Marina Suites	.1 miles north
Paradise Villas	.3 miles north
The Phoenix	.3 miles north
Blue Tang Inn	.4 miles north
The Tides Beach Resort	.5 miles north
Seven Seas	.6 miles north
Hotel del Rio	.7 miles north

NORTH AMBERGRIS

White Sands Cove	2.8 miles north
El Pescador Lodge	2.9 miles north
Capricorn Resort	3.0 miles north
Capt. Morgan's Retreat	3.1 miles north
Belizean Shores	3.2 miles north
Seascape Villas	3.4 miles north
Journey's End Resort	3.9 miles north
Caye Villas	4.6 miles north
SunDiver/Mata Grande	4.7 miles north
Azul Resort	5.1 miles north
Mata Chica	5.2 miles north
Xaman Ek	5.6 miles north
La Perla del Caribe	5.7 miles north
Portofino Resort	6.0 miles north
Costa Maya Reef Resort	6.7 miles north
Blue Reef	8.1 miles north
Salamander	10.6 miles north
Sueño del Mar	11.5 miles north
Tranquility Bay	12 miles north

LODGING TYPES

You have several different types of lodging from which to choose on Ambergris Caye:

Condotels: These are condominiums run like a hotel. Units are individually owned and rented to visitors by on-site management that typical takes 40 to 60% of the gross. They have most of the same amenities as a regular hotel, except usually not a restaurant. Most condotels on Ambergris Caye are not the large sprawling condo complexes found in Florida or Hawaii. They are small, only two or three stories high, with from one to three dozen units. Typically they have a mix of one- and two-bedroom units; a few have three-bedroom suites. The advantage of a condotel is that you get a

lot more space, including a kitchen, for a price not much more than for a regular hotel. The drawback is that most condotels do not offer the range of services of a hotel, such as room service. Condotels range in price from under US\$100 to over US\$400 a night. Among the condotels on Ambergris Caye are **Villas at Banyan Bay, Belizean Shores, Coral Bay Villas, Mayan Princess, Grand Colony, and Xanadu.**

Beachside cabañas and cottages: These come in two flavors – thatch and not. Thatch cabañas have thatch roofs and palapa-style walls, usually over concrete block or wood frames. Among resorts with thatch cabañas (in some cases, only some units are thatch) are **Salamander Hideaway, Portofino, Captain Morgan’s, Hotel del Rio, Ramon’s Village, Exotic Caye, Xanadu** and **Victoria House.** Other properties have more traditional wood-frame or concrete cottages or cabins. Beachside cabañas are available from around US\$75 to more than US\$600 a night.

Hotels: Nearly all hotels on the island are personality inns. Most are small, under 30 rooms, and all are three stories or lower. Hotels come in all price ranges, from US\$15 to over US\$400 a night. Nearly all the hotels, except for a few budget places, are on the water.

Privately owned houses for vacation rental: Dozens of private homes and villas are available on Ambergris Caye for weekly rental. Rates start at around US\$700 a week and go up to US\$6,000 or more.

Longer-term rentals: Monthly rentals of houses and apartments are available, starting at around US\$300 for a small apartment, though most rentals are US\$500 to \$1,000 and up. The best way to find a rental is to ask around in person.

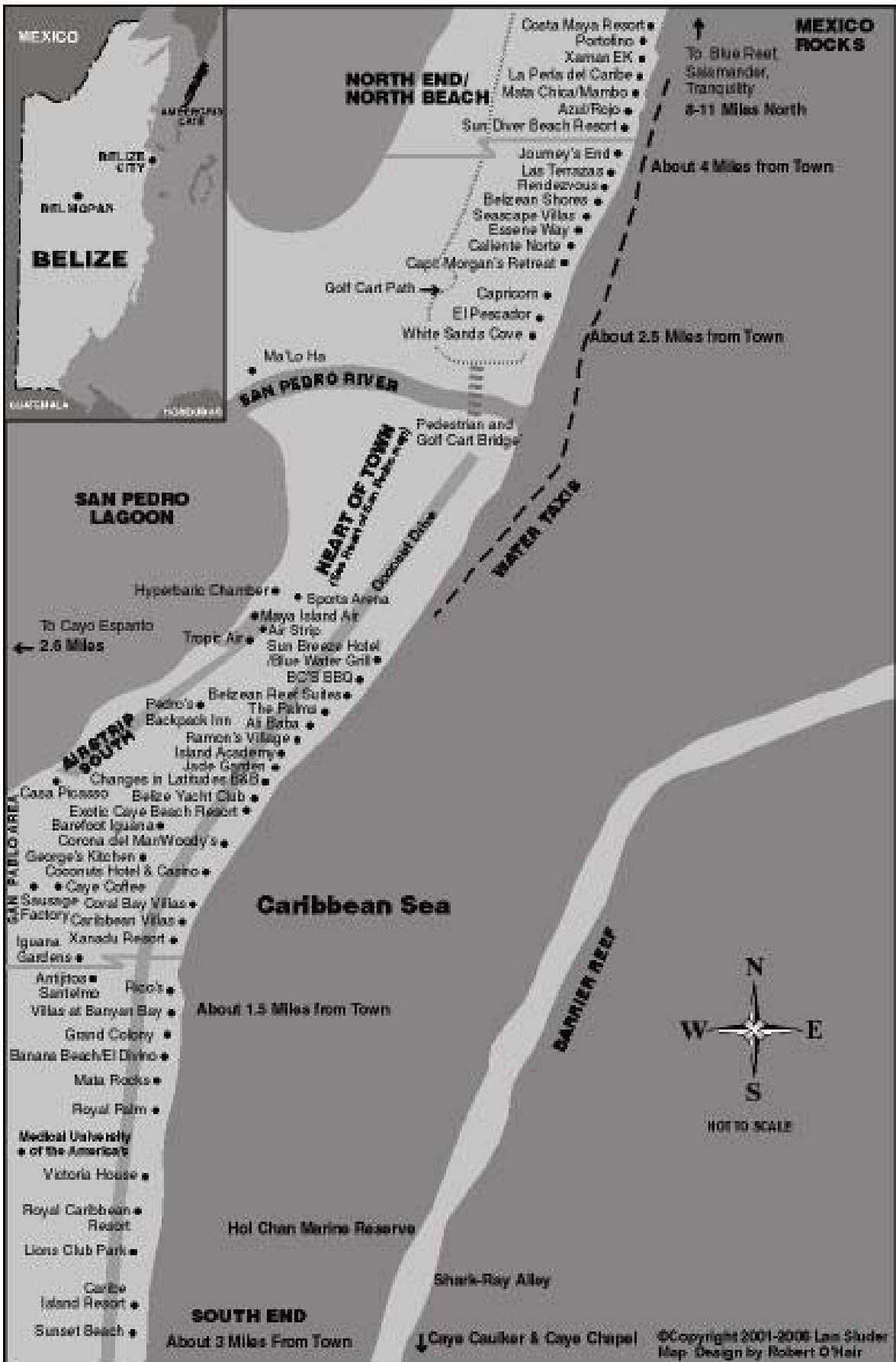
CAMPING

There are currently no campgrounds on Ambergris Caye, and camping, unless on your own land or on other private land with permission, is prohibited. Caye Caulker has a small private campground, and primitive camping is available on some outlying cayes, including Half Moon Caye.

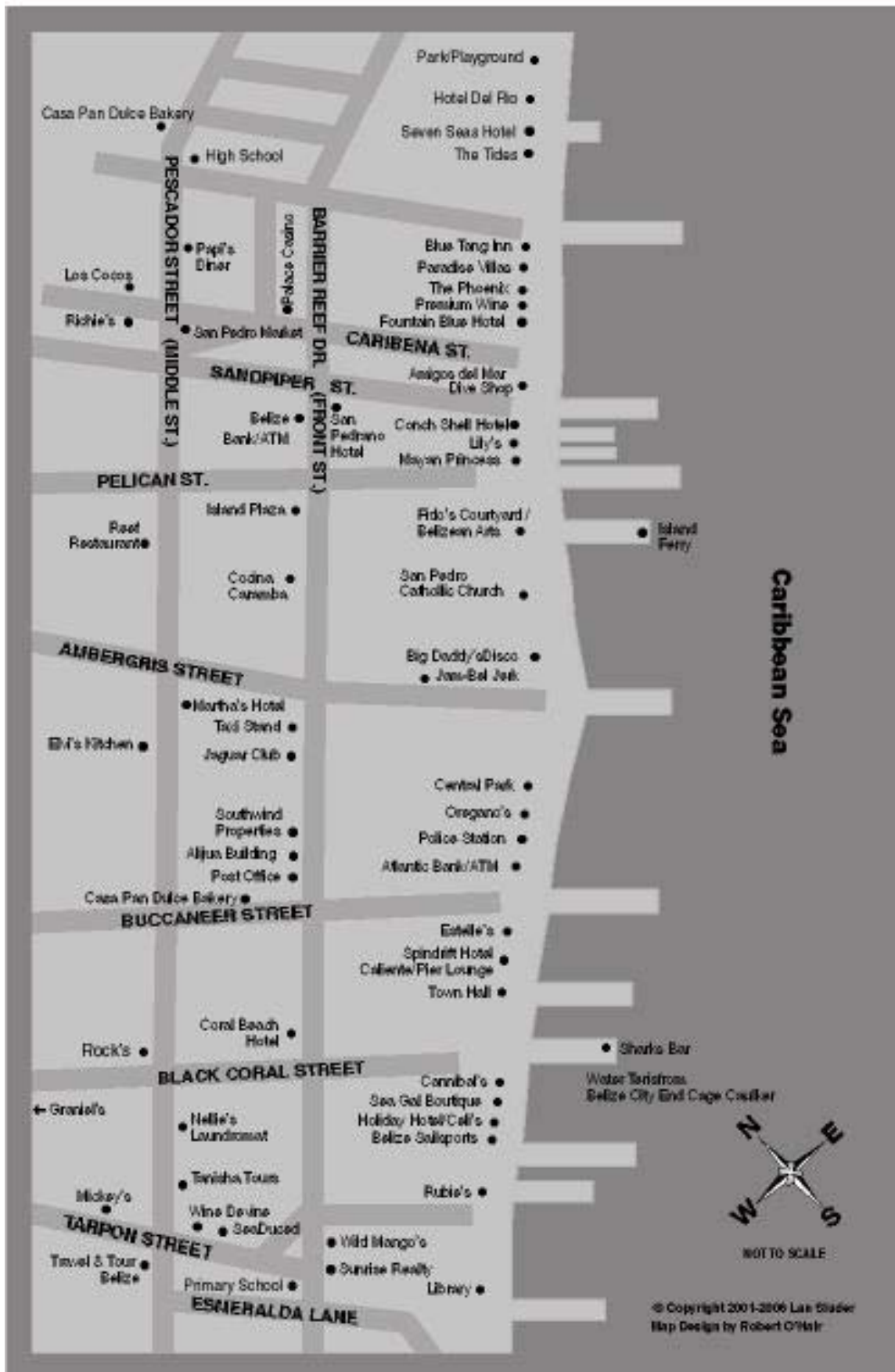
Your Lodging Choices

These hotel reviews are candid and are not influenced by advertising (we accept none) or by comps. On a few occasions we have accepted discounted or free lodging at a hotel we could not otherwise afford, if voluntarily offered by the hotel, but do not solicit such, often pay regular rates and absolutely never provide a positive review in exchange for freebies. They are written to help you, the reader, make the best choice for your needs and your budget. Keep in mind that hotel reviews, like movie reviews,

AMBERGRIS CAYE



HEART OF SAN PEDRO



are matters of opinion. Your mileage may vary.

Also, keep in mind that things change – rates, amenities, management. We routinely check with properties for current and projected rates. Note that rates for the Christmas, New Year’s and Easter holidays may be higher than those shown here, and minimum stays may be required for those prime holiday periods.

SAN PEDRO TOWN

(Listed from the north to south. The hotels just north of town, including Hotel Del Rio, Seven Seas and The Tides, are about a 10 minute walk along the beach to town.)

★★ **Hotel Del Rio.** Boca Del Rio Drive, tel./fax 501-226-2286; www.ambergriscaye.com/hoteldelrio/index.html. At this small seafront operation, you have the choice of a big cabaña, a small cabaña, less-expensive rooms in a Mexican-style building and even more modest rooms in a guesthouse. This is not a fancy resort, there’s no air-conditioning in most units, but it has personality some other places lack. In-season doubles are US\$45 to \$140, off-season US\$30 to \$100. Bottom line: Worth considering if you’re watching your pennies and want a bit of thatch ambiance.

★★★ **The Tides Beach Resort.** Boca Del Rio Drive, tel. 501-226-2283, fax 226-3797; www.ambergriscaye.com/tides/. Owned and operated by San Pedranos Patojo and Sabrina Paz and with Patojo’s Scuba Center on-site, this 12-unit hotel focuses on divers, and you’ll often see wet suits and dive gear hanging over the balcony. Though built just a few years ago, with its wood construction and balconied verandas, this three-story hotel has a vaguely colonial era appearance. The rooms are modern enough, though, with fans and pleasant furnishings. Fridges are available at extra cost. No restaurant, but several good ones are nearby, and there’s a tiny beach bar. Off-season rates are US\$85 with A/C, and US\$125 in-season. Dive packages also available. Bottom line: Good spot for divers.

★★★ **Blue Tang Inn.** tel. 866-881-1020 or 501-226-2326, fax 226-2358; www.bluetanginn.com. The 14 studio-type suites with kitchens in this three-story blue hotel have been remodeled and upgraded, and there’s a new “cozy” swimming pool. (For those who aren’t divers, a Blue Tang is a colorful tropical fish seen around the barrier reef.) Rates US\$110 to \$170 off-season, US\$135 to \$185 November through April, including continental breakfast. Bottom-line: Quality suites accommodation at north edge of town.

[TOO NEW TO RATE, anticipate ★★★★★+] **The Phoenix.** Barrier Reef Dr.; tel. 501-226-3414; www.ambergriscaye.com/phoenix. A new beachfront condo resort is rising at the

north end of town, on the site of what used to be a retreat for Catholic nuns and later the location of the Paradise Hotel. The 30 condo units are of nice size. The two-bedroom, two-bath units are around 1600 sq. ft., with kitchens, broadband internet and all the upscale amenities. There are two swimming pools. Rates not yet set.

★★★ **Paradise Villas.** Barrier Reef Drive, San Pedro. Paradise Villas is an attractive low-rise condo colony at the north end of town. In the past, a complication was that the units were managed and rented by several different companies, plus several owners of one or two units. However, we're told this confusing situation is improving. If you want to stay at Paradise Villas, just contact the agents and see what's available and compare prices. Choose from either one- or two-bedroom condos. The two-bedroom units are not as big as some other two-bedroom suites at island condotels. Though units vary in furnishings and amenities such as whether the air conditioning is just in the bedroom or throughout the units, they are basically similar. There's an attractive seaside pool area, and a small artificial reef at the end of the pier (built by the condo owners) to attract fish for snorkeling. Rates vary among the different agents, but most are in the range of US\$135 to \$200 in-season and US\$90 to \$150 off-season. Paradise Villas, tel. 877-331-9693 or 882-331-9693; www.belizevilla.com. Nellie Gomez Property Management, P. O. Box 143, Pescador Drive, San Pedro Town; tel. 501-226-2087, fax 226-2400; www.nelliesproperty.com. Tradewinds (this travel wholesaler manages 12 Paradise units and has a manager with an office across the street), tel. in the U.S. 800-451-7776, fax 414-258-5336, in Belize tel. 501-226-2822, fax 226-3746; www.tradewindsparadisevillas.com. Bottom line: Comfortable, if slightly confusing, condo colony.

★★ **Lily's Hotel.** Barrier Reef Drive, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2059, fax 226-2623; www.ambergriscaye.com/lilys/index.html. This family-run budget favorite has been around for more than 35 years, recently going upmarket a bit with air-conditioning and some remodeling. Regulars prefer the seafront rooms. Those on the second-floor have breezy verandas with sea views, while the first-floor rooms are for the gregarious who like to gab with passersby. Rooms are smallish and simple, but all have fridges and comfortable beds. Doubles US\$55 to \$65 off-season, US\$65 to \$75 in-season. Bottom line: An old favorite budget hotel.

★ **San Pedrano.** Barrier Reef Drive, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2054, fax 226-2093. Six-room budget spot near the water. Bottom line: For the budget-minded.

★★★ **Mayan Princess.** Barrier Reef Drive, San Pedro; tel. 800-850-4101 or 501-226-2778, fax 226-2784; www.mayanprincesshotel.com. This three-story, seafront condotel, painted a distinctive coral pink, has 23 large and attractive one-bedroom

suites (king or queen beds) with air conditioning, kitchenettes, phones and cable TV. Rates are a good value at US\$100 double off-season, US\$125 in-season, plus hotel tax and 10% service. Some further discounts may be available at certain times. Dive packages and long-term rates available. Amigos del Mar dive shop is nearby. No pool, but each suite has a balcony with wonderful views of the sea, and the whole atmosphere here is comfortable and homey. Bottom line: Convenient, comfortable suites on the water at reasonable rates.

★★ **Spindrift.** Barrier Reef Drive, San Pedro; tel. 800-688-0161 or 501-226-2174, fax 226-2251; www.AmbergrisCaye.com/spindrift/. This dominating three-story concrete hotel won't win any awards from *Architectural Digest*, but it is on the water in the center of town, with 22 rooms and 2 one-bedroom apartments. All but the cheapest rooms have air-conditioning. Caliente restaurant is on the first floor, and the Pier Lounge at the hotel hosts the "famous chicken drop" at which drinkers bet on where a chicken will poop. Doubles US\$50 to \$85, apartment US\$110, all plus tax and 5% service. Bottom-line: In-town convenience and a good place if you like chickens.

★★ **Coral Beach Hotel.** Barrier Reef, Drive, (P.O. Box 16), San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2013, fax 226-2864; www.coralbeachhotel.com. The 19 rooms at this long-established in-town spot, located on the west side of Barrier Reef Drive, are mostly small and basic, but all have fans and some have air-conditioning. The building has been upgraded a bit. A new branch of Jam-Bel Jerk Pit has opened on the first floor. Rates US\$45 double with fan, US\$60 with A/C off-season, about US\$60-\$70 in-season. Bottom line: Another choice for the budget-minded.

★★★ **Holiday Hotel.** Barrier Reef Drive, San Pedro, tel. 501-226-2014, fax 226-2295; www.ambergriscaye.com/holidayhotel/. This was one of the first hotels on the island, opening June 15, 1965. Built and owned by Celi McCorkle, an island native and near-legend in the hospitality industry, the three-story Holiday Hotel has been well-maintained and remains a pleasant spot convenient to most everything. All rooms have A/C and some have refrigerators. Celi's Restaurant, Celi's Deli and Sea Gal Boutique are in the hotel. Bottom Time dive shop is located on the hotel's dock. Off-season doubles are a bit pricey at US\$95 to \$105, but they only go up about \$10 in-season. Bottom line: A lot like the way island hotels used to be.

★★ **Rubie's** (also known as Ruby's). Barrier Reef Drive, P.O. Box 56, San Pedro, tel. 501-226-2063, fax 226-2434; www.AmbergrisCaye.com/rubys/index.html. This is the favorite of many value-conscious visitors. Rooms in the old wooden building are basic but clean, most with shared baths; those on the street side can be a little noisy. Year-round rates: older rooms with fans and en suite baths, US\$35 double (cheaper single

rooms have shared baths); rooms in a new concrete addition on the ocean side sport A/C and private baths and go for around US\$50 plus tax, still a good value. Good inexpensive breakfasts and light meals in the first-floor restaurant. The hotel is often full. Bottom line: One of the island's best values.

SOUTH EDGE OF TOWN/AIRSTRIP SOUTH:

(Listed from north to south, with those nearest town listed first.)

★★★+ **SunBreeze Beach Hotel.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 14), San Pedro; tel. 800-688-0191 or 501-226-2191, fax 226-2346; www.sunbreeze.net. The SunBreeze always had a great location, just steps from the San Pedro airstrip (but you won't be bothered by airport noise) and within walking distance of most of what there is to do in town. Under manager Julia Edwards, SunBreeze has been upgraded and considerably improved. Most recently a number of the rooms have been refurbished. There's a freshwater pool, above ground but nice. The pool is just steps from the excellent Blue Water Grill, where you can charge your bar and restaurant tab to your room. Many other restaurants are within a few blocks. SunBreeze has 39 large rooms, configured in a two-story motel-style U-shape. Five of them are billed as "premier" with amenities such as Jacuzzi tubs. All have strong air conditioners, telephones, color cable TV and tile floors. The best rooms are the deluxe rooms near the water. SunBreeze is directly on the water, with a dock and an independent dive shop, but there's a seawall and no real swimming beach. A good beach is at Ramon's nearby. The SunBreeze has handicap-accessible rooms, uncommon in Belize. Rates for doubles, in-season, US\$147 to \$178; off-season, US\$127-\$158, plus tax and 5% service. Discounts for direct booking often available, and the SunBreeze does a lot of business with discount agents and travel packagers. Bottom line: Not luxury, but comfortable, spacious, convenient, casual and pleasant.

★★★ **Belizean Reef Suites.** Coconut Drive, San Pedro; tel. 330-544-4302 or 501-226-2582, fax 330-652-0026; www.ambergriscaye.com/bzreef/index.html. Bright white, spic 'n span one-bedroom/one-bath, two-bedroom/two-bath and three-bedroom/three-bath condos, on the sea. This is a popular spot for travelers who want a great location and lots of space. The first-floor units on the water are primo. In some units, there's air conditioning in bedrooms only. No pool, but there's a good beach close by at Ramon's. Rates US\$125 to \$225 off-season, US\$160 to \$245 in-season. Rates plus tax, no service charge. Children under 10 not accepted. Bottom line: Very nice small condotel in a very good location.

★★★★ **The Palms.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 88), San Pedro; tel. 501-226-3322, fax 226-3601; www.belizepalms.com. This three-story condotel on the water has a lot

going for it: 12 attractive and well-decorated condominium apartments plus a small casita near the pool, which is small and on the back side but surrounded by tropical greenery, a sandy beach, and a convenient location at the south edge of town. Rates off-season: one-bedroom condo, US\$138, two-bedroom US\$178 to \$193, with discounts on week or longer stays; in-season: one-bedroom, US\$188, two-bedroom, US\$228 to \$243. Rates plus hotel tax and 10% service charge. US\$23 extra per person over two in the one-bedroom and four in the two-bedroom. Bottom line: Excellent option for a condo vacation.

★★★★ **Ramon's Village**. Coconut Drive, San Pedro; tel. 800-624-4415 or 601-649-1990, fax 601-649-1996; www.ramons.com. Anyone who has heard of San Pedro has probably heard of Ramon's Village, the creation of Ambergris native and pioneering hotel operator Ramon Nuñez. Now American-owned, over the years it has grown from a small, moderately priced collection of thatched cabañas on the beach into a much larger group of multiunit buildings and individual cabañas, with 61 rooms and suites. Rates also have gone up, now being near the top price point on the island, but Ramon's retains its sand-and-thatch ambiance. The resort has one of the better beaches on the island. Certainly, it's the best in or near town, part of the hotel's 500-foot water frontage. A small artificial reef near the 420-foot pier brings fish to snorkelers. The pool is gorgeous, but it's smaller than it looks in the brochures. Ramon's has a room service, a popular bar, a (fairly pricey, not particularly notable) restaurant, and a big dive operation. Rooms vary from okay to gorgeous. They are divided into three basic categories: beach front, seaside and garden view. There also are one- and two-bedroom suites with kitchenettes, including the deluxe 600 square-foot Presidential suite, and several "honeymoon cabañas." All are now air conditioned, but the older units on the backside are pretty basic, dark and risk noise from the road. The location, just south of the airstrip, and a five-minute stroll from town, can't be beat. Ramon's does a first-rate job of marketing, especially to travel agents, and it enjoys one of the highest occupancy rates on the island. The crowd here is usually a little younger and more active than the average at island hotels. Rates vary depending on location and date. In-season, cabañas are US\$175 to \$245 double and suites are US\$205 to \$460. Off-season rates are only a few dollars less. Rates at **Steve & Becky's**, the cottage colony annex across the street, are about US\$145 double year-round. All rates plus tax and 10% service. Bottom line: Popular, well-located, well-run hotel that manages to retain its island ambiance despite expansion and relatively high prices.

★★★+ **Corona Del Mar**. Coconut Drive, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2055, fax 226-2461; www.ambergriscaye.com/coronadelmar. This is a low profile lodging spot, also known as Woody's Wharf after the gregarious founder of the hotel (the property currently is for

sale by the family), but regulars know it offers 12 pleasant rooms and four attractive apartments on the water, at moderate cost. It also has the island's first elevator, but no pool. Off-season rates US\$70 to \$120; in-season US\$90 to \$150, all plus tax and 10% service. Bottom-line: Friendly, homey place and one of the best values on the island.

★+ **Pedro's Backpackers Inn.** Seagrape Drive, San Pedro, tel. 501-226-3825; e-mail www.backpackersbelize.com. This hostel in a frame building south of town isn't on the beach, but it does offer affordable accommodations – 36 single beds with share bath start at US\$10 per person. Four private rooms with A/C, cable and private bath go for US\$55 double in-season and US\$40 in low season. Free DSL internet, and there's a sports bar with pool table and projection (6' x 8') TV. The owner, the inveterate Englishman Peter Lawrence, claims Pedro's has the best pizza in Belize. He also offers this deal: Spend BZ\$50 a person at the bar or restaurant and you can stay free in the hostel. Email Peter for details -- peterlawrencepl@gmail.com. Bottom line: A place for backpackers and penny-pinchers.

★★+ **Changes in Latitudes B&B.** Coconut Drive, San Pedro, tel./fax 501-226-2986, www.AmbergrisCaye.com/latitudes/. With six small but pleasant and very clean rooms on the first level, and the helpful new owners Renita and Cindy upstairs, this is a B&B with a tasty Belizean breakfast (hot entrees include breakfast tacos or Belizean eggs) served in the common room. Every other evening, there are happy hour snacks and drinks served in the courtyard. Guests have 24-hour access to the common room and kitchen. Changes in Latitudes isn't directly on the water, but it's close. Guests have pool privileges at the Belize Yacht Club nearby. The new owners have redecorated all the rooms (all have private bath, A/C and fan.) Rates US\$85 double May to mid-December, US\$95 rest of year, plus hotel tax (no service charge), with discounts sometimes available. Bottom line: Intimate little B&B within a short walk of town, but not on the seafont.

★★+ **Coconuts Caribbean Hotel.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 94), San Pedro, tel. 501-226-3500, fax 226-3501, www.coconutshotel.com. Once popular with value-minded island visitors, under new management Coconuts has expanded and remodeled, adding a pool, additional rooms, a restaurant and, in mid-2006, a casino. Rates have jumped to US\$135 for a double room in-season, and US\$165 to \$260 for a suite. Room rates drop to US\$100 in summer. The hotel is next door to a commercial pier, and the loading and unloading of equipment can be noisy. The small casino has equipment from the old Palace in town. Bottom line: Casino has appeal to some.

★★★ **Coral Bay Villas.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 1), San Pedro; tel. 501-226-3003, fax 226-3006; www.ambergriscaye.com/coralbayvillas/index.html. One-bedroom

beachfront condo suites in a white two-story concrete building with red tile roof. No pool, but there's a nice sandy beach. Offered through Southwind Realty, rates start at around US\$95 double, plus tax. The commercial dock just to the north is occasionally noisy. Bottom-line: Another nice condo choice.

★★★+ **Caribbean Villas.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 71), San Pedro, tel. 501-226-2715; www.caribbeanvillashotel.com. The folks who built and ran this place for many years, Wil and Susan Lala, sold out in 2004, and new management now runs Caribbean Villas, though relatively few changes have been made. There's a variety of accommodations in the two-level whitewashed buildings with tile roofs, from small studios to two-bedroom suites. There is no pool. However, you'll enjoy the nice beach area and pier, with a little artificial reef for snorkeling, and there are two outdoor hot tubs. There's no restaurant, but several are nearby, as is a supermarket if you want to self-cater. A "people perch" is great for a bird's eye view of the island or for letting the birds see you. In this fast-growing island, this is one of the few hotels near town that still has a significant amount of undeveloped green space around it. How long that will last, we don't know. Bikes are free for guests, and there are phones in rooms but no TV. Rates are US\$78-\$270 double mid-November through May, and only a bit less, US\$65 to \$225, the rest of the year. All rates plus tax (no service charge). Bottom line: Natural setting, nice beach and easy-going atmosphere make a visit here a good experience.

★★★★ **Xanadu Island Resort.** Coconut Drive, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2814, fax 226-3409; www.xanaduresort-belize.com. Xanadu once billed itself as the "world's first monolithic dome resort," a description which might sound good to an engineer but doesn't exactly get our poetic juices flowing. Happily, these monolithic domes look nicer than they sound. Owner Ivan Sheinbaum one day showed us a new unit that was under construction. The building process is costly, but the result is a masonry dome with foam insulation that, according to Ivan, a Canadian originally from South Africa, is fireproof and can withstand winds of up to 300 mph. The domes are covered with thatch palapa roofs, and inside the condo suites (studios, one-, two-, and three-bedroom) are attractively furnished in earth tone colors, with central air-conditioning, fans, phones and cable TV. Free wireless internet. You get the use of bikes, canoes and kayaks gratis. There's a nice little stretch of seaside sand, though with a seawall, a 350-foot pier and a lovely freshwater swimming pool. Rates US\$150 (studio) to \$360 (three-bedroom) in-season and US\$120 to \$330 mid-May to mid-November, plus hotel tax but no service charge. Bottom-line: Something different on the beach.

SOUTH BEACH:

(This area begins about a mile south of town. Properties are listed from north to south, with those nearest town listed first.)

★★★★ **Villas at Banyan Bay.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 91), San Pedro, tel. 866-466-2179 or 501-226-3739, fax 226-2766, e-mail: www.banyanbay.com. At this 42-unit condotel, there's 24-hour security, cable TV and all the pleasures of home ... if your home happens to be just steps from the Caribbean. Many of the guests here appear to be families, and a terrific family place this is. The kids love the big, two-section pool, and dad and mom go for the fully equipped kitchen and the whirlpool off the master bedroom. The beach here, about a mile and a half south of town, is one of the best on the island, though it does have some seagrass, and there's a dive and gift shop on the pier. The food at Rico's restaurant on-site doesn't always knock us out, but service is good, and it has a beautiful setting on the water for drinks or dinner; breakfast is handy and well done. We're impressed by the space at Banyan – these units with two full baths are significantly larger than most of the other two-bedroom condo on the island. And we're impressed by the high degree of maintenance. The apartments look just as good now as when they were built several years ago. The woodwork and cabinets are mahogany. The cathedral ceilings in the main living area sport a stunning array of tropical hardwoods. A fitness center opened in 2002. Rates: US\$285-\$450 for a two-bedroom condo in-season, depending on location and number of people, and US\$225-\$250 in the summer. Bottom line: Upscale two-bedroom condos on the water, great for families or two couples traveling together.

★★★★+ **Grand Colony Villas.** Coconut Dr.; tel. 501-226-3739, fax 226/2768; www.grandcolonyvillas.com. New in 2005, the Grand Colony Villas, built by the Paz family who also did Villas at Banyan Bay, are probably the most upscale condos on the island. The 21 two-bedroom, two-bath apartments, range from 1,100 to over 1,900 square feet and have 10-foot ceilings, marble and hardwood floors, mahogany doors and cabinets, and deluxe furnishings. Rates: US\$500 to \$875. The beach here is one of the best on the island. Bottom line: One of the most luxe properties on the island.

★★★★ **Banana Beach.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 94), San Pedro; tel. 501-226-3890, fax 226-3891; www.bananabeach.com. This is one of our favorite places on the island, run by former Montanan Tim Jeffers. His resort has just about everything to make your vacation a success – a genuinely friendly staff, spacious and smartly furnished one- to four-bedroom suites, affordable rooms and a setting just steps from the sea. The 35 original one-bedroom units are in a single three-story building, designed in a style similar to Mexican hotels, around a courtyard with swimming pool, within watermelon seed spitting distance of the sea. A three-story addition, which went up in 2002, has a variety of “expandable” suites, regular rooms and also some one-

bedroom efficiencies, which are rented for longer periods (one month or longer.) The suites have fully furnished kitchens. Also added was a second pool, an air-conditioned restaurant, El Divino, featuring excellent steaks and killer martinis. We recommend you spring for one of the seafront units, especially the second and third floor deluxe units in either the original or new building, all of which have fabulous views of the water. The hotel's tour office, Monkey Business, can set you up with tours, cart rentals and diving. Rates have increased but are still good value. Off-season, rates start US\$110 double for a room or US\$130 for a courtyard suite, US\$165 for a deluxe seafront one-bedroom suite and top out at US\$495 for a four-bedroom seafront suite, which handles groups of up to eight. From December through Easter, rates range for US\$125 to \$590. All rates include breakfast but not tax. For longer-term stays, small apartments are available for US\$900 a month. Bottom line: Great choice for service, value and a seafront vacation.

★★★+ **Mata Rocks.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 47), San Pedro; tel. 888-628-2757 or 501-226-2336, fax 226-2349; www.matarocks.com. Mata Rocks is a small beachfront hotel with 11 rooms and two junior suites, just south of Banana Beach. With its stucco and wood exterior in a distinctive white, turquoise and purple paint scheme, Mata Rocks has a comfortable, relaxed feel. The thatch beach bar hops, however, and if you want to pop into town, about 1 1/2 miles away, bikes are complimentary. All units have A/C and little fridges, and the junior suites have kitchenettes. In-season doubles US\$125 for rooms and US\$165 to \$180 for junior suites. Summer rates US\$90 to \$140. Rates are plus tax but include continental breakfast and roundtrip transfers from the San Pedro airstrip. Bottom line: Relax in laidback, non-cookie cutter surroundings on the beach.

★★★★★ **Victoria House.** Coconut Drive (P.O. Box 22), San Pedro; tel. 800-247-5159 or 713-344-2340, fax 713-224-3287; www.victoria-house.com. If what you want is an upscale but casual resort vacation, Victoria House is just about perfect. About 2 miles south of town, Victoria House is a quiet hideaway on 19 acres, with a variety of accommodations ranging from comfy motel-like rooms in two buildings at the back of the resort to rooms in the main lodge to thatch casitas (recently redone) to deluxe villas and gorgeous new condos. The villas, two of which have private pools, can be rented as entire units or in chunks – beautiful but pricey, with rates up to US\$1,930 for a five-bedroom villa at Christmas. That's per day, not per week! There has been lots of remodeling and upgrading of late, including two fabulous beachside pools, along with a new group of condo villas at the south edge of the resort. These new condo villas are our pick for some of the most beautiful beach accommodations in Belize. The hotel's restaurant, Palmilla, remains an asset, though chefs have changed (the current chef is Japanese). A full meal plan is US\$67 per person per day, but many guests prefer not

to be locked into a meal plan and dine around the island. A freestanding lounge cabaña on the beach is ideal for sipping rum drinks or Belikins. Head to the sandy beach area for relaxing, or swim off the pier. The hotel also has a gift shop and a dive operation. Service is top-notch everywhere. Victoria House is a popular place to get married, and the hotel has honeymoon packages. Rates for rooms June through mid-December, US\$160 to \$250, suites US\$280 to \$435; in-season US\$175 to \$300, suites US\$365 to \$475; villas and houses, US\$775 to \$1650 in season, slightly less off, all plus tax and 10% service. Rates higher during holiday periods. Bottom line: Upscale, barefoot hideaway.

★★★- **Royal Caribbean Resort.** Coconut Dr., tel. 501/226-4220; www.ambergris caye.com/royalcaribbean/. New in late 2005, the little yellow cabins lined up in rows at Royal Caribbean remind a lot of people of army barracks, or DFC by the Sea, but, inside, the 45 cabins are fairly spacious, with tile floors, wicker furniture, and kitchenettes, and all have cable TV and air conditioning. There's a pool and 400 feet of beach immediately next door (south) of Victoria House. The prices, US\$125 double off-season and US\$150 in-season, and with summer package rates as low as US\$75 a day, are attracting some guests. (All rates plus tax.) Fido's Sandbar (a branch of the downtown Fido's, has quickly become popular and attracts a local crowd for its Sunday BBQ. Bottom line: Simplicity and value, if not style, at the south end of the island.

[Too New to Rate -- Anticipate ★★★+] **Miramar Villas.** Coconut Drive, San Pedro; This new seafront condo development, just south of Sunset Beach, is set to open in late 2006. It has two buildings, one with six two-bedroom, two-bath units of about 1400 sq. ft., and the other has four units of varying sizes, including a bi-level penthouse suite on the third and fourth levels. (This is one of the buildings that are "higher than a coconut tree" now, unfortunately, permitted under local building regs.) There is an infinity-edge pool, a pier, and the property is gated and fenced. There's a low seawall. As of this writing, the owner's association plans are to use Banana Beach (see above) for rental services. Rates not yet established. Bottom line: Another new condotel option on the South End.

NORTH AMBERGRIS/NORTH BEACH:

These hotels are all north of the river channel. Depending on the golf cart trail condition, you can go by cart as far north as around Portofino. Most people, however, take a water taxi or the regularly scheduled Island Ferry. Typical charges are US\$5 per person one-way to as far north as Journey's End, then US\$10 north of there, with premiums for late night service or to the far north of the island. Hotels are listed south to north, with those nearest town listed first.

★★★ **White Sands Cove.** P.O. Box 191, San Pedro; tel. 888-362-2683 or 501-226-3528; www.whitesandscove.com. White Sands Cove opened in 1999. It was purchased by a new owner in 2004. It has condos in 12-sided buildings, including some that were built in 2005/2006. The one-bedroom units are about 550 square feet, and the two-bedroom condos, about 1,100 square feet. All are air-conditioned and professionally decorated, with tile floors, custom-made cabinets and fixtures, satellite TV and high-speed internet. There's a swimming pool and dive shop. Rates: US\$125 to \$265 off-season, US\$195 to \$335 mid-November to mid-May. Bottom line: A condo choice on the North that's not too far from town.

★★★+ **El Pescador.** P.O. Box 17, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2398, fax 226-2977; www.elpescador.com. For more than a quarter century, El Pescador has been the island's leading fishing lodge. Today, it's bigger and more upmarket than it used to be, with a pool, villas and other resort amenities, but it's still devoted to anglers and angling. The focus here is on catching tarpon, bonefish, permit and jacks, but you can enjoy a fine meal, served family style in the dining room, or enjoy a drink and a Cuban cigar on the verandah. The lodge has 14 comfortable but hardly luxurious units in a rambling two-story colonial-style building with mahogany floors. Adjoining the lodge are new two- and three-bedroom villas, and these are deluxe, with prices to match. El Pescador's emphasis is on fishing packages, which include guide, boat, transfer from Belize City, meals and taxes. About the only extras are drinks, tips for guides and purchases of any fishing gear. These packages start at US\$1,300 per person for three nights off-season and range up to over US\$4,000 per person for a week in-season. Lodging-only rates for villas (HHHH) range from US\$200 to \$650 a night double in-season (US\$150 to \$485 off-season), plus tax and 10% service, with a three-night minimum. Bottom-line: The place on the island for serious, well-heeled anglers.

★★ **Capricorn,** P.O. Box 247, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2809, fax 220-5091 www.ambergriscaye.com/capricorn/index.html. Under new ownership as of late 2006, we're hoping the Capricorn restaurant will regain some of its lost lustre. Capricorn the resort still has three cozy, hand-built wooden cabins, all with air conditioning. Double rates off-season US\$145, in-season US\$185, including continental breakfast, plus tax and 10% service. Bottom-line: Small, cozy cabins. (*See separate review of restaurant, below.*)

★★★ **Captain Morgan's,** San Pedro; tel. in the U.S. 888-653-9090, fax 307-587-8914; www.belizevacation.com. Those thatch cabañas you saw on the first Fox TV *Temptation Island* series were filmed at Captain Morgan's. These days, you may spot more timeshare salespeople than jiggling bare flesh. Captain Morgan's is a collection

of 14 cabañas – older but with upgrades such as air conditioning – and 12 new condo/timeshare villas. The resort has a nice freshwater pool and the beach, while not so great for swimming, is beautiful. The resort has gone through a number of changes over the years, with a variety of managers and staff, and from reports we've heard service isn't consistently top-notch. Rates aren't cheap: US\$199 to \$420 double in-season, and a more affordable US\$139 to \$250 off-season, plus tax and 10% service. Some discounted packages are available which make the resort more affordable. Bottom line: Sand, seclusion and timeshare tours.

★★★★+ **Seacape Villas**, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-2119 (Jazz Management); www.seascapebelizevillas.com. This collection of six upscale homes on four beachfront acres, built by noted island developers Bob and Diane Campbell, opened in 2006. Each villa has around 3,000 square feet, with a sunken living room, slate floors, outdoor garden with hot tub, and unobstructed views of the sea. The homes are privately owned but managed by the developers, and available for rent when the owners aren't in residence. Expect to pay around US\$900 a day. Bottom line: Beautiful collection of luxurious villas.

★★★★+ **Belizean Shores**. P.O. Box 1, San Pedro; tel. 800-319-9026 or 501-226-2355, fax 226-2931; www.belizean shores.com. Belizean Shores is a popular condotel choice on North Ambergris (a US\$7 water taxi ride to town, each way), with good rates and a lot of space in the units. The pool is a beaut, one of the best on the island, with a swim-up bar, and huge. The beach is small but fairly nice, and the seagrass is removed from some of the swimming area, and there's a 350-foot pier. There's free use of kayaks, so you can kayak out to the reef and snorkel. Rates US\$110 to \$170 double May through mid-December, US\$195 to \$255 in-season, plus tax. New condo units are under construction by the developer, Southwinds. Bottom line: Agreeable and popular condo development.

★★★★++ **Azul Resort**. North Ambergris; tel. 501/226-4012; www.azulbelize.com. This is where we'd like to stay if we had the money — about US\$925 a day double in-season for the villa only, or US\$1,695 double all-inclusive (lodging, all meals, drinks, taxes, transfers), slightly lower in the summer and fall. This new resort has only two beach villas, but, man, they are nice. The two-level villas have 20-foot ceilings with beams of mylady wood. Custom kitchens feature Viking appliances, and the cabinets and most of the furniture are made of zericote wood. Each villa has a Mac computer, 50-inch plasma flat-screen TV, and Bose theater system. On the rooftop, you can relax in your own hot tub. The two beach houses share a beautiful pool, 400 feet of beach, and about 10 acres of prime property. **Rojo Lounge**, run by the same couple, Vivian and Jeff, is next door for drinks in a romantic beachside setting and some of the best

food on the island. Bottom line: Hip, romantic and fabulous.

★★★ **Journey's End.** San Pedro; tel. 800-460-5665 or 713-780-1566, fax 713-780-1726; www.journeysendresort.com. Located on 50 acres, Journey's End is one of the larger resorts on the island, with about 44 rooms and cabañas. The cabañas vary in amenities and location — ocean front, garden view or pool view. An upgrading program has improved many of these units, though they still are not deluxe. Journey's End has all the resort amenities you'd expect, such as a large pool, tennis courts, spa, dive shop, restaurant, bar and the free use of water sports equipment. A plus is that the reef is a closer to shore here, so you can use a hotel kayak and paddle 10 minutes out to the reef to snorkel, without having to pay for a boat trip. But you are miles from San Pedro, and you may end up paying a good deal for water taxi fees. In late summer 2006, Journey's End hosted Belize's first "nude week" in conjunction with a travel agency. Journey's End sometimes bills itself as an all-inclusive. Rates in season are US\$155 to \$235 double, and US\$105 to \$205 in the summer. All rates plus tax and 10% service charge. Meal plans are US\$35 per person for breakfast and dinner, US\$45 for all three meals, and US\$75 for all meals, snacks and unlimited domestic beer and drinks -- thus the all-inclusive claim. There are several different packages available, especially off-season – be sure you get the best deal. Journey's End also is building **Las Terrazas**, a condo and beachfront home development with more than 70 condos and a couple of beach houses. Bottom-line: Large full-service resort with all-inclusive option.

★★★★+ **Portofino.** P.O. Box 36, San Pedro; tel. 501-220-5096, fax 226-4272; www.portofinobelize.com. One of Portofino's drawing cards is that it has thatch cabañas, fairly rare on the island. The resort, which opened in 2001 on the site of another resort, the Green Parrot, has lushly landscaped grounds, a well-liked restaurant, dive shop, 11 thatch units including beach cabañas, tree house suites and an 800-square-foot honeymoon suite with whirlpool. However, there's no swimming pool. It often caters to wedding parties and honeymooners. A new "beach mansion" was added in 2006. Rates: US\$240 to \$360+ in high season, US\$200 to \$320 in low, including continental breakfast but not taxes or 10% service. Bottom line: Thatch cabañas on the beach.

★★★★ **La Perla del Caribe.** Tel. 501-220-5733; www.laperlabelize.com. Managed by the same couple, Sharr and Terry Lawrence, who manage The Palms, La Perla is a new collection of seven ultra-deluxe villas, varying in size from two to five bedrooms, and all named after precious jewels such as Emerald, Sapphire and Opal. These villas are jewels indeed, as they feature floors of Mexican tile and tropical hardwoods, luxury furnishings, air-conditioning, gourmet kitchens with all appliances, cookware, cutlery,

glassware and dishes, satellite TV and internet hookup. Moreover, they are stunningly put together, with Mayan-, Mexican- and Moroccan-influenced architecture and interior designs. Recently completely landscaping enhances this seaside colony of fine homes. The complex has a pool, gym and pier. Rates in-season from US\$625 to \$925 per night, slightly less off-season. While pricey, for two or three couples or a family, the cost is similar to that at a luxury hotel. Bottom line: Seaside luxury for family or multi-couple groups.

★★★+ **Mata Chica.** North Ambergris, tel. 501-220-5010, fax 220-5012; www.matachica.com. When it opened in late 1997, Mata Chica raised the bar on what constitutes hip, deluxe lodging on Ambergris Caye. Mata Chica's owners designed this resort to the hilt. Each of the 12 air-conditioned cabañas and 2 two-bedroom villas, has a fruit theme - mango, watermelon, banana, and so on - a theme that begins with the exterior color and is carried through down to the tiles in the baths. It all may be a little too much for some, but others say the colors remind them of Gaugin. New owners have made some much-needed renovations. The beach here is postcard lovely, and a new pool opened in 2005. There's a mini-spa. Mambo, the hotel's expensive restaurant (entrees up to around US\$30), offers an eclectic menu, albeit emphasizing Italian dishes and seafood. Like the lodging, Mambo is seaside monument to design, with dramatic lighting and little touches like salt and pepper shakers made from seashells. It's definitely a romantic spot for dinner. Doubles US\$230 to US\$350 in-season and US\$190 to \$245 off-season, plus tax and 10% service. Two-bedroom villas are US\$650 in and US\$490 off, for up to four persons. A 5,000 sq. ft. "beach mansion" is US\$950 in-season. Rates include transfers from San Pedro and continental breakfast. Package rates also available. No children under 10. Bottom line: If you want stylish, and you want remote, this is it.

[Too New to Rate] **Xaman Ek.** North Ambergris. Formerly Gaz Cooper's Playa Blanca, the property is now under new management and will be operated as a spa and small hotel.

★★★★ **Blue Reef Island Resort.** North Ambergris; tel. 866-825-8501; www.bluereefresort.com. About 8 miles north of San Pedro Town, Blue Reef, which opened in 2005, with construction continuing in 2006-2007, has one- and two-bedroom condo units in six three-story buildings, each with five or six units. The condo apartments are very attractive, with granite tile floors and 10-ft. ceilings, and all have sea views. The swimming pool also overlooks the water. They should be nice, as most sell for around half a million US. Each bedroom has a king bed. Guest rooms have satellite TV, air-conditioning and CD players. There's little within walking distance, so for company you'll have to depend on the hotel's shuttle boat into town, a

20 minute ride each way. According to all reports, the resort's restaurant has good food, or you can have groceries delivered and cook in your upscale kitchen. Rates: US\$269 to \$469 in-season, US\$199 to \$369 off-season. Bottom line: Luxe condo colony way up north.

[Too New to Rate, Projected at ★★★] **Tranquility Bay.** North Ambergris; tel. 888-843-2293; www.tranquilitybayresort.com. Opened in 2006, this resort about 12 miles north of San Pedro, Tranquility Bay has 11 concrete and stucco cottages, 7 two-bedroom and 4 one-bedroom. This is a place to really, really get away from things, including telephones and TVs. The restaurant is named the Tackle Box, after the well-known San Pedro bar of the same name, that was destroyed by Hurricane Mitch. Early reports are generally positive, though not everyone likes the remoteness. Rates US\$200 to \$250 in-season, US\$160 to \$200 off-season. Bottom line: Like being on a remote island.

PRIVATE ISLANDS NEARBY

★★★★ **Cayo Espanto.** tel. in U.S. 888-666-4282 or 910-323-8355; www.aprivateisland.com. Ready, willing and able to pay up to US\$16,000 a couple for a week's pampering, not including airfare or tax? Then Cayo Espanto, a tiny private island on the back or bay side of Ambergris, about 3 miles west San Pedro, may be for you. At Cayo Espanto, the resort staff lines up, as on the old TV show *Fantasy Island* to greet you on arrival. Cayo Espanto's American owners quickly figured out that, in Belize's economy, it's not that expensive to hire a bunch of workers to keep the staff-to-guest ratio at two to one, especially given that the island has no more than 14 guests at one time. So if you like attentive service, you definitely will get it at Cayo Espanto, including your own "houseman" who cares for your every need day or night. Start with breakfast in bed and end the evening with pisco sours (all meals and most drinks, but not wine or champagne, are included in the price) on your private dock, before bundling off to your king-size bed with its luxurious Yves de Lorme sheets. Currently there are five villas, three one-bedroom and two two-bedroom. The villas are quite large – the smallest is 1,500 square feet – and all have small private "plunge" pools. We especially like the units with open-air design, with walls that fold out let the Caribbean in. Having said that, the villas are not as large or as deluxe as some other lodging in Belize, such as the villas at Caye Chapel, or the houses at Seascape or Azul Resort on North Ambergris. Meals are created by Cayo Espanto's crew of award-winning chefs – the resort's chef won the Taste of Belize cooking contest in 2006 — and brought to your villa. Think dishes like Herbed Goat Cheese Mousse Atop Tomato Speckled Polenta Cakes with Balsamic Onion Compote. With beans and rice on the side, we wonder? The resort offers a full range of tours, dive and snorkel trips, fishing and all the rest, but most guests seem to spend most of their time at their villas (and

for the US\$75 more more per hour they're paying to stay here, who wouldn't?) The rates are like the money-is-no-object rates on villa rentals on St. Barths: US\$1,795 to \$2,295 double year-round, per night, including meals and most drinks. There's a minimum stay of five nights (some exceptions to this may be made). Rates are higher during the Christmas season. Transfers from the International Airport by air are extra. Full payment is due no later than 90 days before arrival. Is it worth it? Obviously there are plenty of people who figure it is. The resort was named Hotel of the Year for 2006 by the Belize Tourism Board. Bottom line: Deluxe private cabañas on a tiny private island for those for whom money is nothing.

★★★★++ **Caye Chapel Island Resort.** tel. 800-901-8938 or 501-226-8250, fax 226-8201; www.cayechapel.com. Caye Chapel is a privately owned island just south of Caye Caulker and about 12 miles from Belize City. The island resort was developed as a corporate retreat and deluxe golfing hideaway, but for some reason, perhaps weak marketing, it has never really taken off. The owner, Larry Addington, a Kentucky mining baron, now has the resort up for sale, for a price that's somewhere far north of US\$50 million. The island has Belize's only 18-hole golf course, a beautiful par-72, 7,000-yard seaside course. If golf is your game, this is the best Belize has to offer, with gorgeous views of the sea and the reef, and challenges provided by the brisk prevailing winds and the occasional crocodile. The clubhouse, between the front and back nines, rivals anything at a country club in the States. It has tile floors, high ceilings, imported fixtures and a bar that would knock the socks off Dean Martin's ghost. The island also is outfitted with a Olympic-size swimming pool, private airstrip and tennis courts. Accommodations are in eight deluxe villas, each around 3,800 square feet, with the kind of finishings and furnishings you'd find in a multi-million-dollar residential development in Florida, and in 12 casitas of about 700 square feet. You get your own golf cart to run around the island. Rates: villas US\$1,000 in-season and US\$800 off-season, a day for up to four persons, not including meals, with a five-day minimum; casitas US\$400 double in-season, \$200 double off-season. Unlimited golf is an extra US\$50 per person per day. (If you just want to visit and play golf, day rates for unlimited golf 9 am to 4 pm, golf cart and club rental, and lunch are US\$200 per person, not including transport to the island.) A meal plan — necessary as there's nowhere else to dine except at the resort — is US\$75 a person per day. We've found the food here very good, if not of gourmet quality. Transfers from Belize City are extra. All rates are plus a total of 25% tax, service and fees. Thus, with golf, meals and lodging, plus taxes and service, four people would pay around US\$13,000 a week in-season. While that's spendy, on a per-person basis, around US\$3,300 for a week, it's comparable to a luxury cruise, African safari or a big-time fishing trip. And, honestly, there's nothing else like this in Belize. Most of the time, you have an entire island and golf course virtually to yourself. It's safe, secure, beautiful, and truly quite remarkable.

Bottom line: Paradise for duffers, and one of the most deluxe private resorts in the Caribbean.

PRIVATE HOME AND VILLA RENTALS

Ambergris Caye has dozens of homes and villas that are rented on a weekly basis, with some also offered nightly. Rates start at around US\$700 a week and go to over US\$6,000 a week. Here is a representative sample of them.

South End:

Casa Manana: Three-story luxury villa about 2 1/2 miles south of town sleeps 8 to 10, rates US\$4,550 to \$6,300 weekly. Tel. 501-226-3461; e-mail casamanana@hughes.net.

Casa Tortuga: Five-bedroom, two-baths luxury villa on the beach, about 1 1/2 miles south of town, with a huge private pool. US\$850 to \$1,100 per night. A less expensive guest house is also located on the grounds, with rates from US\$250 to \$400 per night. Tel. 970-925-3268; www.casatortuga.com.

In or Near San Pedro Town

Brianna's Beach House: Cute two-bedroom, one-bath cottage at north end of town, US\$800 to \$1,350 weekly. Tel. 501-226-4202, e-mail searious@btl.net.

North Ambergris

Agape House: Two-bedroom, one-bath cottage less than 2 miles north of town, US\$205 to \$235 per night for two people. A villa is also available. Tel. 440-543-8899; e-mail agapehouse@agapebelize.com.

Villa del Mar: One of several properties available at Los Encantos, with three bedrooms and four baths, US\$375 per night. Tel.402-556-8420; email mbjweiss@aol.com.

AGENTS FOR VACATION HOME RENTALS

These agents handle a number of different units on the island:

Ambergris Vacation Rentals, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-3856.

Caye Management, Beachfront near Wet Willy's, San Pedro; tel. 501-226-3077, fax 226-2831; e-mail cayeman@btl.net; www.cayemanagement.com. The island's oldest and largest rental management company, Caye Management also handles long-term

rentals (six months or more) of fully furnished apartments and houses.

Eden Property, San Pedro; tel. 501-623-9954 or 501-623-9955; www.edenproperty.bz. Represents several rental properties. English, Spanish, German, Dutch and French spoken.

Jazz Management, at Rendezvous Restaurant, tel. 501-226-2119. Handles Seascope Villas rentals.

Dining on Ambergris Caye

IN TOWN OR NEARBY:

Blue Water Grill. At SunBreeze Hotel, Coconut Drive; tel. 501-226-3347. Blue Water Grill aims high, and usually hits the spot. Try the mixed seafood grill or the local snapper dusted in cumin. The crispy Coconut Shrimp is a winner. Many dishes are Asian-influenced. One or two nights a week sushi is offered. Run by Kelly McDermott, a San Pedro native, and Texan Chris Aycock. Often jammed. Expensive/Very Expensive.

Wild Mango's. Barrier Reef Drive, near the town library. Award-winning chef Amy Knox moved here from Victoria House, bringing her "New Wave Latin" cooking with her. She quickly made Wild Mango's one of the top restaurants on the island. One of the specialities is ceviche, not just one kind but a variety of different ceviches. You can try a sampler, the Three Amigos. Knox also delivers some great Mexican dishes and, of course, seafood. The snapper is particularly good. Moderate.

Elvi's Kitchen. Pescador Drive, tel. 501-226-2176, fax 226-3056. Yes, it's a little touristy, and yes, the waiters are a little hyper, and, yes, it's a little more expensive than some, but Elvi's does a fine job with fish and just about everything. Doña Elvia Staines began her restaurant as a take-out burger stand in 1974. It has grown in fame and fortune year after year, until today it is probably the best-known restaurant in Belize. There are still burgers on the lunch menu (under US\$6) along with shrimp and fish burger versions. At dinner, you choose from large selection of seafood, chicken and other dishes, and almost all of it is good, with prices mostly under US\$15 for entrees. We always enjoy our meals here. The sand floor and the living frangipani tree around which the main dining room is built add atmosphere. Open for lunch and dinner. Moderate/Expensive.

Papi's Diner. Pescador Drive, at the north end of town behind Seven Seas, tel. 501-226-2047. This is a great local find. There's no water view here, and the atmosphere

is a bit like being on someone's back porch (though it was remodeled in mid-2006), but just about everything here is good, and the prices (fried chicken, US\$5, or grilled fish, US\$10, both served with potato and steamed veggies) are a bargain. Moderate.

Chon Saan Palace, Tarpon Street and Pescador Drive, San Pedro. The original Chon Saan Palace has been a fixture in Belize City since 1974, and nearly everybody considers it the best Chinese food in Belize. In 2006, it opened in San Pedro. The menu is huge, with over 200 items. Many are "traditional" Cantonese and U.S.-style dishes such as chow mein, chop suey, and sweet and sour pork, but there also are more sophisticated and spicy dishes from other regions. Many think the food in San Pedro isn't as good as that in Belize City. Moderate to Expensive.

JamBel Jerk Pit, Barrier Reef Drive, tel. 501-226-3303, with a branch at the Coral Beach Hotel a little farther south on Barrier Reef Drive (there's also a location in Belize City). Take a fat Belizean grouper and jerk it Jamaica style and whattyagot? Some of the spiciest, tastiest food in San Pedro, that's what. The chicken wings, jerk-style pork, fish and chicken are all delicious. If the wind isn't too brisk, eat up on the roof at the original location, with great views of the water. Moderate.

Cocina Caramba. Pescador Drive; tel. 501-603-1652. Owner Rene Reyes has made a big success out of Caramba by simply serving good food in large portions at moderate prices. This spot is usually packed. Just about any of the seafood and Mexican dishes are tasty and well-prepared. Moderate.

Caliente. Spindrift Hotel, Barrier Reef Drive, tel. 501-226-2170; a Caliente Norte branch is at the Essene Way on North Ambergris. This restaurant, run by Jenny Staines and her partner, gets attention for its spicy versions of traditional favorites such as conch ceviche, its big variety of seafood and Mexican dishes and for its delicious soups. Locally popular for lunch. Caliente Norte opened in late 2005 at the Essene Way. Moderate/Expensive.

El Fogon. In the Airstrip. Directions: Go to Tropic Cargo, take a right at the first street, look for a sign for Madisco -- El Fogon is on the left. New in 2006, and run by island native Patty Arceo and her sisters, this little restaurant tries for local food at reasonable prices. It's cooked on fogons-- traditional open fire hearths. Some say it has the best beans and rice in town. There's outdoor seating and a friendly Belizean atmosphere. The same family operate Hacal Kiik, which has great local breads. Inexpensive to Moderate.

The Reef. Pescador Drive, tel. 501-226-3212. This local favorite serves tasty Belizean

fare such as stew chicken with rice and beans in large portions at small prices. Open for lunch and dinner. At lunch, there's a daily special for BZ\$5. Inexpensive to Moderate.

Fido's. Barrier Reef Drive, tel. 501-226-3714. (Pronounced FEE-doh's.) Extremely popular, centrally located spot for a beer and a bite. Sit under the big palapa by the sea and enjoy burgers, fish and chips or lobster burrito. Live music many nights. Now there's a branch at the South End of the island. Moderate.

Celi's Restaurant. San Pedro Holiday Hotel, Barrier Reef Drive, tel. 501-226-2014. Celi's, on the beach side of the Holiday Hotel, is one of the long-established, unpretentious eateries on the island. Fish is a specialty, and it won't cost you an arm and a leg. You can dine inside or in a screened area by the beach. Open for lunch and dinner. Moderate/Expensive. **Celi's Deli** (H+, Inexpensive), for quick snacks, sandwiches, and meat pies, is nearby.

Estel's-by-the-Sea. Barrier Reef Drive, tel. 501-226-2019. Charlie and Estella Worthington run this little seaside restaurant near Central Park. With its sand floor and piano (you ain't heard piano until you hear it played on a sand floor), this place reeks with atmosphere. It's a favorite spot for breakfast, with all the usual egg-and-bacon basics including fried potatoes, but you'll also enjoy the burritos and huevos rancheros. Opens early, closed Tuesdays. Moderate.

BC's Beach Bar. Tel. 501-226-3289. Named after the owners, Bruce and Charlene, BC's is on the beach just south of SunBreeze. Don't miss the Sunday afternoon barbecue here. On Tuesday evenings, they do burgers on the beach. Other times, it's popular with the drinking crowd. Moderate.

Hacal Kiik. 2 Chicken St., in the Airstrip area. This is another good place for local breads such as banana bread, johnnycakes, powder buns and meat bread. Hacal Kiik, which means "my sister's place" in Mayan, also has pizza and sells a variety of Belizean village wines including cashew, crabooand mamey.

Rubie's (or Ruby's), Barrier Reef Drive, tel. 501-226-2063. If you can't sleep or are heading out for a day of fishing, get up early and grab a casual breakfast at Ruby's. For a few dollars, you can enjoy coffee, burritos and the best coconut tarts on the island. Later in the day, there are sandwiches and daily specials. It starts serving around 6 a.m., and usually stays open until just after lunch. Inexpensive.

Los Cocos. At the north end of town near San Pedro Supermarket and Ritchie's.

Cheap Belizean-Mexican items like stew chicken and pork chops. The atmosphere is pretty low rent but the food more than makes up for it. Lots of locals eat here. Inexpensive/Moderate.

Casa Pan Dulce Bakery. Boca del Rio area north, with a second location at the corner of Pescador Drive and Buccaneer; tel. 501-226-3242. Formerly La Popular, Pan Dulce has the best baked stuff on the island. It has a huge selection of more than 70 kinds of breads and pastries, all baked fresh locally. Inexpensive.

Street vendors offer food that is cheap, good and safe to eat. Most have now been moved away from the stalls at Central Park (progress, we guess), but some have set up on Pescador Drive and elsewhere. You can get a whole plate full of delicious food for a few bucks. Don't worry – it won't upset your tummy. Also don't miss the **Lions Club** barbecue on Friday and Saturday nights. The barbecue is great and the flan is out of this world. The money also goes to a good cause – improved health care on the island. Inexpensive.

For **ice cream**, two great places, both in town, are **Mannelly's** and **DanDe's**, which has frozen custard. For **coffee**, besides Caye Coffee's shop south of town (see below), an espresso bar called H+ **Island Perks** opened in palapas on Barrier Reef Drive across from Fido's. They also serve drinks.

Sunset Grill is a new restaurant on the back side of the island. **Sweet Basil** has reopened on North Ambergris.



Sea kayaking inside the reef

SOUTH OF TOWN

Casa Picasso. San Pablo area, on the lagoon side; tel. 501-226-4507. This restaurant is a little hard to find, but it's worth it, if you like frosty martinis and mojitos, interesting Spanish-style tapas and innovative pasta dishes. Hip atmosphere, but

friendly. Expensive.

Victoria House Restaurant. Coconut Drive at Victoria House resort, tel. 501-226-2067. The main restaurant at Victoria House, Palmilla, once dependent on unexciting buffets, has had a marked change for the better under a succession of innovative chefs. For dinner, dine by romantic candlelight. In late 2006, a new Japanese chef took over. Expensive to Very Expensive.

El Divino. Coconut Drive at Banana Beach; tel. 501-226-3890. Tim Jeffer's air-conditioned restaurant (there's also seating outside) has delicious, Yucatan-style ceviche and some of the best steaks around. Also try the wood-fired pizza. The bar serves big, ice-cold martinis. Expensive.

Rico's Bar & Grill. Coconut Drive, at Villas at Banyan Bay. No other restaurant on the island has a better seaside setting than Rico's. It's right on the beach. This is a fine place for breakfast or lunch on the water. After your lunch, you can feed your leftovers to the "pet" moray eels that hang out at waterside. Dinners are on the pricey side, but, again, the seaside setting is wonderful. Moderate/Expensive.

Caye Coffee. San Pablo residential area near the Sausage Factory. The freshest and best coffee on the island, if not in all of Belize. It's roasted fresh here. Inexpensive.

George's Kitchen. Coconut Drive, across from Woody's Wharf. This casual spot has good breakfasts, and for value and simple good eating, you'll like it for other meals, too. Moderate.

Ali Baba. Coconut Drive, on the east side near the airstrip. Excellent, high-value takeout roast chicken (whole chicken, BZ\$15) and Middle Eastern dishes like humus. Inexpensive/Moderate.

Antojitos San Telmo. Coconut Drive near Villas at Banyan Bay, tel. 501-226-2921. It's just a joint, but a good joint, with snacks like tacos and burritos for almost nothing. Inexpensive.

Tropical Cooking. Coconut Drive across from the Tropic Air terminal. Good local lunches at modest prices -- like four delicious chicken tacos for US\$2.50.

NORTH AMBERGRIS

Rojo Lounge. At Azul Resort; tel. 501-226-4012. Yes, Darlin', this is the hippest restaurant in Belize. It enjoys a romantic beachside setting, where you can watch the

Caribbean change colors by day or the stars flicker at night. Conch pizza is US\$19 and grouper stuffed with cashew-crusted lobster is US\$31. The guava-glazed ribs are a specialty. Killer mojitos are US\$8. You'll want to take a water taxi here. Closed Monday. Expensive to Very Expensive.

Rendezvous. Next door to Journey's End, tel. 501-226-3426. We'll meet you here! This may be the first Thai-French fusion restaurant in Central America and surely it's the best. Run by expats who formerly lived in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, with expert help from local cooks, Rendezvous has become one of the top restaurants on the island. With just 24 seats, the setting is intimate, on the second floor of a colonial-style house by the water. The menu changes frequently, but you can expect dishes such as pad thai or chicken in a red curry coconut sauce. The restaurant even makes its own wines (from imported grape juice). Reservations suggested. Reached by water taxi. Expensive to Very Expensive.

Mambo. Mata Chica Beach Resort; tel. 501-220-5010. Wow! If you'd visited the island a few years ago, you'd never have thought Ambergris Caye would get this kind of place. The restaurant space is open, appealing and upscale. Everything is designed to the hilt – even the menus show hours of design time. On those menus is a selection of sophisticated Italian dishes and seafood, along with daily specials. But you need to bring plenty of money or plastic. Prices are stratospheric, at least by Belizean standards. Open for lunch and dinner. Reached by water taxi. Very Expensive.

Capricorn. About 3 miles north of San Pedro, tel. 501-226-2809. Once without a doubt the best restaurant on the island, Capricorn, under different management, slipped. It's still a romantic setting, and some dishes are first rate, but, sorry to say, it's not what it was. With new owners in late 2006, the hope is that it will return to its former glory. Stay tuned. Very Expensive.

Caye Caulker

Your Lodging Choices

This is not a complete list of island hotels, but these are among our favorites in all price ranges. They are arranged by location, either north or south of the main “front pier” where the water taxis arrive, and then by price range, from most to least expensive.

North of the Main Front Pier:

★★★ **Iguana Reef Inn.** Middle Street next to soccer field, P.O. Box 31, Caye Caulker; tel. 501-226-0213, fax 226-0087; www.iguanareefinn.com. This is the Ritz-Carlton of Caye Caulker. The 12 suites have air-conditioning, Belizean furniture, queen beds and local artwork. A swimming pool was added in late 2006. Considering the size and amenities of the suites, the rates, US\$119 to \$144 in-season, US\$89 to \$127 May-November, plus tax, are quite reasonable, and they include continental breakfast. If there's a downside, it is that the hotel is on the back side of the island and not on the Caribbean, though from some suites you have a view of sunsets on the lagoon. The hotel's Web site is a good source of information about the island. No children under 10.

★★++ **Caye Caulker Condos.** Front St., tel. 501-226-0072; www.cayecaulkercondos.com. Want a suite with a full kitchen to prepare some of your own meals? Try these new condo apartments. Each of the 8 cozy units, on the west side of Front Street, has a private verandah facing the water, less than 100 feet away; those on the second floor have the better views. All the units have tile floors and most have satellite TVs, but not phones. Bikes are free. Rates US\$110 to \$130 double in-season, US\$79 off-season, plus 9% hotel tax.

★★++ **Auxillou Beach Suites.** Beachfront a few steps north of the public pier, tel. 501-226-0370; www.auxilloubeachsuites.com. Wendy Auxillou, a busy businesswoman and law school student, operates this attractive beachfront property, with large (almost 500 sq. ft.) suites, with kitchenettes. US\$129 January-April, US\$99 in the summer and fall, and US\$79 in September and October.

★★+ **De Real Macaw.** Front St.; tel. 501-226-0459, fax 226-0497; www.derealmacaw.biz/main/rates.htm. This friendly spot, which is on the west side of Front Street but still close enough to catch the breezes, has rooms and a two-bedroom self-catering apartment, some units with and some without air-conditioning. There's a porch with hammocks. In-season rates: US\$25 to \$70 for rooms, US\$130 for a two-bedroom unit, slightly lower off-season. Ignore higher rates shown on a competing web site.

★★ **Trends Beachfront Hotel.** Beachfront near public pier; tel. 501-226-0094, fax 226-0097; www.trendsbze.com. As you arrive on the water taxi, this tropically pink and green hotel is one of the first things you see, just to the right of the new pier. Thanks to its location and its seven bright clean rooms, each with a queen and a double bed, mini-fridge and private bath, it stays full much of the time. Rates around US\$40 double, more if you need A/C. The same people operate the original Trends Guesthouse, around the corner. It's cheaper, but it's not on the water.

+ **Tina's Bak Pak Hostel.** Beachfront just north of public pier, tel. 501-226-0351; www.cayecaulker.org/tina/. For US\$8 to \$10 per person, you can grab a hammock or a bunk bed at this hostel on the beach. There's room for 16 friendly people.



Trends Beachfront Hotel on Caye Caulker

South of the Main Front Pier:

★★★ **Seaside Cabanas.** P.O. Box 39, Caye Caulker; tel. 501-226-0498, fax 501-226-0125; www.seasidecabanas.com.

Rebuilt after a 2003 fire, this seafront hotel, with 15 rooms and a seafront suite, is now one of the top places on the island, and one of two hotels on the island with a swimming pool. Painted a deep mustard color, with a combination of tropical thatch and Moorish-influenced design, the buildings are in a U-shape. Four of the rooms (numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4) have private roof-top terraces for sunning or watching the sea in privacy. Rates around US\$95 to \$125 double most of the year. (The hotel is currently for sale but is operating normally.)

★★++ **Tree Tops.** P.O. Box 29, Caye Caulker, tel. 501-226-0240, fax 226-0115; www.treetopsbelize.com. Close to the water, Tree Tops is run by Terry Creasy (who's British) and wife Doris (who's from Germany) and their flock of little terriers. Rooms were spruced up in 2003 and new suites were added. All have color cable TV and a fridge. Two have private baths (one has a composting toilet) and the others have shared baths. Belize needs more places like this one – the guest rooms are clean as a pin, the entire place is meticulously maintained, the owners are helpful, and rooms cost around US\$45 to \$90 double, plus 9% tax. Highly recommended.

★★+ **Lazy Iguana B&B.** South of the public pier on the back side of the island, near airstrip, tel. 501-226-0350, fax 226-0320; www.lazyiguana.net. Owner Mo Miller says no shoes are required at this four-room B&B. The rooms are furnished with attractive wicker and tropical hardwood furniture. Views of the sunsets from the fourth-level rooftop terrace are terrific. The common room has TV and internet access. Rates US\$95 double in-season, US\$85 off.

★+ **Jaguar Morning Star.** Middle St. south of the public pier, tel. 501-226-0347; www.jaguarmorningstar.com. This quiet little budget inn, just behind Treetops, is a good value. It's well run by a Belizean-Canadian couple. There are two rooms, way up on the third floor, with a verandah offering views of the island and the sea, plus a little cabin at the back in the garden. Rates US\$40 to \$60.

★+ **Shirley's Guesthouse.** South End near nature reserve, P.O. Box 13, Caye Caulker; tel. 501-226-0145; www.shirleysguesthouse.com. Nine cabins and rooms, all clean and pleasant with sea views. Some with shared baths. US\$50 to \$80 December-May, US\$40 to \$60 rest of year, tax included. Adults only.

★ **Tom's Hotel.** Beachfront, about 4 blocks south of the public pier, (P.O. Box 15, Caye Caulker), tel. 501-226-0102; e-mail toms@btl.net. This backpacker favorite, with 5 cabins and lots of rooms in a two-story concrete building, continues to attract a crowd. Many rooms are small, share baths and can be very hot, but the seaside location, friendly management and low prices, starting at around US\$15, keep regulars coming back. No credit cards.

Vacation Rentals

For small vacation rental house on Caulker, expect to pay around US\$400 to \$600 a week, or US\$40 to \$100 a night. In most cases, credit cards are not accepted.

Caye Caulker Rentals. Front St., tel. 501-226-0029; www.cayecaulkerrentals.com.

This rental agency has more than a dozen houses for rent, some from as low as US\$40 a night, and others, including beachfront houses, from around US\$400 a week.

Diane's Beach House. Front St., tel. 501-226-0083;

www.staycayecaulker.com/beachhouse.html. Two attractive suites, one with one bedroom and the other with two bedrooms, in a mango-colored house with views of the sea. US\$130 to \$150 a day.

Heredia's Apartments & House Rentals. Calle del Sol, about a block from the public pier, tel. 501-226-0132. Offers several budget apartments and houses on the lagoon side, most under US\$250 a week.

Dining on Caye Caulker

Caye Caulker has more than 20 restaurants, mostly small spots with a few tables and sand or wood floors, where you can get a tasty meal for a few dollars. Many don't accept credit cards.

Habañeros. Middle Street, tel. 501-226-0486. Caye Caulker's most upscale dining and arguably the best. Try the Snapper Santa Fe. Great fajitas. Mayan Pizza is a speciality for lunch. Moderate to expensive.

Rainbow Grill & Bar. On the beach about halfway between the public pier and the Split, tel. 501-226-0281. The Rainbow is the only eatery on Caye Caulker that's built out over the water, to catch the sea breezes. The grilled or fried seafood dishes are terrific. Inexpensive to moderate.

Rasta Pasta. On the beach north of the public pier, tel. 501-206-0356. Formerly on Ambergris Caye and then in Placencia, Maralyn Gill's Rasta Pasta has always served interesting and delicious fare. Conch fritters are our favorite. Moderate.

Syd's. Middle Street, south of the public pier, tel. 501-226-0294. Locals often recommend Syd's. It serves Belizean and Mexican faves like beans and rice, stew chicken, garnaches, tostadas along with lobster and conch, when in season, at prices lower than you'll pay at most other eateries. Inexpensive to moderate.

Glenda's. Come to Glenda's for a cinnamon roll, johnnycake and fresh-squeezed orange juice for breakfast, and come back at lunch for rice and beans. Closed for dinner. No credit cards. Inexpensive. **Amor y Cafe** (formerly Cyndi's) is another good

place for breakfast.

Jolly Roger. Front Street near the Health Center. At little tables beside his house, Roger serves some of the best lobster on the island, at bargain prices. He barbecues delicious fish, too. Inexpensive/Moderate.

WHERE TO PARTY

For Belikin and booze, the **Lazy Lizard** at the Split is among the most popular bars on the island. **I&I**, near Tropical Paradise, a funky joint with rope swings and hammocks instead of chairs, blows reggae and other music. In the back is a tree house.

Popeye's and **Sandbox** also are popular places to soothe a thirst. **Herbal Tribe** near the Spit is a reggae bar.

Other Cayes

Belize's two northern cayes, Ambergris and Caulker, are the two largest and by far the most popular of Belize's island, both by expats and visitors. However, Belize has more than 400 other islands in the Caribbean. Most are small, remote and unpopulated. They are wonderful to visit, but if you're exploring Belize as a place to live or invest, you likely won't spend much time on these remote islands. Here, briefly, are some of the options for lodging.

TOBACCO CAYE

About 10 miles east of Dangriga, Tobacco Caye is a tiny 5-acre coral island. It is getting more attention these days because it offers snorkeling off the shore. As so often happens in Belize, though, rates have shot up at some of the hotels here. There's no scheduled water taxi service, but you can hook a boat at Dangriga to take you out – around US\$17.50 one-way. Captain Buck is reliable. Check at the Riverside Café.

★+ **Tobacco Caye Lodge.** Tel. 501-520-5033; www.tclodgebelize.com. About the best the island has to offer, with tropically blue duplex cabins. Rates December – April with all meals and taxes is US\$150 double; the rest of the year the rate is US\$115 with all meals.

★+ **Reef's End Lodge.** P.O. Box 299, Dangriga; tel. 501-522-2419; www.reefsendlodge.com. This lodge has two fairly large cabañas plus 8 rooms and a suite. High-season dive packages, including accommodations in a cabaña, meals, transportation to the island from Dangriga, taxes and 14 dives are around US\$2,850 for two for one week. Wow, who would have thought you'd pay that much on Tobacco Caye! Maybe it's time to look at Utila in the Honduras Bay Islands.

Other choices: ★ **Lana's on the Reef**, ★ **Gaviota**, ★ **Paradise** and ★ **Ocean's End**. Gaviota and Paradise are the cheapest options, starting at around US\$50 double including meals.

SOUTHWATER CAYE MARINE RESERVE

Southwater Caye, about 15 acres in size, is one of the most beautiful small islands off Belize. The south end of the caye, where Pelican Beach's cottages are located, has a nice little beach and snorkeling right off the shore.

★★★ **Pelican Pouch**. P.O. Box 2, Dangriga; tel. 501-522-2044, fax 522-2570; www.southwatercaye.com. Three charming but simple cottages plus five budget rooms in the main building. In-season, cottages are US\$220 double including three meals; rooms are US\$165 with all meals. Rates include tax. For around US\$500 a person, Pelican Beach also has a four-night package – three nights at South Water and one night at its hotel in Dangriga, including meals, boat to South Water and taxes.

Other choices on the island is the expensive ★★★ **Blue Marlin Lodge** (501-520-2243, www.blumarlinlodge.com), with good dive and fishing options, and the budget-level ★ **International Zoological Expeditions Cottages** (501-520-5030, www.ize2belize.com), which caters to student groups.

Note: Visitors to Southwater Caye Marine Reserve (including those staying on Tobacco Caye and Southwater Caye) pay US\$5 a day per person marine reserve fee, or US\$15 for up to a week's stay.

Whipray Caye

Whipray Caye, about 11 miles off Placencia, is a great spot for anglers, as you can wade out about 50 yards in the flats and fish for tarpon, permit and other gamefish. Julian Cabral, a well-known Placencia fishing guide, owns the island and with American wife Beverly Montgomery-Cabral operates ★★ **Whipray Lodge** and the **Sea Urchin** bar and restaurant (tel. 501-610-1068, www.whipraycayelodge.com.) The three basic cabins can accommodate up to eight people. There's also good snorkeling here.

THE ATOLLS

Atolls are characterized by a large lagoon surrounded by coral reefs. While atolls are common in the South Pacific, they are rare in the Western Hemisphere. Of the four known atolls in the Western Hemisphere, three are in Belize – Glovers, Turneffe and Lighthouse. (The fourth, Chinchorra, is in southern Mexico,)

GLOVERS ATOLL

Glovers Atoll is the smallest of the three atolls in Belize, with an area of about 140 square miles. Some 45 miles from the mainland, Glovers offers some of the best diving and snorkeling in the Caribbean. The atoll has hundreds of coral patches in the lagoon. Around the atoll are 50 miles of walls dropping from 40 to 2500 feet or more. Fishing is restricted in this marine reserve – if you are fishing, reserve rangers will collect a fee of US\$10 per person per day.

★★★ **Isla Marisol.** 189A Rear Ghans Ave., Dangriga; tel. 501-615-1485 or 501-520-2056; www.islamarisol.com. Southwest Caye, where Isla Marisol is located, is owned by the Usher family, which obtained the island in the 1940s. Lodging at this resort is in small wood cabins with zinc roofs. There's a restaurant and bar. Weekly dive packages including meals and transportation from Dangriga are US\$1,850 per person from mid-November to mid-June and US\$1,650 the rest of the year. Fishing packages are higher; snorkeling and beachcombing packages, lower. Shorter packages also available.

★★ **Off the Wall Dive Center and Resort.** Long Caye, tel. 501-614-6348; www.offthewallbelize.com. Run by Kendra and Jim Schofield, Off the Wall focuses on diving, but there's excellent snorkeling and fishing as well. Facilities are rustic — small wood cabins, composting toilets, and outdoor rainwater showers. Meals are served in a beachfront thatch palapa with sand floor. There is no a/c, no room phones, no room TVs. Rates US\$1,295 to \$1,995 per person, depending on activities.

★ **Glovers Atoll Resort.** P.O. Box 563, Belize City; tel. 501-520-5016, fax 501-223-6087; www.belizemail.com/gloversatoll/ Don't let the name mislead you – this isn't your typical resort. The Lomont family, who came to Belize in the 1960s, offer very basic accommodations on Northeast Caye, about 45 miles out in the Caribbean at a reasonable price in a beautiful setting. You won't get running water or electricity here, but you can enjoy one of the most stunning parts of the Caribbean Sea. Around the 9-acre island you can dive or snorkel right from the shore. Weekly per-person rates year-round: Simple palmetto thatch cabañas are US\$249 and those built over the water are US\$299; a dorm room or tent, US\$199; camping, US\$149. Children under 12 are half price. Rates include transportation by boat to and from Sittee River near Hopkins but not 9% hotel tax. A weekly boat from Sittee River leaves at 7 a.m. Sundays. If arriving in Sittee early, if necessary you can stay in the Glovers Guesthouse in Sittee, around US\$10 per person. You'll need to bring most everything you need, including toilet paper, food, beer, cooler with ice and other supplies. Bottled water (US\$1.50 a gallon) and kerosene (US\$1 a pint) and a few grocery items are usually available on the island. Simple meals are offered, but they're fairly expensive – breakfast US\$9, dinner US\$12-18. You can rent kayaks, canoes, and dive and snorkel gear. All in all Glovers Atoll Resort is quite a remarkable place, but not for everyone.

LIGHTHOUSE REEF ATOLL

Lighthouse Atoll is about 45 miles off the mainland coast, east of Belize City. The atoll is famous (thanks to Jacques Cousteau, for the Blue Hole inside the lagoon. The Blue Hole, an underwater sinkhole or cenote, is about one-quarter mile across and about 500 feet deep. Divers usually find the Blue Hole less interesting than they expected it would be, with very little sea life other than some sharks, but it's worth doing once. Several divers have died here, and it is not for novice divers. Half Moon Caye, a 45-acre coral island, is one of the most beautiful of all the Belize cayes, and it was part of Belize's first marine reserve. There's a daily fee of US\$40 per person to visit the

reserve.

Lighthouse Reef Resort is closed for renovation and may reopen under a new name in 2008.

TURNEFFE ATOLL

Turneffe Atoll is about 25 miles from the mainland, to the east of Belize City. The central lagoon, which has some 200 small mangrove islands, is about 240 square miles in area. There is also a smaller northern lagoon. Like Belize's other atolls, Turneffe offers magnificent diving and great fishing. The eastern and southern side of the atoll offers the best diving. Probably the most famous site is The Elbow, on the southern tip. Spur and groove diving is here only for experienced divers.

★★★+ **Turneffe Flats.** U.S. office: P.O. Box 36, Deadwood, SD 57732; tel. 800-815-1304 or 605-578-1304, fax 605-578-7540; www.tflats.com. It's remote, it's beautiful and it's air-conditioned! The lodge, on the northeast side of the atoll, provides boat transport from Belize City to Turneffe on Saturdays. The trip takes about 90 minutes. Dive packages are around US\$2,100 per person for a week, in high season, inclusive of lodging, meals and transport but not booze, tips or taxes. Weekly fishing packages are more, around US\$3,600 January through May.

★★★ + **Turneffe Lodge.** U.S. office: 440 Louisiana, Ste. 900, Houston, TX 77002; tel. 800-874-0118 or 713-236-7739, fax 713-236-7743; www.turneffelodge.com. Accommodations are in eight private cabañas or in rooms in four buildings on Big Caye Bokel at the southern end of the central lagoon. Air-conditioning, pool. Weekly high-season dive rates are around US\$2,065 per person. Other packages, including those for shorter periods than a week, are available. Closed September and October.

★★★ **Blackbird Caye Resort.** tel. 1-888-271-3483; www.blackbirdresort.com. Owned by a well-connected Belizean family, Blackbird Caye, on the eastern side of the atoll, is another option on beautiful Turneffe. All units have air-conditioning. The newer deluxe cabins are more spacious, with king beds. Dinner is served in a large thatch palapa. Dive packages from around US\$1,850 to \$1,995 weekly, per person, in high season. Blackbird Caye Resort is for sale for US\$8 million.

Dangriga and Hopkins

Dangriga, with a population of around 9,000, is the largest town in Belize south of Belize City. Until the 1980s it was known as Stann Creek, when it was renamed Dangriga, meaning “sweet waters” in the Garifuna language. Dangriga, like Orange Walk Town, is not at all a visitor destination, though it is a useful jumping off spot for some of the central and southern cayes. Physically, it slightly resembles the older sections of Belize City, although it is much smaller.

A seaside Garifuna village of about 1,200 people living in unpretentious frame houses, **Hopkins** was first settled in 1942 after a hurricane devastated New Town, a Garifuna community just north of present-day Hopkins. The village gets its name from Frederick Charles Hopkins, a Catholic bishop of the early part of the 20th century. Hopkins was itself leveled by Hurricane Hattie in 1961. The village only got electricity and telephones in the mid-1990s. If “poor but proud” fits anywhere, it fits here. Villagers have gotten by on subsistence fishing and farming, and some are now earning cash money from tourism. You’ll find most folks friendly. Many are eager to share their thoughts with visitors, and it’s safe to walk around the village most anytime. The beach is nice, though many coco palms have died.

You may have heard about the ferocious sand flies in this area, and, yes, they can be pretty bad. At times. At other times, they’re hardly to be noticed. Sorry, but we’re not able to predict exactly when they are at their worst. The hotels here do their best to control the little devils, without resorting to hydrogen bombs, but at times the sandfleas can be a pain in the neck, and also the foot, leg and everywhere else. An oily lotion such as baby oil and a bug spray with DEET helps.

You’ll probably get wet, you’ll probably get eaten up by mosquitoes, but you’ll get to experience the “real jungle” at **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary** and Jaguar Preserve. This preserve covers 150 square miles of broadleaf rainforest. Much of it has been selectively logged for mahogany and other valuable trees, and some of it was

affected by hurricanes, but to the novice bushwalker the rainforest canopy, up to 130 feet high, and the exotic plants and trees are nothing at all like back home. Parts of the preserve get up to 180 inches of rain a year, and the preserve includes the two highest peaks in Belize, Doyle's Delight at 3,688 feet and Victoria Peak at 3,675 feet. Cockscomb has the most extensive trail network of any park in Belize. Trails at the preserve vary from short self-guided hikes near the visitor center to a 17-mile multi-day trek to Victoria Peak, only for the physically fit and best done with a local guide during the dry season. While it's unlikely that you will see one of the 200 or so jaguars in the preserve, you may well see tracks or scat, as the jaguars do frequent the trails and entrance road at night. If you hike long enough, however, you will run into quite a few other wild creatures. The preserve is home to some 300 species of birds, along with all five types of Belize's wild cats, black howler monkeys, peccaries and snakes of all types and biting abilities. The best time to see wildlife is at the start of the rainy season, usually mid-June to early August, although with luck you will see wild creatures anytime you are in the preserve. Animals are most active on cooler, cloudy days.

Mayflower is a smaller park, but perhaps more interesting to the casual visitor than Cockscomb, as it has several beautiful waterfalls and some Maya sites.

Your Lodging Choices in Dangriga

★★ + **Pelican Beach Resort**, Scotchman Town, on the sea near the airstrip, (P.O. Box 2, Dangriga); tel. 501-522-2044, fax 522-2570; e-mail sales@pelicanbeachbelize.com www.pelicanbeachbelize.com The rambling white wood-frame main building at Pelican Beach, reportedly once a dance hall, always reminds us of boarding houses of our youth in Florida; others say it reminds them of old hotels on the coast of Maine. Inside, though, it's vintage Belize, with simple wood paneling, linoleum here and there, and furniture that wasn't selected by any interior designer. There are 12 rooms in the main building and another 8 in a separate structure. All rooms have fans, and 8 have air-conditioning. In any event, this is the best hotel in Dangriga. It's on the water at the north of town, and there's a beach area and a pier. Some people swim here, but it's not exactly Cane Garden Beach in the British Virgin Islands. Originally opened in 1971, Pelican Beach is operated by Tony and Therese Rath and family. Therese's family, the Bowmans, were prominent in colonial days, and she is prominent today in Belize's conservation organizations. Tony, a noted photographer, is among Belize's new breed of Internet entrepreneurs, running Naturalight Webcreations. Rates: Doubles range from around US\$117 to \$125 in-season (mid-November thru April), with modest discounts off-season. Prices are plus 9% hotel tax and 5% service. Packages and meal plans are available. Pelican Beach is associated with the delightful Pelican Beach cottages on Southwater Caye.

★ + **Chleanor Hotel**, 35 Magoon St.; tel. 501-522-2587; e-mail chleanor@btl.net This is a nice budget/low moderate choice in Dangriga. It's well-run and a good value. Rooms are larger than at many budget hotels, and all have private baths. Some rooms

with TV and air-conditioning. Rates around US\$30. Economy rooms with share baths in an adjacent building start at US\$10.

Your Lodging Choices in Hopkins

★★★★ + **Hamanasi**, Sittee Point, Stann Creek District (P.O. Box 265, Dangriga); tel. 501-520-7073 or in U.S. 877-552-3483; www.hamanasi.com Opened in late 2000, Hamanasi quickly became one of the top beach resorts in southern Belize. On about 17 acres with 400 feet of beach frontage, the resort is south of Hopkins village, about 500 feet north of Jaguar Reef. The restaurant and lobby are attractive, the grounds well kept, and the pool, with a “zero effect,” is one of the nicest we’ve seen in Belize. There are four types of accommodations — regular rooms in the main building, luxury and family beachfront suites in a separate set of buildings and “tree houses” (actually just raised units set in the trees in the back). All the accommodations are really nice, though we like the beachfront suites best. They remind us of the units at the Inn at



Maya ruins are everywhere in Belize

Robert's Grove in Placencia, and indeed the same Mennonite builder constructed Hamanasi as built Robert's Grove (and a number of other top resorts in Belize.) The owners, Americans Dana and David Krauskopf, who look like they just stepped out of a *Travel & Leisure* magazine spread, seem to know what they are doing. While they haven't run a hotel before, they have experience in the travel agency biz and in marketing. Certainly their cats, furry grey émigrés from Russia, where the owners lived for awhile, know exactly what they're up to. Hamanasi's dive operation provides full diving services. Hamanasi has several dive boats, including a 43-footer with twin 350-horsepower diesels. A two-tank dive on the reef, about 30 minutes out, is US\$110, and a three-tan, full-day dive trip to Turneffe or Glover's atoll is US\$180. Rates: US\$275 to \$350 in-season, US\$180 to \$260 off. Rates include continental breakfast, tax and service charge, so they are actually a little lower than they look. Packages are available. The hotel's restaurant is very good, if expensive, with a fixed-price dinner at US\$35.

★★★★ **Jaguar Reef Lodge**, Sittee Point, Stann Creek District; tel. 501- 520-7040, or 800-289-5756 in the U.S. and Canada, fax 501-520-7091; e-mail jaguarreef@starband.net, www.jaguarreef.com Well-run and well-marketed, Jaguar Reef, on about 300 acres with 1,000 feet of beachfront, has long enjoyed one of Belize's higher occupancy rates. The Canadian-owned resort has duplex cottages in an arc behind the main lodge building (rebuilt after a fire in early 2003) which houses the beachfront restaurant, bar, gift shop and front desk. Suites units (also rebuilt after the fire) are in a newer building near the swimming pool. The beach here is beautiful to look at, although with a lot of seagrass it's not a great swimming beach. Jaguar Reef runs a variety of tours, both on land and sea. Rates: US\$160 to \$220 double, Mid-December – through April, US\$130 to \$170 rest of the year. Suites, US\$2240 to \$315 in-season, US\$180 to \$265 off. Rates are plus 19% for tax and service. Packages and specials are available. The full meal plan is US\$48, or \$29 for dinner only. Package plans are available. The resort is for sale for US\$4,705,000.

★★★★ **Kanantik Reef & Jungle Resort**, between Hopkins and Placencia (P.O. Box 1482, Belize City); tel. 877-759-8834 or 501-520-8048, fax 520-8089; www.kanantik.com Want to do both the barrier reef and the jungle without having to decide anything, except whether to have the fish or the beef for dinner? Care to relax on a deserted, coco palm-lined private beach the length of four football fields? Enjoy an active seaside vacation, with all the diving, snorkeling, sailing, kayaking, horseback riding and fishing you can handle? Don't mind paying top dollar? = Then Kanantik, a luxury all-inclusive that opened in 2002, may be your place. Kanantik — it's a Mopan Maya word meaning "to take care"— has 25 air-conditioned cabañas hidden away on 300 acres just north of Hopkins. The thatch cabañas, echoing African designs, are striking round structures with conical roofs. They are air-conditioned, luxuriously outfitted and large, about 525 sq ft. The resort took years to plan and build; construction included bulldozing a lengthy road and building an airstrip. When we were there, the food was excellent, and the dinner conversation, led by co-owner Roberto Fabbri, an Italian by way of San Francisco, was equally so. This is not a place for you if

you like a lot of active nightlife (it's miles from the nearest village) but if you're an all-inclusive type, this is one of Belize's few options in that category. The all-inclusive rate of US\$365 per day per person, double occupancy, including tax and service, covers lodging, tours, meals and local drinks and beer. Other packages offer diving and jungle adventures. Kanatik is on the market for US\$10 million.

★★★★ **Belizean Dreams**, Hopkins; tel. 501-523-7272 or 800-456-7150; www.belizeandreams.com. This condo colony just north of Jaguar Reef is among the most upscale accommodation choices on the Southern Coast. All villas have exactly the same floor plans and furnishings, but some are directly on the beach, and the others have sea views. The units can be reserved as a complete villa, or choose a single bedroom or two-bedroom suite. The bedrooms have vaulted ceilings with exposed beams and four-poster king beds. The same developer has built a group of new, similar condos called Hopkins Bay, at the north end of Hopkins village. Rates: US\$225 to \$500 in high season, US\$165 to \$375 in summer.

★★★ **Beaches and Dreams Seafront Inn and Barracuda Bar & Grill**, Sittee Point, tel./fax 501-523-7259; www.beachesanddreams.com. New owners Tony and Angela Marsico traded running a restaurant in Alaska for operating a beachside inn and restaurant in Belize. They've spruced up the inn's two octagonal cottages, each with two rooms with vaulted ceilings and rattan furniture. They've also turned the restaurant into one of the best eateries on the southern coast, with delicious dishes like fig-stuffed pork chops (US\$18) and Gibnut gumbo (US\$16). Rates US\$120, plus 9% hotel tax. Closed May-October.

★★ **Hopkins Inn**, Hopkins (P.O. Box 121, Dangriga); tel./fax 501-523-7013, or tel./fax in the U.S. 907-683-2518; www.hopkinsinn.com Attractive cabañas on the beach, with full bath, fridge, fan and private verandah with sea views. The hotel is run by Greg and Rita Duke, who are knowledgeable about the area. Rates US\$50 to \$75 double, including continental breakfast, plus tax. Discounts available off-season. German spoken.

★★ **Jungle Jeanies**, Hopkins; tel./fax 501-523-7047. This group of wood cabanas on stilts is on 2 acres of beachfront shaded by coconut palms. You can rent kayaks and windsurfers here, or just relax in a hammock. You can also pitch your tent for US\$7 per person. "Jungle Jeanie" Barkman and husband "Jungle John" are Canadians who have lived in Belize for years. Rates around US\$30 double.

★ + **Tipple Tree Beya Inn**, Hopkins (P.O. Box 206, Dangriga); tel./fax 501-520-7006; www.tippletree.com If you're looking for an inexpensive little place on the beach, this is a great choice. The hotel is popular, so reserve in advance. Rates range from US\$30 to \$50 double, plus tax.

Dining in Hopkins

Besides the hotel dining rooms, of which the one at **Beaches and Dreams** is the best,

a number of small restaurants are run by local people, often in their homes. Try **Innie's**, **Iris's** and **Yugadah Café**. You'll pay around US\$4 or \$5 for fish or chicken and beans and rice, up to US\$10 to \$13 for a lobster dinner.

Placencia

You have a choice to make about where to stay on the Placencia peninsula. You have to decide whether you want to stay in Placencia village, the main “population center” for the area, or north of the village. Placencia village is a Creole village at the southern tip of the peninsula. It’s a bit funky, and nearly all of the lodging choices here are in the budget or moderate categories, but it is the focus for restaurants and what shopping there is. By contrast, the area north of Placencia village has most of the peninsula’s upmarket resorts. It’s less jammed up, and the beaches are generally prettier.

If you’re a budget traveler, or if you don’t have a car (and don’t want to bike or take a taxi or shuttle van back and forth between your hotel and the village) you may want to stay in or near Placencia village.

If you decide you want something more upscale and with fewer people around, then your decision becomes: Where north of Placencia village do you want to stay? There are two “addresses” north of Placencia village: Seine Bight, a Garifuna village about 5 miles north of Placencia village, and Maya Beach, about 7 miles north of Placencia village. Maya Beach isn’t a village but a small collection of houses and hotels. (Another small collection of houses and hotels farther north, between Maya Beach and Riversdale, the elbow point where the road from the Southern Highway comes to the Caribbean Sea and turns south down the peninsula.)

A primary consideration is how far north of the “action” in Placencia village you want to be. Unless you have a car, you’re at the mercy of your hotel shuttle, if there is one, taxis (which cost US\$15 one-way to go from Placencia village to the north end of Maya Beach). Some hotels do offer guests the complimentary use of bicycles, which is another option for getting back and forth, though not a very good one after dark.

Your Lodging Choices on the Placencia Peninsula

★★★★★ **Turtle Inn**, Placencia; tel. 501-824-4912; e-mail info@blancaneaux.com
www.blancaneaux.com The original Turtle Inn was a fixture for many years in

Placencia, when the late Skip White ran it. A few years ago, it was bought by Francis Ford Coppola and soon reopened as Blancaneaux's Turtle Inn. Then, in October 2001, a nasty lady named Iris paid a visit to Placencia, and Turtle Inn was virtually blown away. After a complete rebuild, Turtle Inn reopened in early 2003. On a recent stay, the new Turtle Inn knocked me out. My family and I had a two-bedroom sea front villa, and you couldn't ask for anything nicer or more stylish. The villas and many of the single cabañas sit just feet from the sea, so the gentle lap-lap of the Caribbean soothes you, and the prevailing offshore breeze keeps you cool. (There is no air-conditioning, so on a calm summer day I do fear it can get pretty warm.) Our villa was a pure delight. In some ways, the villas at Turtle Inn remind me of those at Blancaneaux Lodge: The bay-thatch ceiling soars high, there's a wide screened porch across the front, and the main living area has comfy seating and a fridge. The two bathrooms are in the Japanese-style, with both showers and tiled square tubs (there also are outdoor garden showers, which are more fun than you'd think.) But, unlike Blancaneaux, the villas and cabanas at Turtle Inn are Balinese in inspiration, with wonderful art and furnishing, and even the doors, picked out personally, I'm told, in Indonesia by Mr. Coppola and his wife, and imported in 14 container loads. We also got a tour of Mr. Coppola's personal villa, the Pavilion, which is available for hotel guests when the director isn't there. It has several extra touches, such as saunas in the bathrooms, not in the regular villas. Pavilion also comes with its own private pool. We sneaked a swim in the Coppola pool, though normally it is reserved for use by the party in the Pavilion Villa. But even if you don't stay in the Pavilion Villa, you'll be very happy with the main pool. The large turtle-shaped, zero-effect pool, between the restaurant and the beach, is one of the best in Belize. There's no pier, but Turtle Inn has a small marina on the lagoon side. I found the food, service, amenities and staff responsiveness all very accommodating. The upscale made-in-Belize bath soaps, shampoos and lotions delighted my wife and daughter, who also were given Balinese sarongs. We had a walk-talkie to hail our "houseman" should we need anything. The open-air restaurant with a sunken sand floor is as tropical as you could want. There are several on-site restaurants. Like Blancaneaux, Turtle Inn has a wood-burning pizza oven and serves excellent wines from the Niebaum-Coppla winery. A continental breakfast of fresh-baked breads and fruits is included in the room rate. Rates: In-season, Turtle Inn cabañas are US\$335 to \$385 double, and villas US\$550 to \$700 for four persons (the Pavilion Villa is US\$1,750.) Summer rates are slightly lower, Christmas rates higher. Rates are plus 9% hotel tax and 10% service.

★★★★★ **Inn at Robert's Grove**, Seine Bight; tel. 501-523-3565; fax 501-523-3567 or, in the US., 800-565-9757; www.robertsgrove.com This 52-unit seaside property, which opened in 1997, raised the standard on what visitors to this part of Belize can expect in a beach resort. Owned by ex-New Yorkers Risa and Robert Frackman, Robert's Grove isn't cheap, but you get what you pay for here. I've stayed several times in one of the "deluxe suites" which come in one- and two-bedroom varieties. All these suites have kitchens. These are condo units available for sale, starting at US\$185,000, and managed by the hotel when the owners aren't in residence. These suites are a delight, with a large, strikingly decorated living room — a happy melange of Mexican tile,

Guatemalan fabrics and African art — with cable TV, verandah with a sea view, a master bedroom with king-size bed with a luxuriously firm new U.S.-made mattress and a jumbo bathroom with big, tiled combination bath and shower. We think the deluxe suites are the way to go. The resort has facilities still missing at many other Belize resorts — not one but three swimming pools, roof-top whirlpools, tennis courts, computer room, work-out room and complimentary use of small sailboats, kayaks, bikes and other equipment. The main restaurant, under the hand of chef Frank DaSilva and a new young chef from the Culinary Institute of America, is excellent. Don't miss the weekly Saturday beach barbecue. The resort has opened a casual restaurant on the lagoon side, at the marina and near the dive shop. There's a tour desk, PADI dive center and a sandy beach where you can actually swim. Rates, while not cheap, do not leave you with the impression that you are being held up at Amex-point. In-season, rates (single or double) are US\$215 to \$485; off-season, US\$180 to \$400. All rates plus 19% tax and service. Robert's Grove also offers day and overnight trips to a private island, Ranguana Caye, and to tiny Robert's Caye.

★★★★ **Chabil Mar Villas**, Placencia; tel. 501-523-3606, fax 523-3606; www.chabilmarvillas.com. This gated property is one of the most upscale on the peninsula. Chabil Mar means "beautiful sea" in Ketchi Mayan, and the sea and 400 feet of beach here are indeed beautiful at this Canadian-developed condo colony. The villas are tastefully designed and luxuriously furnished, down to wine corkscrews and service for eight. They have features such as marble floors, original art and four-poster king beds. Every comfort is at hand, from broadband Internet to DVD players to washers and dryers in each unit. Rates: US\$350 to \$550 in winter, US\$300 to \$475 in summer, plus 9% tax and 10% service.

★★★ + **Laru Beya Villas**, Seine Bight, immediately south of Robert's Grove, tel. 501-523-3476 or 800-813-7762 in U.S. and Canada; www.larubeya.com. This is a condo alternative to the peninsula resorts. Laru Beya means "on the beach" in Garifuna, and the condos sit on 7 acres by the water. There are 24 attractive units. Simple garden-view rooms start at US\$100 double. The larger villa units, with one to three bedrooms, have full kitchens, and some have rooftop whirlpools; they run from US\$175 to \$475. Rates are plus 9% hotel tax and 10% service.

★★★ + **The Placencia**, North end of Placencia Peninsula, 6 miles north of Seine Bight; tel. 501-520-4110, fax 520-4112; www.theplacencia.com. Formerly the condo complex known as Zeboz, the Placencia has grown and grown. It now has 92 condo units, with upscale amenities: tennis courts, restaurant with a 9,000-bottle wine cellar, the largest swimming pool in Belize, and 1,000 feet of sandy beachfront, with a dock that goes out some 200 feet. What it doesn't have, at least not yet, is a lot of guests - we've stopped by when only a few units were occupied. The one-bedroom apartments are spacious and have a whirlpool bath and tile floors. Rates US\$250 double for a seafront suite, a little less for others. Meal plan is US\$75 per person. If you don't want to leave, you can buy a condo here, starting at about US\$200,000.

★★★ + **Maya Beach Hotel and Bistro**, Maya Beach, tel./fax 501-520-8040 or 800-503-5124; www.mayabeachhotel.com. Before ending up here, owners John and Ellen Lee (he's Australian, she's American) traveled and worked in 20 countries. They must have figured out what travelers like, because their Bistro by the beach is one of the best restaurants in Belize (*see below*), and the hotel is a classic beachy inn. The Bistro menu changes from time to time, but among the standards are the gazpacho with grilled shrimp, snapper stack and cocoa-dusted pork chop on a risotto cake. In addition to the simple but pleasant hotel rooms with views of False Caye and the sea, the hotel rents four apartments and two houses nearby, some with access to a pool. Rates: US\$65 to \$100, with rental apartments/houses US\$65 to \$200.

★★ + **Barnacle Bill's**, 23 Maya Beach Way, Maya Beach; tel. 501-523-8010; e-mail taylors@btl.net www.gotobelize.com/barnacle/ The opening of this new place in Maya Beach in 2000 marked a welcome trend toward moderately priced self-catering cottages on the beach. American owners Bill (known as the wit of Maya Beach) and Adriane Taylor put up two one-bedroom Mennonite cottages about 60 feet from the beach. The bungalows are on stilts, cooled by fans and sea breezes, and each has a full kitchen with fridge, microwave, two-burner stove and cooking utensils. They'll sleep up to three. The bedroom has a queen bed, and there's a sofa sleeper in the living/dining area. There's some patch coral off the beach for snorkeling. For groceries, a small market is not far away, and there are several restaurants and bars nearby. Doubles are US\$105 Nov.-Apr., US\$95 rest of year, plus 9% hotel tax.

★★ + **Westwind**, Placencia; tel. 501-523-3255; www.westwindhotel.com. George Westby's Westwind Hotel is a dependable spot to rest your head. The rooms are spotlessly clean. All rooms have a balcony, patio or terrace with at least a partial view of the sea. Rates: US\$75 to \$90 double.

★★ + **Tradewinds**, Placencia Village; tel. 501-523-3122; e-mail trdewndpla@btl.net www.beautifulbelize.com/tradewindshotel If you want a beachfront cottage but don't want to pay the higher prices north of the village, Tradewinds is your best bet. The pastel-colored cabins on the beach at the south end of Placencia village are cute as a bug's ear. They're not large, but at about US\$78 to \$102 in-season, and as low as US\$65 off-season, they're a decent value. Fridges, fans and two double beds are standard. There have been some thefts reported from the cabins here, as at some other hotels in the village without security guards.

★ **Lydia's Guest House**, Placencia Village; tel. 501-523-3117; e-mail lydias@btl.net This is another good budget choice, at the north end of the village. It's run by Lydia Villanueva and offers 8 basic but clean rooms, with fans, shared bath, shared kitchen, refrigerators, and, on the second floor of the wood-frame house, a verandah with hammocks. Rates: around US\$25 double in-season, a little less in summer.

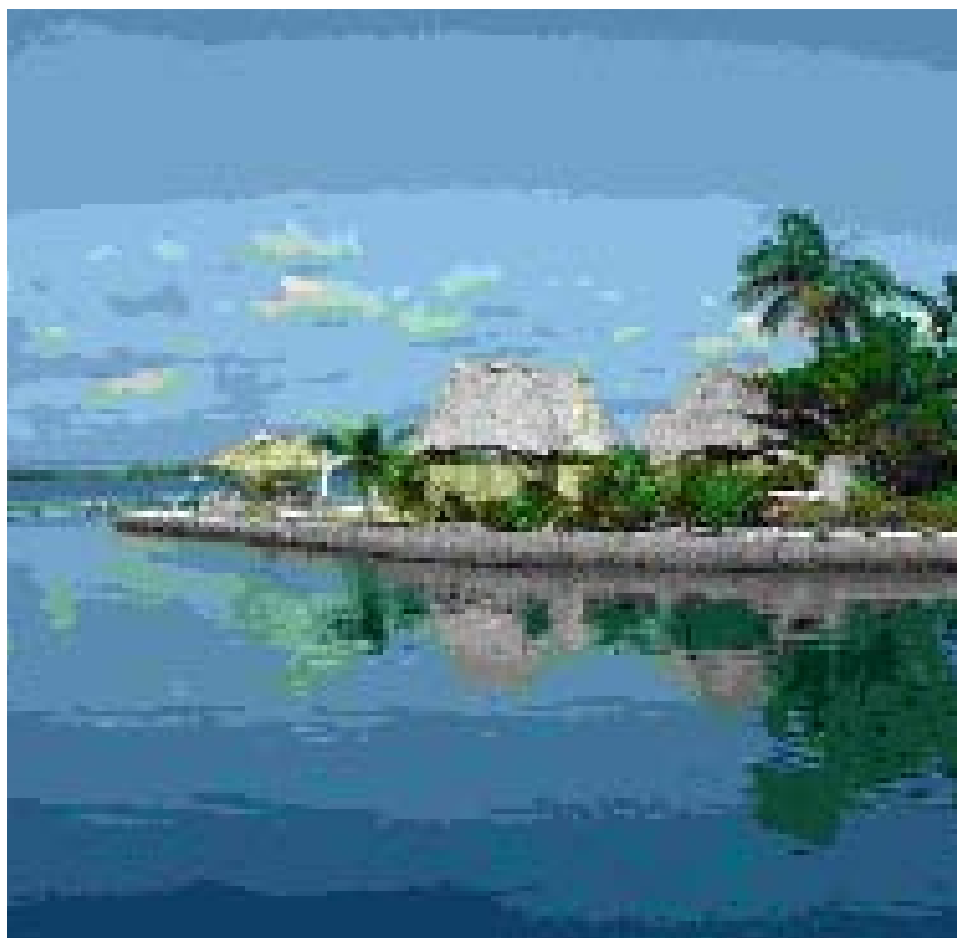
Dining in Placencia

Robert's Grove and **Turtle Inn** (all in the Expensive/Very Expensive category) have worthy restaurants. In addition, try these local places:

Maya Beach Hotel Bistro Opened in 2004, the restaurant at this small hotel has quickly become one of the most talked about in Southern Belize. You'll enjoy the interesting presentations and sophisticated dishes such as five-onion cioppino and cocoa-dusted pork on risotto. Maya Beach, tel. 501-520-8040. Moderate to Expensive.

French Connection A young European couple is working hard to bring French and other continental food to Placencia village. Results vary, but the setting and service are charming. Tel. 501-523-3656. Very Expensive.

Wendy's I do believe I had the best meal of a recent trip here at this unpretentious little restaurant by the road in Placencia village. It was just a simple grilled fish, but oh so tasty, and even with some beer under US\$10. Tel. 501-523-3335. Inexpensive to Moderate.



The lagoon side of Placencia

De Tatch Laidback and tropical, De Tatch is popular for its beer and simple but delicious food. In the village at the Sea Spray Hotel.

Omar's This is probably the best cheap restaurant in the village. Seafood and other local food, served hot and delicious for a few dollars. A good spot for breakfast. Omar also has inexpensive rooms to rent. Tel. 501-523-3236. On the sidewalk across from St. John's church and school. Inexpensive.

Yoli's On a pier at the south end of the peninsula, this bar and restaurant (the food is from Marlene's kitchen nearby) has the peninsula's most tropical setting. Inexpensive to Moderate.

Tutti-Frutti Great place for home-made gelati and ice creams. In Placencia Village. Inexpensive.

Punta Gorda

Your Lodging Choices in the Punta Gorda Area

★★★★ **Machaca Hill Lodge**, tel. 501-722-0050 or 800-242-2017, fax 501-722-0051; www.machacahill.com. Formerly the fishing lodge known as El Pescador PG, Machaca Hill Lodge now focuses on more traditional jungle lodge activities, such as trips and tours in the Laughing Falcon Reserve, an 11,000-acre private nature reserve managed by the lodge's new owners. Fishing trips are still offered. The lodge is set on a steep hill, called Big Hill for the farm that was originally here, on 470 acres above the Rio Grande. A small tram takes guests down to the boats docked on the river at the base of the hill. Up top, on a clear day, you have views of the Gulf of Honduras, with Guatemala and Honduras in the distance. I didn't see or hear any, but I'm told troops of howler monkeys come by frequently. After a day exploring the Toledo rain forest, dive into the pool, then dine on fish and fresh vegetables from the lodge's organic garden. The cottages (renovated in 2006) have vaulted ceilings, tile floors and air-conditioning. Cottages run about US\$210 double. All-inclusive packages including meals, drinks, taxes, and tours start at US\$740 per person for three nights.

★★★ + **Lodge at Big Falls**, P.O. Box 103, Punta Gorda; tel. 888-865-3369 in U.S. and Canada; www.thelodgeatbigfalls This lodge, on about 30 acres on the banks of the Rio Grande River near the village of Big Falls, opened in March 2003. The owners, Americans who lived for years in England, are Rob and Marta Hirons. They've done a good job developing the lodge property. The accommodations are what most visitors are looking for in a lodge — thatch cabañas, but nice ones, with tile floors and private baths. A new pool opened in late 2005. The main lodge building has a restaurant, library and computer with satellite Internet access. Kerosene lamps provide the light. Current rates: May to October, US\$125 double; rest of year, US\$155, plus tax and. Breakfast is US\$12 each, dinner US\$27. Tours of Lubaantun and Nim Il Punit each cost US\$45 for two, and other tours are available. Transfer from the PG airport is

US\$40 for up to four people.

★★ **Sun Creek Lodge**, Mile 86, Southern Hwy.; tel. 501-604-2124; e-mail suncreek@hughes.net, www.belizenet.de. This lodge is run by Bruno Kuppinger, a German, and his beautiful Belizean wife, Melissa. Bruno offers tours, including a new high-adventure tour to the remote Columbia River Forest Reserve, called Maya Divide. Melissa focuses on the lodge and does the cooking, and I'm told she's an excellent chef. The thatch cabanas at this budget-level lodge are simple but look comfortable, with outdoor showers surrounded by plants. The grounds are nicely landscaped. Car rentals available. It's 14 miles from Punta Gorda. Rates are under US\$60.

★★★ + **Coral House Inn**, 151 Main St., Punta Gorda; tel. 501-722-2878; www.coralhouseinn.net. Americans Rick and Darla Mallory bought and renovated a 1938 colonial-era house and turned it into one of the coolest guesthouses in Belize. You'll recognize it by the coral color and the vintage red and white VW van parked in front. There are Confederate graves in the cemetery next door, a legacy of the Confederate immigration to Toledo after the U.S. Civil War. The four guest rooms, US\$83 to \$100 double, have tile floors, good beds, air-conditioning and free wireless high speed internet. There's a small swimming pool, recently upgraded.

★★★ + **Hickatee Cottages Lodge**, Ex-Servicemen Rd., Punta Gorda; tel. 501-662-



Rick Mallory with his vintage VW van at Coral House Inn

4475; www.hickatee.com A British couple, Ian and Kate Morton, built Hickatee Cottages lodge, a little over a mile south of PG. It opened in late 2005. The three Caribbean-style cottages, with zinc roofs and private porches, are nestled in lush foliage. Rates are an affordable US\$60 to \$75 double. Meals are available (dinner is US\$18.50, and breakfast is US\$7.50 per person), with fruits and vegetables from the owners' organic nursery next door. A hickatee, by the way, is a river turtle, *Dermatemys mawii*.

[Too New to Rate - Anticipate ★★★] **Cotton Tree Lodge**, San Felipe village, Toledo (Mailing address: P.O. Box 104, Punta Gorda); tel. 501-670-0557 or 866-480-4534 in the U.S.; www.cottontreelodge.com. Opened in late 2006, Cotton Tree Lodge is on the Moho River about 15 miles from Punta Gorda. Guests are brought in by boat and stay in one of 10 thatch cabanas set among fig trees along the river's edge. Everything here is solar-powered. All-inclusive rates are US\$395 to \$445 double per day and include lodging, meals, soft drinks, horseback riding, most tours, taxes, tips and transfers. Discounts are sometimes available. The lodge is named after the silk cotton tree, aka kapok or ceiba tree.

★★ + **Beya Suites**. Front St., #6 Hopeville, Punta Gorda; tel. 501/722-2188; www.beyasuites.com. Another new addition to PG hotels is Beya Suites. You can't miss it — it's painted a bright pink and enjoys a view of the water. It's Belizean-owned, with six rooms with air-conditioning and TVs. Rates are around US\$75 to \$90 double.

★ + **St. Charles Inn**, 23 King St., Punta Gorda; tel. 501-722-2149. One of the better budget hotels in Toledo. Small, carpeted rooms on the second floor over a store, with cable TV. Doubles from US\$20.

★ + **Tate's Guest House**, 34 José Maria Nuñez St., Punta Gorda; tel. 501-722-0147. Run by William Tate, a long-time post office worker in PG, and his family, this guesthouse on a quiet residential street is a good value. The rooms are clean, and the atmosphere friendly. There's a small common kitchen with refrigerator and microwave for guest use. Rates US\$20 to \$40.

★ **Nature's Way Guesthouse**, 65 Front St., Punta Gorda; tel. 501-702-2119; e-mail thfece@hotmail.com This rambling, funky old guesthouse appeals to the hippy backpacker in us. It has a nice location, on the water toward the south end of town, and guests here are often well traveled, with stories to tell. At these prices — starting at US\$10 per person — don't expect a Hampton Inn.

Dining in Punta Gorda

Note that restaurants in PG often close for several months, then reopen unexpectedly.

Earth Runnins. Popular hangout, especially for expats, and good food. Moderate. 11 Main St., tel. 501-722-2007.

Grace's. Good place for breakfast and locally popular for lunch. Inexpensive/Moderate. 19 Main St., tel. 501-702-2414.

Emery's. Fish is the specialty here, and some people think this has the best and most consistent food in town. Inexpensive/Moderate. North Street near the gas station.

Marian's Bayview. Here you choose from one or two dishes owner Marian prepares for the day, perhaps local fish or Indian dish. The restaurant is on the third floor of a concrete building, with views of the water. It has bare light bulbs and rough cement floors, but you come here for the food, not the atmosphere. Front and Vernon Sts., tel. 501-722-0129.

Belize Practicalities for Travelers

Belize Entry and Exit Requirements: You must have a valid passport to enter Belize, with at least six months before expiration, but visas are not required for citizens of the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and most Caribbean and European Union countries. Entry is granted for up to 30 days, with monthly renewals (renewals cost US\$25 per month for the first six months, then US\$50 a month.)

When leaving Belize by air, there is a US\$36.25 exit fee for those who are not citizens or residents of Belize. The fee also apply to QRP participants. This fee must be paid in cash (either Belize or U.S. dollars) and is collected by the ticket agent when you check in for your international flight. However, many airlines include the fee in the ticket price. When leaving by land, at either the Benque Viejo border with Guatemala or Corozal border with Mexico (but not when you go by boat to Guatemala, Mexico or Honduras), there is a US\$15 border fee, plus a \$3.75 conservation fee, for a total of US\$18.75. Students with valid student ID pay US\$7.50. Children under 12 accompanied by parents are exempt.

What to Pack and Bring: Belize is a very casual country. You don't need evening clothes or even a coat and tie or other U.S.-style business dress. You'll live in tee shirts, shorts, loose-fitting slacks and shirts. A really dressy occasion for men might require a guayaberra or collared shirt and long pants; for women a simple skirt or dress.

Leave all your fancy jewelry and Rolex watches at home. They will impress only thieves. Also leave your rain gear at home. It probably will rain, but raincoats just make you sweat.

Here are ideas for your packing list:

- Lightweight cotton clothes or quick-drying cotton/synthetic blends.



- Comfortable walking shoes. Consider light boots for hiking and sandals for the beach.
- Extra swimsuits.
- Maps, guidebooks and reading material. If available at all in Belize, these will cost more than back home and may be out of date.
- Cap or hat — be sure it's one that won't blow off in windy conditions on the water.
- Sunglasses — the darker the better.
- Small flashlight with extra batteries, baggies in various sizes, a roll of duct tape, a large garbage bag, pen and writing pad, and Swiss Army-style knife — with these you can go anywhere and do anything.
- Extra film or the digital equivalent, plus spare battery — you'll shoot many more photos in Belize than you think you will. Film is readily available in Belize, but it's expensive.
- Health kit consisting of your prescription medicines and a copy of your eyeglass prescription, plus aspirin, insect spray with 30% DEET, sunscreen (more than you think you'll need), baby oil or Avon Skin-So-Soft for sandflies, Pepto-Bismol or other tummy medicine, bandages, sun-burn lotion, toilet tissue, moist wipes, seasick pills and other over-the-counter medicines.

Optional:

- Battery-operated radio if coming during tropical storm/hurricane season (July-November).
- Snorkel mask — you can rent snorkel and dive gear in Belize, but rental masks often don't fit well.
- Fishing gear.
- Headlamp if you are going caving or river cave tubing.
- Cotton sweater or light jacket may be needed in the winter, especially on the water or in the higher elevations of the Mountain Pine Ridge.
- Frisbees, tee-shirts and baseball-style caps with American sports logos make good small gifts for kids.

Money and Credit Cards: U.S. dollars (bills, not coins) are accepted everywhere in Belize, at a fixed rate of 2 Belize dollars to 1 U.S. dollar, although you often will receive change in Belizean money, or in a mix of Belizean and U.S. money. While there's no need to exchange U.S. dollars, sometimes you will get a better rate than 2 to 1 by exchanging at a casa de cambio or at the border from free moneychangers. Particularly in the early fall, when there is often a shortage of U.S. dollars in Belize, you may be able to get up to 2.10 to 2.15 Belize for each U.S. dollar. Canadian dollars, Mexican pesos, Euros and other currencies are not widely accepted. These should be exchanged at banks or moneychangers. The Belize Bank branch at Goldson International Airport offers currency exchange seven days a week.

Traveler's checks in U.S. dollars are accepted by most hotels and at some stores, restaurants and other businesses. You usually need to show your passport when paying with a traveler's check. Banks and some businesses only give about 1.96

Belize to 1 U.S. for traveler's checks. Visa and Master Card are widely accepted. American Express is accepted by many hotels and larger businesses. Discover, Diners and other cards are rarely accepted. Sometimes there is a surcharge for credit card use, usually 3 to 5% but occasionally as much as 10%. Surcharges are becoming less common, due to complaints by consumers and moves by credit card issuers. Ask about surcharges before using your card. In addition to a possible local surcharge, increasingly credit card companies are levying currency conversion fees, from 1 to 3% or even higher. Most products and services in Belize will be charged in Belize dollars, so the currency conversion charges apply.

While bank offices in Belize have modern ATM machines, most of these ATMs only accept ATM cards issued in Belize. The current exception are Belize Bank, Atlantic Bank and First Caribbean International Bank (formerly Barclays). These have ATMs that (usually) do accept foreign cards. If you can't tap your funds with your ATM card, most banks in Belize will issue an advance on your Visa or MasterCard. The fee for this is US\$2.50 to US\$7.50, depending on the bank, plus whatever fees and interest your bankcard charges. Getting a cash advance may take a little time and paperwork.

Smart travelers bring a combination of cash in small U.S. currency denominations, traveler's checks in U.S. dollars, ATM card and credit cards.

Dress: Belize is a casual place. You don't need evening clothes or a coat and tie or other U.S.-style business dress. Heavy winter clothes are unneeded, though a light cotton sweater will come in handy at times. Most of the year, you'll live in tee shirts and shorts or other casual clothes.

Climate: Most of Belize has a sub-tropical climate similar to that of South Florida. Frost-free Belize usually enjoys lows in the 60s to 70s, with highs in the 80s to low 90s. More rain falls as you go south, with average annual rainfall in the north being about 50 inches, similar to Atlanta, Georgia, but increasing to 160 inches or more in the far south. Generally the rainiest months are June through October, with the driest months being February through April. January sees the coolest temperatures of the year, while May has the hottest. In general, daytime temps are higher inland, due to the influence of prevailing winds from the sea on the cayes and coast. The humidity is high year-round in all parts of the country.

Hurricanes and Other Natural Disasters: June through November technically is hurricane season in the Western Caribbean, but the September and October period is the most likely time for tropical storms and hurricanes. The worst hurricane in modern Belize history struck in September 1931, killing as many as 2,000 people in and around Belize City. About two-thirds of all tropical storms that have visited Belize in modern times have struck during those two months. Since 1889, some 42 tropical storms and hurricanes have made landfall in Belize, an average of about once every three years. During the last half of the 20th century, only five serious hurricanes struck Belize, with the worst being Hattie in 1961. However, with the new millennium has

come an increase in storm activity. Hurricane Keith hit Ambergris Caye in late September 2000, killing three and doing some US\$150 million in damage, mainly on the backside of the island. Hurricane Iris in early October 2001 devastated the Placencia peninsula and rural Toledo District in southern Belize, killing 21 people, all in a dive boat. However, no hurricanes have hit Belize in since 2001.

Even without hurricanes and tropical storms, flooding does frequently occur in low-lying areas, especially at the beginning of the rainy season, typically in June or July. Heavy rains from June through September in southern Belize can also cause flooding at any time during this period.

Happily, Belize is not much subject to that other scourge of Central America – earthquakes. While earthquakes have occurred in Belize, notably in southern Belize, no severe terremotos have hit Belize in modern times. Likewise, there are no active volcanoes in Belize. Forest fires are a risk at the end of the dry season, typically April and May.

Best Times to Visit Belize:

Anytime is a good time to visit, but here are the “best times” for different activities and budgets:

Best time to avoid tourists: September-October

Best time to avoid rain: February through April

Best time for underwater visibility: March-June

Best time for lowest hotel prices: After Easter to U.S. Thanksgiving

Best time to visit Toledo District and the far south: February-May

Best time to visit Cayo: July-February (when it's not so hot and dry)

Best time to visit Placencia: January-May

Best time to visit cayes: December-August

Best time to avoid hurricanes and tropical storms: December-June

Air Travel to Belize: At present, five international airlines fly to Belize: American, Continental, Delta, USAir and TACA. USAir has daily flights from Charlotte. Continental has two non-stop flights a day from Houston and a weekly flight from Newark. American has one daily non-stop from Dallas Fort-Worth and one from Miami. Delta has daily flights from Atlanta and a weekly flight from Los Angeles. TACA at present has a non-stop from Houston. Its Miami flights to Belize City require a change of planes in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and its other flights stop in San Salvador, where TACA hubs.

The airlines use mostly 737 or other smaller equipment to Belize, with the usual tight seating in coach and grossly overpriced seating in first or business class. Flights from Miami, Dallas, Charlotte and Houston take about two hours to two and a half hours.

At present there is no scheduled non-stop or direct service from Canada or Europe. In-season, there is one weekly charter from Toronto. With the lengthening of the main

runway at the international airport near Belize City, some service is expected to begin from Europe, perhaps in late 2007.

One of the chief complaints from Belize travelers is the high cost of airfare. Tickets from the U.S. to Cancun or Cozumel often are one-half the cost of tickets to Belize City. From the chief gateways of Houston, Charlotte, Miami and DFW to Belize City, you can expect to pay US\$350 to \$800 round-trip. Several airlines flying to Belize, notably USAir, occasionally have Internet specials with prices as low as US\$300, but you have to act fast as the windows for purchase and travel are narrow.

Our advice: Sign up for Internet fare notices on the airlines that fly to Belize. Keep checking the on-line reservation sites such as Expedia.com or Travelocity.com. Fares change constantly. Priceline.com, Skyauction.com and consolidator sites on the Web may produce lower prices for you. Also, the “**meta**” sites that search multiple sites to find the cheapest fares can be helpful. The best is www.kayak.com.

A travel agent specializing in Belize, such as **Barb's Belize**, tel. 915-760-6399 or toll-free 888-321-2272, fax 915-760-6497, e-mail escape@barbsbelize.com www.barbsbelize.com may be able to find lower fares for you. The owner, Barbara Kasak, is very knowledgeable about Belize.

Another excellent source of air fare deals and hotel and tour bookings in Belize is **Katie Valk**, an American who has lived in Belize for many years; e-mail her at info@belize-trips.com or visit www.belize-trips.com.

Another idea is to fly into Cancun or Cozumel on a cheap scheduled or charter flight and bus it from there. ADO and other bus lines provide frequent service from Cancun and Playa del Carmen to Chetumal for around US\$20. In Chetumal, you can bus or take a transfer van across to Corozal Town, and from there fly (US\$40) or water taxi (US\$22.50) to San Pedro or bus (US\$6 to \$8) to Belize City.

Arriving by Air: What to Expect: The Belize International Airport (also known as the Philip S. W. Goldson International Airport, named after a long-time People's United Party politician) is about 9 miles north of the center of Belize City, off the Northern Highway at Ladyville. The airport is small but fairly modern, having opened in 1990. A new domestic terminal area opened in late 1998. After your airplane taxis to the terminal building, you disembark the old-fashioned way, down a set of stairs. You cross the tarmac and enter the immigration and customs area. Most days, you feel the humidity right away.

The immigration officer will look at your passport and usually ask the purpose of your visit and how long you are staying. You can be granted a visitor's entry permit of up to 30 days, but that's not automatic. If you say you are staying 10 days, the officer might grant only that period or two weeks at most. If you think there's any chance you may want to stay a little longer than your current reservations, be generous about estimating

the time you'll stay. The officer will then stamp your passport and enter the arrival and departure date. From here, you move to a small baggage claim area and then go through customs. Belize now has a Green/Red customs system. If you have nothing to declare, you can go through the Green line, though an officer may still ask to see inside your bags. On a typical flight, probably one-third of passengers have at least one bag inspected briefly.

Customs and immigrations officers generally are courteous and efficient, though like government officials in most countries they are not known for being overly friendly. Treat them with respect, and you'll be treated similarly. Do not even think of offering a bribe. That is not how things work in Belize.

The entire immigration and customs process usually takes from 15 minutes to half an hour.

After your bags pass customs, you can go into the main airport lobby or out to the taxi or rental car area. Porters are available to assist with bags, if necessary. A tip of US\$1 per bag is plenty. If you are continuing on a domestic flight, move quickly to the Maya or Tropic check-in area, as the domestic carriers use small airplanes, and they fill up quickly.

The rectangular passenger lobby, which is usually bustling with people, has banking windows (you do NOT need to change U.S. dollars to Belize dollars —see above), a few tourist shops and airline ticket counters. Upstairs to your left are bathrooms (fairly clean) and a restaurant. There is another restaurant in the new terminal section.

Taxis are available right outside the passenger lobby door. The cabs at the airport — they have green license plates — are regulated and you shouldn't be ripped off. The fare is fixed at US\$25 to anywhere in Belize City — that's for the cab, not per person, although a small additional amount may be charged for extra luggage. In Belize, you do not need to tip taxi drivers unless they perform extra service such as carrying luggage. There are no airport shuttles into Belize City, and no buses. If you have the energy to carry your bags, you can walk almost 2 miles to the Northern Highway, or pay a taxi around US\$8 to take you there, and flag down a bus into Belize City (about US\$1).

Rental car kiosks, including local offices of international franchised auto rental companies including **Avis, Budget, Hertz** and **Thrifty**, along with locals **Crystal, Jabiru** and others, are across the street on the other side of the airport parking area, a short distance.

A modest hotel, the **Embassy**, is within walking distance of the airport, just beyond the parking lot. A better airport hotel for the same money (around US\$50 double) is **Global Village Hotel**, on the Northern Highway near the entrance to the airport access road. Global Village offers a free airport shuttle.

Buses: Travel by bus in Belize is inexpensive. You can travel the whole length of the country from the Mexican border in the north to Punta Gorda in the far south for about US\$20 or go from Belize City to the Guatemala border in the west for US\$3 to \$4. It's also a good way to meet local people and to get a real feel for the country.

Bus travel in Belize falls somewhere between the chicken bus experience in rural Guatemala and the deluxe coaches with comfortable reserved seats and videos in Mexico. Buses are usually recycled American school buses or old Greyhound diesel pushers. On the Northern and Western Highway routes, a few buses are modern coaches offering "premier" express service at slightly higher rates. There is no bus service from point to point within Belize City; you either have to take taxis or walk or being going on a regular bus route out of the city.

The country has a franchised bus system, with the government granting rights for certain companies to operate on specific routes. Belize City is the hub for bus service throughout Belize.

National Transport, a successor to Novelo's, is the largest of several dozen small bus companies. Among the others are **James, Tillet's** and **BZ Bus** (a co-op).

You can make advance reservations by calling the bus companies, although most people don't make reservations. If boarding at a terminal, you pay for your ticket at the window and get a reserved seat. If boarding elsewhere, you pay the driver's assistant.

Air: Belize has two domestic carriers, **Tropic Air** tel. 501-226-2012 in Belize or 800-422-3435 in the U.S. and Canada, www.tropicaire.com and Maya Island Air tel. 501-223-1140, www.mayaislandair.com

Which is better? It's a toss-up. For years, Tropic was larger, but with new owners, Maya Island is expanding, adding new aircraft and building new terminals (at Belize municipal, Placencia and elsewhere). Both have good safety records and very similar prices. For most people, the decision comes down to which airline has the more convenient flight.

Tropic and Maya both fly to Ambergris and Caye Caulker as well as Dangriga, Placencia, Punta Gorda, Corozal Town and Flores in Guatemala, along with a few other stops. Domestic flights from the municipal airport, about a mile from the center of Belize City, are one-fourth to one-half cheaper than from the international airport. For example, a flight to San Pedro on Ambergris Caye costs approximately US\$112 round-trip from international, and US\$60 from municipal. There is usually little or no saving on roundtrip over two one-way fares, and except for occasional off-season specials, fares are about the same year-round, with no advance-purchase or other discounts. Sometimes you can get a 10% to 30% discount by paying cash rather than paying by credit card. It pays to ask.

The airlines fly only during daylight hours, except at peak times when the airlines have permission to continue flying into San Pedro until all waiting passengers are taken care of. Currently both airlines have five or six flights a day going south, running every couple of hours from both Belize City airports, stopping at Dangriga, Placencia and Punta Gorda. Both airlines also have about a dozen flights a day between Belize City and San Pedro; many, but not all, flights to and from international make stops at municipal. At present flights to and from Corozal Town are through San Pedro, and flights to Flores, Guatemala, use the international airport only.

Are advance air reservations necessary? Except at peak high-season travel periods, you can probably get on a convenient flight without advance reservations. Even with reservations on busy days it's often first-come, first-served. Still, having a reservation gives you a little extra edge, and we recommend you book ahead. It's essential you do so at holiday periods such as Easter and Christmas.

Shuttles: If you are going to Cayo, you may want to use a shuttle service, as there is no air service to San Ignacio. Several companies operate shuttle vans from the international airport to San Ignacio, for about US\$35 to \$45 per person. One shuttle service is provided by the Aguada Hotel in Santa Elena, Cayo. Contact 501-804-3609 or e-mail aguada@btl.net Another is offered by Cahal Pech Village in San Ignacio. The Trek Stop (www.thetrekstop.com) runs a shuttle during the winter season -- check at www.sanignacioshuttle.com. You should make reservations in advance. A Guatemala company, Linea Dorado, also known as Mundo Maya, offers daily shuttle service between Chetumal and Flores, with pick-ups in Belize City at the Marine Terminal at 10 a.m. Another Guatemalan company, San Juan, also offers buses to Flores. Price is around US\$20 from Belize City to Flores.

Water Taxis: If you are going to San Pedro or Caye Caulker, you have the option of taking a water taxi. The Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association runs fast open boats from the Marine Terminal in Belize City to both islands roughly every hour and a half. From Belize City to San Pedro takes about 75 minutes and costs US\$14 per person one-way; to Caulker it is about 45 minutes and costs US\$10 per person. Between Caulker and San Pedro (a little over 30 minutes) the cost also is US\$10 one-way. To get to the water taxi terminals in Belize City from the international airport is a US\$25 cab ride. There is also twice-daily water taxi service on between Corozal Town and San Pedro (US\$22.50) and a couple of water taxis daily between Punta Gorda and Puerto Barrios, Guatemala (US\$15). There are two weekly boats between Placencia and Puerto Cortes, Honduras, (US\$50) and also two weekly boats between Dangriga and Puerto Cortes (US\$50). Elsewhere, such as from Dangriga to Tobacco Caye, you can arrange a boat (US\$17.50) but service is not scheduled.

Health: The standards of health and hygiene in Belize are fairly high, similar to that in Costa Rica. Not many visitors become ill from traveler's diseases or from drinking the water. While malaria, dengue fever and other tropical diseases are present in Belize,

they do not frequently affect visitors in the more popular destinations of Belize. Most travelers to Ambergris Caye or Placencia and other popular areas don't get any special shots or take other precautions before they come. No shots are required for entry into Belize, except for yellow fever if you are coming from an infected area such as parts of Africa. However, it's always a good idea to keep tetanus-diphtheria, Hep A and B and other vaccinations up to date. Malaria prophylaxis may be advised for mainland travel, especially to remote areas in southern Belize or into Guatemala. Chloroquine, taken once a week, starting two weeks before arrival, is usually all you need in most of the region. Better be safe than sorry. Check with your doctor or the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, tel. 404-332-4559 or visit www.cdc.gov for the latest information. The biggest trip-spoiler in Belize is probably sunburn. You're only 18 degrees of latitude north of the Equator, and the sub-tropical sun is much stronger than back home.

Medical Care: Belize City is the center for medical care in Belize. A number of dentists and private medical clinics are available there. Many serious problems can be treated at Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital in Belize City (Princess Margaret Dr., tel. 501-223-1548), a modern public hospital albeit one plagued by equipment problems and supply shortages. It's hard to beat the rates, though – under US\$30 per day for a hospital room. There are seven other public hospitals in Belize, including two regional hospitals: the Southern Regional Hospital in Dangriga, and the Northern Regional Hospital in Orange Walk Town. Altogether, there are about 600 public hospital beds in Belize.

The public hospitals provide the four basic medical specialties: internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics and OB-GYN. Karl Heusner Memorial also provides neuro, ENT, physiotherapy, orthopedic surgery and several other services. The quality of these hospitals varies considerably. Karl Heusner Memorial -- named after a prominent Belize City physician -- opened in 1997 and has much modern equipment, such as a CAT-scan, though some Belizeans and expats complain that even this hospital is chronically short of supplies, including at times toilet paper. In 2004-2005, it added new facilities including ones for neurosurgery and trauma care. The Southern Regional Hospital in Dangriga, which opened in 2000, is another modern facility, with much of the same medical technologies and equipment as you'd find in a community hospital in an American town. However, other hospitals leave a lot to be desired. The hospital in Orange Walk, for example, though it is being upgraded, still looks more like a refugee camp than a hospital, with low concrete block buildings and limited equipment. A 24-hour medical clinic, essentially a small hospital, opened in 2004 in San Pedro.

Besides these hospitals, Belize has a network of around 60 public health clinics and rural health posts in many towns and villages around the country, providing primary medical and dental care. Most of these suffer from inadequate staffing, too many patients for their available resources and lack of equipment and medicine. Doctors may diagnose health problems accurately, but they may not be able to provide the proper medications to cure them.

In addition to these public hospitals and clinics, Belize has two private hospitals -- La Loma Luz, a not-for-profit Seventh Day Adventist hospital in Santa Elena near San Ignacio, and Belize Medical Associates, a for-profit facility in Belize City. Universal Health Services, a third private hospital, is being merged into Karl Heusner Memorial. Altogether these private hospitals have fewer than 50 hospital beds. There also are a number of physicians and dentists in private practice, mostly in Belize City.

Starting in the late 1990s, health care in Belize got a boost, thanks to the arrival of a group of several dozen medical volunteers from Cuba. Currently almost 100 Cuban nurses and physicians are in Belize. These doctors and nurses were assigned to clinics in areas of Belize which, until then, did not have full-time medical personnel available to the local people. These hardworking Cubans, who exist on stipends of only a few dollars a month, have won many new friends for Fidel in Belize, regardless of what Belizeans may think of his politics. Medical and dental volunteer teams from the U.S. and Canada also regularly visit Belize to provide short-term care.

Most physicians and dentists in Belize are trained in the U.S., Guatemala, Mexico or Great Britain. There are four so-called offshore medical schools in Belize, but their graduates are unlikely to practice in Belize. A nursing school, affiliated with the University of Belize, trains nurses for work in Belize.

Pharmacies: There are drug stores in Belize City and in all towns. Many prescription drugs cost less in Belize than in the U.S., though pharmacies may not stock a wide selection of drugs. In general, in Belize prescriptions usually are not needed for antibiotics and some other drugs that require prescriptions in the U.S., although pharmacies owned by physicians or operated by hospitals (common in Belize) may require or suggest a consultation with the doctor.

Nightlife: Many visitors to Belize, after full days of hiking, caving, diving or snorkeling, are just too pooped to stay up late and party. At remote jungle lodges and dive resorts, often the lights go out by 10 p.m. Belize City and Ambergris Caye have the most clubs and bars. Visitors thinking about a tropical romance or a visit to one of the several brothels in Belize City, Orange Walk Town, Cayo or elsewhere should be aware that AIDS is a serious and growing problem in Belize. There are an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 people in Belize with HIV, a large number considering the country's small population of around 300,000.

Gambling: A law passed in 1999 permitted gambling, and several casinos have opened in Belize; others are planned. Belize City has the Princess Hotels and Casino, with about 500 electronic machines plus live tables for poker, blackjack and other games. The Princess also has a small branch in San Ignacio. A small casino opens in San Pedro at Coconuts Hotel. There are also three casinos near Corozal Town in northern Belize, including the large Las Vegas Casino, where a near 400-room hotel is planned.

Drugs: Despite its reputation as a source of marijuana and, more recently, as a transshipment point for cocaine and other drugs from South America, Belize has strict laws on the use of illegal drugs, with prison terms and fines for offenders. Quite a few Belizeans smoke marijuana, some fairly openly, but it is illegal. In 2004, the head of Belize's police force announced that henceforth police would ignore possession of small amounts of weed for personal consumption, though they would continue to pursue those growing or selling marijuana. However, some arrests for marijuana possession still take place. Unfortunately, crack, heroin and other hard drugs are a fact of life in Belize, as they are in many countries. Much of the crime in Belize City and in other parts of the country is related to drugs.

Bargaining: In general, prices in Belize stores are fixed, and there is no bargaining. At street markets, you may do some light bargaining, but haggling is not a way of life in Belize as it is some other parts of the world. Hotels and other tourist services may offer discounts – it never hurts to ask. Of course, when buying real estate, bargaining is the order of the day in Belize as most everywhere.

Business Hours: Most businesses open around 8 a.m. and close at 5 or 6 p.m. on weekdays. Some close for lunch, usually from 1 to 2 p.m. Many stores are open on Saturday, or at least on Saturday mornings. On Sundays, most stores and other businesses are closed, except in tourist areas like San Pedro. Banks typically are open until 1 p.m. Monday to Thursday and until 4 or 5 on Friday.

Electricity: 110 volts AC/60 cycles, same as in the U.S., and outlets are like those in the U.S. and Canada. However, electricity is at least twice as expensive in Belize as in the U.S., at around 21 U.S. cents per kilowatt-hour.

Embassies: The U.S. Embassy in Belize moved from Belize City to Floral Park Road in Belmopan in late 2006. The new embassy is a compound constructed at a cost of US\$50 million. In 2005, George W. Bush picked Rob Dieter, Bush's former roommate at Yale, as the new ambassador to Belize. Dieter has been a professor at the University of Colorado law school. He went to law school at the University of Denver and before that roomed for four years with W. as an undergraduate at Yale. Russell Freeman, a Fargo, N.D., lawyer and fundraiser for George W. Bush, formerly was the ambassador. The embassy's telephone number is 501-822-4011, fax 501-822-4012, and the web site is www.belize.usembassy.gov. Canada, the U.K., Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Taiwan and about a dozen other countries have ambassadors or other representatives either in Belize City or Belmopan.

Holidays: The following are legal public holidays in Belize:

New Year's Day - January 1

Baron Bliss Day - March 9 (actual celebration date varies)

Good Friday

Holy Saturday

Easter Sunday

Easter Monday
Labour Day - May 1
Commonwealth Day - May 24
St. George's Caye Day - September 10
Independence Day - September 21
Columbus Day - October 12
Garifuna Settlement Day - November 19
Christmas Day - December 25
Boxing Day - December 26

Language: The official language of Belize is English, and English speakers have little or no trouble communicating anywhere in the country. However, Creole, a combination of mostly English vocabulary with West African grammar, syntax and word endings, is used daily by many Belizeans of all backgrounds. Spanish is widely spoken as well, and tends to be the dominant language in areas bordering Mexico and Guatemala. The current Belize government has called on all Belizeans to learn both Spanish and English. Garifuna and Maya languages also are spoken, and some Mennonites speak a German dialect. As many as two-thirds of Belizeans are bi- or tri-lingual.

Location, Size and Population: Belize is on the Caribbean Coast of Central America, bordered by Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south. To the east is the Caribbean Sea. In Belize waters are as many as 400 islands, most unpopulated specks of sand or mangrove. Belize is about the size of the U.S. state of Massachusetts or Wales in the U.K. — 8,866 square miles — with a population of around 292,000 in mid-2005, and estimated at around 300,000 in early 2007, about as many people as live in metro Savannah, Georgia. From north to south Belize is less than 200 miles in length, and at its widest point it is less than 70 miles across.

Largest Cities and Towns: Populated areas in Belize are officially designated as a city, town or village. Belize City is the largest city, with an official population of 60,800, according to the 2005 updates of the Belize Census by the Central Statistical Office in Belmopan. Including its outskirts, the city is home to about 80,000 people. Belmopan, the capital, also has been designated a city, although it has a population of only 13,500. San Ignacio is the country's largest town, each with almost 17,000 residents, according to 2005 figures. However, the fast-growing San Pedro area of Ambergris Caye may soon surpass these towns in population. Some estimates put the island's population, officially 8,400 in mid-2005, now at close to 20,000, although that includes temporary workers and some expat snowbirders. The country's urban areas, in order of population from largest to smallest, as of mid-2005, are:

Urbanized Areas	Population 2005
Belize City	60,800
San Ignacio/Santa Elena	16,800
Orange Walk	15,200
Belmopan	13,500

Dangriga	10,800
Corozal	8,800
San Pedro	8,400
Benque Viejo	7,200
Punta Gorda	5,000

Belize is divided into six political districts, which function a little like U.S. counties. The six districts, from north to south, are Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize, Cayo, Stann Creek and Toledo.

Mail Service: Mail service to and from Belize is reasonably reliable and not too slow. Mail between the U.S. and Belize City usually takes less than a week. To outlying areas, however, it can take much longer – often several weeks. There are post offices in Belize City and in all towns and some villages. Many areas do not have home delivery. Unlike some of its Latin neighbors, Belize’s postal service does not usually suffer from theft and lost mail. To mail an airmail letter from Belize to the U.S. costs 30 cents U.S. and 15 cents for a postcard. For fast, dependable but expensive international express delivery, DHL Worldwide Express, which has an office in Belize City (38 New Rd., tel. 501-223-4350) is one choice. Federal Express is another.

Maps: The best maps of Belize are these:

Belize Traveller’s Map, ITMB. Scale 1:250,000. The best general map to Belize, last updated as 6th edition in 2005. US\$10.95. Available from www.itmb.com, www.amazon.com or at larger bookstores.

Driver’s Guide to Beautiful Belize, by Emory King. This mile-by-mile guide to most roads in Belize is really handy if you are traveling around the mainland. It’s a 40-some page booklet in 8 1/2” x 11” format, updated annually. It also has maps of Belize City and major towns. Price around US\$10 in Belize.

Belize Topographical Map, British Ordnance Survey, 1:250,000-scale. Beautiful map, in two flat sheets, with Belize City and town maps on reverse sides. Also, there are 44 individual topo maps to most of Belize, at 1:50,000 scale. These are excellent maps but in most cases haven’t been updated since the early 1980s. Most are now out-of-print.

Google Earth has satellite images of Belize. Some areas are in fairly high resolution; others, not.

Media: Belize has three television stations, several radio stations and a number of weekly and monthly newspapers. There is no daily newspaper in the country. Cable television companies operate in most populated areas.

Most of the weekly newspapers in Belize are based in Belize City, but a few other

towns have weekly or monthly newspapers. The two best national newspapers in Belize are *Amandala* and *The Reporter*. These two weekly tabloids are independent and outspoken, though coverage runs to strident political and crime news, and since they are based in Belize City both have a Creole, port city orientation that does not fully reflect the views of all of Belize's diverse society. Both have Web editions: www.belizereporter.bz and www.amandala.bz

The Guardian and the *Belize Times* are operated by the two leading political parties in Belize. The weekly *Belize Times* is the United Peoples Party paper, and *The Guardian* is the United Democratic Party's organ. The *Independent Reformer*, which debuted in 2006, offers political news and analysis, usually from an independent or third party perspective.

Ambergris Caye has two weekly newspapers. The *San Pedro Sun* (tel. 501-226-2070, e-mail sanpdrosun@btl.net www.sanpedrosun.net is operated by expats from the U.S. *Ambergris Today* (tel. 501-226-3462, e-mail ambertoday@btl.net www.ambergristoday.com is run by Dorian Nuñez.

There also are small newspapers in several outlying towns and villages: *Placencia Breeze* in Placencia, *Cayo Star* in San Ignacio and others.

Two Belize City TV stations, Channel 5 – it provides the country's most reliable news – and Channel 7, may also be picked up in a good part of the country, though these stations are not carried on all cable systems. Channel 5 has an informative text version of its nightly news broadcast on-line at www.channel5belize.com Channel 7, which has more of a UDP political slant, also has an on-line news summary at www.7newsbelize.com/. Streaming video versions of the evening newscasts are now also available, though the quality can be spotty. Channel 3 in Orange Walk Town, affiliated with Centaur Cable (www.ctv3belizenews.com) offers some news of Northern Belize and the nation.

KREM-FM 96.5 and LOVE-FM 95.1 (frequencies vary around the country) are the two most popular radio stations in Belize. KREM-FM has a morning talk and call-in show from 6 to 8:30 a.m., with host Evan Hyde Jr. During the day it broadcasts an eclectic mix of local music, rap, soul and other music, along with Belize news. LOVE-FM offers “easy listening” music during the day, with a morning call-in and talk show hosted by station owner Rene Villanueva from 6 to 8 a.m. This station has three full newscasts at 6:45 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 6 p.m., Monday to Saturday, and news updates frequently. Both stations offer Internet broadcasts (you have to install Real One media player.) Web site for KREM is www.krem.bz for LOVE www.lovefm.com Another station, this one with a UDP slant, is WAVE-FM.

Belize First Magazine, an on-line magazine about Belize founded by Lan Sluder, has hundreds of pages of articles and archives at www.belizefirst.com. Among its offerings are free eBooks on Belize and a news archive going back more than seven years.

Belize Magazine (www.belizemagazine.com) is a quarterly on-line magazine about Belize.

Most of these media can be accessed from www.belizenews.com

Cable TV, typically with some 50 channels from the U.S. and Mexico, is available in many areas of Belize. Some Belize hotels have satellite TV.

People of Belize: Belize is truly a multicultural society. **Mestizos** make up about 49% of the population. These are persons of mixed European and Maya heritage, typically speaking Spanish as a first language and having social values more closely associated with Latin America than with the Caribbean. Mestizos are concentrated in northern and western Belize. There is often a distinction made between Mestizos who came to Belize from the Yucatán during the Caste Wars of the mid-19th century and more-recent immigrants from Central America. Mestizos are the fastest growing segment of the population.

Creoles, once the dominant ethnic group in the country, now make up about 25% of the population. These are people usually but not always of African heritage, typically speaking Creole and English and often having a set of social values derived from England and the Caribbean. Creoles are concentrated in Belize City and Belize District, although there are predominantly Creole villages elsewhere, including the villages of Gales Point and Placencia.

Maya constitute about 11% of the population. There are concentrations of Yucatec Maya in Corozal and Orange Walk districts, Mopan Maya in Toledo and Cayo districts, and Kekchí Maya in about 30 villages in Toledo. **Garifuna** (also known as Garinagu or Black Caribs) make up about 6% of the Belizean population. They are of mixed African and Carib Indian heritage. Most came to then British Honduras from Honduras in 1830s. Dangriga and Punta Gorda are towns with large Garifuna populations, as are the villages of Seine Bight, Hopkins and Barranco. The “**Other**” group, making up about 8% of the population, includes several thousand Mennonites who came to Belize from Canada and Mexico in the 1950s. Divided into conservative and progressive groups, they farm large acreages in Belize. Conservatives live mostly in Shipyard, Barton Creek and Little Belize, avoid the use of modern farm equipment and speak German among themselves. Progressives live mostly in Blue Creek, Progreso and Spanish Lookout. Belize also has sizable communities of East Indians, who live mainly around Belize City and in Toledo, Chinese, mostly from Taiwan, living in Belize City and elsewhere, Lebanese and “**Gringos**,” mostly expats from the U.S. and Canada concentrated in San Pedro, Placencia, Cayo and around Corozal Town.

Belize predominantly is a country of the young. More than two out of five Belizeans are under 15 years of age, and the median average age is around 19 years.

Taxes: The main taxes you’ll face in Belize as a traveler are:

- **National Goods and Services Tax (GST)** of 10% on nearly all products and services. The GST replaced a 9% sales tax in mid-2006. A few items are exempt: basic foodstuffs such as rice, flour, tortillas, eggs and beans; some medicines; school textbooks; transportation on buses and airplanes, items being exported and hotel stays taxed under the hotel tax system. Like a value-added tax, the GST is supposed to be included in the final purchase price, rather than added on like a sales tax, but many businesses quote prices without the GST and just add it on at the cash register. Very small businesses, such as street vendors, don't have to register for the GST and don't charge the tax. There are additional taxes on alcohol, cigarettes and a few other items. More than one-half the cost of gasoline is due to government tax.

- **Hotel tax** of 9% on hotel stays.

Telephones: Belize has one of the best telephone systems in the region, with a combination of fiber optic cable and microwave, plus cell service in most of the country. There are some 100,000 cell phone subscribers and 33,000 landlines. You can dial to or from even remote areas of Belize and usually get a clear, clean line. That's the good news. The bad news is that telephone service in Belize is expensive, both for users and for Belizean taxpayers who are footing the bill for an incredible communications mess.

Belize Telecommunications, Ltd. (BTL) is a company with a history dating back to 1956, when a British firm, Cable & Wireless, set up the first telecommunications system in what was then British Honduras. After several changes, it became BTL in 1987. In 2001, majority ownership in BTL was purchased from the Belize government by Carlisle Holdings, Ltd., a U.K. company under the control of Michael Ashcroft, a British lord and politician.

BTL retained a legal monopoly on all types of telecommunications services in Belize until the end of 2002, when its license to operate all forms of telecommunications in Belize expired. It is no longer the monopoly it once was, since BTL now has some limited competition, but it's still the 800-pound gorilla of Belize telcom--and if you live in Belize, you can't escape its clutches.

Lord Ashcroft's Carlisle Holdings sold its interest in BTL back to the Belize government in 2004. Later that same year, the Belize government sold BTL to Innovative Communications Corporation (ICC), an American company based in the U.S. Virgin Islands. ICC added 5,000 new land lines and claims to have brought on thousands of new cell users. Then, BTL/ICC and the Belize government got into a row, culminating in a law suit in Miami. In 2006, Lord Ashcroft, a friend of some top Belizean officials, moved to repurchase some of BTL, and the saga continues.

In spring 2005, a new Belizean-owned wireless company, Speednet, began offering digital cell service in Belize, with an interconnect to BTL.

Local calls in Belize are charged by the minute (each local minute costs US5 cents, after some free units.) Costs for calls to other parts of Belize vary from US 10 to 20 cents a minute during the day, and half that at night. A 10-minute daytime call to Belize City from San Pedro is US\$1. Costs of direct-dialed long-distance calls to the U.S. currently are US 80 cents a minute, less at night.

With Belize and international long-distance and cell phone rates so high, some Belizeans with personal computers are turning to Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOiP) services. However, BTL periodically attempts to block VOiP. In 2007, BTL began offering its own VOiP service, naturally at much higher cost than most other services

A new seven-digit dialing system was introduced in 2002. Formerly, telephone numbers in Belize had five digits, plus a two-digit local exchange number in Belize. Some travel guidebooks and Web sites still list these old numbers, which no longer will work. Most numbers can be looked up on the online directory on BTL's Web site, www.btl.net. Now to reach any number in Belize you must dial all seven digits. All numbers begin with a district area code: 2 for Belize District, which includes Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker, 3 for Orange Walk District, 4 for Corozal District, 5 for Stann Creek District, 6 for mobile phones, 7 for Toledo District and 8 for Cayo District. The second digit of the phone number is a service provider code: 0 for prepaid services, 1 for mobile services and 2 for regular telephone service. So a number like 22x-xxxx indicates that it is in Belize District and is a regular telephone, not a cell phone and not a prepaid service. When dialing from outside Belize, you must also dial the country code and international calling prefix.

The country code for Belize is 501. When dialing from the U.S., add 011.

Pay phones in Belize now operate only with a prepaid BTL calling card. These cards are sold in many shops in denominations from US\$5 to \$25. BTL provides a single telephone directory for Belize, published annually in the spring.

Cell Phones: In addition to an older analog system, Belize Telecommunications, Ltd. now offers "Digicell," a digital service on the GSM 1900 Mhz technology. As with cell phone service nearly everywhere, cell plans in Belize are complex, but BTL offers a package for US\$50 a month that includes 200 minutes, and a US\$75 a month plan that includes 400 minutes. Generally, you can figure on paying at least US25 cents a minute for cell service. You can also purchase pre-paid cell service at a higher minute rate. Visitors to Belize can buy a SIM card for their cell phone for US\$25, or rent a Digicell phone from BTL for US\$5 a day (not including outgoing call usage). SpeedNet is a new digital cell service that began operating in 2005 and may offer slightly lower rates than BTL..

Internet: There are about 4,000 internet hosts in Belize, and around 35,000 users. Internet access in Belize has been greatly improved over the past few years. BTL now

offers DSL in most of the country, for either PC or Mac. However, costs are higher than in the U.S. or most other countries. Rates range from US\$50 a month for 128 kbps to US\$150 for 512kbps to US\$250 for 1meg bps. These are download rates, and in practice you may not get these speeds. In addition, there is an installation charge of US\$100 (US\$500 deposit for non-residents) and a monthly modem rental fee of US\$15 (or you can buy a modem for around US\$155.) DSL is currently available in Belize City area, San Pedro, Caye Caulker, Belmopan, San Ignacio, Benque Viejo, Punta Gorda and Placencia. Note: DSL may not be available in all areas of these cities, towns and villages.

Some heavy Internet users in Belize go with a satellite service, mainly HughesNet. Setup, installation and activation fees vary but currently are in the US\$1,000 range, with monthly fees for unlimited service of around US\$60. There are issues with getting import permits for satellite service, and BTL takes the position that satellite is not authorized in Belize.

Most businesses and nearly all hotels in Belize have Internet access. Internet access is also available at cybercafes in San Pedro, Caye Caulker, Placencia, San Ignacio, Punta Gorda, Belize City, Corozal Town, and elsewhere. BTL also has installed internet kiosks for public internet access in several locations around the country. There are a number of wireless hotspots in Belize.

Time: Local time is GMT-6 year-round, the same as U.S. Central Standard Time. Belize does not observe daylight savings time.