



Belize is a tropical enclave, wedged between Mexico and Guatemala on the Caribbean coast on the Yucatan Peninsula. It is both a mainland and an island nation — with exotic and diverse flora and fauna. A handful of sparsely populated cays attract the tourists.

Belize: A beautiful, bewitching new land

Edward Iginio Placidi
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CCROSSING the Belize River by a hand-drawn ferry, a steep and treacherous track climbs to a lush, grass-carpeted clearing in the dense jungle. Looming above is the ancient Mayan pyramid of Xunantunich, and all around are mysterious green knolls concealing unexcavated ruins beneath the growth — and who knows what treasures.

Xunantunich flourished here centuries ago, but it is also a reflection of today's Belize, which became the world's newest nation on September 21, 1981. From atop the pyramid the jungle panorama is endless, as are the new hopes and expectations of independence. And like the mysterious knolls, Belize harbors untouched riches and surprises.

This tropical enclave, wedged between Mexico and Guatemala on the Caribbean coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, is the long-forgotten anomaly of Central America ... and the Caribbean.

Mentioning Belize's name usually brings a blank response, though its old designation, British Honduras, often rings a bell — but nothing more. For the most part, the world — and time, progress and tourism — has passed Belize by. This friendly and peaceful land has drawn its breath in isolation. And its bewitching lure is precisely this romantic, nostalgic flavor of a time that once was coloring this poor and undeveloped newest member of the community of nations.

This flavor can be sampled in quiet towns with cheerful pastel facades and unobtrusive hand-painted signs; on the rivers traveled by the sleek local craft, the "pit-pans"; on country lanes where plump black "mamas," as they call them here, donning bright bandanas tend their gardens and hang out hand-scrubbed wash; and in the spicy but picturesque, laid-back charm of Belize City.

The wood-frame, colonial-like, clapboard buildings, many sagging and rickety, once painted or trimmed in vivid colors are sorely in need of a new coat. Purple and orange bougainvillea and red poinciana emblazon the spaces between the houses. As protection from occasional flooding and to cap-

Dateline: Belize



Map by Tommy Richards/Sunday Express-News

ture the cooling breeze, they are built on stilts, many standing side-by-side with enormous barrels — storing collected rainwater, the source of drink-

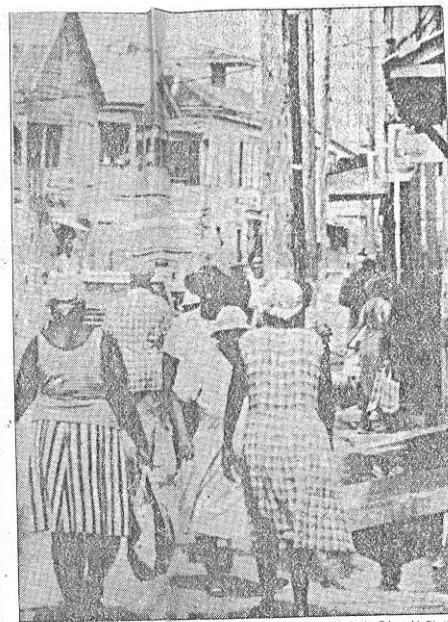
ing water for most Belizeans. The only stone structure in the city of 40,000 is imposing St. John's Cathedral, the oldest Anglican church in Central America, built in 1812.

Haulover Creek both feeds canals that crisscross Belize city as well as dissects it. The two sides are connected by an old-fashioned 'Swing Bridge,' which swings open twice daily allowing a flotilla of fishing and other boats through to the delight of the gathered crowd of gawking spectators.

Surrounded by swamps and built on reclaimed marshland, Belize City is the country's hot and sultry commercial center and base for its fishing fleet. And also where the flavor of its bizarre history and uncanny ethnic mix is sharpest.

In 1638, centuries after the Mayans had inexplicably abandoned their fabulous cities here, Belize was accidentally founded by shipwrecked British seamen. It became the stronghold of buccaneers who terrorized the Carib-

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Photos by Edward I. Placidi

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BELIZE

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bean, a logging center importing black slaves, and finally a prize fought over by the Spaniards and British before becoming a British colony in 1862.

TODAY, an offshoot of the colorful Afro-Caribbean Creole culture of the West Indies predominates, but with a distinct melting-pot twist: Chinese running Chinese restaurants and other businesses, Arab Shopkeepers, Mayans working the land, British businessmen, plus East Indians, Mestizos, Black Caribs, Italians and various other Europeans not to mention descendants of Belize's founders.

Beyond this international mix are several Mennonite communities — time warps reminiscent of

1930s Midwest farming communities — of blond, fair-skinned, blue-eyed people who speak "Old German" and are devoutly committed to their old-fashioned mores. They shun farm machinery. School girls still wear calico dresses, the boys checkered shirts and straw hats. Canadians of German extraction, they migrated to Belize in 1959 and today are the major source of the country's dairy products.

History's hand in creating the anomaly of the region has deposited an English-speaking, predominantly black nation amid its Latin, Spanish-speaking neighbors. And not only was it the only British foothold in Central America but, unlike any other colony, it struggled to remain so. Guatemala, considering Belize part of its inheritance from Spain's empire in the New World, long threatened to invade it and when the British granted independence and pulled out. The dispute has been only partially resolved, requiring the British to reluctantly still maintain a defense force there to ensure the territorial integrity of its ex-possession.

Belize is, not surprisingly, also a geographic anomaly. It's both a mainland and an island nation — with exotic and diverse flora and fauna you'd expect to find in the Amazon basin.

On shore, Belize is boggy marshes, thick jungles, cool, verdant highlands and vast stands of valuable hardwood timber, unlogged for lack of road access. A great expanse of untouched fertile land for farming and grazing holds promise of Belize becoming the region's breadbasket. However, unlike crowded El Salvador, the only country smaller in Central America, Belize is strikingly underpopulated — a mere 140,000 people living mostly along the marshy coast.

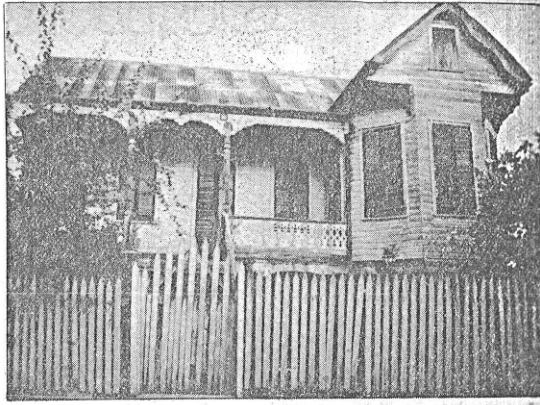
Howler monkeys, crocodiles, piglike tapirs, furry kinkajous, turtles that climb trees and attacking snakes that jump from them, ocelots and anteaters are among the creatures that roam the jungles and forests, which are replete with countless varieties of trees and flowering plants. Overhead fly more than 500 species of painted, warbling birds. Even jaguars still abound here and may be hunted — along with other big game — under the supervision of government licensed guides.

HIDDEN in the impenetrable thicket are a number of unearthed Mayan sites. Xunantunich second in importance to Altun Ha: a flourishing trade and commercial center some 2,000 years ago, major pyramids, temple and other structures cover this sprawling site open to visitors.

Not only is this newly-born country a fascinating laboratory for botanists, naturalists, sociologists and archeologists — in large part a result of Belize's isolation — but home of the single greatest natural and water-sport jewel of the Caribbean, virtually undiscovered by tourists.

Offshore, Belize is hundreds of idyllic, sandy, palm-fringed cays — pronounced as in keys — islands that is, of which only a handful are populated.

It's sparkling jewel is the world's second-longest coral reef. Flying into Belize, the traveler is struck by dazzling jades, indigos, violets and turquoises reflected by the sun off a 100-mile-long, semi-submerged coral chain. Second in size only to Australia's famed Great Barrier Reef, it parallels and protects Belize's scalloped coastline of thousands of coves, inlets, bays and anchorages. And between the reef and the shore are the Polynesian-like cays. All in all, the topography comprises what was a perfect escape-hatch and hideaway for the buccanniers of Belize's past.



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or trimmed in vivid colors are sorely in need of a new coat.

LIFE for most islanders consists of waiting for fish to wander into their traps and ripe coconuts to fall to the ground. Their cays and the reef are attracting more and more vacationers every year — bringing inevitable change in their lives. The bulk of Belize's trickle of tourists are lured by the warm, crystalline waters, the cays and the reef — enjoying unsurpassed sport, fishing, snorkeling and scuba diving and some of the world's most brilliant, fascinating and diverse marine life. Hence, most of the country's tourist facilities are out on the cays, particularly at the resort town of San Pedro on Ambergris Cay, which is becoming increasingly popular with well-heeled Latin Americans, Britons and Americans. From San Pedro, you can easily swim out and plunge into the reef's rainbow of aquatic flora and fauna.

With the youth set, low-key Cay Caulker, where many residents have turned their houses into little cafes, clubs and shops, is the favorite. Other cays are ultimate getaways. On Gallow's Point Reef, the modest Belcove Resort shares the Cay with only a couple of houses.

The breeze-cooled island are all accessible by planes, ferries or motor-boat services, and virtually every hotel provides or can secure equipment, boats and guides for diving or fishing excursions.

The cays are growing in popularity and hold great promise, but tourism is still in its infancy here. It was not until 1968 that the runway at Belize City's international airport was lengthened to accommodate medium-size jets. Much of the nation is still without running water and electricity, and traveling motorists often bypass Belize because of the terrible

roads. Beyond the few better accommodations on the cays, there is little to choose from: Belize City has only two good hotels, the Fort George and the Bellevue, Corozal has the Don Quixote and Tony's while quaint, red-roofed San Ignacio, near Xunantunich, has the charming Hotel San Ignacio.

MANY travelers come just to relax and enjoy to sun, white sand and sea of the cays, feasting on fresh fish and lobster — an idyllic dream experience in itself. But Belize is much more. It is a land of unique flavors in today's world. And it remains more a spot for the adventuresome traveler who relishes hunting big game or one of hundreds of varieties of orchids, climbing into the 1,300-foot-high waterfall in Mountain Pine Ridge, a national forest reserve; exploring the depths of the reef; four-wheeling by Landrover to the 127-foot-high pyramid of Xunantunich, where imaginations run wild; or getting out and meeting the amiable people on their own ground.

Belizeans have a rich folklore, cloaked in superstitions, and are lovers of music.

Outside the towns, Belizeans live in thatched huts reminiscent of Africa. And everyone you pass or encounter smiles or says hello. Belizeans are quick to give up their seat on a bus for you; help if you've run out of gas; eager to talk about their country; and generally go out of their way to welcome visitors.

Like the knolls of Xunantunich, the people are one of Belize's secret riches.

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