



BELIZE CITY

Comments are by CruiseCritic.com members & friends collected by 'DarryDFL' & 'PegEggFL'.¹

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OVERVIEW

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: Bordering on Mexico, Guatemala & the Caribbean, Belize is the second smallest country in Central America (after El Salvador), with an area of approximately 9,000 square miles that includes numerous small islands off the coast known as *cayes*. More than half of the mainland is covered with dense forests, & at its longest point Belize is 174 miles long while its greatest width is 68 miles. Long a strong advocate of environmental protection, the government has set aside approximately 20% of its land as nature reserves.

Belize has been attracting steadily increasing numbers of U.S. visitors as it has become better known as a reasonably priced destination offering some of the best diving in the Caribbean. It also continues to increase in

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popularity as a cruise destination & is often included as one of the ports of call on Western Caribbean itineraries.

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

A SCARY PLACE

- DarryDFL, Dec/18/2009: Downtown is one scary place, & I'm a retired Special Forces warrior. The pier shops are within a gated area with armed guards who seemed on more focused on keeping the natives out than anything else. I interviewed several people who ventured outside that gate. I doubt they will again. One lady took the bus tour, but was overcome by the destitute look of most of the city — including abandoned homes. Although the lady tour guide assured her that there was little crime — other than frequent burglaries — this lady tourist was firm in her commitment not to visit downtown Belize again.
- ChefWoz, Dec/18/2009: We talked to two big, strapping guys who ventured outside the pier area gates, entering a local bar. They said one patron had a 3-inch scar on his face — & it was still bleeding. These tourists rushed back to the secure area.
- MasterBaker, Jan/28/2010: Belize has nothing close by the port. All the beaches are on Motu Islands on the barrier reef. You really must plan a tour there either to the reef or inland to a ruin or cave tubing. There is no large ship dock in Belize because of the shallow entry to the harbor, so everyone tenders into the gated shopping area ashore that most tours leave from. (Sometimes tours to the reef leave directly from the ship.) Outside the gated area it's not very safe. I definitely wouldn't recommend you bring your family outside the gate unless you are with a tour. We have been to Belize several times & highly recommend you use that new underwater camera at the reef. You won't be disappointed — I promise.

ALTUN HA

► MomJen, Jun/2010: Belize: We went to Altun Ha through Carnival. Our tour also included a drive through Belize City. Our tour guides were Merlene & Maud. Absolutely wonderful!! They were very informative & funny. Our driver was Richard & he lived up to the name “Best Bus Driver.” He avoided hitting a teen on a bike who darted out in front of us on the return trip. And, none of us got hurt either! This was the highlight of our trip. We loved the ruins! Didn’t even mind the intense heat & humidity. We saw two plazas & climbed the temple. Scary but breathtaking! There are handrails on both sets of stairs. Take bug spray & sunscreen. I only got three bites & you don’t see the bugs. There are also several local artisan stands. We only got a magnet for my daughter, hand-carved of the temple. My friends bought several carved mahogany animal pieces. And, a bottle of cashew wine.

BIRDERS

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: Belize is a birder’s delight as it is home to more than 500 different species from toucans to egrets. Two highly recommended ways to encounter bird life is on a guided boat trip to the Bird Caye Bird Sanctuary and/or a visit to the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary.

CAVE-TUBING.NET — <http://Cave-Tubing.net>

aka **MAJOR TOM CAVE TUBING**

► SMC0320, Dec/23/2009: Major Tom Cave Tubing in Belize! Amin was our tour guide. He was AWESOME! You MUST book this trip with Major Tom.

► SandS0817, Jun/2010: We did the Cave tubing adventure & this was really, really a lot of fun — even the hike through the jungle. The bus ride there was about an hour & a half through the city of Belize. WOW is all I can say! The tour guide was really great & informative. I learned a lot about the lifestyle & culture. I think her name was Marsha. I sampled the wine & wanted to try the Belize beer, but was afraid.

☆ Site, 07/29/2010, says: “Tour includes A/C van/bus with cellular phones for constant contact, cold bottled water, all professional cave tubing & safety equipment, highly trained guides, river safety staff, security for personal items, modern bathrooms, park entrance fees, showers & changing rooms provided for you at the site. A 1-hour drive from Belize City into the historic Sibun Caves Branch Archaeological Park. Cave tubing tour begins with a 30-minute

hike thru well-kept & easy-to-traverse nature trails thru 2 small, dry caves with gorgeous stalactite & stalagmite formations. Then tour the river system of the Sibun Caves Branch — a cool splash in this undisturbed, unpolluted spring and rain fed waterway which punched a cavernous cave system through the hills of the Sibun Range over 100 million years ago.”

CAVETUBING.COM — <http://CaveTubing.com>

► Haganwood: It is fun, & one package. Cave tubing guys meet you at the port & escort you to a bus. You ride the bus for an hour to get to the ATV spot. Ride the ATV's thru the jungle. Then get on a bus for another short ride to the cave tubing area. That is when you walk. It is up & down hills through the jungle. It is a very scenic walk. You then get in your tubes, form a line & they take you thru the caves for 45 minutes. Definitely worth the price of admission. <http://CaveTubing.com>

► ChefWoz, Dec/17/2009: There is a lot of uphill walking required. If there has not been a lot of rain in the months before you go, the water level will be low & you will hit a lot of bottom rock which you'll feel even through the tube.

★ Site, Jul/29/10, says: “Package includes transportation, life vests, tubes & head lamps, tour guide, national park fees & refreshments. 4 hours: 2 hours traveling to & from Caves Branch Archaeological Reserve in our air conditioned bus/van. There you hike for 30 min thru Belize Rain Forest & through dry caves until you come to the opening of the 1st cave through which the underground Sibun Caves Branch river flows. It's a short, amazing journey of 45 minutes. Bring water shoes, towels, sun block, extra clothes, & a waterproof camera.”

CAVES

► Magma, Aug/30/2010: Explore Belize's caves. In ancient times, the Mayans believed that caves were the “underworld” & were revered as sacred places. Options for exploring the network of caves include tubing or by kayak or canoe. Some of the tubing is at a place known as “Jungle Paw,” where the float through a series of caves in an inner tube lasts about two hours.

CAYE CAULKER

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: For the ultimate in R&R at the beach, head to Caye Caulker, a 45 minute ferry ride from the Marine Terminal. Just five miles long & one mile wide, laid-back Caye Caulker is ideal for sun worshipping on one of its gorgeous beaches. There are no cars here so everyone rides around either in golf carts or on bicycles which can be rented by the hour or for the day. Divers can hop boats that go out to the barrier reef just 10 minutes away. For more information on Caye Caulker contact www.gocayecaulker.com.

CURRENCY

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: Belizean dollar (exchange rate is roughly \$2 Belize to \$1 U.S.); all shops & merchants readily accept U.S. dollars (most also accept credit cards) so it is unnecessary to change money. ATMs are plentiful in both the Tourism Village & the rest of the city.

CAUTION: When using cash — particularly with merchants that accept U.S. dollars — be sure you get change in U.S. currency. Also almost all the major attractions are at some distance from the city; so if you're exploring independently & hiring your own transportation, make sure you are back in time at the Tourism Village for the last tender departure for your ship.

GETTING AROUND

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: Taxis are readily available at the Tourism Village as well as in the city & at hotels. Taxis do not have meters & although most drivers charge a standard fare, make sure you determine the fare before getting in so as to avoid being burned upon arriving at your destination. There are also water taxis & ferries that depart from the Marine Terminal to the outlying cayes, including the larger resort cayes such as Caye Caulker & Ambergris Caye. A trip from Belize City to San Pedro, the largest town on Ambergris Caye, takes around 80 minutes & costs \$45 round-trip.

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: Do-It-Yourself Driving: It's also possible to rent a car although this is not recommended due to the poor condition of many roads. Rental agencies in Belize City include Safari/Hertz(011-501- 2-235395) & AvisBelize(800-331-1084) have downtown & airport locations & there are other agencies with offices at the Tourism Village.

GOFF'S CAYE SNORKELING EXCURSION

► TaraParrothead, Aug/24/2010: We booked the morning Goff's Caye Snorkeling Excursion thru Carnival because you get on the snorkel boat right from the cruise ship and don't have the hassle of the tender when most people are trying to leave the ship. It looked like we would get back in time to go to Belize in time to look around and do some shopping after lunch.

HOSPITAL

► DarryDFL, Nov/21/10: If you are on a ship, such as the Carnival Dream, that is scheduled for the ports (in the order of) Belize, Roatan, Costa Maya, you need to be aware that only Belize has a hospital. If you visit the ship's medical center with anything complicated, the doctor will order you ashore to that hospital. My sister-in-law's husband had water on his lungs so the doctor ordered him to go to the Belize hospital. After negotiations with Carnival, it agreed to charge only \$2100/day and wanted him to stay 3 days. He said, "No." Carnival got them a room at a Radisson (enclosed by high gates & armed guards). They missed their flight the next day by 5 minutes, and since there is only one flight a day, they had to wait another day. Finally, they got home on Thursday, Nov/18/2010 (2 days after the adventure began). We brought their 5 pieces of luggage home.

LANGUAGE

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: English is Belize's official language & is spoken by virtually everyone.

LUNCH

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: The Smoky Mermaid (13 Cork Street, open daily for breakfast, lunch & dinner from 6:30 AM – 10 PM). Menu features fabulous lobster & fresh fish dishes. Four Fort Street (Monday-Saturday, 7-10 AM, 11 AM – 2 PM & 5:30 PM – 10 PM). A great place to soak up local atmosphere & enjoy native cuisine.

SHOPPING

► MasterBaker, Jun 11, 2010: I'd like more bottles of Beware Sauce. Man, that stuff is good. We've almost finished the bottle we got in Belize last trip.

There are a lot of shops right at the pier that have some very unique things. Prices are great & it's not like shopping in most Caribbean ports where every shop has the same basic stuff. There is something for everyone in those shops.

The bags are all handmade. They come in lots of shapes & sizes, from small enough to hold a cell phone to large purse size. (I love the clutch size for cruising.) They come multi-colors, are fully lined & no two are alike. They are made in Belize; not designer.

Last year, I got my daughter a couple of really dressy evening tops that are beautiful. She wore them at Christmas & New Years parties. Two tops cost me less than \$20. She loves them.

DIVING & SNORKELING

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: Number one on the hit parade of favorite outdoor activities due to the astounding sites along the barrier reef. Some of the best dive sites lie just off Ambergris Caye (see Getting There above). Charter operators listed on the Belize Tourism's Web site also offer day trips that include transportation. However you get to Ambergris Caye, head for the main town of San Pedro, where many of the dive operators are clustered. A favorite snorkeling area is known as "Shark Ray Alley" (one hour by speedboat from San Pedro) where it's possible to get "up close & personal" (petting is permitted) with nurse sharks & sting rays. Hol Chan Marine Reserve is a five square mile underground water park.

DOCK LOCATION (TENDER TO PORT)

► DarryDFL, Dec/17/2009: You have to use tenders to get to the port because of the barrier reefs that surround the port. With our ship 3.8 nautical miles offshore, it was a 20-minute ride in, & a 12-minute ride out over very rough waters. On windy days, if you've got hemorrhoids, it'll be the longest 4 hours of your life. Sit toward the back of the tender if you've ever gotten sea sick unless you're on a tender that has no Windows on the sides. In that case, sit where you can see the water. Those on the bow get wet & are tos-

sed around like bingo balls. The port is a big shopping mall with t-shirts for \$10, assorted trinkets, & few bargains. (T-shirts in Cozumel are 3/\$10.)

- MasterBaker, April 3, 2010: Our tender trip was 45 minutes. Last tender will be about 5pm. Don't expect to get on the 1st, or possibly even the 2nd tender off in the morning either, they will be reserved for Carnival tour participants.
- MomJen, Jun/2010: Belize: The tender was a little bumpy, but was only 20 minutes. Don't sit near an open window on the single deck ones. I got wet!

MAYAN HERITAGE

- Magna, Aug/30/2010: Among the best of Belize's Mayan sites is Altun Ha, a heavily excavated site that is a convenient day trip out of the city. Once a major trading & ceremonial center, it consists of several impressive temples & tombs highlighted by the Temple of the Masonry Altars. Another important site is Xunantunich, located near the Guatemalan border that can only be reached by crossing the Mopan River on a hand-cranked ferry. Situated here are six major plazas ringed by more than 25 temples & palaces; largest of the remaining temples is Il Castillo which is worth climbing for the spectacular panoramic view one gets from the top.

TOURS

- Magna, Aug/30/2010: Best nature lover/history buff combo: An ideal tour for those who want to view creatures in the wild & also explore Mayan ruins. Travel first up Belize's Wallace River (also known as the Olde Belize River), inhabited by a host of creatures including manatees, crocodiles, iguanas & many species of tropical birds. The second half of the tour is spent at Altun Ha, one of the most important Mayan sites in the country. Duration: 6 hours; Price: \$65
- Magna, Aug/30/2010: Best soft adventurer excursion: Tubing along Belize's Sibun River in a flotation tube provides a unique look at limestone caves formed before the dawn of mankind. Duration: 6-7 hours; Price:\$85
- Magna, Aug/30/2010: Best for snorkelers: Travel in a snorkel boat to Goff's Caye, a tiny caye 12 miles offshore where there is abundant reef life & magnificent coral formations. Here it's possible to snorkel either from the beautiful beach or directly off the snorkel boat. Duration: 4 hours; Price: \$55
- Magna, Aug/30/2010: Best "interactive" shark excursion: Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get up close & personal with some of Belize's most "people-

friendly” underwater creatures. Speedboats transport passengers directly from the ship to area of coral reef known as “shark ray alley” where they can snorkel amidst nurse sharks & stingrays; excursion also includes lunch stop in San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. Duration: 7 hours; Price: \$70

► MasterBaker, March 22, 2010: My 2 cents: We have visited both **Chacchoben & Lamanai**, & both were very good tours. We did Chacchoben with David & Ivan (Native Choice) booked independently. They are amazing guides, & I highly recommend if you decide to tour Chacchoben that you book with them. Lamanai on the other hand, I would recommend you book through the ship because of the distance you will have to travel to get to the ruins. It involves a long bus ride & a transfer to a boat to take you upriver, touring the ruins, a meal, & the boat/bus transfer back to the pier. It’s a full day & your tour will take your entire time ashore. Chances are you will be on the first tender off the ship & the last tender back & even then, there is a good chance that the ship will have to wait for your tour to return. It’s not a location I would even think of doing independently. All it would take is one mechanical issue with some of your transportation & you would miss the ship because it won’t wait for independent travelers. Lamanai is more visually striking, & when we were there they let people climb to the top of one of the ruins where you can see for miles in every direction over the jungle. Both are great choices.

If the cruise ship does not offer a tour, I wouldn’t even consider an independent trip to Lamanai. I highly recommend you reconsider. I didn’t realize that our ship doesn’t offer that tour. If you decide to take the chance & go anyway, prepare yourselves before you leave the ship, just in case you miss sail-away. Bring ashore plenty of cash, credit cards, a change of clothes, the ships port contact information & your passports. I’m really not trying to scare you, just making you aware of the real possibility that your tour will run late & the ship will not wait. (This is probably why Carnival doesn’t offer Lamanai tours from there; they, historically, run late.) I doubt you will be able to re-join the cruise in Costa Maya (no airport close by), & you will need resources to book air reservations back to Florida.

★ Chacchoben: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chacchoben>

★ Lamanai: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamanai>

► MasterBaker, April 25, 2010: Belize has no shore snorkeling at all. The reef is a barrier reef with very small islands along its path that some tours use as

a beach stop with the snorkeling or diving excursion. The only way to get to the reef is by boat.

Basically, two kinds of boats are usually used for these tours, sloop type sailboats or Catamarans. The sloops have smaller passenger capacity & that is attractive, *until* you have a physical limitation like your DH (knee replacement). Only a ladder is available for getting back onboard after snorkeling. Boarding or de-boarding from a dock is easier, but because of their draft they will have to anchor out from the islands of the reef, making it necessary for your DH to use a ladder to eventually re-board the sloop. Catamarans on the other hand, hold a lot more passengers but they are also much lower to the water & usually have a stair type entry back onboard from the water. They also have a much more shallow draft & can get much closer to the islands on the reef, sometimes they are even beached for easy access. IMHO, a catamaran would be your best choice in Belize.

We are considering the Carnival tour in Belize “**Barrier reef snorkel at Turneffe with Beach Break.**” It’s a 65 ft. Catamaran which I would bet my last dime has a stair entry. All snorkeling on the reef in Belize is guided since it is a marine sanctuary. Hopefully on a boat as large as a 65 ft. They break the passengers up into smaller groups with multiple guides for less “fins in your face.” It’s nice if you can find a guide on your tour that knows you are very experienced & is willing to take you away from the crowd for some one-on-one time after the novices get finished & head to the beach. I had one like that on **Rendezvous Cay** that I kept out in the water with me for the full 3 hours of tour time. We both had a blast. My DH gave up long before, & went to the beach with the others & relaxed with an adult beverage. That guide earned her generous tip, she was great. I can only wish to find another like her this time.

➤ JudyBlu, Jun 9, 2010: My favorite thing to do is ride the water taxi.

RENDEVOUS CAY

➤ WannaSail4ever, Aug/22/2009: We did a snorkeling excursion out to **Rendezvous Cay**. It’s a 30–45 minute cruise out to the island, & it is beautiful. They had all kinds of mats & little toys. The snorkeling was quite good.

➤ MasterBaker, March 11, 2010: You need to take a tour in Belize. The snorkeling is all on the barrier reef. There is absolutely no snorkeling from shore. Try to get to **Rendezvous Cay** if possible. It is so amazing there, tied at #1

with Champagne Reef in Dominica in my all time best snorkel spots. We snorkeled over 10,000-year-old (no, not a typo) corals that were just beautiful with lots of fish around. The barrier reef in Belize is a protected marine park so everywhere should be just as nice. All snorkel & diving there is guided to protect the reef so you will always have a guide watching to make sure no one touches anything in the water. Rendezvous Cay is **not** a Carnival tour option; so this time, we will be trying a different location, probably Turneffe. Belize is a must tour port, worth every dime of the cost of a tour.

SCUBA

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: Diving is Belize's main claim to fame due to an almost unbroken line of reefs & cayes extending for 150 miles along its coast that make up the longest reef system in the western hemisphere (and the second longest in the world). While many cayes are tiny & uninhabited, some like Ambergris Caye are sufficiently large to have built resorts that attract divers from all across the U.S. & from countries around the world. There are also several important Mayan sites situated on the mainland such as Altun Ha & Xunantunich that make for excellent day trips & are included on shore excursions by most cruise ships. As a matter of fact, Belize has the highest concentration of Mayan sites of all the countries in Central America.

SOUVENIR, BEST

► Magna, Aug/30/2010: The best buys are wooden & slate carvings. The National Handicrafts Sales Centre in Belize City sells an assortment of locally produced mahogany bowls & various carvings & artwork.

WEATHER

► MasterBaker, Jul/16/2010: November – February is rainy season:

- ★ Roatan: 16 inches or rain over 15 days in November.
- ★ Cozumel: 4 inches average over 5 days in November.
- ★ Belize: 7 inches
- ★ Costa Maya: 2 inches

Think of it as 'island air conditioning'. The humidity level is practically liquid & the average temps are in the mid-80's in the region. The rain is a relief in that heat & humidity. Pick clothing to wear ashore that is lightweight & dry quickly; you are going to be wet either from sweat or rain.

WEB ACCESS

➤ Magna, Aug/30/2010: The “Click & Sip” Internet Café is located inside the Belize Tourism Village.

WEBSITE

- Darry D’s website: <http://DarryD.com/CC>
- CruiseCritic website: <http://CruiseCritic.com>

WILDLIFE LOVERS

➤ Magna, Aug/30/2010: Belize City’s three major sites containing wild creatures are all located fairly close together. Those who would rather not venture very far from the city can check out the Belize City Zoo & Tropical Center (Western Highway mile marker 29, open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily). A little farther out is the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (Western Highway mile marker 30.8) & the Community Baboon Sanctuary (across the street), which is home to a substantial number of black howler monkeys.