



# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

**Belize**



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success .

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Central America (CENTAM).



Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Belizean society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.



This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact the AFCLC Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing.

For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature

in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to



perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better

understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains –which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural

boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

## Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal

standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true — regardless of whether there is evidence to



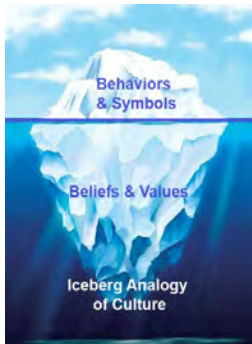
support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through CENTAM, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.



## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

CENTAM occupies a narrow isthmus that connects the continents of North and South America and comprises 7 countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Archaeological finds suggest nomadic hunter-gatherers inhabited the region as early as 9,000 BC.

Eventually, these groups adopted small-scale agriculture, and beginning around 2,500 BC, erected permanent farming settlements.



Around 1,000 BC, the Maya civilization emerged in southern

Mexico and Guatemala, flourishing over subsequent centuries as it spread across Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and parts of Nicaragua. At their civilization's height from 250-900 AD, the Maya excelled in mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, and art, constructing magnificent cities featuring massive stone pyramids, temples, and palaces. Although Maya society and culture encompassed nearly the entire CENTAM isthmus by the 10th century, the Maya remained politically fragmented. The Maya world was characterized by independent, adversarial city-states competing for power and resources.

In the early 16th century, Spanish explorers arrived on the Panamanian coast, while others entered the CENTAM isthmus



from Mexico. Seeking wealth and enhanced social status, along with an ambition to spread Catholicism, the Spanish swiftly and violently subdued the Maya and other indigenous communities. By 1540, the Spanish had consolidated rule over most of CENTAM as conflict, disease, and famine decimated the region's indigenous population. Uniting all CENTAM territories except Belize and Panama as the Kingdom of Guatemala, the Spanish ruled the region for the next 300 years. Meanwhile, Panama became part of the Spanish-ruled Viceroyalty of Peru, while most Belizean territory came under British control.

In the late 18th century, mounting unrest over colonial tyranny led to nationalist independence movements. All the CENTAM states but Belize and Panama briefly united as the Federal Republic of Central America in 1821. Politically fractured, the union quickly disintegrated, and within 2 decades, most CENTAM territories had become independent nations. Panama was a part of Colombia until it gained independence with the support of the US in 1903. Meanwhile, Belize remained under

British control well into the 20th century.



Following independence, the CENTAM nations grappled with decades of political upheaval, poor governance, and poverty. By the 1960s, right-wing military dictators ruled over much of the region.

Years of profound economic disparities and government-sponsored abuse flamed insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, eventually flaring into brutal civil wars. As part of its anti-communist agenda, the US was highly influential, even actively involved, in many of these conflicts. By contrast, Costa Rica and Belize experienced relative peace. Costa Rica even abolished its military amid other progressive political, social, and environmental reforms.

By the mid-1990s, civil conflict across the region had significantly reduced. Since then, most CENTAM governments have supported mostly stable democratic systems, expanded

economic opportunities, and invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Despite these improvements, the CENTAM nations remain in various stages of development. Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama have seen the greatest stability and economic growth. By contrast, residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua continue to face high rates of poverty, unemployment, and violence.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All CENTAM states except Belize are presidential republics led by an elected President and legislature. By contrast, Belize is a constitutional monarchy with a democratic parliamentary government led by an elected Prime Minister and legislature. The United Kingdom's hereditary monarch serves as Belize's head-of-state.

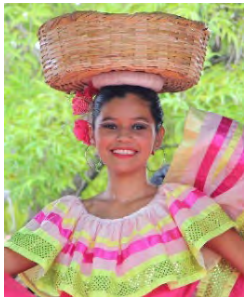


While El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua emerged from years of repressive dictatorial rule and protracted civil war by the 1990s, they and the other CENTAM states continue to face challenges to the

democratic process. Corruption is widespread, contributing to instability and stifling political and economic progress. In some states, corruption engenders public distrust of democratic institutions and public officials and results in frequent and occasionally violent public protests.

Moreover, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (collectively known as the “Northern Triangle”) struggle to curb the illicit drug trafficking industry and high rates of gang violence. In stark contrast to the other states’ internal volatility, Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama enjoy minimal violence within stable democracies marked by peaceful and transparent democratic elections.

While some bilateral tensions exist, notably Guatemala's claim to over 1/2 of Belize's territory, most states cooperate in strong regional alliances focused on economic, security, and governance issues. The Northern Triangle nations, for example, work closely to halt the movement of narcotics across borders and diminish the power and influence of organized crime networks. All CENTAM states actively cultivate relations with



the US and rely on substantial US military and financial assistance to address regional security and economic concerns.

CENTAM is ethnically diverse. **Mestizos** (people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry) comprise about 72% of CENTAM's population, some 20% claim European (white) ancestry, and about 8% are Amerindian or members of indigenous

communities. The region is also home to smaller numbers of people of mixed African descent and other minorities. The ethnic makeup of each CENTAM nation varies. For example, a majority of Guatemalans identifies as indigenous, yet few Salvadorans and Costa Ricans do. White and *mestizo* populations hold most of the wealth, political power, and social prestige. By contrast, Amerindians and those of African ancestry generally lack political representation, suffer disproportionately high rates of poverty and disease, and are subject to discrimination and social stigmatization.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. The region's early inhabitants followed a variety of indigenous religious traditions, worshipping spirits and deities who inhabited the natural environment. The Maya enjoyed a particularly rich and complex belief system that included ancestor veneration and the worship of over 250 gods.

The Spanish introduced Christianity to CENTAM in the early 16th century, forcefully converting the indigenous population to Catholicism, while suppressing traditional beliefs and practices. As a result, Catholicism spread quickly, and the Catholic Church became entrenched in daily life, fundamentally influencing education, social services, and colonial policy. After independence, Church power fluctuated as various political factions supported or opposed Catholicism's influence in the social and political spheres. Meanwhile, Protestantism grew in popularity in British-controlled Belize. In the 20th century,

Protestant evangelical movements thrived across the region following the arrival of North American missionaries.

In the latter half of the 20th century, ongoing violence prompted clergy to advocate on



behalf of victimized populations and assume influential roles in the resolution of regional conflicts. Across the region today, some religious organizations remain politically involved while others focus on providing important social services. While the Roman Catholic Church still enjoys a privileged status in most countries, all nations but Costa Rica name no official religion and explicitly separate church and state.

The region's population is overwhelmingly Christian: 55% of CENTAM residents identify as Roman Catholic, while 30% are Protestant. Many CENTAM Christians fuse elements of indigenous beliefs with Christian rites and traditions.

Some 9% of regional residents claim no religious affiliation, while some 6% are adherents of traditional beliefs or followers of other faiths, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Baha'i (a belief system that recognizes the essential worth of all religions and the unity and equality of all people).

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional

bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are valued greatly within CENTAM. While the traditional family unit consists of a husband, wife, and their children, Central Americans also maintain strong connections with extended family members. Accordingly, extended kin are influential in family matters, typically live nearby, and are important sources of physical, emotional, and financial support. Children often live with their parents until they marry, though some choose to stay longer. In poorer families, children contribute to the family income from an early age by performing tasks like washing cars, shining shoes, or selling food and trinkets. By contrast, children of wealthy families have comparatively fewer responsibilities.



Urbanization has resulted in changes to family life. Urban residents tend to marry later and have fewer children, resulting in more diverse urban family structures. In the Northern Triangle and other areas, widespread poverty and social instability have significantly disrupted traditional family life, forcing some members to migrate within the country or leave CENTAM altogether.

While close kin ties mean family members have some influence over children's choice of spouses, men and women generally choose their own partners. Both Spanish traditions and Roman Catholic teachings strongly emphasize the value of marriage as an institution and discourage divorce. Nevertheless, divorce rates have risen in some areas.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

CENTAM's traditional Spanish and indigenous cultures privileged men as providers and leaders, while casting women in subordinate roles. **Machismo** (strong masculine behavior and pride) remains an important element of male identity in the region. While today women and men have equal rights before the law, inequalities between the genders remain.



Women often face discrimination in hiring and promotion, and although they face some barriers to their participation in the political sector, the

number of women serving in public office across the region has steadily increased in recent years. Today, women hold a considerable proportion of national and local government positions, and Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica have had female Presidents. Female participation rates in the national legislatures of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are higher than the US.

Gender-based violence is widespread in some areas. Women are often reluctant to leave abusive partners or report incidences of gender-based violence, considering the abuse to be a private matter. Among reported cases, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Abortion laws across the region are highly restrictive and in recent years have caused significant public debate. Although homosexuality is legal in every CENTAM nation, homosexuals suffer discrimination, stigmatization, and violence.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

As a result of centuries of Spanish colonialism throughout the region, Spanish is an official language in every CENTAM country except English-speaking Belize. Despite the prominence of Spanish, the region is linguistically diverse: 26

languages are spoken in Guatemala, 10 in Honduras, 15 in Panama, 14 in Costa Rica, 11 in Nicaragua, 9 in Belize, and 5 in El Salvador. Though most of these languages are indigenous to the region, a few are so-called creole languages combine vocabulary and grammar from indigenous or African languages with English or Spanish.

Some of the region's most widely spoken indigenous languages are Mayan, notably K'iche', Q'eqchi', and Kaqchikel. The systematic suppression of indigenous communities during the colonial era contributed to the demise of many of the region's indigenous languages. In some regions, government-sanctioned violence against indigenous residents in the 20th century prompted many native speakers to abandon their heritage, notably also their languages, to avoid persecution. Despite recent revitalization efforts, some of the region's native languages remain nearly extinct. English is taught in schools across CENTAM as a 2nd language and is especially popular among the educated elite and in the business community.

While communication patterns vary among ethnic groups, CENTAM residents generally demonstrate courtesy, respect, honesty, and patience in interpersonal relations. When conversing, Central Americans tend to be warm, friendly, and eager to extend hospitality, particularly when speaking with family and friends. By contrast, some indigenous groups, such as the Maya, are more reserved in their communication styles, especially with strangers.



## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors,



and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers. Education in early CENTAM societies was primarily an informal transfer of skills, values, and beliefs from parents to their children. Scholars believe the Maya employed a more formal education system in which religious leaders taught medicine, history, math, and science to elite children.

During the colonial era, Roman Catholic religious orders became the primary providers of education. While these institutions eventually established schools and universities throughout the region, educational infrastructure remained limited through the 19th century. Moreover, Catholic orders provided only limited instruction to indigenous inhabitants, largely restricting secular

education in subjects like math, science, and the humanities to a small population of male Spanish elites.

In the early 19th century, CENTAM states began to expand educational offerings to women



and indigenous groups, eventually establishing free and compulsory public-school networks. Today, enrollment rates in primary education are high across CENTAM. Adult literacy rates have risen in recent decades and range from about 83% in Guatemala to 96% in Panama. Challenges to the education systems include uneven access to secondary and post-secondary education, particularly in rural areas, a lack of government funding, and low teacher salaries. In some areas, gang violence and poverty significantly disrupt children's access to education.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management,

devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in most CENTAM societies, establishing and maintaining relationships with others often takes precedence over accomplishing a task. Consequently, business tends to move more slowly in CENTAM than in the US. To build relations with business partners, Central Americans often engage in a **sobremesa**, a period of coffee and conversation at the end of a meeting that may include personal questions about family, relationships, or other light topics.



Concepts of personal space in CENTAM also differ from those in the US. Generally, Central Americans stand closer when conversing than Americans. Moreover, while men shake hands in greeting and parting in a similar style to the US, CENTAM women typically greet both men and women with a kiss on the cheek.

The rhythm of daily life changes during national holidays and local celebrations, when most businesses shorten their operating hours and residents engage in various festivities such as parades, feasts, and religious ceremonies. While the CENTAM states observe a variety of public holidays, popular ones include Christmas, Easter, indigenous celebrations, and independence days.

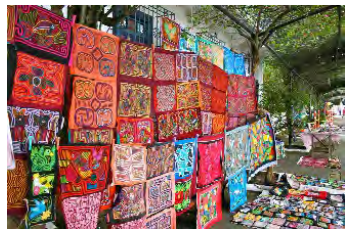
## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of CENTAM's forms of artistic expression – including its art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect a rich combination of Spanish, indigenous, and African influences as well as modern global trends.

Salsa, calypso, and Spanish reggae are prominent musical genres across the region, while jazz is especially popular in Panama. Meanwhile, Afro-Caribbean culture influences music and dance along CENTAM's Caribbean coast. In Belize and Honduras, coastal residents enjoy the rhythmic and drum-based

**punta**, a modernized interpretation of the Garifuna ethnic group's songs and dance. By contrast, Panamanians enjoy the **congo**, a dance with African roots whereby performers portray a fight with the devil.

Central Americans are skilled in various traditional handicrafts and folk art such as weaving, woodworking, and ceramics, among many others. Maya artisans are famed for their vibrant,



woven textiles, while members of Panama's Guna ethnic group weave **molas**, intricately cut and sewn panels featuring geometric patterns. In El Salvador, artists mimic indigenous weaving techniques to create baskets, hats, and other

items from palm leaves. Visual arts traditionally reflected indigenous and Christian motifs but today often incorporate brightly colored rural landscapes.

In the 20th century, poetry became the region's most popular and politically influential literary genre. Today, the work of Rubén Darío, Nicaragua's national poet, is celebrated across Latin America. The region also has produced critically acclaimed novelists, who have chronicled the region's tumultuous history while living in exile abroad. Soccer is by far the most popular sport throughout CENTAM. Residents closely follow local, regional, and international teams, and many enjoy playing in amateur settings in their spare time.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While CENTAM cuisine reflects the region's ethnic and geographic diversity, most dishes tend to be simple and prepared from fresh, seasonal ingredients. Corn is CENTAM's primary staple and prepared in a variety of ways but most

commonly as the **tortilla** (round, flat bread of ground corn). Rice and black beans are also featured at most meals. Chicken, beef, and pork are prevalent forms of protein in interior regions, while an assortment of seafood is more readily available to residents living along CENTAM's coasts. In addition to native vegetables, the region's residents also enjoy numerous fresh fruits year-round, often juicing or blending them into refreshing drinks.



The overall health of the region's population has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Nevertheless, non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases are on the rise and today account for most deaths in the region.

Moreover, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and hepatitis are prevalent in some rural regions, particularly in areas where residents have limited access to clean water and modern sanitation.

CENTAM nations face several challenges to providing healthcare to their populations. Significant disparities in access to modern healthcare exist between urban and rural areas, where facilities tend to be understaffed, ill-equipped, and limited to basic health services. In some remote rural regions, residents lack access to modern healthcare and instead rely on traditional medicine to treat diseases and ailments.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the region's larger and wealthier communities produced luxury items such as ceramics, art, and woven textiles for local consumption and regional trade, while also practicing subsistence agriculture.

After their 16th century arrival, Spanish colonists developed an agricultural economy centered on the production of various cash crops for export to Europe, primarily on large estates with forced indigenous or African slave labor. The region's first cash crops included cacao and indigo, yet by the 19th century, tobacco, sugar cane, cotton, and bananas dominated exports.

Following independence, conflict and political instability largely hampered economic growth. In the early 20th century, several states came under the economic control of large, multinational

corporations that reaped large profits but did little to improve the conditions of the working populations.

By contrast, coffee production in Costa Rica allowed the nation to largely avoid economic downturns, while the



1913 construction of the Panama Canal (a shipping route crossing the CENTAM isthmus) amplified Panama's strategic and economic importance. Today, several states have diversified their economies across numerous sectors, including manufacturing, food processing, transportation, and agriculture. Belize, Costa Rica, and Guatemala have also developed robust tourism industries.

The economic outlook in CENTAM is varied. While all the states struggle with substantial unemployment and poverty, their economies differ significantly. For example, Panama's GDP per capita is CENTAM's highest and more than 5 times that of CENTAM's lowest, Nicaragua and Honduras. While some 22% of Panamanians live below the national poverty line, rates in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras are 25%, 26%, and 64%, respectively. Nevertheless, wealth is unequally distributed in all the states. Across the region, residents of indigenous or African heritage are much more likely to live in poverty than white or *mestizo* residents.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Since the end of the colonial period, CENTAM states have developed their transportation and communication infrastructure at different rates. As a result, the quality of roads and modern technology varies throughout the region.

Roads form the primary transportation infrastructure across CENTAM, though

regularly maintained, paved roadways are generally limited to cities and major highways. Unpaved, poor-quality roads coupled with mountainous terrain and aggressive driving habits make



road travel dangerous in some areas. Violent crime and social unrest also threaten some travelers.

While modern information technology is available across CENTAM, Internet usage is highest in Panama, Guatemala and Costa Rica, where more than 1/2 of the population are regular users. Many CENTAM residents access the Internet primarily through mobile phones.

The region has abundant renewable energy resources. In 2023, renewable sources accounted for almost 98% of electricity production in Costa Rica, 62% in Panama, 74% in Guatemala, and 62% in Honduras compared to just 23% in the US.

The US, European Union, and Canada are the region's largest trading partners. Moreover, the US, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica belong to the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which liberalizes trade among its members.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize CENTAM society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Belize.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

Known as British Honduras until 1973, Belize is Central America's (CENTAM's) least-populous and only English-speaking country. Following the 16th-century arrival of Spanish conquerors to the region, Belize was the object of long-term colonial competition between Spain and Britain before becoming a British colony in the late 19th century. Since achieving independence in 1981, Belize has emerged as one of the region's most stable democracies.

### Early History

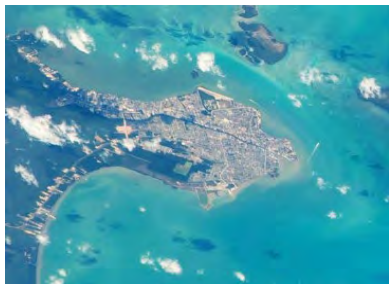
Prior to the early 16th-century arrival of Spanish conquerors in the New World – an era referred to as the “Pre-Columbian”

period – Belize was home to a robust

indigenous population. Stone tools and other artifacts indicate humans likely first inhabited the area between 7,000-10,000 BC. From 4,000-1,000 BC, hunter gatherer communities gradually adopted farming, raising primarily corn, beans, and squash. By about 1,500 BC, sedentary farming communities became common as trade networks developed across CENTAM that extended as far as Mexico and South America.

### Maya Civilization

Around 1,000 BC, Maya civilization emerged in southern Mexico and Guatemala. Over subsequent centuries, it spread across El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and Belize.





Maya civilization reached its zenith during the Classic Period (250-900 AD), when urban centers featured large stone pyramids, ball courts, and elaborate temple complexes. Besides adopting advanced irrigation and terracing techniques, the Maya were expert astronomers, who developed an accurate solar calendar. They were also accomplished artists and architects, using a complex writing system to record dynastic histories, rituals, and astronomical tables. While Maya culture spread to encompass a vast region between southern Mexico and modern-day Nicaragua, it never developed a unified empire. Instead, individual city-states remained independent, often competing and warring against each other.



Within Belize, Classic Period Maya civilization thrived, supporting up to one million people by 600 AD. Inhabitants constructed several notable ceremonial centers, such as Caracol, home to some 100,000 people at its height. A Maya temple at Caracol remains Belize's tallest man-made structure today.

Beginning in the 9th century, Maya civilization began to decline. While the exact reasons are unknown, some scholars believe overpopulation, deforestation, and drought likely made food, construction materials, and fuel scarce. Meanwhile continual war between the cities caused social instability. The Maya abandoned many of their great Classic Period cities across CENTAM and Mexico, yet in Belize, people continued to occupy several significant sites throughout the subsequent Postclassic Period (900-1540). The Maya settlement of Lamanai even remained occupied well into the 17th century and was the site of the region's first Spanish mission (see *Religion and Spirituality*). When the first Spanish arrived in the early 16th century, the area of modern-day Belize divided into several Maya provinces. These include Dzuluinicob in the center (which included Lamanai) and Chetumal in the North, (which also included parts of the Yucatan Peninsula).

## The Arrival of Europeans

**The Spanish:** In the decades following Christopher Columbus' 1492 "discovery" of the Americas, Spain conducted various expeditions in the region largely staffed by unemployed soldiers, impoverished nobles, and young men seeking their fortune. Across the Americas, these **conquistadores** (conquerors) subjugated and decimated indigenous societies. The first European to arrive in the region of modern-day Belize was likely a Spanish sailor who shipwrecked on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula in 1511 and later settled in northern Belize.

In 1519, *conquistador* Hernán Cortés vanquished the powerful Aztec Empire in central Mexico and turned his sights south, passing through the southwestern corner of Belize in 1525. Some two years later, the Spanish began their conquest of the Yucatan Peninsula, then used it as a base for launching attacks on the Maya in Belize. After several unsuccessful incursions, the Spanish defeated the Maya settlement of Tipu in western Belize in 1544.



The Spanish were unable to hold Tipu for long given its distance from the center of Spanish colonial authority in the Yucatan Peninsula. Resistance in Tipu grew, and by 1642, the entire Maya province of Dzuluinicob (central and southern Belize) was in a state of rebellion, causing the Spanish to withdraw. Meanwhile, thousands of Maya fleeing violence in the Yucatan entered Belize in the 2nd half of the 16th century. Tipu's population surged as it became a refuge for displaced Maya and a center of opposition to the Spanish.

Until 1695, the Maya living in Dzuluinicob maintained their independence from Spanish rule. Nevertheless, the Europeans' presence had devastating consequences for the indigenous population. Diseases brought by the Europeans soon spread to the Maya, killing an estimated 90% of the indigenous population within a century.

The Spanish retook Tipu in 1696, then used it as a base to pacify surrounding areas. The Spanish forcibly resettled Tipu's remaining inhabitants in Guatemala in 1707, as many other Maya fled to the forests to escape Spanish rule.

**The British:** Meanwhile, other European countries – notably Britain, the Netherlands, and France – sought to participate in the colonization of the New World. To challenge Spain's monopoly in CENTAM and the Caribbean, these powers resorted to smuggling, piracy, and all-out war. Because Spain's presence on the Yucatan and Belizean coasts was minimal, English pirates concentrated in these areas, attacking Spanish ships and capturing their cargo bound for Europe.

In the early 1600s, these English “buccaneers” began settling on Belizean shores. By mid-century, many had stopped their piracy activities and instead harvested logwood (a flowering tree used to dye textiles and leather) for direct sale to Europe. Logwood profits allowed the English settlers, now known as “Baymen” (after the Bay of Honduras, the inlet of the Caribbean Sea bordering Belize), to develop more permanent settlements, notably Belize Town (later Belize City), first settled around 1638.

Even though the Spanish had largely withdrawn from Belize by the time of British occupation, they strongly objected to the presence of other Europeans in what they considered their territory. Spanish-British conflict over Belize persisted for centuries and reverberates in Guatemalan claims to Belizean territory even today.

### The Origin of the Name “Belize”

Several theories explain the origin of the name “Belize,” given to both a river and a settlement in the early 1600s. According to some experts, the name traces to the Spanish pronunciation of the last name of Scottish Bayman Peter Wallace. Others suggest the name evolved from Maya words, namely *belix*, meaning “muddy water” or *belikin*, “facing the sea.”

## The Settlement of Belize in the Bay of Honduras

Despite Spanish territorial claims, the English settlement persisted and even grew. A 1670 treaty between Spain and England confirmed English possession of New World territories that it occupied, yet it did not specifically name those territories. Consequently, the Spanish repeatedly attacked the English settlers, temporarily forcing them to abandon Belize Town in 1717, 1730, and 1754. Since the Spanish never tried to settle the region themselves, the English returned each time.

A 1763 treaty confirmed the Baymen's right to harvest logwood, while re-asserting Spanish sovereignty. Nevertheless, the Spanish attacked again in 1779, forcing the English settlers to withdraw. This time, though, the settlers had the official support of the British government. Upon their 1784 return to Belize Town, the colonial governor of Jamaica named a superintendent to oversee what Britain now officially called the Settlement of Belize in the Bay of Honduras. A 1786 agreement between Britain and Spain confirmed the English settlers' right to harvest both logwood and mahogany but denied them the right to build fortifications, establish a government, or develop any sort of plantation agriculture. Nevertheless, the English presence grew, especially following

the arrival of some 2,000 English settlers expelled from Nicaragua in 1787.

Spain made one last attempt to eject the English in 1798, sending a flotilla of some 30 vessels, 500 sailors, and 2,000



troops to attack the settlers. After a short battle, the English successfully repelled the Spanish in the Battle of Saint George's Cay, an event commemorated annually today (see *Time and Space*). Subsequently, the English settlers largely ignored treaty agreements forbidding local government and plantation agriculture. Gradually, landownership became concentrated in a small group of wealthy white residents, who controlled the settlement's politics and economy.

**Slavery and the Rise of Creole Culture:** In the early 18th century, English settlers began importing African slaves to support timber extraction. By the 1820s, some 2,300 slaves resided in the settlement and comprised a large portion of the population. As the focus of harvest shifted from logwood to labor-intensive mahogany, most male slaves worked in logging camps separated from their wives and children, who performed domestic labor for English families in Belize Town. Over the decades, many slaves resisted their harsh fate by revolting or escaping to the Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, or Honduras. Through the gradual process of assimilation and the influence of English culture and language, a new Creole culture and language emerged (see *Political and Social Relations* and *Language and Communication*). Gradually, a small population of free Creoles arose, though they faced significant restrictions on their economic activities.

In the 1830s, the British government wanted to abolish slavery yet also avoid drastic social changes. Consequently, it initiated a 5-year program in 1833 that gradually transitioned slaves to “apprenticeships” without pay. In subsequent years, newly-emancipated slaves found little freedom within Belize’s rigid societal hierarchy based on race and class. Denied access to land, most former slaves remained tied to logging operations and economically dependent on their former owners.

**Garifuna Immigration:** Meanwhile, another group with African roots began to arrive. Descendants of African slaves and Carib peoples (the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean Lesser Antilles islands), the Garifuna rebelled against the British colonialists on Saint Vincent in 1796. In response, the British moved up to 5,000 Garifuna to islands off Honduras. In subsequent decades, many Garifuna immigrated to Belize, settling on the coast and bringing their own culture and language (see *Language and Communication*).



**Mestizos and Maya Arrive from Mexico:** Between 1847-52, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula was shaken by an indigenous uprising called the Caste War. Consequently, northern and western Belize experienced an influx of thousands of Spanish-speaking *mestizo* (people of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage) and Maya refugees. In subsequent decades, these new settlers reintroduced traditional subsistence farming and

the production of sugar, banana, and citrus.

The British prohibited both the Garifuna and the Maya from owning land, assigning them to reservations in 1872. Colonial policies severely limited their



economic activities, effectively forcing them to labor for the timber industry.

### **The Settlement of Belize Becomes British Honduras**

An 1850 treaty between the US and Britain required Britain to withdraw from all its CENTAM holdings, yet business interests in London successfully lobbied the British government to maintain control of Belize. In 1854, Britain introduced a Constitution for Belize establishing a Legislative Assembly with 18 elected members, though the body had no real decision-making authority.

Meanwhile, Guatemala (which had achieved independence from Spain in 1821) challenged the British occupation of Belize. Britain in turn used its economic leverage over Guatemala and status as Europe's primary naval power to force Guatemala to accept an 1859 treaty recognizing British control of Belize and defining its present-day borders. In return, Britain pledged to build a road from Guatemala City to the Caribbean through Belize. Because neither Britain nor Belize ever fulfilled this requirement, Guatemala renewed its claim to Belizean territory decades later (see below).

In 1862, the British formally declared the Settlement of Belize a colony called British Honduras that was subordinate to the

colonial governor of Jamaica. For the next several years, Maya refugees from the Yucatan attacked various logging camps, requiring significant defensive intervention by colonial authorities. When landowners in the Legislative Assembly suggested new taxes to fund the protection of the camps, Belize Town merchants resisted, causing significant conflict. As a result, the Legislative Assembly surrendered its authority and requested the imposition of direct British rule as a crown colony in 1871. Under the new Constitution, power effectively passed from the local white settler elites to the British Colonial Office in London.

**Maya Arrive from Guatemala:** Fleeing forced labor in Guatemala in the 1880s-90s, Q'eqchi Maya (see *Political and Social Relations*) settled in the colony's South. Primarily due to their remoteness, these Maya communities largely maintained their traditional lifestyles and language. By contrast, Maya and *mestizo* settlers in the North tended to mix and speak Spanish (see *Language and Communication*). Thus, by the end of the 19th century, the main ethnic and linguistic groups of modern Belize were present, though their population proportions have shifted over time (see *Political and Social Relations*).



### **Economic Stagnation and Reorientation**

Meanwhile, British Honduras experienced a severe and prolonged economic depression as mahogany prices fell beginning in the 1850s. The downturn affected all residents, even the old settler landowning class. Land and capital became increasingly concentrated in British hands, notably the Belize Estate and Produce Company (BEPA). A partnership between a Belizean settler family and a London merchant, BEPA owned about 1/2 of all privately held land in the colony by about 1875.



By 1890, most commerce in the colony was controlled by Scottish and German merchants who encouraged consumption of imported goods, thus furthering the colony's economic dependency on Britain.

Beginning in the 1880s, US demand for a new forest product, **chicle**, helped to reorient the economy. Obtained from the bark of the sapodilla tree, **chicle** was chewed by the ancient Maya to

quench thirst or fight hunger and became an essential ingredient in the new US chewing gum industry. Meanwhile, increased US demand for mahogany briefly re-invigorated that industry.

This trade with the US gave rise to a new class



of Creole merchants who began to challenge the European minority for political and economic control of the colony. In the 1920s, mahogany, cedar, and **chicle** accounted for 97% of forest production and 82% of all exports. However, timber extraction without reforestation or other conservation eventually resulted in a significant decrease in mahogany production.

### Economic Collapse and Labor Mobilization

The world economic crisis known as the Great Depression of 1929-33 devastated British Honduras's economy. As demand for mahogany and **chicle** fell, so did exports, with trade decreasing by 75%. Then, a 1931 hurricane brought widespread destruction, killing over 1,000 people in a population of just over 51,000 and destroying some 3/4 of dwellings. British government disaster relief was slow and insufficient, angering local residents. Tensions rose further when the colonial governor rejected the introduction of a minimum wage, sickness insurance, and trade unions.

With many of the colony's poor already working in slave-like conditions in the mahogany camps, the colony's lower classes suffered most. Constantly in debt, suffering from malnutrition, and subject to repressive labor laws, the poor began to

organize politically, holding a series of strikes and demonstrations that marked the beginning of an independence movement.



In 1934, workers' groups marched through Belize Town, continuing their demands for relief and a minimum wage. In response, the colonial government

established jobs such as the construction of over 180 mi of new roads for some of the unemployed.

As workers' demands expanded to include the introduction of a representative government, the colonial government responded by introducing a new Constitution for the colony. The Constitution retained a set of restrictive voting qualifications so that only the wealthiest 1-2% of the population qualified as voters (in 1945 this meant there were only 822 voters in a population of over 63,000).

Nevertheless, the victory of Creole candidates in the 1936 Legislative Council elections demonstrated the growing power of the new Creole upper class. Meanwhile, the colony's poor, disenfranchised population largely threw their support behind the emerging Creole middle class, which won all 6 seats on the Belize Town Board in 1939. As working-class agitation continued, the early 1940s saw significant labor reforms, notably the legalization of trade unions.

### **Movement toward Independence**

As part of its post-World War II efforts to strengthen its



economy, Great Britain devalued its currency in 1949, and despite widespread resistance in the Legislative Council, the colonial governor of British Honduras did the same. This move benefitted large multinationals like BEPA but harmed the poor and middle classes.

In response, labor leaders, nationalists, and the Creole middle class united against the colonial administration. In 1950, George Price and other leaders organized the People's United Party (PUP), which sought an all-elective Legislative Council, the introduction of a ministerial system, and universal suffrage. Alarmed by the PUP's popularity, the colonial government jailed several PUP leaders and attempted to discredit the movement as pro-Guatemala and communist. Nevertheless, the PUP continued to gain support. In 1954, the government lifted the restrictive voting qualifications, offering the vote to all literate adults. In elections for the new Legislative Assembly that year, the PUP won 8 of 9 seats.

### **Decolonization and Conflict with Guatemala**

In 1961, a hurricane again leveled Belize City, prompting

#### **The Mennonites**

Beginning in 1958, some 1,700 Mennonites from Mexico moved to Belize, establishing farms and dairies in the West. Members of a pacifist Protestant Christian sect related to the Amish with roots in Europe, the Mennonites signed an agreement with the government allowing them limited self-governance and exemptions from military service, educational requirements, and certain taxes. Today, Belize's ca. 12,000 Mennonites maintain their own traditions and language (see *Religion and Spirituality* and *Language and Communication*) and are an integral part of the economy, producing some 85% the country's poultry and dairy products.

authorities to construct a new capital, Belmopan, some 50 mi inland. By the early 1960s, Great Britain was prepared to grant British Honduras independence, and in 1964, a new

Constitution gave the colony internal self-governance, although it retained British authority over defense, foreign affairs, and internal security.

Taking office as Premier (similar to Prime Minister or PM) following the country's first general election, PUP leader George Price would shepherd the colony through independence.



Nevertheless, the plans for independence were delayed due to the posturing of a hostile neighbor, Guatemala. In the 1930s, Guatemala had renewed its territorial claims, asserting that the 1859 treaty recognizing British sovereignty was invalid since the promised road to the Caribbean coast had never been constructed.

Over the next several decades, right-wing Guatemalan governments used this issue to fuel nationalist sentiment, while periodically threatening to invade. Negotiations between Great Britain and Guatemala over Belizean territory continued to fail in the 1970s, so Belizean leaders took their case for self-determination to the international community. Meanwhile, in 1973, the colony changed its name from British Honduras to Belize in anticipation of eventual independence.

### **Belize Achieves Independence**

Gradually, Belize gained international support for its cause, and in 1980, the United Nations passed a resolution demanding independence for Belize with continued defense support from Great Britain. Despite Guatemala's ongoing territorial claims, Belize gained independence on September 21, 1981, though British troops remained until 1994. Independent Belize also joined the Commonwealth of Nations, an international cooperative organization of former British colonies (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Following independence, a two-party system emerged in which the center-left PUP and the center-right United Democratic Party (UDP) alternated in power. Known as “Father of the Nation,” PUP leader George Price became the independent country’s first PM in 1981, an office he held until 1984 and again from 1989-93. Before and after Price’s terms, UDP leader Manuel Esquivel was PM from 1984-89 and 1993-98.

### Contemporary Belize

In 1998, PUP leader Said Musa became PM, holding the office for some 10 years. He proved an unpopular leader, especially when he tried to reduce the foreign debt by raising taxes, sparking riots in 2005. Following accusations of corruption, the PUP lost power in 2008 when UDP leader Dean Barrow took office as PM. He remained in office after winning an unprecedented 3rd term in 2015. In 2020, Belize voters overwhelmingly elected center-left PUP leader Juan Antonio Briceño to succeed longtime Prime Minister Dean Barrow.



**Influx of Refugees:** In the 1980s-90s, Belize welcomed approximately 30,000 refugees from civil wars and political unrest in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The

refugee influx, coupled with Garifuna and Creole migration to the US, has caused a demographic shift, with Spanish-speaking *mestizos* now comprising around 53% of the population and the historically dominant Creoles composing about 26% (see *Political and Social Relations*).

**Ongoing Territorial Dispute with Guatemala:** Although Guatemala formally recognized Belize as an independent nation in 1991, it continues to maintain its claims to almost 1/2 of Belize’s territory plus certain maritime zones. Negotiations between the 2 countries continued through the 1990s-2000s with little success. In 2008, Guatemala and Belize agreed to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) pending confirmation by public referendum, yet a decade

passed before further action occurred. In May 2018, Guatemala held its referendum which revealed overwhelming support for this plan, though turnout was very low. In April 2019, Belizeans also approved the reference of the dispute to the ICJ by a 55% majority.



A stable democracy, Belize struggles to reduce crime associated with drug trafficking (see *Political and Social Relations*) and its massive government debt. Although it has CENTAM's 2nd highest per capita income, Belize suffers high unemployment and poverty rates (see *Economics and Resources*).

## Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Belizean myths tend to vary by ethnic group (see *Political and Social Relations*) Two legends with Maya and *mestizo* roots warn of the dangers of the jungle.

**The Xtabai:** According to legend, the *Xtabai* is a demon who preys on Belizean men, typically appearing as a beautiful woman who sits in a secluded spot combing her silky long hair. Upon seeing a man, she uses her seductive voice to lure him back to her home in a ceiba tree. When the man tries to embrace her, she transforms into a mass of thorns that pierces the man and induces a delirious fever. According to some versions, men who encounter the *Xtabai* die, while other versions suggest that some men are allowed to escape so that they can learn from their mistakes.

**Tata Duende:** This is a small, ugly man with backwards feet and no thumbs who lives deep in the Belizean forest. A mischievous supernatural spirit, *Tata Duende* plays tricks on people and farm animals. He is especially attracted to children, who can only escape him by hiding their thumbs and showing him their four fingers.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Belize

### Political Borders

Mexico: 171 mi

Guatemala: 165 mi

Coastline: 240 mi

### Capital

Belmopan

### Demographics

Belize's population is just over 415,789 making it by far Central America's

(CENTAM's) least populous country (the population of the next largest, Panama, is 4.5 million). Belize's annual population growth rate of 1.47% has slowed in recent years in part due to a decreased birthrate (see *Sex and Gender*) and emigration as Belizeans search for employment and education opportunities abroad. Immigrants – mostly from nearby Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador – comprise about 17% of the population. Belize is primarily rural: almost 47% of the population lives in towns and cities. Population density is greatest in the North and along the coast, with approximately 25% to 30% of Belizeans residing in Belize City.



### Flag

The Belizean flag consists of a blue background with narrow red stripes running along the top and bottom. Centered in the blue

background is a large, white disk bearing Belize's coat of arms, which features a shield, 2 loggers holding tools, a mahogany tree, and the words "***Sub Umbra Floreo***" ("I flourish in the shade") – all encircled by a green garland of 50 mahogany leaves.



The flag's blue and red colors represent Belize's 2 main political parties (see "Political Climate" below), while the various components of the coat of arms symbolize the nation's historically significant logging industry (see *History and Myth*).

## Geography

Situated in CENTAM's Northeast, Belize is bordered by Mexico to North, the Caribbean Sea to the East, and Guatemala to the South and West. Belize's total land area is about 8,805 sq mi, making it slightly smaller than Massachusetts and about the same size as Israel. Belize's northern half is characterized by a gently undulating, low-lying plain interspersed with marshes and lagoons. The Maya Mountains rise in the South, where the nation's highest point, Doyle's Delight, reaches 3,688 ft. The mountains descend into a hilly limestone plateau featuring pine and rain forests, fast-running rivers, sinkholes, caverns, and underground streams. Mangrove swamps and sandy beaches



extend along the eastern coastline. Forests cover about 61% of the country.

About 200 mi of the 600 mi-long Mesoamerican Reef (the Western Hemisphere's longest coral reef) is situated 10-20 mi

offshore and stretches north-south along Belize's coastline. Belizean territory also includes hundreds of small **cayes** (islands), some populated while others are simply tiny, low-lying outcrops of coral. Belize's varied geographical features are home to numerous rare species of plants and animals.

## Climate

Belize experiences a hot and humid tropical climate characterized by both a dry (late February-May) and a rainy season (June-November). Temperatures average 79°F year-round but are cooler in the higher elevations of the southern mountains. While rainfall varies across the country, it is generally heaviest in the South.

## Natural Hazards

Belize is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards, notably flooding, tropical storms, and hurricanes. Flooding occurs most frequently in coastal regions during the rainy season. In August, Belize experiences the **mauger** – weeks of windless, oppressive heat and humidity. Storms originating in North America strike northern Belize from December-February, bringing strong and often destructive winds.

Devastating and frequent hurricanes result in massive, nationwide infrastructural damage, loss of life, and millions in economic losses. In 1961, Hurricane Hattie destroyed nearly 3/4 of Belize City, killing over 400 people, leaving thousands displaced, and resulting in the capital's move to Belmopan (see *History and Myth*). Other significant storms causing major damage include Hurricane Mitch (1998), Hurricane Iris (2001), and Hurricane Earl (2016), among numerous others.

## Environmental Issues

Immediately upon gaining independence in 1981 (see *History and Myth*), Belize's government implemented a system of environmental policies to preserve its diverse natural resources.

Today, Belize remains one of the world's most biodiverse nations. About 40% of Belizean land is protected in national parks and conservation areas, which strictly control commercial logging and agricultural activities, the small-



scale harvest of plants and animals for local populations, and tourism activities.

Nevertheless, deforestation remains an ongoing concern due to illegal logging and farming practices in protected areas. Besides disrupting Belize's fragile ecosystems, deforestation leads to soil erosion, which in turn reduces agricultural yields and impedes the natural retention of water.

Further, overfishing, the illegal removal of coral, oil spills, and the improper disposal of sewage and industrial and domestic waste threaten animal and plant life in rivers, coastal areas, and on the barrier reef. Marine degradation is most widespread in popular tourist areas with their concentrations of maritime traffic. Other environmental concerns include the removal of vegetation to create beaches for tourist use.

## Government

Belize is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary, democratic government. The country divides into 6 districts governed by local councils having authority over most municipal affairs. Mennonite communities (see *History and Myth* and *Religion and Spirituality*) have some autonomy in their own affairs. Similarly, the **alcalde** (mayoral) system of local government historically imposed on indigenous communities by Spanish colonial authorities has been revived in some Maya villages, particularly in the South. Adopted in 1981, Belize's Constitution divides power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches and outlines the basic rights and freedoms of the Belizean people.



## Executive Branch

Belize belongs to the Commonwealth of Nations, a cooperative organization of 53 sovereign states that were once colonies or territories of the British Empire. These

Commonwealth

members share the United Kingdom's hereditary monarch (presently King Charles III) as head-of-state. An appointed governor-general – a Belizean citizen whose powers are largely ceremonial – represents the monarch in Belize. Most executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who is head-of-government and runs the nation's day-to-day affairs. Appointed by the governor-general to serve renewable 5-year terms, the PM is traditionally the leader of the political party with the most seats in the National Assembly. A council of ministers supports the PM.

Prior to Charles' ascension, Queen Elizabeth II had acted as Belize's chief-of-state since ascending to the throne in 1952. Lady Froyla Tzalam was appointed as governor-general by the Queen in May 2021, taking over the post of Sir Colville Young after. The current PM, Juan Antonio Briceno, was elected in November 2020 as well (see *History and Myth*).

### **Legislative Branch**

Belize's legislature is a two-chamber National Assembly (NA), composed of a 14-seat (including the president) Senate and 31-seat House of Representatives. The governor-general appoints all Senators upon the advice of the PM (for six members), the leader of the opposition (three members), the Belize Council of Churches and Evangelical Association of Churches (one member), the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Belize Better Business Bureau (one member), non-governmental organizations in good standing (one member), and the National Trade Union Congress and the Civil Society Steering Committee (one member). By contrast, the 31 Representatives are directly elected in single-seat constituencies by a simple majority vote. All NA members serve five-year terms. The House of Representatives controls most legislative powers, including amending the Constitution, appointing positions in government, and approving declarations

of war. The Senate serves as an independent body that advises the governor-general on executive duties such as granting pardons, stays of execution, and removal of justices, among others.

### **Judicial Branch**

Belize's legal system is modeled after English

common law and includes a Supreme Court of Judicature, Magistrate Courts, and a Family Court. The Supreme Court of Judicature divides into a 9-member Supreme Court and 4-member Court of Appeal and is Belize's highest court. In 2009, Belize adopted the Caribbean Court of Justice (the judicial



institution of the Caribbean Community or CARICOM – see “Foreign Relations” below) as

its highest court of appeal for both criminal and civil cases.

The governor-general appoints the Supreme Court’s chief justice and the Court of Appeal’s president and its justices upon the recommendation of the PM and NA opposition leader (the leader of the minority party in the NA). All other judges are appointed by the governor-general upon consultation with the Judicial and Legal Services Section of the Public Services Commission along with the PM and NA opposition leader.

### Political Climate

Since attaining independence in 1981, Belize has experienced one of the region’s most stable political environments with peaceful and transparent democratic elections. Although smaller political groups operate within Belize, political power has alternated between 2 major parties – the center-right United Democratic Party (UDP) and the center-left People’s United Party (PUP) since independence (see *History and Myth*). For the most part, little ideological difference exists between the 2 parties.



Formed in 1981, the UDP is presently Belize’s second-largest political party and holder of the minority (5) of House of Representative seats with the PUP holding the

majority (26) of seats. Several decades older, the PUP was instrumental in achieving Belize’s independence (see *History and Myth*), and during much of the latter half of the 20th century, was known as a nationalist champion of the Belizean people. In recent years, however, corruption scandals, a stagnant economy, and failed reforms reduced the PUP’s popularity, with many Belizeans viewing it as increasingly plagued by cronyism and corporate favoritism.

Unseating a 10-year PUP incumbency when elected to power in 2008, the UDP continued to sweep both the following 2012 and



2015 elections, giving UDP leader Dean Barrow an unprecedented 3rd term in office as PM. Initially winning on an anti-corruption platform, Barrow implemented a broad range of social, educational, agricultural, and oil and

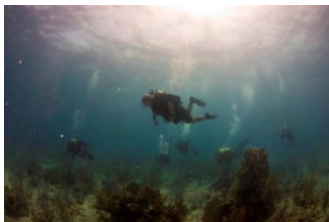
energy sector reforms, while cracking down on violent crime.

Moreover, Barrow's administration invested heavily into various infrastructure programs to help stimulate Belize's lagging economy. Despite these efforts, Belize continued to be plagued with corruption, narcotics trafficking and its associated violence, and massive government debt. In 2020, Belize voters overwhelmingly elected center-left PUP leader Juan Antonio Briceño to succeed longtime Prime Minister Dean Barrow.

## Defense

The Belizean Defense Forces (BDF) comprise a small military force with a strength of 1,500 active duty troops and 700 reserve personnel. The BDF is primarily charged with defending Belizean territory against foreign threats, particularly incidents occurring along the border with Guatemala (see "Security Issues" below). Other tasks include disaster relief efforts and, most recently, counter-narcotics operations.

**Army:** The Belizean Army is a well-trained force of 1,500 active-duty troops consisting of a special forces unit, 2 light maneuver battalions and a combat service support group. The Army also has an Air Wing division equipped with 4 aircraft and 2 helicopters.



**Paramilitary:** The Belizean Paramilitary consists of approximately 550 members.

## Belizean Defense Force Rank Insignia



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Officer  
Cadet



Warrant  
Officer  
Class 1



Warrant  
Officer  
Class 2



Staff  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Lance  
Corporal

## Foreign Relations

Over the last decades, Belize has cultivated ties with its CENTAM and Caribbean neighbors despite a lingering territorial conflict with Guatemala (see “Security Issues” below). A former British colony (see *History and Myth*), Belize maintains strong ties to the United Kingdom and retains cordial relations with the US, which provides substantial military-to-military support. Belize also participates in a number of large, global



organizations like the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization.

**Regional Cooperation:** As one of the more stable and prosperous nations in the region, Belize takes an active and increasingly influential role in the regionally aligned Organization of American States, Caribbean Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM).

Each of these regional alliances promotes the economic, social, and political integration of member states. CARICOM, for example, is a prominent and powerful regional alliance of 15 Latin American and Caribbean states that seeks to improve member nations’ standards of living, security, and foreign policy coordination, often focusing on the needs of less developed members.

**Relations with the US:** The US and Belize share stable political, economic, and military ties. The US engages with Belize to curtail illicit narcotics smuggling and prevent the growth of organized crime in the region. US programs also focus on socio-economic development, improving governance structures, supporting the growth of civil society, expanding the efficacy of the justice sector and police force, and engaging at-risk youth to counter the appeal of criminal gangs.



The US also provides financial assistance to the BDF, as well as military training and equipment to bolster the BDF's capacity to confront and disrupt criminal organizations. Moreover, the US military and various US-based charitable organizations deliver a wide range of humanitarian aid to Belize. These include helping construct and renovate schools, providing medical assistance to remote and vulnerable populations, and implementing drug reduction programs.

Finally, Belize shares a steady trade relationship with the US – the US is Belize's largest trading partner and invests substantially in Belizean tourism, telecommunications, agriculture, and



petroleum, among other industries (see *Economics and Resources*). The US is home to some 100,000 Belizeans – the largest Belizean community outside of Belize.

### Security Issues

Belize's security environment is dominated by a long-standing territorial dispute with neighboring Guatemala and internal threats related to illicit drug trafficking.

**Belize and Guatemala:** Guatemala's long-running territorial claim over a large portion (53%) of Belize (see *History and Myth*) dominates bilateral relations and contributes to significant tension between the two nations. Incursions into Belize by Guatemalans who perform illegal logging, poaching exotic animals, panning for gold, harvesting palm for export, or clearing land for agriculture result in frequent confrontations between the transgressors and Belizean authorities. In 2016, diplomatic relations weakened considerably after Belizean troops patrolling the 1.2 mi-wide "adjacency zone" along the disputed Belize-Guatemala border killed a 13-year-old Guatemalan boy, who had crossed into Belizean territory. Tensions flared again later that year, when Guatemala asserted control over the Sarstoon River, increasing military presence along Belize's southern

border and detaining or questioning Belizean citizens wishing to navigate the river and surrounding region.

Recent political and economic volatility in Guatemala adds to the volume of illegal activities such as narcotics smuggling, human trafficking, and other criminal activities along Belize's permeable



border region. Despite these tensions, the two countries maintain a dialogue and have agreed to settle the territorial dispute in the International Court of Justice pending the results of public referendums – held in Guatemala in May 2018 and Belize in May 2019 with 95% and 55% of voters in favor, respectively (see *History and Myth*).

**Crime and Narcotics Smuggling:** Violent crime poses a risk to Belizeans' safety, particularly in Belize City where street gangs occasionally commit robberies, assaults, extortions, kidnappings, and other violent crimes.

Moreover, Belize is a major transit point for drug trafficking and smuggling. Smaller Belizean organizations become increasingly



involved with larger, regional criminal networks centered in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico.

The BDF's small size and insufficient maritime patrol and aerial surveillance

capabilities pose a shortfall in Belize's ability to adequately counter the rise in crime and narcotics smuggling. As a result, in 2016 Belize engaged in training with US, UK, and other international forces to bolster the BDF's counter-narcotics and counter-gang operations

## Ethnic Groups

Belize's small population divides primarily into 4 main ethnic groups: **mestizos** (people who descend from a mixed European and indigenous ancestry), Creoles (Belizeans of mixed African and European descent), Amerindians or indigenous groups (Maya and Garifuna), and those from other backgrounds.

**Mestizos:** Belize's largest and fastest-growing group, *mestizos* comprise about 53% of the population. Many *mestizos* are the descendants of 19th-century immigrants from Mexico, though the group also includes more recent arrivals from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (see *History and Myth*). *Mestizos* generally speak Spanish as their first language and concentrate in northern and western Belize.



**Creoles:** Historically Belize's largest ethnic group, Creoles now make up about 26% of the population (see *History and Myth*). Creoles generally speak Belize Kriol and English as their primary languages (see *Language and Communication*) and historically concentrate in Belize City and rural areas of the surrounding Belize District.

**Maya:** Maya comprise some 11% of the population. The largest group is the Q'eqchi' followed by the Mopan. Both groups tend to live in the southern Toledo and western Cayo districts. A small group of Yucatec Maya lives in the northern Corozal and Orange Walk districts. Each group has its own language (see *Language and Communication*).

**Garifuna:** The Garifuna (or Garinagu in their own language – see *Language and Communication*) settled Belize in the 19th century (see *History and Myth*), primarily along the southern coast. Today, they make up about 6% of the population and concentrate in the coastal town of Dangriga and villages in the central Stann Creek District.

**Other Groups:** Other groups include the Mennonites, members of a Protestant Christian sect with roots in Europe (see *History and Myth*). About 12,000 Mennonites live largely in their own communities in Corozal, Toledo, Cayo and Orange Walk districts, where they speak a dialect of German as their first language (see *Language and Communication*) and follow their religious traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Other groups include South Asians, Chinese, Arabs (mainly Lebanese), Canadians, and Americans.

## Social Relations

Belizean society retains inequalities in the distribution of wealth, power, and prestige that were established during the country's colonial history (see *History and Myth*). Nevertheless, these divisions are not as deep as in other CENTAM and Caribbean countries, in part due to the country's small population and ethnic diversity. Indeed, Belize has been largely spared the violent class- and racial/ethnic-based conflicts that have

devastated many of its CENTAM neighbors in recent decades.



Generally, political and economic power remains in the hands of a relatively small elite who are typically Creole or *mestizo*, though the group also

includes citizens of Chinese, Indian, Palestinian, and Lebanese descent. Most members of the elite live in Belize City. Belize's middle and working classes contain members of all ethnicities, while rural dwellers are predominantly Maya and *mestizo*. Some southern Maya communities have recently gained the right to manage their lands in the traditional, collective fashion, generating tensions with the government. Belize experienced a significant demographic shift in recent decades, with *mestizos* becoming the majority ethnic group. This shift, Guatemala's ongoing territorial claims (see *History and Myth*), and the fear of gang violence from other CENTAM countries have fueled some anti-Hispanic (anti-*mestizo* and anti-Spanish language) sentiment.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

Belize's population is primarily Christian. A 2010 census estimates about 40% of Belizeans are Roman Catholic, 32% Protestant, and some 2% Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups together constitute 11% of the population. These include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Hindus, Buddhists, the Salvation Army, Rastafarians, Muslims, and Baha'is. Some 16% of Belizeans claim no religious affiliation.



Belize's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, prohibits religious discrimination, and allows Belizeans to worship and express religious beliefs freely. To achieve legal recognition, all religious groups must register with the government in a relatively straightforward process similar to that of a business. Once registered, religious organizations are eligible to receive government funding, own property, hire employees, operate charities, and establish religious schools permitted to teach religious beliefs without restriction, among other benefits.

Although the Constitution names no official religion or church, it acknowledges "the supremacy of God" and does not explicitly separate church and state. Religious groups are involved in the political process – the governor-general (see *Political and Social Relations*) appoints 1 of the 12 Senate members upon the recommendation of the Council of Churches and the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches.

These organizations together represent the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches; the Salvation Army; the Chinese Christian Mission; the Church of Christ; the Assembly of God; Seventh-day Adventists; and several other evangelical Protestant organizations.

## Early Spiritual Landscape

The region's early inhabitants, notably the Maya (see *History and Myth*), had a rich spiritual life. Scholars believe the Maya recognized a variety of spirits and gods, who constructed the universe, created the earth and humans, and influenced daily life. The Maya worshipped numerous nature gods, notably those controlling the sun, moon, rain, and animals and practiced elaborate rituals to honor gods and ancestors.



Today, Belize is home to the sites of important Maya temples, tombs, shrines, and other sites that provide insight into the complexity of Maya religious beliefs and

practices. These sites include Caracol (which became the largest Maya city-state in Belize at the height of Maya civilization), Altun Ha, Lubaantun, and Xunantunich, among many others. They are characterized by large, central plazas surrounded by towering pyramids and other stone structures that likely served as important religious ceremonial centers. Moreover, Belize's numerous limestone caves became burial chambers and sites of rituals and ceremonies associated with specific deities, ancestors, and the transition after death into the underworld.

## Introduction of Christianity

Although Spanish conquerors first brought Christianity to Belize in the early 16th century, their initial attempts to establish Catholic missions were largely thwarted by indigenous resistance to the missionaries' proselytization efforts. Over subsequent decades, however, the Spanish continued their systematic and aggressive subjugation of indigenous groups (see *History and Myth*), while attempting to convert followers of traditional religions. Generally, the Spanish burned Maya sacred texts, destroyed temples and other sacred sites, forbade traditional rituals and dances, and established Catholic churches in Maya cities like Lamanai – the site of the 1st Spanish mission in 1544 (see *History and Myth*).

Despite their fierce resistance to the Spanish, the Maya had reduced dramatically within a century of the Europeans' arrival due to conflict, mistreatment by colonial authorities, and disease (see *History and Myth*). By the end of the 17th century, only remnants of the region's traditional Maya culture and religion remained, and many of the remaining Maya had converted to Catholicism. Although they identified as Christian, most Maya combined ancient beliefs with Christian doctrine, practicing a "folk" form of Catholicism still evident in many Maya communities today (see "Religion and Indigenous Groups" below).

### Religion in the British Colony

In the late 18th century, Protestant Anglican (Church of England) missionaries arrived to minister to the region's English settlers (see *History and Myth*). These missionaries also proselytized among the Maya and African slave populations (see *History and Myth*). As the British presence gradually increased, Protestant Christianity took firm root alongside Roman Catholicism.

While Christian organizations advocated for the better treatment of local populations, the authorities' continued their repressive and inhumane policies. These policies coupled with inaction by the Church of England resulted in the rise of non-conformist churches. The Baptist and the Wesleyan Methodist churches, both established missions in Belize in the 1820s, were two prominent non-conformist



churches. These and other reform churches focused on improving the welfare of the region's subjugated populations, providing them education, medical care, and various social services. Following the 1838 abolition of slavery (see *History and Myth*), these churches also aided former slaves in their transition to freedom and promoted their inclusion in Belizean society.

Meanwhile, Catholic orders built schools, convents, and institutions of higher learning, such as Saint John's College,



which after its establishment in 1887, prepared upper-class boys for careers in politics, business, and medicine. In subsequent decades, the arrival of Catholic immigrants from Mexico and other Central American countries helped grow the Roman Catholic population.

As Catholicism flourished, allegiance to Protestantism waned, at least in part due to Catholic proselytization efforts. As a result, Catholic institutions

became influential in most aspects of Belizean life – education, politics, and economics in particular.

The arrival of evangelical and fundamentalist sects like the Pentecostals and Seventh-Day Adventists significantly bolstered the numbers of Protestant practitioners starting in the 1970s. Nevertheless, Roman Catholicism maintained its prominent position in Belizean society.

### Religion Today

Religious groups are spread relatively evenly throughout the country, and no group has the majority in any of Belize's six districts. Relations among followers of all faiths are generally harmonious, and the Belizean government actively promotes religious tolerance.

Christian churches typically offer a range of social services to their members. Occasionally, religious groups join together to deliver large-scale aid, such as post-disaster relief, environmental clean-up, and poverty alleviation measures. Christian organizations operate most of the nation's public elementary and high schools with government subsidies (see *Learning and Knowledge*). The early school curriculum includes noncompulsory weekly nondenominational spirituality lessons on morality, social responsibility, and world religions.



While Roman Catholicism retains its prominent place in society, about 1/3 of Belizeans are members of Protestant or other non-Catholic Christian churches. Denominations include Pentecostals (9% of the population), Seventh-day Adventists (6%), Anglicans (5%), Mennonites (4%), Baptists (4%), Methodists (3%), and Church of the Nazarene (3%).

**Mennonites:** Since first arriving in the late 1950s, (see *History and Myth*),

Mennonites today number some 12,000.

Most live in small communities primarily in Belize's rural North and West. Mennonite communities prefer to be largely self-sufficient and typically operate their own schools, local



government, businesses, and banks. A Protestant sect related to the Amish, Mennonites strictly follow the New Testament of the Christian Bible, subscribe to a separation of church and state, and commit to a "simple life." The most conservative Mennonite communities avoid modern technology, wear conservative, handmade clothing, and strive to remain separate from mainstream society.

### Religion and Minority Groups

Garifuna and Maya (see *Political and Social Relations*) typically attend Catholic and Protestant churches but often incorporate elements of traditional beliefs and practices into their Christian worship. For example, the Garifuna traditionally perform several rituals to help the spirits of their deceased relatives on their journey in the afterlife. Other rituals are performed to appease angered ancestors, determine the cause of sudden death, or heal illness. Some Garifuna consult a **buyae** (diviner or spiritual healer) to perform certain rituals which typically incorporate dancing, singing, drumming, and offerings of food to the spirits. Some evangelical churches forbid Maya traditional practices common among Catholic Maya, causing some tension in Maya communities.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Belizean households tend to be large, consisting of several extended family members. Even if the extended family does not share a home, relatives traditionally live in close proximity. Belizeans typically draw significant financial and emotional support from their large networks of kin.

### Residence

In 2023, some 47% of Belizeans lived in urban areas, a significant decrease since 1960, when the rate was 54%. Experts attribute this reverse urbanization to two trends: the emigration of Belizeans from urban areas to the US and an influx of refugees and agricultural workers from other Central American countries into rural areas (see *History and Myth*). Free land for home construction is available to Belizean citizens upon successful application to the government. Though the approval process can be lengthy, this program makes real estate ownership attainable for some.

**Urban:** While apartments are increasingly common in urban areas, most Belizeans inhabit free-standing homes. Large, wooden clapboard houses with verandas are popular among the middle-upper classes. Most homes feature painted pastel



colors and large glass windows. Coastal homes often sit on stilts due to frequent flooding (see *Political and Social Relations*).

By contrast, poorer urban residents tend to live in wooden or concrete dwellings having 1-2 rooms,

outdoor kitchens, and porches with hammocks. In the absence of glass windows and air conditioning, shutters keep out rain but maintain air flow in the tropical climate. The poorest urban dwellers typically have inadequate shelter, often occupying

temporary shacks constructed of plastic, scrap wood, and corrugated sheet metal.

**Rural:** Rural homes are usually constructed of wood, mud, and thatch, though concrete and corrugated metal are increasingly popular. The government supports the construction of new structures in rural neighborhoods, yet these homes remain unaffordable for many rural poor. Some rural dwellers prefer to live in traditional dwellings, taking pride in the skill required to construct them and the protection they provide from the elements.

### Family Structure

In Belizean families, the father is traditionally the primary breadwinner and head of the household, while the mother is typically responsible for all domestic tasks and childcare. Creoles (see *Political and Social Relations*) tend to live in female-headed households at higher rates than other groups. In such situations, extended relatives, particularly grandmothers, provide significant financial support and help care for children. Some Creole households comprise several generations of women without any adult men.

### Children

Most Belizean families have 2-3 children, though rural families tend to have more. Children usually live at home until they marry or have children, though many choose to remain longer. Adolescents often work to help support their families or pay school fees (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Teen girls typically perform domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings. Outside the home, young men often labor in agriculture, construction, or food service industries, while adolescent girls generally serve as secretaries, maids, or nannies.



**Birth:** Most Belizean women give birth in hospitals or at home with a birth attendant. After birth, mothers vigilantly protect their infants from *mal de ojo*, the “evil eye,” which is believed to bring misfortune. To defend against the evil eye, mothers tie

red ribbons around their babies’ wrists or dress them in red socks or caps.



### Rites of Passage

Roman Catholic Belizeans (see *Religion and Spirituality*) typically mark life’s milestones with Christian rites-of-

passage. For example, families usually baptize their children within a few weeks of birth, then celebrate first communion and confirmation around age 8-10 and 15, respectively. *Mestizos* typically celebrate their daughters’ 15th birthdays and entrance into adulthood with a formal party called a *quinceañera*. By contrast, a girl’s 16th birthday is a celebrated milestone among Creole families.

**Dating and Marriage:** Courtship traditions vary by ethnic group. For example, some Maya families restrict dating to supervised events at the girl’s home. Yet most Belizean boys and girls interact from an early age.

Popular gathering places for young couples include school dances, church events, and parties. Some schools have strict dating policies discouraging adolescent relationships due to high teen pregnancy rates (see *Sex and Gender*). While the legal minimum marriage age is 18, adolescents between 16-18 may marry with parental permission.

Not all Belizeans pursue official civil or religious unions. Instead, some couples choose to live in common-law relationships. After five years of cohabitation, these common-law arrangements receive official recognition from the government. Sometimes an unmarried couple with children elects to live separately and instead pursues “visiting arrangements” whereby the father occasionally calls on the family, while providing some financial support. According to

recent studies, some 34% of Belizean women aged 20-24 had married or were cohabitating before age 18.

**Weddings:** This occasion usually consists of a religious service in a church followed by a reception. Traditionally, the bride walks from her home to the wedding venue, while loved ones cheer her on with compliments and gifts. At the church, the bride and her father may dance down the aisle to the altar together. Guests enjoy music, dancing, and storytelling at the subsequent festivities.

**Divorce:** Since formal marriage is less common, so is divorce. However, should an official union dissolve, most couples simply separate and begin unofficial relationships with new partners rather than undergoing Belizean law's tedious divorce process.

### Death

Loved ones typically hold a funeral at a church. Rituals include hours of prayer, song, and storytelling at the gravesite after interment. For the nine days following the funeral, a period



known as the **novena**, Catholic families say special prayers at home or attend special church services. During this time, mourners also enjoy traditional foods like rice, red or black beans, and stewed meats (see *Sustenance and Health*). Though traditions vary among ethnic groups, Belizeans generally believe ancestral spirits influence the lives of their living relatives.

The Garifuna (see *History and Myth* and *Political and Social Relations*) follow their own unique funeral traditions. Following a death, family members wash the deceased with rum. They then place a cup of water and candle next to the deceased to represent the person's spirit. On the last night of the **novena**, the Garifuna host a **beluria** (party) with food, drink, music, and dancing to celebrate the deceased's journey to **seiri** (heaven).

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Belizean society is patriarchal, meaning men hold most power and authority. Despite legal guarantees to equality, some women are victims of discrimination and remain underrepresented in government and high-level business positions.

### Gender Roles and Work

Belizean society maintains a distinct division of labor between the genders. Within the home, women typically perform domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In rural areas, women also perform agricultural chores.

By contrast, men traditionally serve as the primary breadwinners, though increasing numbers of women also work outside the home.



**Labor Force:** In 2024, 49% of women worked outside the home, lower than the US rate (57%), more than Honduras (39%), and higher than El Salvador (47%). Although more Belizean women graduate from universities than men, few attain managerial positions within the workplace, inhibiting their ability to earn higher salaries. Indeed, women across the workforce receive lower wages than men with comparable education levels and work experience.

Within the labor force, jobs typically divide by gender. While men predominate in construction and food service, women tend to work as domestic laborers and administrative assistants. Female immigrants from other Central American (CENTAM) countries working in the agriculture, services, or tourism sectors are particularly vulnerable to labor exploitation due to limited language skills, desperate economic circumstances and fear of deportation.

## Gender and the Law

Despite legal guarantees of equality and government programs aimed at empowering women, Belizean women face social and economic discrimination. Further, employers frequently ignore reports of sexual harassment on the job and occasionally deny lawful requests for maternity leave.

## Gender and Politics

Traditional attitudes generally discourage women from running for office, and rates of female participation in Belize's political process are low. In 2024, just 16% of National Assembly members were female, slightly higher than in neighboring Guatemala (20%) and significantly lower than rates in Honduras (27%) and the US (29%). While female rates of government service have steadily increased over recent decades, women remain underrepresented in all levels of government. The government appointed the first female attorney general in 2016.

## Gender Based Violence (GBV)

While rape and sexual assault are criminal offenses, they remain underreported due to victims' fear of retaliation and lack of faith in the judicial system. There also exists a societal stigma for victims who report sexual violence. Marital rape is also a criminal offense, though spouses must be separated or have initiated divorce proceedings for the courts to label such an assault as rape.

Belizean law classifies domestic violence as a civil rather than criminal offense. Under the legal code, domestic violence encompasses not just physical abuse but also sexual, financial and psychological harm. Nevertheless, victims receive inadequate services and support. As of 2018, just three women's shelters existed for the entire country.



**Trafficking:** Belize is a destination, transit, and source country for forced labor and sex trafficking, particularly among children. In tourist areas, foreign sex tourists exploit child victims. In other cases, destitute parents sometimes encourage their adolescent children into relationships with older men who provide money or gifts in exchange for sexual acts. Immigrant women from other CENTAM countries are particularly vulnerable to both forced labor and sex trafficking. Limited enforcement of anti-trafficking laws and complicity by government officials aggravates the problem.

### Sex and Procreation

Belizeans traditionally view sexual intimacy as a private matter appropriate only within a marriage. Nevertheless, the fertility rate among adolescents is high, with some 55 births per 1,000 females aged 15-19 in 2023, over 3 times the US rate (13).



Upon becoming pregnant, most teens drop out of school, though recent reforms allow some to resume their education after giving birth. Some young mothers choose to remain unmarried, staying at home with their

own mothers as support (see *Family and Kinship*). At 2.0 births per woman, Belize's overall fertility rate is lower than regional neighbor Honduras (2.5) but higher than El Salvador (1.8), as well as that of the US (1.6).

### Homosexuality in Belize

In 2016, Belize's Supreme Court ruled that laws criminalizing male homosexuality were unconstitutional. The ruling also outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation. Nevertheless, homosexual individuals often face harassment and discrimination, even from the authorities. Although society has become more tolerant in recent years, homosexual Belizeans tend to conceal their sexual orientation.

At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Belize. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.



## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Most Belizeans speak more than one language. According to the 2010 census, some 63% of Belizeans speak English, the official language, while about 45% speak Belize Kriol, an English-based creole language. Due to decades of immigration from Belize's Central American (CENTAM) neighbors, some 57% speak Spanish. Other languages include three Mayan languages, Garifuna, and Low German.

### English and Belize Kriol

Spoken by most Belizeans at least as a second language, English is the primary language for education government, and business. By contrast, Belize Kriol is spoken commonly in the home and in other informal contexts. While Kriol was historically purely a spoken language, linguists have developed a writing system and published a dictionary in recent years.

Creole languages like Belize Kriol typically develop in environments where several languages are spoken. As



informal intermediary languages, they use grammar and vocabulary borrowed from 1 or more languages. Belize Kriol likely emerged in the 17th century, when British settlers began importing African slaves to harvest timber (see *History and Myth*). Although it has evolved since then, Belize Kriol is based on English yet has its own grammatical structure and vocabulary borrowed from several African languages, Miskito (a language native to northeastern Nicaragua), and Spanish.

Consequently, experts often describe the relationship between English and Belize Kriol as existing on a spectrum, meaning speakers are able to modify their speech to suit the situation.

While English and Kriol are usually mutually intelligible for most Belizeans, speakers of standard English from outside the region may have difficulties understanding Kriol. For example, although some Kriol words are similar to standard English, such as “Gud Mawnin” for “Good morning,” Kriol’s unique grammatical constructions, loanwords from other languages, and distinctive Caribbean accent tend to make it incomprehensible to non-speakers of the language.

## Spanish

Spanish was a minority language for much of the country’s history (see *History and Myth*). Yet in recent decades, the number of Spanish-speakers has grown significantly (see *History and Myth*). Most are native speakers, though many Belizeans speak it as a second or third language. Spanish-



speakers tend to concentrate along the Mexican and Guatemalan borders and in Belize’s far South.

While English remains the primary language of instruction in Belize’s schools

(see *Learning and Knowledge*), some primary schools offer Spanish as a language of instruction, especially in the early grades in areas where Spanish predominates. A mixed form of Spanish and Belize Kriol called “Kitchen Spanish” is spoken northern Belize.

## Maya Languages

Around 11% of Belizeans speak Mayan languages, notably Yucatec Maya along the Mexican border and Mopan and Q’eqchi’ in the South.

## Other Languages

Some 3% of Belizeans speak Garifuna, the native language of the Garifuna people (see *Political and Social Relations*). A member of the Arawakan language family, Garifuna is rooted in the Arawak and Carib languages native to the Greater and

Lesser Antilles Islands of the Caribbean. Reflecting the Garifuna's turbulent past (see *History and Myth*), it also contains some words from French, English, Spanish, and African languages.

Some 12,000 Mennonites (see *Political and Social Relations* and p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*) speak Plautdietsch. A Prussian dialect of Low German with significant Dutch influence, Plautdietsch also contains Russian, Ukrainian, English, and Spanish loanwords.

It is generally not intelligible to speakers of modern or High German. While most Mennonites use



High German for written purposes, a minority speaks it fluently. Around 10,000 Belizeans speak other languages, notably Chinese, Arabic, and South Asian languages (see *Political and Social Relations*).

## Communication Overview

Effective communication in Belize requires not only knowledge of English or Spanish but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

## Communication Style

Communication patterns vary with Belize's ethnic and cultural diversity, yet they generally reflect a society-wide emphasis on honesty, friendliness, and respect. Generally, Kriol communication styles tend to be more similar to Caribbean patterns than those of other CENTAM countries. Kriol speakers

tend to be open and outgoing communicators, who appreciate a sense of humor as well as colorful and descriptive language. By contrast, Spanish and Mayan language speakers tend to be more reserved, especially around strangers.

As is common throughout Latin America, ***machismo*** attitudes (the notion of strong masculine pride) are common. Some men use derogatory language or make suggestive comments about women to their male friends or directly to women. Foreign nationals should avoid participating in such discussions.

## Greetings

Belizean greetings often appear informal but are important. Belizeans consider it rude not to greet or “hail” even a slight acquaintance or not to return such a greeting. They typically hail clerks or salespeople when entering a place of business, and some Belizeans even greet strangers in the street by waving or nodding. Common Kriol greetings include ***Hey, how, Y’aright?*** and ***Wa di gwan?*** (“What’s happening?”), while Spanish-speakers greet with ***Buenos días*** (“Good morning/day”) or ***Buenas tardes*** (“Good afternoon/evening”),

depending on the time of day.

Following verbal exchanges in informal contexts, men typically shake hands, sometimes locking the thumbs or fingers, patting each other on the



back, or following the handshake with a fist bump. Women reserve hugs for close friends and relatives. In more formal situations, Belizeans tend to shake hands.

## Forms of Address

Belizeans use certain forms of address to demonstrate respect, employing terms like Mister or Miss to address strangers and responding to questions or requests with “Yes Sir/Ma’am.” When speaking to someone of high social standing, Belizeans typically use Mister or Miss followed by the last name.

Because Belize is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations (an international cooperative organization of former British colonies – see *Political and Social Relations*), Belizeans are eligible for knighthood granted by the British monarch. Belizeans who have received this honor may use Sir or Dame before their full names.

### Conversational Topics

After initial greetings, Belizeans typically engage in light conversation about work and family. They are usually friendly and welcoming yet avoid topics of conversation that could cause conflict or dispute. To avoid offense, foreign nationals should avoid discussing politics, religion, and money. Belizeans tend to openly discuss a person's ethnicity or physical appearance, a habit that is not intended to be rude.

### Gestures

Belizeans tend to use gestures to accentuate or replace spoken words, though the custom varies with ethnic identity. Garifuna, Kriol, and English-speakers are typically more animated, often using their hands, bodies, and faces during conversation. Spanish and Mayan language speakers tend to be somewhat more reserved.



Belizeans generally avoid pointing, instead using their head or their lips to indicate direction. Belizeans sometimes use noises to replace spoken words, such as sucking air through the teeth to express disbelief, though these habits are generally acceptable only in informal situations.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Spanish	Kriol
Hello	Hola	Helo
How are you?	¿Cómo está usted?	Da how yu di du?
I am well	Estoy bien	Aarait
Yes	Sí	Yes
No	No	No
Please	Por favor	Pleez
Thank you	Gracias	Tenk yu
You are welcome	De nada	Welkom
I'm sorry	Lo siento	Ahsari
I don't understand	No entiendo	Mee noh andastan
I don't know	No sé	Mee noh know
What is your name?	¿Cuál es su nombre? / ¿Cómo se llama?	Weh yuh naym?
My name is ____	Me llamo ____	Mee naym dah ____
Where are you from?	¿De dónde es usted?	Wehyu fram?
Where am I?	¿Dónde estoy?	Weh I deh?
Goodbye	Adiós	Gidbai
Good morning/night	Buenos días / tardes	Gud maanin / night
What does ____ mean?	¿Qué significa ____?	Weh ih meen?
How much does this cost?	¿Cuánto cuesta esto?	Humoch dis kaas?
What time is it?	¿Qué hora es?	Weh taim yuh gat?
Who?	¿Quién?	Hoodi?
Where?	¿Dónde?	Weh-paat
Why?	¿Por qué?	Wai?

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 82.7%
- Male: 82.3%
- Female: 83% (2018 estimate)

### Traditional Education

Before the arrival of Spanish conquerors and English buccaneers (see *History and Myth*), most regional inhabitants informally transmitted skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. Among the Maya of the Classic Period (see *History and Myth*), religious specialists taught advanced math, science, astronomy, medicine, and writing to the children of nobles.

### History of Education

For centuries following the arrival of Europeans in the region, Belize remained largely outside the control of Spain, which



colonized the rest of Central America and Mexico. The Spanish made some efforts to establish Roman Catholic missions, although with minimal effect (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Similarly, British settlers in the region (see *History and Myth*) made little attempt to introduce formal schooling.

In the first half of the 19th century, educational offerings remained undeveloped, with most British settlers either educating their children privately or sending them to Britain. Other inhabitants, namely Maya peoples and African slaves, had no access to formal education. By contrast, some Creoles (the offspring of slaves and British settlers – see *Political and Social Relations*) acquired limited schooling. For example in 1816, the Church of England established the Honduras Free

School, Belize's first formal educational institution, to serve primarily poor Creoles. Meanwhile, private schools began opening for the children of English settlers, although most residents who could afford it continued to send their children to Britain.

In 1850, local authorities committed to establishing schools for students of all Christian denominations. Subsequently, a few primary schools opened that were based on the English model, although no institutions offered secondary or post-secondary education. Belize's official designation as a British crown colony in 1871 signaled the beginning of real investment in education. By the 1880s, some 14 schools were operational, mostly around the capital of Belize City, though just a small proportion of children attended school.

### Education in the 20th Century

In 1915, primary education became compulsory. By the 1920s, 75 schools located throughout the country offered primary education, while 6 secondary schools operated in Belize City. Schools mostly catered to Creoles since there was a lack of qualified teachers to provide instruction to speakers of the Mayan languages, Spanish, or Garifuna (see *Language and Communication*).

Colonial government support to education primarily consisted of subsidies to private schools. These so-called "government-aided schools" made up the majority of the colony's educational offerings. Even as education funding increased from 3% of the budget in 1930 to 8% in 1951, few public schools opened: That year, the colony had just two public primary schools compared to some 116 government-aided schools.



The 1954 opening of a teacher training college increased the supply of trained education professionals.



Despite these and other advances, Belize's educational offerings remained limited and of poor quality through much of the 20th century, even after independence (see *History and Myth*). A lack of local education material forced schools to use curricula focused on Britain. Because the Church of England continued to financially support most schools, the Ministry of Education had little influence on education policy.

Post-secondary educational offerings remained nonexistent until 1979, when the Belize College of Arts, Science and Technology was founded and began offering a few courses. Its charter was revoked in 1984, when the government invited an American university to establish the University College of Belize (UCB). The government took over UCB operations in 1991, then combined the UCB with several other institutions to form the University of Belize in 2000.

### Modern Education System

Belize's education system consists of primary, secondary, and higher education programs overseen by the Ministry of Education, Youth, Sports and Culture. The system still follows



the British model, although some Roman Catholic Jesuit schools follow American-inspired curricula. Most primary education is provided free of charge through government-aided, church-run schools, while government-aided secondary

schools generally charge tuition. Government spending on education as a percentage of gross domestic product was about 5% in 2023, higher than that of neighbors Guatemala (3.2%) and Honduras (4.4%).

Belize's education system faces some challenges that affects outcomes. The government continues to struggle in the area of enrollment. In 2022, 95% of primary aged school children were

enrolled in school. Many students permanently leave school after completing compulsory primary schools: in 2022, about 43% of children aged 13-16 were not enrolled. There has been a significant increase in the level of trained teachers over the last 15 years. Between 2005 and 2023, the percentage of trained teachers rose from 8.9% to 74% at the preschool level, from 46.7% to 89% at the primary level, and from 34.2% to 75% at the secondary level.

**Pre-Primary:** Pre-primary education is non-compulsory and generally private, although there are some public institutions. In 2021, about 34% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary programs.

**Primary Education:** Consisting of 8 grades starting at age 5, primary school is compulsory and divides into 2 primer grades (Infant 1 and 2) and 6 years of junior grades (Standard 1-6). The curriculum focuses on 4 areas: language studies (both English and Spanish); math, science, practical skills, and technology; social studies and personal development; and expressive arts, physical education, and health. Upon completion of 8 years, students take the Primary School Examination (PSE), a nationally-administered test of English, math, science, and social studies that determines access to secondary school. About 88% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary education in 2023.



### **Secondary Education:**

Non-compulsory secondary education comprises 4 grades, known as “forms,” for children aged around 14-18. Secondary education is generally fee-based, although the government offers scholarships for the children of poor families. The first 2 years continue the general education curriculum of primary school and focus on English, Spanish, science, math, social studies, religion, and literature. The final 2 years separate students into tracks focusing on business, secretarial, or academic subjects.

Besides academic coursework, most secondary schools have a significant vocational component. In addition, separate vocational schools also offer short-term courses in the basic trades. In 2023, around 83% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary programs.



Graduates of secondary school are awarded a General Certificate of Education (GCE). Students wishing to

attend university must pass the Caribbean Examinations Council Secondary Education Certificate Examinations, given twice yearly.

**Post-Secondary:** Belize's post-secondary offerings include 4-year colleges such as the public University of Belize, the private Galen University, and a branch campus of the University of the West Indies. These institutions offer Associate's and Bachelor's degrees as well as certificate programs in education, business, nursing, social work, science, and technology.

Postgraduate study is limited to Master of Business Administration degrees. Students wishing to complete any other postgraduate studies leading to medical, law, or doctorate degrees must do so abroad.



Belize also has post-secondary vocational schools and so-called "sixth form" schools attached to secondary schools that do not require a specialized entrance exam. Some of these institutions award US-recognized Associate's degrees, enabling students to advance to Bachelor's degree studies at a university.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Belizeans' warm, friendly attitudes extend to the workplace, where patience and a sense of humor are admired characteristics. Most Belizeans tend to exhibit a casual attitude towards time and punctuality.

### Time and Work

Belize's work week typically runs Monday-Friday from 9:00am-5:00pm. While hours vary, many shops open Monday-Saturday from 8:00am-5:00pm, with a break for lunch from 12:00pm-1:00pm. Grocery stores are typically open all day, but other shops may close early on Wednesdays, Fridays, or Saturdays. Although most businesses are closed on Sundays, a few shops remain open. Overall, business schedules can be informal, often varying according to the owners' preferences.

Most banks are open Monday-Thursday from 8:00am-3:00pm and on Friday from 8:00am-4:30pm. Post office (PO) hours are typically Monday-Friday from 8:00am-12:00pm and 1:00pm-5:00pm. Though most POs close on Saturdays, some operate from 8:00am-12:00pm.



### Working

**Conditions:** The legal work week in Belize is 45 hours over a maximum of 6 days. The law also sets health and safety standards and a minimum wage of \$5.00 Belizean dollars, or US\$2.49 an hour as of 2025.

Belize's minimum wage was last changed in January 2023. Despite these protections, lax enforcement often results in unsafe working conditions. Undocumented immigrants from other Central American countries routinely receive less than the minimum wage.

**Time Zone:** Belize adheres to Central Standard Time (CST), which is 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 1 hour behind Eastern Standard Time (EST). Belize does not observe daylight savings time.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, Belize uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans but like the British,

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March 9: National Heroes and Benefactor's Day
- March/April: Good Friday (dates vary)
- March/April: Holy Saturday (dates vary)
- March/April: Easter Monday (dates vary)
- May 1: Labour Day
- May 24: Sovereign's Day
- September 10: St. George's Caye Day
- September 21: Independence Day
- October 12: Pan American Day
- November 19: Garifuna Settlement Day
- December 25: Christmas Day
- December 26: Boxing Day

Any holiday that falls on a Thursday or Friday is typically observed on the preceding or following Monday.

Belizeans often write the day first, followed by the month and year.

### Time and Business

Belizeans tend to view friendly introductions and conversation as key to building positive business relationships (see *Language and Communication*). Generally, business moves slower than in the US. While Belizeans typically expect foreign nationals to be punctual, most meetings begin late, usually some 30 minutes or an hour after their scheduled starting time.

This relaxed view of time also extends to most other types of appointments and transportation schedules.

Most Belizeans prefer formal titles within the workplace, using “Mr.” and “Mrs.” before last names unless individuals are well acquainted and have a similar status. Moreover, most offices have hierarchical power structures with top-down management styles, which means leaders make most decisions and hand down directives to subordinates.



Belizeans typically prefer indirect communication over frank confrontation. Instead of getting directly to the point, they typically work their way slowly to the

main topic of discussion. When critiquing an employee's performance, managers avoid direct criticisms and soften reprimands with assurances of positive performance in other areas.

## Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Belize depends on the nature of the relationship. Friends and family generally observe less personal space than acquaintances or strangers. Belizeans tend to sit close to each other on public transportation.

**Touch:** Belizeans typically reserve physical affection for family and friends, though customs can vary by ethnic group (see *Political and Social Relations*).



Greetings usually include little touching beyond the handshake, though men sometimes exchange pats on the back (see *Language and Communication*). While close friends might add a hug or cheek kiss regardless of sex, public displays of affection between romantic partners are rare.

**Eye Contact:** Belizeans typically engage in friendly eye contact during greetings, whether with a friend or stranger but do not maintain direct eye contact for the duration of a conversation.



### Photographs

Foreign nationals should always acquire a Belizean's consent before taking his photo, and some Belizeans may expect compensation in return. Explicit

permission is particularly important when photographing indigenous peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*) and children. Churches generally prohibit photography.

### Driving

Poor road maintenance and a general disregard for traffic laws make driving conditions hazardous, particularly at night. Few roads have shoulders or clear markings, resulting in poor lane discipline and other driver unpredictability. Further, few drivers or cyclists respect traffic signs and signals.

Many rural roads are unpaved and prone to flooding (see *Political and Social Relations*), while most bridges have just a single lane.

In 2021, Belize's rate of traffic-related deaths was 18 per 100,000 people, lower than El Salvador (22) and higher than Guatemala (13) and the US rate (14). As in the US, Belizeans drive on the right side of the road.



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Belize's dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's diversity, natural features, and colonial history. African, European, and indigenous customs continue to influence modern Belizean traditions.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Each of Belize's ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) has its own unique traditional style. For example, Mopan Maya women traditionally wear a **pic** (long, ruffled skirt made of cotton) with a **camisa** (an embroidered blouse). By contrast, traditional Q'eqchi' Maya women's styles include a long skirt with an intricate woven pattern paired with a monochrome cotton blouse. Traditional clothing for Maya men consists of a shirt and pants of less vibrant textiles paired with a straw hat. By contrast, some members of Belize's Mennonite communities traditionally wear plain, conservative styles in dark colors.



Among the Garifuna, traditional women's clothing includes skirts, blouses, and headscarves of coordinating bright colors, often trimmed with seashells. Men typically wear matching pants and shirts of linen. With the exception of the Mennonites and some Maya, most Belizeans reserve traditional clothing for special occasions, though some older residents incorporate traditional styles into their daily dress.

**Modern:** Everyday Belizean clothing generally consists of casual Western fashions. Men typically wear sandals with long pants and shirts of breathable fabrics like cotton. Womenswear is similar, though most prefer capri-length pants. Young Belizeans tend to wear clothing that reflects recent American fashion trends. Across age and class, Belizeans favor a neat and clean appearance.



Within the professional workplace, dress codes are typically relaxed. Few men wear formal suits or ties, instead opting for long pants and a **guayabera** (a dress shirt with rows of vertical pleats worn untucked). While women traditionally wore dresses in the office, an increasing number of professional women wear slacks. Workers in certain industries, notably tourism and education, typically wear uniforms.

## Recreation

Belizeans enjoy spending their leisure time with family members and friends. Popular socializing occasions include community events like church functions, festivals, concerts, and picnics. Friends also meet at neighborhood cafes to chat.

Belize's natural features enable a variety of outdoor adventure sports. Popular activities include diving or snorkeling over coral reefs, swimming in rivers and waterfalls, sailing, and hiking through the tropical jungle. When not taking advantage of their country's natural beauty, Belizeans enjoy watching television.

**Festivals:** Belizeans celebrate a series of holidays in early fall known as the "September celebrations". First, Belizeans mark Saint George's Caye Day on September 10, when they commemorate the 1798 British defeat of the last Spanish

attempt to control Belize (see *History and Myth*). On September 21, Belizeans celebrate Independence Day from Britain with music, dancing, and festivals.

Finally, Belizean Carnival takes place at the end of the month and involves parades



and a sunrise street party during which residents cover themselves in mud, chocolate syrup, flour, and paint.

While boisterous celebrations are commonplace today, Protestant Wesleyan missionaries (see *Religion and Spirituality*) instituted legal restrictions on festive gatherings in the late 19th century that lasted until the 1940s.

Easter and Christmas are central holidays for this predominantly Christian nation (see *Religion and Spirituality*). During Holy Week or the week preceding **Semana Santa** (Easter), residents throughout Central America and Belize create **alfombras** (“rugs”) in the streets. These elaborate designs made of colored sand, leaves, and salt create a colorful path for religious processions. Other Easter festivities include a cross-country bike race, parties, and concerts. Christmas celebrations are generally more subdued and focus on small family gatherings. Among the Garifuna, the “John Canoe” dance is a popular Christmas tradition in which dancers dressed as clownish slave owners knock on doors and demand small gifts of candy and alcohol.

Other holidays mark Belize’s diverse cultural heritage. Celebrated in November, Garifuna Settlement Day includes a reenactment of the arrival of the Garifuna (see *History and Myth*) along with parties with food and drink.

For the Maya, the annual celebration of patron saint San José Succotz involves traditional music as well as modern entertainment forms like carnival rides. Belizeans also celebrate Columbus Day as a day to honor indigenous peoples.



Belize has several festivals that honor the country’s bountiful natural resources. Held in early May, the Cashew Festival involves tastings, demonstrations, and indigenous performances. Also held in May, the Toledo Cacao Festival celebrates the cacao industry and features Belizean cuisine, arts, and music. The International Billfish Tournament is a fishing competition that awards a prize for the largest marlin. Finally, some 50,000 people attend the annual Agriculture and Trade Show which features folk art, a rodeo, and displays of prize livestock, among other attractions.

**Sports:** Football (soccer) is Belize’s most popular sport and pastime. Besides a national team that competes in international

competitions, Belize has a professional league of teams representing the country's largest communities.

Basketball, boxing, track, volleyball, cricket, and softball are also popular sports. While many Belizeans rely on bicycles for transportation, cycling is also a popular sport featuring 2 major road races each year. Belize competed as an independent nation for the first time in the 1984 Olympics but has not won any medals to date.



**Games:** Belizean children enjoy a variety of traditional games, many with British or African roots. The game “Jacob and Esau” is based on characters from the Bible and involves a blindfolded child hiding from another. A game with African roots is **brokakachista**, during which children hold hands in a ring while singing and dancing.

## Music and Dance

The music of Belize's various ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) involves a variety of traditional instruments. Featuring prominently in Garifuna music, drums are traditionally made of animal hides stretched over turtle shells or hollowed cedar or mahogany trunks. Maya music commonly features the **marimba** (a wooden xylophone), guitars, violins, and a variety of wooden harps. Belize's rich musical tradition reflects the country's blend of cultural influences. **Punta** is a traditional Garifuna music and dance genre characterized by call-and-response drumming and singing. *Punta* rhythms are typically fast-paced and upbeat, yet the lyrics are often dark or melancholy. Inspired by this traditional style, some contemporary Belizean musicians have created Punta Rock, a genre that combines styles popular across the Caribbean and Latin America, such as hip hop, calypso, salsa, and reggae with traditional Garifuna drums. Well-known Garifuna musicians and Punta Rock pioneers include Andy Viven Palacio and Pen Cayetano.

Other traditional music styles include **Parranda** and **Brukdown**. Similar to Punta Rock, *Parranda* incorporates Garifuna drumming styles with acoustic guitar. *Brukdown* traces its roots to 18th- and 19th-century experiences of slaves in mahogany logging camps (see *History and Myth*).

Lacking formal instruments, slaves repurposed rum bottles, animal jawbones, and other objects to create a unique percussion-based musical genre. Later, *Brukdown* musicians added accordions, banjos, and harmonicas.

Traditional Maya dances often incorporate animal masks and elaborate costumes to tell a story. Set shortly after the Spanish conquest (see *History and Myth*), the Maya Deer Dance features masked dancers – some dressed as forest animals and others as Maya or Europeans – to symbolize the traditional Maya relationship with nature.



## Literature

Over the last several decades, some Belizean writers have embraced Belize's multicultural heritage (see *History and Myth*), producing works exploring Creole history and written in Belize Kriol (see *Language and Communication*) or other varieties of Caribbean English in addition to standard English. Perhaps the best-known Belizean-born writer is Zee Edgell, the author of several award-winning novels exploring the legacy of colonialism, slavery, and the experience of women in Belizean society.

## Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Belize has a rich artistic tradition. Traditional Maya crafts include intricately woven textiles, baskets, hammocks, stone carvings, and pottery, while the Garifuna specialize in dolls and drums. Artisans in Belize's Mennonite communities create high quality wooden furniture.

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Friends and family gather frequently to enjoy leisurely meals both in the home and at cafes and restaurants. Belizean fare commonly features fresh, local ingredients.

### Dining Customs

Belizeans typically eat three daily meals. While the midday meal tends to be the most substantial for most Belizeans, dinner is traditionally the largest meal among some Maya groups (see *Political and Social*



*Relations*). In some Maya families, women eat separately from the men or have their meals after the men and guests have finished.

Friends and family often drop by unexpectedly for short, informal visits, especially during the workweek. On weekends and formal occasions, Belizeans usually arrange visits in advance. When invited to a Belizean home for a meal, guests typically arrive a few minutes late.

Once seated, hosts usually serve their guests first and encourage them to begin eating immediately. After guests finish their portions, they usually must decline several additional offers if they do not want more food. To indicate they are full, diners push their plate slightly toward the center of the table, while placing silverware neatly to the sides of the plate.

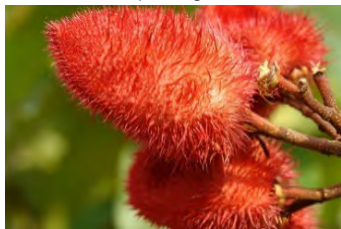
### Diet

Belizean culinary traditions reflect the nation's ethnic diversity and varied geography. Among Creoles, Garifuna, and urban **mestizos** (see *Political and Social Relations*), the most common staple is white, boiled rice, usually served with red or black beans. By contrast, corn ground into cornmeal features more prominently in the diets of rural *mestizos* and Maya.

Meanwhile, fish and other seafood comprise an important dietary component of the Garifuna and those living along the coast and rivers. Popular varieties include sea bass, red snapper, barracuda, conch (large snail), lobster, and shrimp. Belizeans living inland typically rely on chicken as their primary protein. Some rural inland residents also enjoy wild duck, iguana, deer, armadillo, peccary (a hoofed mammal resembling a pig) and **paca** or **gibnut** (a large, rabbit-like rodent).

While the **tortilla** (a round, flatbread made from cornmeal or wheat flour) is the most common bread, Belizeans across the country enjoy other types made from wheat flour, ground cassava (a tuberous starchy root), and dried breadfruit or bananas. Popular fruits and vegetables include coconuts, oranges, bananas, papayas, mangos, guava, limes, pawpaws (a yellow-green or brown fruit with sweet flesh), avocados, sweet potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, squash, and pumpkins.

Belizeans typically use an array of flavorful and fresh herbs and spices such as cilantro, basil, dill, garlic, marjoram, sage, and parsley, among others, to season most dishes. Some cooks combine multiple ingredients into thick pastes to flavor beans or meat.



For example, **black recado** combines burnt *tortillas*, vinegar, black pepper, cloves, onion, and garlic, while **red recado** is a mix of **annatto** (boiled seeds from the fruit of the

achiote tree), garlic, black pepper, onion, and vinegar. Belizeans also enjoy accenting dishes with fiery, peppery sauces. Belize's most common bottled hot sauce, the iconic Marie Sharp's brand, combines fresh habanero peppers, carrots, onions, lime juice, vinegar, and garlic.

### Popular Dishes and Meals

While breakfast varies by region, common dishes include eggs and beans paired with *tortillas*, johnny cakes (baked flour biscuits served with butter or stuffed with meat and cheese), and fry jacks (fried puff pastry served with fruit preserves). A

typical midday meal consists of boiled rice with beans served with stewed chicken or fish and coleslaw. A popular Creole meal is rice cooked in coconut milk served with beans and chicken in a thick gravy. In seaside communities, a lunch may consist of a “boil up,” a stew of freshly-caught seafood, coconut milk, boiled eggs, vegetables, and spices. Dinner is usually a lighter meal of similar dishes.

Popular dishes include **panades** (fried turnovers filled with beans, meat, or fish); **escabeche** (onion soup); **chirmole** (a thick chicken, beef, or fish stew made with a unique spice mixture that produces a dark broth); **garnaches** (fried *tortillas* served with beans, cheese, and sauce); and **tamales** (cornmeal dough filled with cheese or meats and steamed in a corn husk or banana leaf). For dessert, Belizeans enjoy fresh fruit, cakes steeped in rum, or various pastries.



## Eating Out

In urban areas, restaurants and cafes tend to be popular socializing sites. In larger communities, restaurants serving Chinese, Indian, and other international fare are popular. Though eating out is less common in rural areas, small, casual eateries dot the countryside and serve a range of inexpensive and hearty Belizean meals, light snacks, and fresh fruit.

Street stalls typically feature conch fritters (deep-fried, battered conch), shrimp burgers, and other snacks. While tipping is generally not required or expected, some upscale restaurants may automatically add a 10-15% surcharge to the bill.

## Beverages

Coffee, tea, and soda are served throughout the day. Belizeans also enjoy fresh juices from a variety of native fruits and often combine fruit juice with ice, condensed milk, coconut milk, and spices. Popular alcoholic beverages include rum and beer – the locally-brewed Belikin brand is the national favorite. Among the Garifuna, “local dynamite” (a mix of rum and coconut milk) is popular, while cashew wine is prevalent among Creoles.

## Health Overview

Improvement in Belize's overall wellbeing in recent decades is due primarily to government investment in the healthcare system. Between 1981-2023, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased dramatically from 48 to 11 deaths per 1,000 live births. Moreover, between 1990-2023, maternal mortality dropped from 54 to 36 deaths per 100,000 live births – a rate that is considerably lower than in neighboring Guatemala (95) and on par with Mexico (33). Despite these positive trends, Belizeans' life expectancy at birth remains somewhat low – 76 years in 2023, lower than in the US (81) and higher than in Mexico (73), but similar to El Salvador (76). While urban Belizeans generally have access to modern healthcare, many rural residents must rely on small, often ill-equipped and understaffed clinics that provide only basic care. Quality of care also varies significantly between private and public facilities.



## Traditional Medicine

This form of treatment consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Belizean medicine centers on the use of herbal remedies, not surgical methods, to identify and treat the basic causes of illness.

Many Belizeans routinely supplement modern therapies with traditional remedies, and some remote Maya communities may rely entirely on medicinal plants to treat diseases and other ailments. Belizeans commonly use various herbal tinctures, pastes, and oils to treat everything from skin infections to respiratory diseases. For example, the Garifuna brew medicinal **bittas**, tinctures of roots and various plants steeped in rum. Belizeans may also consult traditional healers, who perform rituals rooted in indigenous religious beliefs (see *Religion and Spirituality*) to rid the body of illness, ward off evil spirits, sickness, and misfortune, and restore spiritual wellbeing.



## Modern Healthcare System

The Belizean government provides free or low-cost medical care to all residents through a network of public hospitals and clinics. All employed Belizeans contribute to a mandatory health insurance scheme, which covers all maternal and pediatric care; the treatment of major illnesses like HIV/AIDS, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases; and healthcare in retirement. Belmopan, Belize City, and other urban areas feature public hospitals staffed by well-trained physicians, while small healthcare centers and mobile clinics provide care to rural and more remote communities.



Several challenges prevent the delivery of quality healthcare. Public medical centers tend to be understaffed, poorly maintained, ill-equipped, and primarily located in large urban areas.

High demand coupled with a lack of resources forces patients requiring critical medical care to wait for extended periods before receiving treatment. Rural areas experience chronic shortages in physicians, equipment, and medicine. In these regions, small clinics and mobile units struggle to adequately address residents' needs.

Although private urban clinics offer first-rate care, they are only available to Belizeans who can afford private health insurance or high out-of-pocket medical expenses. As Belize's population ages, rising demand for long-term geriatric care and the treatment of non-communicable diseases will likely further strain the nation's already overstretched medical resources.

## Health Challenges

As in most countries characterized by an aging population, chronic and non-communicable diseases are the leading causes of illness and death in Belize, accounting for 65% of all deaths in 2019. The top causes included cardiovascular

diseases, cancer, respiratory diseases, diabetes, and digestive diseases. Preventable “external causes” such as car accidents, suicides, and other injuries resulted in about 19% of all deaths, higher than neighboring Guatemala’s rate (16%) and significantly higher than the US rate (7%).

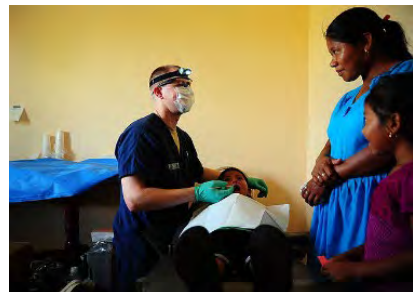
Contributing to almost 16% of all deaths, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis, malaria, and dengue fever remain a risk, especially to inhabitants of remote rural regions. Moreover, Zika, a virus transmitted by mosquitos that can cause birth defects in unborn children, has been present in Belize since 2016. Regular flooding creates standing pools of water and increases the prevalence of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and Zika.



Further, occasional but destructive tropical storms and other natural disasters lead to shortages in potable water and reduce Belizeans’ access to sanitation facilities, which in turn puts

them at greater risk of infection from parasites and bacteria.

Belize’s HIV/AIDS prevalence rate 1.3% of the population is among the region’s highest as compared to Guatemala (0.2%)



and Mexico (0.4%). The Belizean government partners with international health organizations to provide various prevention and outreach services to vulnerable populations.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, regional inhabitants engaged in agriculture and long-distance trade (see *History and Myth*). In the 17th century, British “Baymen” (see *History and Myth*) began to settle the area and harvest logwood (used to dye leather and textiles) and mahogany. When the development of synthetic dyes rendered logwood obsolete, the Baymen focused exclusively on mahogany, importing slaves from Africa to perform most labor-intensive logging activities (see *History and Myth*).

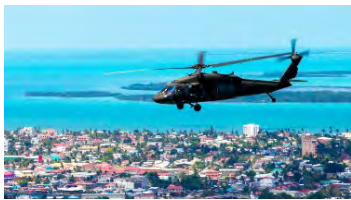
Logging remained the economic focus for decades until the region experienced prolonged depression, beginning in the 1850s, when the price of mahogany began to fall. In the 1880s, US demand for **chicle**, a component of chewing gum, somewhat reinvigorated the economy (see *History and Myth*). In the 20th century, some plantation agriculture – mostly sugar, citrus, and bananas – developed, but it was the 1960s before they surpassed wood as the country’s main exports. In 1974, Belize joined the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), an organization of 15 countries established to facilitate economic integration among its members (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Since gaining independence in 1981 (see *History and Myth*), Belize has experienced seesaw economic growth. In 1983, low commodity prices caused a record -2.1% GDP contraction. However, by the late 1980s, the economy was improving largely due to the performance of agriculture and tourism combined with investment in infrastructure. Between 1986-92, the economy grew just over 10% annually. In the 1990s, Belize’s economy faltered due to economic contraction in the US and a decrease in commodity prices. Seeking to attract foreign investment, Belize implemented the International Business Companies Act, which allowed foreign companies to



register in Belize without paying local taxes. Nevertheless, the economy continued to stagnate.

Throughout the 1990s, the government borrowed heavily, causing debt to hit a high of about 104% of GDP by 2004. In an effort to reduce this heavy debt load, the government raised taxes in 2005 in a widely unpopular move that led to rioting (see *History and Myth*). Belize's up-and-down economic performance continued throughout the 2000s, with GDP per capita alternating between slight growth and contraction between 2005-13. This economic stagnation was particularly harmful to the country's poor, with the number of people living in extreme poverty increasing by about 45% between 2002-06. In 2005, oil was discovered in western Belize, becoming a valuable export commodity. Production peaked at 5,400 barrels per day in 2008. As of 2023, Belize continues crude oil production at 0.8 thousand barrels per day.



With Central America's 4th-highest GDP per capita today, Belize is considered an upper-middle income country. Nonetheless, wealth is unequally distributed, with about 59% of rural residents in 2018 and

36% of the general population in 2023 living in poverty (compared to the Latin American average of 35.4%). The unemployment rate remains high, especially among the youth (17.4% in 2023).

Since the 1980s, Belize has transitioned from an agricultural to a service economy focused on tourism. Yet it remains dependent on foreign aid and preferential trade arrangements with the US, the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union. In 2023, Belize had a GDP growth of 4.5%.

Belize's economy is particularly vulnerable to global commodity price shocks and the effects of natural disasters (see *Political and Social Relations*). Damage caused by storms and flooding during the period 1994-2013 cost Belize on average \$71 million every year or about 4% of GDP.

Because of its location between South America and the US, Belize serves as a transshipment point for illegal drugs. The security costs of violence associated with the drug trade deter some businesses from investing in Belize, negatively impacting economic growth.

### Services

Accounting for 62% of GDP and 67% of employment in 2023, the services sector is Belize's largest economic sector and primarily comprises tourism, banking, communications, transportation, and community services. The growth of the services sector in recent years has been driven largely by the booming tourism industry.

**Tourism:** Comprising some 15% of GDP in 2021, Belize's tourism subsector is an important economic component and source of foreign currency. International arrivals reached nearly one million in 2022, a significant influx considering the population is only about 419,137. Popular sites include 127 offshore cays (islands), the Belize Barrier Reef, the longest in

the Western Hemisphere, and important Maya sites (see *History and Myth*).



### Financial Services:

Inspired by other Caribbean nations in the 1990s, Belize created an offshore financial sector that

allowed anonymous business incorporation and tax-free operations. Since then, the arrangement has proven susceptible to misuse by money launderers and tax evaders, prompting warnings that Belize is at risk of becoming a haven for drug and terrorism financing.

### Industry

Belize's small industrial sector comprised some 14% of GDP and 18% of employment in 2023. Composed mostly of light manufacturing, the sector also includes some food processing and the small oil industry.

**Manufacturing:** First emerging in the late 20th century, the manufacturing subsector has remained small and mostly focused on supplying the local market. Prominent employers include fertilizer and animal feed plants, sawmills, a wire and nail plant, and a roofing materials plant. Belize also has a sugar refinery and rum, beer, and soft drinks plants.



**Oil:** Oil made up roughly 0.9% of GDP in 2023. With its known reserves rapidly dwindling, Belize has declined efforts to grow the industry, banning offshore oil exploration and extraction in 2018 in a move to protect its unique marine environment and safeguard the tourism industry.



### Agriculture

Once the primary driver of Belize's economy, agriculture accounted for 8% of GDP and about 16% of the labor force in 2023. About 3% of the country's land is under cultivation, and while there are some large

plantations, much land under cultivation consists of **milpas**, temporary fields that are cleared from the jungle, cultivated for a few years, then allowed to lie fallow.

**Farming and Livestock:** While many residents practice subsistence farming, Belize also exports agricultural products, notably sugar (31% of exports in 2023), fruit juice (5%), and bananas (13%). Belize's farmers also raise livestock for the domestic market, such as large-scale chicken farming by members of the Mennonite community (see History *and Myth*).

**Fisheries:** Belize's Barrier Reef provides rich fishing grounds, and coastal areas support shrimp farming. Belizean fishermen are organized into cooperatives granted exclusive fishing rights. Fishermen harvested some 100,000 tons in recent years, although this count is down from about 400,000 tons in 2010 due to overfishing. Much of the catch is consumed locally, although Belize exports some of its catch – non-fillet frozen fish exports comprised 9% of exports in 2023.

**Forestry:** For much of Belize's history since the 17th century, logging was the primary economic activity. While timber and other forest products have lost their central significance, Belize still exports some mahogany, pine, cedar, rosewood, and the sapodilla tree which produces *chicle*.

### Currency

Belize uses the Belize dollar (BZ\$), issued in 6 banknotes (2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 BZ\$) and 1 coin (1 BZ\$). It subdivides into 100 cents, issued in 5 coin values (1, 5, 10, 25, 50¢). It is pegged to the US dollar at a value of \$1=BZ\$2.01.



### Foreign Trade

Belize's exports, totaling \$375 million in 2023, primarily consisted of sugar, fruit juices, bananas, frozen fish, and gold sold to the US (29%), UK (17%), Guatemala (9%) Spain (7%), Trinidad and Tobago (6%), and Honduras (6%). In the same year, Belize imported \$1.73 billion of refined petroleum, tobacco, gas, trunks and cases, and cars from the US (42%), China (17%), Mexico (10%), Guatemala (9%), and Trinidad and Tobago (2%).

### Foreign Aid

In 2022, Belize received about \$20.38 million in foreign aid. In 2022, the US provided some \$5.9 million in funding which included aid allocated through the Central America Regional Security Initiative. The Caribbean Development Bank provided average of about \$14.90 million to Belize between 2018-19 while the UK provided an average of \$7.56 million in the same time period.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Largely due to its small population, Belize has some of the region's most underdeveloped physical infrastructure. Some rural residents lack access to modern telecommunications. The government generally respects freedoms of the press and speech.

### Transportation

The most common forms of transportation are foot, bicycle, and motorcycle. Since, few Belizeans have a privately-owned vehicle, they



instead rely on taxis and so-called “dollar vans” that run on fixed routes and cost BZ\$1 per ride (see *Economics and Resources*). For intercity travel, Belizeans depend on a network of private buses linking larger towns. Services range from repurposed American school buses to luxurious air-conditioned coaches. Small commuter airlines linking Belize's larger communities and tourist areas are popular among visitors and some residents.

### Roadways

As a former logging colony (see *Economics and Technology*), Belize's transportation infrastructure traditionally focused on rivers. Today, the country still lacks an extensive road network. Of Belize's 2,000 mi of roadway, just 18% is paved – the lowest rate in the Latin American and Caribbean region. Belize's 1st paved road was the Northern Highway connecting Belize City to the Mexican border. Other major roadways include the Western Highway, connecting Belize City to Guatemala via the capital Belmopan, the Hummingbird Highway, connecting Belmopan to the coastal town of Dangriga, and the Southern Highway, connecting Dangriga to Punta Gorda in the South. Since 2012, a paved road also connects Punta Gorda to the Guatemalan border in the South.



## Ports and Waterways

Belize has 239 mi of Caribbean coastline. Belize City's Port of Belize is the country's largest and primary port. It and Placencia in the South service cruise ships. Other ports serve specialized functions, such as Big Creek Port (banana exports) and Commerce Bight Port (citrus fruit exports). Belize also has about 512 mi of inland waterways navigable by small crafts. Since Belize allows foreigners to register their ships (a practice known as "flag of convenience"), it has the world's 31st largest merchant marine fleet, consisting of 774 ships.



## Airways

Of Belize's 27 airports, 6 have paved runways. The largest airport is Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport located near Belize City and serviced by major North American and

Latin American carriers. Local airlines Maya Island Air and Tropic Air provide for inland flights.

## Energy

Belize produces about 53% of its required electricity from hydroelectric sources. The domestic sugar industry uses sugar cane husks (a waste product in sugar production) to power its operations, making the entire industry carbon neutral.

Today, experts estimate Belize has oil reserves of about 6.7 million barrels (see *Economics and Resources*). With no domestic refining capacity, Belize must export its oil to the US to be refined before reimporting the refined petroleum products.

## Media

Belize's constitution protects freedom of speech and press and the government generally respects those rights. However, some observers report incidences of government overreach. For example, in 2016, police officers removed a reporter from Belize's House of Representatives, prompting claims of censorship. Each of Belize's main political parties owns and operates a major media outlet. The center-left People's United

Party prints *The Belize Times*, while the center-right United Democratic Party publishes the *Guardian* (see *Political and Social Relations*). Outlet ownership by political parties contributes to a polarized atmosphere in the media landscape, especially when even non-affiliated outlets also fail to remain impartial. Some journalists are subject to the threat of violence from criminal gangs (see *Political and Social Relations*), causing them to self-censor.

**Print Media:** Belize has several local and national newspapers, though none publishes daily. The largest include *Amandala*, published twice weekly, and *The Belize Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Reporter*, all published weekly.



**Radio and TV:** Belize has 25 private radio stations and 8 private television stations. In many rural communities that lack electricity, battery powered radios are an important source of news and entertainment.

### Telecommunications

While Belize's telecommunications sector remains underdeveloped, the government has pursued significant investment and much of the population has access to modern telecommunications. In 2022, Belize had 4 landline and 66 mobile phones per 100 inhabitants.

**Internet:** Some 70% of Belizeans regularly used the Internet in 2022, mostly through shared access points like Internet cafes, and access rates from home remain low. In 2022, nearly 52% of the web traffic in Belize was generated via mobile phones. As of 2022, Belize had just 10 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. Nevertheless, mobile phones are quickly gaining popularity, particularly models with solar battery chargers.



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