

## My Trip to Belize and Northern Guatemala By John Chappell

For Spring Break, my family and I went to Belize and Northern Guatemala for one week. We spent two days in northern Belize, two days in Guatemala, two days in central Belize, and two days on Amergris Caye in the Carribbean.

On the first day, we arrived at Belize City via Houston, and were met by our guide Antonio and his father. They drove us to Orange Walk, where we got on a small boat. Antonio's brother, Gilberto, was our guide for the next two days. He took us on a boat trip 32 miles (1 and a half hours long) up the New River to our lodge for the next two days, Lamanai South Lodge. While there, we went on a dawn jungle walk, met with local villagers, went on a night safari on the river by boat, toured the ruins, and swatted at bugs. The lodge was near Indian Church village and Lamanai Ruins.

Then we went to Guatemala. We flew to Flores, Guatemala, and then drove to Tikal with Ray Snaddon, the owner OF Pook's Hill Lodge in Belize. He stayed with us in Guatemala, and then took us back to Belize. In Tikal, we walked the ruins and climbed the pyramids.

Then we drove back to Belize to Pook's Hill. We spent two days at Pook's Hill. We went canoeing, cave tubing, and saw the Belize Zoo. We also walked around the property which had a river, Mayan ruins, and lots of paths through the jungle.

Finally, we went to San Pedro Island by water taxi. Our condo was on the beach. We swam, snorkled, and made sand castles. Then we returned to Belize City, and then home.

In Belize and Guatemala, we met many wonderful people, including the guides. They spent a long time talking to me about their country. This paper tells some of the things that I learned in Belize.



Like many Central and South American countries, Belize and Northern Guatemala have rainforest over much of their area. The rainforest is a habitat for many flora and fauna. Some of the animals that live in the Belizean and Guatemalan rainforest are monkeys, birds, insects, reptiles, and large and small mammals.

While on my trip, I saw some of the Belizean and Guatemalan monkeys. One day when we were walking down the road from our lodge near Indian Church Village, we saw a troop of at least seven Howler Monkeys, including some very small babies that were on their mother's backs.



In Belize, the Howler Monkey is called the Baboon, although they are very different from the African Baboon. The Black Howler Monkey is approximately 2 feet tall. With the prehensile tail, it is about 3 and a half feet. They weigh about 15 pounds, and the dominant male is usually larger than the others. They live in troupes, and to mark their troupe's territory they often howl to keep other troupes away.



The howl is the loudest animal sound in the world and was used as the base for the T-Rex in the movie Jurassic Park. To howl, the monkeys fill up a throat sack with air, and then let it out. The resulting roar can be very frightening for someone who does not know what this sound is.



In addition to the Black Howler Monkeys, I saw a troop of Spider Monkeys while I was swimming in Guatemala. The spider monkeys seemed a little smaller than the Howler Monkeys, but they are generally the same size. They have long, lanky arms and legs. They were very acrobatic, and were swinging from branch to branch. We saw a baby spider monkey attempting to swing to a far away branch. It was having trouble getting over, and then we saw an adult spider monkey hold the branch closer so the baby could get across.

According to a National Geographic website about Spider Monkeys, baby spider monkeys only rely on adults until they are about 10 weeks old, so I think this spider monkey was very young. It seemed to me that they were very social.

We saw a lot of large mammals in the Belize Zoo, but none out in the wild. We saw tapirs, grisons, jaguars, jaguarundis, pumas, deer, and lots of other mammals.

Some of my favorites were the tapir, the jaguars, and the jaguarundis.





The tapir is the national mammal of Belize. It sometimes called “The Mountain Cow.” It is related to the horse and rhino, according to a sign at the Belize Zoo. It has smooth skin like a hippo, and a trunk-like nose like an elephant. At the time that we saw them, they were playing around in the water.

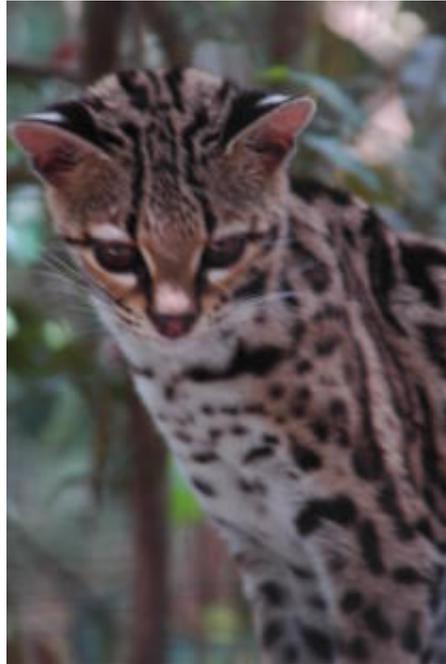


Jaguars are very elusive and mostly are not seen in the wild very often. We saw a yellow jaguar and a black jaguar. We could see the faint outline of the spots on the black jaguar. The jaguarundi is a smaller version of the jaguar, with pointed ears.

We saw some small mammals, mostly rodents, in the wild. In Belize, at Lamanai, we saw a Paca, also known as a Gibnut, running across the road at dawn. We were on a Dawn Jungle Tour. Ramon, a guide from Indian Church, told us that they are known as “The Queen’s Rat” because when the Queen of England came to Belize, she ate a Paca.

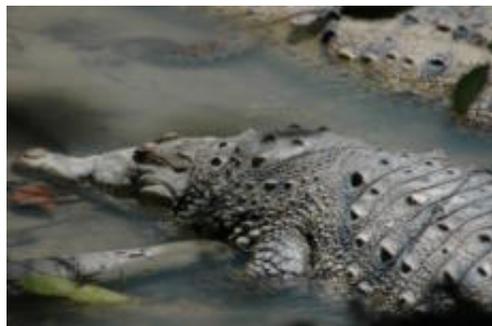


Many were lizards, but we also saw crocodiles on the New River. As we were boating on the New River at night, we saw the red eyes of crocodiles waiting near shore. We saw one crocodile up close. In Belize, there are two different kinds of crocodiles, the Morelet Crocodile and the American Crocodile. We probably saw the



We also saw a peccary at one of the villager’s houses in Indian Church. We had fun playing with it. It was small and cute, since it was young, but the white-lipped peccary is the most dangerous animal in Belize, according to Gilberto, the guide who was with us at the time.. We saw hints of what it might be like in the future. It sort of looked like it was on the prowl, and it was attacking the dog. The kind we saw was a collared peccary. It’s called a collared peccary because it looks like it has a collar around its neck. They have large teeth when fully grown, and coarse fur throughout their life.

To my brother’s delight, we saw a lot of reptiles in Belize and Guatemala.





Morelet Crocodile because the American Crocodile lives in salt water. We saw an Orange Iguana, and also a green iguana. The green iguana was swimming in the water, and climbed up on to a branch. Outside our cabana at Pook's Hill in Belize, there was a family of Jesus Christ Lizards. The male Jesus Christ Lizards have crests on their heads. All Jesus Christ Lizards run on their back on water, which is why they are called the Jesus Christ Lizard. One experience I would not want to repeat is when we were at Belize International Airport waiting for our flight to Guatemala. My brother found a small gecko that he kept playing with, and was very annoying. We saw a tiny black frog that had crawled into my seat pocket on the boat on the New River. We called

it "the Stowaway." To our surprise, there was also a tiny frog in our bathroom when we returned to our lodge at Lamanai.

Like in other South and Central American countries, in Belize and Guatemala there was an assortment of colorful birds. One of these birds was the famous, endangered Scarlet Macaw. There are only two hundred left in Belize. We saw them at the Belize Zoo



trying to crack open nuts with their large beaks. In addition to the more colorful birds, we saw an

assortment of woodpeckers, and the huge, threatened Harpy Eagle. The Eagle was at the Belize Zoo. Another bird we saw was the keel-billed toucan, the national bird of Belize, in a



banana tree. Surprisingly another colorful bird that we saw was the turkey that we saw in Tikal, Guatemala.

There were very annoying bugs everywhere, including in our beds. On the river trip, small bugs kept hitting us at about 30 miles per hour. The first night at the lodge in Lamanai South, there were hundreds, if not thousands of bugs in our room. We went to a butterfly farm in Indian Church. There were the Owl Butterfly and the Blue Morpho Butterfly. The Owl Butterfly looked like the eye of an owl. They kept landing on us and I did not like it. In the jungle, we saw a lot of leaf-cutter ant paths that we called highways. Our guide told us that the pinchers of



the leaf cutter ants are sometimes used as stitches. In Tikal, we saw an army of army ants. Thousands of army ants were swarming up the hill towards us. Our host from Pook's Hill, Ray, told us that he had woken up in the middle of the night covered in army ants. He lay still and they went over him. My mom and dad found a small scorpion in the cabana at Pook's Hill, but didn't tell us about it until we had left. They also had a huge moth flying around in their room.





Not all of Belize is jungle. It also has the second largest barrier reef in the world, so we saw a lot of marine life. This included sharks, rays, barracudas, and many other smaller fish. Some of the main fish were the blue tang and sergeant major. There were many stingrays and an occasional eagle ray. When I was wading, I almost stepped on a small spotted eagle ray. The largest ray we saw was around five feet in diameter.

Our guide was touching them a lot. Another interesting creature that we saw was the nurse shark. Our guide was touching them, as well. There were some large fish like the barracuda and many different kinds of groupers. We also saw an octopus home.



Since we were in the rainforest, of course there were lots of plants. The flora in Belize and Guatemala is very beautiful, but also very useful.

The flowers included orchids, bromeliads, and hibiscus. The orchids and bromeliads are parasites, and just hang in the



trees. The Black Orchid is the national flower in Belize.

Many spices come from the rainforest in Belize. Peppercorns and Allspice both came from trees in Belize. The rubber tree is also found in Belize. There's also a tree that produces a glue-like substance inside its leaves. Ramon, the guide from Indian Church, told us that when he was a child, he

and his friends would use this substance as glue for school.

The bay leave palm is used to make the thatched roofs on huts. It can only be harvested 5 days before and 5 days after the full moon. The reason for this limited time frame is because there is less moisture in the leaves at that time, and bugs won't eat the thatching once it is dried out.



We saw many huge trees, like the guanacaste, which has been used to make dugout canoes because it was large and soft. Gilberto told us the story of when Christopher Columbus encountered some Mayan Indians in a dug out canoe that was 38 feet long by 12 feet wide. There were 28 Mayans with trading goods, such as honey, salt, cotton, aquatic animals, and rock. They had used a guanacaste tree to make the canoe.



The strangler fig vine seemed to strangle the guanacaste tree a lot. There are over 7000 species of vines in Belize.

Lots plants are used for medicine. Our guide, Gilberto, told us that the possible cure to cancer is in the rainforest. He showed us an orange moss-like substance growing on a tree. Ruben told us that his mother is the village midwife and she using herbs and plants from the rainforest to heal people. He said that the small village doctors are called bush doctors. They are like shaman. We bought a book about the different medicinal uses of the plants in Belize's rainforest.

The flora and fauna in Belize was very extensive. I learned that a lot of resources came from the rainforest, and many, many animals make their homes there.

### Mayan History

Belize and Guatemala both have histories that are rich in Mayan tradition. There are many ruins in both countries. We visited Lamanai in Belize, then Tikal in Guatemala, then Pook's Hill in Belize.

The ruins help to tell the story of the Mayans who once lived there. They built temples and monuments for many different reasons, including as monuments to kings. On some of the temples that we saw, there was a monument to the king. On each level of the pyramid, there was a carved face of the king.



One of them that we saw was in the Olmec style, so the Maya and Olmec probably intermarried. When a king died, the temple was buried and the temple for the new king was built over it. So when archaeologists excavate the temples, they can see the different layers and learn more about the kings. Another tradition when the king died was to break all the pottery and scatter it all over. Then they would make new pottery. This is also helpful for archaeologists in piecing together the history.



Another interesting thing at the temples were the stellas. The stellas were the stones where people were sacrificed. We saw them at Tikal and Lamanai. On the ground, there was a stone where the person was sacrificed, and a carving of that the person. On another upright stone next to it, there was a carving of the person who did the sacrificing, usually a priest or king. The king's carvings were very details and showed details such as the headdress and jewelry. The headdresses were sometimes 20 pounds and the jewelry 5 pounds. The stellas were always life size, but still pretty small because the Mayans were 3-5 feet tall.

The steps of the Mayan pyramids are about two feet tall each. The Mayans made their enemies run up and down the pyramids so they would fall and be humiliated. The Mayans believed this put their enemies in their place. We had a really hard time climbing up the

pyramids. On one in Lamanai, we had to use a rope to rapel up.

A lot of the pyramids went above the rain forest canopy. The view was incredible, but the climb up and down was scary. Our guide, Gilberto, told us that it was all a state of mind. We just took one step at a time.

Lamanai is one of the few ruins where the Mayan name is known. It used to be called Lamanayin, which means "submerged crocodile" in Mayan. The person who discovered called it Lamanai, which means, "submerged bug." It was permanently settled in 1,500 B.C. They ate a lot of marine foods such as fish and snails. There were still a couple of Mayan families living there when they began excavating the ruins. They relocated all of the people to Indian Church.

One important site we saw in Tikal contained the temples of an important king and queen. These two pyramids are the main pyramids at Tikal. The king's name means "chocolate" and the queen's name



means “parrot.” There were a lot of stellas in that area.



The Spanish came to Belize in the late 1400s. They built many churches in the places of Mayan temples. The Mayans then destroyed the churches and the Spanish rebuilt them. The Spanish mistook the Mayans for the Aztecs, and tried to take their non-existent gold. The Spanish left, and the British came in search of logwood, a special wood that made the color purple. Then they found out about mahogany and started cutting that down.

In time they started harvesting sugar cane.

All

the British buildings in Belize are made of bricks. There were three different kinds of bricks that were used during different time periods. We went to the ruins of a mill, which had red bricks.



### Food, Language and Culture

There are currently over 287,730 people living in Belize. Different cultural groups include the Mestizo, the Creole (Kriol), Mayan, and Garifuna. Almost everyone in Belize speaks English because it is a former British colony and because there are so many American tourists. Everywhere we went, with the exception of Indian Church and Guatemala, we could speak English.

For the first couple of days, we were in a Mestizo village called Indian Church. The Mestizo are a mix of Spanish and Mayan.

We ate our meals at a “restaurant” called “Las Orquideas” (the orchids) which was run by a women’s cooperative group. There were only four inside tables. They had ours set with a tablecloth, cloth napkins, candles and flowers. We sat there for every meal. It is a really small village, but it has generators. One time when the generator went out, we ate by flashlight and candlelight. The food was traditional Mestizo food. They shared their dinner with us. We didn’t get a choice of what we ate, but it was really good. It usually had beans and rice. It had some sort of meat, usually chicken, and vegetables. We also had fried banana one night. We always had juice. They grew all their own food. We felt like everything was special for us. They told us that 6 women and their families were working for feed us.



When it came out, it was masa. Then they added to lard and salt and kneaded the mixture. They took a handful of masa and flattened it onto a banana leaf. Then they put chicken and a sauce called aoli sauce (made from tomato, onion and spices). Our guide, Gilberto, told us that the sauce was traditionally used to paint Mayan buildings red. Then they folded the masa like a burrito, wrapped it in another banana leaf, and then steamed it over boiling water for an hour. We ate it for dinner, and it was delicious!

The Mestizo usually speak Spanish, and the older people speak one of the Mayan languages such as Yucatec. Antonio, the guide who picked up at the airport, brought his father, who spoke a little Spanish, no English, and

A couple of the women showed us how to make traditional tamales. In my opinion, they were better than Mexican tamales because they were moister. They started by boiling corn. It is easier to grind when it is boiled. Then they grounded the corn, either with a grinding stone or in the mill. They added water while grinding.



mostly Mayan. In the village of Indian Church, 75% of the people spoke Spanish and only 25% spoke English. One of our drivers also spoke Mayan. An easy phrase in Mayan is (spelled phonetically) *Kim sayem*, which means “come here.” Other Mayan dialects are Kekchi and Mopan.

The rest of Belize is either Creole, Garifuna, or “other.” The Creole are pretty much a mix of everything. They speak Creole and Spanish. A lot of Creole live near Belize City. A good friend of our family, Emmy, who used to be our nanny, used to live near Belize City. She was Creole, and spoke Creole, Spanish and English. 24.9% of the population is Creole. 6.1% of the population is Garifuna. The Garifuna speak the language Garifuna and are descended from African slaves that were brought to the Caribbean by the British. They live primarily on the islands, or cayes.

In Guatemala, only the guides and hotel staff spoke English. Our Tikal guide, Mario, told us that Guatemala means “land of friends.”

### Government and Economy

Belize is independent now, but was under the control of the British up until 1981 when there was a... Guatemala still claims some of Belize, and Guatemala refused to acknowledge the independence of Belize in 1992. The current government is run by a parliamentary democracy. The prime minister is Said Wilbert Musa.

The currency in Belize is the Belizean dollar. While we were there, the exchange rate was about 2 Belizean Dollars to 1 U.S. Dollar. The currency in Guatemala is the Quetzal, named after the Mayan Quetzal bird that was used as money and as a popular trading item in Mayan times. The rate was 7 Quetzals to 1 U.S. Dollar. Pretty much everywhere that we went, the U.S. Dollar was accepted.

The main source of income in Belize is tourism. There is a lot to do in Belize, While we were in the airport and the island, we saw many large groups of travelers from the United States and Canada, and the occasional European. When we were in the more rural areas, we didn't see very many other Americans. Many tour boats came from the cruise ships three times a week to Lamanai, but they only stay for an hour. There are also many jungle tours, including trips to the Mayan ruins. Even when we were on the island, we saw many tour groups going to the main land for jungle tours.



Another big source of income is agriculture, including sugar, rum, citrus and bananas.. There are over 6,000 tons of sugar processed every day. We saw hundreds of sugar cane trucks lined up for the sugar cane to get processed. Sugar has been processed in Belize since the times of the British. We saw an old British sugar mill near the ruins of Lamanai.

Rum and its byproduct molasses are also produced in Belize. We saw a large barge full of Molasses that was going to Orange Walk from Belize City. It takes 3 days for the barge to make the trip.



#### Conclusion

I had an awesome time in Belize. Every place that we went to was so unique and amazing that I can't think of what would be my favorite place. The highlights were the river trips (including the trip to Indian Church, the water tubing, and the canoeing), the ruins at Tikal and Lamanai, and snorkeling near San Pedro. I highly recommend Belize for anyone with a taste for adventure.

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