

## BELIZE & Tikal, Guatemala

### Ruins, Reefs & Rainforests

**13 days**

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#### **Day 1 Arrival in Belize City - Transfer to Crooked Tree**

Today we arrive in Belize City, the largest city in Belize, and transfer to the Bird's Eye View Lodge at the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. The balance of the day is at leisure.

Overnight in Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### **Day 2 Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary: Lamanai & Orange Walk Sugar Cane Factory**

Today we depart on a full day excursion. We first drive for an hour until we reach the wharf where we board our boat and take the half-hour water transfer to Lamanai – an impressive archeological site and the only one to retain its original Mayan name – which is surrounded by an area of Belize that bird watchers will love. Here, there are a wide variety of exotic birds, plus howler monkeys and iguanas can be spotted. The Maya Archaeological Site at Lamanai contains pyramids, open-air plazas, a ball court, and other remnants of an ancient Maya civilization, including the three large temples, each with its own unique carvings and decorations. We will have our lunch in a local restaurant, explore the Maya ruins for a couple of hours, then take some time for bird watching before heading back to our hotel.

On our return to the lodge we will stop at the town of Orange Walk, known throughout the country as “Sugah City”. As one can guess, sugarcane is vital to the economy of this town of approximately 14,000 inhabitants. Other important economic industries include, naturally, rum produced from the sugarcane and for the raising of cattle. Appropriately, we will have a walking tour of Orange Walk and a visit to one of the region's main export products; a Sugar Cane Factory. Afterwards, we will return to our resort for the evening.

Overnight in Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

#### **Day 3 Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary: Lagoon Birding Tour**

This morning after breakfast at the lodge, we depart on a full day lagoon birding tour to explore the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary and to visit the Crooked Tree community, which hosts a Cashew Festival in May, featuring many products made from the nut. We explore several trails around the village of Crooked Tree to view the startling variety of fowls and waders, including the Jabiru Stork, black-collared hawk, pygmy kingfisher, rufous-tailed jacamars, various egrets, and stork, to name but a few. And, if very lucky, visitors may also see the elusive agami heron.

After lunch we visit the Western Causeway, and walk through the north end of the Crooked Tree Community to observe local life. Established in 1984, Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary is one of Central America's premier bird-watching regions. Built on a network of lagoons, swamps, and estuaries, the sanctuary is home to thousands of native and migratory birds. After our tour, we return to our hotel.

Overnight in Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

#### **Day 4 Crooked Tree - Altun Ha - Great Blue Hole - South Water Caye**

Today we depart Crooked Tree for Altun Ha, an ancient Mayan city that once covered 3 square miles and housed up to 10,000 people. Located about 50 kilometres (31 miles) north of Belize City, the central area contains more than 500 structures, mostly built during the Maya Classic era 200 to 900 AD. Divided into two main clusters, Plaza A and Plaza B, each site has its own special attractions. Plaza A features the

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mysterious Temple of the Green Tomb, where jade, jewelry, flints, and other artifacts were found. Plaza B is home to the biggest structure on the site, the Temple of Masonry Altar, which rises more than 60 feet (18 meters) above the plaza. Thought to be the main religious center of the civilization, the temple houses the famous head of Kinich Ahau: a 10-pound (5-kilogram) jade stone carved into the head of the Mayan sun god; this national treasure is depicted on the local currency.

After touring Altun Ha we travel along the Hummingbird Highway towards Dangriga, making a stop at St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park. Here we see the inland blue hole, or Cenote, that gives the national park its name. We make a 30 minute stop here, and those who don't want to go for a swim have time to walk the trails and enjoy some of the over 200 species of birds, and other flora and fauna, that call this park their home.

Afterwards we continue to Dangriga, where we leave our bus and board our boat to transfer to South Water Caye. On our arrival on South Water Caye we transfer to the IZE Ecological Research Station and check into our accommodation. Dinner is served at the station.

Overnight in South Water Caye.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### Day 5 South Water Caye: Reef Excursion

Today after breakfast we gather for a full-day excursion of water-based activities with a break at the resort for lunch. We can drift snorkel and kayak the South Water Caye Reserve, and visit the Smithsonian's Research Station on Carrie Bow Caye. Belize is well known for having the second largest living barrier reef in the world with approximately 300 kilometres (185 miles) of coral formations of marine life. The area around South Water Caye offers unique snorkeling opportunities for both beginners and the experienced. With visibility ranging from 20 to 30 metres (60 to 100ft), spotting eagle rays, sea turtles, exotic fish, and even dolphins can frequently be seen! ore Reef is a colourful, healthy spur and groove coral formation on the barrier reef, where we might spot eagle rays, turtles, tarpon & groupers. We also have a guided tour of the Smithsonian Marine Research Station on Carrie Bow Caye.

We then head back to our accommodation, disembark and have free time before dinner. Dinner is served at the station.

Overnight in South Water Caye.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### Day 6 South Water Caye: Reef Excursion

Today after breakfast we embark on a second full day of water-based activities. Depending on our guide or local conditions, we may visit any combination of the following: the Twin Cayes - for a mangrove snorkel to see seahorses, upside-down photosynthesizing jellyfish and possibly, the gentle giant Manatee! Or the Whale Shoal - a picture perfect patch reef with triggerfish, rock beauties, Creole wrasses, parrotfish and an assortment of angelfish. The coral gardens are also teeming with sea fans, large brain coral formations to stag horn coral! Or the Grand Channel - aptly named, the largest and deepest channel of all 8 channels in southern Belize and is truly grand. It features a long sandy bottom rife with basking rays; both southern and Caribbean. Your tour leader will determine the best options for the day based on previous sightings, weather, and other mitigating circumstances.

After our day's activities, we return to our accommodation, disembark, and have free time before dinner. This evening we gather in the hotel foyer and depart for our Garifuna Culture Night dinner and show, with drumming, dancing, songs, a bonfire, and traditional food. After our feast, we return to the hotel.

Overnight in South Water Caye.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### Day 7 South Water Caye - Dangriga - Mayan Museum - Bocawina - Chaa Creek

After an early breakfast at our accommodation we will transfer to the wharf and take the boat back to Dangriga on the mainland. Here we

meet and board our bus and depart Dangriga for our overnight destination of Chaa Creek. En route we stop at The Maya Center Mayan Museum, a culturally interactive museum that entertains and teaches real Maya culture. Here we spend a couple of hours watching hands-on demonstrations of Mayan tortilla making, a cultural dance experience, coffee preparation and chocolate making. We tour the farm, then try our hands at making chocolate.

We will break for lunch at the Bocawina Rainforest Lodge, afterwards making our way to start a half-day 3-hour nature/waterfall hike through the Mayflower and Bocawina National Park. Listen as the guide unlocks the secrets of this mystical and magical jungle habitat. We walk the undulating trail from Bocawina Lodge to the foot of Bocawina Falls where we take a refreshing swim and relax in the pools below. We then return to Bocawina Lodge, rejoin our vehicle, and depart for our overnight stop at Chaa Creek, located close to San Ignacio.

Overnight in Chaa Creek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### Day 8 San Ignacio/Chaa Creek: Excursion to Xunantunich & Cahal Pech

After breakfast, we depart on a tour of Xunantunich & Cahal Pech, the finest Maya Ruins in Belize. The drive through the western villages is a cultural experience in itself, with first hand views of colorful homes, schools and market-places. We then reach the Mopan River, which we cross on one of the country's last two-hand-cranked river ferries. On the other side lies the ancient Maya temple of Xunantunich ('Maiden of the Rock') the tallest part of the ruins is the pyramid which stands at 40 metres (130 feet high) which makes it the second tallest Maya ruin in Belize. From the top we are rewarded with panoramic view of San Ignacio, nearby towns across the border in Guatemala, and the River Mopan below. This site has been largely excavated and has a well-appointed educational museum (Information Center). In July 2016, archaeologists working Xunantunich discovered an ancient tomb under one of the smaller ruins. It contains the skeletal remains of what is believed to have been a Mayan leader- based on the construction of the tomb itself. The figure has the features of a young man, thought to be in his 20's or 30's and laid to rest along with a number of other interesting items or value and importance including what experts believe may even be either a jaguar or a deer. This new discovery exposes one of the largest burial sites in the area and adds significant historical value and importance to one of Belize's most popular Maya Cities.

After lunch in a local restaurant, we drive to our second stop on today's Maya history tour - the ruins of Cahal Pech ('Place of the Ticks'). Cahal Pech Maya is just a few minutes' drive from downtown San Ignacio. Although smaller in size than the other popular ruins in Belize, the site's religious significance is vital to our understanding of the story of the ancient Maya. Among the objects discovered are carvings made from Conch shells, molded female figurines, pottery made with jade and obsidian (thought to be imported from Guatemala) and other items used for sacrificial purposes. Also of interest are the two Ball Courts at Cahal Pech, which according to the writings of the 'Popol Vuh' (the sacred "bible" of the Maya), the game is believed to have been a ritual where victims to be sacrificed were first "defeated" by their captors. After our tour we return to the hotel.

Overnight in Chaa Creek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### Day 9 San Ignacio/Chaa Creek: Chaa Creek Property & San Ignacio

Located on the grounds of the Chaa Creek Resort is the Blue Morpho Butterfly Exhibit, the Natural History Center, Botanical Gardens, a small artifact museum, and the Belize Nature Reserve. Learn more about the life cycle of the beautiful Blue Morpho, immerse yourself in the history and geography of Belize, and take a walk on several of the nature trails located on site.

Afterwards a shuttle bus will be available to take you to the center of San Ignacio where you can enjoy lunch on your own in one of many cafés and restaurants, followed by an afternoon of independent exploration. The shuttle will return to the hotel at the end of the afternoon.

Overnight in Chaa Creek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 San Ignacio/Chaa Creek: Caracol Excursion

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Today after breakfast we depart on a full day tour to visit the dramatic Caracol ('Three Water Hill').

Located deep within the Chiquibul Forest Reserve, a two-hour drive from our accommodation, Caracol is the largest known Maya site in Belize and one of the biggest in the Mayan world. Caracol was a Classic Period urban center spread out over 90 square km (55 square miles) with an estimated population of 180,000 people. Caracol's enormous central core area covered 25 square km (15 square miles) and was linked together by more than 32 kilometres (20 miles) of "sacbeobs" (causeways) that radiated outward from its epicenter. The 'Caana Temple' (Sky Place) rises 42 meters (138 feet) above plaza level and to this day is the largest man-made structure in Belize. Over 70 formal tombs have been excavated and many hieroglyphic texts have been found on stelea, altars, and ball court markers, capstones and wall facades. Ocellated Turkeys are one of the many wildlife species that you will find in this area. This region is also known as an excellent location for birding. We carry a picnic lunch and our guide will find the perfect and picturesque spot in the shade to enjoy. After our excursion we return to our hotel. Dinner is served at the lodge.

Overnight in Chaa Creek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### Day 11 San Ignacio/Chaa Creek - Flores, Guatemala

Today we depart Chaa Creek, Belize, to drive to the border with Guatemala. After passing through border procedures we will then drive to Flores.

Flores is a charming colonial town of 14,000 people that is primarily located on an island on Lake Peten Itza that is now connected to the mainland by a causeway. It is the regional capital of the landlocked northern region in Guatemala of El Peten. Historically speaking, the last independent state of the Maya held out here until the end of the 17th century. Survivors of the assault by Spanish forces fled to the nearby jungle and the Spanish constructed a colonial town on the ashes of the former settlement.

After our arrival into Flores we will check in to our hotel and have dinner.

Overnight in Flores.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Flores: Excursion To Tikal

This morning we embark on full day tour of Tikal possibly the most magnificent of all Mayan sites. Here we discover ancient temples, pyramids and stone structures dating from 500 BCE. The five great pyramids of Tikal give this ceremonial center a majestic grandeur unique among Maya cities. The height of the temples, crowned with tremendous roof combs; the complicated assemblage of the palace structures of the Central Acropolis; and the complexity of the chronology of the North Acropolis are staggering to anyone visiting Tikal for the first time. In ancient times Tikal functioned mainly as a ceremonial center in which the aristocratic elite and their priests ruled, dictated, and directed the activities of the architects, builders, craftsmen, and labourers. All endeavours in the region of Tikal were directed to enhance the city, to glorify the gods, to amass wealth, and to acquire tribute for the ruling upper strata of society. To sustain this activity for over a thousand years demanded a well-disciplined peasantry. We spend the entire day, with a break for lunch, exploring these dramatic ruins. After our tour we return to the hotel. Dinner is served at the hotel.

Overnight in Flores.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Departure from Flores

Today you transfer to Flores airport for your departure flight.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast