

The Best of Belize

Belize proves the cliché that big things come in small packages. This tiny Central American country has the longest continuous barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere; the largest known classic Mayan city, Caracol; and the highest concentration per square mile of the largest new-world cat, the jaguar. It also has one of the most extensive and easily accessible cave systems for amateur and experienced spelunkers alike, as well as a nearly endless supply of some of the world's best snorkeling and scuba-diving opportunities. Depending on your personal preferences, you can choose to stay in an intimate and luxurious hotel, an isolated nature lodge in the heart of the Mundo Maya, or a tent on your own desert island. Or you can sample all three. The best part about all these world-class places and experiences is that Belize's compact size makes it easy to sample a wide range of them in a short period of time. The lists below should help you zero in on a few personal bests of your own.

1 The Best Purely Belizean Experiences

- **Spending the Night in a Mayan Ceremonial City:** An intimate and rather luxurious nature lodge, **Chan Chich Lodge** (☎ 800/343-8009 in the U.S., or 223-4419 in Belize; www.chanchich.com) is built right on the site of a minor Mayan ceremonial city. The hills just outside your private cabin are unexcavated residences and pyramids. Ruins and basic excavations dot the grounds, and the surrounding rainforests are rich in bird and animal life. See p. 118.
- **Drinking a Cool Seaweed Shake:** Made from dried natural seaweed, blended with both condensed and evaporated milk, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, and some ice, this drink is surprisingly refreshing and tasty. You can get these drinks at several beach destinations around Belize, but Placencia seems to be the home of the seaweed shake. See "Placencia" in chapter 8.
- **Betting on a Chicken Drop:** A chicken drop is a sort of poor man's version of roulette, and much more fun. Numbers are painted on a grid and bets are placed. Then, a chicken is set loose on a wire mesh screen suspended over the grid. The winner is chosen by the chicken's first "drop." In addition to any monetary winnings, the "winner" often must clean the grid. You'll find a chicken drop held every night at the Pier Lounge on Ambergris Caye. See "Ambergris Caye" in chapter 7.
- **Staying with a Mayan or Garífuna Family:** It certainly isn't going to be like a night at the Four Seasons, but if you're looking for a real cultural exchange experience, you should consider actually staying with a traditional

Mayan or Garífuna Family. The **Toledo Ecotourism Association** (☎ 722-2096; ttea@btl.net) can

organize this for you. See “Punta Gorda & the Toledo District” in chapter 8.

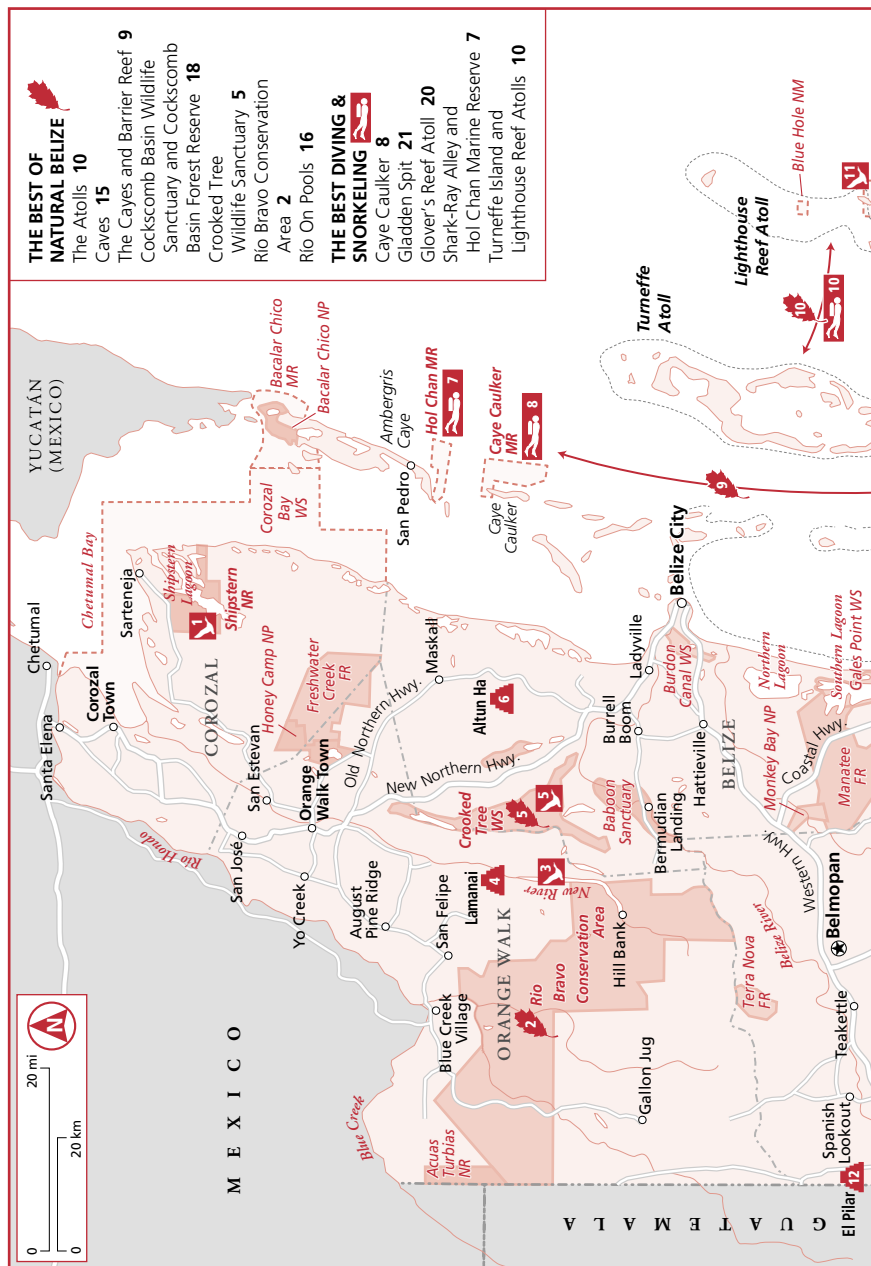
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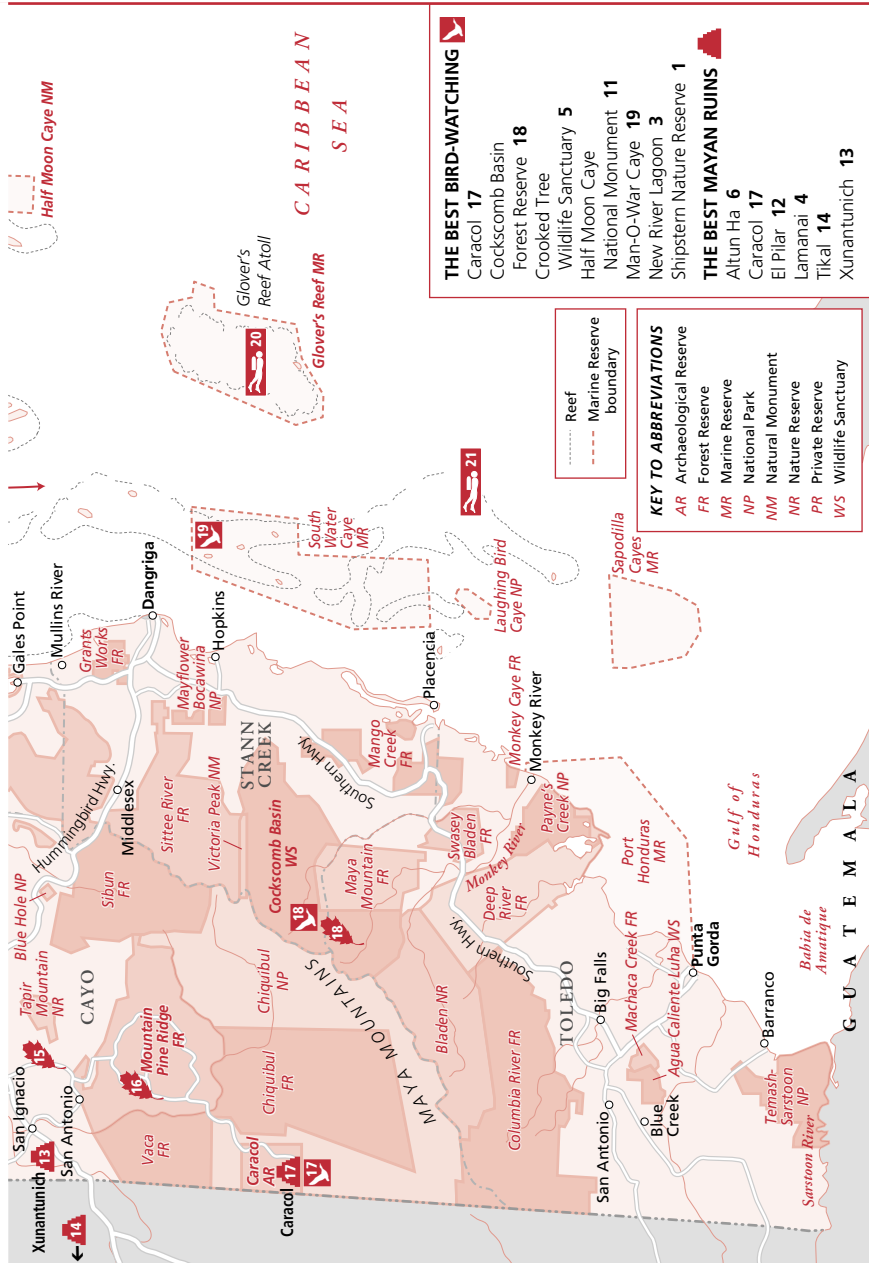
- **Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary** (Northern Belize): This preserve is a swampy lowland that is home to over 250 resident species of birds and serves as a resting spot for scores of migratory species. It is also the principal nesting site of the endangered jabiru stork, the largest bird in the Americas. The sanctuary is an excellent place to spot other wildlife as well, including crocodiles, iguanas, coati-mundi, and howler monkeys. The best way to explore Crooked Tree is by paddling around the network of lagoons in a dugout canoe. See “En Route North: Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary” in chapter 6.
- **Río Bravo Conservation Area** (Northern Belize): This massive mixed tract of virgin forest, sustainable-yield managed forest, and recovering reforestation areas is home to nearly 400 bird species and over 200 species of tropical trees. It also supports a healthy population of most of the new-world cat species, and is one of the best areas in the Americas to try your luck in spotting a jaguar. The Río Bravo Conservation Area is also home to La Milpa, an ongoing excavation of a major Mayan ceremonial city. See “Going West: Río Bravo Conservation Area, La Milpa & Chan Chich” in chapter 6.
- **The Cayes & Barrier Reef:** Running the entire length of the country's coastline, the Belize Barrier Reef is the second longest continuous barrier reef in the world. Here you will find some of the best snorkeling opportunities and scuba-diving sites in the world. Moreover, the barrier reef is

lined with hundreds and hundreds of small islands, or cayes. Most are uninhabited. These cayes range in size from tiny patches of sand or mangrove smaller than a football field to the larger and more developed vacation destination islands of Caye Caulker and Ambergris Caye. Whether you want the hustle and bustle of the latter, the deserted isle feel of a smaller or even private cay, or something in between, your choices are many and uniformly inviting. See chapters 7 and 8.

- **The Atolls:** Belize's three mid-ocean atolls are arguably more spectacular than the barrier reef and its many cayes. Unique formations of small islands and reef surrounding a mid-ocean saltwater lagoon, atolls are a unique, isolated, and stunning phenomena. Belize has three of them: Turneffe Island, Lighthouse Reef, and Glover's Reef. These atolls are very sparsely developed, and any visit here will be imbued with a sense of adventure, isolation, and romance. See “The Outer Atolls” in chapter 7 and “Dangriga” in chapter 8.
- **Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary & Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve** (Southern Belize): This is a huge protected area comprised of rugged forested mountains. The sanctuary was designed to protect and help researchers study the largest new-world cat, the jaguar. The park is also home to Belize's other four wild-cat species, as well as Baird's tapirs, coati-mundis, tayra, kinkajous, deer, peccaries, anteaters, and armadillos, as well as some 300 species of birds. Inside the park you'll also find Victoria

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Peak, the country's highest mountain. See "Dangriga" in chapter 8.

- **Caves** (Cayo District and Western Belize): Belize has an extensive network of caves, which were considered by the ancient Maya to be a mystical portal between the world of the living and the underworld of spirits and the dead. They called this mystical realm Xibalba. In almost every explored cave in Belize, some evidence of use by the Mayans has been uncovered. Fire pits, campsites, burial mounds, and ritual altars have all been found. Numerous pieces of pottery and abundant skeletons, bones, and artifacts have also been encountered. These caves are relatively easily accessible

and you should not leave Belize without at least one foray into Xibalba. See chapter 9.

- **Río On Pools** (Cayo District and Western Belize): This series of flowing falls and pools is somewhat reminiscent of Ocho Rios in Jamaica. While the views and swimming are fine at the base of the falls, it's worth the hike upstream to even better views and numerous pools flowing between big rocks, which are perfect for sunbathing. This place can get crowded on weekends, when locals come for family picnics and getaways. See "Mountain Pine Ridge & Caracol" in chapter 9.

3 The Best Diving & Snorkeling

Belize is rightly considered one of the top scuba-diving and snorkeling destinations on the planet. The Belize Barrier Reef, second only to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, runs the length of its coastline, and the country has three open-ocean atolls. Diving and snorkeling are superb all along the barrier reef; the following are just a few of the truly standout sites and dives.

- **Shark-Ray Alley & Hol Chan Marine Reserve** (Northern Cayes and Atolls): These two very popular snorkeling sites are threatened with overcrowding but still live up to their billing. Shark-Ray Alley guarantees a very close encounter with schools of large stingrays and nurse sharks. The experience provides a substantial adrenaline rush for all but the most nonchalant and veteran divers. Hol Chan Marine Reserve is an excellent snorkeling destination comprised of a narrow channel cutting through a rich and well-maintained shallow coral reef. See "Ambergris Caye" in chapter 7.

- **Caye Caulker** (Northern Cayes and Atolls): If you're looking for a relaxed vacation spot to serve as a base for some good snorkeling, you can't do much better than Caye Caulker, which has some excellent and easily accessible snorkeling sites. It's also much less developed and less crowded than its more popular neighbor, Ambergris Caye. Many of the dive sites are a very short boat ride from shore. Since the distance to the dive sites is so short, Caye Caulker is also a good place to hook up with a local sailboat captain who can take you out to the sites. See "Caye Caulker" in chapter 7.

- **Turneffe Island & Lighthouse Reef Atolls** (Northern Cayes and Atolls): For many divers coming to Belize, these spots are the Holy Grail, and justifiably so. Both of these mid-ocean atoll formations feature nearly endless opportunities for world-class wall, drift, and coral garden diving. As a cherry to top this cake, this is also where you'll find the Blue Hole.

A host of dive operators all across Belize offer day trips to dive these sites, although these usually involve a 2- to 3-hour ride each way. Alternatively, you can stay at one of the very few lodges out here, or take a vacation on a live-aboard dive boat. See “The Outer Atolls” in chapter 7.

- **Glover’s Reef Atoll** (Southern Belize): Glover’s Reef is the third of Belize’s mid-ocean atolls. The diving here is spectacular and underexploited. Unlike the Turneffe Island and Light-house Reef atolls, far fewer day-trippers visit the dive sites around Glover’s Reef Atoll. The best way to really take advantage of the diving and snorkeling is to stay out here, and for this, **Glover’s Atoll Resort** (☎ 520-5016; www.glovers.com.bz)

is your best option. See “Dangriga” in chapter 8.

- **Gladden Spit** (Southern Belize): More or less due east of Placencia, Gladden Spit is a world-renowned spot for diving with massive whale sharks. This mid-ocean site is the natural spawning ground for a variety of marine species. Whale sharks come regularly to feed on the energetically rich and very plentiful reproductive effluence. Whale-shark sightings are fairly common here in March, April, and May, and to a lesser extent from August to October and December and January. Since they tend to feed and cruise close to the surface, snorkelers and divers alike can enjoy the spectacle. See “Placencia” in chapter 8.

4 The Best Nondiving Adventures

- **Chartering a Sailboat for Some Isolated Island Explorations:** The protected waters, steady gentle trade winds, and hundreds of isolated islands and anchorages make Belize an ideal place for bareboat charters. Given the shallow draft, increased interior space, and reduced drag, a multihull is your best bet. Both the **Moorings** (☎ 888/952-8401 in the U.S. and Canada, or 523-3351; www.moorings.com) and **TMM** (☎ 800/633-0155 in the U.S., or 226-3026; www.sailtmm.com) are two large-scale charter companies with operations on Ambergris Caye and in Placencia. See “Ambergris Caye” in chapter 7 and “Placencia” in chapter 8.
- **Fly-Fishing for Bonefish, Permit & Tarpon on the Outer Atoll Flats:** Belize is a world-class fishing destination, and while offshore fishing for bigger game is possible, the real draw here is fly-fishing for feisty and world-record size bonefish, permit, and tarpon (actually, the tarpon get as

big as most deep-sea game). **Turneffe Flats** (☎ 888/512-8812 in the U.S.; www.tfflats.com) is an excellent fishing operation located on Turneffe Island Atoll. See “The Outer Atolls” in chapter 7.

- **Kayaking & Camping around Glover’s Reef Atoll:** The relatively calm protected waters of the atoll and manageable distances between islands make this a perfect place to explore under your own power, paddling a one- or two-person sea kayak. Both **Island Expeditions** (☎ 800/667-1630 or 604/452-3212 in the U.S.; www.islandexpeditions.com) and **Slickrock Adventures** (☎ 800/390-5715 or 435/259-4225 in the U.S.; www.slickrock.com) run various adventurous multiday kayak tours to small camps and lodges on private isolated cayes of Glover’s Reef Atoll. See “Dangriga” in chapter 8.
- **Riding an Inner Tube through the Caves Branch River Cave System** (Cayo District and Western Belize):

This is certainly the most popular and probably the easiest way to explore Belize's vast network of caves. You strap on a battery-powered headlamp, climb into the center of an inflated car inner tube, and gently float through a series of limestone caves, your headlamp illuminating the stalactites and the occasional bat. The entire sensation is eerie and slightly claustrophobic, but fun nonetheless—especially if you go with a small group on a day when the caves are not crowded. See “Belmopan” in chapter 9.

- **Canoeing, Kayaking, or Inner Tubing on the Macal or Mopan Rivers** (Western Belize): These two rivers converge around the city of San Ignacio, in the Cayo District. Upstream from town on either river are ample opportunities for paddling

or floating. Depending on the water level and the section you choose, this can range from a lazy canoe or inner tube paddle to a Class III kayak trip over rushing rapids. Any of the hotels in the Cayo District can help you organize one of these adventures. See “San Ignacio” in chapter 9.

- **Horseback Riding through the Cayo District** (Western Belize): The Cayo District is a perfect area to explore on horseback. Rides can be combined with visits to jungle waterfalls and swimming holes, as well as nearby Mayan ruins. **Mountain Equestrian Trails** (☎ 820-4041; www.metbelize.com) have one of the better stables and horse riding operations in the Cayo District. See “San Ignacio” and “Mountain Pine Ridge & Caracol” in chapter 9.

5 The Best Day Hikes & Nature Walks

- **Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve** (Southern Belize): This large forest reserve has an excellent network of well-maintained trails. The Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve—in addition to being the only dedicated reserve designed to protect the endangered jaguar—is also home to an amazing array of tropical flora and fauna. Truly adventurous hikers can arrange to climb Belize's tallest mountain, Victoria Peak, which is found inside this reserve. See “Dangriga” in chapter 8.
- **Guanacaste National Park** (Cayo District and Western Belize): This small national park is located right on the side of the Western Highway, about 2 miles (3km) north of Belmopan. The gentle trails and easy accessibility here make this an excellent choice for an introduction to tropical forests. There are nearly 2 miles (3km) of well-marked and

well-maintained trails in the park, with several benches for sitting and observing wildlife. The park is bordered on the west by Roaring Creek and on the north by the Belize River. See “Belmopan” in chapter 9.

- **Blue Hole National Park** (Cayo District and Western Belize): This hike combines a pleasant 1.5-mile (2.4km) hike through dense primary and secondary tropical forest, with the chance to hike farther inside the large and long St. Herman's Cave, while also stopping for a refreshing dip in the park's beautiful namesake swimming hole, or cenote, here. If you hire a guide, you can actually hike for several miles more inside the stunning **Crystalline Cave**. See “Belmopan” in chapter 9.
- **Tikal National Park** (Tikal, Guatemala): In addition to being one of the best excavated and preserved ancient Mayan cities, the extensive

trail network running through the Tikal ruins happen to be dense tropical rainforest. Howler and spider monkeys clamor overhead and parrots squawk through the canopy. You can

see a wealth of tropical fauna here, as you slowly wander from plaza to plaza and pyramid to pyramid. See “Tikal” in chapter 10.

6 The Best Bird-Watching

Belize is home to over 570 species of resident and migratory birds. With varied ecosystems, ranging from coastal mangroves and swamps, to isolated barrier reef cays, to dense tropical rainforest and clear open savannahs, Belize is a wonderful destination for avid bird-watchers and amateurs alike.

- **Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary** (Northern Belize): This rich wetlands is perhaps the top bird-watching site in Belize. Home to hundreds of resident and migrant species, it is one of the best spots to see the giant and rare jabiru stork, especially during the dry season. You can spot various heron and kingfisher species here, as well as the yellow-lored parrot and Yucatán jay. See “En Route North: Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary” in chapter 6.
- **New River Lagoon** (Northern Belize): This wide-open lagoon is reached via the winding and narrow New River, and branches off into a network of narrow canals, streams, and marshlands, the perfect and preferred habitat for a wide range of bird species. Common species sighted include the black-collared hawk, northern jacana, and purple gallinule. You can combine a bird-watching trip here with a visit to the Lamanai Mayan ruins, which also has wonderful opportunities for bird-watching all along its trails and from the peaks of its pyramids. See “The Submerged Crocodile: Lamanai” in chapter 6.
- **Shipstern Nature Reserve** (Northern Belize): Covering some 22,000 acres (8,800 hectares), including several distinct ecosystems, Shipstern Nature

Reserve is home to over 250 bird species. You can explore the area on foot, as well as in little dugout canoes and flat-bottomed boats. See “Corozal Town” in chapter 6.

- **Half Moon Caye National Monument** (Northern Cayes and Atolls): This isolated wildlife and marine reserve is a major nesting site for the red-footed booby. Thousands of these birds can be spotted on the island at any one time, an amazing sight. In addition, you can also spot a wide range of resident and migratory sea birds here. See “The Outer Atolls” in chapter 7.
- **Man-O-War Caye** (Southern Belize): This small caye is a government-monitored bird sanctuary and major nesting site for the magnificent frigate, or man-o-war. Circling the island in a small boat, you'll see hundreds of these large seabirds roosting on and hovering above the tiny caye. In addition to the frigates, the island also is home to a large community of brown boobies. See “Dangriga” in chapter 8.
- **Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve** (Southern Belize): In addition to its jaguar reserve, the Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve is home to a large number of tropical forest-dwelling bird species. This is one of the best sites in Belize to spot the large and loud scarlet macaw, as well as several toucan species, and the imposing king vulture. See “Dangriga” in chapter 8.
- **Caracol** (Cayo District and Western Belize): Also a major Mayan ruin, Caracol and its surrounding forest are

a prime bird-watching destination. The area is replete with numerous tropical forest species, including such beauties as the keel-billed motmot, violaceous trogon, the ocellated

turkey, crested guan, and great curassow. Some visitors have even spotted the harpy eagle here. See “Mountain Pine Ridge & Caracol” in chapter 9.

7 The Best Mayan Ruins

- **Altun Ha** (Northern Belize): One of the most easily accessible Mayan ruins from Belize City, Altun Ha is a small yet well-preserved site featuring two large central plazas surrounded by mid-sized pyramids and mounds. Only a few of the most imposing temples, tombs, and pyramids have been uncovered and rebuilt; hundreds more lie under the jungle foliage. Many jade, pearl, and obsidian artifacts have been discovered here, including the unique jade-head sculpture of **Kinich Ahau** (the Mayan sun god), the largest carved jade piece from the Mayan era. See “Along the Old Northern Highway: Altun Ha & Maruba Resort Jungle Spa” in chapter 6.
- **Lamanai**: One of the more interesting and picturesque Mayan ruins in Belize, Lamanai features three large pyramids, a couple of residential areas, various restored stelae, and open plazas, as well as a small and unique ball court. Moreover, the ruins of two 16th-century Spanish churches are nearby. The site is set on the banks of the New River Lagoon. Since it was still occupied by the Maya when the Spanish arrived, Lamanai is one of the few sites in Belize to retain its traditional name. See “The Submerged Crocodile: Lamanai” in chapter 6.
- **Xunantunich** (Cayo District and Western Belize): Xunantunich is an impressive, well-excavated, and easily accessible Mayan site, close to San Ignacio. Xunantunich was a thriving Mayan city during the Classic Period, from about A.D. 600 to 900. You’ll find carved stelae and one very tall main pyramid here. To reach the ruins, you must cross the Mopan River aboard a tiny hand-cranked car-ferry in the village of San José Succotz. See “San Ignacio” in chapter 9.
- **El Pilar** (Cayo District and Western Belize): El Pilar just may be the most underappreciated major Mayan city in Mesoamerica. The site is huge, with over 25 known plazas, covering some 100 acres (40 hectares) that straddle the Belize and Guatemala border. Excavation and exploration here are in their early stages, and I don’t think it will be long before El Pilar joins the ranks of Caracol and Tikal as one of the major Classic Mayan sites of this region. See “San Ignacio” in chapter 9.
- **Caracol** (Cayo District and Western Belize): Caracol (www.caracol.org) is the largest known Mayan archaeological site in Belize, and one of the great Mayan city-states of the Classic era. Located deep within the Chiquibil Forest Reserve, the ruins are not nearly as well excavated as Tikal or Xunantunich or any number of other sites. However, this is part of Caracol’s charm. The main pyramid here, **Caana** or “Sky Palace,” stands some 136 feet (41m) high; it is the tallest Mayan building in Belize and still the tallest man-made structure in the country. See “Mountain Pine Ridge & Caracol” in chapter 9.
- **Tikal**: Just over the Belizean border in neighboring Guatemala, **Tikal** is

the grandest of the surviving Classic Mayan cities. Tikal is far more extensively excavated than any ruins in Belize. The pyramids here are some of the most perfect examples of ceremonial architecture in the Mayan world. The peaks of several temples poke through the dense rainforest canopy.

Toucans and parrots fly about, and the loudest noise you'll hear is the guttural call of howler monkeys. In its heyday, the city probably covered as much as 25 square miles (65 sq. km) and supported a population of over 100,000. See "Tikal" in chapter 10.

8 The Best Views

- The main pyramid at Xunantunich, **El Castillo**, rises to 127 feet (38m). It's a steep climb, but the view from the top is worth it. On a clear day, you'll be able to make out the twin border towns of Benque Viejo, Belize, and Melchor de Menchos, Guatemala. See chapter 9.
- Try watching the **sun rise over the New River Lagoon** from a hammock strung on the front porch of your veranda at the **Lamanai Outpost Lodge** (☎ 800/733-7864 in the U.S., or 322-2199 in Belize; fax 727/864-4062 in the U.S.; www.lamanai.com). It is a view you'll always treasure. The view is lovely throughout the day, but it's worth waking up early for. See chapter 6.
- The **Blue Hole** is probably best experienced and viewed from above. A perfectly round sinkhole measuring some 1,000 feet (300m) across in the

middle of the Lighthouse Reef Atoll lagoon, the Blue Hole appears as a deep dark blue circle in a sea of shimmering turquoise.

- Although the **main temple at Cerros** is a just a diminutive 70 feet tall (21m), it offers excellent views across Corozal Bay. Moreover, this is an easy climb for most, and far easier than the climbs to the tops of most other major Mayan ceremonial pyramids. See chapter 6.
- Poking their heads over the dense rainforest canopy, the **pyramids of Tikal** offer some of the best views to be found in all of Central America. Temple IV is the tallest, and the preferred platform for enjoying this view, but Temple II just off the Great Plaza is really just as good. Get here early, or stay late, to enjoy the views without the hustle and bustle of busloads of tourists. See chapter 10.

9 The Best Destinations for Families

- **Belize Zoo** (near Belize City): The Belize Zoo (☎ 220-8003; www.belizezoo.org) houses over 125 animals, all native Belizean species. It is considered a national treasure and a model for the possibilities of a conservation-based zoo. The zoo itself is wonderfully laid out, on meandering trails with large and well-maintained enclosures for the animals. See "What to See & Do" in chapter 5.
- **Ambergris Caye** (Northern Cayes and Atolls): Ambergris Caye is the

most developed of Belize's beach and diving destinations. As such, it has the greatest selection of hotels and activities, many of them either geared towards or just plain great for kids. From snorkeling to paragliding to touring the island on golf carts and visiting the new Butterfly Jungle, there's plenty to keep families and kids of all ages occupied here. **Xanadu Island Resort** (☎ 226-2814; www.xanaduresort-belize.com) and **Captain Morgan's Retreat**

- (☎ 888/653-9090 or 307/587-8914 in the U.S., or 226-2207 in Belize; www.belizevacation.com) are two good choices for families. See “Ambergris Caye” in chapter 7.
- **Jaguar Reef Lodge** (Hopkins Village, Southern Belize; ☎ 800/289-5756 in the U.S., or 520-7040 in Belize; www.jaguarreef.com): This intimate beachfront resort has a range of amenities and activities that will make parents happy and keep kids occupied. In addition to the pool, beach, sea kayaks, and mountain bikes, these folks have a “day lodge” on the Sittee River, as well as a private cay, which can be visited for a day of snorkeling and diving or on an overnight adventure. See p. 186.
 - **The Inn at Robert’s Grove** (Placencia, Southern Belize; ☎ 800/565-9757 in the U.S., or 523-3565 in Belize; www.robertsgrove.com): This is another small beach resort that is well suited for families. As at Jaguar Reef, there’s a wide enough range of activities available here to keep families active and interested for a full vacation. What makes this place slightly trump Jaguar Reef are its two swimming pools and two private cays. See p. 196.
 - **Cayo District** (Western Belize): The Cayo District is the heart of Belize’s Mayan world, as well as its prime ecotourism destination. Between a full plate of active adventure activities and a steady diet of Mayan ruins and ancient burial caves, families will find this a great place to spend time in Belize. **Chaa Creek** (☎ 824-2037; www.chaacreek.com) is not only extremely comfortable for families, but they also have their own butterfly breeding project and natural history museum on-site. And if parents need a little pampering, they also have an excellent spa. See chapter 9.
 - **Caves Branch** (Cayo District and Western Belize): You’ll be heroes in your kids’ eyes after you take them inner tubing through the dark and spooky network of limestone caves traversed by the slow-moving Caves Branch River. Families looking for some creature comfort would be wise to choose **Jaguar Paw** (☎ 888/775-8645 in the U.S., or 820-2023; www.jaguarpaw.com), while those with a real hankering for adventure should head to **Ian Anderson’s Caves Branch** (☎ 822-2800; www.cavesbranch.com). See “Belmopan” in chapter 9.

10 The Best Luxury Hotels & Resorts

- **Radisson Fort George Hotel & Marina** (Belize City; ☎ 800/333-3333 in the U.S. or 223-3333 in Belize; www.radisson.com): This is the top business-class and luxury hotel in Belize City. This oceanfront hotel is located in the quiet Fort George neighborhood, out by the lighthouse, just a block from the cruise-ship tourist village. The hotel has an excellent swimming pool, a well-equipped gym, several restaurants and bars, and easy access to the best Belize City has to offer. See p. 89.
- **Maruba Resort Jungle Spa** (off the Old Northern Hwy.; ☎ 888/790-5264 in the U.S., or 225-5555; fax 225-5506; www.maruba-belize.com): This small resort and spa is set in a patch of lush forest and flowering gardens. The whole operation is an eclectic orgy designed to please the eyes and all other senses. The individual villas here are spectacular. A wide range of spa treatments is available, and excellently and professionally done. Don’t miss out on their signature Mood Mud Massage, perhaps

one of the few massage experiences for which you'll want to bring a camera. See p. 107.

- **Captain Morgan's Retreat** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 888/653-9090 or 307/587-8914 in the U.S., or 226-2207; www.belizevacation.com): This is probably the best of the full-scale resort hotels on Ambergris Caye. The accommodations are a mix of individual bungalows and one- or two-bedroom suites. All are quite close to a long and beautiful stretch of beach. The hotel has two swimming pools and a beach volleyball court; it also offers a whole host of activities, tours, and adventures. See p. 145.
- **Victoria House** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 800/247-5159 or 713/344-2340 in the U.S., or 226-2067; www.victoria-house.com): Casual elegance and attentive service await you at this Ambergris Caye resort. A varied collection of rooms, suites, and villas are spread around an expansive piece of land planted with lush tropical gardens. The hotel also has one of the best restaurants in the country, as well as a wonderful patch of soft white-sand beach. See p. 144.
- **Cayo Espanto** (just off the coast of Ambergris Caye; ☎ 888/666-4282 in the U.S. and Canada; www.aprivateisland.com): What could be more decadent and luxurious than staying in a private villa, with a private swimming pool, a private dock, and a personal butler, on an almost private island? (There are five villas here, although you can rent out the whole island if you like.) This place pulls out all the stops, providing all the modern conveniences and pampering possible on a desert island getaway. See p. 146.
- **Turtle Inn** (Placencia; ☎ 800/746-3743 in the U.S., or 523-3244; www.turtleinn.com): Building on the experience gained from his Blancheaux Lodge, and building upon the ruins of a hotel destroyed by Hurricane Iris, director Francis Ford Coppola has upped the ante on high-end hotels in Belize. The individual villas here are the most beautiful and luxurious in Belize. The hotel is set right on an excellent stretch of beach, and the service and dining are top-notch. See p. 196.
- **El Pescador South** (Punta Gorda; ☎ 800/242-2017 in the U.S., or 722-0050; fax 722-0051; www.elpescadorpg.com): This is by far the most luxurious option around Punta Gorda, and one of the nicest lodges in the country. Although geared toward fishermen and women, the accommodations and setting of this lodge would please just about anybody. See p. 208.
- **Jaguar Paw** (near Belmopan; ☎ 888/775-8645 in the U.S., or 820-2023; www.jaguarpaw.com): Set in a section of dense tropical forest on the edge of and entrance to one of Belize's most spectacular cave systems, this hotel is one of the most unique nature lodges in Belize. The rooms themselves are all distinct and feature bold architectural and decorative touches. The food is excellent, and this is the best place in the country to combine comfort with intensive spelunking and cave explorations. See p. 220.
- **Chaa Creek** (off the road to Benque Viejo, Cayo District; ☎ 824-2037; www.chaacreek.com): A pioneer nature lodge in Belize, this collection of individual and duplex cottages was also a pioneer in the whole concept of rustic luxury. Cool terra-cotta tile floors, varnished wood, thatched roofs, and beautiful Guatemalan textiles and handicrafts are elegantly yet simply combined. The property is set on a steep hillside over the lovely Macal River. Service is very friendly and personable, and the lodge provides easy access to a wealth of natural

adventures and ancient Mayan wonders. See p. 234.

- **Blancaneaux Lodge** (Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve, Cayo District; ☎ 800/746-3743 in the U.S., or 824-3878; www.blancaneaux.com): Francis Ford Coppola's first Belizean mountain retreat remains one of the most elegant and luxurious nature lodges in the country. The hotel is set on a steep pine-forested hillside, overlooking the Privassion River and a series of gentle falls. The individual cabanas are all spacious, are beautifully decorated, and feature a private balcony or deck designed to take in

the excellent views. The hotel recently added a wonderful riverside spa facility. See p. 242.

- **La Lancha Resort** (Lago Petén Itzá, Petén; ☎ 800/746-3743 in the U.S., or ☎/fax 502/7928-8331 in Guatemala; www.lalanchavillage.com): Set on a steep, high hillside overlooking the lake, this is the plushiest option close to the amazing ruins of Tikal. Another of Francis Ford Coppola's regional resorts, the rooms here are once again decorated with style, featuring furniture and artwork from around the world. The food is also excellent. See p. 262.

11 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **San Pedro Holiday Hotel** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 226-2014; www.sanpedroholiday.com): This brilliantly white three-building complex with painted purple and pink trim sits in the center of San Pedro town. This was the first hotel on Ambergris Caye when Celi McCorkle opened it over 40 years ago, and it's still one of the best. Grab a room with an oceanview balcony and you'll be in tropical vacation heaven. See p. 142.
- **Tides Beach Resort** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 226-2283; www.ambergriscaye.com/tides): Every room comes with either a private or shared balcony or veranda overlooking the Caribbean Sea. The hotel and its in-house dive shop are run by the very friendly and highly respected local couple of Patojo and Sabrina Paz. See p. 143.
- **Lazy Iguana Bed & Breakfast** (Caye Caulker; ☎ 226-0350; www.lazyiguana.net): You can't beat the views from the fourth-floor open-air thatched terrace of this intimate bed-and-breakfast. The rooms are spacious and well appointed, and your hosts are a wealth of knowledge about the island. See p. 160.

- **Jungle Jeanie's By The Sea** (Hopkins Village; ☎ 523-7047; www.junglejeaniebythesea.com): Located at the southern end of this small traditional Garífuna fishing village, this is in effect a new hotel. (Jeanie's has been in business many years, but this is a new hotel, in a new location.) The individual wooden cabins are just steps from the ocean on a beautiful patch of beach. See p. 187.
- **Blue Crab Resort** (Seine Bight Village; ☎ 523-3544; www.bluecrabbeach.com): Simple, comfortable, and cool rooms located on a beautiful and isolated patch of beach make this a wonderful option. Throw in an excellent restaurant serving eclectic international fare, and you've got the makings of a perfect getaway. This place is located just a little bit north of the traditional Garífuna village of Seine Bight. See p. 197.
- **Coral House Inn** (Punta Gorda; ☎ 722-2878; www.coralhouseinn.net): By far the best option in the town of Punta Gorda itself, this new little bed-and-breakfast is set right on the edge of the ocean. The hotel offers neat rooms, a refreshing pool,

and free Wi-Fi access throughout its rooms and grounds. See p. 209.

- **Cahal Pech Village Resort** (San Ignacio, Cayo District; ☎ 824-3740; www.cahalpech.com): With a commanding hillside perch, this collection of individual cabins and hotel

rooms is an excellent option in the San Ignacio area. The resort is located just beyond the entrance to the Cahal Pech Mayan ruins, and a whole host of tours and activities can be arranged here. See p. 230.

12 The Best Budget Hotels

- **Belcove Hotel** (Belize City; ☎ 227-3054; www.belcove.com): This budget hotel is set on the banks of Haulover Creek, just a block from the Swing Bridge and the heart of downtown Belize City. The old wooden building is in funky shape, but the riverview balconies are one of my favorite spots in all of Belize to sit and read a book, or watch the sporadic action on the river and streets below. See p. 91.
- **Hok'ol K'in Guesthouse** (Corozal Town; ☎ 442-3329; www.corozal.net): The second-floor oceanfront rooms at this little hotel are the best bargains in Corozal Town. The hotel itself is just across the street from a small seaside promenade that fronts the beautiful Corozal Bay. See p. 125.
- **Ruby's** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 226-2063; www.ambergriscaye.com/rubys): Located right on the waterfront in the center of San Pedro, most of the rooms here overlook the ocean, and the best ones come with a balcony. This is one of the older and more historic hotels on the island, and you just can't do much better on Ambergris Caye for this price. See p. 143.
- **De Real Macaw** (Caye Caulker; ☎ 226-0459; www.derealmacaw.com): This small and relatively new compound on Front Street in Caye Caulker is a great bargain. The hotel is close to all the action, and the rooms are clean, cool, and comfortable. Plenty of trees strung with hammocks make this a great place for a

well-deserved tropical siesta. See p. 161.

- **Tree Tops Guest House** (Caye Caulker; ☎ 226-0240; www.treetopsbelize.com): While the best rooms here actually fall into the moderately priced category (and are some of the best rooms on Caye Caulker), the whole place offers such good value for your money that it's getting a listing in this category. The budget rooms here continue to set the standard on Caye Caulker, and the service is friendly, knowledgeable, and attentive. See p. 162.
- **Tipple Tree Beya** (Hopkins Village; ☎/fax 520-7006; <http://tippletreetree.net>): There are just five simple rooms at this friendly hostel-like option at the southern end of Hopkins Village. However, if the rooms are full, you can also camp. The hotel sits on a lovely section of beach, and is within easy walking distance of the small Garífuna village of Hopkins. See p. 187.
- **Tradewinds** (Placencia; ☎ 523-3122; www.placencia.com): Set on a curving spit of sand at the southern edge of Placencia, the individual cabins here are so close to the water's edge that I worry it's only a matter of time before the ocean reclaims them. But if you get here soon enough and land one of them, you'll likely never want to leave. Each has a private front porch strung with a hammock, where you can swing and listen to the lapping waves. See p. 199.

- **Midas Tropical Resort** (San Ignacio, Cayo District; ☎ 824-3172; www.midasbelize.com): Sure you can stay in San Ignacio for a little less, but this collection of cottages and cabins is just a half-mile or so from downtown, right on the banks of the Macal River. You can also camp here. The whole thing has the feel of an isolated nature lodge, at a fraction of the cost. See p. 231.
- **Clarissa Falls Resort** (San Ignacio, Cayo District; ☎/fax 824-3916; www.clarissafalls.com): Set on the banks of the Mopan River at the foot of its namesake Clarissa Falls, this

collection of cabins, rooms, a bunkhouse, and campsites is one of the most popular and vibrant budget options in the Cayo District. Owner Chena Gálvez is as famous for her pleasing demeanor and attentive service as she is for her wholesome Belizean cooking. See p. 237.

- **Hotel Santana** (Flores, Petén, Guatemala; ☎/fax 502/7926-0262 or 7926-0491; www.santanapeten.com): This lakefront hotel is the best budget choice on the island of Flores. In fact, it might just be the best hotel on the island itself, regardless of price. See p. 271.

13 The Best Restaurants

- **Harbour View** (Belize City; ☎ 223-6420): Set on the water's edge overlooking the juncture of Haulover Creek and the Caribbean Sea, this is the most creative and elegant restaurant in Belize City. Fresh seafood and local staples are cooked with fusion flare and some Asian accents. If the weather's right and you land one of the outdoor tables on the wrap-around veranda, you'll enjoy the finest dining experience available in the city. See p. 93.
- **The Smokey Mermaid** (Belize City; ☎ 223-4722): Less formal than the Harbour View, this place also serves up some excellent and eclectic cuisine in a lovely garden setting. This is also probably the best breakfast option in Belize City. See p. 93.
- **Wet Lizard** (Belize City; ☎ 223-2664): Even less formal than either of the two Belize City restaurants mentioned above, this often-rowdy little restaurant and bar still serves up excellent fresh seafood and burgers, in an open-air setting overlooking the Swing Bridge and Belize Harbor. This is a great place to savor some

late-afternoon conch fritters and a refreshing drink. See p. 93.

- **Elvi's Kitchen** (San Pedro, Ambergris Caye; ☎ 226-2176; www.elviskitchen.com): Elvia Staines has come a long way since she began selling hamburgers out of a takeout window over 30 years ago. Today her friendly and very popular restaurant oozes island charm. The restaurant is a thatched, screened-in building with picnic tables, with a large flamboyant tree growing up through the roof and a floor of crushed shells and sand. No visit to Ambergris Caye is complete without a meal here. See p. 149.
- **Palmilla** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 226-2067): This is easily the most elegant and finest dining to be had on Ambergris Caye, if not in all of Belize. The atmosphere is island formal, meaning relaxed yet refined at the same time, and the chefs here prepare the freshest of local ingredients with a creative blend of techniques, spices, and cuisines from around the world. When the weather's nice, you can dine under the stars by candlelight. See p. 150.

- **Wild Mangos** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 226-2859): Chef Amy Knox was the guiding force in creating the menu and reputation of Palmilla (see above), and now she's set up a shop of her own. Her new restaurant is quite a bit more casual, but the cuisine remains top notch. See p. 148.
- **Mambo** (Ambergris Caye; ☎ 220-5010): The folks at this isolated beach resort serve up very creative and well-prepared fusion cuisine. The menu is so wide and varied that you'll want to eat here with several friends, just to taste as many offerings as possible. Whatever you do, save room for their chocolate soufflé dessert. See p. 150.
- **Habaneros** (Caye Caulker; ☎ 226-0487): Featuring a creative menu with influences from various Caribbean and Asian cuisines, this is a perennial must-visit restaurant on Caye Caulker. Be sure to grab one of the outdoor tables on the wraparound porch. See p. 163.
- **Rasta Pasta Rainforest Café** (Caye Caulker; ☎ 206-0356): This place is

the epitome of funky island charm, but it's even better than that sounds. Sure you get your sand floor, your plastic lawn furniture, your view of the Caribbean Sea, and your fair dose of vegetarian and Rastafarian-influenced menu items. But you also get a wide and eclectic menu, huge portions, and excellent service. What's more, the food is delicious and the ambience is wonderful. See p. 163.

- **Marian's Bayview** (Punta Gorda; ☎ 722-0129): The ambience and decor here are basic—at best. But the mix of Indian and Belizean cuisine is some of the most spectacular in southern Belize. The small menu changes regularly, but always includes some of Marian's expertly prepared spicy East Indian fare. See p. 210.
- **La Luna** (Flores, Guatemala; ☎ 502/7926-3346): If you find yourself in Flores, Guatemala, be sure to seek out this hip little restaurant. The eclectic decor varies from room to room, but like the food, it is consistently creative and tasteful. See p. 273.

14 The Best After-Dark Fun

Belize doesn't really have all that much in the way of nightlife. The capital city is small and relatively quiet by most international standards. In both the capital and throughout the rest of the country, you'd be hard-pressed to find a truly notable bar or club. Still, some unique after-dark destinations and activities are out there, and should not be missed.

- **Stargazing:** This is one of my favorite nighttime activities, but it is especially rewarding when there is no (or little) ambient light. Given its sparse development and low population density, Belize offers a wealth of opportunities for some truly spectacular stargazing. Your best spots are the

isolated beach getaways of Belize's three mid-ocean atolls, but you can also enjoy the astronomical splendor from any number of deserted beaches or rural mountain getaways.

- **Night Diving:** If you've come to Belize to scuba dive, you should definitely try a night dive. Many creatures are nocturnal, and the reefs here come alive at night. Moreover, the brilliant colors of the coral and sea life really shine under the strong glare of an underwater light, and there's something truly eerie about the experience. All of the major dive destinations and resorts offer night diving. See chapter 4 and the destination chapters for more details.

- **Barefoot Iguana** (Ambergris Caye): This cavernous bar features everything from hot new DJs to mud wrestling to sporting events shown on a giant screen. The two-story hangar-sized space is hung with faux jungle plants and foliage, and it has quickly become the most happening nightspot in San Pedro. See “Ambergris Caye” in chapter 7.
- **Sugar Reef Lounge** (Placencia; ☎ 523-3289): Placencia is a small village. On Wednesday nights, it seems like the entire town heads to the Sugar Reef Lounge for their karaoke night. On other nights of the week, this is also one of the better

spots in town to hang out after the sun goes down. See “Placencia” in chapter 8.

- **Moon Rise at Tikal:** Watching the full moon rise from the top of Temple IV in Tikal is one of the highlights of my many travels to this region. You’ll have to stay at one of the hotels on-site to do this, and you may even have to persuade or bribe a park guard. You’ll also have to time your visit with the moon phase. But if all these things come together, you’re in for a memorable and awe-inspiring evening. See “Tikal” in chapter 10.

15 The Best Websites About Belize

- **Latin America Network Information Center** (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/belize>): Hosted by the University of Texas Latin American Studies Department, this site houses a vast collection of information about Belize. This is hands-down the best one-stop shop for Web browsing on the country, with helpful links to a wide range of tourism and general-information sites.
- **Belize By Naturelight** (www.belize.net.com): This is probably the single best collection of links to Belize’s individual hotels, restaurants, and attractions. The site also boasts links to the various regions and destinations within Belize, as well as links to most other major and important websites on the country.
- **The Belize Forums** (www.belizeforum.com): These are active and informative forums on living in and traveling around Belize. Several regular posters are quite knowledgeable, and are generous with that knowledge.
- **Belize News** (www.belize.news.com): This site provides access to all of

Belize’s major online news sources, including all the major weekly print newspapers.

- **Belize Kriol** (www.kriol.org.bz): If you want to know about Belize’s Kriol (Creole) culture, this is the place to go. The site includes pages on Kriol history, culture, and language. There’s a handy spelling guide and Kriol dictionary here as well.
- **The Toucan Trail** (www.toucantrail.com): This is an excellent site geared towards budget travelers, with extensive links and comprehensive information.
- **Belize Tourist Board** (www.travelbelize.org): This is the official site of the Belize Tourist Board. It has its fair share of information and links, although you’ll probably end up being directed to one of the other sites mentioned earlier.
- **Belize Magazine** (www.belize-magazine.com): This online site is fashioned after a typical glossy magazine. The articles, interviews, insights, and information are all excellent, and you can read all of the back issues online.