

The Cayo District Protects Belizean Treasures

IT'S EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHY BELIZE'S CAYO District has one of the country's highest hotel concentrations. Nature has been generous to that region, endowing it with amazing vegetation and spectacular animals that roam through its forests and fly across its skies. The district also holds a treasure trove of archaeological sites, and its people, most of whom are descendents of the ancient Maya, are known for extending a warm and friendly welcome to every visitor. How could a visitor help but be enchanted?

Located in western Belize, near the border with Guatemala, is San Ignacio, the Cayo District's principal city, which is surrounded by forests, wildlife, rivers, waterfalls, archaeological sites and mysterious caves. It is the destination of a growing number of travelers who want to enjoy the wonders of tropical nature and learn about an ancient civilization.

The emerald waters of the Macal River, which winds its way past San Ignacio, are perfect for rafting, canoeing, kayaking, swimming and exploring caves that have been the sites of Maya rituals. The land surrounding the river holds national parks where hiking trails lead deep into the forest and where the outdoor options include mountain biking and horseback excursions.

The Cayo District's growing popularity has brought development and higher living standards, but the increase in tourism also threatens to negatively impact the area's fragile natural and archaeological treasures and degrade its vibrant culture. In collaboration with Programme for Belize and Conservation International, the Rainforest Alliance, an international conservation organization, has begun working in the district to help business owners to adopt, and benefit from sustainable tourism.

The organizations concentrate their efforts on the district's small hotels, businesses that provide activities for tourists and companies that



Visiting the Mayan site of Xunantunich provides the tourist with the opportunity to learn more about Belize's archeological treasures.

design package tours for international travelers. Representatives of those enterprises receive training in good practices for sustainable tourism, learn how to best promote their services in key markets and benefit from opportunities to form alliances with international tour operators that can deliver more clients.

Maya Heritage

Like Guatemala, Mexico and Honduras, Belize has a rich Maya heritage. That impressive and mysterious legacy draws travelers to the archaeological sites that are open to the public in the Cayo District.

One of the most popular of those sites is Xunantunich, which is reached by crossing the Macal River on a pontoon ferry and driving or hiking down a dirt road through the tropical forest. Though it is located about eight miles from San Ignacio, a trip to Xunantunich is like traveling back through time to the days when its six plazas and 25 temples and palaces vibrated with the activities of a mysterious and fascinating civilization.

The Cayo District also holds Belize's best-known Maya site, Caracol, famous for its impressive "Canaa" pyramid, a massive structure that towers

470 feet high. Because it is located in the Chiquibul Forest Reserve, Caracol not only provides visitors with an opportunity to marvel at the works of an ancient civilization, it also offers ample exposure to the exuberant flora and varied fauna of the tropical rainforest.

The Cayo District's great attraction is the fact that it combines an array of natural treasures and a rich archaeological heritage within a relatively small area. The district also holds various caves that were sacred sites for the Maya, who believed they were passages into the underworld. Modern day spelunkers are impressed by their combination of Maya artifacts and geological record of the processes that created the Belizean landscape.

Some of the area's caves hold underground rivers, which can be navigated in a kayak, canoe, or small boat. Those amazing subterranean journeys allow glimpses of artifacts once used to store food during ancient rituals and of human remains that bear silent witness to the days when people



The artifacts discovered in these caves show that they were used during ancient rituals. Photo by The Lodge at Chaa Creek.

were sacrificed to the gods. Cave systems such as Che Chem Ha, Actun Tunichil Muknal, Río Frío and Barton Creek hold hidden landscapes that can open a traveler's eyes to yet another facet of amazing Belize.



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The waters of the Macal River offer opportunities for exciting water sports or peaceful boat rides. Photo by The Lodge at Chaa Creek.



The Rainforest Alliance works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior.

Learn more about the Rainforest Alliance:

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Rainforest Alliance

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