

NATURAL WONDERS

Raves for Caves

Ghosts of ancient Maya
share timeless caves and caverns
with wide-eyed spelunkers
and subterranean creatures

Belizean caves and caverns — the largest such system in the Americas — lead visitors on a journey through time. Explorers witness the geological formation of the planet, the great civilization of the Maya, and the peculiar animals of today, all inside the caves.

In these eerie mazes of silent darkness, giant limestone stalactites drip from the ceilings. Mica-studded formations sparkle like crystal as beams of light from headlamps land on them. Echos from distant walls play with one's senses of time and space. Thousand-year-old artifacts of Maya shamans still lie in some caves, as if waiting for a ritual to begin. Cool breezes from deep within the earth suggest the arrival of ghosts. Far from claustrophobic, many caves open into caverns the size of cathedrals.

Two hundred million years ago, seeping rainwater and underground rivers began to carve out the Belizean cave system. Sea levels fell. Mountains heaved up. Eons of wind and rain perfected the Maya Mountains of today, complete with subterranean rivers, aquifers, and dry caverns.

Depending on age and fitness, visitors can hike into many caves on foot. But rivers run through some caves, apparently so folks can have more fun exploring by kayak, canoe, rubber boat, or inner tube. Whenever launching a spelunking adventure, do so with an experienced guide.

Belizean cave exploration started as early as 1918, and regular studies began in the 1960s. By 1984, researchers had documented 65 sites. Today the number is 250. Perhaps hundreds more still hide in the jungle, guarding their secrets a little while longer.

Actuns (Mayan for “caves”) did much to form the worldview of ancient Maya culture. In dry periods, people came to fetch fresh water and store clay pots of

grain. Caves served as portals between the surface world of the humans and the underworld of the gods, a place called Xibalba. Deities and ancestors resided in the caves, and holy water dripped from stalactites. So Maya performed their sacred rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices in the caves. They came to the caves to ask the gods when to burn fields, plant corn, and offer sacrifices. Important burials took place here as well. Because vapor formed at their mouths, people believed that caves gave birth to the clouds, wind, rain, and thunder.

Nearly every Belizean cave shows some trace of occupation, and the ancient humans structurally modified nearly a third of them. Evidence includes platforms, stairs, terraces, and similar structures, as well as storage vessels, ceramic dinnerware, carved jade, stone altars, and other artifacts. The footprints of shamans and the skeletons of ancestors remain visible today among the discoveries.

Current law, however, protects these discoveries from further handling by humans. They are national treasures as important as any in the sunlit world above. Look, but do not touch. These extremely fragile resources have survived a thousand years. They must survive another thousand for the generations yet to see them.

These caves hold significance not only for humans, but also for exotic species generally unseen above the surface. Deep inside, strange creatures called troglobites — blind or nearly sightless crustaceans and other invertebrates — live, reproduce, and evolve. White, nearly translucent crayfish and catfish inhabit placid pools, and a few species of spiders and insects climb the slippery walls. Occasionally a jaguar will wander in while stalking a gibbon or agouti. Bats, however, are the primary inhabitants of caves. Although usually encountered in small colonies, one chamber at Actun Chapat (Waterhole Cavern) in Cayo may contain millions of them. Not to worry, the winged mammals pose no threat to humans, since they feed on insects and fruit.

People go to Cayo, Toledo, and Stann Creek districts to find accessible caves. Many sit conveniently in the foothills near the Western, Southern, and Hummingbird highways. Below are some popular ones:

On Caves Branch River, south of Belmopan, take a leisurely tube ride with professional guides through private caves, many with Maya artifacts and wall carvings. Or get an adrenaline fix by hanging from rappelling ropes, descending 300 feet into a jungle sinkhole. Down the highway at Blue Hole National Park, St. Herman's Cave offers ease and accessibility, with stair steps down to the mouth

and trail markings inside the cave. In the same park, hot spelunkers can swim the cool waters of the Blue Hole.

Barton Creek Cave, in Mountain Pine Ridge, features popular boating, marvelous formations, and Maya relics. Rio Frio Cave, also popular and accessible, has two openings, massive stalactites, and a shallow river running through it. Others nearby include Blancaneaux Cave and Skeleton Head Cave.

After a 30-minute trek uphill, Che Chem Ha Cave, near Vaca Falls, amazes people with its intact collection of Maya storage jars, called *ollas*. Nearby, a maze of ritual chambers contains both modifications and relics at U'chen Tzub. Several caves at the base of a large sinkhole form Flour Camp Cave.

The far southwestern Chiquibul wilderness, beyond Mountain Pine Ridge and Caracol, contains the largest, wildest cave system in Belize, once featured in *National Geographic*. Visitors need government permission before guides may take them into this 25-mile system, running from Belize to Guatemala.

Ben Loman's Cave sits near the village of Gales Point in southeastern Belize District. To reach this dry cave with dripstone formations, visitors approach by boat. Mayflower Caves, near Pomona in Stann Creek, have two entrances and a labyrinth of passageways only partially explored. Not far from Mayflower Archaeological Reserve and Mayflower Bocawina National Park, only tour groups have access.

Adventurers can explore Hokeb Ha Cave, near Blue Creek in Toledo, with a local guide. Classic period Maya used this cave as a ceremonial center. See several ceramic artifacts and an altar on the four-hour tour through wide caverns and narrow chambers.

Tour operators and resorts arrange guides for cave hiking, tubing, canoeing, or kayaking excursions in their areas. During rainy season, water levels may not allow entrance to some systems. Usually no special training or equipment is needed, but guides do provide lights, helmets, and other protective gear when necessary. Leave nothing behind, not even a gum wrapper, to spoil the natural experience for the next visitor.

Serious spelunkers may want to contact Ian Anderson's Caves Branch Adventure Company near Belmopan, which offers several high-adventure cave expeditions

such as the Black Hole Drop and Lost World Expedition. Milder fare includes basic caving, cave tubing, and river kayaking.

The Belize Institute of Archaeology exercises jurisdiction over caves that contain Maya relics, which means most. For more about caves and qualified caving guides, contact the institute or the Belize Tourism Board.

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