

CAYO DISTRICT

SAN IGNACIO

BENQUE VIEJO • MOUNTAIN PINE RIDGE • SANTA ELENA

Adventure junkies get high in mountainous western Cayo

Cayo means the opposite of coastal. Waterfalls thunder down mountainsides into glistening pools. Vacationers bob on inner tubes and careen over rapids. Echoes bounce off the walls of crystalline caves. Forest canopy shields hiking trails from the tropical sun. Choirs of birds perform avian melodies. Mysterious temples reach for the sky. Crisp mountain breezes invigorate the body, while high mountain vistas rejuvenate the soul.

The largest district geographically, Cayo covers more than 2,000 square miles of diverse terrain, from rolling ranches to rugged ridges. It ranks second in population, with 63,900 residents. The capital, San Ignacio, with its sister town of Santa Elena just across the Macal River, form the country's second-largest population center, with 16,100 residents. Mestizo (Spanish-Maya), Creole, Maya, Mennonite, and other cultures all speak their own languages, in addition to English.

About 70 miles west of Belize City, drivers on the Western Highway reach San Ignacio in 90 minutes. High above the Macal River, the impressive Hawksworth Bridge, a one-lane suspension structure built in 1949, carries traffic east. Vehicles heading west, from Santa Elena to San Ignacio, cross downstream on a wooden bridge as low and unassuming as the Hawksworth is high and picturesque.

Hospitable locals and curious visitors mingle at restaurants, bars, and shops of the British Colonial era. They conjure up images of missionaries on steam-powered riverboats like the African Queen, which used to ply the rivers here. Cahal Pech Village Resort puts guests within walking distance of downtown. Also nearby, Maya Mountain Lodge, San Ignacio Resort Hotel, and Windy Hill Cottages all offer memorable experiences. Rates start about US\$60 per room. A dozen more modest lodgings allow visitors to stay in town and on budget with rates from US\$20 to \$60 per room.

Final stops before the Guatemalan border, the quaint mestizo villages of San Jose Succotz and Benque Viejo del Carmen nestle on the banks of the Mopan River. Ironically, many people know tiny Benque as home to a Belizean music mogul, Ivan Duran. His Stonetree Records preserves the country's endangered Paranda and Maya musical cultures by turning them into popular CDs. Convenient to river adventures and major archaeological sites, Mopan River Resort offers all-inclusive packages in Benque.

Far from civilization, vacationers get back to nature — in the most luxurious possible way — at jungle lodges a few miles down Chial Road (off Western Highway mile 75). Trails, rivers, caves, and other forms of adventure surround the heavenly Black Rock River Lodge and wildly civilized Lodge at Chaa Creek, which has its own museum, butterfly farm, and world-class spa, plus camp sites for budget travelers.

THINGS TO SEE AND DO

Here in Mother Nature's version of an amusement park, choose from birding, canoeing, caving, hiking, swimming, river tubing, horseback riding, mountain biking, and exploring archaeological sites. But first, kick around downtown San Ignacio, starting with busy Burns Avenue. On market day (Saturday) a throng of vendors shows up to tout fresh vegetables, tropical fruits, and other tasty wares. Go early and enjoy the show, as well as the food.

San Ignacio Resort Hotel — “the only jungle in town” — runs the Green Iguana Exhibit to help preserve these descendants of the dinosaurs. Curators gather iguana eggs from the wild, incubate them, then release the hatchlings after nine months to a year, which increases their survival rate by 80 percent. Although the ugly little reptiles look like refugees from a sci-fi movie, they do move many guests to adopt them, give them names, and get a certificate, for a US\$20 donation.

Another project of the San Ignacio Hotel, the Medicinal Jungle Trail, threads around 70 species of plants and trees. Expert guides point out the ones with known medicinal properties and narrate the Maya and African traditions of treating ailments. Tours depart at 9 a.m. and 2 p.m., US\$5.

Both the Macal and Mopan rivers carry canoers, kayakers, swimmers and tubers through picturesque landscapes. Thrill-seekers can tube the Mopan River at Clarissa Falls, a retreat three miles west of San Ignacio near the village of Calla Creek. Avid

bird watchers prefer afternoon trips. Self-guided canoe trips cost US\$23-40. Guided trips cost US\$35-60.

In March, rowing fans cheer their favorite teams during La Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge, the longest canoe race in Central America. Three-man teams compete during the grueling 170-mile, four-day challenge down the Macal and Belize rivers from San Ignacio to Belize City. In another annual competition here, the Holy Saturday Cross-Country Classic, bicyclists peddle from Belize City to San Ignacio and back. The race started in the 1900s, when nothing but a mule track connected the settlements.

Guests in San Ignacio need not take a bus or car to explore impressive Maya sites. They can walk. Perched atop a hill just a mile from town, Cahal Pech rewards the 15-minute hike with a panoramic view of San Ignacio and the Belize River Valley. A museum and visitors center displays Maya artifacts from the site, open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., US\$5.

Bullet Tree Road, through the village of Bullet Tree Falls, leads to the 100-acre archaeological reserve of El Pilar, which means "Water Basin," site of an annual celebration of Maya culture each April. Hike or ride horseback to two magnificent sinkholes also found in the area.

Eight miles west of San Ignacio, the impressive Maya city of Xunantunich, which means "Maiden of the Rock," towers 130 feet, the highest in Belize. Fit visitors climb to the top of El Castillo, adorned by an impressive architectural frieze, for a sweeping view of Cayo to the east and Guatemala to the west. To reach Xunantunich from the village of San Jose Succotz, a hand-cranked ferry carries vehicles across the Mopan River. One mile farther, the site has a refreshment stand, gift shop, and visitor center with a scale model of the city, open 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., US\$5.

Windy Hill Resort, on Benque Viejo Road, offers guided jungle walks at night to observe nocturnal plants and animals. Maya guides demonstrate how sap is extracted from the sapodilla tree, the source of chicle, main ingredient of chewing gum.

To see remains of the first Spanish mission in Belize, take Chial Road (off Western Highway mile 75) to Negroman and the overgrown site of Tipu. A little farther, the road leads to Ek'Tun, a private 500-acre retreat with hiking trails, a spring-fed natural swimming pool, and secluded beaches. At the end of the road sits solar- and

hydro-powered Black Rock River Lodge. From here, an easy 40-minute hike, past black slate formations and 800-foot cliffs, leads to Vaca Falls.

Spelunking expeditions combine history and adventure for hikers with good fitness, professional guides, and the right equipment. Che Chem Ha Cave (Chumpiate Cave), in the Vaca Plateau area, houses one of the largest caches of intact pots in the ancient Maya world. More pots, tools, and burial sites await discovery at nearby Flour Camp Cave (U'chen Tzub). Waterhole Cavern (Actun Chapat), contains rare bats. Horseback tours to the falls and caves start at US\$65 per person.

Chaa Creek Natural History Centre, at the Lodge at Chaa Creek, showcases traditional life through its replica of a K'ekchi' Maya house, complete with fire hearth, furnishings, and clothing. Other displays include geology, bird nests, butterflies, deadly snakes, animal skulls, and a growing library. A butterfly farm raises beautiful iridescent blue morphos. The history centre and butterfly farm open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., US\$5. Also at Chaa Creek, a traditional Maya farm demonstrates organic farming methods, and the Ixchel Rainforest Medicinal Trail reveals healing plants and trees, many of which now serve in modern medicine. The exhibits open 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., US\$5.

Garden trails in nearby Belize Botanic Gardens at duPlooy's Jungle Lodge pass hundreds of species of exotic rainforest plants and trees, open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., US\$5. Eighteen species of butterflies grow and develop at Tropical Wings Butterfly House and Nature Center, off the Western Highway just east of the ferry to Xunantunich, open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., US\$2.50.

Benque Viejo del Carmen, a mestizo village two miles shy of the Guatemalan border, comes alive during its annual fiesta in mid-July, which honors the village's patron saint. At Easter time, Christians from around the country come for the dramatic Passion of Christ procession on Good Friday, commemorating the life of Jesus. Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church can be seen from nearly anywhere in town.

Benque House of Culture gives classes in art, music, and dance; sponsors forums on local history; and displays artifacts from early Benque. Housed in a former police station, the museum opens 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The 60-acre Poustinia Land Art Park, a few miles out of town on Arenal Road, makes a home for environmental art by Belizean and international sculptors. Thick with orchids, the park adds hundreds of new flowering, fruiting, and medicinal plants and trees each year to repopulate the former cattle ranch.

In the village of San Antonio, Magana's Zaac-tunich Art Gallery features local woodcarvings, and Cayo's famous slate carvers, the Garcia sisters, run the Tanah Mayan Art Museum. Many musical instruments were uncovered during excavation at Pacbitun, a Maya cultural site on the outskirts of the village.

Bird watchers love Cayo, where blue crowned motmots, rufus-tail hummingbirds, purple crowned fairies, and green breasted mangos fly freely. At Elijio Panti National Park, birders may spot elusive emerald toucans. Aguacate Lagoon, 20 minutes beyond Spanish Lookout, makes another good perch for birders. Avian books include *Birds of Belize* by H Lee Jones, and a pamphlet called *Birding in Belize - San Ignacio Area*, by James H Schultz and Tom Chase. Look for them in gift shops.

A great place for horseback riding, Cayo hotels can arrange it for US\$45 per person. After a hard ride, loosen up with a sensuous spa treatment at the Lodge at Chaa Creek. The elegant spa, covered in fresh flower petals each day, adds a misty view of the Maya Mountains to its long list of services. Meanwhile, guests at Royal Mayan Resort and Spa take in breathtaking views of El Castillo at Xunantunich.

SHOPPING

Visitors searching for arts and crafts typical of the region should look for zericote wood carvings, black slate carvings, ceramics, Guatemalan masks, hot sauces, jewelry, and embroidered Maya clothing. Find the mother load of such gifts at Caesar's Place (Western Highway mile 60), which also makes its own folding mahogany clam chairs, optimal for back yards and beaches. The village of San Antonio has a couple promising sources of goodies, Magana's Zaac-tunich Art Gallery, featuring local wood carvings, and the Tanah Mayan Art Museum, famous for black slate carvings of Maya gods.

DINING

San Ignacio's restaurants, great for reasonable meals and local flavor, include Erva's, Martha's Kitchen, and Eva's. Hannah's serves Indian dishes. Sanny's Grill, in a quiet residential area, offers an upscale menu. Good local food at Hode's Place and tasty Sri Lankan dishes at Serendib await downtown. Aguada Hotel makes Belizean, American, and Italian dishes. Cahal Pech Village serves up a lovely view of San Ignacio and Santa Elena. Try Maxim's for Chinese food. A few miles east of Santa Elena, visitors out for a day of sightseeing can refuel with fresh juice or lunch at Caesar's Place.

Depending on mood, nights can be peaceful or lively. The Stork Club at the San Ignacio Hotel features live music, Thursday-night karaoke, and Friday happy hour. Enjoy live jazz the first Saturday of each month at Caesar's Place. At the Princess Casino in the San Ignacio Resort Hotel, gamers can play the slots from noon to 4 a.m.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Advertised accommodations are listed here. While this index does not include all properties, more appear in the Belize Tourism Board directory (pages 00-00) and the Belize Tourism Industry Association directory (pages 000-000).

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Cahal Pech Village. 32 rooms. Thatched cabanas in Mayan decor, plus rooms in the main building, overlook San Ignacio, Santa Elena, and the rolling hills of Guatemala, with balconies, cable TV, and AC. Enjoy the swimming pool, internet, conference facility, restaurant, and two bars. Walk to Cahal Pech site or San Ignacio. Family packages and inland tours.

Chiclero Camp Resort. 824-3132. 15 rooms. Walk the paths of Maya kings, in the rainforest next to the Cahal Pech archaeological site, overlooking San Ignacio, Santa Elena, and the Macal River Valley. Fine accommodations and amenities include private cabanas, parking, and fine dining in an excellent restaurant/bar.

The Lodge at Chaa Creek. 824-2037. 23 rooms. Winner of green hotel awards. Thatched cottages include treetop Jacuzzi suites, honeymoon sky room, orchard villa, and garden suites. Restaurant, bar, and AC conference center for 100. State-of-the-art spa offers fabulous treatments. Camp at Chaa Creek has 10 casitas, dining, and recreation area. Butterfly farm and museum displays birds, reptiles, geology, and a traditional Maya house. Birding, canoeing, camping, caving, swimming, hiking, horseback riding, and biking tours.

Maya Mountain Lodge. 824-2164. Eight cottages and six rooms. Jungle lodge and expedition center has private baths, hot water, fans, restaurant, and swimming pool. AC is available. Birding, canoeing, cycling, hiking, horseback riding, plus tours to jungle, rivers, and Maya sites. Enjoy workshops, educational displays, interpretive trails, and reserves. Rainforest and ecology courses for credit.

Mopan River Resort. 823-2047. Nine cabanas and three suites. All-inclusive resort on the Mopan River near Benque Viejo del Carmen features a swimming pool, dining room for guests, bar, wedding chapel, and bird-watching tower. Expeditions, fabulous meals, drinks, transfers, taxes, and service charges all included in the price. Tikal, caving, kayaking, ruins, and birding available.

Royal Mayan Resort and Spa. www.royalmayan.com. 22 rooms. Exotic perch high in the heartland has a view of famed El Castillo pyramid at Xunantunich and is accessible to important Maya sites, including Caracol, Cahal

Pech, El Pilar, and Tikal. Bird watching, horseback and mountain bike riding, canoeing, kayaking, and cave adventures. Rest and relax, overlooking panoramic vistas.

San Ignacio Resort Hotel. 824-2034. 24 rooms. Overlooking 17 acres of jungle and the Macal River, rooms have AC, balcony, and private bath. New tennis club joins conference facilities, swimming pool, gift shop, two restaurants, and Stork Club with Friday happy hour. Dine at inside/outside Running W Restaurant. Green Iguana Conservation Program, birding, personalized tours, and swimming.

Windy Hill Resort. 824-2017. 25 rooms. Deluxe cottages with AC. Verandas, hammocks, panoramic views of Maya Mountains, cable TV, gift shop, restaurant, bar, infinity swimming pool, recreation area, fitness center, equestrian center, jungle tour, nature trails, caving, canoeing, rafting, and tours to Maya sites and Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve. All-inclusive packages. Special children's rates.

[458 words listings, was 502 words]