

Belize



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1981
Population:	307,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	2.2% p.a. 1990–2009
UN HDI 2010:	world ranking 78
Official language:	English
Time:	GMT minus 6hr
Currency:	Belizean dollar (Bz\$)

Geography

Area:	22,965 sq km
Coastline:	386km
Capital:	Belmopan

Belize forms part of the Commonwealth Caribbean, and is located in central America, bordering Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south.

Main towns: Belmopan (capital, pop. 19,200 in 2009), Belize City (former capital and commercial centre, 68,200), San Ignacio (19,900), Orange Walk (16,500), San Pedro (12,500), Dangriga (12,400), Corozal (9,500), Benque Viejo (9,300) and Punta Gorda (5,500).

Topography: The long east coast is mostly flat with lagoons and mangrove swamps. For 16–32km out to sea the water is only about 5m deep and a barrier reef (second in size only to Australia's) stretches nearly 297km, with many tiny islands known as cays or cayes inside. Three smaller reefs lie further out. Inland, the terrain rises with Victoria Peak (1,122m), the country's highest point, in the Cockscomb range to the east, and the heavily forested Maya Mountains to the south-west. Continuing north, the Western (Cayo) District is also hilly, with the Mountain Pine Ridge. The northern districts have wide areas of tableland. There are 17 principal rivers, navigable at best only by vessels of shallow draught.

Climate: The climate is subtropical, moderated by trade winds. The average temperature from November to January is 24°C and from May to September 27°C; inland there is a greater range. There are two dry seasons: March–May and August–September (the Maugre season). Annual rainfall ranges from 1,290mm in the north to 4,450mm in the south. The country is susceptible to hurricanes; Hurricane Iris in October 2001 – the fourth in three years – was the worst for 40 years. Several years later in August 2007 another hurricane, Hurricane Dean, hit Belize affecting the livelihoods of up to 2,500 families in the northern parts of the country.

Environment: The most significant environmental issues are deforestation; water pollution from sewage, industrial effluents and agricultural run-off; and solid waste disposal.

did you know?

Of 13 Commonwealth member countries in the Americas, only Belize, Canada and Guyana lie on the mainland, three of the most sparsely populated in the association; all the others are islands or archipelagos.

The country's current prime minister, Dean Barrow, is the first of African descent.

The mayor of Belize City, Zenaida Muoya, is Chair of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum.

Vegetation: Forest covers 73% of the land area and includes rainforest with mahoganies, cayune palms, and many orchids. Higher in the mountains, pine forest and cedar predominate. Arable and permanently cropped land extends to less than 3% of the land area.

Wildlife: There is a strong emphasis on conservation. By 1992, 18 national parks and reserves had been established, including the world's only jaguar reserve. Other native species include ocelots, pumas, baboons, howler monkeys, toucans and many species of parrot.

Transport: There is a road network of some 2,870km, 17% paved, with 1,420km of all-weather roads. The four main highways are: Northern Highway (Belize City to Chetumal on the Mexican border); Western Highway (Belize City via Belmopan to the Guatemalan border); Hummingbird Highway (Belmopan to Dangriga); and Southern Highway (Dangriga to Punta Gorda).

Belize City is the main port; the international airport, Philip S W Goldson, lies 16km north-west of Belize City.

Society

KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 13
Life expectancy: 77 years
Net primary enrolment: 98%

Population: 307,000 (2009); 52% lives in urban areas; growth 2.5% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 24 per 1,000 people (40 in 1970); life expectancy 77 years (66 in 1970).

Belizeans descend from Mayans, Caribs, and the many groups who came as loggers, settlers, refugees, slaves and imported labour: English, Spanish, Africans and East Indians.

According to the 2000 census, the population comprises 49% Mestizos (Maya–Spanish), 25% Creoles (Afro-European), 11% Mayans and 6% Garifuna (Afro-Carib). There is a small Mennonite farming community who speak a dialect of German, and a fast-growing Chinese community.

Language: English is the official language, but Spanish is spoken by more than half the population, and English-based Creole is widely understood. Other languages are Maya, Garifuna and Ketchi. Most Belizeans are bilingual and many trilingual.

Religion: Mainly Christians (Roman Catholics 50%, Pentecostals 7%, Anglicans 5%, Seventh Day Adventists 5%, Mennonites, Methodists); small minorities of Baha'i, Muslims and Jews (2000 census).

Media: Weekly newspapers include *Amandala*, *The Belize Times* (People's United Party), *The Guardian* (United Democratic Party), *The San Pedro Sun* and *The Reporter*.

Radio stations and TV channels are all privately owned; one radio station is broadcast in Spanish, one is targeted at younger listeners, and one is affiliated to the United Democratic Party, another to the People's United Party.

There are 153 personal computers (2007) and 117 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

Education: Public spending on education was 5.7% of GDP in 2008. There are ten years of compulsory education starting at age five. Primary school, which is free of charge, comprises eight years and secondary four. Some 90% of pupils complete primary school (2007). The school year starts in September.

The University of Belize opened in 1986. Belize also shares in the regional University of the West Indies, which has campuses in Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Health: There are government hospitals in Belize City, Belmopan and other main towns, and health-care centres and mobile clinics in rural areas. Malaria requires constant surveillance. The National Primary Healthcare Centre organises preventive programmes. 99% of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 90% adequate sanitation facilities (2009). Infant mortality was 16 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (74 in 1960). In 2009, 2.3% of people aged 15–49 were HIV positive.

Communications: Country code 501; internet domain '.bz'. Mobile phone coverage is good in most areas, especially on the coast and along the main routes to Mexico and Guatemala.

There are 102 main telephone lines and 527 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Baron Bliss Day (9 March), Labour Day (1 May), Commonwealth Day (24 May), St George's Caye Day (10 September), Independence Day (21 September), Pan-American Day (12 October), Garifuna Settlement Day (19 November), Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Carnival (week before Lent), Good Friday and Easter Monday.

Economy

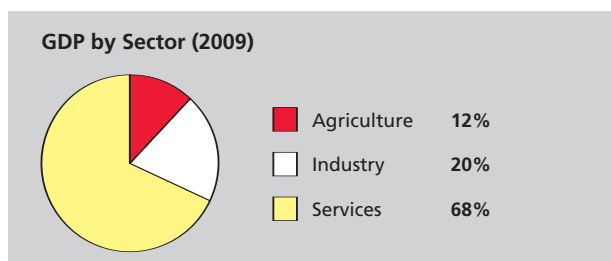
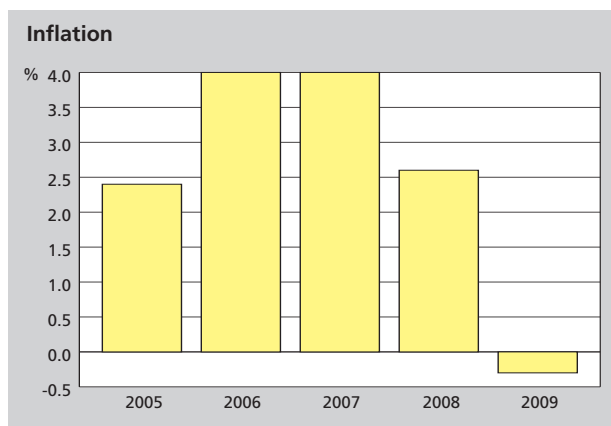
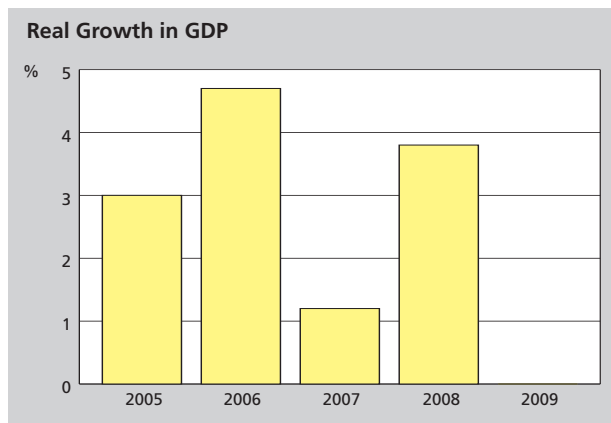
KEY FACTS 2009

GDP:	US\$1.4bn
GDP p.c.:	US\$4,410
GDP growth:	2.5% p.a. 2005–09
Inflation:	2.5% p.a. 2005–09

Overview: Belize's economy is predominantly agricultural, and it is vulnerable to volatility in world commodity markets. Efforts have been made to diversify from traditional export products such as sugar and timber into bananas, citrus concentrates, seafood and fish products. Forestry has been revitalised and tourism expanded to become a significant foreign currency earner. Since 1990, an export-processing zone has been developed near Belize City International Airport, mainly for clothing production. And, mainly for domestic consumption, a free zone has been established at Corozal on the coast near the Mexican border.

Though Belize had not had a formal relationship with the IMF, it implemented its own structural adjustment programme, with expenditure controls, a public-sector wage freeze and job cuts, and some privatisation, aimed at restoring a fiscal surplus.

There was a short pause in the vigorous economic growth of the early 2000s when, in 2001, the fourth hurricane to strike Belize in three years caused heavy damage to tourist facilities and rice production in the southern part of the country. Another short



pause ensued in 2007, when the economy felt the impact of Hurricane Dean on agricultural output and tourism. The recovery of 2008 was then summarily reversed by the world economic downturn and consequent fall in tourism, and the economy stalled in 2009.

Trade: Main exports are citrus concentrate, fish products, sugar, and bananas and other fruit.

Constitution

Status: Monarchy under Queen Elizabeth II
Legislature: National Assembly
Independence: 21 September 1981

Belize is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy which recognises Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, represented by a governor-general. The governor-general, appointed on the advice of the prime minister, must be of Belizean nationality. The legislature, the National Assembly, is bicameral, composed of the Senate and House of Representatives.

The Senate has 12 members: six are appointed on the advice of the prime minister, three on the advice of the leader of the opposition, and one each by the churches, business community and trade unions.

The House of Representatives comprises 29 members, directly elected at intervals of no longer than five years on the basis of universal adult suffrage. The prime minister and cabinet have executive power.

There are six administrative districts. With the exception of Belize City, they are administered by a locally elected town board of seven members. The island resort of San Pedro on Ambergris Caye was granted township status in 1984. Belize City is administered by a city council of nine elected members. There are also village councils.

Politics

Last elections: February 2008
Next elections: 2013
Head of state: Queen Elizabeth II, represented by governor-general, Sir Colville Norbert Young Sr (1993–)
Head of government: Prime Minister Dean Barrow
Ruling party: United Democratic Party

The 1993 election was won by the United Democratic Party (UDP) in coalition with the National Alliance for Belizean Rights, a new party which was formed after five members left the UDP in 1992 following disagreements over the negotiations with Guatemala. Together they received 49% of the votes, securing 16 of the 29 seats; the UDP's Manuel Esquivel was now prime minister.

George Price of the defeated People's United Party (PUP) announced his retirement in October 1996, and was replaced by Said Musa at the party convention in November 1996. In the general election in August 1998, the opposition PUP won a resounding victory and Said Musa became prime minister. With 59% of the votes, the PUP took 26 of the 29 seats in the House of Representatives. With 39% of the votes, the ruling UDP took only three seats and Esquivel handed over the party leadership to Dean Barrow.

For the first time since independence, the ruling party was returned to power in the March 2003 general election. The PUP, under Said Musa, took 22 seats to the UDP's seven, with 53% of the votes.

In January 2005, the government increased tax rates on commodities and property and riots broke out. Civil unrest continued until April with trade unions and government opponents demanding Musa's resignation. This and allegations of corruption in the PUP government proved decisive in the subsequent elections.

The February 2008 general election resulted in a landslide victory for the opposition UDP, which won 25 seats to the ruling PUP's six. UDP leader Barrow became the country's first prime minister of African descent.

Relations with Guatemala: After 1986, and a change of government in Guatemala, relations between the two countries improved and in 1991 Guatemala recognised Belizean sovereignty, Belize joined the Organization of American States (OAS) and diplomatic relations between Belize and Guatemala were established.

The new rapprochement seemed at risk when in 1993 the Guatemalan president was ousted; though the new president announced that Guatemala would continue to respect the independence of Belize. In January 1994 responsibility for defence was transferred to the Belize Defence Force and later that year the UK withdrew most of its 1,500-strong garrison. In March 1994, however, Guatemala renounced its earlier agreements and formally reaffirmed its claim to the territory of Belize. A tense period ensued during which Belize continued to receive strong support from the Caribbean Community and the Commonwealth.

It was thus not until February 1997 that an ambassador was sent to Guatemala City, opening the way for a diplomatic resolution of the dispute. The two countries embarked, through the good offices of the OAS, on a peace process leading, in September 2005, to agreement on a framework for negotiations to resolve the dispute and confidence-building measures. Included in this agreement was a mechanism, should the parties fail to reach agreement in negotiations, to allow recourse to an international judicial body.

International relations

Belize is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Association of Caribbean States, Caribbean Community, Non-Aligned Movement, Organization of American States, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

Belize is strengthening its links with its Central American neighbours through its membership of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana.

Traveller information

Local laws and conventions: Possession of drugs is considered a serious crime in Belize and can lead to a fine and or even imprisonment.

Dress is casual, although beachwear must not be worn in towns.



History

The earliest known inhabitants were the Mayans, whose extensive civilisation (AD 250–900) reached its peak in about the 8th century, spreading northward throughout Yucatan. The Mayans cultivated most of the arable land in the country and built cities and ceremonial centres out of limestone. By the time the Spanish arrived, in the early 16th century, the numbers of Mayans had declined, and many of the remainder were sent to Guatemala or died of introduced diseases.

The Spanish then moved north to Mexico, and British pirates (who had lost their occupation when Britain and Spain made peace in 1670) moved in to cut logwood for export to Europe. In time, the settlers expanded inland to cut mahogany and cedar, and African slaves were brought over from Jamaica. Attempts by the Spanish to dislodge the Baymen (as the woodcutters were called) failed, but the settlers asked England for help.

In 1765 Admiral Sir William Burnaby arrived with a fleet from Jamaica and, without recourse to violence, established a constitution known as Burnaby's Code and the Public Meeting, a law-making body. Friction continued, however, until 1798, when the Spanish were defeated at the battle of St George's Caye.

In 1847, Mayans in neighbouring Mexico rebelled against Spanish rule and refugees (Mayans, Mestizos and dissident Spaniards) made their way into Belize, a migration which set up new tensions. In an attempt to resolve the situation, the settlement, at its own request, became a British colony (supervised by the governor of Jamaica) in 1862 and the country took the name British Honduras. It became a Crown colony in 1870. In 1884, it was detached from Jamaica and given its own governor. Burnaby's Code and the Public Meeting were abolished in 1840 and 1853 respectively and replaced by a nominated legislative council.

Economic recession followed. Mahogany prices slumped in the 1870s and sugar (introduced by the immigrants from Mexico)

slumped in the 1880s. An upturn in the early 20th century was short-lived and poverty continued between the world wars.

In 1935, the principle of voting was reintroduced, with elections for five of the 12 seats on the legislative council, although with a very limited franchise (1,000 out of the population of 50,000). The number of elected members increased under a new constitution in 1954, when the council changed its name to legislative assembly and extended the franchise to universal adult suffrage. By now the movement for independence was under way; it had gained momentum in 1949 when the British Honduras dollar was devalued. This became a rallying point with the cry: 'Give us back our dollar. Give us independence.'

In 1954 the first general election was won by the People's United Party (PUP), headed by George Price (the PUP won all subsequent elections until 1984). In 1964, the country became self-governing with a bicameral legislature. In 1971, the seat of government was moved from Belize City to the new inland site of Belmopan. In 1961 Hurricane Hattie left Belize City in ruins. The country's name was changed from British Honduras to Belize in 1973.

Independence was delayed by the claim to the whole of its territory by neighbouring Guatemala and in 1975 and 1977 British troops and aircraft were used to protect Belize from the threat of invasion. The UN passed several resolutions asserting Belize's right to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. By the late 1970s, although the claim was unresolved, constitutional talks on independence were successful, and the UK agreed to provide a defence guarantee, notably by patrolling the border with Guatemala.

After 20 years in power, George Price and the PUP lost the 1984 elections to the United Democratic Party led by Manuel Esquivel, but power shifted back to the PUP in 1989.

Appointments for business meetings are customary and business cards are often exchanged. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0800–1200 and 1300–1700.

Immigration and customs: Passports must be valid for six months beyond the intended length of stay. When entering the country, visitors must prove they have sufficient funds for their stay as well as a return or onward ticket. All visa requirements must be checked well in advance of travel.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required by all those arriving from infected areas.

Prohibited imports include Pre-Columbian articles, marine products, unprocessed coral, and turtle shells.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the right and visitors can hire cars with a national driving licence for the first three months of stay. Car hire is available in larger towns and at the international airport. All-weather highways link the main towns and most of the roads are in good condition. Visitors should be aware, however, that the Manatee Highway running from the Western Highway to Dangriga is prone to severe flooding after torrential rain.

National speed limits are 40kph in built-up areas and 90kph on the highways.

The country's main domestic airline is Maya Island Air, which operates scheduled flights from Belize City to most of the main towns and cayes (islands). Boat services connect Belize City to Ambergris Caye, Caye Chapel and Caye Caulker.

Bus services are frequent and inexpensive, and link most of the towns and villages. Many of the vehicles are ex-school buses imported from the USA.

Travel health: There are government-run hospitals in all the main towns. Visitors are advised to take out comprehensive medical insurance.

Dengue fever is present in Belize, and visitors will need to protect themselves from mosquito bites with insect repellent and suitable clothing. Tuberculosis and Hepatitis B also occur, and vaccinations are sometimes required. All those planning to travel to Belize should check the most up-to-date inoculation requirements.

Tap water is usually safe to drink, though it is advisable to check before drinking; bottled water should be used if there is any doubt. Milk is unpasteurised and should be boiled before use.

Money: Local currency is the Belize dollar, although most businesses accept US dollars. ATMs accept some foreign cards but should not be relied on for cash. Visa and Mastercard are widely accepted. Travellers cheques can be exchanged at most banks, many hotels and some travel agencies. Banking hours are Mon–Thur 0800–1300 and Fri 0800–1630.

There were 232,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

Further information

Belize Government Official Portal: www.belize.gov.bz

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

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