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I INTRODUCTION

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Belize, country in northeastern [Central America](#) that borders the [Caribbean Sea](#).

Belize is one of the smallest and least populated countries in Central America. It was ruled by Britain for almost two centuries and until 1973 was known as British Honduras. Belize became independent in 1981 and is a member of the [Commonwealth of Nations](#). [Belize City](#) is the country's largest city and was the capital until 1972. After severe hurricanes damaged Belize City, which is on the coast, a new capital was built inland at Belmopan.

Belize is a land of great ethnic and cultural diversity. About half of the people are black

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Belize (pronounced /bəˈliːz/), formerly British Honduras, is a country in Central America. Once part of the Mayan and Spanish Empires, it was most recently affiliated with the ...

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or of mixed African and European ancestry. There are also large numbers of Maya Indians and *mestizos*—people of mixed European and Indian ancestry. Small groups of Europeans and Asians also live in Belize. English is the language most widely spoken in Belize.

The area now known as Belize was once part of the [Maya civilization](#), which began to develop around 2000 BC and lasted to about AD 1550. The Maya Indians were skillful farmers and developed one of the most advanced civilizations of the period. They built many elaborate temples. Today, the ruins of Maya cities attract tourists to Belize, as do the country's scenery, wildlife, and beaches.

II LAND AND RESOURCES

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Belize is bounded on the north and northwest by [Mexico](#), on the east by the Caribbean Sea, and on the south and west by [Guatemala](#). The country's greatest length from north to south is about 280 km (about 175 mi) and its greatest breadth is about 100 km (65 mi). The total area of Belize is 22,965 sq km (8,867 sq mi). A large barrier reef lies about 30 km (20 mi) offshore. Within it are many low-lying islands, or cays.

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The northern half of Belize is generally low and flat. Large areas of it are swampy. The southern half consists of a coastal plain that rises abruptly to inland hills and mountains. The Maya Mountains, the most notable feature of southern Belize, run parallel to the coast and rise to a maximum elevation of 1,120 m (3,675 ft) atop Victoria Peak. Tropical forests blanket much of the south, although commercial agriculture and logging have led to deforestation.

The principal streams are the Belize River; the Río Azul, which forms much of the boundary with Mexico; and the Sarstún River, which forms the southwestern boundary

with Guatemala.

A Climate

The climate of Belize is subtropical, moderated by sea breezes along the coast. The average annual temperature is about 26° C (about 79° F). Inland, however, summer temperatures can exceed 38°C (100°F). Humidity is high, especially along the coast.

The total annual rainfall increases from north to south and averages about 1,800 mm (about 71 in). A rainy season extends from May to December. The height of the rainy season is from June to October. Belize is located near one of the most active tropical storm areas of the Caribbean and periodically suffers severe damage from storms and hurricanes.

B Plants and Animals

Forests cover about 72 percent of Belize. Deciduous trees are found in the north; tropical hardwood trees predominate in the south. Principal species include the commercially important mahogany, cedar, and rosewood, as well as pine, oak, and palms. Mangrove swamp vegetation is found along the coast.

Belize is rich in wildlife, including [jaguar](#), [deer](#), [tapir](#), [monkey](#), and [kinkajou](#). Numerous species of birds inhabit the forests. Reptiles and amphibians include iguanas, crocodiles, and green tree frogs. Tropical fish swim in the coral reef off the coast. The country has a number of wildlife reserves, including the Cockscomb Jaguar Reserve.

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