

## BELIZE TRAVELOGUE

The sea breeze through the second-floor, latticed window is ruffling the napkin under my glass of iced scotch as local slogans...*you better Belize it!...seeing is 'beliezing' it!...* waft the cool air that crosses from the open porthole windows to the other side of the hotel's Harbour barroom, from which facing mirror there my tanned face looks back contentedly between sea and reflected sea. My ankles are swollen from 10 days of walking, climbing, and bug-biting but I wouldn't trade one moment of this trip now ending for all the proverbial 'tea in China'.

As I turn from the reflection the last bright light of day slants silverly on Belize City's historical Southern Foreshore harbor where the Caribbean meets its west limit. These moments upstairs at the old Bellevue Hotel's white-raffia-furnished café and bar mark the JC's and my trip's last hours before we board a morning plane for Mexico City. Already I am losing myself in the rewards of travel that endure as long as one lives to recall memories....

*The historic Governor's Mansion, now a museum—a south sea colonial mansion built on the point, surrounded by lush gardens. I pictured myself the governor's wife, rising from bed in the high-ceilinged, aerial blue master bedroom and throwing open its wide doors to the veranda and the sea....*

Belize hosted a wide Mayan civilization from about 1500 b.c.e. until 800 c.e., an estimated four hundred thousand inhabitants in its late classic period, before the end of the first millennium. As with the Americas, matters changed when Europeans began to arrive in the 16th century; English and Scottish buccaneers ("Baymen") settled shelters on the coast for convenient attack of Spanish ships.

A British superintendent was installed in 1786, but with time wealthy settlers gained control of the local government. Britain's long attempt to seize Belize ended in a famously summarized "Battle of St. George's Cave" on September 10, 1798, a Belize national holiday. Increased settlers turned to cutting logwood (from which was produced clothing dyes vital to Europe's woolen industry)—a right the Spanish granted in exchange for ending piracy. In 1836, when Central America was freed from Spanish rule, Great Britain declared Belize a British Crown Colony subordinate to Jamaica, and called it British Honduras. Investors, attracted, dominated the colony and the mahogany trade that flourished throughout the rest of the 19th and into the first half of the 20th centuries....

*Across from the museum mansion is St. John's Cathedral, the oldest Anglican church in the western hemisphere, built of bricks used as ballast in the first English vessels to arrive. The bites are my own fault! Bug repellent ordinarily isn't necessary in Belize City; it was my eagerness to look into the church window that stood me in a muddy mosquito village. Herbal and plant medicines still are used in a lot of the Belize region, and we walked 'round town I stopped at an herb seller stand. Did the woman have something for my bites? My skin reaction was bad, she said, because I had "dirty blood" that needed a flushing. She gave me an "all-purpose" mix of seeds and barks, to be boiled twice into tea.*

*At dinner the hotel kitchen was good enough to make my tea—as the seller said, bitter! But I was given a small demitasse china cup with the Hotel logo on it, as consolation. Belize food is something! We are trying all the regional standbys—fried jack, Johnny cakes, stew beans and rice, conch soup, and lobster salad (all lobster; not a leaf of lettuce!). On our walk I bought a home-baked Creole bun (traditionally made with coconut milk) from a girl name Ruby. I'll bake them next Easter breakfast....*

*On the morrow, we were taken on an outboard water-taxi ride from the dock across the street from the hotel to Caye ('Key') Caulker, a fishing village on the inner caye that faces east toward the longest barrier reef in the world. Three of the merely four coral atolls in the western hemisphere exist off the coast of Belize.*

*Now middle-aged, JC and I chose not to snorkel but enjoyed vicariously the underwater views that the reef offers the younger and heartier. Near the gush of the reef's narrow opening, which many a boat has failed to clear, we were content to watch sting rays gliding beneath transparent waters. Eight a.m. at the following morning, after a tropical rain shower, I sat in my bathing suit on the second-story deck at Lena's, a typical sea-green and white seaside hotel, with naught to contemplate except calm waters and the coming breakfast at Glenda's—all in keeping with Caye Caulker's motto: Go slow....*

*Our second evening on Caye Caulker, the harbor light is on the water and a cooler wind has come up. The sky is heavy and starless, the sea as black as sea can be. We are just returned from a souvenir hunt along the village's main street (business in the shops in best after the sun goes down). A t-shirt from The Other Side of the Moon restaurant is tucked carefully in my duffle bag....*

*Back on the mainland at the Bellevue, its staff graciously agreed to store our extra luggage. We have chosen three side trips and engaged a driver—strenuous days ahead! Our driver, Elijah Sutherland, having conducted Belize tours for 30 years, is on the eve of his retirement, to Belize travelers' great loss.*

Belize economy almost collapsed as a result of the 1930's great depression, together with a 1931 devastating hurricane. In 1934 labor union demonstrations and riots marked the beginning of a move toward independence. But despite improved economic conditions during World War II, and service of Belizeans in the armed forces, the financial situation worsened again when Britain devalued the British Honduras dollar. The People's Committee demanded independence, and its successor, the People's United Party, sought constitutional reform of voting rights.

Constitutional reforms were initiated in 1954 but it not until 1964 was a new constitution realized, and British Honduras secured self-government, with George Price its first prime minister. Officially renamed in 1973, Belize wasn't fully independent until 1981, when it freed itself from a Guatemalan claim to sovereignty. In the interim, a 1500-member British troop remained as protection against the Guatemalan threat. Finally, in 1992, Guatemala recognized Belize independence, Britain removed its military except for a training unit to aid the Belize Defense Force, but a border dispute seems to linger on. Meanwhile, the United States is one of Belize's major trading partners, with sugar the chief crop and the banana industry the country's biggest employer. After agriculture, tourism is the country's second priority of development.

*From Belize on the east we traveled southwest on the Western Highway a short distance to the Belize Zoo. A highlight of our trip, the zoo is a sprawling jungle park with wandering trails. Its various animal areas are enclosed by wire fences made almost invisible by overgrowing vegetation. I didn't know until then that such a thing as a black jaguar existed—shiny blacker spots on a sleek black hide, lying under a tree up against a vine-covered fence. As I knelt beside the fence and the cat turned its head toward me, I looked directly into the yellow glow of its eyes.*

*Making my way back to the car I stopped, oblivious to the humidity and sun, drawn to an area dominated by large trees. Soon a macho howler monkey of his clan came swagging along the fence; no doubt who was boss there! He sounded a call, rising in a crescendo that was joined by the females, who*

*emerged one by one in the trees above. They were putting on a show it seemed, especially for me. When I arrived at the car long after JC and Elijah, the howler monkeys still were howling. Elijah opened one of the oval pods that grow off cocoa tree trunks, revealing the rows of beans inside that the natives lay on tarps to dry; and JC took a photo of a trogon bird, rare even in Belize, with its blue head and yellow breast .*

*Leaving the zoo, we traveled a similar distance along the Western Highway to Belmopan. The 1931 hurricane wasn't Belize's only one in recent history, Elijah filled me in as we swang through the town. Four others since 1931 also wreaked great damage, and it was two of them striking Belize City that caused Belize's capital to be moved to Belmopan, some 50 miles inland. Had I known, I told Elijah, I might have confirmed that the season for our trip (it was December) was the best one! Out of Belmopan we took the Hummingbird Highway southeasterly; near Dandriga-- the Brits main port in the 17<sup>th</sup> century-- we turned due south. We were traveling parallel with the tracks of the old railroad once used for moving bananas and other goods, as we headed for the Jaguar Reef Lodge, our one big splurge....*

*The travel books weren't kidding when they talked about sand fleas—tiny little bugs with what it seems must be BIG teeth, leaving a bite hole 10 times their size which on certain people (like me) swells an archipelago of surrounding skin into an itching Mount Vesuvius. I was unprepared for them at the Jaguar Reef Lodge , where we stayed overnight-- a white stretch of virgin beach where one looks out from the dining terrace onto clear blue sky and sea. Those little buggers are invisible, or at least so they were to me when I sat on the stoop outside our room, feet in the sand, waiting for JC the next morning to go to breakfast, and neglected to put on repellent....*

*North again, beyond Belmopan to the Five Sisters Waterfalls that cascade into one "blue hole." It rained all night on our thatched-roof cabana at Five Sisters, stopping just in time for us to have breakfast on the deck. We are feeling that motoring with Elijah is the greatest way to go. He takes care of everything from drinking water to room reservations and what he can share about his homeland is priceless.*

*Past San Ignacio to Melchor de Mencos and the Guatemala border, altogether about 70 miles west of Belize City; high noon, past Customs, still on unpaved road. Traveling through vast sub-tropical, lush expanses of jungle forest broken by orange groves, the drive to the ancient Mayan city of Tikal will take some three hours. Elijah tells us that the road, which 30 years ago took him nine hours to drive, now is in "pretty good shape." He points out tall trumpet trees used by the ancient Maya trumpeters to sound the day's passage from temple tops.*

*Elijah's travel-worn Mitsubishi slows down to pick its way through a small herd of Brahma cows. Dense greenery stretches from the roadway to the western horizon. Here and there one sees thatched-roofed huts built by their inhabitants exactly as their ancestors' homes were, 2000 years ago. The sides are made of neatly aligned, slim stripped tree trunks, but not of the once abundant mahogany. "The British were first to mine Belize for choice building woods, and gum trees for rubber," Elijah responds to my curiosity. The Mitsubishi is forced to stop altogether while a religious procession—a local church's "novena" celebration—passes the car on both sides. Singing villagers, colorfully costumed in feast-day attire, carry a flowered altar.*

*Language in the region is endlessly fascinating. Amid Belize's national language of English one hears many "Kriol" forms of African/Mayan and African/Mixteco blends. Belizean Garifuna lingo is fun for a linguistically-bent tourist. I asked Elijah about a sign I had seen above some restaurants in cities we*

*passed through: Dis du fue we chicken. He had trouble understanding my enunciation, but when he got it he laughed heartily. "Oh! You mean, 'DIS da fu WE chicken!'"--in other words, THIS, the chicken for US!--chicken prepared the way natives like it. But I liked best the line in the little local paper, which had this to say over a story about a fallen politician: "Butty noh so big now!"*

*Past Lake Peten, past pretty little Mayan villages...the road paved for the last 20 miles into Tikal; bright red hibiscus and blue morning glories; enormous palms of every type and elephant-ear plants with such huge leaves one expects the real thing to emerge from beneath them at any moment. The hills look like they're covered with gigantic broccoli; unbelievable, how much plant life can spring from earth. Land between villages is occupied by farms. The houses, built on pilings, are reminiscent of America's deep south. Drawn from their porches, line after line of freshly washed laundry flared over the moist ground. I thought, "Is every woman in Belize a laundress?" until it dawned on me that I was in the region of large families. "My grandmother had 22 children. Yes!-- all with the same husband," Elijah nodded cheerfully.*

*We paid our respective (then) 50 Quetzels (\$4.25) admission at Tikal Park entrance, disappointed that Elijah had to wait in the parking lot, no matter how agreeable he was about it. But I respected him for honoring the unwritten code, that it was unfair for knowledgeable drivers to take business away from park guides. But he told us to be certain to see the replicated stela (large standing rock slab) bearing testimony of the period when Caracol's temple reportedly overshadowed Tikal. The original stela is in Pennsylvania, whose University archaeologists had explored Mayan sites. "As replicas go, it isn't too bad," Elijah said, acknowledging he "wasn't too mad" about the original residing outside of Belize....*

*I couldn't wait to see Tikal's main pyramid which I before had seen only in photos. But when I came into the clearing of the main plaza my mind for an instant was rendered thoughtless, like the mouth, speechless, at a totally unexpected amazing revelation: the temple had a twin at the direct opposite side of the plaza! Uncapturable with a camera, the eyes only could move from one to the other, imagining a throng in the square with those imposing, incredible pyramiding stone edifices at either end....*

*Tikal covers six square miles of ancient city, of which many building remain unexcavated. I wandered through the now roofless little 'villas' along the plaza's perimeter. Coming 'round one wall I became for one moment a daughter of Mayan aristocracy, glancing up to the nearby pyramid but not seeing it—as a woman on Park Avenue absorbed in daily life no longer marvels at neighboring edifices. Mexico, Belize and Guatemala have had an international organization called "Mundo Maya," toward developing a corridor of improved road linking the major Mayan sites. (As I edit this travelogue a decade later I wonder whether it is still a live project....)*

*Belize, a nation so tiny it's a traveler's delight, I'm thinking, as we make for the Mayan site of Caracol, only 25 miles south of San Ignacio but some 50 miles of road to reach it. I'm wondering whether my trick knee will hold out, as the Mitsubishi joggles past groves of majestic cohune palms. Their nuts are used for coconut oil; their hearts, eaten as a vegetable.*

*Indeed, Elijah seemed to have family everywhere! Such was true at San Ignacio. There, at the entrance to the Maya mountains, after our marathon day of sightseeing, we ate cheesecake and drank Belizean coffee in a cozy hotel restaurant, part of a small motel which (you guessed it) was owned by one of his relatives. There was a beautifully decorated family Christmas tree all alight; and I noticed that the very front ornament had on it the picture of a new baby of the clan, as we headed gratefully for bed....*

*Caracol is in the deep jungle heart of Belize on the Vaca Plateau, in the Cayo District. It was discovered in 1938 by a logger although excavation didn't begin until the 50's. The "Caana" pyramid at Caracol is said to be the tallest structure in the country. Despite only 100 or so steps to the third level, those steps, however, are 15 to 18 inches high! I did some on all fours, and smiled breathless accord with another middle-aged, American lady tourist's remark: "How is it?—every time one starts to climb, the sun comes out in full force!"*

*My handwriting squiggled on the page, receiving the last of the toil that driving the rain forest takes on vehicles, as we head back to Belize City and our hotel. When Elijah began his touring business, he told us, he used Land Rovers that then cost 7,000 Belizean dollars. "Today they cost 125,000," he noted, "approximately \$62,000 American."*

*I was going to miss sitting in the Mitsubish, miss throwing on levis and a t-shirt, miss the feeling of a hot shower washing away the sweat of a perfect day. There was a plane somewhere that we would be on tomorrow; but the beckon of Mexico City wasn't enough to salve the knowledge that JC and I were nearing the end of the best trip, so far, of our livestimes. (And I hope that up or out there he's been smiling down on my hands on the keyboard, and glad I made a record of it....)*