

## The Mayan Ruins Of Belize



Belize has the highest concentration of Mayan Ruins in the World, With over 600 sites identified. Ancient Mayans flourished from around 300 BC to 900 AD. Archaeologists estimate that 2,000,000 Mayans once lived in what is now Belize, which currently has a population of about 300,000. They built cities, palaces and pyramids with their own hands in the unwelcoming jungle. Their sacred colors are red, blue, yellow and green. The diverse species of tropical forests supplied the essentials. The rivers provided transportation and the limestone formations provided building blocks. Over a span of nearly 2,000 years, the Mayans developed a cosmology, an arithmetic system that included the concept of zero, a calendar system based on a comprehension of astronomy and a system of writing, which included both hieroglyphics and phonetics. The Mayan civilizations were rediscovered by explorers in the 18th Century with more discoveries still to come by archaeologists today. Belize was known to be the center the great Mayan civilization. There are estimates of thousands of Maya Ruin Sites within the country. Only a small number have been found and fewer have been excavated.

### The Belize Museum

The Belize Museum holds artifacts that have been gathered throughout the country. All ancient monuments, over 100 years old, are considered property of the state. Possession, removal, destruction, buying or selling is considered illegal. Many finds have been left on-site, or transferred to the new [Museum of Belize](#) in Belize City. The goal of [The Institute of Archeology](#) is the Protection, Preservation and Promotion of the rich cultural heritage of Belize. Some of the most popular sites available for viewing are:

### Altun Ha

Altun Ha, the archaeological site closest to Belize City, was a major ceremonial center and the discovery site of Belize's famous Jade Head. Altun Ha functioned as a central trading link between the Caribbean



coast and Maya centers in the interior during the Maya Classic Period. Two main, plazas with some thirteen temples and residential structures, have been excavated here. A unique feature of this site is the absence of carved stelae, while its most notable artifact is a large jade carving of the Maya sun god "Kinich Ahau." Weighing almost ten pounds, this six-inch carving is the largest carved jade object to be found in any Maya community in the region. A national treasure, a replica of the "Jade Head" is on display at the Museum of Belize and its likeness watermarked on all Belizean currency. Altun Ha is located near Rockstone Pond Village in the Belize District. Although there is no public transportation to the site, this is a popular day tour with hotels and tour operators in the area as well as with the cruise

lines at port in Belize City.

### Caracol

The Caracol Archaeological Reserve includes the Mayan ruin of Caracol, the largest Mayan site in the country. This ancient city had much importance and was large, advanced and hidden from the world by rain forest. Caracol encompasses 30 square miles of high canopy tropical rain forest, which is populated by various species of birds, cats, and howler monkeys. Caracol, meaning "the supremacy of lord water," was re-found in 1938. The largest pyramid in Caracol, "Canaa" meaning Sky Place, is 143 feet high, making it the tallest man-made structure in Belize. Also included are several pyramids, three plazas, an astronomical observatory and many smaller buildings.

Excavation and reconstruction is ongoing and there is a new visitor's center with photographs and diagrams of the site, as well as artifacts and a ceremonial altar. Caracol is located in the Chiquibul Rain Forest and is surrounded by rich flora and fauna. The ruins of Caracol are located in the



Vaca Plateau of the Cayo District. Next to the ruins is Caracol Camp, located at about Mile 46 of the Chiquibul Rd.

## Lamanai



Lamanai, one of Belize's largest Maya centers, sits on the bank of the 30-mile long New River Lagoon in the Orange Walk District. Lamanai features monumental architecture of temples and palaces dating from the Classic and Pre-Classic periods. Set in tropical forest and providing spectacular views from several of its large temples, Lamanai provides a unique glimpse into the culture of the Maya and the biological diversity of the tropical forest. This Mayan center, Lamanai (meaning submerged crocodile), thrived for nearly three millennia. The Lodge that overlooks the New River Lagoon combines education, relaxation and exploration in a habitat rich in history and ecology. This research center, a Belize non-profit organization has been active since 1992. It offers the largest inland body of fresh water in Belize, several endangered species, over 350 species of birds and over 700 Mayan structures making it a wonderful research and educational site for many scientific disciplines. [Jungle River Tours](#) (Lamanai Mayan Ruins) offers excellent, well guided tours up the New River to the ruins. +501-302-2293 or +501- 670-3035.

## La Milpa

La Milpa is the third largest Maya site in Belize. The ceremonial center is built on a high limestone ridge, and, with more than 24 courtyards and over 85 structures, is in the topmost rank of Maya sites. The Great Plaza is one of the largest public spaces in the Maya world. Beyond the Great Plaza lie other plazas, pyramids and buildings, which gradually merge into the surrounding jungle. Located in the Rio Bravo Conservation Area in Northwestern Belize.



## Xunantunich



Pronounced Zoo-nan-two-nich and meaning "lord of war and fertility," this site is about 325 square yards, and is located near the western border, across from San Jose Succotz, about eight miles west of San Ignacio in the Cayo District. The most prominent pyramid, El Castillo, meaning the Castle, is 130 feet above the main plaza and has panoramic views of the Cayo District. On a clear day, you can also see across into nearby Guatemala, and over towards Caracol in the Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve. Xunantunich is made up of six major plazas and more than 25 temples and palaces. To visit from San Ignacio, take Benque Viejo Road to San Jose Succotz. From there, a hand-cranked ferry will take you across the Mopan River and then there is about a mile walk to the entrance. The ruins are open daily from 8AM to 4PM.

*Information obtained per various sources including websites and advertising.*