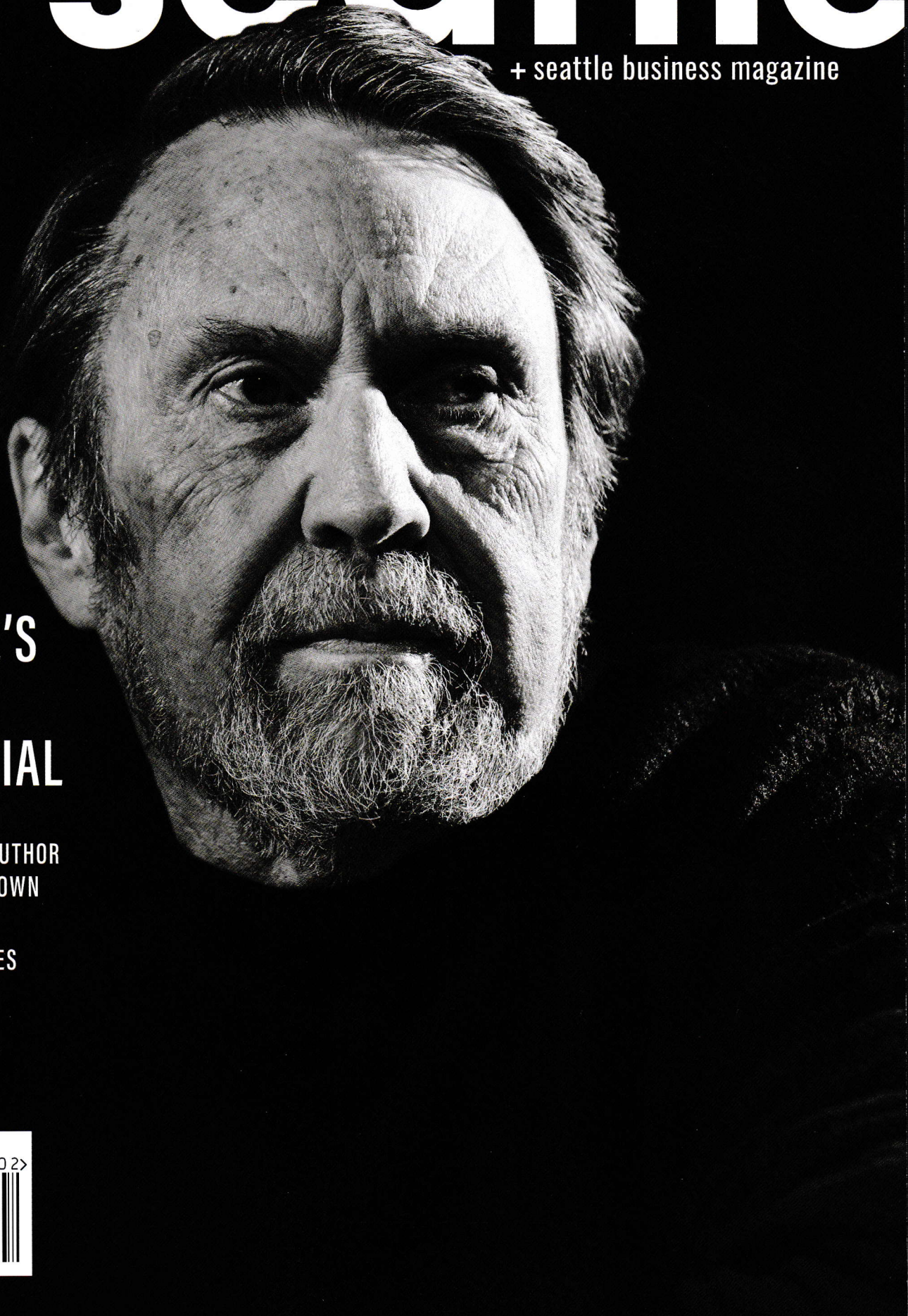


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# YOU BETTER BELIZE IT

FLY NONSTOP FROM SEATTLE AND ENJOY THE JUNGLE, THE SEA,  
AND EVERYTHING ELSE THE COUNTRY HAS TO OFFER

BY GREG FREITAS & NATALIE COMPAGNO



**B**elize burst onto Seattle's radar two years ago with the announcement of the first nonstop flights on Alaska Airlines. Overnight, this tiny Central American gem, nestled between Mexico, Guatemala, and the Caribbean, became more accessible and enticing to travelers from the Pacific Northwest.

With its colonial past as British Honduras, Belize is the only English-speaking country in the region. But the blend of European, Central American, Mexican, Spanish, and Caribbean influences doesn't even begin to describe Belize's unique potpourri of cultures. The landscape is dotted with numerous Mayan temples, both ready to visit and still under excavation. The jungles teem with wildlife, including the elusive jaguar and the world's first nature preserve dedicated to the well-being of that magnificent beast.

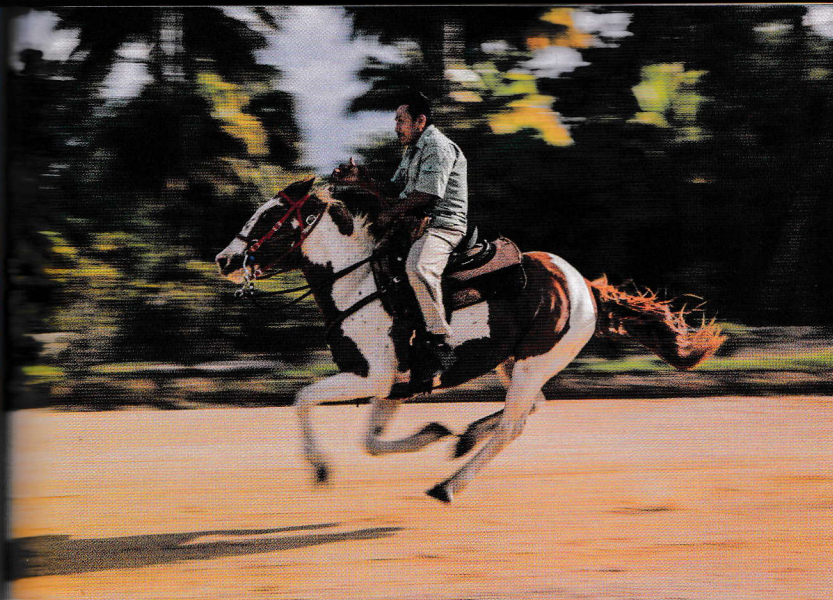
In addition to its ancient Mayan history, Belize has another indigenous population dating back hundreds of years, the Garifuna. This vibrant culture descends from the Afro-Caribbean and Carib people escaping the British on the island of Saint Vincent, arriving in Belize around 1802.

Of course, for Seattleites there is also the overwhelming allure of immersive heat and warm, soothing water. Belize boasts fishing, diving, and snorkeling to rival anywhere in the world. Most of these beach adventures begin in the town of San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. Take a puddle jumper from the airport in Belize City and in just 15 minutes the island vibes begin.

## SUN, SAND, SEA

**San Pedro** has the relaxed, louche appeal of a Jimmy Buffett song or an Elmore Leonard novel. (Donald Westlake's humorous smuggling caper *High Adventure* is set throughout Belize and is the perfect beach read pairing.) Everyone you meet will be wearing flip-flops or driving a ubiquitous golf cart, and the locals are incredibly friendly. Some expats carry the aura of escaping from something, whether city life back home or something more nefarious, but that doesn't change the easygoing nature of the island.

**Ambergris Caye** is a 25-mile-long narrow island, formerly a peninsula, separated from mainland Mexico by the Mayans about 1,500 years ago. Today, it is a delightfully disorganized jumble of shops,



restaurants, and beach bars as far as the eye can see. Don't miss **Palapa Bar & Grill**, a rite of passage for first timers who can enjoy inaugural rum punch, or Landshark Lager served to them as they bathe in the Caribbean's healing waters. The L-shaped dock leads to stairs descending into the ocean and features easy chairs and a rope slide for delivering buckets of beer. Lodging options are numerous as well. Those looking for luxury should seek out **Victoria House Resort & Spa**, or **Alaia Belize**, an Autograph Collection property, but simple hotels, condos, and Airbnbs loom everywhere.

Paradoxically, San Pedro is not noted for its beaches. The shallow waters are surrounded by mangrove forests, making swimming iffy and murky. No problem. Hire a taxi or show off your golf cart skills and head to **Secret**

**Beach**, the not-so-secret beach just north of town. You'll know when you arrive as the twice-human-size SECRET BEACH sign greets visitors and begs for selfies. Along with hot sand and refreshing water, you will find beach chairs, cold beer, fresh food, and umbrella drinks galore.

San Pedro has a surprisingly robust dining scene and almost any alluring doorway or sign leads to flavorful meals. **The Truck Stop** is, as the name implies, a parking lot filled with local food trucks and well worth a visit. Sample the fare while sipping a cold Belikin. PUR has boutique cabanas surrounding a cocktail and taco bar. For brunch, sports on TV, or a pool game with new friends, post up at **The Dog House at Tres Cocos**. The blended coconut mojitos are addicting.

**Robin's Kitchen** serves legit Jamaican cuisine just a short walk from the hotels, so if you're feeling that jerk chicken/Red Stripe craving, dine with the locals.

**Estel's Dine by the Sea** serves hands down the best breakfast in San Pedro. Indulge in Johnny cakes, breakfast burritos, and more at the tranquil seaside location.

Belizean waves beckon. Hire a craft for snorkeling, or head out for an all-day adventure to dive at the legendary **Blue Hole**. Swim with nurse sharks (not dangerous) or accidentally catch a reef shark (slightly dangerous). Fishing in the Caribbean is a treat, and many outfitters take out groups for half- and full-day rod-and-reel adventures. Afterward, the group's catch is delivered to a local restaurant so guests can savor the expertly prepared fresh fish.

**Caye Caulker** is another popular boat trip, to an even smaller, more laid-back island nearby. Order a margarita at **The Lazy Lizard** and bask in the sun, knowing that you embody both laziness and a lizard. If time permits, stay overnight to get away from the "busy" nightlife in San Pedro.

There are also many charming shops in San Pedro, and visitors can be seen around town proudly wearing t-shirts that say, "Do you Belize in Life after Love?" or "UnBelizeable" and the ubiquitous "You Better Belize It" without sarcasm. Belizean Breezes is a chic shop with homemade soaps, candles, and other beauty products for those

Clockwise from left: Enjoy the rooftop pool at the **Alaia Belize**, horseback riding at **Blancaneaux Lodge**, and check out **Mayan Ruins** at Xunantunich.

wanting to avoid slogan-laden tchotchkes. It's also OK if you decide to take home a sign announcing, "We Belize." It's been known to happen.

Ambergris Caye can simultaneously lull and entertain, providing travelers with a rejuvenating and rewarding week or long weekend, and yet the true heart of Belize is on the mainland. To experience one of the world's most magical ecosystems, be sure to make an expedition into the jungle.

#### WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE: A WILDERNESS RETREAT

As a small, independent country, Belize has been proactive and successful at managing its resources and preserving its environment.

In 1986, zoologist Alan Rabinowitz achieved a milestone in what would become his legacy: convincing the Belizean government to ban the hunting of jaguars.



### The Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary

opened the same year, becoming the first place on the planet to preserve these beasts of prey. Battling local bureaucracy, tradition-bound locals, and dangerous poachers, Rabinowitz finally achieved his dream of protecting the enigmatic big cat. His book, *Jaguar: One Man's Struggle to Establish the First Jaguar Preserve*, should be required reading for visitors and is one of the most riveting nature books ever written.

Tourists wishing to spot a jaguar are certainly welcome to try. Just know that there are locals who have lived in the jungle for 20-plus years without ever seeing one. The best places to immerse yourself in jungle life are in one of the many outstanding ecolodges clustered around the small town of **San Ignacio**. **Blancaneaux Lodge** is owned by Francis Ford Coppola and offers all the amenities of a posh hotel. **Black Rock Lodge** is more modest but equally wonderful, with the **Macal River** flowing lazily below for swimming and the full array of yoga, hikes, and waterfalls. A more obtainable thrill is

From top: Explore the small island of Caye Caulker off the coast of Belize, and enjoy a cocktail at Blancaneaux Lodge. Right: The ATM is a cave that includes skeletal remains.

the quest to spot the iridescent blue morpho butterfly, which flocks the rainforest.

### MAYAN MARVELS

Humble **San Ignacio** is not without its charms. Be sure to have dinner at **Ko-Ox Han-Nah** ("Let's Go Eat") for a deep dive into indigenous Mayan cuisine. Thus fortified, set out to visit the local Mayan temples. **Cahal Pech** is easily accessible in town to get a taste of ancient history.

For an unforgettable experience of having these glorious ruins all to yourself, hire a driver or a car to visit **Xunantunich**. After traversing a narrow river by hand-pulled ferry, visitors are free to explore perfectly preserved Mayan temples, altars, stelae, and burial sites at will. Climb to the top of the 130-foot main temple, aka **El Castillo**, and gaze into the vast jungle across the border into Guatemala.

Another adventure on the way back to Belize City is the **ATM** cave system, which stands for **Actun Tunichil Muknal**, in which explorers can seek out the Crystal Maiden, the skeleton of a young lady who may have been sacrificed to the gods.

### HOPKINS AND DANGRIGA

The ideal Belizean adventure would conclude with a visit to the coastal towns of **Hopkins** and **Dangriga**, where visitors can immerse themselves in the distinctive culture of the Garifuna people. Hopkins is known for its welcoming community, lively drumming, dance traditions, and delectable Garifuna cuisine. Take a drumming and dance lesson to experience the spirited rhythms of Garifuna language, dance, and music, which were recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Just a short drive from Hopkins, Dangriga is another hub of Garifuna culture. Explore the **Gulisi Garifuna Museum** to gain insight into history, art, and traditions. Savor traditional Garifuna fare like hudut (a fish and coconut stew), and cassava bread.

The Garifuna culture is an essential part of Belize's diverse tapestry, offering a glimpse into the rich heritage of its Afro-Caribbean communities and a deeper appreciation for the cultural mosaic that makes Belize unique. **S**

