

NOMAD

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TRAVEL MAG

Gobbled Up By Nature

*Wading Into Belize's
Many Caves*

Descend Into Darkness

Great Blue Hole Diving

Escape To Dry Land

*Mayan Ruins
and Funky Fauna*

BELIZE

Rolling in the Deep

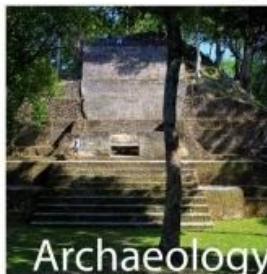
A

region with myriad archaeological sites, tumbling jungles, pine-clad mountains, and a Swiss-cheese-like topography (hundreds of caves pock the area), Cayo District is a giant outdoor playground with a fascinating cast of characters. Mayas, Mestizos, and Mennonites live here, as do Garífunas, Creoles, and expats. English is Belize's official language, and many Cayo locals speak that and more: You'll also hear Spanish, Creole, Mayan dialects, and German.

It's no larger than Massachusetts and home to only about 330,000 people, but Belize is a geographic and cultural melting pot. This we noted as soon as we crossed the border from northern Guatemala's Tikal and Flores area into Belize's Cayo District, where we spent four days of our trip.

Iguanas and Spiders and Owls Oh My!

Article &
Photos /
Melissa
Denchak



Archaeology

MPR Reserve

Caves



**EXPLORING
CAYO
DISTRICT**

In San Ignacio, the Cayo District's main hub, Shon and I played with green iguanas (the San Ignacio Resort Hotel rears and releases the lizards as part of an on-site conservation project) and explored the nearby ruins of Cahal Pech, which once served as the hilltop home of an elite Maya family. Turns out, iguanas cling like static. And no, Shon did not eat any lizard heads.

We ventured deep into two wet caves: Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM) and Barton Creek. The ancient Mayas believed both were entrances to the underworld and used them as spots for human sacrifices, ritual bloodletting, and hallucinogenic vision quests (there are still old ceramics and bones in each). We swam through much of ATM (at times, the water was so deep we couldn't touch the ground; sadly, taking photos was impossible) and

sat in a canoe while our guide paddled us through Barton Creek. (That sounds hoity toity, but it's how the tour is run, okay? It's billed as the romantic, couple-y thing to do and there's nothing romantic about arguing over who paddled the canoe into a stalagmite. In this hypothetical scenario, it was Shon.)

One day, while at a small, rustic (read: no electricity/read: Shon's choice) lodge called Moonracer, we did a local tour offered by our hosts that entailed hiking to a series of rarely visited caves. Here, with the help of headlamps, we squeezed into small, dark spaces where we saw fishing bats, scorpion spiders, and big, burly-looking arachnids that I suspect are called fat-a\$\$ mother f*ckers. But that's just a guess.

Continued...



**PHOTOS /
Melissa Denchak**

Exotic Bird Watching

Hiking through the jungles of Belize you'll come across some fantastic creatures. With a sharp eye on your surroundings you might catch a glimpse and, if you're quick, a photo of owls, toucans and toucanets in the wild.

PHOTO LEFT / The toucanet and his giant schnoz!
(His head is poking out from the trunk of the tree.)
ABOVE / Owl on a rocky ledge watching over the hikers.

Incredibly, there were also plenty of ancient Maya ceramics, like pots and plates. It's amazing that after so many centuries, these items still exist and that people have resisted the urge to claim them as their own.

We were served a mystery rodent for lunch at our guide's house, but what I'll most remember from our tour occurred just as I stepped from one of many dark caves into a sunny opening. A half-dozen giant rat bats whirled around me, but I paid them no mind. Instead, I struggled to find the words to tell Shon to ignore the bats and Look!! where I was pointing. In front of us, a burrowing owl stared down from the edge of high rock ledge. Never had I seen an owl like that in the wild, and my heart broke just a little at how incredible the world is.

On hikes through dense, dark jungles where giant palm trees towered above us, we worried about the highly venomous and common fer-de-lance snake; fortunately, we spotted a keel-billed toucan and a rarer toucanet, instead.

In the Mountain Pine Ridge (MPR) Forest Reserve—Belize's hilly take on the New Jersey pine barrens—we flicked ticks off our skin (really, it's just like the pine barrens), swam in a warm waterfall, saw a silver fox, and stayed at a pretty resort called Gaia Riverlodge. The property was located high on a cliff that

overlooked bird-flecked Caribbean pines, the clear Privasion Creek, and a small waterfall called Five Sisters.

The Cayo District isn't as popular as Belize's coastline and cayes, but I thought it was a wild and fantastic destination. After just four days there, I was nowhere near ready to call it quits, but the Caye Caulker Lobster Fest beckoned, and so we set out for the beach. {Melissa}



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In 2012, Melissa moved from New York City to Guatemala with her fiancé and dog. A writer, editor, and consulting communications manager for a Central American travel company, she spends the majority of her time "researching" street food hot spots, practicing her subpar Spanish, exploring the wilds of the region, and planning big adventures. She blogs about all that and more at NotQuiteRoughingIt.com.

