

The Must-Visit Caribbean Destination You've Never Heard Of



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Just a short 30-minute flight on a puddle jumper from Belize City is Placencia, a burgeoning town that was once a sleepy fishing village. Sandwiched between a lagoon on the west and Caribbean Sea on the east, Placencia appears to be an unassuming destination. Modest storefronts line the only main road and verdant vegetation grows throughout. But dive in a little deeper and you'll find that its culturally diverse inhabitants—who range from those of Maya and mestizo descent to American expats—are genuinely friendly with a laid-back attitude inherent to such beach locales. The food, too, is unbelievable (or un-Belize-able if you really want to go there) and there's a little something for everyone—whether you want to explore by land or sea.

Where to Stay



Photo: Alexandra Avila

Nestled within 200 acres of private property is one of the newest kids on the block, Naïa Resort and Spa. A ritzy edifice is not what you come here for, but instead, a cozy and intimate hotel composed of 35 individual accommodations sitting on soft white sand. There's nothing quite like waking up to the sounds of waves crashing against the shoreline and the sight of palm trees swaying back and forth in the wind, which is exactly what you get from a beach-facing bed in a studio room with glass double doors. If the Caribbean waters aren't enough for you, opt for a one-bedroom beach house outfitted with a personal plunge pool.

In the front of the lobby is the main pool, and the properties boasts three restaurants that use only local ingredients as well as a watersports center that

provides kayaks, paddleboards, and snorkeling gear. The ultimate treat, however, may be the tranquil spa surrounded by lush greenery and set in a lagoon dotted with lily pads. It'd be borderline ludicrous if you didn't spend at least one afternoon in the serene oasis. Start off with an aerial yoga class before heading to one of the private treatment suites for a massage or body scrub. Cap it all off by lazing away on the spa's pool deck and you've got your ultimate day in paradise.

What to Do



Photo: Christina Liao

Visit a Cacao Farm

About two hours from [Placencia is Ixcacao](#), a cacao operation owned by husband and wife, Juan and Abelina Cho. Here, you'll learn everything from the history of chocolate to how it is made, while sampling some pure hot chocolate (warning,

it's not the sweet and creamy beverage that you are probably used to) and a variety of bean-to-bar dark chocolates. Don't be alarmed when it melts in your fingers; that's the mark of high quality. If you have time, opt in for a home-cooked lunch by Mrs. Cho, where the star of your meal is a ridiculously scrumptious chocolate chicken, and don't leave without buying a couple of bars (try the dark chocolate with cacao nibs) as souvenirs.

Dive With Whale Sharks

In the spring (around the time of the full moon from March to June), a special part of the Belize Barrier Reef—which, by the way, is the largest in the Northern Hemisphere—is home to the feeding grounds of whale sharks. Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, about 22 miles east of Placencia, is likely your best bet at spotting the largest fish in the ocean. Dive into the clear blue waters and swim alongside these gentle giants for an unforgettable experience.



Photo: Christina Liao

Snorkel at Laughing Bird Caye

Declared a national park in 1991 and only around 11 miles out from Placencia, Laughing Bird Caye is a beautiful isle that sits atop a faro reef that has been carefully preserved, in part with help from coral restoration projects by the community-based organization Fragments of Hope. Feel free to grab a lounge and soak in some sun, but make sure you spend some time in the water and check out the amazing marine life, such as queen angelfish, trumpetfish, and snapper.

Look for Jaguars

For the outdoor enthusiast, head inland to Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary & Jaguar Preserve, the only jaguar reserve in the world. While it's rare you'll catch a glimpse of the stealthy mammal, keep your eyes peeled for black howler monkeys and trek your way through the rainforest to cascading waterfalls.

Explore Mayan Ruins

While Xunantunich is too far of a trip from Placencia, you can still visit smaller archaeological sites Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun in the Toledo District. The former is believed to have been a ceremonial center while the latter has unique construction characteristics that reflect the style of southern Belize. If you decide you want to check out these two ruins, consider bundling it up with your trip to Ixcacao as they are near one another.

Where to Eat and Drink



Photo: Alexandra Avila

Named after the year the country gained its independence from the U.K., 1981 offers up modern cuisine with a Belizean twist. Using high-quality, local ingredients, the care put into the selection process translates onto your

plate. The grilled octopus is cooked to perfection with a nice, deep char and no hint of tough chewiness while the lobster tail paired with a curry cauliflower puree should be your go-to entrée choice. 1981 also arguably serves up the best drinks on the peninsula—with cocktails like the Garden Quencher (made with infused cucumber gin), Spicy Cantaloupe Colada (prepared with infused pineapple ginger rum), and Jalapeño Grapefruit Margarita (infused jalapeño tequila!) on the menu, you'll end up throwing back a few of these delights.



Photo: Courtesy of Rumfish y Vino

While the menu at Rumfish y vino may seem a little all over the place (red curry snapper, braised-short-rib lasagna, fish 'n' chips), the food is not to be missed at this outstanding eatery. With an extensive wine list and tasty cocktails to match (try the mojito made with watermelon-infused rum), you're bound to have a beautiful evening filled with great fare.

Below Rumfish in a white wooden building adorned with hunter green louvered shutters sits Tutti Frutti, a no-frills gelato shop owned by two Italian transplants. Flavors change daily and range from a refreshing pineapple to a rich dark chocolate to a perfume-y violet. Locals claim it's the best in the world, but if there's something that all of Tutti Frutti's patrons can agree on, it's that one scoop just isn't enough.

With organic, direct trade beans from independent producers in Guatemala, quality is the name of the game at the treehouse-esque Above Grounds Coffee. Aside from a good cup of joe, Above Grounds also serves fresh fruit juices and delectable local jams. This might just be the perfect way to kick off your day.

Maya Beach Hotel Bistro is a beachfront restaurant that offers up contemporary Caribbean fare not to be missed. Start off with a watermelon and feta cheese salad or sweet coconut shrimp paired with a spicy mango dipping sauce before moving on to a guilt-laden lobster grilled cheese or a hefty cacao-spice-rubbed pork chop. Cap off the night with a slice of peanut-brittle ice cream pie for an extra-special treat that's shockingly out of this world.

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