

SACRED CAVES & LIGHTHOUSE REEF ATOLL ~ 9 Days

Did you Know?



One of the most powerful birds of prey, the **Harpy Eagle** (*harpia harpyja*), is near-extinction in Central America due to habitat loss and hunting. A reintroduction program originating in Panama is underway and eagles have recently been released in Belize with the assistance of The Peregrine Fund, Las Cuevas Research Station and the Belize Zoo. Harpy eagles are distinguished by their distinctive crest and are known in Belize as the monkey eagle for their tendency to predate on both howler and spider monkeys.



Marine Location

Approximately 35 miles seaward from the eastern border of the Barrier Reef, lies one of Belize's most spectacular atolls – Lighthouse Reef. This elliptical shaped reef system climbs from the ocean floor and surrounds a central lagoon. The surrounding reef is primarily made up of two kinds of coral, the hard hydro-corals (reef-forming coral), such as brain coral or elkhorn coral, and the soft corals, such as sea fans and feather plumes. The sheltered lagoon harbors the Caribbean's most diverse marine environments including a thriving community of fish, invertebrates and coral reefs. One mile off the eastern shore of the atoll, the reef wall quickly drops 2600 feet to the ocean floor below. The interaction between the deeper, open waters of the Caribbean Sea and the sheltered lagoons of the atoll, results in a diversity and abundance of life, which is ideal for sea kayaking, snorkeling and diving. Lighthouse Reef Atoll is one of only four coral atolls in the Caribbean, and home to the famous Blue Hole, a massive underwater cave that is over 1,000 feet across, and more than 400 feet deep.

While exploring the atoll and the surrounding walls and patch reefs, there are opportunities to see grouper, bonefish, angel and parrot fish, stingrays, conger, moray eels, and goatfish; just to name a few. Bird-life includes osprey, royal terns, brown and red-footed boobies, frigate birds, peregrine falcon, mangrove warblers, and white-crowned pigeons. Around the atoll there are nesting sites for loggerhead, green and hawksbill turtles. If we're lucky, we may see them while out snorkeling or kayaking. We will definitely have a chance to see and sample the main staple for Belizean fishermen, the spiny lobster (when in season) and the queen conch.



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Accommodations

Tropical Education Center & Belize Zoo The education center has comfortable accommodations in forest cabanas or our research dorms. Situated in a tropical pine forest setting there is a network of trails and wildlife viewing platforms along with an interpretive center on the property so we can discover and appreciate this unique forest and savannah setting. Right next door is the world famous Belize Zoo which showcases the wildlife of Belize in a series of large natural enclosures. There is no better place to introduce students to the wildlife and diverse ecosystems of Belize.

Half-Moon Cay Basecamp The camp area encompasses approximately 2-3 acres of the 45 acre island, in an area of coconut palms and coral sand. The camp faces east to the open sea. The beach to the east is sandy to the water line with coral rubble and rock outcrops in deeper water. During prevailing Northeast through Southeast winds this is an area of breaking surfing and open ocean swells. In calm conditions this beach area is perfect for swimming and snorkeling patch and fringing reefs. On the north side of our camp the white sand beach faces the sheltered lagoon and is ideal for kayak instruction, swimming and snorkeling coral reefs just off the beach margin.

Daily Itinerary

B= breakfast L = lunch D = dinner

Day 1: Arrive at the Belize International airport and transfer to Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center. After settling into our quarters we are led by a senior zookeeper on a unique nocturnal tour of the Belize Zoo. Organized around the theme of "a walk through the habitats of Belize" with trails leading into pinelands, the forest edge, rainforest and wetlands we are able to see first-hand the remarkable diversity of wildlife in the neo-tropics. The Belize Zoo has gained an international reputation for it's outstanding conservation and education achievements within Belize. *Overnight: Tropical Education Center.D*

Day 2: An early start this morning, as we travel west to the edge of the Mountain Pine Ridge where we begin our remarkable journey back through time into the dark underworld of the Maya. Our destination—Actun Tunichil Muknal—the *Cave of the Stone Sepulcher* (burial vault) is reached after driving ten miles of back roads, hiking a rainforest trail and wading through waist deep creeks. Once at the cave entrance we gear up with helmets and waterproof lights, then wade into the clear, cool water that flows out from the cave mouth. Inside the cave we follow the creek bed to the entrance of a massive chamber that holds an astonishing array of Mayan artifacts; our light beams illuminate ceramic bowls and vases, stone tools, carved slate altars and eerie calcified skeletons of what are believed to be



Recommended Reading

Greenfield, David E., Thomson, Jamie E. 1997
Fishes of the Continental Waters of Belize University Press of Florida

O'Neal, Catherine 2003
Hidden Belize: Including Tikal, Copan, and the Cayes Ulysses Press

Rabinowitz, Alan. 1986
Jaguar, One Man's Struggle to Establish the First Jaguar Sanctuary New York. Island Press

Peedle, Ian 1999
Belize in Focus: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture Interlink Publishing



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sacrificial victims dating back centuries to the terminal classic period of the Mayan civilization. To the ancient Maya, the caves were the entrances to Xibalba (*shil-balba*), a realm inhabited by demonic spirits and powerful gods, an underworld of untold fears and dreams where Mayan shaman, in supposition to the gods, ventured into darkness to conduct their secretive rituals. In our experience the cave of the Stone Sepulcher is one of the most profound archaeological experiences in the Americas. *Overnight: Tropical Education Center. B,L,D*



Day 3: We explore and learn about biodiversity and tropical forest ecology. Paddle inflatable kayaks on the Sibun River, hike interpretive trails and enjoy swimming in hidden pools. *Overnight: Tropical Education Center. B,L,D*

Day 4-8: We travel by motor charter offshore to our basecamp at Halfmoon Cay, Lighthouse Reef. is a stunning 45-acre island with beautiful white sand beaches, coconut groves and a rare littoral hardwood forest. The island is also home to a profusion of wildlife, including a 4,000 strong red-footed booby colony. Because of its biological diversity and rare beauty, Half-Moon Cay was first protected in 1928 and has the distinction as the first protected marine area in the entire Caribbean. Here we have over 50 miles of pristine coral reefs and remote islands as our natural classroom. Using sea kayaks we are active each day paddling and snorkeling amongst coral reefs and mangroves; we study fish behavior, coral reef ecology and invertebrates with options to include scuba diving in our itinerary. Our sheltered beach and warm water is the perfect setting for developing students snorkeling and sea kayaking ability and appreciation. We also learn about Belizean and Garifuna culture; with creative projects and demonstrations involving crafts, stories and music. Our last evening on the island is a grand celebration with a mouth-watering seafood feast, fresh coconut baking and traditional Garifuna drumming and dancing.

Overnight: Halfmoon Cay Basecamp B,L,D

Day 9: After breakfast we transfer by boat back to the coast and travel overland to connect with our international flight home. *B*

Student Responsibilities

- * eager participation in activities
- * understand that we are traveling in remote settings and respond fully to direction from leaders, guides and teachers
- * assist with camp duties including meal preparation and clean up with direction from trip leaders and teachers



Guides and Group Leaders

Both Belizeans and North Americans will pilot the trip. Alongside our NA trip leaders, we will bring in guides who have specific expertise pertaining to the local area. Typically this will involve Garifuna or Creole captains and fisherman on the sea and Mayan or Creole bush guides. Leaders are trained and certified in Emergency First-Aid procedures

Teachers/Facilitators Responsibilities

Generally work with IEC leaders and guides to ensure smooth flow of activities and logistics. Responsible for assigning sleeping arrangements, mustering students to staging areas for meals and activities. Establish standards for accepted behavior.

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Equipment...

Island Expeditions will provide all group and specialized equipment for the duration of the trip. This will include but is not limited to:

- * Base camp equipment at Lighthouse Reef
- * Expedition-equipped sea kayaks, two-person and single boats, paddles, lifejackets.
- * Inflatable two person river kayaks
- * Tents for sleeping
- * Portable field kitchen
- * safety equipment
- * emergency response kit
- * VHF Radio and satellite communication devices as required in remote



Services

- * 2-4 guides/leaders
- * Meals as per itinerary
- * Accommodations, hotels and camps
- * All camping and field facilities
- * International flight arrangements (optional)
- * Lighthouse Reef Park fees
- * Transportation within Belize
- * Pre-trip information packages
- * Free trip for facilitators
- * School Membership with the Belize Audubon Society

Not Included

- * Belize Departure Tax - \$20US
- * Personal gear as specified on equipment list including masks fins, snorkel
- * Items purchased that are of a personal nature

Did you Know?



Watch out for **Hawksbill Sea Turtles** (*eretmochelys imbricata*) while snorkeling out at Lighthouse Reef. They

have a distinctive hawk-like beak and an attractively coloured shell of overlapping scales and feed primarily on sponges. As an endangered species they are in high demand for several commercial products including perfume, oil, and cosmetics.

Trip Costing

The cost of your Belize trip is based on several factors:

- * Group size
- * Number of Facilitators
- * Activities included
- * Dates of travel
- * Length of trip

Itinerary revisions and adjustments are possible and we encourage you to discuss your objectives with our office staff. These changes may effect the trip cost.

The Belize Audubon Society

Is a membership organization founded in 1969. The society is involved in enhancing the development of Belize's Natural Resources through environmental education, protected areas management and advocacy programs.



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