

THE HUMMINGBIRD

Scenic Hummingbird Highway and Belize's Little Capital and Environs



Featuring

- One of the world's most compact capitals
- Belize's most scenic drive
- Jungle lodges
- Caving
- Rivering

Ratings

Ratings are on a scale of 0 to 10. Best is 10.

Natural Beauty:	8
Wildlife & Birding:	7
Hotels:	4
Restaurants:	2
Beaches:	0
Bugs:	6
Health & Hygiene:	7
Fishing:	1
Diving & Snorkeling:	0
Maya Sites:	4
Attractions:	4
Adventure:	7
Value:	5
Safety:	8
Cultural:	3
Shopping:	1
Overall Rating:	7

What to Expect

Belmopan has a reputation as a Nowheresville. Truth to say, the capital is not exactly a jumping place, but nearby is the Hummingbird Highway, the most scenic road in Belize. Also in the area are several top-notch jungle lodges.

Lay of the Land

As you drive west on the Western Highway, you'll pass through lightly populated pine savannah, with a few ranches and some Chinese-owned developments sprouting along the road. About 20 miles from Belize City you begin to see low limestone hills, some in striking formations, rising up from the plain. The highest limestone outcrop is Gracie Rock, near the Sibun River. It was featured in the 1981 Harrison Ford movie, *The Mosquito Coast*. After about Mile 32, the savannah gives way to citrus groves and cattle ranches. The land becomes progressively more hilly and more scenic as you go west.

The capital of Belmopan remains a small town of about 6,000 people. It has the feel of suburbia. Single-family homes with small yards stand on tree-lined streets. Most of the government buildings are nondescript concrete structures. Government offices, a few embassies (the British High Commission is here, but the U.S. Embassy is in Belize City) and commercial buildings are on or near the Ring Road that circles Belmopan.

The Hummingbird Highway begins at Belmopan, edging along the eastern



Government buildings in Belmopan are mostly nondescript and functional

slopes of the Maya Mountains to the Stann Creek Valley. You slowly gain altitude for about 29 miles, when you reach Hummingbird Gap. From then on you are going downhill toward the Caribbean. Technically called the Stann Creek Valley Road as it nears Dangriga, it connects with the Southern Highway about 49 miles from Belmopan.

30-Second History

Belmopan owes its existence to 1961's Hurricane Hattie. Fearing more killer storms, in 1971 George Price and the PUP government moved the capital from Belize City inland some 50 miles. In 1999, Belmopan residents opted for local government, and they elected their first town mayor.

Getting There

There is a small airstrip, the Hector Silva Airport, in Belmopan, but it has no scheduled air service. Buses run frequently on the Western Highway between Belize City and San Ignacio. (*See Cayo section for details.*) Most of the buses stop in Belmopan, or they will drop you at any point along the highway. The buses pull in at an unpaved area near the small market on the west end of town. Novelo's depot is nearby. During the day, buses depart Belmopan at least hourly for both San Ignacio and Belize City. Buses also leave here for Dangriga, via the Hummingbird.

The best way to see the Belmopan area and the Hummingbird is in your own car. Sections of the Western Highway have been resurfaced in 1999-2000, and the Hummingbird is a superb two-lane road.

What to See and Do

Sightseeing and activity ratings are based on a scale of one to five stars.

- ☆☆☆☆☆ Extraordinary — don't miss it.
- ☆☆☆☆ Outstanding — one of the best of its type in Belize and worth a detour.
- ☆☆☆ Noteworthy — worth your time.
- ☆☆ Interesting — above average of its type.
- ☆ Try to visit if in the area.

☆ **Guanacaste Park.** This tiny, 50-acre park, established in 1990, was named after a large guanacaste tree growing near the entrance. Loggers spared the tree because its trunk was split into three parts, instead of having one straight trunk. Don't go out of your way to see this park, but if you're in the area, it's worth a two-hour stop, to hike the trails that loop through the park beside the Belize River. *Daily 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Admission US\$2.50. Directions: Coming from Belize City, the park is on the right at Mile 47 3/4 of the Western Highway, across from the turn-off to Belmopan.*



“Over the top” on the Hummingbird Highway at 29 miles from Belmopan -- from here on it's downhill to the blue Caribbean Sea

☆☆☆☆☆ **Hummingbird Highway:** Once a pot-holed nightmare, with repaving completed in 2000 the Hummingbird Highway is now Belize's best road. It is also the most scenic route in Belize, winding about 55 miles through the Maya Mountains past, at Mile 49, the junction with the Southern Highway and into Dangriga Town. It should be said, however, that the low Maya Mountains, while beautiful, don't compare with the drop-dead high mountain vistas common in highland Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico. As you go “over the top” and leave the mountains, heading into the Stann Creek valley, you'll see large citrus farms. Also note the old railway bridges along the side of the highway, dating from British colonial times. Some of the existing Hummingbird Highway bridges were originally built as railway bridges. The railroad, in existence from around World War I to 1937, was used to transport bananas.

☆☆ **Blue Hole National Park.** One of the pleasures of driving the Hummingbird is stopping at the Blue Hole for a refreshing swim. Except after heavy rains or during very dry periods, the water in the Blue Hole looks intensely blue, like a sapphire. The Blue Hole is actually a collapsed sinkhole in the limestone karst, a *cenote* in an underground river. Years ago, several

visitors here were attacked and their vehicles burglarized, but now there is caretaker on-site, and it is safe to park, leave your vehicle by the road and walk down the steps to the Blue Hole for a swim. It's an expensive swim, though, as the entrance fee, which also includes entrance to the rest of the park, is US\$4. The swimming hole is just one aspect of this 575-acre national park, established in 1986. In the park you can also visit St. Herman's Cave. The cave entrance is about a 10-minute hike from the visitor center. Bring a flashlight. A tour guide is not needed to see the main part of the cave, although to continue on through the cave you will need a guide. There is a 2 1/2-mile signed trail over the cave, which leads to a campground. *Daily 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Admission US\$4. Directions: The Blue Hole visitor center and entrance to St. Herman's cave is about 12 1/2 miles from Belmopan, on the right; the Blue Hole swimming area is about another mile farther on the Hummingbird Highway, on the left just beside the road.*

☆☆ **Five Blues National Park.** This 4,000-acre park, established in 1994, is near St. Margaret village. The park is mostly bush, except for a 7-acre lake. The name of the park comes from the different shades of blue of the lake, which is another, though much larger, blue hole or *cenote* formed by the collapse of a limestone cave. The lake is about an hour's walk from the highway, or a 10-minute drive on a rough, unpaved road. Usually, the park and lake are deserted. Small boats are sometimes available for rent for use on the lake.

Crime and Personal Safety

With its suburban-like setting, Belmopan feels quite safe, and most crime is property crime — burglaries and thefts. The Hummingbird Highway was the site of one of the worst crime incidents in modern Belize history. In May 1998, a group of Guatemalan thugs stopped cars on the Hummingbird near Belmopan, robbing dozens of Belizeans and killing one young Belize Defence Forces soldier before escaping back into Guatemala. Happily, no other serious incidents have occurred on the road, and visitors say they feel completely safe driving it.

Water and Electricity

Belmopan has a municipal water system, with potable water. The remote jungle lodges in the area have their own water supplies, with safe water to drink. If in doubt, ask locally. The Belmopan area is on the power grid, but remote jungle lodges either generate their own electricity or do without.

Lodging

Price categories are for in-season double without meals, not including 7% hotel room tax or service charge, if any. To make comparisons

equitable, rates for hotels which include meals or other items in the tariff are adjusted, reflecting an estimated cost for room only. However, specific rates shown in the listings below are actual rates but do not include 7% hotel room tax, 8% sales tax on meals or service charge, unless otherwise stated.

Most hotels listed, except low-cost budget places, receive a star rating of from one to five stars. Only a few hotels in the country are rated five stars. Keep in mind that, although there is no direct correlation between the price of a hotel room and the hotel's star rating, three- to five-star hotels are likely to be considerably more expensive than average. Some travelers may be willing to accept a lower level of amenities and services in exchange for a lower price, or they may even prefer staying in inexpensive lodging to better appreciate the local culture.

- ★★★★★ One of the top hotels in the Caribbean, well-run with striking location and/or facilities.
- ★★★★ One of the best hotels in Belize, with a dependably high level of hospitality.
- ★★★ Excellent accommodations, with above-average amenities, service and/or hospitality.
- ★★ Good accommodations and often a very good value.
- ★ Functional accommodations, meeting basic needs, and often a good value.

Belmopan Lodging

The only lodging choices in Belmopan proper are small motels and hotels, geared more toward the needs of government bureaucrats than of tourists. Jungle lodges and other more interesting lodging choices are located outside of Belmopan along the Western and Hummingbird highways.

Under US\$75

★★ **Bull Frog Inn.** This will remind you of a small mom 'n pop motel in the U.S. or Canada. Rooms have air-conditioning, cable TV and are clean and comfortable enough, though your bed may not be quite as new as you'd like and the TV picture may roll. Still, the Bull Frog Inn is the best Belmopan offers. Rates around US\$50 to \$70. *25 Half Moon Ave., Belmopan; tel. 501-8-22111, fax 8-23155; e-mail bullfrog@btl.net.*

★★ **Belmopan Convention Hotel.** This is not a Hampton Inn, but you can relax here and maybe have a beer by the pool, the only hotel pool in the Belmopan area. We're told the owner, George Sosa, is a nice guy. Rates around US\$50. *Corner of Bliss Parade and Constitution Drive, across from*

Novelo's terminal; tel. 501-8-22340, fax 8-23066; e-mail gsosa@btl.net; www.belmopanhotel.com.

Jungle Lodges Under US\$200

★★★★ **Jaguar Paw.** If your idea of roughing it at a jungle lodge includes air conditioning, ice-cold martinis and 24-hour electricity, Jaguar Paw may be your kind of place. A lot of lodges claim to offer adventure by day, luxury by night, but this is one that actually lives up to the luxury promise. Opened in 1996, the lodge has 16 rooms in four one-story units located to the back of the main building. Rather than the thatch-roof cabaña style that has become the de facto standard for lodges in Belize, the owners, ex-Floridians Cy and Donna Young, went with North American-style construction. Each room was decorated by Donna in a different theme: Wild West (complete with a John Wayne poster), Chinese, English Country Garden, and African are some of them. The furnishings are of high quality, the beds firm, the accessories and knickknacks of the type rarely found in hotels, for fear of theft by a souvenir-hunting guest. The centerpiece of the restaurant in the Maya temple-inspired main building is a high rock wall with water cascading down. There's a colorful Maya-inspired



Maya-inspired main lodge at Jaguar Paw

mural, painted by Pamela Braun, on the 25-foot high walls of the room. Out back, next to an aviary, framed by luxuriant foliage, waits a beautiful swimming pool. The 24-hour air-conditioning at Jaguar Paw is provided by big, 100 kilowatt generators discreetly tucked away from the hotel. For the adventure part, the lodge specializes in tube floats down the Caves Branch river, which is next door to the lodge. On the trip you float through subterranean caves still filled with Maya pottery and other artifacts. There are some 9 miles of trails on the lodge's 215 acres. Jaguar Paw, like a surprisingly large number of other hotels in Belize, is for sale, though that shouldn't affect operations. Rates: US\$170 double, Dec. 15-May 15, US\$140 rest of year, plus tax and 10% service. Meals extra. AE, MC, V accepted with 3% surcharge. Tel. 501-8-23024, or in the U.S. 888-775-8645; e-mail cyoung@jaguarpaw.com; www.jaguarpaw.com. Directions: Turn south at Mile 37 of the Western Highway and follow the dirt path about 7 miles to the lodge.

Under US\$125

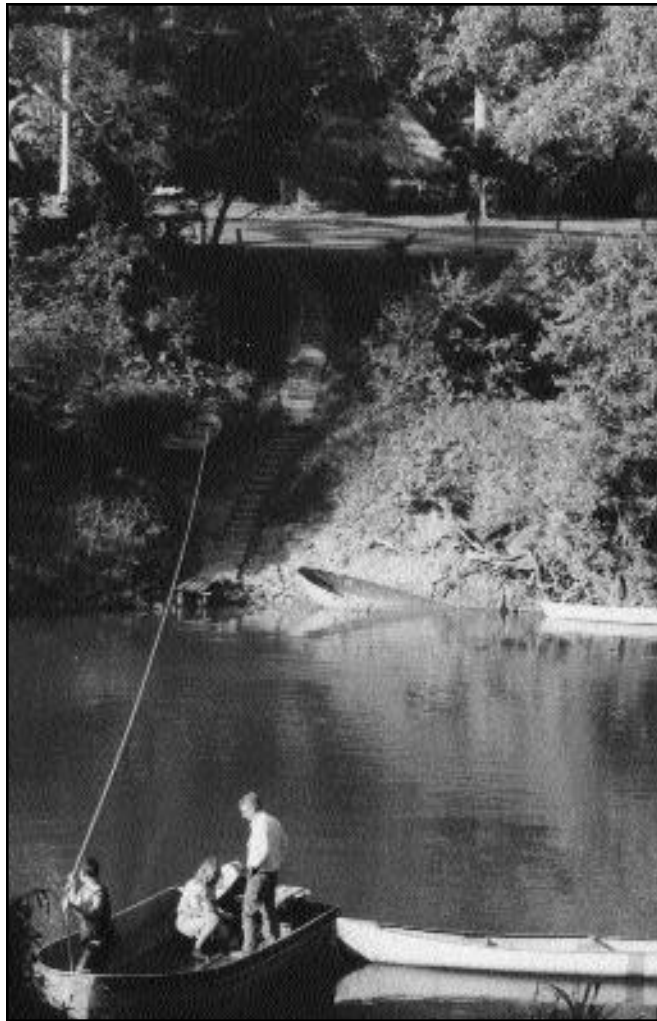
★★★ **Pook's Hill.** How about a remote lodge in deep jungle, next to a river and on the site of a Maya plaza, run by an engaging couple where meals are by lantern-light and you're totally isolated from the cares of civilization? That pretty much describes Pook's Hill, a collection of thatched, Maya-style cabañas on 300 acres next to Tapir Mountain Reserve and the Roaring River. We like the rustic touches here, like hot water for showers from cohune nut fires. Owners Ray and Vikki Snaddon, long-time Belize residents though they're both from other outposts of the British commonwealth, have a green iguana raising project underway. There's horseback riding (US\$55 for a full day, including lunch) and tubing on the river (US\$10 per person) and excellent birding. Rates US\$118 double, with a 30% discount May to October. Meals are US\$6 breakfast, \$9 lunch and \$16 dinner. MC, V accepted with 5% surcharge. P.O. Box 14, Belmopan; tel. 501-8-12017, fax 8-23361; e-mail pookshill@btlnet.net; www.pookshillbelize.com. Directions: Turn south off the Western Hwy. at Mile 52 1/2 at Teakettle village. Go about 4 miles, then turn right and go another 1 1/2 miles to the lodge (the route is well-signed.)

Under US\$100

★★★★ **Banana Bank.** You're guaranteed to see a jaguar at this lodge, because Tika has lived here since 1982. It's okay — the Belize government has granted permission for the lodge to have the jaguar. If you're brave, you can step into the cage and get an up-close and personal picture of a jaguar. John Carr, who in his youth was a real Montana cowboy and rodeo star, in 1973 with a partner bought Banana Bank, then a 4,000-acre ranch with 1,500 head of cattle. At one time the ranch was headquarters for Belize Estates, one of the large companies that in colonial days logged huge tracts of land granted

them by the Crown. John Carr and his wife, Carolyn, have lived on the ranch since 1977, one of a small group of pioneering American expats who adopted Belize as their home. Carolyn is a noted artist; her paintings of Belize street scenes and wild creatures (sometimes both in the same scene) have been widely exhibited, and she has a studio at the lodge. Our favorite is her painting titled “Jimmy Hines,” which shows the old market in Belize City where fishermen are cleaning lobster, snapper and jimmy hines, the local name for a type of sea bass or grouper. Anyway, back to the lodge. It’s a

wonderful, family-oriented spot, a great place for kids. There are five cabañas, with bay leaf thatch, on a bank above the Belize River. The cabañas are spacious, with curving internal walls and — something new — 24-hour electricity. Three more units — these will have air-conditioning — are expected to open in 2001. You can hear howler monkeys calling, and besides Tika, on the grounds of the lodge are toucans, parrots and a spider monkey named Simon. At night you can use the Carrs’ 12” telescope to star



Banana Bank Lodge’s “front door” is across the Belize River, via a hand-pulled ferry

watch under clear Central American skies. The food is filling and tasty, served family-style. Banana Bank is especially good for those who like to ride, as the lodge keeps about 50 horses. The horses are mixed breeds, mostly quarter horses. There's a large stable, a round pen to hone your riding skills and a larger arena. Rates: US\$89 to \$119 double for a cabaña and US\$59 for a lodge room. Rates include breakfast. Lunch is US\$10 and dinner, US\$15. The lodge also offers many packages, including tours, all meals and horseback riding. Transfers from Belize City are US\$25 per person one-way. MC, V accepted. *P.O. Box 48, Belmopan; tel. 501-8-12020, fax 8-12026; e-mail bbl@pobox.com; www.bananabank.com. Directions: Turn north off the Western Hwy. at Mile 47 on a dirt road. Follow signs to a landing on the Belize River. Ring the bell, and a caretaker will bring a hand-pulled boat over to pick you up. The lodge is up the hill. Access by road is also possible via a back route -- ask for directions.*

★★★ **Ian Anderson's Caves Branch Adventure Camp.** Prepare to sweat. Set in a 58,000-acre chunk of private land on the Caves Branch river, this lodge is for travelers who like to do things outdoors. Ian Anderson, a Canadian, and his teams run fairly strenuous caving, hiking and river trips, and they do a top-flight job. They call them adventure trips, not sightseeing. Anderson says: "Of our guests 90% have never had either caving or jungle experience before coming to Caves Branch. We have taken children from the age of 6 to seniors at the age of 76 on many of these expeditions. Age is not necessarily a deciding factor. However, a degree of fitness and, most importantly, your sense of adventure will be the deciding factors." In short, this is not a place for couch potatoes. More than a dozen adventure tours are offered, open to non-guests as well as guests. Each Caves Branch guide has been trained in first aid and in cave and wilderness rescue. The lodge has four types of accommodations: The four cabaña suites are the most upmarket, with a master bedroom with king-size bed, inside bathroom with hot and cold shower and toilet, wicker-furnished living room with pull out bed, at US\$94 double. Six jungle cabañas are more basic, with outside washroom facilities, for US\$58 double. The camp also has budget accommodations in a co-ed bunkhouse, for US\$15 per person; camping is available for US\$5 per person (camp cooking is not allowed.) Buffet meals are delicious and healthful, at US\$12 for breakfast or lunch, US\$17 for dinner. Caves Branch also has a variety of packages, including a one-week "Lost World" trip which takes you to some of Belize's least visited caves, waterfalls and cenotes, for around US\$1,500 a person. No credit cards. *P.O. Box 356, Belmopan; tel./fax 501-8-22800; e-mail caves@pobox.com; www.cavesbranch.com. Directions: About 14 miles from Belmopan at Mile 41 1/2 of the Hummingbird Hwy. (mile markers on the Hummingbird run backwards, starting at Mile 55 at the Western Hwy.), turn left and follow a dirt track to the lodge grounds.*

Under US\$75

★★★ **Warrie Head Lodge.** The theme here is “colonial history in a natural setting” from the white lodge building to the mahogany furnishings in the 10 guest rooms. On the grounds of this former logging camp are several historic relics, including a steam tractor, once used to drag logs to the nearby Belize river, a horse-drawn sugar mill and old chicle pots. Owned by John and Bia Searle and managed by “Miss Lydia,” Warrie Head still caters mostly to groups, but individual guests are welcome. Miss Lydia serves up tasty dinners. Rates are a good value at US\$70 double in-season; from June 1-September 30, rates drop by US\$5, and off-season the seventh night is free with a week’s booking. AE, MC, V accepted. *P.O. Box 244, Belize City; tel. 501-2-70755, fax 2-75213; e-mail: bzadventur@btl.net; www.warriehead.com. Directions: At mile 54 1/2 of the Western Hwy.*

RV Parks/Campgrounds

Tent camping is available at **Ian Anderson’s** (no camp cooking permitted).

Restaurants and Nightlife

All the jungle lodges in the area serve healthful, well-prepared meals, but except with advance notice are for guests only. Other restaurants in the Belmopan area are modest spots, where you can eat a filling meal for around US\$5.

Bull Frog Inn. The restaurant at the Bullfrog Inn is probably the most popular place to eat in Belmopan. The usual Belizean dishes such as chicken with rice and beans are the way to go here. *25 Half Moon Ave, Belmopan.; tel. 501-8-22111.*

Caladium. Near Novelo’s bus terminal, this place has good stew chicken with rice and beans, fish, pork chops and other Belizean dishes for a few dollars. Daily specials. *Market Square, Belmopan; tel. 501-8-22754.*

What Readers Say

From Dangriga I made my way to Belmopan by the Hummingbird Highway. This is a really nice drive and made me wish I was in a convertible instead of an Isuzu Trooper. I ended up making several stops along the way for pictures, checking out the old bridges (railroad bridges), or just to relax. In Belmopan, I stayed at the BULLFROG Inn, which thankfully offers air-conditioned rooms. This seems to be the best hotel in the capital. *Pat Marshall, Houston, Texas*

We just spent eight days in Belize and had a great time, with only a few glitches. People were very friendly, more so than I’ve experienced in Mexico or the Caribbean, and the country is beautiful. The rooms at JAGUAR PAW are spacious and quite nice. The food

was good but not incredible. The drinks and local fruit, however, are wonderful. They grow pineapples on the property and if you order a piña colada they take the whole pineapple, hollow it out, and serve you the drink in the pineapple shell, with the extra pineapple on the side. It was definitely the best drink I've ever had. We thought the staff members were great and very friendly, and clearly they have a good relationship with the owners, unlike many "luxury" establishments. *Vali Frank, Berkeley, California*

JAGUAR PAW, with its imposing main building reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Maya houses in Los Angeles, has got to be the most unusual eco resort in Belize. We loved prowling the jungle paths, cave openings and soaking up the general ambiance of the place. *Gale Randall, Palo Alto, California*

On our honeymoon, my wife and I stayed at the JAGUAR PAW. The lodge is located in a beautiful jungle setting, near the Caves Branch River. The lodge offers exciting day activities (all of which are charged extra to your bill), including nature hikes along miles of jungle trails with an expert local guide, exploration outings in the many caves surrounding the area, trips to the nearby Belize Zoo and Mayan ruins, and (our favorite) inner-tubing down the Caves Branch River THROUGH various caves! In spite of the fact that our stay coincided with the beginning of the rainy season, we thoroughly enjoyed the outdoors "Jaguar Paw" style. On our last night at the Jaguar Paw, Cy and Donna sent a bottle of champagne to our room, which we promptly shared with the other guests, with whom we had quickly become good friends. I'll admit that the lodge is a bit on the expensive side (including meals and activities, we spent US\$1,000 in 3 days.) However, it was completely worth it. *Jason R. Cryan, Raleigh, North Carolina*

We stayed at the BANANA BANK LODGE for three days with our children. The lodge is in a beautiful setting, and is breathtaking to see across the river, where you are pulled across in a boat. There is road access, though it is a little rough, and you really need a 4WD or front wheel drive vehicle to get across the ferry that doubles as a bridge. Banana Bank has a lot of land, and the lodge sits on a beautifully landscaped area that is probably about 10 acres. We stayed in a thatched-roof cabin that was roomy. All the meals, which are simple, good and reasonably priced, are served in their restaurant where everyone sits together at one large table. We met a lot of interesting people this way and quite enjoyed it. The activities were wonderful, we canoed down the river and went horseback riding through the jungle which was an experience none of us will ever forget. The kids loved all the animals there — Tika the jaguar, Festus the spider monkey, and Walter and Margaret the toucans. The kids felt that Banana Bank was one of the best places we visited on our trip because of all the wildlife. *Elizabeth Everitt, Princeton, BC, Canada*

IAN ANDERSON'S CAVES BRANCH was a real adventure and one of the highlights of the trip. It is designed for the affluent adventurer. Accommodations range from bunkhouses to cabañas with private facilities. All the accommodations are pretty rustic. Dinners were family style buffet and among the best food we had in Belize. The cave trips are phenomenal and highly recommended. We did the tube trip: 4 1/2 hours underground among amazing formations and Mayan artifacts. Others who did the crystal cave tour raved about it as well. *Mark Vigder, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada*