

Toursim ≈ 1980s

Belize has always been seen as an interesting country with a lot to teach visitors in the area of culture, anthropology and the biological sciences. Although the country was an excellent field school, there were no hotels for visitors like John Lloyd Stephens who visited in 1839 (Stephens, 1854). Stevens visited on a quest to locate Maya cities in Central America and to observe how the emancipation of slaves had been accepted by whites living in Belize.

By the time the American Confederates¹ began arriving in the 1860s, hotels such as the Hotel Monte Carlo, the Union Hotel, the International Hotel (Figure XX), Belisle's Hotel, Wagner's Hotel and Brewers's Hotel were accepting visitors. Around these times, accommodation was \$1.50-\$2.00 per day.

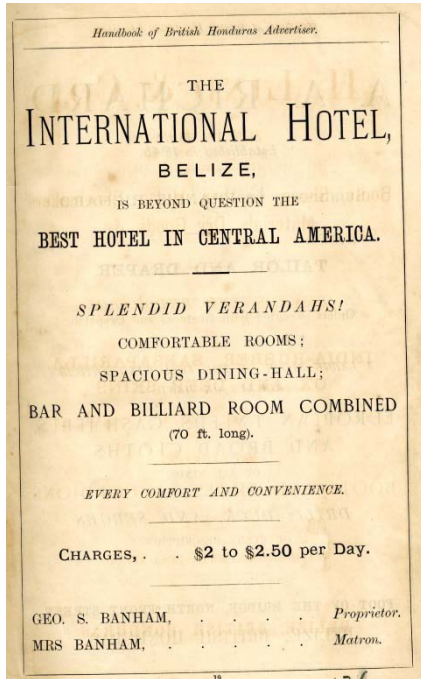


Figure 1: The International Hotel, Belize.

Besides the availability of hotels, there were a number of informal services offered to visitors. For example, when a reporter from The New York Times visited for sea based nature tourism and caving in 1889 (Anon., 1889), he had many guides carrying him to the southern cayes and caves. Other early visitors included persons conducting archaeological, botanical and geographical research. These visitors hired local guides to make their work easier.

Some of the first indications of the viability of a modern tourism industry in Belize came in the 1950s when guides like Charlie Payne,

¹ The Confederates were attracted to Belize because of its British influence and became involved in sugarcane production (page XX).

and Jackie Vasquez were taking foreign visitors to hunt jaguars (*Panthera onca*). Other guides included people like Leroy Eiley, Phillip Andrewin, Jimmy Evans, Roy Baptist, Richard Smith, Joel Westby, Sommers and Martin McCord and George Morales who took tourists fishing. This type of tourism was developed because the biodiversity of most of the country was intact and the tourism product had a resource base on which to develop.



Figure 2: Jaguar hunting was one of the first tours offered in Belize in the 1950s

Jaguar hunting (Figure XX) was done in an area known as Mountain Cow Pass located on the road to the Caracol Maya ruins as well as in the Blue Creek (Orange Walk) area. To book a tour, guests would communicate with guides using letters in the mail. No advertising was carried out and most tourists got to know their guides by word of mouth referrals.

Safari tourism in Belize soon shifted into a product that focused on visits to Maya temples and the forests of the country. This was encouraged by companies like S&L Tours who were able to develop a customer base of families who visited the country over the years. Thus, by the early 1960s, guides such as Lascelle and Sarita Tillet were pricing tours around their dinner table at night, and taking out overland tours by day.

The first institutional investment in tourism was the Fort George Hotel which was developed by the Colonial Government in 1953. This hotel was built because British officials visiting Belize to evaluate projects could not find proper lodging. After the Fort George, one of the first hotels catering to experiential tourism was Barothy's Caribbean Lodge. This was a camp opened by Vic Barothy (Figure XX), an American immigrant who was the first to prove the concept that it was feasible to earn substantial money by catering to visitors seeking to experience the culture and wildlife of rural Belize. These investments were on the mainland but the first hotel on Ambergris Caye was Celi McCorkle's four bedroom Holiday Hotel which started operating in 1965. This was followed by the Paradise Hotel which opened its doors in 1969. Another early player on San Pedro was Jim Currie, a retired Scottish sailor, who operated a luxury yacht.



Figure 3: Mr. Vic Barothy, owner of Belize's first sports fishing lodge.

As the industry developed, locals like David Gegg entered the business around 1972. Gegg got his start in the business when he met some tourists on a flight from the US to Belize. The following day, Gegg took the tourists water skiing. Gegg started Discovery Expeditions soon after and pioneered the water taxi business with "Don Pedro" as the first vessel ferrying tourists from the mainland to San Pedro. Don Pedro was built in St. Petersburg Florida but Gegg personally brought it across the Gulf of Mexico to Belize. Gegg also

started a yacht rental business in 1979. The yacht rental evolved into a tour company in 1982.

Another notable tourism establishment which started just around the time of Independence was Ramon's Reef Resort which was led by San Pedro native, Ramon Nunez. This was later sold to American investors who sold the property to Richard Headrick in 1987. Ramon's Reef Resort has set high standards for other developments which have been built on the island of San Pedro.

Chaa Creek Cottages (Figure XX) has been another success story in the tourism sector in the country. In 1977, Mick and Lucy Fleming, a British couple, moved to Belize and started a family farm on the Macal River, upriver from San Ignacio. The farm produced milk, yogurt, cheese and eggs and attracted tourists visiting San Ignacio. The Flemings then decided to create Belize's first jungle lodge which they called Chaa Creek Cottages. Tourists liked the rural experience which included immersion into the local culture, jungle treks, visits to the Maya ruins, canoeing down the Macal River and horseback riding. Business was brisk and the infrastructure was upgraded in 1990. Their Blue Morpho Butterfly Breeding Centre and the Natural History Centre were added in 1997.



Figure 4: Ecotourism accommodation at Chaa Creek Cottages in the 1980s.

These early businesses relied on word of mouth as advertisement and bookings were often done through the mail. Growth was brisk but not exceptional in the mid 1980s. During this decade, a suggestion

of the future importance of tourism to Belize came in the form of a new Tourism, Transport, Education and Youth Ministry created in 1984. The subsequent government paired Tourism along with Environment in 1989. In the private sector, the Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA) was also formed in 1985 with Mrs. Jean Shaw as its first President.

During these pioneering years in tourism, the tour operators relied on repeat visitors and only limited efforts were placed on marketing. This changed around 1996 when Naturalight Productions, a company from Dangriga began Website Design and Development and Internet Marketing for Belize's tourism companies. Around 2,006, companies like Orchid Bay and Idea Lab Studios developed internet hosting of hotel bookings as well as data compilation of tourism statistics for Belize.

Besides the private sector led marketing of Belize tourism, the upliftment of tourism as a Government priority saw the first true tourism boom occurring between 1992 and 1995 around the time when the Tour Guide Regulation and Belize Tourism Board were legislated. This boom occurred after Canadians and US citizens became aware of Belize and started visiting the country for extended stays during the Christmas season. After this boom, a low ebb occurred between 1996 and 1998. This prompted the Government to hire the Blackstone Corporation to assist in diagnosing the industry. The resulting Blackstone Report of 1998 highlighted the opportunities Belize had in nurturing the growth of its existing ecotourism product. It was during this time that birding became a notable tourism activity.

The second tourism boom started in 2001 when the Belize Tourism Village was opened. This saw a dramatic rise in the amount of cruise tourists coming for one day visits. This growth lasted until 2008 when the world economic crisis caused a slowdown in the industry.

During the course of the two booms, tourism became the number one income earner for the country and destinations including San Pedro, San Ignacio, Placencia and Belize City were established as the country's tourism hotspots.

Environmental Protection ≈ 1989

In 1989, when the new Ministry of Tourism and the Environment was created, environmental issues for the first time became a ministerial responsibility in government. Although issues such as

solid waste, latrines, drains, forestry, wildlife and protected areas were issues prior to 1989, the new ministry focused on the Environmental Impact Assessment process, effluent limitations and on pollution regulations. The first Chief Environmental Officer was Dr. Victor Gonzalez who was soon joined by Mr. Ismael Fabro. Fabro, along with Keith Sproule (A Fulbright scholar) worked on creating Belize's first environmental legislation. Initially, this legislation did not make it to Cabinet. However, this was just before the 1992 Rio Earth Summit which the Ministers of Natural Resources and Tourism attended. These ministers came back from the summit to discover that an American investor was exploding a channel in the reef near Hatched Caye to make the caye more accessible to large yachts. As it turned out, there were no laws in place to prohibit such activities and the investor was only fined \$2,000 before he left the country. Government then quickly passed the Environmental Protection Act (EPA) (Chapter 328) in 1992. This law stated that the penalties for infractions would be three times the assessed value of the damage.

Since the passing of the EPA, growth in the tourism sector in the 1990s precipitated a gradual shift in the technology of effluent disposal. Prior to the boom in tourism in the 1990s, pit latrines, soak-aways and septic tanks were the methods used to dispose of grey waters at tourist destinations. With the passage of Chapter 328 of the Laws of Belize in 1992, developers seeking approval for large projects have been required to propose waste water treatment systems for their facilities. In 2002, the Department of the Environment began efforts to ensure compliance with the new law through voluntary upgrading of septic systems to biologically active water treatment systems. To date, most firms have opted for above ground, aerated waste water treatment plants. These have included Biologically Engineered Sewage Sludge Treatment (BESST) systems. Hydro-Action, Nyadic and Zoeller Onsite treatment plants have also been approved by the Department. A low-flow compost system called Aquatron has also been approved. It is said that more of the existing resorts on San Pedro have complied with the Department of the Environment (DOE) request compared to resorts in the south of the country on the mainland. One company, Old Belize Adventure, has constructed its own active water treatment plant, using a plastic sedimentation tank as well as a second biologically active tank fitted with aerators.

The efficacy of these systems has been monitored by the DOE which has acquired Hydrosound and YSI Hydrolab water instruments. Hotels have also been required to conduct self-monitoring on a monthly basis for quarterly reporting. Water testing for private

sector establishments is conducted by laboratories owned by Bowen and Bowen Ltd, Travellers Liquors or the Public Health Laboratory of the Ministry of Health. The DOE has also monitored for noise pollution and the department relies on the Land Information Centre for its mapping requirements.

Box 1: The UDP and the transition from agriculture to tourism

Because of the territorial dispute with Guatemala, Belize's Independence was delayed twenty years compared to the other CARICOM countries which got their independence in the 1960s. When Belize did get its independence in 1981, it was at a significant financial cost to the country. Shortly after Independence, export income suffered as sugar prices slumped, and the country fell into recession. This caused the PUP to lose the national election of 1984 in a landslide. Between the time of self government and the time just after independence, the PUP approached tourism cautiously, fearing that this industry would easily get out of control of the state, opening up the potential for rapid neocolonialism.

When the United Democratic Party (UDP) won the national elections in 1984, tourism became a top development priority for the new government. Just after the elections, the Minister responsible for tourism personally visited New York to lobby for tourism traffic to the country. Energies were invested in showcasing the destination and "Sixty Minutes" and National Geographic took up the offer to feature Belize in the popular press in the United States in 1988 and 1989.

The UDP lost the elections of 1989 but came back to government in 1993. Two important contributions made during the administration between 1993 and 1998 was the passage of the Tour Guide and Tour Operator legislation. Another milestone was the establishment of the Belize Tourism Board in 1996. With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that UDP policies regarding scale of the tourism industry and the involvement of locals may have contributed to the mainstreaming of the tourism industry, making it a key pillar in the Belizean economy in 2013.