

The Northern Illinois University Alumni Association  
*Presents*



# *Tropical Belize*

**March 8 - 17, 2018**

**\$3,875 Per Person, Double Occupancy from Chicago**



*This is an exclusive travel program presented by the Northern Illinois University Alumni Association*

# Day by Day Itinerary

## **Thursday, March 8 – CHICAGO / BELIZE CITY (HD)**

This morning we depart Chicago's O'Hare International Airport aboard scheduled service of American Airlines and take to the skies for Belize, a tiny country nestled on the coast between Mexico and Guatemala. On arrival at Belize's Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport we'll meet our Tour Guide who will accompany us on vacation and introduce us to Belize. With one foot in the Central American jungles and the other in the Caribbean Sea, Belize may be small but it's packed with adventure and culture, and is known for its extreme biodiversity and distinctive ecosystems.

## **Friday, March 9 – BELIZE CITY (Crooked Tree) (B,L)**

Our day will begin with an introduction to Belize City, the historical - if no longer the actual - capital of the nation. We'll see numerous beautiful British colonial buildings; St. John's Cathedral, the oldest Anglican church in Central America; the Museum of Belize; Memorial Park, honoring the Belizeans killed in World War I; and stop to view both the diminutive Fort George Lighthouse and Barron Bliss Tomb, the final resting place of Belize's most famous benefactor. Without a doubt, the heart and soul of Belize City is the historic Swing Bridge, traversed by just about everyone every day, and said to be the only remaining manually operated bridge of its type in the world. Following our introduction to Belize City, we'll enjoy a truly interesting insight into one of Belize's natural wonders. Our destination is the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, containing a mosaic of wetland and terrestrial habitats, which make it one of the best birding destinations in the country. Between December and May, the wetlands attract migrating birds as they flock to the lagoons, rivers and swamps of this massive 16,400-acre sanctuary managed by the Belize Audubon Society.

## **Saturday, March 10 – BELIZE CITY (Altun Ha) (B,L)**

Today we travel north of Belize City to Altun Ha, an important Mayan agricultural and trading town, home to a population of 10,000 inhabitants until the mysterious collapse of Classic Maya civilization around 900 AD. Although the original site covered 1,500 acres, archeologists did not know about this ancient site until 1963 when Hal Ball, a pilot and amateur Mayanist, noticed the existence of the site from the air. Altun Ha now displays 10 structures with an immaculate central plaza that is home to the Temple of the Masonry Altars, also known as the Temple of the Sun God. At the completion of our tour, we'll return to Belize City for an afternoon at leisure in the Fort George District.

## **Sunday, March 11 – BELIZE CITY / HOPKINS (B,L)**

This morning we depart Belize City and travel along the Coastal Road, also known as the Manatee Highway, to Gales Point. There's off the beaten track, way off the beaten track and then there's Gales Point. A traditional Creole village, Gales Point sits on a narrow peninsula in the Southern Lagoon, one of a series of interconnected lakes and waterways between Belize City and Hopkins. So why come? Gales Point is home to one of the highest concentrations of West Indian manatees in the Caribbean. Sit back and relax as we explore the 14-square-mile Gales Point Wildlife Sanctuary and float through mangrove-bordered canals and lagoons in search of manatees as they graze on sea grass in the shallow, brackish

Southern Lagoon near Manatee Hole. Afterward, we'll be on our way to the quaint, traditional fishing village of Hopkins, located in Belize's Stann Creek District.

## **Monday, March 12 – HOPKINS (South Water Caye) (B,L)**

As we'll soon find out, the village of Hopkins is surrounded by the misty-green Maya Mountains, the Cockscomb Range inland, and the blue Caribbean Sea on its shore – making it the perfect base for exploring the Belize Barrier Reef, the second longest barrier reef system in the World. Today we'll cruise to the 15-acre island of South Water Caye, one of the most beautiful on the reef. You can snorkel right from the beach, offering an extraordinary experience whether you are a first-time snorkeler or a seasoned diver. In 1996, UNESCO included the South Water Marine Reserve in its' World Heritage list of protected sites. Home to significant marine life that includes threatened species, a showcase of extraordinary natural phenomena, and a place of heart-stopping beauty, the barrier reef is one of Belize's most prized assets.

## **Tuesday, March 13 – HOPKINS / SAN IGNACIO**

### **(Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary) (B,L,HD)**

Early this morning we venture into the lowland jungles of the lush Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, Belize's most famous jaguar sanctuary. This great swath of tropical forest became the world's first jaguar sanctuary in 1984, thanks to the efforts of American zoologist Alan Rabinowitz. Today, this critical biological corridor is home to an estimated 40 to 50 jaguars and a vast array of other endangered animals including the ocelot, margay, Baird's tapir, and scarlet macaw. Then we'll travel along the lyrically named Hummingbird Highway, one of the prettiest drives in Belize, winding its way through jungle and citrus orchards and impossibly small villages as it skirts the northern edges of the Maya Mountain. Along the way, we'll stop to visit the Blue Hole National Park, an opportunity to visit St. Herman's Cave and the nearby Blue Hole, a 25-foot-deep popular recreational spot for which the area is named. Afterward, we'll be on our way to San Ignacio, the heart and soul of the Cayo District, a vibrant traveler center from where all roads and activities fan out. San Ignacio's positive and infectious local vibe attracts a steady influx of free-spirited expats from Europe and North America.

## **Wednesday, March 14 – SAN IGNACIO (Caracol) (B,L)**

Today we will step out of the modern world and into the ancient realm at Belize's largest Maya site. In 1937, a logger named Rosa Mai first stumbled upon the Caracol ruins. Once among the most powerful cities in the entire Maya world, this ancient city near the Guatemalan border now lies enshrouded by thick jungle. Sitting high on the Vaca Plateau, 1650-feet above sea level, it's postulated that at its peak, Caracol may have stretched over 70-square-miles and the city's population may have approached 150,000, more than twice the number of people in Belize City today. We'll spend the day wandering through a city that once rivaled Tikal in political influence and, for many, is more impressive today. Standing in the central area of temples, palaces, craft workshops and markets, we'll feel the power and glory of ancient Caracol; at 141-feet, Caana, which means Sky Place, is still the tallest building in Belize.

**Thursday, March 15 – SAN IGNACIO (Tikal) (B,L)**

The spectacular ruins of ancient Tikal have often been described as Archaeological bliss. The glory and splendors of the ancient Maya world await just over the border in the lush rainforest of eastern Guatemala. Larger and more completely restored than any of the Maya sites in Belize, Tikal is the most fabled and easiest to reach of Guatemala's slice of La Ruta Maya. The most striking feature of Tikal is its towering steep-sided temples, rising to heights of more than 144-feet, but what distinguishes it is the jungle setting. Its many plazas have been cleared of trees and vines, its temples uncovered and partially restored, but as you walk from one building to another you pass beneath the dense canopy of rainforest amid the rich loamy aromas of earth and vegetation.

**Friday, March 16 – SAN IGNACIO / BELIZE CITY (B,L,RD)**

This morning we'll visit the Chaa Creek Nature Reserve to learn about Belize's medicinal plants. A licensed naturalist guide will take us along the bank of the Macal River and introduce us to many of the plants and herbs used in traditional Maya medicine. The Maya were masters at utilizing the jungle's natural resources for their practical and medicinal needs. We'll learn about vines that store drinking water, plants that helps abate malaria, aid diabetics, cleanse the blood, plus many more. The trail's most remarkable feature is that all the plants and trees were already there. The fact that none were planted is a testament to the natural diversity found in the rainforest. Afterward, we'll return to our hotel for lunch, and then travel along the George Prince Highway as we make our way back to Belize City. This evening we'll enjoy a night out on the town with an open-air meal accompanied by the refreshing sea breeze.

**Saturday, March 17 – BELIZE CITY / CHICAGO (B)**

This morning we travel to Belize's Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport in preparation for the return journey home.

No better time to reflect on memories of our Tropical Belize vacation to last a lifetime and new friendships made along the way!

**\* \* \* Welcome Home \* \* \***



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- Transportation by deluxe private motor coach with accompanying Tour Guide.
- Accommodations in first-class hotels.
- All meals as shown in the Day by Day Itinerary.
- Sightseeing as detailed in the Day by Day Itinerary including applicable entrance fees.
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*\$100 of the trip cost is tax-deductible as a charitable donation.*

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