

The Escape Artist

Road to Ruins

Belize's jungles are ripe for adventure.

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Photo Credit: Eileen Chiang

"My surname?" says the guide on his way to the Actun Tunichil Muknal cave. He fingers his machete before grinning widely. "It's Warrior." This is Belize, and it begins where the world ends—Mayan apocalypse or not.

Known for its lush landscapes, which include jungles, rainforests, pine forests and Caribbean beaches, Belize has a history made rich in part by the Mayans, who thrived here for the better part of three millennia and still live in its villages today. Nearly two-thirds of the Cayo District, some two hours by car from the airport, consists of national parks and reserves.

This area is also where the jungle thickens; where mist-covered tree lines join ancient ruins and where underground caves are filled with dripping stalactites and bat guano. Here is where howler monkeys are an eerie early morning alarm, croaking deep in the jungle, maybe miles away. Maybe only feet. It's hard to tell.

Here, in the denseness of the Cayo, is where you settle, deep in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve at Gaia Riverlodge. Gaia greets each guest with a juice made of fresh papaya, watermelon, lime, mango, orange and other fruits. Sixteen private cabanas dot the property, decked with thatch roofs, luxuriously plush beds and screens in place of windows. Two of the cabanas and the main lodge, with its open-air two-story dining deck and screened-in dining room, overlook the Five Sisters Waterfall, which produces 95 percent of the eco-friendly resort's electricity.

For your first full day, book the Caracol tour directly with Gaia's managers. The trek puts you deep in the neighboring Chiquibul Rain Forest at Belize's largest, most important Mayan site. The drive there reveals why it earned the nickname "snail" or "conch" after its discovery in 1936—the road, it seems, is composed solely of curves.

The bumpy journey is worth it, however. Transformed into a tourist destination in the early 2000s, the archaeological site boasts limestone pyramids so tall that a person at the base appears to be the size of a thumbnail when viewed from the summit.

The ruins are organized into four main groups, with the biggest, Caana, built sometime in the seventh century. Caana stands 140 feet and is still the country's tallest manmade structure. Just above the tree line, the top of its highest temple offers the rainforest's most spectacular view.

Take it easy on day two and visit the Barton Creek Cave before exploring the canopy by zip-line. At Barton Creek, which neighbors an Amish community, a guide leads you by canoe and spotlight into what the Mayas call Xibalba, or the gateway to the underworld. At points on the journey, the stalactites, which grow at a rate of one inch per 100 years, reach so close to the water's surface that ducking low in the canoe is the only way to avoid contact. Travel just deep enough into the seven-mile wet-cave system to see Mayan pottery and a 1,500-year-old skull believed to be the remnant of a human sacrifice to Chac, the rain god.

After a snack and water break, it's off to Calico Jack's Village for zip-lining. The three tour options range in length from 1,135 feet of cable to 2,700 feet. But each includes a 500-foot glide high above the jungle, with views so magnificent that it's tempting to slow down.

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For the final day, embrace your inner Lara Croft or Indiana Jones. You're about to be a badass tomb raider. The aptly named Actun Tunichil Muknal ("Cave of the Crystal Sepulchre," or ATM cave) tops National Geographic's list of sacred caves. It's known for its Mayan artifacts, including human remains, but particularly the Crystal Maiden: an intact skeleton of a sacrificed Mayan princess, her bones shimmering with centuries of calcification.

The cave—which requires free-climbing, full submersion, swimming and shimmying—is accessible only in the company of one of the country's 21 trained, working guides. Request Patrick Warrior, who leads barefoot and makes the locals shake their heads and say, "He's crazy!" at his mention. After a 45-minute hike through the bush, stopping to look at medicinal plants, Warrior leads you across the thigh-high Roaring River (three times) to base camp. Here, all belongings are left behind. He affixes headlights to helmets then instructs you to jump into the blue-green water at the mouth of the ATM cave, swim to a boulder just inside and climb it before submerging into total darkness. It's an experience so invigorating and transcendent that neither photo—nor write-up—could do it justice.

Traveler's Checks

- Climb the ladder to the side of Barton Creek Cave and jump 25 feet into the river for an extra thrill.
- Fear of heights? Opt for a tour of the Green Hills Butterfly Farm instead of zip-lining.
- Take Gaïa's tram or walk the 300 steps down to the Five Sisters Waterfall and relax in shaded hammocks or lounge chairs.

Gaïa Riverlodge

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