

# Belize for Chocolate Lovers

Belize is truly “Mother Nature’s Best Kept Secret!” With a population of around 350,000 and around 40% of its land area under protected status, Belize is a hidden gem in Central America. Sparsely populated and ethnically diverse, the country is rich in natural wonders from the barrier reef and coastal cayes to the Maya Mountains and inland rainforest.

The southern district of Toledo is the Mayan heartland of Belize and the traditional centre for growing cocoa (cacao). The Lodge at Big Falls is centrally located in the Toledo, and is the ideal base from which to explore this unspoiled area of Central America.



**Day 1** Arrival at Philip Goldson International (BZE) airport in Belize City. Transfer to Tropic Air for the one hour flight from Belize City to the coastal fishing town of Punta Gorda, which is also the Toledo district capital. Here you will be met and transferred 20 miles to the Lodge. On arrival enjoy a welcome rum cocktail and settle into

**Day 2** Begin the day with an early-morning **bird walk** around the Lodge property and through our gardens where you can spot colorful toucans, trogons, parrots, parakeets and many other exotic species.

Around mid-morning we will drive the eleven miles to San Felipe village where **Ixcacao Mayan Belizean Chocolate** is based. Juan and Abelina Cho have developed their business over the past twenty years. Juan explains the history and biology of the cacao species growing in the garden around the house and chocolate making facilities. Upstairs you will have the opportunity to try a cacao drink as well as a variety of chocolates flavoured with salt, chili, cinnamon, cardamom, orange, ginger and coconut. You will have an opportunity to husk the cacao beans and grind them on a metate to make your own chocolate. They offer an excellent buffet lunch with a chocolate themed main course as well as variety of delicious vegetable side dishes. Products available in their gift shop. On your return enjoy the lodge pool and gardens or take a tube and enjoy a leisurely float around the meander that surrounds the lodge.

**Day 3** We begin the day with a short ride nine miles north to the **Belize Spice Farm**. The farm is the vision of Thomas and Tessy Matthew from Kerala in south west India. The farm produces commercial quantities of vanilla orchids, cardamom and black pepper. They have dozens of species of Belizean fruits and nuts and exotic species like nutmeg and cinnamon, with many varieties of palm and bamboo.

We have lunch back in Big Falls village at Coleman’s café which offers a delicious, daily Belizean buffet with rice, beans, chicken, pork, cohune cabbage (heart of palm cooked in turmeric) and fried plantain and other dishes.

After lunch we visit **the Mayan site of Nim Li Punit** perched on a hilltop overlooking the coastal forest and cays beyond. The site has the largest collection of carved stelae in Belize that tell the story of the civilization that occupied the site over several hundred years. It is also a great place for birding among the large forest trees that have



**Day 4** Today you will experience authentic Maya culture visiting a Mayan home in Big Falls village. **The Cal family** will share with you the way in which the Maya lived and how they used the plants, trees and herbs for housing, furniture, food and medicine. This is also where we have lunch today and you will have a chance to make your own tortillas and taste some of the local produce and enjoy a cacao drink from a calabash gourd.

**Mahogany Chocolate** describes itself as a tree-to-bean-to-bar chocolate company producing premium gourmet chocolate and related products using Belize's fine flavour cacao from their very own "Peini" farms and 150 Mayan cacao farmers in Toledo. Our visit to their Punta Gorda facility will include understanding the processes of bean selection, roasting, grinding, conching and tempering as you make your own chocolate bar to take with you when you leave. Products also available in their shop.



**Day 5** This morning, with your guide, explore the Mayan archaeological site of **Lubaantun** where the crystal skull was discovered in 1924 by Anna Mitchell-Hedges who, as a teenager, was accompanying her father Frederick, an adventurer explorer. This magical site is beautifully preserved with a wonderful ambiance and few other travelers.

From here, drive through the Mayan villages to the **Rio Blanco National Park** where you will enjoy a picnic lunch and can jump from the rocks into the deep pool below the waterfall. Cross the river on the cable bridge and trek the jungle trail that loops through the surrounding forest, keeping an eye out for small mammals and birds.

**Day 6** Breakfast and departure.



## Belize Spice Farm



Tom Matthew with his banyan tree



Nutmeg surrounded by red mace



Vanilla orchid pods on the vine



Vanilla pods on the drying rack

## Ixcacao Mayan Belizean Chocolate



Juan grinds cacao beans into a paste on the me-



Abelina & Juan serve lunch





Learning about cacao and chocolate



Cacao beans ground to a paste



Chocolate and cocoa samples



Jade, flint and pottery found in tomb at Nim Li Punit





Tanager Rainforest Lodge