

CORAL JAGUAR EXPEDITION

An Epic Reef Journey with a Jungle Paddle into the Cockscomb Jaguar Sanctuary!

Trip Details

10 days / 11 nights

Price

\$2199 USD Contact us for current Cdn prices

Departures 2010

TBA

Activities

Sea Kayaking (paddling & sailing), Snorkeling, Fishing, Captive Jaguar Program, River Travel, Whitewater, Hiking, Birding, Photography, Mayan Culture, Natural History Interpretation

Accommodations

1 night forest cabana, 5 nights beach camping, 3 nights jungle camping, 2 night local lodge



10 DAYS / 11 NIGHTS

The Setting...

This incredible journey affords us the unique opportunity to venture inland and explore the rivers of the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary combined with an epic paddle along the Southern Belizean Barrier Reef. We start our trip at the Belize Zoo, where we become part of the Captured Problem Jaguar Initiative. Here, we get face to face with one of Belize's newest programs designed to rehabilitate problem jaguars, that are normally destroyed. After a half-day at the zoo, we journey down the Hummingbird Highway to the village of Maya Center to a lodge managed by some of the villagers. From here, we then continue to the highlight of the inland portion of the trip; learning about and traveling through the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve. The Cockscomb Basin became a forest reserve in 1984, and the world's first and only Jaguar reserve in 1986. The area was protected because of the incredible diversity and profusion of wildlife and birds found within. The reserve supports the highest concentrations of jaguars (Felis onca) north of the Amazon Basin. Here we have a great opportunity to view wildlife as we travel along the river. Our exciting and challenging river-run is combined with a rich cultural experience, as we travel into the heartland of the Maya people with our Mayan Guides.

The Barrier Reef, which runs the full length of the Belizean coastline, is considered one of the richest marine ecosystems on earth. The reef, which is 185 miles long and runs from 10 to 25 miles offshore of the mainland, is the longest continuous reef in the Caribbean and one of the longest in the world. Along the barrier reef are over 225 cays, ranging from small sand-fringed islands perched along the reef's edge, to larger islands of partially submerged land and mangroves found west of the main Barrier Reef and closer to the mainland. Teeming with brilliantly-colored fish, sea grass beds, and patch reefs, the reef systems here have not seen nearly the level of human impact as witnessed in Mexico to the north and Honduras to the south where large scale tourism and intense commercial fishing have damaged the marine habitat. It is in this region that we find the best sea kayaking and snorkeling.

A Note About the Ecology...

Flora...

As we travel into the Cockscomb Basin, we are traveling through the magical world of the tropical rainforest. The broadleaf rainforest covers approximately 70% of Belize's wooded area. The year-round growing season, huge amounts of moisture, and generations of evolution have yielded this area with a highly complex and diverse range of plant life species. The forest floor is a spongy



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mass of roots, fungi, bacteria and microorganisms, which is broken down with the assistance of insects and chemical decay. Each plant fulfills its own ecological niche, as the continuous recycling of the decayed plant matter fuels new growth. This rich soil, in turn, feeds the diverse range of plant life, from the huge, buttressed trunks of the Ceiba trees to the smallest of fungi. High above the forest floor is the enchanted world of the broad-leaved canopy. This system has its own unique infrastructure, which supports much of the forest's birdlife and a diverse range of mammals. The canopy ranges from the treetops of Cecropias and Gumbo Limbo trees to the many species of Epiphytes (air plants). This complex and diverse plant and animal life produces powerful biological compounds that are just recently being discovered and understood by the scientific community.

The ecology of the Belizean coast is a complex combination of coral reefs, sand flats with extensive turtle grass and mangrove ranges. The Barrier Reef shelters the Belizean coastline from the rougher open waters of the Caribbean sea. It acts as a huge breakwater, holding in the sand, resulting in the beautiful islands forested with coconut palms, sea grape and coco plum, and in the remarkable protected reef structures. The 'breakwater' action also enables the diverse ecosystems of the mangrove and turtle grass to flourish. These tangled partially submerged "forests" provide essential feeding and nursing habitat for hundreds of species of fish, shell-fish, reptiles, marine mammals, and birds.

Fauna...

While traveling in the Cockscomb Basin, we have great opportunities to view all sorts of animals. Whether we are catching a glimpse of a spiny-tailed iguana on a tree branch, or by the tiny red-eyed tree frog motionless on a limb, we are totally immersed in a strange and wonderful world. We will more than likely be visited in our camp at night by kinkajou, sitting high above us and watching our every move. Or we may see a flight of the Scarlet Macaw over the river valley, with their brilliant red and blue plumage. There are also an assortment of raptors, falcons, and hawks that are scavenging and hunting through the rich forest floor. The southern Belizean rainforest hosts a number of unique mammals, the largest being Belize's national animal, the Baird's Tapir, or Mountain Cow. This is an animal unique to the neo-tropical rainforest with a large hippopotamus-like body and a long prehensile snout, much like the fabled armadillo. This, along with the white-lipped peccary, the jaguar, and the puma are some of the larger mammals found within the 100,000 acre wildlife sanctuary we are traveling through.

While traveling along the Barrier Reef, paddling from caye to caye among the many "patch" reefs, we will have the opportunity to view a diverse range of sea-life and tropical birds, such as: bonefish, angel and parrot fish, stingrays, conger, moray eels, goatfish, just to name a few. Trailing a line from our kayaks, we also may get a chance at a tug from barracuda, grouper, tarpon, or snapper. Over our heads, we may see various birds including osprey (the billy hawk), sea gulls, brown-footed and white-footed boobies, frigate birds, hawks, mangrove warblers, and white crowned pigeons. Throughout the reef and along the coast are nesting sites for loggerhead, green and hawksbill turtles. If we're lucky, we may see them while out snorkeling. We will definitely have a chance to see and sample the main staple for Belizean fishermen - the spiny lobster (when in season) and the queen conch.

Typical Daily Itinerary:

Day 0: Arrive at the Belize International Airport where you will be met by an Island Expeditions representative and transferred to the Tropical Education Center, adjacent to the Belize Zoo. After checking into our rustic accommodations we are greeted with a BBQ dinner where we have a chance to meet our fellow travelers. At the Tropical Education Center, we are able to explore the surrounding savannah forest through their network of interpretative trails and wildlife viewing platforms. There is also a great wildlife interpretative center, which details the diverse ecology of Belize, and is an ideal starting point for the adventure ahead. *This day is your day to arrive before the trip starts, meet your fellow travelers and acclimatize to your new tropical environment.*

Accommodation: (Lodge)

Meals: Dinner is included



Recommended Tour-books:

Eltringham, Peter 2004.
Belize: The Rough
Guide .London. Penguin
Publishers.

Perottet, Tony. 2004.
Belize: Insight Guide
Singapore. Houghton
Mifflin Publishers.

-Great photographs and
written by a Belizean!

Recommended Reading:

Rabinowitz, Alan. 1986
Jaguar, One Man's
Struggle to Establish the
First Jaguar Sanctuary
New York. Island Press.



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Day 1: After breakfast our guides take us on a morning walk along the wildlife viewing platforms at the center, and then we travel across the road to the Belize Zoo to participate in the Problem Jaguar Program. This has recently been setup by the Director of the Belize Zoo to address the growing number of Jaguars that are preying on cattle and pets on farms and in villages across Belize. The program live-captures Jaguars, exposes them to people as part of their rehabilitation, and gets them used to captivity. Eventually these animals will be available to high quality zoos around the world instead of being exterminated. This trip helps fund this new program, and gives people a once in a lifetime chance to spend time face to face with the master of the neo-tropical jungle.

After lunch at the TEC, we meander down one of Belize's most spectacular drives, the Hummingbird Highway, into the Maya Village of Maya Center. Here we are greeted by a local Mayan family that hosts us for the night, and talks to us on how the village helps manage the park and about the life of the modern Maya. Here we enjoy a traditional Belizean dinner with our Belizean guide, discuss how to pack for the river portion of the trip, and talk details of the next days hike into the river.

Accommodations: (Lodge)

Meals: B, L, D

Day 2, 3, 4: Early in the morning, we leave the lodge and head to the Cockscomb Park headquarters, where we tour the small interpretive center, load our backpacks, and begin our journey into the river put-in and our first camp in the Cockscomb. Stopping along the way to learn of the many plants and animals of the rainforest, we travel down a wide trail through the center of the park before veering off the main path into the Mexican Branch junction of the South Stann Creek River.

For this portion of the trip, we use two-person inflatable kayaks which combine the stability of a raft with the maneuverability of a kayak. We begin by traveling slowly, learning different paddle strokes and getting a feel for how the boats handle on the water. Traveling downriver we experience all the luxuriance and beauty of the tropical rainforest. Each bend in the river holds the promise of something new. As the trip progresses, we learn how to navigate through small rapids becoming proficient with reading the water and choosing the right channels. Arriving at our established bush-camps in the afternoon, we have time to explore and learn more about the plants and wildlife in the surrounding forest, and can take advantage of the afternoon light for photography. At night, we have the chance to go for a night-walk to try and see some of the nocturnal animals. This is the premier trip for encountering wildlife in the rainforests of Belize.



Accommodations: (Camping)

Meals: B,L,D

Day 5: Our last morning in the rainforest we travel downstream through an exciting boulder garden and rapids section, before we are met by IEC staff at the pull-out point. After lunch in Maya Center, we drive overland to the coastal town of Dangriga, where we take a motor to our first camp on the Belize Barrier Reef. Moving from the green, lush jungle to the waving palms and turquoise waters of the Caribbean is an exceptional contrast. And throughout we will gain an appreciation of the similarities of the ecosystems on the coral reef and that of the rainforest. We begin with the fundamentals of sea kayaking; we learn and practice paddle strokes, as well as self-rescue and group-rescue techniques, before heading out in the evening for a paddle. Time permitting, we can also enjoy some snorkeling and exploration at one of the nearby patch reefs.

Accommodation: (Camping)

Meals: B,L,D

Day 6-9: Expect an adventure of a lifetime as we explore south and east of Dangriga along this wild section of the Barrier Reef. Our days are a blend of paddling and sailing our kayaks, swimming and snorkeling in the turquoise waters and camping amongst the hundreds of tropical islands along the reef. We engage in a variety of activities as we travel each day. We learn new paddling skills, hone our kayak-sailing skills and try our hands at navigating with a marine chart and compass. A big part of each day is spent exploring the many coral reefs encountered along the way. We also travel through productive fishing grounds with bonefish, tarpon, snapper, grouper and barracuda providing excellent sport fishing, as well as a wonderful variety for the dinner table. For those who savor the simple pleasures of life, you can master the art of relaxing in a hammock with a good book while your guides prepare a fresh seafood dinner.

Accommodation: (Camping)

Meals: B,L,D

Day 10: Enjoy our last day on the cays snorkeling paddling, fishing. In the afternoon we end our journey on an island along the inner channel of the barrier reef, and are transferred to the mainland by motor charter. Back in Dangriga, we settle into our accommodations, and have a chance to shower, dress and relax before our evening celebration at a local family's house for dinner. Trip finishes in Dangriga the following day. Our office can help you make whatever travel arrangements you need from this point.

Accommodations: (Lodge)

Meals: B, L, D

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Accommodation...

On 'Day 0', we will be spending the night at the Tropical Education Center, spending one night in comfortable forest accommodations. The Education Center harbors Belize's largest collection of tropical animal specimens, a fantastic interpretative center, and has a network of trails on the property.

On Day 1', We'll be staying at a guest house in Maya Center a small Mayan village at the base of the Cockscomb Jaguar Reserve. In the village we meet with our lead Mayan guides and learn about Mayan Culture.

While out on the cayes and also while on the river, we are practicing minimum impact camping, to ensure the pristine state of the wilderness remains for future visitors. We will be keeping our weight and volume to a minimum, carrying our gear in our kayaks from site to site. We will be staying in three-person MSR tents, which provide more than enough room for two people and gear. As we travel from caye to caye, we use pre-determined camping areas to minimize our impact on the islands and rainforest. However, we also give ourselves some flexibility to adjust our schedule to different conditions.

On the final night we will be staying in Dangriga. Our accommodation is at Chaleanor's Hotel, a Belizean-style hotel in the town center.

What's Included...

All meals & accommodation
All transfers described in the tour
All park and camping fees
10% Sales Tax and 9% Hotel tax.
Unlimited use of our equipment
Use of waterproof dry bags for both the sea and river components of the trip
Lodge accommodations on 'Day 0, 1', and on the last night of the trip.
Professional Guiding Services
Contributions to Conservation and Education programs in Belize

What's Not Included...

Transportation back to Belize City from Dangriga after the trip
Alcoholic Beverages
Gratuities
International Flights
Personal Equipment
Extra costs due to late Arrivals, lost luggage and other circumstances beyond our control

Thinking about seeing other parts of Belize with IEC?

The Coral Jaguar combines well with a trip exploring one of the atolls in the Caribbean or exploring some Maya ruins. The Glovers Reef Weekend gives you a flexible itinerary, with a "luxury" base-camp, from which you can explore the Marine Reserve. Or, travel inland with the Maya World Extension, where we visit the Mayan sites of Lamanai and Altun Ha and also the Crooked Tree Bird Sanctuary.

Getting back to Belize City ...

Our North American office can help you make arrangements for your return to Belize City the day after the trip ends, unless you have made other arrangements with us. We can book a domestic flight from Dangriga to Belize City. The cost of this flight back to Belize City (25 minutes) is approximately \$60.00 USD per person or you can travel overland by bus (2-3 hours) for approximately \$10.00 USD.

Special Note!

This trip takes place in remote regions of Belize. There are rough jungle roads and then a 6 mile hike into the put-in point for the river. Participants are expected to carry their personal gear into the river, and need to be ready for the unexpected. Weather conditions can affect water levels and access into the river and may increase the level of difficulty. We also believe that the remoteness and variability of conditions are what make this trip the best of its kind. Trip itineraries can vary significantly depending on water levels.



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