

Slow Down, You're in Belize



Punta Gorda. All photos by [Mike Brown](#).

PUNTA GORDA, Belize - Even when it feels like the modern world is whirring around you at an inhuman pace, certain corners of the planet still enjoy a slow-paced solace. In these places, people exude a calm contentment, the food is plentiful and fresh, and the things that brought joy to daily life centuries ago do so just as much today (see: rum, chocolate, no WiFi).

One such oasis is the sleepy Belizean town Punta Gorda, nestled between the Caribbean Sea and the Selva Maya rainforest. Tourism is relatively new to this farming and fishing hub, where more than half of the residents still speak a Mayan language at home. (Mopan and Q'eqchi are the main two dialects.) It's well worth the journey into the Central American jungle for a respite of rare simplicity – yes, it still exists on our fast-spinning earth.

Lay of the Land

The 6,000-person town of Punta Gorda, or just PG, lies in the Toledo District, deep in southern Belize, an area often called the forgotten land. For centuries, it's been home to the Garifuna and Maya people.

Visitors need to be moderately intrepid to get there, comfortable with a small Cessna flight with a few stops down the coast or a bumpy drive south from Belize City that can span four or six hours. Expect no Belizean beachside or snorkeling getaway in this thick jungle. PG is all about raw nature and rich culture, along with a nascent eco-tourism scene that beckons visitors to fall in love with both.



A black cane demo at Copal Tree Distillery.



The cane fields at Copal Tree Distillery.



Ducky making drinks at The Rum Bar. Photo courtesy of Copalli Rum.

If You Only Do One Thing

Drink the rum. Well, drink the thoroughly guilt-free, sustainable rum from Belize's newest social enterprise, the [Copal Tree Distillery](#).

The colonial sugar industry did unspeakable damage to Indigenous and African communities throughout Central America and the Caribbean (and Mexico and the United States and many other spots around the world). Today's rum industry leaders, like so many others, are confronting their ugly histories with a refreshing humility and a

pledge for change. Copal Tree in PG was designed and opened in 2018 to upend the industry's historic hierarchy entirely. "We are a very inefficient distillery," says Mark Breene, the distillery's CEO. "We're not here to produce the most rum. We're here to support the people of Belize."

Indeed, the distillery pays their cane-field workers nearly three times the area's average and invited one of PG's most vocal conservationists onto their Copalli Rum brand's Board of Directors. Some of the distillery's profits are directed as merit grants to local cultural organizations, recreational groups, and even infrastructure improvements (e.g. ensuring consistent WiFi during the height of Covid-19).

Copal Tree's supply chain is so transparent that travelers can visit the very fields where sugar cane stalks are hand-cut by machete — and even try their hand at the labor, tour the immaculate distillery, and take a mixology class to learn to craft ultra-fresh cocktails like the [Copalli mojito](#) made with hand-picked sage and mint from the neighboring farm.

But if you honestly just want a drink (hey, no judgment), pull up a wicker stool at [The Rum Bar](#). Order a fresh rum cocktail shaken by the expert hands of Ducky, the resident PG-born bartender with a thousand-watt smile and infectious joie de vivre.



Garifuna drummers and singers.



Lubaantun.



Lubaantun.

What to Do

To get a feel of daily life in town, check out the Punta Gorda Town Market on Front Street, open Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday mornings. Look for vendors selling anything from fresh fish, spice made from roasted bird's eye chilies (a great souvenir), sticky copal resin from the eponymous tree to burn as incense, and other assorted items from spoons to socks.

Once you're in sync with the natural rhythms of the rainforest, try your hand at simple drumming with the Garifuna, an African-Indigenous community whose music, dance, and language have been named to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In PG, you can experience this living culture firsthand at the [Warasa Drum School](#), just one of many that offer hour-long lessons for first timers.

Belize is home to some 900 Mayan ruins. The closest is Lubaantun, located 13 miles outside of PG near the village of San Pedro Columbia. Built and active from around 700-900 BCE, this was a center of salt and cacao trade, brutal ball games, and human sacrifices to the gods. I had the good fortune of touring with a Maya guide named Bicente Ican, who shared the learned history of the site as well as stories about his own ancestry and modern life in the nearby Maya village of Blue Creek.



The view from Copal Tree Lodge.



Sunset at Copal Tree Lodge.

Where to Stay

The grand dame hotel of PG is the [Copal Tree Lodge](#), located near the similarly-named but separate Copal Tree Distillery. This 17-suite property began its life as a humble fisherman's camp and changed hands in 2005, whereupon it was transformed into a luxury eco-lodge with panoramic views of the rainforest. It's still a world-class fly-fishing spot where you can see monkeys, agouti, hummingbirds, and crocodiles, along with tarpon and snook.

A simpler but lovely option is [Blue Belize](#), which has six suites and a view of the Caribbean. If you're really yearning to get off the grid, [Hickatee Lodges](#) may be your best option. Its six cabins are sweet and simple. The simplicity includes no A/C, minimal power (forget your hairdryer), and a tucked-away location off of an unpaved road.



Waluco's Bar and Grill.



Alg's Snack Shop.

Where to Eat

You won't find fresher foods than the dishes at [The Garden Table](#) up at Copal Tree, with menu items like chilled watermelon gazpacho and Mayan spice shrimp salad. In town, check out [Alg's Snack Shop](#) for Belizean panades, a local incarnation of empanadas made with corn masa, cabbage, onion, and fresh fish. Settle in later for drinks or dinner at [Waluco's](#), a no-frills, open-air bar and grill overlooking the Bay of Honduras. The food menu changes daily (look for the conch fritters) and drink options are scribbled on a small whiteboard by a

bar run by laid-back bartenders. Go on a Thursday, Friday, or Saturday night when the DJ turns up dancehall, Tejano, and reggae hits. It feels like all of PG hits the dance floor.

Plan Your Trip

Getting Around

If you're staying at the Copal Tree Lodge, your transportation will be taken care of after your flight lands. For most other accommodations, renting a car is a solid option. Look for four-wheel drive and get insurance for the many unpaved roads. [Alirams Auto Rental](#) is a trusted local shop. Punta Gorda is so small, however, that if you're content staying in town, you can safely walk around. Taxis are available too.

When to Go

The coolest and driest season is from December through April.

Covid-19 Precautions

As of February 2022, all visitors to Belize are required to purchase Belize Travel Insurance, and staying at a BTB-approved hotel is recommended (all hotels mentioned here are approved). Fully-vaccinated travelers no longer require a negative Covid-19 test, but must show proof of vaccination for entry into the country.

For Your Netflix Queue

Fun fact: Since no one knows what dinosaurs actually sounded like, we have to make our best guesses. For the producers of *Jurassic Park*, the otherworldly roars of Belizean howler monkeys seemed right to the film's sound designers, who recorded their howls in the Selva Maya nearby.