

# Hiking, wildlife and hot sauce? Belize is a surprise at every turn with G Adventures



Front Street Caye Caulker

## By Waheeda Harris

For those seeking sun, adventure, history and culture in the Caribbean, Belize is an emerging destination to consider for Canadian travellers. G Adventures offers the 'National Geographic Journeys/Explore Belize', a 10-day trip that includes encounters with howler monkeys, Mayan history and the ability to snorkel the second largest barrier reef in the world.

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According to Jackie Garrity, Product Manager for National Geographic Journeys, "Belize is one of our original travel destinations for the past 20-plus years, in fact, our founder Bruce Poon Tip designed the first trip." Garrity explained that Belize's popularity continues to grow as travellers look for new destinations and authentic experiences in the

Caribbean and Central America.

Excursions begin in the former mahogany logging village of Burrell Boom. A three-hour tour kicks off explorations of central Belize and includes bird and wildlife spotting along the New River and lagoon, and a hike through Lamanai, a former Mayan village that dates to 1500 BCE. Although not completely excavated, Lamanai provides insight into the daily lives of the Maya and visitors

are allowed to climb the three temples.

The other attraction of this region is the Community Baboon Sanctuary. Originally founded in 1985, locals voluntarily allowed parts of their farmland to be left as is to encourage howler monkeys to prosper (locally referred to as baboons). With one-time funding from the World Wildlife Fund, National

Geographic Society and other foundations, the sanctuary is now home to 4,000 monkeys. Visitors are taken on a walk through the sanctuary during which they learn about local trees, flowers and hopefully encounter a howler monkey family.

Heading west to San Ignacio near the Belize/Guatemala border, G Adventures travellers are welcome to lunch made by the Cayo Women's Co-operative. The co-op formed 16 years ago to revive Maya Yucatec cultural traditions that had disappeared within their community of 3,500. Thanks to support from the Planeterra Foundation, the women have learned to create pottery and embroidery, opened a gift shop and encourage women and youth in their village to learn the skills of the past while also supporting education opportunities for their children.

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ancient Mayan ceramics and human remains. Participants swim, wade, hike and climb during the three-hour tour, learning about Mayan rituals and the geological formations within the cave. The highlight is the crystal maiden, a crystallized Mayan skeleton.

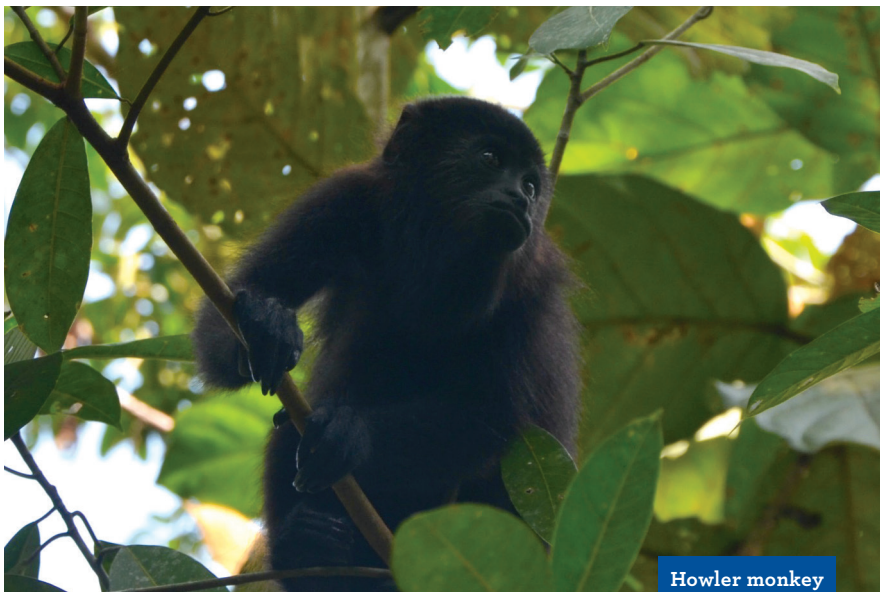
A bonus inclusion on the 'National Geographic Journeys Explore Belize' tour is a visit to the Marie Sharpe Hot Sauce Factory. The sauces, jam and jellies are made with fruit and vegetables sourced from a 400-acre family farm surrounding the factory, just off the Hummingbird Highway, which connects western Belize to the coast. And if you're lucky, you will get a glimpse of the lady herself, who runs the company and distribution with a staff of 30, mainly women and single mothers.

Next stop is the laidback village of Hopkins, where a dip in the warm ocean is the goal. The Labede Drumming Centre is an evening highlight during which guests learn about the Garifuna people and try their hand at getting the beat.

The end of the journey is spent on Caye Caulker, an hour from Belize City by fast ferry. It's ground zero for those wanting to explore the Mesoamerican Reef, the second largest barrier reef in the world. Snorkelling and diving trips to the clear turquoise waters will allow sights of Nemo and friends such as stingrays, eels, nurse sharks and a wide array of coral and underwater plants.

G Adventures groups can take a Bike With Purpose tour, a Planeterra sponsored project for island exploration. Local high school students lead the bike tours, showcasing their view of Caye Caulker based on visitor interests. These include a seahorse protection project, their high school projects or a favourite bakery. Students earn money to pay their school fees and save for post-secondary education.

For visitors who want to immerse in Belizean culture and natural beauty, G Adventure's 'National Geographic Journeys Explore Belize' provides an unforgettable experience. Twice weekly seasonal direct service from Toronto to Belize City was introduced in October 2016 by WestJet, and will continue for the 2017-2018 season.



Howler monkey



Cayo Womens Cooperative



Lamanai Mask Temple