

A new dawn for the Garifuna community

When the Garifuna people settled in Belize, they had to carry their traditions and culture with them; now a new trail is inviting visitors to explore this heritage through local communities

Words **Lynn Houghton**



“Would you like to try some homemade wine?” asked Pen Cayetano. Tall, gangly and with a fistful of dreadlocks tightly clenched in a ponytail atop his head, the prolific painter and musician proffered a glass with the air of a good host. As introductions to the world of traditional Garifuna music went, this was certainly a more genteel opening gambit than I’d anticipated, particularly from a man credited with the creation of *punta* rock. Even to this day, the 1980s sounds of his Original Turtle Shell Band still underscore much of Belize’s club-music scene.

I accepted the glass and stepped up to the backyard bandstand, where I was faced with an imposing set of tall, African-style drums that reminded me of Cuban congas. They were played in a similar fashion, and after Pen laid out the basic rhythm, I set my wine to one side and followed along.

I’d had a drum kit in my youth, so I relished the opportunity to relive those days. Pen, meanwhile, accompanied himself as he sang a song of freedom and the transfixing power of the sea. I played along but mostly just listened, enthralled by the sounds that came from his hands.

“It was the women who created the punta beat with the rhythm of their kitchen utensils,” Pen explained, sketching the origins of a music unique to the Garifuna people. When I thought about the enormous pestles and mortars used locally to pummel plantains into mash, it was easy to see the connection.

As Pen played, my mind drifted along with the music while my eyes caught sight of his paint-splattered Crocs. Prior to my drum session, his wife, Ingrid, had ushered me into their studio gallery in Dangriga for

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a brief tour, showing me some of his early paintings depicting the Garifuna experience, culture and roots. Images of hurricanes and hardships had blared from the canvas. But as he beat out his punta rhythms with the broad slap of his palms, he painted a history of his community every bit as vivid as if he had done so with the stroke of a brush. It was certainly a story worth hearing.

Dangriga, on the southern coast of Belize, is a major cultural centre for the Garifuna people, known collectively as the Garinagu. They trace their roots to the island of St Vincent, and although differing tales of their origins exist, it was here that a group of West Africans and the island’s Indigenous Kalinago-Taino (Carib-Arawak) people formed a unique culture and community, bolstered by the steady influx of those escaping slavery.

The Garinagu resisted European colonisation until a bloody conflict with the British led to them being exiled to a Honduran island in the late 1700s, from where they spread out along the Caribbean coast. By the time Belize acquired its modern-day name in 1973, they were already scattered along its southern shoreline; today they make up around 6% of the country’s population.

In 1802, the first Garifuna settlers arrived in what is now part of southern Belize. This is celebrated on 19 November as Garifuna Settlement Day, as festivities take over the small coastal communities. In Dangriga, this includes the re-enactment of a coterie of sailors arriving on the beach and others drifting up Stann Creek in traditional boats, and is followed by lots of food and dancing.

I had arrived just as celebrations were being planned for this year’s events. But ►



Life in the little city (clockwise from far left) With a population of under 12,000, Dangriga is a busy centre for the Garifuna community, and visitors have plenty of opportunity to delve into different aspects of the local culture, from drumming sessions and crafting workshops to exploring the many culinary traditions; the author meets Pen Cayetano, a self-taught painter and musician who is a legend in his own lifetime, having invented *punta* rock by introducing the turtle-shell drum and electric instruments to the age-old sounds of the Garifuna community; the wall of Pen’s studio is like a museum of traditional instruments

I was also here to explore the Garifuna Trail, an exciting new scheme aimed at introducing visitors to a collection of local businesses and institutions that promote Garifuna art, food, crafts and dance in the context of the wider community. Pen was just my first stop.

Touring the historic house next to his studio afforded me the chance to see not just Pen's artwork, but also that of local artists such as Mercy Sabal, famous for her quilts and dolls. It had given me a long-ing to explore this side of Garifuna culture. So, after wrapping up our session, I took a few photos, wished Pen good day and set off into town.

Dangriga's buildings are mostly decorated in bright hues of yellow and black, the official colours of the Garifuna flag. Some of the older houses – painted orange, indigo blue or cerise – are constructed of wood, so had been treated with a resin to combat the furious wind and rain of hurricane season,

the tail end of which fades just as November's celebrations begin. It seemed a fitting symbol for everything this resilient community has had to weather down the centuries.

Having whetted my appetite for traditional Garifuna music, it was now time to visit local drum maker Daytha Rodriguez. Her 'workshop', I discovered, was actually the family's front garden, which was populated with logs, equipment, a baby, chickens and dogs.

Daytha and her sister are carrying on a tradition that was passed down from their father, Aston, who arrived by bicycle halfway through our session but didn't

take part; he instead took up grandfatherly duties and settled down to play with the littlest child. As training began, Daytha's daughter held up a large, laminated poster that provided a step-by-step illustration of the process of traditional drum making. It felt like I'd been invited into their family. ►

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NEED TO KNOW

Getting there: Currently, there are no direct flights to Belize from the UK. British Airways (ba.com), United (united.com), Air France (airfrance.co.uk), KLM (klm.co.uk) and Delta (delta.com) typically fly from London (Gatwick, Heathrow, City) via US hubs such as Houston or Miami and then on to Belize City, taking about 24 hours. Return flights cost from around £649.

Currency: Belize dollar (BZD), currently BZD2.61 to the UK£. US dollars are widely accepted.

Accommodation: In Dangriga, the author stayed at Pelican Beach Resort (pelicanbeachbelize.com), which lies on the coast north of the town centre and has rooms from £177pn. Elsewhere, Gaia Riverlodge (gaiariverlodge.com) is a great base for those wanting to explore Cayo District and Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve; rooms from £174pn.

When to go: Dangriga and Hopkins are the best towns to see the Garifuna Settlement Day celebrations on 19 November.

The Garifuna Trail: Tour operator Uncharted Jewel Belize (unchartedjewelbelize.com) offers cultural tours of Dangriga and its Garifuna community. A map of businesses, museums and workshops on the Garifuna Trail is currently being put together; visit travelbelize.org for updates. The author visited the following:

Pen Cayetano has a studio-gallery on Aranda Crescent, Dangriga, that he opens on weekdays, or on weekends by appointment. cayetanos.com

Tugucina Gloria, Hopkins, is a restaurant that runs traditional Garifuna cookery classes hosted by Mama G herself. You can book classes online. tugucinagloria.com

Workshops with drum-maker **Daytha Rodriguez** in Dangriga can be attended by appointment with a tour operator.

Gulisi Garifuna Museum, Dangriga, has exhibits looking at the Garifuna migration and culture. Book a visit by emailing gulisimuseum@yahoo.com.



The big day (clockwise from far left) A boat makes its way up Stann Creek to Dangriga for the landing ceremony on Garifuna Settlement Day, which marks the moment the Garifuna people first arrived in what is now southern Belize; a local Garifuna fisherman heads out for the day; the colourful houses of the Garifuna community remind you of their Caribbean roots and the similar designs that are found across the region; the town of Hopkins is another important cultural centre for the Garifuna community and is surrounded by small fishing villages; Daytha demonstrates hollowing out a log to make her drums



Cultural explosion (this page; clockwise from top left) Gloria leads a cookery lesson in which guests are only allowed to use traditional Garifuna preparation methods; a typically appetising bowl of *hudutu*; Pen's turtle-shell drums are what first gave him his unique sound; sunset over the Pelican Beach Resort in Dangriga; a group of drummers lead the procession on Garifuna Settlement Day; the November celebrations touch every corner of the Garifuna community, both young and old; (right page) one of the most striking things about Belize, other than its Maya ruins, is the sheer diversity of its peoples, from Creole to Mennonite

OTHER BELIZE CULTURES

Maya Indian

The Indigenous ancestral Maya make up about 10% of Belize's population and are split into three groups: the Yucatec Maya in the north and the Mopán and Kekchí Maya in the south. They are working to save their languages, as many worry they could be lost. Caves in the Cayo region have evidence of ancient Maya ceremonial sacrifices.

Mestizo

The Mestizo, who have a mix of Indigenous and European ancestry, are the largest ethnic group in Belize, comprising nearly half of the population. They are often found in the sparsely populated interior; many also live in the north.

Mennonite

Mennonite farmers arrived here from Canada and Mexico in the 1950s to escape religious persecution, settling in rural areas. Many speak Plautdietsch, an archaic Low Saxon language influenced by the Dutch. They shun most technology and have strict rules regarding dress and their appearance; for example, older men typically grow long beards. Though small in number, they make a significant contribution to the economy through their farming.

Creole

Descended from enslaved West and Central Africans and the British who once traded them, the Creole are mainly based along the central coastal regions. They have their own dialect, or patois, which is unique to Belize and is spoken by most of the population.



What I have left unsaid is just how unique this whole business is. Historically, it was only the Garifuna men that took up this craft. Drums are a hugely important part of their culture, and the two sisters were breaking a generations-long mould by being the first women to have taken up the calling.

I soon learnt that Daytha had shown an early interest in her father's profession. As a child, she had been intrigued that he didn't seem to work every day, and she only grew more curious after he explained this was because he was his own boss. With her brothers uninterested in the family business, Daytha and her sister carried it on instead.

She'd begun by learning to smooth out the wooden drums alongside her father. When she had originally asked when she'd know when the drum was ready, Aston had replied:

"When you can smell the garlic." It made little sense, but as an adult she realised that he had been describing a formula for unattainable perfection. The wood would never smell of garlic, any more than the perfectionist would be satisfied with their work.

What I found fascinating was that not only had Daytha and her family broken with convention, but she was willing to innovate too. She had decided to speed up the process of hollowing out the drums by using a chainsaw, which she ably demonstrated. Aston had been against this at first, preferring the old-fashioned way of crafting entirely by hand, but using modern machinery has revolutionised her drum-making business, meaning they can make instruments much faster.

Before long, it was time to depart, but I did so knowing that I was in for a treat. I joined up with tour-guide Ian, who delivered us to the popular beachside restaurant Tauni for a taste of traditional Garifuna food.

"Don't be afraid to use your fingers," he advised as the food arrived, picking at a piece of fish dexterously. We were having *hudutu*, a traditional Garifuna coconut soup. Next to this steaming bowl was a grilled red snapper, ready to be pulled apart and added to the broth, and floating atop the soup was a habanero chilli – locals typically sprinkle in the seeds to spice things up. Alongside this was a huge disc of cassava, a type of traditional flatbread made from the eponymous plant.

Wiggling my toes in the sand, I scarfed down the accompanying plantain mash and thought back to Pen's story of the origins of punta music. All the while we were watched over by Bob Marley, Elvis Presley and other legendary figures painted on the walls.

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This wasn't my first taste of local cuisine. Earlier in the week I had visited another Garifuna stronghold, the town of Hopkins, to have a cookery lesson with Gloria at Tugucina Gloria. We made *hudutu* soup using only traditional utensils and methods. She instructed each participant on how to cut and peel plantain, husk coconuts, grind coconut meat and then squeeze it into a milky substance. The hardest task was manoeuvring the enormous hardwood pestle into a wooden bucket in order to mash up the plantain.

"Be sure to put passion into everything you cook!" declared Gloria. Perhaps it was because of the effort that was involved in making it, but this was one of the most delicious meals I had ever tasted.

Back in Dangriga, we finished lunch and moved on to our final stop, the Gulisi Garifuna Museum, which

has a primary school on its grounds that teaches lessons in the Garifuna language. I was met here by Wahrisie Elijio, who was, appropriately enough, wearing a yellow dress with black

trim for the occasion, and had even gone so far as to dye half of her naturally black hair blonde. She gave me a personal tour of the museum, highlighting Garifuna history, music and educational principles. Several displays showed cooking utensils, including *matapi*, which are used to remove toxins from the cassava root before baking bread.

I was fascinated by a timeline in the museum that indicated an alternative history to the one widely told about the origins of the Garifuna people. In 1311, it claimed, two expeditions travelled the Atlantic Ocean from West Africa under the orders of King Abubakari II of Mali to what we now know as the Caribbean island of St Vincent. There is some controversy as to whether the West Africans arrived at this date, were shipwrecked much later (as some believe) or escaped slavery. Whatever the history, there is no doubting the remarkable culture that it gave rise to.

The most important exhibit in the museum, Wahrisie told me, demonstrated the making of drums. It made me think back to Pen and to Daytha, who had carried on this tradition but also shaped it in their own image. It made me realise that you can't turn a living culture into an exhibit, as it's forever evolving, but you can meet and talk to the people who carry it within them: in their art, their food, their clothes, their music. That is the point of the Garifuna Trail, and in doing this, I had experienced a side to Belize every bit as unique as its reefs and Maya ruins. **W**