



## Belize 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Maritime; Theft; Drug Trafficking; Murder; Burglary; Rape/Sexual Violence; Information Security; Human Trafficking; Money Laundering; Riots/Civil Unrest; Hurricanes; Floods; Earthquakes; Wildfires; Hate Crimes; Kidnapping; Extortion; Fraud; Hotels

Western Hemisphere > Belize; Western Hemisphere > Belize > Belmopan

5/4/2016

### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Belize (formerly British Honduras) is the only English speaking country in Central America. Belize is located south of Mexico and east of Guatemala on the Caribbean Sea. Tourism is a major part of the Belizean economy, with high season from November-April. Thousands of tourists visit Belize. Favorite destinations include the cayes (islands) off the eastern coast, including Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker, and the coastal areas in the south, including Placencia. Tourists also frequent ecotourism destinations in the lush rainforests in the west and south.

Post Crime Rating: High

### Crime Threats

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Overall crime in Belize City increased significantly in 2014 due in part to the increase in gang violence and drug trafficking and remained largely the same in 2015. Criminal acts, including extremely violent acts, can and do happen in Belize.

Due to the small population (335,000) and high murder rate per capita, Belize consistently ranks among the top 10 in the world for homicides, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, with an average of around 40 homicides per 100,000 residents. After setting an all-time record in 2012 for homicides at 145, the number of murders significantly decreased to 99 in 2013. However, in 2014 the number of murders surged to 123. In 2015, the total number of murders dropped slightly to 119. The Belize District, which includes Belize City, continues to have the highest number of murders in the country, due in large part to dozens of street gangs. Belmopan, the tiny capital of Belize and home to several diplomatic missions, including the U.S. Embassy, recorded 21 murders in 2015, a dramatic increase from five in 2014.

2015 saw a significant increase in shootings and thefts. The majority of crimes are burglaries and thefts, often without injuries. In 2015, there were a disturbing number of robberies that ended in serious injuries and fatalities.

Break-ins and vandalism of automobiles do occur.

Major crimes remain low around popular tourist destinations (including the Mayan ruins), but the risk still exists. Several tourist areas along the border with Guatemala have active military patrols due in part to border incidents that are reported each year. Some tourism excursions require a military patrol to view ruins located on the border with Guatemala. Tourist attractions, including cave tubing and zip lining, remain relatively safe. While crime against

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tourists exists on the cayes (San Pedro, Caye Caulker), it is less frequent and generally non-violent, though murders, sexual assaults, and robberies that have turned violent do occur in these areas.

Over the past several years, there has been a shift in major crimes from being concentrated mostly in the population center in Belize City to districts in the north, west, and south of Belize. Many of the Western expatriates who were killed in 2014 and 2015 lost their lives in rural areas, to include the popular tourist destination San Pedro on Ambergris Caye.

There were several high-profile investigations involving Ministerial-level officials involved in the illegal sale of Belizean identity documents, including passports. Government officials (including immigration department officials) have been investigated. The U.S. Embassy and other law enforcement organizations are following the progress of these cases closely.

Corruption, human smuggling and trafficking, the drug trade, money laundering, and organized gang activity remain significant criminal problems. Criminal organizations and individuals often operate beyond the ability of the police. Compounding this problem is the very modest capacity to prosecute offenders successfully.

#### Other Areas of Concern

Travelers are advised to avoid areas of the south side of Belize City where numerous gangs are known to operate. The government has designated certain areas on the south side of Belize City as "crime ridden," thereby enabling law enforcement and security authorities to

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conduct random searches without a warrant. It is recommended that travel to the south side of Belize City be minimized to official business only and that personal trips be avoided.

## Transportation-Safety Situation

### Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road conditions generally can be characterized as very poor. The rainy season, which occurs from winter into spring, exacerbates the poor road conditions. The road systems range from short stretches of newly-paved roads in Belize City to decades-old pavement on the major highways that connect north-south and east-west. Major highways can be characterized as two-lane in some stretches, but the roads can narrow depending on the paving and the frequent break-off of the pavement along the edges of the roads. The highways are mostly not illuminated, laden with potholes, and contain unpaved dirt shoulders. Lane markings are present on a few major highways for short stretches. The primary highways – Philip SW Goldson Highway (northern), George Price Highway (western), Hummingbird and Southern highways – are in generally better condition (paved) than most roads, although the quality and grade of the roads are inconsistent. Certain stretches of the George Price Highway that connects Belize City to Belmopan and continues west to the Guatemalan border have been the site of several fatal accidents. The combination of inconsistent paving and slick roadways have been contributing factors in several fatal accidents along this highway. Traffic fatalities remain an urgent and very real danger. Roads in rural areas and villages are typically dirt or loose gravel and in poor condition.

Driving can be extremely hazardous after dusk and during the frequent rains. The major highways are the only reliable avenues to transit the country, aside from small tourist

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airplanes operated by two Belizean commercial carriers. Pedestrians, bicyclists, cars, and buses utilize the same roads day and night. Stray dogs wander freely in close proximity to the many small villages that dot the major highways.

Defensive driving is critical to navigate the road systems. Drivers should always use maximum follow distances to allow plenty of time to react to the unexpected. Local drivers may use turn signals to signify different vehicle movements. For example, a left-hand turn signal in a vehicle ahead of you on the highway may be a signal for your car to pass on the left or it could indicate a left turn by the vehicle ahead.

Due to the absence of stoplights and vehicular police patrols, speed bumps are used, especially in/around small villages, schools, and population centers. There are several different signs that indicate speed bumps, but many speed bumps are not marked at all. Speed bumps can be a significant hazard to vehicles and occupants, as they tend to be very large and damaging to vehicles that hit them too hard. Drivers should always be aware of the speed bumps, especially during dusk, dawn, and night driving, and should be aware that vehicles may slam on their brakes unexpectedly to try and avoid hitting one.

Hitch hiking is an accepted means for Belizeans to travel. Hitch hikers often gather at speed bumps where traffic must slow and are often picked up by local motorists. This form of travel, however, can be extremely dangerous. It is strongly advised that motorists do not stop for hitchhikers.

Traffic circles take the place of traffic lights. At traffic circles, you must yield to exiting traffic before proceeding and then signal before you exit to alert the vehicles behind you.

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Buses and cars often do not yield to pedestrians.

The police regularly operate checkpoints, especially in/around Belize City, Belmopan, and sporadically along the major highways leading west and south. All personnel should stop at these checkpoints and fully cooperate with police. The police may ask for a form of identification. Often, the focus of the checkpoint is to ensure that vehicles are properly insured or to spot-check window tinting to ensure that it is within the legal limit. There have been few reports of false checkpoints or extortion of persons in vehicles passing through these checkpoints.

Individuals wishing to travel via personally-owned vehicle should exercise extreme caution. Theft of small, easily pilfered items and the car sound system is a common crime. So keep your vehicle sterile, storing anything that would entice a thief out of plain view. Do not leave items visible inside your parked car and keep important items out of reach of outsiders while driving. Prior to road travel, ensure that your vehicle is in good operating condition, paying particular attention to the engine, tires, brakes, head/tail lights, spare tire/jack, horn, and fluid levels. Particularly on trips to remote areas, try to travel in tandem and advise someone of your travel plans (anticipated arrival/departure times, contact numbers). If your tire is mounted on the outside of the vehicle, secure it with a chain and padlock or similar device. If this is not possible, leave the tire at home, reinstalling it only for extended trips outside the city. Replace one lug nut on each wheel with a specially-keyed bolt that locks or can only be removed with a special attachment to the tire iron. Parking on the street can rarely be avoided. If left overnight, ensure you park in an area that is well-illuminated, with security guards (most hotels have them), and within view of the location of your visit. The use of a car alarm is a necessary precaution in deterring vehicle thefts and thefts of interior contents.

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## Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation can be problematic and unreliable. Taxi stands and plazas are located throughout major cities and villages, and taxis can be contacted by phone. Do not accept rides from unauthorized taxis (legitimate taxis have green license plates but perhaps few other markings) and do not hail a taxi with more occupants than just the driver. Taxis should generally only be hailed from reputable establishments (hotels, taxi stands, restaurants). There have been occasional reports of sexual assaults of unaccompanied females by taxi drivers.

Public buses are prone to safety and security problems, and extreme caution should be taken when using them. Buses often operate under poor conditions and lack adequate maintenance. Bus drivers are often observed exceeding the speed limits, pulling over suddenly and without warning for passengers, and passing vehicles where it is unsafe to do so.

Water taxis are an inexpensive and reliable method to travel from Belize City to the cayes, (Caye Caulker, San Pedro). Water taxis are generally safe, but caution should be exercised while using them, and travelers should ensure that there are adequate life vests on board.

## Terrorism Threat

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Post Terrorism Rating: Low

### Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

In 2012, an individual with suspected ties to Hezbollah was arrested in Mexico. The individual had obtained fraudulent Belizean identity documents that enabled him to travel from Belize to Mexico. Though this individual had suspected ties to the Islamic militant group, there are no known local, regional or international terror groups operating in or out of Belize.

### Political, Economic, Religious and Ethnic Violence

Post Political Violence Rating: Low

#### Civil Unrest

Political violence is rare. Lawful protests do occur regularly but are generally peaceful and orderly. The government requires a permit that must be requested at least 24 hours prior to a planned protest. Embassy security messages are generally issued to advise personnel to avoid areas where protests are scheduled to occur.

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## Post-Specific Concerns

### Environmental Hazards

The most frequent natural disasters are hurricanes and tropical storms. Hurricane Hattie destroyed much of Belize City in 1961. Hurricane season in the western Caribbean is June 1-November 30. However, September-October is when tropical storms have generally affected Belize. Belize has very limited capabilities to respond adequately to the aftermath of a direct major hurricane hit. Although the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) has analyzed Belize's vulnerability to a hurricane, preparations in response to these reports remain inadequate. Hurricane shelters exist along the coast, but limited emergency food and water stockpiles would be exhausted quickly by the high number of potential victims of a serious storm. Belize has a rudimentary evacuation plan, but practical implementation would likely be difficult. In October 2010, Hurricane Richard slammed into the coast, resulting in power outages throughout 65 percent of the country, extensive flooding, and the blockage of Belize's major highways. The eye of the hurricane crossed as far inland as Belmopan, causing serious damage across the Cayo district.

Minor earthquakes have occurred, typically in the south. The most recent, severe earthquake was a 7.1 magnitude quake with an epicenter 140 miles off the coast in May 2009. Electricity in the southern portion of the country was temporarily knocked out; however, damage was minimal, and there were no reported casualties. Minor after-shocks were felt for several weeks with minimal effect.

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Because Belize is tropical and has regular rainfall, clogged drainage, waterways, and urban growth lead to frequent flooding of roadways, even during the “dry” season (December-May). Flooding has not been disastrous, but severe storms do cut off vehicular movement in many coastal and inland areas as the low bridges flood. Waterways require frequent dredging, so flooding can be exacerbated.

There is a significant risk of forest fires during the dry season.

Much of Belize is protected rainforest, and there is the threat of attack by indigenous animals. In 2010, an American citizen and a Belizean were killed by jaguars in separate incidents. There are also isolated reported crocodile attacks. Belize rivers do contain large reptiles, so extreme caution should be exercised.

Belize offers a tremendous variety of ecotourism adventures including diving, snorkeling, horseback riding, cave tubing, rappelling, bird watching, and exploring caves and Mayan ruins. These adventures are mostly “at your own risk” and can involve long hikes, climbs, and dive sites that are not within cell phone range. Personnel who engage in these activities should have portable first aid kits and satellite phones.

### Personnel-Background Concerns

There is significant hostile sentiment toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) individuals. LGBT issues are frequently highlighted in the press and can spur passionate discussions at community forums, and there have been instances of violence reported against

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LGBT individuals. A well-reported case involved the murder of a transgender person in Belize City in January 2014. Authorities are still investigating whether the person was murdered because of his sexual orientation or as a result of a robbery.

While Belize is generally a friendly and accommodating society, females should be particularly attentive to risks associated with being in public alone or in the company of only one other female. Sexual harassment and sexual assaults against women have occurred.

### Drug-related Crimes

Due to Belize's location, the transit of drugs, particularly cocaine and precursor chemicals for methamphetamine, has risen. Belize was included on the FY2012-2015 U.S. Majors List of illegal narcotic producing and/or transit countries.

In 2011, a plane carrying suspected, violent drug smugglers crashed outside of Belmopan near the Belize Zoo. In 2012, there was a shoot-out between security forces on the north part of Ambergris Caye that resulted in the deaths of four individuals, dressed in military uniforms with military-style rifles, who had suspected ties to Central American gangs.

### Kidnapping Threats

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Kidnapping is very rare, but in January 2014, two U.S. citizens were kidnapped at gunpoint from a tourist lodge near the western border with Guatemala. The American citizens were released unharmed within a few hours.

## **Police Response**

The police work very closely with the Regional Security Office, but their ability to respond quickly to and prevent crime is severely challenged. The police force is understaffed and poorly equipped. There are shortages of standard law enforcement equipment (vehicles, weapons, handcuffs). Investigations are slow and limited by bureaucratic, administrative, and resource deficiencies. Although the government takes crimes against visitors very seriously, these deficiencies seriously hamper the police's ability to respond, investigate, and prosecute offenders. The police and emergency telephone lines are continually busy, and contacting police can be difficult. Response times are generally extremely slow. Senior police leadership has taken measures to address some of these deficiencies.

Due to significant resource donations provided by the U.S. government-administered Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the police are receiving more equipment and training that will allow them to better carry out their law enforcement responsibilities and citizen security.

Reports of police harassment and extortion attempts of American tourists are rare. However, there have been recent complaints that Western tourists disembarking cruises are offered drugs and then "set-up" for arrest and payment of a hefty fine. All U.S. citizens are advised that the purchase of drugs is against the law, and violators are subject to substantial

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penalties, including jail time.

## How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Emergency assistance from the U.S. Embassy is available 24-hours a day, 365 days a year. During regular business hours (Mon-Fri 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.), U.S. citizens with emergencies may appear for assistance in person at the Embassy Consular Section or may call 822-4011. If you are a U.S. citizen with an after-hours emergency, please call the duty officer at (501) 610-5030. If you are calling from the U.S., you must first dial 011-501 and then the seven-digit number. The U.S. Embassy Consular Section should be contacted in the event of an arrest, medical emergency, death, crime, loss or theft of a U.S. passport, or other emergency.

## Crime Victim Assistance

The local emergency line is 911.

If you are the victim of a crime, contact the local police first to obtain a police report and then the U.S. Embassy in Belmopan (tel. 822-4011). This includes the loss or theft of a U.S. passport. The Embassy's consular staff can assist in finding appropriate medical care, contacting family/friends, and explaining how U.S. funds may be transferred to Belize. The investigation and prosecution of local crimes are solely the responsibility of local Belize authorities, though consular officers can assist with understanding the local criminal justice

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process and with finding a Belizean attorney if needed.

Police contact information:

Belize City: +501-207-2222

Belmopan: +501-802-2221

Benque Viejo: +501-803-2038

Caye Caulker: +501-226-0179

Corozal: +501-402-2022

Dangriga: +501-522-2022

Independence: +501-523-2022

Orange Walk: +501-322-2022

Punta Gorda: +501-722-2022

San Ignacio: +501-804-2022

San Pedro: +501-206-2022

Police/Security Agencies

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Belize Police Headquarters: Belize Police are headquartered in Belmopan and can be contacted at 802-2221. Most police contact information can be found on the Belize Police Department webpage at <http://www.police.gov.bz/index.php>.

National Crimes Branch (NCB): This unit, under the Commissioner of Police, is the lead investigative agency for serious crimes in Belize. NCB can be reached at 802-3818.

Belize City Police Station: Responsible for the Eastern District of Belize, including Belize City. Belize City Police can be reached at 227-2222.

San Pedro Substation: Responsible for San Pedro and can be reached at 702-0137.

## Medical Emergencies

Medical care can be costly and inadequate by U.S. standards. There are nine hospitals in Belize. All medical clinics treat only outpatient cases and are not staffed to handle emergencies. Medical facilities outside Belize City are not adequate to handle serious medical conditions and often fail to meet basic U.S. standards.

Travelers should bring any legally-prescribed drugs that they may need during their visit. For more information, please refer to OSAC's Report, "Traveling with Medications." There are reasonably well-stocked pharmacies in most major towns and tourist destinations, and prescriptions are usually not required.

## Contact Information for Hospitals/Clinics

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Belize City is the center for medical care in Belize with the two major hospitals considered adequate by U.S. standards and equipped to handle serious medical problems. They are:

Belize Medical Associates

5791 St. Thomas Street, Kings Park, Belize City

Tel # +501-223-0303

Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital

Princess Margaret Drive, Belize City

Tel # +501-223-1548

Regional Hospitals

Western Regional Hospital

Florina Avenue, Belmopan

#+501-822-2264

San Ignacio Hospital

Bullet Tree Rd, Cayo

#+501-824-2066

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San Pedro Clinic

San Pedro, Belize

Tel#+501-226-2918

Punta Gorda Hospital

Punta Gorda, Belize

Tel#+501-722-2026

Orange Walk Hospital

Orange Walk, Belize

Tel#+501-322-1468

#### Available Air Ambulance Services

People with serious or life-threatening problems who need to be evacuated to the U.S. should contact Air Ambulance. It is recommended to check with your insurance company to verify you have sufficient coverage before traveling to Belize.

#### Air Ambulance Professionals

Ft. Lauderdale Executive Airport

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Hanger 36B, 1535 S. Perimeter Road

Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33309

Tel: 800-752-4195; 954-491-0555

Fax: 954-491-6114

[www.airambulanceprof.com](http://www.airambulanceprof.com)

Those traveling in the more remote areas or to the off-shore cayes should note that emergency transportation to adequate medical facilities may be problematic. Astrum Helicopters provides MEDEVAC flights in coordination with the Belize Emergency Response Team (BERT). For emergency response and transportation, BERT is Belize's only qualified provider.

Astrum Helicopters

Mile 3.5 George Price Highway

Belize City, Belize

Office: +501-222-5100

Fax: +501-222-5105

[www.astrumhelicopters.com](http://www.astrumhelicopters.com)

Belize Emergency Response Team (BERT)

P.O. Box 1370

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1675 Sunrise Avenue

Coral Grove Area

Belize City, Belize

Tel: +501-223-3292

Cell: +501-610-3890

Fax: +501-223-0549

Email: [info@bertbelize.org](mailto:info@bertbelize.org)

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:  
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/belize.htm>

## **OSAC Country Council Information**

Belize has an active OSAC Country Council. Interested parties can contact the Council through the Embassy's Regional Security Office at +501-822-4011 x 4105. To reach OSAC's Western Hemisphere team, please email [OSACWHA@state.gov](mailto:OSACWHA@state.gov).

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## **U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information**

### Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

U.S. Embassy Belmopan

4 Floral Park Road

Belmopan, Belize

or

P.O. Box 497

Belmopan, Belize

U.S. Embassy Belmopan is open for regular business Mon-Fri, 0800-1200 and 1300-1700 hours. The Embassy is closed on American and Belizean holidays.

### Embassy Contact Numbers

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(Belize Country Code: 501):

Main Embassy Number: 822-4011

Main Embassy Fax: 822-4012

Embassy Duty Officer: 610-5030

Regional Security Office: 822-4011 ext. 4105

Regional Security Office Belmopan [RSO@state.gov](mailto:RSO@state.gov)

Economic/Political Section: 822-4011 ext. 4197

Embassy Nurse: 822-4011 ext. 4286

American Citizen Services: 822-4011 ext. 4219/4209

Website: <http://belize.usembassy.gov/>

<http://www.facebook.com/Belize.USEmbassy>

## Embassy Guidance

Americans are encouraged to register with the American Citizens Service Office (<http://belize.usembassy.gov/service.html>) located in the Consular Section or via STEP

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(<http://travel.state.gov/>).

[http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1055.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1055.html)

<http://www.osac.gov/>

## **Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

### Scams

There have been numerous reports of fraud committed against expatriates and Belizeans who have attempted to purchase land in Belize. Many expatriates have reported being the victim of scams in which land is purchased that was not available, land was purchased that was legally owned by other parties, or land that they had purchased was sold without their knowledge. It has been reported that authorities have not been proactive in investigating these crimes. However, the government has renewed efforts to address property disputes by converting physical records to electronic records.

### Situational Awareness Best Practices

Visitors and residents should always be aware of the presence of criminals who prey on targets of opportunity. Visitors should practice sound personal security techniques. Keep a

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low profile and avoid wearing expensive/flashy jewelry, especially when in open markets. Do not dress in a manner that indicates wealth. Move about in groups, stay in well-illuminated areas, avoid short-cuts, and maintain good situational awareness. Walking or exercising after dark is not recommended, especially for women. Make a note of emergency telephone numbers and locations you may need: police, fire, your hotel, and the U.S. Embassy.

Beware of pickpockets. Men should keep wallet/cash in a front pants pocket. A woman's purse should be small and held closely in front of her. Avoid carrying large amounts of cash and do not flash large amounts of money when paying a bill. It is always best to leave valuables and large amounts of cash locked in a secure location. Make sure your credit card is returned to you after each transaction.

In all confrontations with criminals, resistance may provoke a more violent response. If you are confronted, do not fight back -- give up your valuables as they are not worth your life. It is generally preferable that you comply with a robber's instructions.

Keep your hotel door secured. Meet visitors in the lobby. Do not leave money or other valuables in your hotel room while you are out. Use the hotel safe, if available. If you are out late at night, let someone know when you expect to return. If you are alone, do not get on an elevator if there is a suspicious-looking person inside. Read the fire safety instructions in your hotel room. Know how to report a fire and be sure you know where the nearest fire exits and alternate exits are located. Count the doors between your room and the nearest exit; this could be a lifesaver if you have to crawl through a smoke-filled corridor.

Particular caution and situational awareness should be exercised by expatriates living in

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smaller communities in Belize.

While engaging in tourist activities, it is prudent to assume that safety procedures and standards at tourist destinations are not up to U.S. standards and consideration should be given prior to engaging in “at your own risk” activities.

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