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Louisa Reynolds

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## **Belizean Tourism Industry Continues to Boom**

*by Louisa Reynolds*

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Belize recorded its highest level of overnight tourist arrivals in 20 years in 2016, while cruise tourist arrivals increased to over a million visitors, according to a report published by the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) on Feb. 9.

The country reported a total of 385,583 overnight tourist arrivals in 2016, a 13% increase over 2015. This figure follows increases of 6.2% in 2015 and 9.2% in 2014. Belize's 13% increase was the fastest growth reported by any tourist destination in the Caribbean in 2016, a total increase of 44,422 visitors, year-on-year.

### ***US visitors top the list***

Overall, tourist arrivals in the Caribbean increased by 4.2% in 2016, above the 3.9% global average. Most of the tourists who choose Caribbean destinations continue to be from the US, which accounts for half of all arrivals. In the specific case of Belize, the country's tourist board reports that US visitors account for more than 60% of all visitors to the country, followed by Europeans (12%) and Canadians (7%).

Other Caribbean destinations reporting the greatest increase in tourist arrivals are Dominican Republic, the British Virgin Islands, and Grenada.

There was also good news for the region's cruise industry, with the CTO recording a 1.3% growth in cruise passenger arrivals to the Caribbean in 2016, reaching a total of 29.3 million visitors, in line with the organization's predictions at the beginning of 2016.

"Caribbean tourism continues to break new ground, surpassing 29 million arrivals for the first time in our history, and once again we have grown faster than the global average," said CTO Secretary General Hugh Riley.

The CTO's acting director of research, Ryan Skeete, added: "2016 marked another record-setting year, as for the first time in our history we received over 29 million arrivals. This is also the seventh consecutive year of growth and our estimated 4.2% increase in tourism trips is the third consecutive year above the global growth rate."

### ***Increased expenditures***

According to the report, total visitor expenditure in the Caribbean in 2016 increased by approximately 3.5% to reach US\$35.5 billion.

The CTO regards greater air access from the source markets to the Caribbean as well as investment in airport infrastructure and hotels as the key to the region's success as a booming tourist destination. Belize, in particular, benefited from new flights from the Canadian airline Westjet, which started to run a Toronto-Belize City flight in October 2016, as well as the Panamanian airline Copa, which launched its twice-weekly Panama City-Belize City service in December 2015.

Westjet, the only Canadian carrier flying to Belize, launched its twice-weekly direct service to Belize in the hope that Canadian tourists would no longer be deterred from visiting the Caribbean destination by lengthy layovers and connections in the US.

The Belize Tourist Board also released a statement citing “vigorous marketing, product development, and expansion efforts of the stakeholders in the industry” as the main factors driving the boom in the Belizean tourism industry.

The upward trend is expected to continue in 2017, although tourist arrivals to the Caribbean are expected to grow at a slower rate of between 2.5% and 3.5%.

Belize has undergone a rapid transformation over the past three decades, from a tiny Caribbean country that was not regarded as an attractive tourist destination due to its lack of infrastructure, to a country with a booming tourism industry that employs 28% of the population and represents 21% of GDP, according to World Bank statistics (agriculture, the country’s other major source of income, employs 10% of the labor force and contributes 13% of GDP, mostly through the export of sugar and tropical fruits).

The country boasts the Belize Barrier Reef, the second largest in the world ([NotiCen, March 12, 2015](#), and [April 28, 2016](#)); over 450 offshore islands; safe waters for windsurfing, swimming, cave rafting (the country has the largest cave system in Central America), scuba diving and snorkeling; and various wildlife and jungle reserves, as well as Maya ruins.

Popular tourist destinations include San Pedro Town and Caye Caulker, both located about 70 km east of the Belizean coast and only a few miles from the Barrier Reef and described by the Los Angeles Times as “tropical paradises.”

In recent years, the Belizean tourism industry has strived to increase the country’s appeal to the higher end of the tourist market by investing in the creation of luxury resorts such as the Naïa Resort and Spa, which opened in January and is located within a 200-acre private reserve on the Placencia peninsula in southern Belize, and the Itz’ana beach resort, which is due to be inaugurated in September and will include 22 villas and 17 one-bedroom cottages.

### *At what cost?*

Although tourism has become a major driving force behind Belize’s economic growth, environmentalists have raised concerns regarding the impact of tourism on the country’s limestone caves and ancient Maya ruins.

In an article published by Science Daily, Professor Peter Kumble, of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, highlights the fact that many caves have suffered damage to natural rock features such as stalagmites and stalactites, as well as the theft of ancient artifacts. “In some locations, it is fairly easy for a tourist to pick up a shard of pottery and take it home, not realizing that they are disturbing an important archaeological site,” Kumble writes.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is working with the Belizean government to identify which areas can cope with the influx of tourists and which locations should remain closed to the general public, with the aim of putting forward a master plan that establishes guidelines for site maintenance, the implementation of “no footprint policies,” meaning that visitors should stick to existing trails rather than creating new ones, and debris collection, among other issues.

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