



YA'AXCHÉ CONSERVATION TRUST

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER INFORMATION MANUAL

Ya'axché's Vision:

Harmony between nature and human development for the benefit of both

Ya'axché's Mission:

Ya'axché is a Belizean organization which aims to maintain healthy forests, rivers and reefs for the benefit of all through protected area management, advocacy, and working hand in hand with communities to develop capacity for the wise use of land and natural resources in and around the Maya Golden Landscape in Toledo

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

Quick Facts about Belize

- **Language:** The country's official language is English, but most people speak Kriol (Belizean Creole) in informal situations. The communities where Ya'axché works speak Kekchi and Mopan Maya, while some villages in the region use Spanish as the main language of communication.
- **Government:** Britain granted British Honduras (Belize's former name) self-governance in 1964, when the head of PUP government, George Price, became the first prime minister.
- **Electricity:** 110 volts AC, 60 Hz, flat two-pin plugs
- **Time zone:** GMT/UTC - 6; daylight saving time is not observed in Belize
- **Weather:** The overall climate of Belize can be described as sub-tropical. The coastal areas are exposed to southeast trade winds. Temperatures in Belize range from 50°F/10°C to 100°F/38°C with an annual mean of 79°F/26°C. May through August is the wet season, which is also the warmest period of the year at about an 81°F/27°C average. Location is a big factor for temperature as inland areas to the west tend to be several degrees cooler than areas along the coast.

Brief Cultural History of Belize

The earliest known inhabitants of southern Belize were the ancient Maya. Great Mayan cities and ceremonial centers grew and flourished throughout the region. Uxbenka ("The Old Place") is one of the oldest settlements known, perched on a hill outside of Santa Cruz village. Nim Li Punit ("Big Hat") wasn't discovered until the 1970s and is known for its variety and number of stele (modest-sized monoliths). Lubaantun ("Place of the Fallen Stones") is thought to have been the regional capital, acting as the religious, administrative, political and commercial center of the region.

Eventually, these great cities disappeared beneath the dense jungle canopy. The reason for the collapse of the Mayan Civilization is hidden in the mists of time. But we do know that the architects of the Mayan cities of southern Belize were a group of people called the "Manche Chol Maya." Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the Chol remained unconquered, successfully resisting attempts by the Spanish to rule and tax them, though many were converted to Catholicism. Eventually, diseases such as smallpox decimated the Mayan

population, and during the 18th and 19th centuries, the entire Ch'ol population was transported to the highlands of Guatemala by the British. After this forced movement of people out of southern Belize, Toledo was mostly unpopulated until the mid 1800s when the Garifuna settlements of Punta Gorda, Punta Negra and Barranco were founded. The Garifuna are the result of a cultural and racial fusion of Carib Indians and African Blacks that occurred on the Lesser Antillean island of St. Vincent in the 16th century. The Garifuna have remained along the coastal communities of southern Belize.

Meanwhile, in 1868, Confederate soldiers seeking asylum at the end of the American Civil War settled in a spot called "Cattle Landing" just north of present day Punta Gorda. Sugar quickly became the dominant crop and by 1870, no less than 12 distinct sugar mills were in full operation in the region. Within a few years, sugar prices fell and, combined with a labor shortage, the sugar industry collapsed by the turn of the century.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two distinct groups of Maya Indians, Mopan and Kekchi, began migrating into southern Belize from Guatemala, fleeing from heavy taxation. The Mopan Maya settled the uplands of Toledo around the present day village of San Antonio. The Kekchi Maya spread out into the isolated lowlands and along the many rivers of Toledo. Today, the Maya comprise the largest percentage of the population in Toledo and have remained the most traditional and culturally distinct. The Mopan and Kekchi Maya have together formed over 38 communities throughout Toledo. The other ethnic groups - Garifuna, Creole, East Indians and Chinese - live together in Punta Gorda and a few other small communities along the coastline.

Toledo District

Toledo District in the south of Belize is Mayan country - over half the population and most of the villages in this district are Mayan. However, Toledo District residents are proud of the harmony that exists between the many and varied cultures of southern Belize.

Traveling south along the Southern Highway, clusters of thatched huts appear with increasing regularity - Toledo district is the poorest district of the country with 65% of the population living in poverty.

Punta Gorda Town

Known locally as P.G., this is the southernmost town in Belize and the capital of the Toledo District. Almost 210 miles by road from Belize City, the population of P.G. is close to 6,000 people. Despite the fact that majority of Toledo's population is Mayan Punta Gorda is home to a mix of primarily Creole and Garifuna residents.

The road into town follows the shoreline; five main streets run parallel inland. Various fruit trees, especially mango trees, line the streets. Most small homes are made of wood on stilts. The town has one hospital, a police station, two banks, a post office, a gas station, a civic center, a number of churches and schools, and various grocery stores and food vendors, hotels, restaurants and bars. Punta Gorda is a gateway to the Guatemalan towns of Puerto Barrios and Livingston, with an Immigration and Customs office near the town dock.

Punta Gorda is a pleasant and interesting town, with a slow and easy-going pace. Traffic is minimal on the streets with no traffic lights. People hang out on street corners chatting, while children play in the schoolyards. On holidays and market days (primarily Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday), the villagers pour into town to buy and sell homegrown produce and simple household goods. Fishermen may often be found selling along the sea front, as well as in the market. Nightlife is quiet, but on certain nights, Garifuna and Creole drummers perform for tourists.

Threats to the Environment

Despite having one of the lowest population densities in the world, Belize faces great environmental concerns. The challenge is to nurture the economic livelihoods of local communities while sustaining the pristine ecosystems that make this region so special. As one of the most biologically diverse habitats on Earth, this area has been treated in the past as a limitless resource and evidence indicates that both land and reef systems are threatened by severe natural and human-induced impacts. Rising population density, associated development, and agricultural and industrial activities result in increased pressure on the reef and associated ecosystems.

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Benefits of Volunteering with Ya'axché

- Free accommodations in a quiet nature preserve
- Opportunity to work closely with dynamic multi-cultural staff
- Reference for future employment
- Appreciation for your dedication and hard work
- Adventure in a country with pristine ecosystems, world-class snorkeling and SCUBA
- In-depth, interactive cultural experience unattainable by tourists

Accommodations

Ya'axché has an office in Punta Gorda and an operations center in Golden Stream Corridor Preserve referred to as 'Golden Stream Field Centre'. Depending on the duties and responsibilities of the volunteer position, the volunteer may decide to live and work at the Field Center or to rent an apartment in Punta Gorda and work from the main office. Ya'axché is unable to sponsor volunteer's rent in PG, but the Field Center facilities are free to use. If staying at the Field Center, volunteers may sleep either in the spare bedroom of the main building or in a separate bunk house, which has a shared bedroom and shower facilities.

Most volunteers choose to live in a beautiful but rustic setting at the Field Center, which is a fruitful place to be and to understand the scope of Ya'axché's activities, as well as to quickly become a part of the Ya'axché team. *Note that it is highly recommended to live at the Field Center for at least 2 weeks at the beginning of the stay in order to learn the context of Ya'axché's work.*

How rustic is the Golden Stream Field Centre?

- The Field Center is easily accessible by bus/vehicle as it is located right along the Southern Highway
- The nearest village (Golden Stream) is ~1 mile away, while Punta Gorda is ~ 35 miles (50km) away
- Solar power and internet access are available, but can be limited at times
- Cold water showers in a shared bathroom
- You may see tarantulas, scorpions, rats and bats

- Cooking is with a butane stove/oven. You are the cook and volunteers can choose to cook individually or share responsibilities and food.
- No refrigerator
- No washing machine but you may hand-wash or there is a drop-off laundry in PG

Transportation

You will not be allowed to drive Ya'axché's vehicles, but you may rent or drive your own vehicle. There is a bus system throughout the country and buses to Punta Gorda pass the Field Center several times every day.

Food and Supplies

The Head Ranger is responsible for all operations at the Field Center. He also ensures that basic supplies are always available, including butane, dish soap, toilet paper, et cetera. Although all essential kitchenware is available for use, the volunteer is responsible for purchasing his/her own food. Food and supplies may be bought in PG at shops, grocery stores, and open-air markets. While fresh vegetables can only be bought in PG, Golden Stream Village (~ 1 mile from the Field Centre) has three shops selling food and household items (packet and tinned food, flour, rice, beans) and general items (beer, rubber boots, soap).

Medical Safety

Ya'axché does not take responsibility for medical emergencies or illnesses, but of course the volunteer will be transported to the nearest clinic if critical medical care is required. There is a polyclinic in Punta Gorda, where general medical concerns can be addressed (i.e. prescriptions for antibiotics and cough medicine). This medical care is free. For more specialized attention it would be necessary to travel to Dangriga or Belize City, where more extensive facilities and private hospitals can be found.

All medical decisions are the responsibility of each volunteer. Note that health conditions around the world are constantly changing, so keep informed and consult your physician, a local travel health clinic, the US Center for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov), the World Health Organization (www.who.int), or International SOS. Please consult your physician for guidance on inoculations for Belize and if you intend to travel to other parts of the country or Central America.

Biting insects, including sand flies, doctor flies, botlas flies, and mosquitoes are nuisances throughout the year. Mosquitoes may transmit a number of diseases, including malaria, which is present in Belize. Although avoiding mosquito bites by covering up at night and using repellent are effective measures, taking an anti-malarial medication is up to the discretion of the volunteer.

Communication

Belize has very limited network coverage compared to neighbouring countries, with even international roaming services often not working. Check with your cell phone provider to see which carriers work in southern Belize.

It is possible to purchase a local cell phone from one of two communication companies: Digicell (BTL) or Smart. If you have an unblocked phone, you may purchase a SIM card from Digicell. It is also sometimes possible to unblock blocked phones, but the cost of unblocking can be equivalent to purchasing a new cell phone on sale. If you choose to use Smart service you will have to buy a new phone because Smart does not use regular SIM cards. Both phone services use pre-paid minutes and can be easily recharged at most shops in PG.

Skype is no longer blocked in Belize, but the internet is frequently too slow to have non-interrupted conversations.

Money

The official currency is Belizean dollars; however US dollars are accepted and welcomed everywhere at a more or less fixed rate of BZ\$2 = US\$1. There is NO NEED to change US dollars into Belizean dollars. Change will be given, and ATMs dispense in Belize dollars. ATM's are available in PG but check with your home bank to ensure that you will have access in Belize. Remember to bring some small bills (US\$1, US\$5, US\$10) to use initially as many vendors will be unable to change large bills.

Traveler's checks and credit cards are somewhat difficult to use, but are becoming more acceptable each year. Traveler's checks can be cashed in banks and Visa and MasterCard credit cards can be used to get cash advances from most banks. Most debit cards work in the ATM's in Belize, but stores, restaurants, bars, and some hotels accept payments only in cash.

However, larger stores, restaurants and hotels (primarily in tourist-heavy locations such as Placencia and San Ignacio) accept debit or credit cards.

How much \$ will I need?

This varies greatly with each volunteer, depending on the amount of traveling and type of activities you plan to engage in as well as how much imported goods/food you purchase. On average, volunteers who live at the field station and commute to Punta Gorda 2-3 times per week spend \$300 US per month for transportation, food, and incidentals (i.e. this does not include traveling around the country and tourist activities).

FYI: Sample Approximate Costs (Belize dollars)

Bus round-trip between PG and the field station	\$10
Lunch in a PG restaurant	\$6-10
Guest house / budget hotel	\$20-50
Monthly rent in PG (2-3 bedroom, furnished)	\$500+

Local Travel

During weekends and before and after your volunteer time, you may choose to visit Mayan ruins, Mayan communities, caves and waterfalls, and to kayak rivers and coastal waters. You may also be able to arrange jungle hikes and bird-watching trips, and enjoy some of the local Maya, Garifuna, Creole and East Indian cuisine.

This area of coastal Central America contains a myriad of habitats, from tropical forests and mangroves to the vast Meso-American Barrier reef, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Thousands of Maya archaeological sites dot the landscape, and rivers cascade from the mountains to the sea over dramatic falls and through limestone caves. Belize has retained much of its coastal forest providing a vital resource for local sustainability.

Belize's barrier reef ecosystem, second only to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, covers a large offshore area of estuaries, lagoons, islands, and shallow water reefs. The reef supports hundreds of species of fish, as well as mollusks, sponges, and other plants and animals. Of

special note are the critically endangered manatees and marine turtles as well as struggling populations of lobsters and queen conch that are vital to the local economy.

Personal Security and Travel

Volunteers should exercise caution and good judgment regarding their personal security. You are advised to not travel alone at night and to safeguard your valuables. For those traveling to other regions in Belize before or after their volunteer experience, be aware that Belize has some high crime areas. Please consult <http://travel.state.gov/travel> for the latest travel information.

Arrival to Belize

Volunteer is responsible for scheduling his/her own travel to Punta Gorda, Belize. The only international airport in the country is in Belize City, but in general, international flights through Cancun or Guatemala City airports are cheaper. The following are instructions for local travel to Punta Gorda:

- From Belize City: fly with Maya Air or Tropic Air (1 hour) or take the James Bus Line from downtown Belize City to Punta Gorda (5-7 hours)
- From Cancun: take the ADO bus that runs directly between Cancun and Belize City (12 hours), then fly or take the James Bus to Punta Gorda
- From Guatemala City: take the Litegua Bus from Zona 1 in Guatemala City to Puerto Barrios (6 hours), then take the boat from Puerto Barrios to Punta Gorda (1 hour, but note that the last boat leaves at 3PM).

Pick up of the volunteer from Punta Gorda will be scheduled prior to arrival. Note that it is also possible, if taking the bus, to get off at the Golden Stream Field Station, which is only 50 meters off the road. The field station is about one hour before Punta Gorda and is located between Medina Bank and Golden Stream villages.

Transit Visa

If traveling through any other countries (US, Mexico, Guatemala), the volunteer must check the transit visa requirements of those countries. For example, if traveling through the US it is necessary to apply for the ESTA visa: <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta/>

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE VOLUNTEER

Expectations

- Length of Stay: Ya'axché's volunteers are non-paid full time staff (not travelers on a work-vacation). They fill key positions in the organization and are therefore expected to devote at least 6 months to their positions. Many volunteers end up staying for 1-2 years.
- Personal conduct: The volunteer is expected to conduct him/herself in a professional manner, respectful of local customs and laws. Any conduct that reflects negatively on Ya'axché will result in the volunteer's dismissal. Any violations of Belizean law will be prosecuted in Belize with no recourse to foreign laws and attorneys and may be grounds for immediate deportation at the volunteer's own additional expense.
- Cultural sensitivity: Volunteers will have the opportunity to interact with the district's different cultural groups. The volunteer must be able to experience new cultures and situations with grace and sensitivity, refraining from potentially offensive language and dress, as well as judgmental and ethnocentric attitudes. If there is any question of what is acceptable for the situation, please discuss the situation with the supervisor.
- Ya'axché's focus on capacity building and education: Capacity building is the process of helping people identify issues and develop insights, knowledge and experience needed to implement change and to solve problems. Ya'axché's initiatives include local capacity building and community education, moving conservation to the forefront and working toward constructive solutions. One of the primary solutions is to facilitate the adoption of sustainable livelihoods by the local villagers as a means of protecting the natural resources; substituting eco-friendly activities and methods for traditional, less environmentally healthy practices. However, all these changes in attitudes and behaviors are to be encouraged through awareness building and with consent of individuals.
- Volunteer Assignments: Although volunteers are selected to do a specific task as per their TOR, they will be able, or sometimes requested, to help in other activities with Ya'axché. This is a great way to build new skills and to provide help where it is most needed.

Volunteer Personal Expenses

There is no program fee charged for this experience, but the volunteer is expected to arrange and pay for:

- Transportation to Punta Gorda, Belize, including airfare
- Food, personal expenses, in-country travel, passport, visa expenses
- Rent if the volunteer chooses to live in PG

PAPERWORK

All volunteers will receive an e-version of their position's Terms of Reference and International Volunteer Information Manual prior to their departure. Please read both documents; also **print, fill-out, and sign the last 2 pages of the Volunteer Information Manual** (Release from Liability Form, Acknowledgement of Volunteer Information, and contact information).

Belize Visa

Check the requirements for your nationality about entering Belize. American and European Union citizens are not required to apply for a tourist visa prior to arrival. The tourist visa received upon entry into the country is for 30 days. You may extend this visa at the Immigration and Customs Office in Punta Gorda for BZ\$50 per month for the first 6 months and BZ\$100 per month afterwards. Leaving and re-entering Belize automatically renews the tourist visa at no additional cost.

Alternatively, it is possible to go through a lengthier procedure to receive an **extended volunteer visa**. Ya'axché will advise on the process; however, all costs are to be incurred by the applicant. The process and requirements are subject to change, however, as of February 2012, they are as follows:

1. Apply for a Police Record at the Punta Gorda police station (may take up to 2 months) or at Belmopan police station (1 day).
2. Receive confirmation from the Tax Office in Dangriga that you are not getting paid in Belize (1 day).
3. Apply for a permission to work as a volunteer at the Labour Department in Punta Gorda. The required paperwork will include:
 - Application for Employment Form, 3 passport photos, Letter of recommendation from Ya'axché, one copy of identification page in passport, bank statement, police record, proof of no-pay from Tax Office, fee.
4. Apply for visa at the Immigration Office in Punta Gorda once the approval is granted by the Labour Department.

PACKING LIST

Required Items

- ☐ Paperwork: signed forms from this manual, passport, flight itinerary, photocopies of documents
- ☐ Money: credit cards, cash (carry some smaller denominations for initial use)
- ☐ Laptop, surge protector, and charge adaptor if necessary (inform Ya'axché staff if laptop is not available to make alternative arrangements)
- ☐ Prescription medications as needed, including copy of prescriptions
- ☐ Eyeglasses/contacts (very difficult to purchase in Belize)

Suggested Items

- ☐ Camping: backpack, camping hammock, and warm sleeping bag if intending to conduct patrols with rangers. It gets very cold farther in the mountains.
- ☐ Bedding: mosquito net, sheets (first check with Ya'axché staff for availability of items)
- ☐ Clothing: sandals, tennis/hiking shoes, raingear, light-weight clothing, beach clothes including sunglasses/hat
 - some warmer clothes is useful as it can get chilly at night
 - long-sleeved clothing made of light material is very helpful to stay cool and be protected from sand flies
- ☐ Towels
- ☐ Headlamp or small flashlight
- ☐ Water bottle
- ☐ Alarm clock/watch
- ☐ Camera, memory storage, camera battery, charger
- ☐ Entertainment: books, ipod
- ☐ Snorkel/scuba gear
- ☐ Biodegradable toiletries (regular toiletries can be purchased in country)
- ☐ Insect repellent and sunblock, but can be purchased in-country
- ☐ Unblocked phone - will still need to purchase Belizean SIM card

RELEASE FROM LIABILITY (To Sign)

Volunteer's Name (please print): _____

To minimize liability to Ya'axché Conservation Trust, please read the following conditions that apply to your service as a volunteer:

1. I wish to volunteer my time, effort, and services as a volunteer to assist Ya'axché Conservation Trust and understand that I will receive no monetary compensation in return.
2. I have read the International Volunteer Manual and I promise to follow the expectations of me as a volunteer for Ya'axché Conservation Trust.
3. I recognize and understand that my volunteer activities for the Ya'axché Conservation Trust may expose me to the possibility of injury to my person and property and that I may suffer some kind of injury as a result of an accident and other unforeseen circumstances.
4. I recognize that as a volunteer, I am not covered by any workers' compensation or similar insurance that would pay my medical bills incurred because of any injury I may receive while performing services as a volunteer.
5. Despite this risk of injury and lack of workers' compensation or other medical insurance coverage from Ya'axché Conservation Trust, I knowingly and voluntarily waive any and all claims, actions, or causes of action against Ya'axché and agree to hold Ya'axché, its board, agents, affiliates, and employees harmless for any injury or damage that I may suffer as a result of my activities as a volunteer.
6. In return for my agreement to these conditions, Ya'axché Conservation Trust agrees to accept my services as a volunteer.

Signature

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF VOLUNTEER INFORMATION

(To sign and fill out)

I have read and understand all of the information included in this document and in my Terms of Reference. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions and address any issues therein.

Signature

Date



CONTACT INFORMATION

Name

Home address

Home phone

Email address

Medical Conditions

Medications

Emergency Contact - name, relationship to you, phone number

Emergency Contact - name, relationship to you, phone number