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Belize—A Great Romantic Getaway or Wedding Destination

By Norm Goldman

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Today Norm Goldman, Editor www.sketchandtravel.com and www.bookpleasures.com is pleased to have as a guest Joshua Berman (<http://www.stonegrooves.net/contact.html>), co-author of Moon Handbooks Belize (<http://www.moon.com/catalog/belize.html>)

Joshua is an expert on traveling in Belize, and recently chose this tiny Central American country for his own honeymoon; he has also lived in and written extensively about Nicaragua and Honduras.

NORM:

Please tell our readers something about yourself and your expertise pertaining to Belize.

Joshua:

I have been living, working, teaching, and traveling in Central America since the U.S. Peace Corps sent me to Nicaragua in 1998. I have been returning to the region ever since to write guidebooks, lead service trips, and visit friends and adopted families. Last year, I was asked by Avalon Travel Publishing to take over Chicki Mallan's Moon Handbooks Belize, which, when it first appeared 15 years ago, was the first and most acclaimed guidebook to the country. I gladly accepted and proceeded to research and write the sixth edition, which was released in early 2005.

NORM:

Where is Belize?

Joshua:

Belize is tucked into the northeast corner of Central America, bordering Mexico's Yucatan peninsula to the north, Guatemala's Petén wilderness to the west, and the Caribbean Ocean to the east. Culturally

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however, Belize and its hundreds of cayes (islands, pronounced keys) is more Caribbean than Latin. English is spoken everywhere (along with seven other languages). The diversity is astounding, especially considering there are only 260,000 people in the entire country.

NORM:

Would you consider Belize a good choice for a romantic getaway or wedding and honeymoon destination? Why?

Joshua:

- They can rent their very own waterfall for the day at Hidden Valley Inn.
- Couples can get Mood Mud Massages at Maruba Resort Jungle Spa.
- They can rappel into a vertical cave shaft together, at the bottom of which they'll find a flower strewn bed next to a subterranean spring at Ian Anderson's Caves Branch. The list goes on and on.

Belize's size (smaller than Massachusetts), easy access (only a two-hour flight from Miami or Houston), and astonishing selection of small, intimate resorts and lodges seal the deal. In order to solidify my endorsement of Belize as a romantic destination, I even took my own bride here on our honeymoon (ah, the work never stops)

NORM:

When is the best time to visit Belize from the point of view of weather, costs, crowds, and the availability of flights from the USA, Canada and Europe and Australia, etc?

Joshua:

Some resorts distinguish holiday season from the normal high season, with even higher prices and lower availability around Christmas, New Year's, and Easter be sure to make reservations during these periods. High season (re: more tourists and hiked prices) is generally mid-December through April; this is also the dry season during most years, although December, January, and even February can play to host to cool fronts that either blow right through or sit around for days.

Your best bet—be prepared, both with clothing and attitude! A week of stormy weather may ruin a vacation planned solely around snorkelling, but it could also provide the perfect setting for exploring the rainforests or enjoying a hot tub and fireplace in the Mountain Pine Ridge.

June, July, and August technically fall in the rainy season, and travelers during this time are rewarded with significantly discounted prices at most accommodations rain during these months may mean just a quick shower each afternoon, or it may go on for days. August is the big month for European backpackers and travelers, while December and February are dominated by North Americans. Some tourism businesses shut down completely during the months of September and October, the peak of

hurricane season.

NORM:

Could you give our readers an idea of the costs involved if travel originates from the USA, Canada and Europe and Australia?

Joshua:

Conventional traveler wisdom calls Belize the cheapest Caribbean vacation spot and one of the most expensive Central American. There are plenty of mid-range and upscale accommodations throughout the country, running from US\$25 to hundreds of dollars per night. Exact hotel rates are an elusive thing in Belize; seasonal fluctuations are compounded by various taxes and service charges, sometimes by

as much as 25 percent additional. Always make sure the rate you are quoted is actually the same amount you will be asked to pay. And, of course, great deals are abundant in the low season (May through November), when room rates plummet across the board.

·For food, budget travelers can get by on less than US\$20 per day, but you're on vacation, right? Entrées run from US\$5 to US\$25, depending on where you are; at the trendiest restaurants in San Pedro, a fancy dinner can cost up to US\$75 per person. A few resorts include meal prices in their nightly rates, which can be a good deal.

·Don't forget to budget an extra US\$40–80 per person per day for activities like scuba diving, sailing trips, and guided tours of Belize's rainforests, ruins, and fascinating cave systems. Experienced, independent travelers can get around for less, but transport can be a hassle.

·US\$10 per person per night is the bottom line for budget lodging, and it'll get you anything from a cramped, stuffy concrete box in most towns to a generous wooden cabin at the Trek Stop (in Cayo) and other backpacker hotspots.

NORM:

If you had to choose 5 unequalled venues in Belize for a romantic getaway, honeymoon or wedding destination, what would they be and why?

Joshua:

First of all, remember that selecting a place to stay has a lot to do with where you want to be and what activities you would like to do during your stay: beach or rainforest? Diving or hiking? Reef or ruins? Do you want to get pampered with massages or get sweaty and muddy with your loved one on a jungle trek? Get an idea of what kind of trip you and your honey are looking for, then dive in and book it. Following are only a few of Belize's upscale romantic accommodations that stick out in my mind for

quality and intimacy. For more on Belize's ample budget options, flip through a copy of my book, *Moon Handbooks Belize*.

·Starting on swanky Ambergris Caye, just inshore from Belize's famous barrier reef and three miles north of San Pedro village, you will find Capricorn Resort, offering intimate beachfront seclusion in one of three bright and tasteful cabanas. Capricorn's restaurant is one of the best (considered the best by many) on the island.

·Situated on 7,200 acres of private property in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, Hidden Valley Inn is a quiet paradise for hikers and birders who will have a blast exploring the resort's 90-plus miles of walking trails and old logging roads and then cozying up in front of their cottage's fireplace, listening to the birdsong outside (especially nice during the cool, misty, rainy season). The property encompasses lush broadleaf forest and pine tree habitat. The two diverse ecosystems are divided by a geological fault line, which marks the edge of a towering 1,000-foot escarpment. Numerous watercourses spring from the mountain and then cascade down the steep slopes, often into deep, inviting pools; Hidden Valley's trail system runs through it all.

·On Placencia Peninsula, Kitty's Place is one of the best and most unpretentious resorts on this long strip of beach resorts call it "low-key luxury," and check your shoes at the front desk. Be sure to schedule a day trip or overnight on Kitty's private isle, French Louis Caye, 12 miles offshore with great

snorkelling and upscale accommodations.

·Two of Belize's most romantic, beautiful, and expensive options are Francis Ford Coppola's gorgeous pair of resorts: Turtle Inn and Blancaneaux Lodge, located on the Placencia Peninsula and Mountain Pine Ridge, respectively, and offering a number of collective packages. Both places feature breathtaking architecture and artwork from all over the world, and top-notch service and facilities.

·Located about an hour north of Belize City, Maruba Resort Jungle Spa pampers the body and soul, as evidenced by its acclaimed spa treatments and unique focal points spread around the grounds: A tiny, glass-decorated chapel; a palapa-covered stone chess table; two pools that seem to spring from the jungle complete with waterfalls. The rooms are spread out for privacy and are addressed by name Moon, Fertility, and Bondage, to name a few. All boast an eclectic neo-primitive motif carved masks, mosaic tile floors, standing candles, cement fountains, tiled tubs, screened shuttered windows and fresh flowers on the massive feather beds and in the bathrooms.

NORM:

What should people know about celebrating a wedding in Belize from the point of view of requirements, experience of the various hotels, etc.

Joshua:

Belize is gaining quite the reputation as the perfect place to tie the knot. A growing number of resorts

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cater to weddings of all sizes, some quite creatively (such as ceremonies underwater or atop Maya pyramids). If eloping, you must be in Belize three business days before submitting your marriage application to the Registrar General's Office (tel. 501/227-7377, not open on weekends or local holidays). You get the paperwork back the following business day for your ceremony. If you have been divorced or widowed, bring a photocopy of the death certificate or divorce decree. The Government of Belize charges US\$100 for the license and you'll need a birth certificate or passport.

NORM:

How far in advance should a couple prepare themselves for their honeymoon, romantic getaway or wedding in Belize?

Joshua:

Honeymoons and getaways are easy and do not need much advance time when booking, except around the holidays and at the more popular resorts. If you are planning a wedding during the high season that will require numerous rooms for guests, book a year in advance if possible. Otherwise, a few months are usually sufficient.

NORM:

What resources are available on the Internet pertaining to weddings and honeymoon vacations in

Belize?

Joshua:

Several wedding specialists can facilitate paperwork, ministers, flowers, book hotels, celebrations, etc. including Katie Valk for anywhere in the country, Iraida Gonzales on San Pedro, and Lee Nyhus in Placencia.

NORM:

Is there anything else you wish to tell our readers that we have not covered?

Joshua:

Yes, keep an eye on my WEBSITE for new links and developments regarding romance in Belize and beyond; I have the most popular Belize forums and news posted on my links page. Also, MY PUBLISHER'S SITE will soon feature sample itineraries and other excerpts from my book, to make planning your Belize trip even easier. Lastly, remember the words of Kurt Vonnegut's prophet, Bokon:

Peculiar travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God.

Happy trails, everyone, Joshua

Norm Goldman is editor of the travel site, www.sketchandtravel.com & the book reviewing site: www.bookpleasures.com. Norm and his artist wife Lily, meld words and art. You can read Norm's travel articles and Lily's art work at www.sketchandtravel.com. Norm and Lily are always open to invitations to visit resort properties, B&Bs, hotels etc in the New England states, New York, Florida and California.

Destination Weddings: No Longer Reserved For The Wealthy

By Kirsten Hawkins

For a long time the destination wedding, a wedding combined with a vacation for the couple, wedding party, and guests, was an exotic treat attainable only by the extremely wealthy. This is no longer the case as destination weddings have, in recent years, become an attainable and attractive alternative for more and more couples seeking to put an enjoyable romantic spin on their nuptial occasion.

Destination wedding planners like to advertise that the destination wedding can cost thousands less than a traditional wedding. While this may or may not be true, depending on what a particular couple plans to spend on their traditional wedding as opposed to what they'll have to spend for a destination wedding, it is certainly a fact that a destination wedding is no longer completely out of the question for the average couple. If you're interested in celebrating your own marriage ceremony with a destination wedding, here are some helpful pointers that can have you enjoying your wedding in a vacation locale without completely emptying the coffers.

Your Destination Doesn't Have to be Distant:

One of the truly beautiful things about living in the United States is that we have vacation spots nearly everywhere. By planning your destination wedding in a place that is relatively close to home, you can save considerably on airfare or other travel arrangements. Do you live on the East Coast? Make Orlando, Florida your destination and enjoy your honeymoon with Mickey Mouse. Already in Florida and been to Disneyworld far too many times? Set your sights on the Big Apple and enjoy a destination wedding in the City that Never Sleeps. Maybe you're in the Midwest? If so a destination wedding in Chicago may have just the right romantic touch for you. You could also consider heading south to Texas to visit the Alamo. Live in the Southwest or Northwest? Then Las Vegas and Los Angeles are mere hours away by plane. The point is that your destination wedding doesn't have to be held in London, Paris, or Munich to be an event you will remember fondly and cherish forever.

Plan Ahead and Get Group Rates:

Everyone knows that air passage costs less when booked and purchased well in advance. Be sure to make the reservations for your destination wedding far ahead of time to get the best value for you and your guests. Also, utilize the services of a talented travel agent who can negotiate your airfare and hotel accommodations all together. Doing so can save you an amazing percentage of the overall cost of your destination wedding.

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If There's an 'Off Season,' Take Advantage of It:

Many of the vacation spots around the country have an off season where the rates for hotels, airfare, and attractions are quite lower than they are during their busier times. By planning your destination wedding during these non-peak times you can save money and enjoy your destination when there are fewer tourists getting in the way of your enjoyment.

Kirsten Hawkins is an event planner from Nashville, TN. Visit

for more

event planning tips, strategies, and resources.

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