

## **Belize's culture integrates an array of ethnicities into its society**

### *Coming Together*

The history of Belize includes territorial wars and the inhumane enslavement of people of various ethnicities. But the outcome of this marred past is a country brimming with diversity and a population with roots from all over the world. Today, the little Central American country of Belize is a melting pot of cultures that have combined to make this beautiful nation a unique and fascinating place.

### **Influence of the Mayans**

The Mayans were the first known people to inhabit the territories known today as Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Archaeologists estimate that during the peak of the Mayan empire, about 1 million to 2 million Mayans lived in the Belize region. Ancient Mayans and many of the Mayan people who live in the country today consider themselves to be fruit of the ceiba tree. In Mayan culture, the ceiba tree is symbolic of life and is said to be the center of the universe that holds up the heavens.

The Mayans' advanced ancient civilization contributed a great deal to Belize and beyond, specifically in terms of scientific and mathematical practices. In fact, the Mayans are credited with the concept of the number zero. Today three groups of Mayans inhabit Belize: the Yucatec, Mopan, and Kekchi Mayas. As their name suggests, the Yucatec Mayas came from Yucatan when trying to escape the Caste War. They now live in the Orange Walk and Corozal District of Belize. The Yucatec people no longer speak their original language, but now speak English and Spanish. The Mopan Mayas also fled to Belize, but were running away from forced labor and taxation in Peten. This group of Mayas can be found in San Antonio Village in the Toledo District and in the Cayo District. Kekchi Mayas were another group trying to escape oppression, but they were fleeing enslavement by German coffee growers in Verapaz Guatemala. The Kekchi are the most isolated and self-reliant group in Belize, with their villages located in low-lying areas along rivers and streams throughout Toledo.

### **The Mestizos**

Mestizos, people with a mixture of Mayan and Spanish heritages, comprise 48 percent of the Belizean population. The Mestizos arrived in Belize in 1840, trying to escape the Caste War; they now live all over Belize, but predominately in the northern regions of Orange Walk and Corozal. The Mestizos have played a very important part in the growth and progression of Belize, and are vital to the Belize community.

## **The Creoles**

Creoles are another major ethnic group in Belize, making up about 30 percent of the Belizean population as of the year 2001. The Creole culture came about with the mixing of British settlers and African slaves. Their descendants have created a unique and fascinating culture all their own. What makes the Creole people a distinct ethnic group is based not so much on their appearance, but on their way of life. Most of the Creole population resides in Belize City, and many of the Creole men work in logging crews and provide great civil services.

## **Other Ethnic Groups in Belize**

Smaller parts of the population in Belize consist of various ethnic groups, including the Garifuna, the Chinese, East Indians, and Mennonites. The Garifuna people make up about 6.6 percent of Belize's overall population, and their culture is a mixture of heritages from African slaves, Arawak, and Carib Indians. The majority of the Garifuna now flourish in Belize's southern towns of Punta Gorda and Dangriga, but they also have villages in Seine Bight, Hopkins, Georgetown and Barranco.

The East Indians first arrived in the country around 1838 and now represent about 2 percent of the Belize population. They live in villages and towns spread throughout Belize. The Chinese migrated to this part of the world when fleeing the Japanese invasion of China just before the start of World War II. And, finally the Mennonites, who arrived in Belize in 1958 from Manitoba, Canada, Chihuahua, and Mexico, live in six main communities in the Orange Walk and Cayo District: Blue Creek, Shipyard, Little Belize, Progreso, Spanish Lookout, and Barton Creek. The Mennonites have made it a point to have very distinct communities in Belize with their own schools, churches, and financial establishments.

*\*Text Source: <http://belize-guide.info/past.and.present/culture/>*