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YOU BETTER BELIZE IT

Hungry for affordable properties and enticing returns in a tropical location? Look no further than Belize. **Mike Cobb** explains why there's more to Central America than just Mexico

It's no secret that for many years, the best bang for your North American buck has been Central and South America. But with the overexposure of many traditional expat hotspots like Cancun and Costa Rica, prices have inflated to beyond ideal. Consider, then, the newest Caribbean darling for in-the-know expats: Belize.

While some savvy international minds have figured out the wonders Belize has to offer, the country is still in the infancy of its growing popularity. With world-class diving, fly fishing, beautiful Caribbean climate and beaches, Mayan ruins in the jungle, colourful culture, and a host of top

financial and investment opportunities, Belize is the expat secret that's about to be let out of the bag.

Real estate affordability

For investors interested in owning foreign real estate, there's good news: Belize is a buyer's market. Whether for commercial property, rental property or even personal property, the economic landscape of Belize is the perfect place for foreign capital injection.

The reason is twofold. First, while other countries in the region with a developmental head start were receiving press, Belize was waiting just out of sight, working on

its infrastructure. When neighbouring countries became pricey, insightful investors turned their attention toward Belize, particularly the island of Ambergris Caye, which is surrounded by the crystal blue waters of the Caribbean. The result is an island with the infrastructure and quality-of-life opportunities to attract tourists and expats in waves.

Second, Belize's cost of living hasn't yet caught up to that of its more popular Central American counterparts. Real estate prices are increasing as people catch on, but in early 2019, assertive investors are still well ahead of the curve.



Belize Barrier Reef. Due to intensive training and education efforts, the reef in Belize was recently removed from the UNESCO Danger List. Last year, Belize was named in *National Geographic's* Best Winter Trips 2018 and was the only Central American nation included in the magazine's Best Trips 2019 list.

Where to look

Belize contains three main areas attractive to investors looking to capitalize on the rising

tourist revenue for the country. If you're looking for reliable cash flow, then owning a property on the island that generates the vast majority of the country's tourism revenue is probably a smart move. Tiny homes on the water there start at C\$189,000 and generate nightly rental rates of between \$150 and \$300 seasonally.

Untapped potential

Belize is the perfect example of an untapped market. Its idyllic natural

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Growing tourism

The heartbeat of any good tourism sector is the ease of travel in and out of the country. International flights into Belize are increasing every year, including direct flights from Toronto and Calgary. The Belize City International Airport recently underwent a 130,000-square-foot expansion, including upgraded baggage claim, increased duty-free shopping, and additional check-in counters and departure gates.

In 2011, tourism in Belize accounted for 12% of the country's GDP, bringing in \$176 million. By the end of 2018, that number had grown by over 38% – more than \$244 million in revenue for the country.

In 2015, 1.3 million tourists visited the small Caribbean nation, and in 2016, tourism-related jobs made up nearly 13% of the country's employment. All 12 months of 2017 saw an increase in arrivals, accounting for 7.8% growth, and monthly overnight arrivals reached highs of 49,000 visitors by December. There was a 14.6% increase in overnight arrivals in 2018.

For two consecutive years, Belize has been featured prominently by *National Geographic* for both its tourist-friendly offerings and its conservation efforts to protect the famed

market. The country has tropical highlands, a coastal mainland and about 300 small islands in the Caribbean called cayes, the most popular of which is Ambergris Caye. Each of these regions brings something different to the investment party.

Placencia is a long, skinny peninsula in the southern part of Belize. Typical properties there are single-family homes and condo resorts. While it's possible to find condos under \$500,000, the main market emphasis has been four- to six-bedroom homes ranging in price from US\$1.2 million to well over US\$2.5 million. Rental rates for these larger homes range from \$300 to \$600 per night on average.

The Cayo District is becoming more popular because of its cool, tropical highland nature and abundance of fertile farmland. There are a few planned communities and resorts where you can buy a managed property. Another interesting opportunity could be purchasing an eco-resort and developing a community for North Americans. One such 50-acre property is on sale right now for US\$750,000.

Ambergris Caye is the pearl of Belize's oyster, generating more than 70% of the

landscape, countless leisure and adventure opportunities, exceptionally affordable real estate, efforts towards first-world tourism infrastructure, and undersaturated business market mean huge potential for those willing to invest in the country.

Pair these attributes with close proximity to North America (less than two hours from Miami and under five hours from Toronto); the ease of owning property; the English language; and attractive banking, trust and corporate registry laws, and you have a formula for success. Residency is easy to obtain and maintain, and the locals are very welcoming to outsiders. If you're serious about dipping your toes into the crystal blue waters of international investing and real estate, Belize is a regional opportunity you should examine right now. ■

MIKE COBB is the CEO of ECI Development, a company that creates value through socially responsible development in communities in Nicaragua, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama and Argentina. For more information, visit ecidevelopment.com.

