**Brief History of Belize**

Belize is an accessible tropical country in the western hemisphere, located on the Caribbean coast of Central America just 750 miles from Miami, Houston, and New Orleans. Belize is almost 9,000 sq. miles in area, just about the size of Massachusetts. Along its eastern shore lies the second largest barrier reef in the world. To the west, ancient ruins from Mayan civilizations are enveloped in the lush vegetation of the jungle.

Belize was the site of several Maya city states until their decline around AD 600. The Maya were the first to permanently settle in Belize, followed by the Spanish and then English and Scottish pirates in the 1600’s, but the country did not fully gain independence from England until 1981, known previously as British Honduras.

Today, Belize is known as one of the world's leading "ecotourism" destination. The land consists of vast plains of untouched rain forest, endless savannah and mangrove coasts, all containing the greatest variety of animal habitats north of the Amazon Basin. Offshore, Belize's coral reef is the most expansive in the Western hemisphere, second only to Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Belize has a subtropical climate, controlled by dominate trade winds from the Caribbean Sea. The climate fluctuates between two season: the rainy season from June to January with a brief respite in August and the dry season from February to May. However, the weather does not always follow this seasonal allotment, and torrential tropical downpours can occur at any time of the year.

Taking into account its population of 330,000, Belize is one of the most diverse populations. The Belizean people are made up of Maya, Mestizo, Kriol, Garifuana, East Indian, Mennonite, Arab, and Chinese. There are also a number of expatriates in Belize from Canada, Europe, and the United States. English remains the official language, but Spanish, Garifuna, Mandarin, Maya, and Kriol (a Spanish/English Creole) are spoken as well.

With the rich history, impressive natural wonders, and gracious people, it's easy to forget that the struggling economy in Belize creates many needs among its people. Education in Belize is underfunded. School buildings are small, deteriorating, or not easily accessible for the people of Belize.

**Ancient Maya**

Please refer to: Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens by Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, published by Thames and Hudson in 2000, The Ancient Maya by Robert J. Sharer, published by Stanford University Press in 1994 from which the following was compiled for more detailed information.

The ancient Maya occupied the area of modern day eastern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and the western extremities of Honduras and El Salvador (see map). Occupation of this area began during the Preclassic (2000 BC to AD 250) extended through the Classic Period (AD 250 - 900) and survived into the Postclassic (AD 900 - 1500). There really is no end to the occupational history of Mexico and Central America by the Maya since today there are still approximately 6 million Maya descendants.

There is no other New World culture that has aroused so much interest or posed so many questions. Europeans' encounter with the great ruins of the Maya in the sixteenth century was initially attributed to the Egyptians, but others included the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Israelites to name a few. It was not until the 1960's that these misconceptions were corrected, of note would be articles by Tatiana Proskouriakoff that demonstrated the hieroglyphic inscriptions included biographies of ancient Maya rulers.

Despite attempts by divine lords to dominate, political unification never occurred and during the Classic period there were approximately 60 independent city-states. Each divine lord fought for both their
independence and rulership over other city-states. The majority of these rivalries ended in the 10th century when there was a breakdown, populations declined, and the majority of cities were abandoned.

**Preclassic (2000 BC to AD 250)**

This time period is in itself divided into three periods: Early (2000 to 1000 BC), Middle (1000 to 400 BC), and Late (400 BC to AD 250). It was during the Middle Preclassic that the great civilization often referred to as the 'mother culture' of the Maya, the Olmec, emerged in the swampy Mexican Gulf Coast region. Olmec concepts and ideas spread to a wide array of locations in Mesoamerica but most notably to the Maya region.

The first major cities of the Maya, as early as 500 BC, were establishing themselves in the lowland forests. It was during this time they began to ornately decorate structures with beautiful stucco masks and red paint. One of the first of these Preclassic cities was Nakbe, which was superceded by the massive site of El Mirador. For reasons not yet understood this culture failed and there was a shift to the Southern Area, which included the cities Kaminaljuyu and El Baul. It was in this area that, for the first time, the Maya began to develop features we refer to as Classic traits; the use of the Long Count calendar, hieroglyphic inscriptions and historical portraits that all reflected a rise in new political ideology. It was during this same time around 100 BC that the Classic period dynasty of Tikal was establishing itself. Again, for reasons not yet known cities in the Southern Area declined and there was yet another shift this time back into the lowlands.

**Classic (AD 250 to 900)**

This time period can also be divided. In the Early Classic (AD 250 to 600) state-level political organizations developed and expanded in the Maya region, especially in the central lowlands, and included Tikal, Altun Ha, and Xunantunich. The Late Classic (AD 600 to 800) saw a rise in the new kinship-based rulership combined with a peak in population and cultural development especially in the central and southern lowlands. And finally, the Terminal Classic (AD 800 to 900), which marks a sharp decline, indicating severe stress in the central and southern lowland sites and ends with the last recorded date in the Long Count calendar.

The opening of the Terminal Classic period marked the beginning of a dramatic decline. Thriving cities of hundreds of thousands were left largely deserted. There have been numerous theories proposed to explain the decline including drought, exhausted soils, depleted subsistence sources, poor nutrition, disease, and social disintegration. Once failure began to set in it was most likely a combination of the above but many questions still remain.

**Postclassic (AD 900 to 1500 ?)**

The Postclassic is sometimes characterized as a time of decline following the population and cultural peak of the Classic period and is divided into two sub-periods Early (AD 900 to 1200) and Late (AD 1200 to 1500). The Central Area that once included the major city-states of Tikal, Palenque, Caracol, and Calakmul was only sparsely populated and the Northern and Southern Areas saw the majority of concentration.

Chichen Itza was the dominant power in the north and showed close ties with the powerful Toltec culture located in central Mexico creating a unique combination of Maya and Mexican architecture. Once Chichen began to decline it was replaced by Mayapan which was able to hold on to some of Chichen's previous power until it too was abandoned. The Maya were extremely resistant to Spanish invaders and held out even longer then the famed Aztec Empire which was defeated in 1521. Even at outlying sites such as Lamanai the Maya were able to resist until as late as 1638.

This is only a brief introduction to one of the world's greatest civilizations. Many turbulent stories remain to be told and discovered.
One of the few remaining original ancient Maya city names designated by the Maya that still exists today is Lamanai. This site itself is located in northern Belize on the west bank of the New River Lagoon. The ancient name of Lamanai was recorded by the Spanish in the 16th century and brought to light again by historian Grant Jones through his work in the archives in Seville, Spain. The name Lamanai is loosely translated as "Submerged Crocodile". Knowing these two facts tells us two very important things, one, the ancient Maya were still residing at Lamanai when the Spanish arrived. And two, the site name indicates the importance of the Morelets' Crocodile whose remains are rarely found in midden deposits indicating they were rarely consumed due to their important status within the community. As one visits this site it becomes apparent that this translation is fitting because there are numerous representations of crocodiles that appear on ceramics, stone, architecture and accompanying stucco facades.

An estimated 30 - 60,000 Maya may have resided at Lamanai during the height of the civilization and the occupational history well exceeds many other Maya cities with 3,000 years of unbroken human history. This history of occupation carries right through to contact period, and it certainly is the case that the Spanish would not have constructed two churches at this Maya site if there were not a population residing at Lamanai to convert. The first Spanish church, Structure N12-13, dates to approximately AD 1570; it was constructed some time after Lamanai became part of the Spanish encomienda system (royal grant to a Spaniard for the right to labor and tribute a native population, who is also responsible for christianizing the natives). This first church was built over an existing Tulum-style Postclassic building that contained painted murals; in this case it appears the Spanish were attempting to convert the Maya to Catholicism by substituting one religious practice for another. Conversion was difficult and the archaeological evidence for this exists in the form of a burned and destroyed first church and the caching of various figurines around and near the churches in traditional Maya fashion. Although a second Spanish church was constructed, Structure N12-11, ultimately the Spanish were never able to establish a strong hold in this area. It was in AD 1638 that there was a widespread revolt by the Maya that ended in the retreat of the Spanish at least for the time being.

The Late Postclassic and historic/colonial periods at Lamanai are certainly fascinating and are what the majority of current research is focusing on. But the fact that Lamanai has one of the tallest securely dated Preclassic structures in the Maya world, Structure N10-43, indicates that it certainly had a strong foundation upon which to build and thrive. This Preclassic stronghold may have been one of the reasons why Lamanai survived what many other major city-states suffered during the 9th century.

It was during the Late Classic period that there was a decline or collapse of the Maya civilization that consisted of a political and/or economic breakdown, a possible drought, and possibly a population increase that severely stressed the food supply. This decline affected numerous Classic period city-states such as Tikal, Copan, Palenque, and Caracol. During this time these city-states were almost completely abandoned and monumental architecture was no longer constructed, production of pottery declined, and carved stone monuments no longer told the stories of the elite ruling class of the Maya. Lamanai survived this decline or collapse and there are several theories why, one already mentioned is the strong Preclassic foundation, and a second being the construction of the city on a large body of fresh water today called the New River Lagoon. During ancient times, as well as modern, this lagoon provided food, a means of transportation, drinking and bathing water, a sacred haven for the revered crocodile, and a suitable setting to carry out sacred rituals.

Due to Lamanai's close proximity to the New River Lagoon the ancient Maya residing there may have escaped the possible environmental degradation seen elsewhere. It has also been suggested that Lamanai was fairly isolated from other major cities, we know the Maya never had a central, capital city, and that there were constant conflicts during the Classic period. It may have been the case that Lamanai's somewhat isolated location, to some extent still the case today, again protected it from this decline or collapse.

Ancient and more recent history of Lamanai mirrors the development of the young nation of Belize with occupation by the Maya, Spanish, and British. The British commercial pursuits during the colonial period at
Lamanai included production of 200 acres of sugar cane by the British who constructed a mill whose success was really never seen during the 15 years of operation from 1860 - 1875. The extensive iron works that were once one of the only steam-operated mills in Belize is located in the western portion of the Lamanai Archaeological Reserve.