

Belize Barrier Reef

The Belize Barrier Reef is a series of coral reefs straddling the coast of Belize, roughly 300 m (0.2 mile) offshore in the north and 40 km (25 mile) in the south. It extends for about 300 km (185 miles), making it the second largest coral reef system in the world after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. It is Belize's top tourist destination, attracting almost half of its 260,000 visitors, and vital to its fishing industry.

Charles Darwin described it as "the most remarkable reef in the West Indies" in 1842.

The Belize Barrier Reef is home to a large diversity of plants and animals, one of the most diverse ecosystems of the world:

- * 70 hard coral species
- * 36 soft coral species
- * 500 species of fish
- * hundreds of invertebrate species

With 90% of the reef still needing to be researched, it is estimated that only 10% of all species has been discovered.

A large portion of the reef is protected by the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, which includes seven marine reserves, 450 cays, and three atolls. It totals 960 km² (370 miles²) in area, including:

- * Glover's Reef Marine Reserve
- * Great Blue Hole
- * Half Moon Caye Natural Monument
- * Hol Chan Marine Reserve
- * Cays include: Ambergris Caye, Caye Caulker, Caye Chapel, St. George's Caye, English Caye, Rendezvous Caye, Gladden Caye, Ranguana Caye, Long Caye, Maho Caye, Blackbird Caye, Three Coner Caye.

Because of its exceptional natural beauty, significant on-going ecological and biological processes, and it contains the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity (criteria VII, IX, and X), the Reserve System has been designated as a World Heritage Site since 1996.

Despite these protective measures, the reef is under threat from oceanic pollution, uncontrolled tourism, shipping, and fishing. Hurricanes, global warming, and the resulting increase in ocean temperatures are a particularly significant threat, causing coral bleaching. It is claimed by scientists that over 40% of Belize's coral reef has been damaged since 1998.

Source: -- Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]