

The Blue Hole National Park was established in December 1986. Located only 12 miles southeast of the nation's capital, Belmopan, the park includes an area of some 575 acres, most of which is covered by primary and secondary forest.

From its northern boundary, demarcated by the Hummingbird Highway, a rugged karst landscape quickly rises to some 600 feet. Through and under the Blue Hole National Park flow some of the upland tributaries of the large nearby Sibun River, one of Belize's principal rivers.

### Habitat

Much of the topography of this central area of Belize consists of limestone, which includes many underground streams, rivers, sinkholes and an extensive subterranean cave system. One of the main attractions at the park is an easily accessible cave called St. Herman's Cave. The other main attraction of this park is the Blue Hole itself.

The Blue Hole is a sinkhole filled with flowing water on its way to the Sibun River. The collapsed karst sinkhole is thought to be about 100 feet deep and roughly 300 feet in diameter. The pool near the sinkhole is about 25 feet deep and is colored a beautiful sapphire blue, for which the area is named.

After a short run through a thickly vegetated stream bed, the water disappears again into what is called a siphon, the top of a large underwater cave. The dome shape of the opening creates an unusual echo chamber. The sparkling blue water is chilled while traveling through the underground, so that while only briefly exposed, it forms a perfect swimming hole on hot, dusty afternoons. The swimming hole is enjoyed by thousands of Belizeans and visitors to Belize every year.

### St. Herman's Cave

St. Herman's cave is located about 400 meters from the Hummingbird Highway on the western border of the reserve. It is also accessible along a rugged hiking trail direct from the Blue Hole. The nearest of the three known entrances to St. Herman's Cave is very impressive. The entrance sits in a sinkhole 180 feet wide and narrows to a 60 foot wide entrance. Originally, steps were carved into the rock leading down to the entrance by the ancient Maya during the Classic Period, but because the steps were unstable, a safer set of concrete steps were constructed. As you approach the cave, you can feel a draft of cool, damp air in contrast to the hot, damp air outside.

The cave has great archaeological significance. Pottery vessels, used by the ancient Maya to collect sacred water from cave drippings, have been found along with spears and torches. These items are under study by the Belize Department of Archaeology. Thanks to the Government of Belize, permission has been granted to all visitors to enter the cave without the usual permits. A trail and markers have been placed within the cave for easy travel. Flashlights are a necessity though.

Three of the five species of wildcat found in Belize have been recorded in the park - jaguar, ocelot and the jaguarundi. Other mammals include the tapir, peccary, anteater and both species of deer. Black howler monkeys have been heard from time to time but have not been seen

within the park boundaries. The park is home to over one hundred species of birds. A complete list of the birds seen can be found at the new visitor center near the trail which leads to St. Herman's Cave. Some of the unusual sightings have included honeycreepers, trogons, cotingas and mot mot.

#### Visitor Information

A beautiful trail leads from the Blue Hole to St. Herman's Cave. The "Nature Trail" runs through secondary low forest and is rugged, with steep paths. Wear sturdy walking shoes and long sleeve shirts and trousers are recommended.