

Belize, Central America: Of The Coral Reef and the English Language

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They say people are a product of their experiences. And I think that countries are products of their geography. Today I'd like to start a mini-series of speeches in which I will share my impressions from travelling to different parts of the world and observing the different forces that shaped their history by virtue of their geographical location.

Today's speech is about the country of Belize in Central America. About the effects of the **coral reef, the pirates' heritage** and the **English language** on the local culture and economy.

You've probably heard that Belize is small, it is on the Caribbean coast **and** that it's a popular diving and snorkeling destination. You probably also know that Belize hotels are 2 or 3 times more expensive than elsewhere in Central America.

But do you know why? How come a poor country like Belize can command **such** high hotel prices?

I - HOTEL PRICES AND ENGLISH

- 1) Well, for starters – Belize is the only country in Central and South America that speaks English. Which helps them put up website of their beach cabanas and charge \$100 per person for a room with a fan, if you're lucky. And what's better than the peace of mind that you're **booked** when you travel to a foreign country?

When I went to Belize a few months ago I was hoping for another inexpensive trip to the Caribbean, **like** the ones I'd done do Costa Rica, Honduras and Columbia. I was completely shocked to see the prices these guys were charging in comparison to their **much more modest** neighboring countries, offering similar services and conditions. So why do they do that? I think the answer is – just because they can! Because **only** they speak English, among all other countries around them, and only **they** make it easy to book a place online for English speakers who are **also** the most frequent travelers.

And so, how come they speak English? Didn't the Spanish rule the entire place? How come no other country picked up English in Central **or** South America?

I think the answer has something to do with the country's geographic location and its natural resources.

II – CARIBBEAN REEF AND SPANISH SHIPS

- 2) The Caribbean coast of Belize marks the beginning of the second largest coral reef in the world, after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. The reef starts in Belize and goes all the

way down to Honduras, and it's almost 200 miles long. The reef is home to thousands of sea creatures and naturally offers superb conditions for diving and snorkeling year round.

However, back in the 17th Century, the Spanish conquistadores did not really think much of the recreational qualities of the reef. In fact – sailors dreaded the reef, because it would often tear the keels of the ships approaching the shore. Although Belize was strategically located between South America and today's Mexico, the Spanish moved their forces from Belize to Cartagena in Columbia, where they would gather the riches they plundered from the interior of the continent.

The lack of local control and the safety, offered by the barrier reef, gradually attracted English and Scottish pirates to Belizean waters. From there, without serious hindrance, they attacked the cargo Spanish fleet, which was heavily loaded with gold and riches from the Spanish colonies.

III – PIRATES: THEIR BACKGROUND MISSION

- 3) Contrary to my idea of pirates, those men were actually well trained ex-military personnel from the British navy who deserted the rough life at sea in favor of attacking Spanish ships. Pirates would rather avoid fighting the attacked vessels. Instead, they looked to intimidate the enemy with their scary looks and pirate flags, hoping that the ship would be surrendered and the goods it carried would not be damaged.

The numerous islands off the coast of Belize served as a convenient springboard to attack passing ships. At one point, the island of San Pedro counted 5,000 pirates who attacked ships for a living. Some of them operated for their own benefit, but some worked under the direction of the British government. That's right – the British would hire privateers to prey on the commercial shipping of the Spanish and sabotage their cargo routes.

At one point, though, in 1670, Spain convinced Britain to clamp down on pirates' activities. Most of the pirates became unemployed and went into the logwood business. They stayed in Belize for over 120 years. The British government continuously assured the Spanish that Belize was still Spanish possession. Then suddenly in 1798 a British force defeated the Spanish armada off the coast of Belize and delivered the country from Spanish rule.

IV – CREOLES: PIRATES + SLAVES

So the English liberated the country from the Spanish, only to make it their own colony. But they also brought the gift of the now most popular language in the world. But that's not their only contribution. Pirates were also responsible for building the largest ethnic group in the country – the Creoles. The Creoles are descendants of African slaves and English pirates.

Given such cultural heritage, it was little surprise we were triple charged for a cab ride, that took us all the way around the island, only to bring us back almost full circle to where we had first started.

CONCLUSION: DESTINY DEFINED BY GEOGRAPHY

Looking forward to my next travelling destination I am excited not only about trying new foods and drinks, meeting new people, hearing new stories and having new experiences, but also about how they all came to be, and whether or not my theory of geographically-defined destiny holds true with other countries.