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## **The Craft Trade and International Tourists at Xunantunich, Belize, Central America**

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## Overview

Tourism plays a vital role in the economy of Belize, comprising about one-fifth of GDP and employment (Tourism Revenue, n.d.). Belize attracts approximately one million international visitors a year, three times the national population of the country, which straddles both Central America and the Caribbean. One of the major inland tourist attractions in Belize is the Mayan archeological sites, such as Altun Ha, Caracol, and Xunantunich (Belize Maya Ruins, n.d). The archaeological site that will be studied in this paper is Xunantunich, the second most visited archaeological site in the country.

Located near the western border with Guatemala, Xunantunich (or “Stone Woman” in the local Maya language) is an impressive Mayan archaeological site dating from the Classic period (250-900 AD). The height of the site’s activities and development occurred between 700-1000 AD. Dominating the site, at 40 meters tall, is “El Castillo” which provides striking views of the surrounding land, including Guatemala. Exploration of the site dates back over 100 years, though serious archaeological work began in the 1930s and continues to this day. Among the more interesting results, the unearthing of residential palaces, ball courts, friezes, roads, (sacbe) and stelae is esteemed greatly. Today, the site is easily accessed from San José Succotz on the Western Highway and across the Mopan River via a quaint, hand-cranked ferry. From the river, Xunantunich is about a mile walk uphill.

In 2008, Xunantunich received 46,275 visitors.<sup>1</sup> Of this total, 7,264 came as unpaid guests of the state (2,790 free Sunday visitors, 4,091 school trip visitors and 383 guests of the government). The remaining 39,011 visitors paid \$2.50 or \$5.00<sup>2</sup> to enter, with the higher admission fee targeted to international visitors. Of the 39,011 paid entrants, 2,498 were local Belizeans with the remainder (36,513) international tourists. International tourists who arrive at Xunantunich are either day travelers from cruise ships (9,547) or overnight tourists (26,966).

## Purpose of Study & Methodology

The purpose of this study is to tabulate a census of small businesses tied to the tourist trade at Xunantunich. This research paper details the different types of businesses that are located close to Xunantunich; these businesses range from fixed to portable stalls. This paper examines business type, age of business, and business operations (e.g., currency usage and business income).

In this research, all of the data was collected through personal interviews and observations during two visits in July 2009. A basic five-question survey was constructed to ask each craft stall owner. The data was collected in order as it pertained to both stall groups. As a form of introduction, a member of the local community introduced the researcher to each stall owner interviewed. This was one of the major reasons why the interviewees became more confident to share their information.

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<sup>1</sup> All tourist information comes from the Institute of Archeology in Belize ([www.nichbelize.org](http://www.nichbelize.org)).

<sup>2</sup> All monetary figures are reported in U.S. dollars.

In one instance, I was reprimanded for asking about estimated daily earnings. That same individual did not want to contribute too much. When I told the person I was a student, she asked me to show her my student ID. For the most part, all the interviewees treated me nicely. The questions were asked in both Spanish and English as it pertained to the interviewee. The questions that were asked to each respective business owner were: 1) What is your name? 2) What type of business do you have? 3) How many years do you have working at the site? 4) What types of currencies do you accept? And 5) what is your daily (business) income?

## Results

The quantitative results were obtained from the data collected from the interviews. Data was collected from interviews done with the 16 fixed stalls owners, 14 located before crossing the ferry and two at the site proper, and seven portable stall owners.

### *3.1 Fixed Stalls at Ferry*

Most of the stalls sell similar products, such as chains, key chains, bracelets, and earrings, among other items. Other stalls have a larger variety of products, such as hammocks and personal drawings. When the vendors were asked when they started working at the site, the results ranged from a few months to 12 years with an average of about five and a half years. There is no direct correlation between the years working at site to monthly income. It is just the amount of influence the vendors have on their customers and their having more product choices. For instance, the owner of stall 1 only has two years working at the site but has the highest monthly income from the fixed stalls.

One of the major forms of retaining foreign currency through tourists visiting Xunantunich is by the fixed stalls that are situated before crossing the ferry. Out of the 14 stalls that were interviewed, four take only Belize and U.S. dollars, five accept Belize, U.S. dollars, and Guatemalan quetzals, and five take Belize, U.S. dollars, Guatemalan quetzals, and Mexican pesos.

Monthly income was calculated for the fixed stalls based upon four ranges. The original data was converted from daily income sources to monthly figures. Four out of the 14 fixed stalls earned between \$250 and \$500. Six stalls earned between \$501 and \$750. One vendor made between \$751-1,000. The remaining three stalls earned over \$1,000 monthly.

### *3.2 Fixed Stalls at Site*

At the site, there are two stalls that have a fixed location (or building). Unlike the stalls that are at the entrance, they do not complain of the limited time that tourists have to go buy at their stall. If a tourist from a cruise ship wants to buy something at the stalls by the ferry, they only have about five minutes to do so. On the other hand, tourists on average spend about an hour walking around at the site. It does not typically take the entire hour for the tour, so tourists have more time to buy from the two fixed stalls at the site. Shop A has 13 years at the site, while Shop B has only 1.5 years. Both stalls only accept Belize and U.S. dollars. Shop A did not want to disclose their monthly income, but based upon their inventory and my other

interviews, their monthly income most likely averages above \$1,000. Shop B, on the other hand, had sales in the range of \$500 to \$750.

### *3.3 Portable Stalls*

At the ferry, there are also seven portable stalls. What is important to note about the portable stalls is that unlike the fixed stalls before crossing the ferry and at the site, the portable stalls are present only part-time. These individuals do not stay the entire day working there. When asked why, some of them mentioned that working at the ferry is just a second source of income to their family and that they love their leisure time. The majority of the people working with the portable stalls are family members. When the vendors were asked how many years they had been working at the site, their answers ranged from two to ten years, with an average of seven years.

Out of the seven stalls, only two accept Belize and U.S. dollars and the other five take Belize dollars, U.S. dollars, and Guatemalan quetzals. Three of the portable stalls have a part-time income that ranges from \$250-\$500. Two of the seven stalls earn from \$501 and \$750. The two remaining stalls earn over \$1,000.

### *3.4 Income Census Map of Craft Vendors at Xunantunich*

Based on the business income data collected, a map was created to illustrate how local craft business is tied to the tourism trade at Xunantunich. All in all, there are a total of 23 businesses associated with the tourism trade at Xunantunich. Six out of the 23 businesses have an average monthly income ranging from \$250-\$500. Nine out of the 23 businesses have an average monthly income ranging from \$501-\$750. One business has an average monthly income of \$751 to \$1,000. Six businesses have an average monthly income of over \$1,000.

[Please Refer to Figure 1 in Appendix]

## **Discussion and Implications**

One of the main issues that concerned the vendors was the purpose of the research. Some were hesitant to provide the specific data that was required; others were glad to help in conducting the research. Based on my observations, I can say that it is quite evident why some vendors have stayed working at their stalls for years. The income is relatively good for most of these laborers because the average hourly minimum wage in Belize is about \$1.25. In my opinion, these vendors would be classified as unskilled laborers because there is no training required for them to perform their jobs. The income amidst all of the 23 businesses fluctuated. Location did not play a factor in purchasing products from these vendors but product variety did. All of the businesses accept Belize and U.S. dollars. It is very interesting to see that four out of the 23 businesses accept the Mexican peso, despite being far from the Mexican border. Quite evidently, more businesses would accept the Guatemalan quetzal because of the relatively close proximity to the border; 14 businesses accepted the Guatemalan quetzal. The map showing census of businesses tied to the tourist trade at Xunantunich was made to illustrate an image of the data that was collected.

The map shows the 23 businesses that rely on Xunantunich to make a living. The map shows each separate stall as a separate business and is color coded (the color grey is \$0-\$250, aquamarine \$251-\$500, red \$501-\$750, yellow \$751-\$1,000, and green over \$1,000 ). There is no pattern for income distribution and firm age at the site. Income is earned on how well vendors can influence the tourist into buying and the availability of various goods. The income patterns that were observed at the site show that vendors with similar products have similar incomes. The vendors with much more variety of goods had higher income.

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Appendix

Figure:  
A Map Showing Census of Businesses Tied to the Tourist trade at Xunantunich

