

Seeing Is Belize-ing

Reef to rainforest, a one-of-a-kind vacation By Ken Beaulieu

So there we were, looking out past our private splash pool to the crystalline waters of the western Caribbean — in one hand, a superlarge piña colada, in the other, a martini glass filled with pan-seared tiger shrimp — as the soothing sounds of island music resonated through our airy 1,500-foot villa. It was almost too much to comprehend. “You know,” my wife, Kathy, said, as she made her way to our private dock, “it doesn’t get any better than this.”

Actually, it does. The staff at Cayo Espanto sees to that. The tropical resort, a private island off the east coast of Belize, reminds you of just how good life can get. For four days, we were treated as if we owned the place. Our tireless butlers, Obed and Erwin, provided genie-like attention in granting our every wish.

Cayo Espanto, a six-minute boat ride from the town of San Pedro on the island of Ambergris Cay, was the first of three stops on our 10-day tour of Belize. We would also visit two remarkable retreats in the country’s breathtaking jungle — the Lodge at Chua Creek and Blancaneaux Lodge, owned by Francis Ford Coppola. Our itinerary underscored the beauty of Belize, which offers a feast of unspoiled natural wonders, from the longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere to lush rainforests teeming with history and abundant wildlife.

Long before trading our sandals for hiking boots, however, we were anxious to see why the small island of Cayo Espanto is a perennial favorite with celebs. The answer to that question began to unfold the moment our boat pulled up to the main dock, as the entire staff lined up to greet us with warm smiles and friendly handshakes. I kept looking around to see if perhaps they had confused us with someone important. Obed handed us the best



tasting piña coladas this side of Central America and then led us to our private villa, Casa Olita, one of only six on the island. *He’s not in Kansas anymore, honey.*

We spent our first enchanted evening — then the next and the next — enjoying a candlelit dinner at the end of our dock, beneath a canopy of stars I thought we could reach out and touch. The four-course meal, customized to our individual palates (but with a Belizean twist), was as delightful as the warm breeze and the splashing of needle nose fish.

Our days were equally memorable, split between relaxation (including an in-room massage) and outdoor adventure. Dive master German Alamilla took us to two prime snorkeling spots, Shark-Ray Alley and the Hol Chan Marine Reserve, a 5-square-mile area that includes part of the barrier reef, seagrass beds and mangroves. I was downright giddy swimming among southern stingrays and nurse sharks; it was akin to being in a room full of playful puppies.

The highlight of our Cayo Espanto experience was a private picnic on the remote western side of Ambergris Cay. We parked ourselves on two chaise lounges under an

umbrella as the affable Alamilla assumed the role of chef. He whipped up a fresh batch of ceviche (raw conch marinated in lime juice with olive oil and spices) and grilled fish he had speared earlier that day.

By contrast, Chaa Creek, in the country's Cayo District, provided the quintessential jungle experience. Located on a shady hillside above the Macal River, the diverse property is a 330-acre environmental wonderland. It offers hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding and accommodates a natural history center and Blue Morpho Butterfly breeding farm.

We visited the ancient Maya site of Xunantunich (Maiden of the Rock), with its impressive 135-foot palace overlooking three plazas. (The Maya civilization dominated Central America from about A.D. 250 to 900.) Then we took a fascinating tour of Actun Tunichil Muknal (Cave of the Stone Sepulcher), where we waded through water as deep as 5 feet and squeezed between limestone rock formations en route to "The Cathedral." There, we stood amid jaw-dropping stalagmites and stalactites, cultural artifacts and the remains of a young Maya girl sacrificed many moons ago. The place gave my wife the creeps; I wanted justice.

Our Belizean journey ended at Blancaneaux Lodge, in the country's

remote western mountains. The upscale 70-acre property was once used as a retreat for Coppola's family and friends. Each spacious, masterfully decorated villa sits on stilts for striking views of the idyllic Privassion River, the jungle and surrounding pine forest.

One evening, we rode horses through the sweet-smelling forest and meadows out to Big Rock Falls

for an invigorating swim. The following day, we explored the dramatic Mountain Pine Ridge, including Thousand-foot Falls, Rio Frio Cave and Rio on Pools. And when it was time to head back to reality, we knew we had experienced a vacation of a lifetime. ■

Ken Beaulieu is a former executive editor of Continental.

GETTING THERE

Continental offers daily nonstop service between Belize and its Houston hub. For more information on the resorts highlighted, please contact Cayo Espino, 888.666.4292, www.agrivateisland.com