



Cayo Espanto owner Jeff Gram knows what high profile celebrities and CEOs crave most—privacy.

# OFF the MAP

BY JUDY KIRKWOOD

Cayo Espanto, located a mere three miles from San Pedro, off the coast of Belize, offers a luxurious, private retreat to travelers wishing to get away from it all. INSET: Atlanta-based Jeff Gram, the mastermind behind and owner of Cayo Espanto.

**P**ersonal attention—spoiling and cosseting—is the signature of Jeff Gram’s Cayo Espanto, a private island resort off the coast of Belize. “Some of the most famous people in the world have said ‘You didn’t have to do all this for me,’” says Jeff Gram, the owner of Cayo Espanto. He is referring to how the entire staff lines up on the dock to offer a welcome reminiscent of a royal family being greeted in front of their castle by faithful retainers. “We’re really glad you’re here,” Gram responds; he doesn’t always add “We do this for everybody.”

For a clientele made up largely of those who can afford to go to any island in the world, some on their own jets, it’s the service and staff that make the petite (only four acres) land mass in the Caribbean Sea the perfect escape. Each of the six villas has a houseman who detects and anticipates desires. A kayak or fly fishing rod appear mysteriously as soon as the thought enters your mind; chilly pool water is pre-heated for the night swim you did not know you would take; creative displays of food materialize as if a magician dreamed up a new trick to hold your attention. The chef prepares guests’ meals based on a pre-trip survey, without regard to a budget. If a guest wants smoked salmon, which has been banned by the government, the chef builds a smoker and smokes it himself. The fishing and diving guide knows the local waters and reef intimately; he used to catch so many fish that he would have to swim back pulling his canoe because there was no room for him. You will always catch a fish.

Gram’s first ever guest on the island has returned more than a half-dozen times. Anyone who spends their honeymoon on the island will want to come back for an anniversary. Often, after only one sunset, guests confide to Gram that they, too, would like to own an island. “Why don’t you?” he asks.



Most Cayo Espanto guests are CEOs. Only two hours from Miami or Houston, the island allows executives to work almost a full day in the States and still make it to the island in time for a leisurely dinner under the stars. Gram will pay for the Belize City airport to stay open at night to accommodate guest schedules.

Although Gram's degree in Industrial Relations from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill might have some bearing on his success in developing a premier private island resort, it's his can-do-right-now attitude that impresses. He likes things to be "ridiculously wonderful."

It's hard to reconcile his southern accent with words that come out at a gallop instead of a slow canter. Maybe growing up an army brat, moving all over the Southeast every few years—Alabama, Texas, Georgia, Oklahoma, Kentucky—gave him the sense that he had to work fast because he wouldn't be in one place long. Or maybe it made him want to put down roots; to have a place of his own that would not disappear—like an island.

In 1989, at age 27, Gram was working for Jostens yearbook publishing division when he saw a Mazda Miata for the first time. He had to own one immediately. Circumventing the six-month waiting list by calling every Mazda dealer he could track down, he had a red roadster in his driveway within three days.

Realizing a flaw in the design—things in the trunk could shift during transit and ding the left side of the car panel from the inside—Gram commissioned a Fayetteville steel manufacturer to make an aluminum trunk shield and began selling it to members of his Miata car club for \$40 a pop. Then he started a mail order business ([www.mmmiata.com](http://www.mmmiata.com), based in Fayetteville, North Carolina), selling Miata accessories like calendars and cup holders, grille and doorsill protectors. He made a fortune, or at

least enough to buy a fantasy island in Belize. "That's how I made my money," says Gram, "and Cayo Espanto is how I spent it."

How does one acquire an island in Belize?

When Gram got an intestinal bug in Guatemala while traveling as a manager for pro tennis players in 1994, they left him to go on to their next stop on the circuit. Once he could stand up again, Gram thought he might as well check out that part of the world before returning to North Carolina. Since he loved to dive and snorkel, he went to San Pedro on Ambergris Caye, near the longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere. It was Carnival and the small town of 3,000 was in rare form. The locals may have been rowdy, but the second day Gram noticed a yacht with two helicopters on it. The third day, Queen Elizabeth arrived to visit the British Commonwealth country. Gram loved the idea of a laid-back barefoot existence co-existing with living like royalty. He was hooked.

Filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola had recognized the possibilities for a resort in Belize back in the early 1980s when he built a family retreat that he eventually turned into Blancaneaux Lodge, which opened to the public in 1993. (He opened a second retreat, Turtle Inn, in 2000.) For Coppola, Belize was reminiscent of the jungle that was the backdrop for *Apocalypse Now*. The landscape in Gram's imagination was less complicated: "I was born in 1962 and grew up watching *Gilligan's Island* and *Flipper*. My passion has always been the ocean, the beach, and islands."

Gram took his parents to Belize two months after his Carnival experience for fishing and diving. The third time he went back he checked an inflatable boat and a motor as luggage and began looking for an island to buy.

It took him only two weeks to find Cayo Espanto, a swampy land mass with exactly one coconut tree on it. What did Gram see in it? He liked the way the wind blew.

Since Cayo Espanto opened in 1998, Gram's private island retreat has graced more magazine covers than any other private island. Celebrity guests include Tiger Woods, Robert de Niro, Harrison Ford, Chelsea Clinton, and, most auspiciously, Leonardo diCaprio, who is Gram's partner in Blackadore Caye, another private island venture in Belize. Most Cayo Espanto guests are CEOs. Only two hours from Miami or Houston, the island allows executives to work almost a full day in the States and still make it to the island in time for a leisurely dinner under the stars. Gram will pay for the Belize City airport to stay open at night to accommodate guest schedules. The island's helicopter pad is used two or three times a week.

Gram won't say what he originally paid for the island or what it's worth now. It is generally acknowledged that cays that sold in Belize for \$200,000 to \$300,000 10 years ago are now worth \$2 to \$3 million. There are about two dozen islands listed for Belize at [www.privateislands.com](http://www.privateislands.com), from the unfortunately named Cockroach Caye (10 acres) at \$189,900 to Calabash Caye, a 14-acre island with a 4,200-square-foot house, for \$3,500,000. Caye Chapel Resort, which opened in 2002 and has a marina for yachts up to 140 feet, a paved airstrip, and an 18-hole championship golf course, is on the market for \$75 million.

Currently Gram has two island projects in the Bahamas, in the Exumas and Eleuthera, where islands that were selling for \$500,000 10 years ago are now worth \$20 million. Media sites buzzed that Blackadore in Belize sold for \$1.75 million in 2004. Gram says he was going out to the island when Leo and former girlfriend supermodel Giselle Bündchen were staying at Cayo Espanto. DiCaprio came along for the ride, which evolved into an equal partnership to develop the island with a "green" hotel.

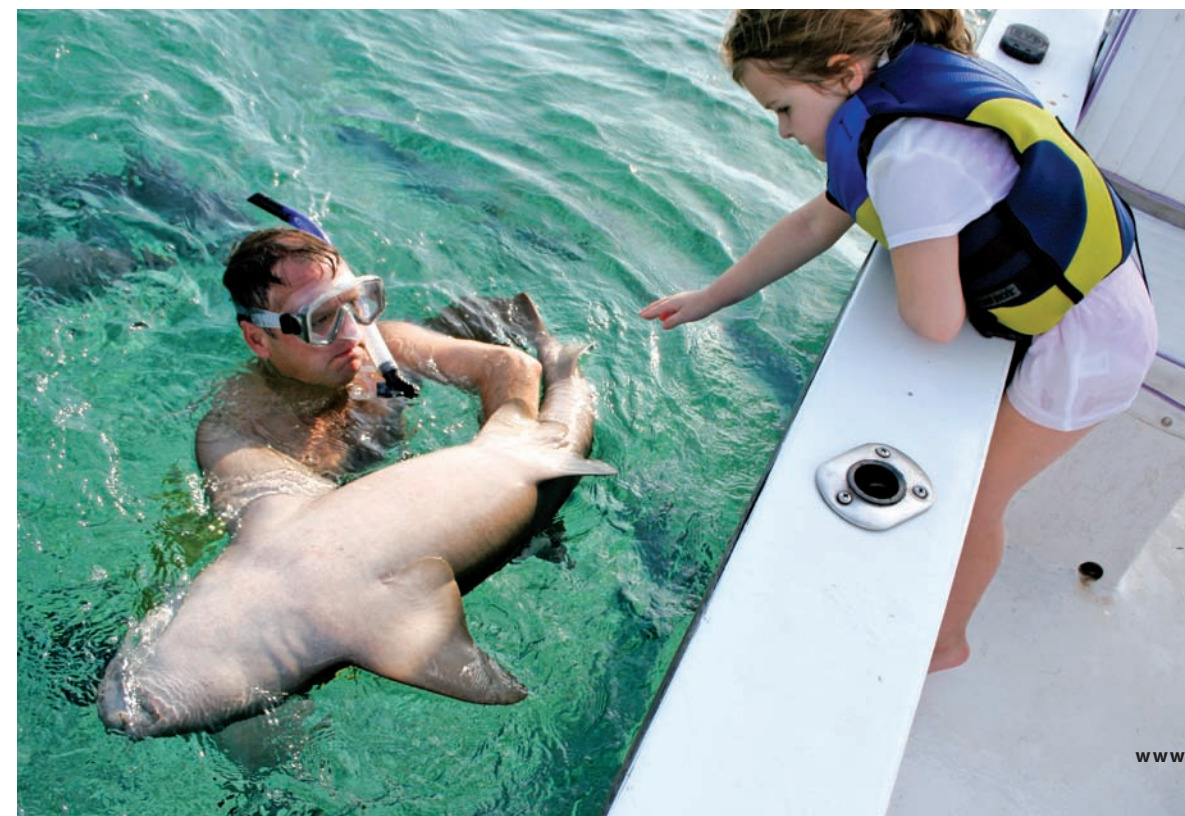
Gram cannot confirm, but it has been reported elsewhere, that Four Seasons has signed on for the project. Blackadore, at over 100 acres, will have perhaps 125 homes in addition to a resort. It is rumored that diCaprio's friends may want to make the island a celebrity outpost—privacy being the biggest luxury they desire. But Gram is still taking names of people who might be interested in a future villa there.

Although Gram says that building Cayo Espanto was easy because he had a fantastic contractor, developing an island requires a pioneer spirit. Sand and gravel that came in a sailboat from Belize City to Cayo Espanto had to be shoveled into dugout canoes that were pulled on shore. Several hundred small palm trees were dug up and transported in pairs from another island to Cayo Espanto. Reverse osmosis systems, satellite TV, and solar power have made island development a breeze, says Gram. But the price of fuel is a significant concern since everything depends on transportation.

Based in Atlanta, Gram has learned that he doesn't have to be on his island as often as in the past. Although still enthralled with the sea—in 2005, he took time off to sail with friends in the Rolex Transatlantic Challenge, a 3,000-mile race from New York to England—he has scaled back his trips to the Bahamas and Belize to accommodate his five-year-old daughter's schedule.

"As the owner of an island resort," Gram admits, "I worry about things like the price of fuel, which has impacted us dramatically. But the minute I get down there, I experience why everyone who goes there loves it and live my dream."

Best of all, his daughter, Sarah Kate, is growing up with her own island. "She's a coconut kid," says Gram. "She loves the staff and we extend ourselves in the same way to her, on a child's scale, as we do to all our guests. Instead of drinks on the dock, I set up a table under a low mangrove tree and duck under it and have a tea party with her." Look for his future projects to be more child- and family-oriented. For Gram, *Gilligan's Island* is much better the second time around, with Sarah Kate. ET



THIS PAGE: Gram's daughter, Sarah Kate, attempts to touch a shark Gram caught off the coast of Belize. OPPOSITE: Casa Olita is one of six private villas on the island, and features a private dock and splash pool, as well as an alfresco shower and walled garden.