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SURF AND TURF IN BELIZE

BY SABRINA LOPEZ

A dense forest adventure, a visit to ancient Mayan ruins, or just relaxing along the ocean shores of crystal clear water, Belize provides an experience for travelers with virtually any type of budget. Belize is a relatively easy trip from New York; if you leave on the first flight out, you can be in Belize by mid morning, ready and excited to start your vacation.

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Belize

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Once arriving at the airport in Belize City, we were greeted by a representative from the first stop of our trip, the Ka'ana Boutique Resort (www.kaanabelize.com). Arriving at the resort, we were served some refreshing ginger and lemon cocktails and given a brief tour of the grounds. The tour provided us with a chance to check out the 16 newly refurbished private casitas which were immaculate, as well as the spa, and a main dining room with adjacent wine cellar and bar.

Most of the Ka'ana packages range from three days and two nights for just over \$350.00 per night during low season, which is truly a great value. Packages include breakfast and dinner and a welcome cocktail hour where it is standard procedure for the General Manager to personally welcome each guest. We had an opportunity to learn more about the resort during this time as well: Ka'ana actively helps the local schools and underprivileged children in the region, and they are trying to work closely with the ministers in the Belize government to continue the development of their tourism program and continue to improve eco-tourism.

Following a few drinks of Craboo, their local liquor, we were invited to a meal prepared by the executive chef who perfectly incorporated vegetables from the Ka'ana organic garden and created a well-balanced and delicious menu. Needless to say, all of our meals were carefully prepared and were by far, the best "inclusive" meals we have ever had.

One of the key components to our visit at Ka'ana was the extremely knowledgeable staff, who were always willing to assist us in making last minute changes to our excursion itinerary based on our key interests, weather, and the limited time we had to get the most out of our stay.

One of the trips recommended was a private tour of the Mayan ruins in the surrounding areas; Ka'ana provided us with a private tour guide. We visited the Mayan residences of Cahal Pech, developed approximately 1000 BC, and then we crossed on foot into Guatemala, where we saw one of the largest temple sites in Guatemala called Tikal, from approximately 500 AD.

Cave tubing was another exciting excursion. While there are a number of caving trips that ranged in degrees of difficulty, we chose to visit Jaguar Paw, which is appropriate for adults and escorted children. We hiked for about thirty minutes on level ground and the cover of the trees provided a relatively cool environment before we arrived at the starting point of our river journey. Within a few minutes, we were deep inside the underground tunnel checking out stalactites, stalagmites, and a variety of geological formations of rocks and minerals that were unique to the climate and location of the river. Towards the end of our drift we encountered bats that were sleeping and feeding on small insects before emerging right at the base camp where we first started our hike.

In an effort to get the most out of our visit, we had to experience the spa back at Ka'ana, so we called ahead and the resort had two attendants waiting for us. The choice of spa treatments was as comprehensive as any major spa resort, ranging from facials to herbal wraps to massages, and beyond. My deep tissue massage was one of the best I have ever had.

The next morning we had an opportunity to contribute to the continued development of the countryside by planting a tree on the Ka'ana property before our drive to the airport to fly to our next destination in San Pedro, Ambergris Caye (pronounced Ambergree Key), home to the second longest coral reef in the world.



Upon arrival in San Pedro we were greeted by a uniform-clad representative of Cayo Espanto, (www.aprivateisland.com), who would take us to our "private island". We were escorted to a small transfer boat, offered cold towels, refreshments, and an opportunity to check out the local waterways on our way to the island. In less than ten minutes, we arrived to find a team of people lined up on the dock ready to greet us, all of whom would make sure we were comfortable during our stay. We had a feeling we were going to have an extraordinary experience when we received a brief questionnaire about our favorite types of music and food, and whether we like to be pampered or not. Of course, we chose to be pampered!

We were then guided to our private 1500 square foot villa, which was equipped with air conditioning, while three of the villa's walls opened to the elements to allow a steady breeze to sweep through. Our new living quarters were equipped with a king size bed with 1000 thread count cotton sheets, a small living area, kitchenette, iPod dock, wireless network, and fresh water plunge pool about twenty feet from the edge of the water.

They provided us with a two-way radio and explained that they were accessible pretty much any time, and they would make every effort to create the most peaceful and relaxing experience we could imagine. All we had to do was call. Then the Executive Chef arrived and provided us with a list of choices. Each multi-course dinner was based on our favorites, coupled with a local culinary twist, and rounded out with a spectacular dessert.

The choices were endless. The wide range of spa treatments offered in the privacy of our villa was vast, as a specialist was shipped in from town depending on the type of service we wanted. One of the most amazing excursions I have even been on was "A Private Day at Sea". After being served breakfast in bed, we were escorted to a small boat with a travel guide and fitted with a mask, snorkel and fins while we cruised out towards the barrier reef, where we snorkeled and went spear fishing. We successfully caught a 20 pound grouper, two lobsters and seven conch, and then set sail to our next destination with our lunch. As we approached a sandbar we saw that someone from Cayo Espanto had put two lounge chairs in the water along the shore line, pitched a tent, set a table, and lit a fire. Once on land, we were directed to kick back and relax as our guides made fresh conch ceviche, marinated and barbequed our grouper to perfection.

Ultimately, you couldn't ask for a more relaxing vacation, one where all of your requests are met with, "it would be our pleasure." This is the perfect place to disconnect from the rest of the world, eat great food, take in a seaside spa treatment, or just sit on your lounge chair and do nothing.

As our time to leave arrived much more quickly than we would have ever wanted, the staff lined up on the pier to wish us goodbye, and all we could think was how much we'd love the opportunity to come back to relive such a perfect experience.

All Photos Courtesy of Cayo Espanto