

TRAVEL + LEISURE

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**YOUR OWN
PRIVATE ISLAND**

**20 GREAT WINTER GETAWAYS
FOR LESS THAN \$200 A NIGHT**

**A GUIDE TO THE BEST
NEW YORK RESTAURANTS**

Display until November 28



www.travelandleisure.com

by michael gross photographed by michael mundy

A front-row view of paradise. The plunge pool and deck chairs at Casa Oleta, one of the five cabanas at Cayo Espanto. OPPOSITE: Exploring Belize's barrier reef.



CAYO ESPANTO, A NEW LUXURY RESORT OFF THE COAST OF BELIZE,



the ultimate retreat

IS ELEVATING THE PRIVATE-ISLAND EXPERIENCE TO A HIGHER PLANE



Easy, breezy. RIGHT:
The open-air bedroom at Casa
Mañana. BELOW: A beached
skiff. OPPOSITE: Nibbling on fresh
tropical fruit in Casa Mañana.



ROSITA KEPT APOLOGIZING—AND WE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY.

My wife and I had just arrived at Cayo Espanto, a new private-island resort off the Belize Barrier Reef, the longest reef in the Western Hemisphere. On the boat trip from Ambergris Cay, our skipper had offered iced washcloths and radioed ahead with an order for daiquiris. Now, lined up before us in white T-shirts and crisp khakis were a half-dozen members of the hotel's staff, offering more iced towels, ice water, icy drinks, and a warm greeting.

So why was Rosita Alamilla, Cayo Espanto's guest services manager, apologizing as she took us up the line, introducing the island's dive master, the chef and his assistant, a housekeeper, and a houseman?

Rosita ducked her head. Usually, she said shyly, the line would have stretched more than twice as long, with more housemen and kitchen staff, a laundress, groundskeepers, and an engineer. It added up to a staff-to-guest ratio of two to one, impressive for an island with only five cabanas and a maximum capacity of 14 guests. But this week, most of the staff was off for Easter.

Then she gestured toward our cabana, Casa Oleta, reached via a boardwalk that seemed to float over a stretch of perfectly white, perfectly raked sand. At the end of a dock jutting off Oleta lay two bleached-wood beds positioned to face the sun and an endless blue horizon. Two carefully rolled towels beckoned our jet-stiff necks.

Rosita had nothing to apologize for.



LIKE SOME FASHION DESIGNER'S VISION OF PERFECTION, CAYO ESPANTO DISTILLS THE CARIBBEAN DREAM TO ITS PUREST, SIMPLEST FORM—JUST YOU, ALONE WITH THE ELEMENTS





A torchlit path to an
alfresco dining room. Ozeosire
Chaises with a view.



WITH ITS DENSE JUNGLES, COUNTLESS MAYAN RUINS, AND WORLD-CLASS diving, Belize has been an adventurer's destination for decades. Only recently have its hotels dabbled in the subtler pleasures of high style. Like some fashion designer's vision of perfection, Cayo Espanto distills the Caribbean dream to its purest, simplest form—just you, alone with the elements.

Jeff Gram, the owner of Cayo Espanto, amassed a small fortune selling Mazda Miata accessories before becoming a real estate developer. "That's how I make money," he explained one night over cocktails wrapped in Egyptian linens. "This," he said, waving his arm out the window of Cayo Espanto's dock house, "is how I spend it."

Gram discovered Belize when he fell ill in Guatemala, headed to Ambergris Cay to recuperate, and, as is his wont, spent his days looking at islands. "I've always wanted to buy an island; doesn't everybody?" he asks. He sensed an opportunity and returned repeatedly, tooling around Belize's 200-plus cays in an inflatable boat with a 15-horsepower motor that he lugged in his suitcase. In 1993, Gram bought Cayo Espanto, a raw, low three-acre island. (Continued on page 269)





Belize it or not. ABOVE: Seats by the plunge pool at Casa Estrella. RIGHT: A stingray gliding off the coast of Cayo Espanto. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Lounging in a handmade hammock on Estrella's deck; Casa Mañana's marble bathroom; bonefishing off Cayo Espanto.



(Continued from page 204) and decided to build his fantasy hotel, "because I couldn't afford what I wanted and a staff of twenty-five any other way." The kind of traveler who asks for six extra pillows when he checks into a hotel, Gram wasn't satisfied by Belize's existing island resorts, which are isolated outside the barrier reef and cater to serious divers. So he chose to create a luxury resort right on the reef.

Cayo Espanto translates as "Phantom Key." Years ago, fishermen would go to the island to salt their catch and hang it to dry on chicken-wire racks. A guard, left behind to keep watch and armed with no more than a bottle of rum, would inevitably get scoused and see apparitions.

Frankly, only ghosts would have wanted to stay on this flat platter of sand ringed with tangled mangrove. But Gram dredged four feet of sand to raise the island's surface, brought in rich dirt, and planted 600 trees.

Two renowned resort planners who had worked on the Peninsula Beverly Hills—landscape designer James Hyatt and interior designer Darrell Schmitt—were so intrigued by Gram's vision for Cayo Espanto that they helped plan it free of charge. Schmitt says his primary goal was to provide a stage for "a wonderful sleeping experience and then a wonderful waking experience, ten steps from a swimming pool." The five cabanas seem to float in beds of foliage. All are surrounded by decks and trellises; vividly painted shutter walls latch open by day. Three have plunge pools and beds covered in voluminous mosquito-net curtains—perfect for honeymooners. The two-bedroom dock house, with a larger pool, is well suited for families.

BARBARA AND I DIDN'T MEAN TO BE, BUT WE proved to be demanding, if not difficult, guests. After hearing of Cayo Espanto, we sent for a brochure, which we examined closely as soon as it arrived. From the photos, we began to suspect that the water around the island was too shallow for anything more than wading and floating. Our skepticism didn't en-

dear us to the hotel's booking office in North Carolina. It took several weeks of persistent phone calls and e-mails to confirm our suspicion (but we decided to go anyway). The hotel's payment policy was off-putting, too. Within five days of booking, Cayo Espanto requires a 50 percent deposit and doesn't take credit cards. Payment in full must be made 90 days before your stay. At the last moment, we learned that the hotel might still be under construction, as it remains a work in progress (three or four more cabanas and a central swimming pool are planned). So when we decided to switch our trip from November to April, we felt like hostages, negotiating for our few days of peace.

The slightly sour taste left by that haggling was later sweetened by the care Gram's team took to ensure that everything would be to our taste. We received a four-page questionnaire asking which activities—diving, fishing, sightseeing—we might be interested in and what cuisines—Asian, kosher, vegetarian—we liked and disliked, right down to how we took our morning coffee. The last question on the survey was, "Do you prefer to be spoiled with attention . . . or do you prefer complete privacy?" I really wasn't trying to be difficult when I answered, "It depends."

Cayo Espanto is used to that sort of behavior. And considering its prices, it should be. The cabana we stayed in runs \$895 per night for two—complete with food and drink but not wine—and will cost as much as \$1,595 over the Christmas season. And indeed, after a rocky first few hours when our demands were nonstop (more hangers, a hair dryer, Band-Aids, a beach umbrella, a rubber raft—the last arrived two days later, but arrive it did), our personal houseman, Obed, began to anticipate our desires, fulfilling them so smartly and sweetly that we came to suspect that pleasing us actually pleased him.

Obed was both a hovering presence and a pleasant ghost. We were told how to signal him when the coast was clear to approach in the morning—by opening one wall of shutters (the other

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two-faced the sea and the mangrove that hid our cabana from the next). The rest of the day we could call Obed on the intercom in our pantry, or on the walkie-talkies we declined to carry, or we could listen for his singsong "knock-knock" and find him, hands behind his back, waiting for a wish or command. After dinner he would ready the bed and disappear. Presumably, he slept when we did, though we couldn't be sure. Each night the mats and towels on our sun beds would disappear, but no matter how early we awoke, they had already been silently replaced with fresh ones.

Then there's Salty, Cayo Espanto's resident yellow Labrador, who is not allowed on the decks or in the cabanas, but nonetheless ended up snoozing beside our bed one night. Curious, sweet, and full of personality, Salty flitted in and out of our three-day stay, circumnavigating his island with us in great wet leaps whenever we took out sea kayaks, sometimes standing motionless on our dock to watch the swarms of minnows in the water below, but never once begging.

We ourselves had little need to beg on Cayo. Freshly made guacamole awaited when we first entered our cabana. A few moments later, Belize-born, Louisiana-trained chef Jason Espot arrived to discuss our first meals. Breakfasts began with watermelon or papaya

juice, followed by such offerings as huevos rancheros with just-baked tortillas. Lunches were simple affairs—jackfish tacos with mango salsa one day, pasta primavera with grilled chicken the next. Dinner was a production. Obed and a helper wore headsets (à la 'N Sync) to communicate with the kitchen. The first night, we ate in our house. The second, we asked Obed to set up a torchlit table on the sand. It was so pretty that on the third night, we chose a repeat engagement rather than eat at the end of our dock or under the dining palapa.

Stuffed with food, stunned by the sunny vista before us each morning, we were tempted to do nothing. To never leave our room, with its Frette robes and towels and its Egyptian linen pillows. To just sit by the plunge pool; to float face-down in the sea three steps beyond; to drink, have a massage, or simply stare at the horizon. The staff tells the tale of two couples who shared the island for a week but never met until they were at the airport heading home. We saw our neighbors—a honeymooning couple—only a few times, when they emerged to go bonefishing.

Cayo Espanto is as eco-friendly as its staff is guest-friendly. Part of what attracted the design team was Gram's insistence that the resort be self-sustaining. Each cabana has its own solar-powered battery. The air-conditioning runs only

The staff, lined up to greet arriving guests.





feed them chunks of fish while the customers snorkel in water only eight feet deep. "I swim with sharks on a daily basis," said my fashion-designer wife. "It's not my idea of a good time."

The next afternoon, we headed out snorkeling again with German, this time blissfully alone at a secret spot: a bit of reef his co-workers call Germany. Surrounded by coral as colorful as a box of Crayolas, we swam with a school of barracuda.

German repeatedly dived

from dusk until dawn; the island's generator drives all the modern conveniences—phones, a fax machine, an Internet connection—and operates a reverse-osmosis desalination system that can produce 3,000 gallons of potable water a day. Gray water from the sinks and showers is recycled to irrigate the island's extensive plantings. Linens are washed only every two days, though that schedule can be changed on request.

CAYO ESPANTO OFFERS MANY EXCURSIONS, from shopping trips in San Pedro to half- or full days of snorkeling and fly-, spear-, or reef-fishing; tours of Mayan ruins at Xuanontunich, Lamanai, and Tikal, the largest pre-Columbian settlement in nearby Guatemala; bird-watching; and trips to a baboon sanctuary.

We went on a private tour of the Mayan ruin Altun Ha, a small but breathtaking site an hour's boat ride up the Northern River Lagoon. We also booked two half-day snorkeling trips with German Alamilla, the dive master. He brought us first to Hol Chan, a three-square-mile underwater reserve. Despite tour boat traffic, the lagoon teemed with parrot fish, snapper, jack, grouper, tarpon, and moray eels. He also took us to Shark Ray Alley, a spot where southern stingrays and nurse sharks were known to gather (and where fishermen once cleaned their catch). They circle lazily, waiting for the dive masters to hand-

deep into curlicues of coral, carrying a speargun and surfacing an impossibly long time later with a lobster, then another, and then a third, his smile all the while growing larger and larger.

After snorkeling for another hour, we took the boat, accompanied by leaping flying fish, to a bird sanctuary where we found dozens of cormorants sadly hovering above a freshwater lagoon that had dried to cracked mud. It was crisscrossed by iguana tracks and the patterned streaks of crocodile bellies.

After a fruitless hour's search for crocs, it was back to Cayo Espanto. In honor of our last night, we popped a bottle of Dom Pérignon and dined on the langoustes German had speared—a tail and a half apiece—drizzled with papaya coulis and accompanied by fresh asparagus and tiny roasted potatoes. After dinner, we lay on our sun beds, backs turned to the glow of San Pedro, seeking the Southern Cross in the diamanté sky, just us and the elements, on an island that—for the moment, at least—seemed to be ours alone.

To reach the island, guests fly into Belize City. Cayo Espanto takes care of flight and boat arrangements from there. Rates at Cayo Espanto start at \$495 per cabana, including all meals (wine is extra) and most activities (but not scuba diving or day trips). Rates increase after December 20. Call 888-466-4382 or 910-323-8355, fax 910-323-4212, www.aprivateisland.com.