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NOVEMBER 200



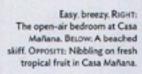
20 GREAT WINTER GETAWAYS FOR LESS THAN \$200 A NIGHT

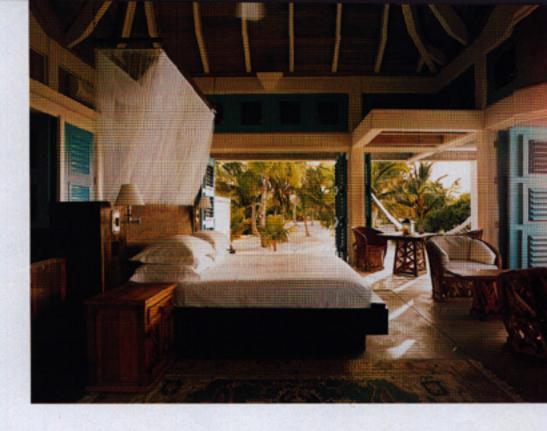
A GUIDE TO THE BEST
NEW YORK RESTAURANTS

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 Belist's parrier reef. CAYO ESPANTO, A NEW LUXURY RESORT OFF THE COAST OF BELIZE,









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.

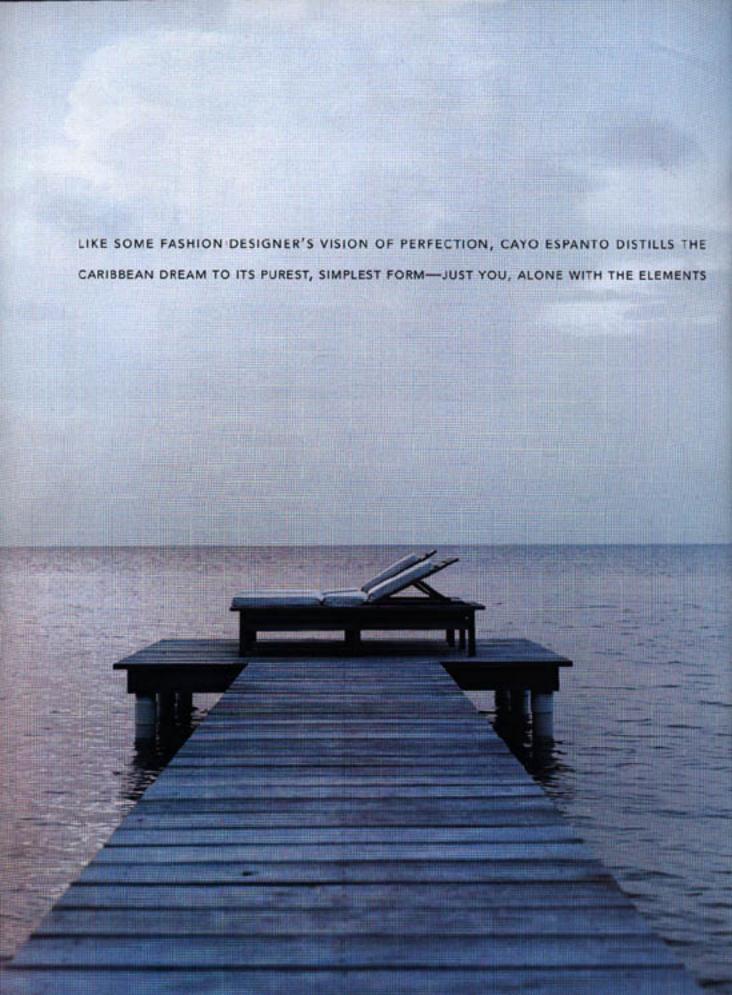
So why was Rosita Alamilla, Cayo Espanto's guest services manager, apologizing as she took us up the line, introducing the island's dive master, the chef and his assistant, a housekeeper, and a houseman?

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.











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 cut 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 15horsepower 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. Abovt: Seats
by the plunge pool at Casa
Estrella. RIGHT: A stingray gliding
off the coast of Cayo Espanto.
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE MON 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-live any other way." The kind of traveler who asks for six extra pillows when he checks into a hotel, Gram wasn't satisfied by Beltes's existing sland resorts, which are isolated outside the barrier roef and cater to serious divers. So he chose to create a luxury resort tight no the reef.

Cayo Espanto translates as "Phanom 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 soused and see annatifious.

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 Schmittwere 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.

BABBARA 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 exarrined 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 endear 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-cutting, 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

BELIZE

two faced the sea and the mangrow 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 walker-talkies we declined to carry, or we could late 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 awork, they had liready been sliendy replaced with ad liready been sliendy replaced with

fresh ones.

Then there's Salty, Cayo Espanto's resident yellow Labrador, who is not almost one to the control of the control

We ourselves had little need to beg on Cayo. Freshly made guacamole awated when we first entered our cabana. A few moments later, Belize-bom, Louisiana-trained chef Jason Espat arrived to discuss our first meals. Breakfasts began with watermelon or papaya juice, followed by such offerings as huevos rancheros with just-baked not be used to be

dining palapa Stuffed with food, stunned by the sunny vista before us each moming, 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 faceclown 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 almost heading home. We saw our neighbors-e honeymooning coupleonly a few times, when they emerged to go bonefishing.

Cayo Espanto is as oco-finendly as its staff is guest-finendly. 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





from dusk until damn; the island's generator drives all the modern conveniences—phones, a fax machine, a niterate connection—and operate an evene-conosis desalinization system that can produce a 2000 gallons of potable water a day. Gray water from the sistent's act showers in excycled to linigate the siland's extensive plannings. Linens are washed only energy two days, though that washed only energy two days, though that

COTO ESPANTO OFFES MANY EXCUSSIONS, from shopping trips in San Pedro to half-or full days of snoriceling and fly-spear, or reef-fishing; tours of Mayan rulins at Xuannonuvich, Lamanai, and Tikal, the largest pre-Columbian settlement in nearby Gustemala; bird-watteling; and trips to a beboon senchatry.

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 threesquare-mile underwater reserve. Despite tour boat traffic, the lagoon teemed with parrot fish, snapper, jack, grouper, tarpon, and moray ee's. 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 handfeed them chunks of fishwhile 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: e bit of reef his co-workers call Germany. Surrounded by coral as colorul as a box of Crayolas, we swam with a school of barasouda. German repeatedly divide

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 brid sanchisary where we found dozens of comprants sadily howeving above a freshwater lagoon that had dried to cracked mud. It was crise-crossed by iguans tracks and the particular distribution of the control of th

After a feutiless hour's search for concept test best on Copy Eigenton in honor of our lest night, we popped a bottle of Dom Regroun and dimed on the language of the language of the page couls and accompanied by fresh ageing and any reset postures. At ser dimer, we lay on our sur both, backs turned to the given offs of herics, welling the Southern Coss in the disaments site, just us and the elements, on an inliend that—for the moment, at least—seemed to be our allows.

To reach the island, guests fly into Believ City.

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