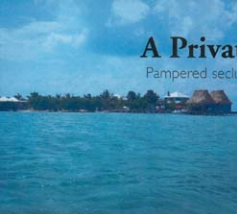


# A Private Island in Belize

Pampered seclusion and a golf course all to yourself

BY MICHAEL HILLER



Royal-blue skies. Turquoise, crystal-clear waters. Pearl-white beaches. I don't know how Crayola chooses their Crayon colors, but I'm pretty sure they first see them here.

I'M BOARDING A SMALL SKIFF JUST A FEW PAGES FROM THE airport, my luggage already stowed. The water-taxi pilot welcomes me with ice-cold hand towels and chilled bottled water and then whisks us across Ambergris Bay for the seven-minute ride. The waters are refreshingly warm as we glide smoothly across the channel under a cloudless sky.

Hundreds of keys speckle these Caribbean waters. My 20-minute Maya Air flight from Belize City to San Pedro had taken me over this same area. Gazing out the plane's small windows, all eight passengers on the 10-seat, twin-engine plane had spotted the same little islet peppered with palm trees. From the sky, this private island with its handful of tin-roofed villas stood apart from the rest.

"What's that place? It looks fantastic," a couple seated in the front of the plane remark aloud.

"Cayo Espanto," another passenger promptly replies, "and it is fantastic!"

I smile. That's where I'm headed.

**TOP LEFT:** Approaching paradise from Ambergris Bay, Cayo Espanto is an island like no other; the entire staff lines the dock to welcome you.

**CENTER:** A perfect sunset on your own private island.

**BOTTOM:** Cayo Chapal, where you can play incredible golf on an island course built just for you.



Casa Mariana

As my water taxi approaches the private island from the east, I already sense that this resort will be special. The entire staff, all smartly dressed in khaki shorts and crisp shirts, has lined the dock to welcome me by name. This is Cayo Espanto, a new, private island retreat off the barrier-reef coast of Belize.

Though Belize is only two and a half hours by plane from Dallas, Cayo Espanto couldn't seem further. No pagers, no cell phones, no Internet. No chores, no faxes, no meetings, no newspapers. Just endless sky, endless ocean and endless pampering.

After meeting me at the dock, Churchill and Larry, the two housemen assigned to my private villa, offer me a Cayo Espanto Special, an icy concoction of Grand Marnier and island rum. Accompanied by Saly, the island's three-year-old yellow Labrador retriever, Churchill and Larry escort me to my one-bedroom villa, Casa Mariana.

My villa, like the other four on the island, has shuttered wood doors lining the entirety of each wall. These French doors open on three sides of the villa, revealing a panorama of ocean and the island. The Caribbean breezes are constant and welcome. You can shutter the doors closed and use the air-conditioning at night, but few guests ever do. Marble vanities,

leather seats, an alfresco shower and crisp linens and robes grace each villa. Each private beachside deck wraps around an equally private infinity-edge plunge pool. A weathered boardwalk leads to an expansive landing that hovers over the tranquil waters. On the deck, two teak steamer chairs and a large market umbrella face the sunrise in the morning and are turned toward the sunset in the evenings.

Churchill and Larry, like the housemen serving the other guests on the island, have one goal: Keep their guests pampered and happy. They bring me breakfast, lunch, dinner, cocktails, snacks, more cocktails ... and escort me across the lush property each time I leave or return to the island. Any time I need something, one of them seems to be near, though never hovering or lurking. Upon approaching the villa, they softly announce their presence and ask permission before entering. Each evening, one of the island's two chefs presents you the dinner menu he has planned for you ("Carrot and Ginger Soup flavored with coconut milk," followed by "Tiger Shrimps and Sea Scallops on saffron risotto with a red pepper coulis"), but he'll prepare virtually anything you request.

Tired of rest and tranquility? You're in luck: There's also plenty to do.



Like fly-fishing in Chumal Bay, a 20-minute boat ride away. Professional guide Jose Perez has been fishing these Cal Congrallo flats and teaching others to do so for years. The jewel-colored shallow waters are ideal for catching bonefish with Crazy Charlie flies. We catch a few fish in the mangrove-lined playas and drink a few beers, but mostly we enjoy the natural beauty of the coast.

Tacio, one of the two dive masters employed by Cayo Espanto, will guide you through a half-day of snorkeling. Unless, of course, you choose to scuba dive the world's second-largest barrier reef instead. Tarpon, parrot fish, yellow snapper, barracuda, rays, grouper—even nurse sharks ply these protected diving waters. Belize is famous for its incredibly clear, warm waters and for its barrier reef. With private dive masters on staff, Cayo Espanto is an ideal base for a scuba vacation.

Ready for golf? Grab your clubs and hit the links on your own private island. Take the short boat ride from Cayo Espanto back to San Pedro, hop in a \$27 seat on Maya Air's flight to Caye ("key") Chapel, and seven minutes later, you're touching down on a private air strip that runs along the first fairway of 18 holes of heaven. No marshal, no starters, no pro shop, no beverage carts, no yardage book. Just pure, unadul-

TOP LEFT: Churchhill and Larry, two of the housemen at Cayo Espanto.  
BOTTOM LEFT: A view into a casa (keep the doors open at night).  
BOTTOM: From your casa, your private plunge pool and the ocean.



terated golf on a course where more than half the holes border the ocean. Not challenging enough? Most of the other holes touch fresh-water lakes.

Built a couple years ago by an avid golfer who is said to have made a fortune in the Kentucky coal business, the island exists for its spectacular golf. A full-time staff keeps the conditions pristine. There are a few private villas (which are available for rent), a clubhouse and a dining facility (open every day, though it rarely has customers), a marina, and a great resort pool and bar. The whole thing cost millions to build. The best part? You'll likely be the only golfer on any given day, and it's all there for you.

Want to take a mulligan (or two)? Go ahead; no one cares. Take your shoes off between holes. Play 54 holes if you want. Play No. 16—a 623-yard, par-5 monster—again. It's a tricky course, with crosswinds and fresh-water crocodiles to contend with, but the narrow fairways are a fair trade for the well-manicured property, sculpted bunkers, spectacular ocean views, and the opportunity to play a course you can truly call your own.

As I reluctantly prepare to leave the tranquility and luxury of Cayo Espanto for the return home, Churchill hands me the guest book. Leafing through the comments of previous vacationers, I see one has written, "How sinful to spoil, pamper and overindulge people the way you do." Churchill tells me that, like many of their guests, the comment's author has since been back ... twice.

I look forward to reading my own guest-book entry ... when I, too, return.





WHAT THE GUIDEBOOKS DON'T TELL YOU

- Cayo Espanto is expensive, but go ahead and splurge. Current rates for a one-bedroom villa start at \$700 a night, but all amenities, meals and cocktails are included. The entire island and all five villas can be had for \$5,500 a night.
- Though pricey, Cayo Espanto remains fully booked most of the year. To book the entire island for a family or corporate event, plan early.
- Leave all your valuables and jewelry at home. Cayo Espanto is very private, and you're unlikely to run into any other guests while you're there.
- Each villa has a CD player, stereo, telephone (to call your houseman), wet bar, air-conditioning ... but no clocks and certainly no alarms.
- Bring sunscreen and camera film. Both are difficult to find.

#### A PERFECT DAY AT CAYO ESPANTO

Wake up with the sunrise, no alarm clock in sight, and enjoy morning coffee watching the sun stretch itself across the sky. For breakfast, ask Chef Papi, who worked at some of the best restaurants and resorts in Napa, to prepare *huevos rancheros* and fresh papaya pancakes. Before lunch, go snorkeling with Tacio, then return for a late lunch on the way to catch the 1 p.m. flight from San Pedro to Caye Chapel. For a \$54 round-trip ticket, Maya Air will fly you to a most extraordinary golf experience. The greens fees are \$200, but the course and the views are worthy. After the round (or two), enjoy a cocktail at the pool bar while waiting for your return flight home. Don't worry: You'll see the plane landing just a hundred yards away. Back at Cayo Espanto, join your spouse for dinner on your private dock, now lit with *luminarias*, and enjoy a Cuban cigar