

# Condé Nast Traveler

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

AUGUST 2003

Airfare-and-hotel  
packages that really fly  
**ONE-STOP DEALS**

The New CENTRAL AMERICA

## Tropical Sensations

From Belize to Panama,  
**11** intimate resorts redefine luxe



**EXCLUSIVE!** Fourth Annual Listing

### WORLD'S 125 TOP TRAVEL SPECIALISTS

Experts who can make  
your dream trip come true

### RISING STAR

Phenomenal Dubai

### NOBLE BERTHS

Sleep like a lord in Britain

# THE NEW



Up of more than  
of the 14,000  
in Bimini Cove.  
Bimini is one of  
with its own beach,  
and the hotel  
pools and frag-  
rant jungle views.  
Bimini is the  
perfect tropical  
getaway.

# WORLD'S NEW GROOVE

Forget rough-around-the-edges eco-outposts.

Central America's latest wave of nature

lodges is all about creature comforts.

ALISON HUMES happily wades in

Photographs by  
Cathrine Weasel



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As we get closer,  
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and blue shirts,  
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One is holding  
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land in northern Belize where the dream of environmentally pure luxury is living large. Once again, a boat is speeding me across an expanse of shallow blue sea, threading through several small islands that are for sale, each waiting to be groomed into an island paradise. Cayo Espanto comes into view, and there's a crowd on the dock. As we get closer, I realize that they are lined up to greet me. There are about ten of them, standing in the full sun—guys in pith helmets and blue shirts, and a few women, some in uniform. One is holding a tray with a tall piña colada on it. The boatman helps me onto the dock, whereupon I'm handed an iron washcloth. I'm taken down the line and introduced to the staff one by one. I feel ridiculous participating in what seems to be some anachronistic colonial ritual.

What saves the moment from its stiff formality is the mixture of pride and earnestness on the faces before me. Here I meet Obed, my man Friday for the coming days and a primer among men. He leads me to a luxuriously appointed villa, where, if I have any requests—lunch, some music, a boat, a massage—I just pick up the Takabont and call him. Inevitably, he responds, "It will be my pleasure."

The villa can be opened on three sides or closed up and air-conditioned. The bed is centrally positioned, with fancy sheets and fat down pillows. Here, too, awareness that freshwater is a luxury is reinforced by composting toilets and signs about recycling gray water—as if there weren't also a gorgeous private plunge pool, tiled in pale green and with a vanishing edge. Even disappointment has an environmental rationale: The explanation for one dinner of inedible frozen meatballs was that one meatball overfed the local snapper and grouper.

Cayo Espanto is all about pampered relaxation, indolence, and service, as the guest book, replete with honeymoon testimonials, affirms. Ultimately, what makes it work is the staff—Obed's sincerity and grace. Tasio's sensitivity in leading snorkeling expeditions and his knowledge about the rich marine world of Belize's reef. And of course the charming small comforts of hot and cold washcloths frequently proffered, fresh flowers, being rinsed with freshwater (not too fresh, I hope) when emerging from snorkeling, finding drinks awaiting upon one's return.

The role that Central America plays in our dreamworld has shifted. No longer is it the collection of sleepy banana republics of our collective unconscious. Now it is the fantasy in which we can have it all—luxury without waste, consumption without consequence. □

WITH THESE TOP-LEVEL PLACES NOT yet up and running, the most exclusive resort I can find in Cayo Espanto, a private is-