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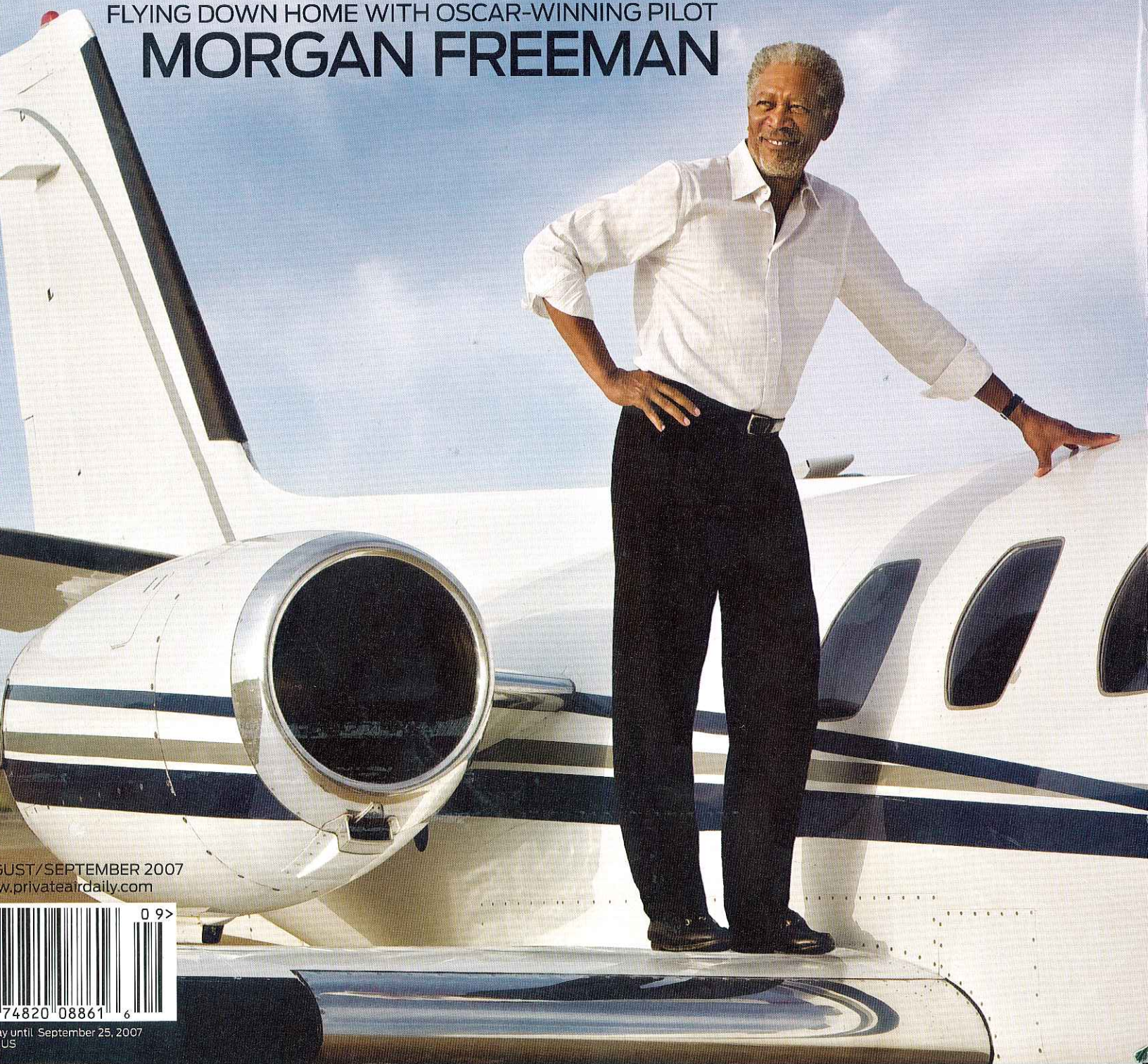
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FLYING DOWN HOME WITH OSCAR-WINNING PILOT

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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2007
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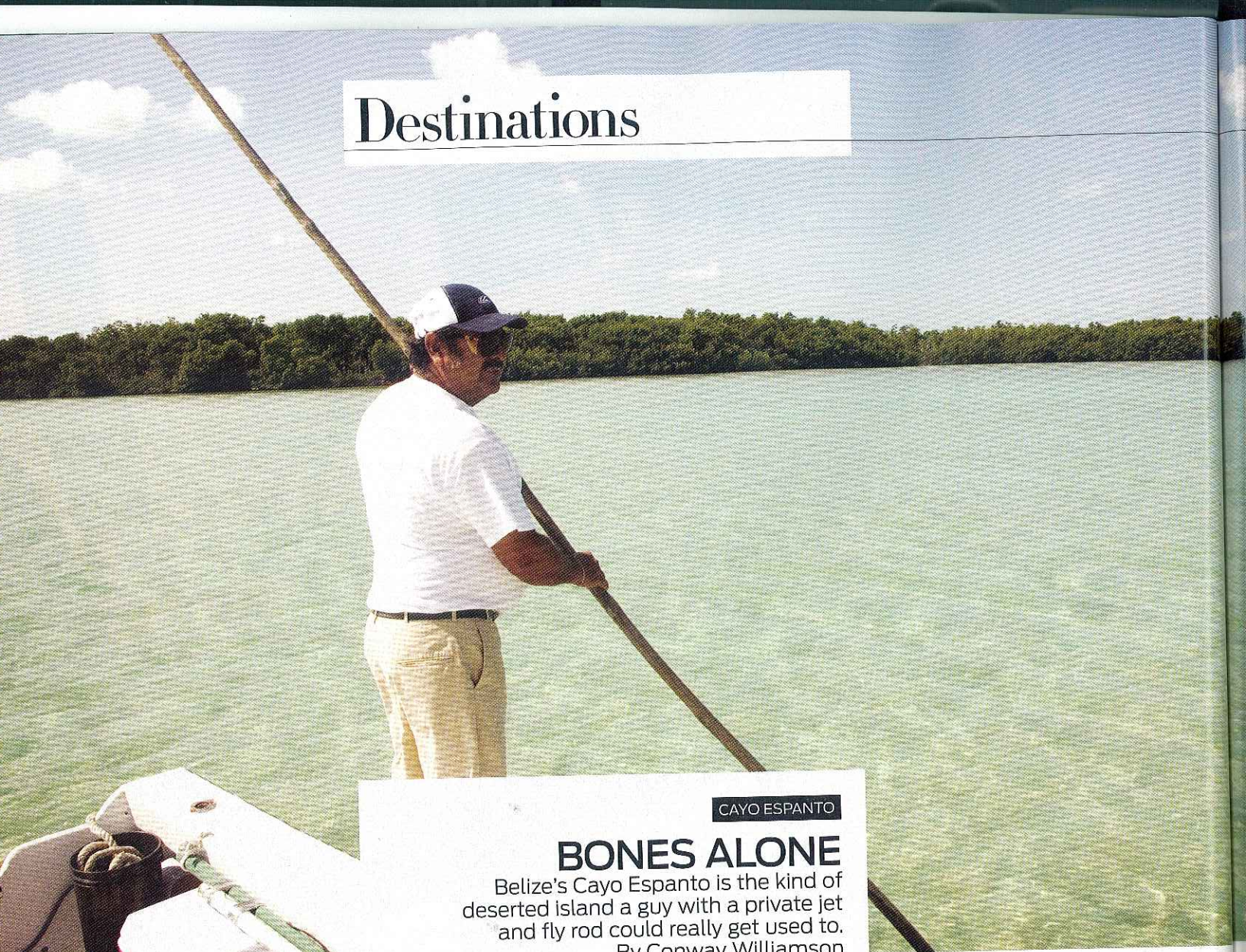
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US

Destinations

A photograph of a tropical destination. In the foreground, a wooden pier or walkway leads towards two small, rustic wooden huts with gabled roofs. Behind the huts is a dense line of palm trees and other tropical vegetation. The sky is filled with large, dramatic clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is serene and remote.

"WHAT MAKES CAYO ESPANTO UNIQUE
IS ITS ABILITY TO LOOK DESERTED
YET HAVE EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO
LIVE BETTER THAN 99.999 PERCENT
OF THE HUMAN RACE." PAGE 70

Destinations



CAYO ESPANTO

BONES ALONE

Belize's Cayo Espanto is the kind of deserted island a guy with a private jet and fly rod could really get used to.
By Conway Williamson

S

ince I was around 8 years old, I have had a fascination with life on a deserted island. It was that year, as a third grader, when I dressed up as Robinson Crusoe, taking first prize in my school's Halloween costume contest. Daniel Defoe's story had hooked me, and ever since I've been preoccupied with the idea of living in a bamboo hut and drinking from a coconut shell.

Now, though, as I've grown accustomed to life's luxuries, I'm a little less interested in the more rugged aspects of castaway life. Don't get me wrong — I still want to fall off the map and disappear for a while, reemerging in the real world only after a thorough bout of rest and beard-growing. But in the current iteration of my fantasy, the weather would, of course, be perfect year-round and I'd need world-class bonefishing just outside my front door. To really top it off, I'd also need a world-class chef preparing gourmet meals for me, served seaside at my open-air villa by a personal, full-time houseman (or housewoman, but that's a slightly different fantasy), who is completely at my service 24 hours a day.

Just a little deserted island with life's most basic necessities



CASTING AWAY

Local bonefishing Buddha Mr. Jose maneuvers his skiff toward another prized spot.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CONWAY WILLIAMSON

... that's the dream. You can imagine my surprise, then, when I recently learned that such a place actually exists, and it's just off the coast of mainland Belize, an easy three-hour flight from Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport.

After a little due diligence confirmed that this was, indeed, the very place I'd been dreaming about all these years, I called my dad, who happens to share my love of luxury roughing it. Eight seconds of difficult persuasion later, he was in and sworn to secrecy. We then coined the name of our mission: "Operation Shipwreck" had begun.

WE'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES

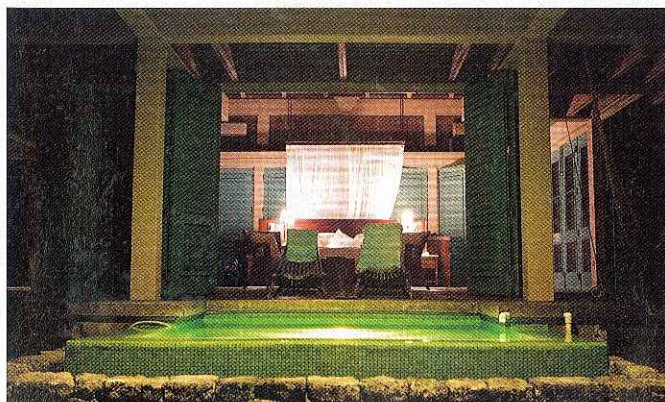
Ten years ago, to the few people in the world who knew of its existence, Cayo Espanto was just three acres of overgrown scrub and sand, a short boat ride from Ambergris Caye, Belize. But when a North Carolina native named Jeff Gram stumbled across the island while vacationing on Ambergris, the lightbulb went on. Gram, it turns out, was a kindred spirit to Pops and me. (His childhood inspiration was not Crusoe but that other cultural touchstone for our ilk, Gilligan.) And once he'd amassed the means, he hired engineers and architects and set about turning our reverie of a retreat for high-end castaways into an exquisitely designed reality.

Getting to Cayo Espanto requires flying into Belize City (MZBZ), where you clear customs before either continuing on to the San Pedro Municipal Airstrip (SPR) on Ambergris

(followed by a five-minute trip to Cayo via boat) or just heading straight to the island on a helicopter.

Either way, first impressions are indelible. As we circled over the triangular patch of lush greenery, I could already feel my pulse slowing. By the time the warm salt water splashed my face as our skiff skittered over the flats toward the island, I was pondering what it would take to settle my affairs back in New York. I wondered if a forwarding address of "Paradise" was sufficient to receive all my mail. Dad simply added his approval. "Yep," he said. "This'll work."

What makes Cayo Espanto unique is its ability to simultaneously look completely deserted yet offer everything you need to live better than 99.999 percent of the rest of the human race. Somehow, the resort Gram has constructed has all the amenities and services you'd expect from the finest five-star Caribbean lodging with none of the foolishness; it has no restaurants or tiki bars, no shuffleboard courts or group activities. As we walked along the island's tree-lined paths, the only thing we noticed were hints of hidden villas, the occasional staff member rushing a tray of tropical drinks to an unseen guest and the overwhelming chatter of the local birds.



There are five open-air cottages, each tucked away in its own secluded part of the island. Although it is possible to bump into the other guests, you have to work at it. The only true interaction we had with anyone was with our houseman, who checked in to see if we needed anything (he was also reachable at any time via walkie-talkie), and with the chef, who read us the options for our next meal.

Once we had settled into our well-appointed villa, sitting in all the chairs and lying on our beds to make it feel more lived-in, we headed to the end of our private dock, otherwise known as Operation Shipwreck's main transfer hub. Belize is home to the world's largest living barrier reef, so the scuba is pretty spectacular. (While we were there, we heard about some intrepid resort guests who went diving with whale sharks.) You can be picked up by helicopter at the island's helipad and taken over to the jungles on the mainland to explore Mayan ruins. You can also kayak and sail. But my co-conspirator and I were at Cayo Espanto for one reason and one reason only: to fly-fish some of the best small-permit and bonefishing waters on the planet.

For the well-rounded angler, the hardest part is deciding what *kind* of fishing experience you're up for. You can test your skill and patience

DESERTED FIVE-STAR

Your only other human contact will be with your fishing guide, personal chef and the housemen reachable from the villas, shown here, via walkie-talkie.

Destinations

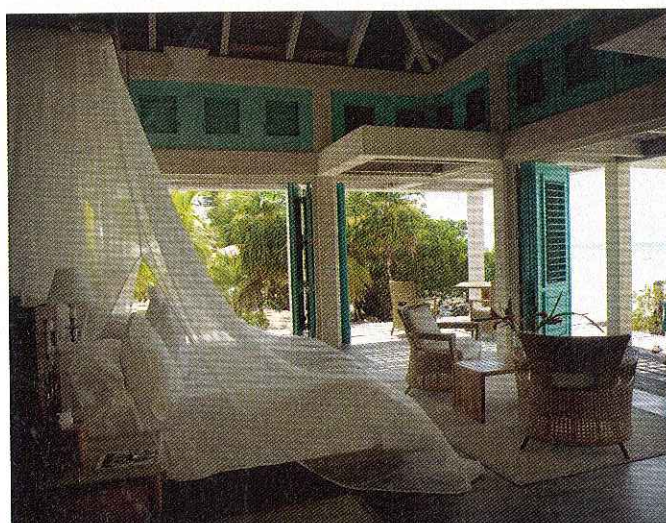
fly-fishing for permits in the flats, or you can head farther offshore for some light-tackle exercise. The crystal-clear water and the 8-weight fly-rods in our bags, though, put us in a mind for sight-fishing. The better the sight, after all, the bigger the fight.

You'll recall that in my fantasy, I could bonefish right outside my villa door, and, indeed, that's how Dad and I started until "Mr. Jose," the shaman-like local guide who made our acquaintance that first afternoon, informed us that the fish close to shore are "wise to the ways" of fly-fishing guests. (Just because *you* can't see any people doesn't mean the fish can't.) Able to recognize talent when we see it, Dad and I immediately entrusted the rest of our calendar to Mr. Jose, who didn't disappoint us, spending the next several days leading us on an island-hopping tour of his favorite bonefishing spots in and around the dozens of surrounding uninhabited atolls.

While this approach made for maximal *Fishing With Jose*-style action, due to Belize's strict catch-and-release policy every last one of our toothsome specimens lived to fight another day. If you're looking for some more tangible evidence of your conquests, head for deeper waters and try for grouper or snapper. Whatever you reel in can be expertly plated for dinner that night. Tip: We found the best dessert to be the superb local Belikin beer, to be enjoyed at the end of your dock while counting stars and solving the world's problems.

As our stay at Cayo Espanto drew to a close, we started to wonder if we would be able to adapt to life back on the mainland. Beyond the obvious aesthetic of Gram's creation, what really stood out was its service. From the moment we arrived, nothing had been overlooked. Fishing guides and staff outnumber guests two to one, and their sole mission, it seemed, was making sure we had everything we could possibly need, even if we hadn't realized we needed it. By the time we grudgingly left Cayo Espanto, we resembled a couple of very well-fed Robinson Crusoes and, just like a recent addition to the castaway canon — Jack from the final episode of this season's *Lost* — we're already plotting our return. ■

I WONDERED IF A FORWARDING ADDRESS OF "PARADISE" WAS SUFFICIENT. DAD SIMPLY NODDED HIS APPROVAL. "YEP," HE SAID. "THIS'LL DO."



LOGBOOK

Belize City is the only gateway into Belize for private and commercial aircraft. After landing, private aircraft may continue on to other national airstrips depending on the size of plane and runway, after clearing customs, immigration and air-traffic services.

AIRPORT Phillip Goldson International Airport

DISTANCE FROM RESORT

15 minutes

FBO Aero Dispatch Services

(aerodispa@btinternet.com; contact

Rudolph Coye, 501-225-2454)

FAA DESIGNATION MZBZ

CONTACT RADIO

FREQUENCY Goldson

Approach, 121.0 megahertz

(after September 2007,

Goldson Radar, same

frequency)

RUNWAY SIZE 7,100-by-150-

foot

PEAK TRAFFIC SEASON

December-April

Private aircraft heading to San Pedro after clearing customs, immigration and air-traffic services in Belize City, must state their intentions. Daylight operations only.

AIRPORT San Pedro Municipal Airstrip

DISTANCE FROM RESORT

Five minutes

FBO None in San Pedro

FAA DESIGNATION SPR

(airport designation only)

CONTACT RADIO

FREQUENCY Common

Broadcast Frequency, 122.8

megahertz

RUNWAY SIZE 3,500-by-60-

foot

PEAK TRAFFIC SEASON

December-June

MILES FROM ORDINARY:

(Clockwise from top) a villa interior; the local Belikin longnecks; the San Pedro airstrip; breakfast.