

Escape to BELIZE

With only seven villas on a remote island, Belize's Cayo Espanto is redefining resort exclusivity

Text by NICOLAS STECHER

After your gleaming G650 comes to a skidding stop on the blacktop of Philip S. W. Goldson Airport in Belize City, a small team will meet you on the tarmac and usher you to a helicopter waiting nearby. A scant 20 minutes later, skimming over emerald islands, remote beaches and turquoise Caribbean water below, a small tropical key will materialize—the kind filed in your memory banks under “desert island.” Soon the chopper descends onto a green patch of grass where paradise awaits: a white sand, palm-studded Xanadu of solace dubbed Cayo Espanto.

The brainchild of entrepreneur Jeff Gram, Cayo Espanto—aka Ghost Key—opened in 1999 with only a trio of casitas spread out over three acres. In the two decades since it has grown to seven villas, each nestled away in its own corner of the island, and shaded by leafy palms and knotted mangrove trees to offer an unheard-of level of privacy. There is no common area here at Cayo Espanto; there's no lobby or restaurant, or even a bar to belly up to.

No wonder A-listers like Jennifer Lawrence, Bill Gates, Robert De Niro and Tiger Woods are rumored to have called Cayo Espanto home. Local gossip whispers Bradley Cooper and his buddy Leonardo DiCaprio rented out the entire island during the pandemic just for themselves and their girls. “I definitely like the privacy, I wanted that for personal reasons,” explains Gram of his vision from day one. “I like to interact with people and have fun, but I want to be able to get away with a special person and feel as though I am the only one on the island.”



This level of solitude has always been exigent for a certain pedigree of folk, but since the global pandemic it's now paramount for many a wary, well-heeled traveler. Gram's concept was prescient, especially given the circumstances. Consider Belize 30 years ago: the former British colony—one straddling both Central American and Caribbean cultures—was even more primitive then, with materials and skilled workmanship hard to come by. There were no five-star resorts anywhere in the English-speaking nation; Francis Ford Coppola had yet to build his famed Turtle Inn resort there. When Gram purchased the feral island, it was mainly swampland.

“You'll notice how we did the landscaping, you really don't see any other people,” notes Gram, highlighting the 300-plus coconut, poisonwood, and almond trees they brought in for shade and shelter, while consciously working around the gorgeous knotted mangrove trees already there. “It's very important for people to feel as though it's just the two of them on their own private island.” “The ground was to be left as natural sand—no shrubs or ground cover and definitely no walkways,” adds the resort's landscape architect James Hyatt of the initial design he and Gram imagined. “We wanted the guests to feel like they had come upon a natural, idyllic island.”

According to Hyatt, the villas' strong pyramidal roofs reference



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAYO ESPANTO

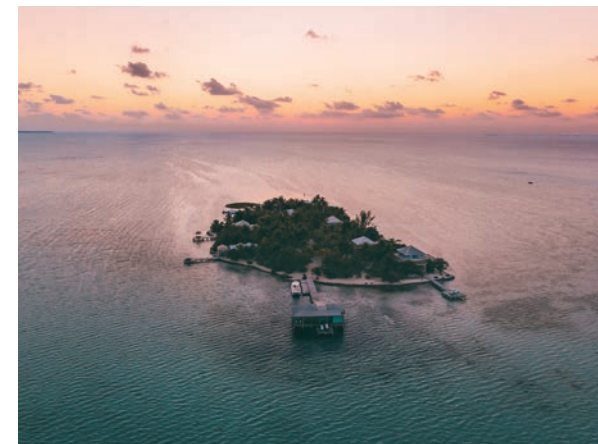


primitive island huts across the world, and collectively are meant to recreate the appearance of a small littoral village. Villa walls open nearly 360 degrees to erase any separation between man-made luxury and mother nature, and in concert with the tall ceilings help create a great sense of interior space. “Definitely ADHD created Cayo Espanto,” laughs Gram. “Nobody else would be crazy enough to do it.”

These eggshell-blue villas make ideal epicenters for long, almost endless hours of doing nothing. Soaking in the Belizean rays from your private dock, feeling the warm breeze blowing in from the west and the hot kiss of sun on your skin. Minutes turn to hours, mornings blend into evenings, delirious and long and in slow motion. After months of simmering anxiety in the global zeitgeist, this type of luxurious indolence is a priceless commodity.

Perhaps the world was devolving into chaos all around us, we knew nothing. Ignorance—alongside a well-made piña colada with a Myer’s Original Dark Rum floater—is bliss. The languid, lazy days are punctuated by world-class meals, the only intermittent entertainment breaking the time apart. Whenever you awake, simply press the walkie talkie and tell your butler—each villa has two—your choice for breakfast.

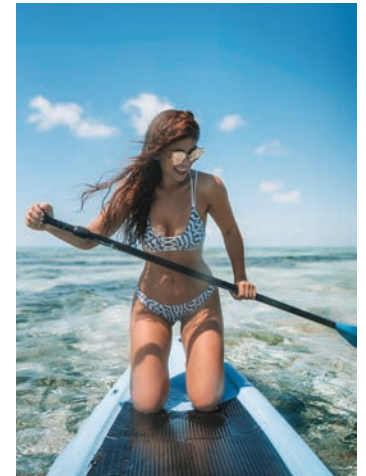
Despite Cayo Espanto’s seclusion and island limitations, the team



does a superb job moving locations every night to lend each dinner a unique ambience, one of the rare clues that separates Monday from Friday. One evening supper is plated by your small private pool, the other on the dock, or perhaps under a giant curling mangrove. Our last sunset we dined by the grass helipad, lit up by small candles and tiki torches. Grilled grouper on polenta, shrimp skewers and ribeye steak were served, all finished with a flowing lava cake of gushing chocolate, accompanied by a dram of Laphroaig. At the end of the meal our servers lit Chinese wishing lanterns and set them adrift over the Caribbean. My girl’s flew high into the horizon until it disappeared into the star-lit heavens; mine went up in flames almost immediately and plummeted into the dark water. An auspicious beginning to 2021.

Of course should you tire of sinking in your pool sipping Campari Americanos all day, there’s no lack of distractions. If you so desire, one can paddleboard, kayak, snorkel and fly fish directly from your deck. We scuba dove the second-largest barrier reef in the world, and on another day took a private yacht to fish and dive for fresh langostinos, which we then grilled on a nearby deserted island for lunch. There are also helicopter tours over the famed Great Blue Hole, and day trips to Mayan ruins.

But never mind all that. We quickly realized the best activity of all is not doing a damn thing. And should you require anything to help you not do it—salt-rimmed Herradura Palomas, a deep-tissue massage, or a couple plates of sushi—your butler is only a walkie talkie blip away.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAYO ESPANTO