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Ka'ana: A Belizean Sense of Place

December 11, 2009 by Melanie

2 Comments

Filed under Belize, Central America, The Americas



All our favorite trips have the same thing in common: We return home with the sense that something foreign has now become familiar. Staying at **Ka'ana Boutique Resort**, with its focus on sustainability and cultural authenticity, helped me feel this way about the entire country of **Belize**.



Ka'ana's La Ceiba Restaurant

Set in the jungly Cayo District near the scruffy, bustling town of San Ignacio, **Ka'ana is the first luxury spa resort in Western Belize**. Open since 2007, this little slice of paradise features everything you'd expect in a swanky stay: High-threadcount sheets, a spa, an elegant restaurant, even a wine cellar. However, with its committed staff of young locals, casual vibe and eco-friendly agenda, it feels more like a landed estate that's been returned to everyday Belizeans.

I'd attribute this impression to the passion of Belizean resort director Ian Lizzaraga. At Ka'ana, he's eager to create an environment defined by his country.

For instance, the **pottery, jewelry and woodwork** for sale in the lobby gift shop is all made by Belizean artisans. Paintings in the rooms depict **mystical Mayan scenes**, reflecting the resort's proximity to the **sacred site of Xunantunich** (zshoo-NAHN-too-neeoh). The grounds are landscaped with (helpfully labeled) **indigenous trees and plants**. Several spa products feature the country's **exquisite chocolate**. Ian's even been toying with the idea of replacing Ka'ana's present, cumbersome wooden room keychains (which could easily double as weapons) with a small MP3 player, stocked with a **full spectrum of Belizean music**.



My casita at Ka'ana

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At Ka'ana's restaurant, *La Ceiba* (named for a huge tree sacred to the Mayans), chef Sean Kuylen creates elegant dishes that reflect both Belize in particular and Central America in general. **The resort's gorgeous organic garden** allows him to keep much of his cuisine local in the extreme, but the proteins are also sustainably farmed. Menu standouts are jerk chicken with cumin yogurt, salmon cooked on a cedar plank, and the bright bite of lemon meringue pie, but be sure not to miss the grilled jalapeño cheese made by Mennonite farmers in the Belizean north.



La Ceiba Restaurant and their cedar-plank salmon (R photo by Almost Fearless)

Also, **don't skip the cocktails.** (Unless non-alcoholic is more your style, in which case you should go for their fresh-from-the-garden coolers in flavors like ginger, mint or hibiscus.) The bar here manages to be slick, modern and cozy at the same time, and makes a tangerine mojito that's a vacation in itself. Or, try a spot of *nance* (*nahn-cheh*), a mellow brown sugar liqueur made by fermenting one *nance* berry for months in the bottle; hard to find at many resorts or even at the airport duty-free, Ian introduced this sweet aperitif to our **travel bloggers group** as an everyday drink in Belize.



Nance in the Ka'ana wine cellar - Photo by Almost Fearless

Booze aside...**some of my favorite moments in Belize happened at Ka'ana.** One afternoon, I treated myself to a float in the palm-fringed infinity pool, a soft rain erasing my memories of drought back home in L.A. Later in my *casita*, I moved my still-drying sneakers only to disturb a tiny frog, olive green with black speckles. Carefully, I scooped him up between a water glass and a small dish (that had recently contained handmade Mayan chocolates) and set him down outdoors on the rain-slick front porch. Off in the tangled trees, his brethren could be heard croaking the song of a healthy ecosystem.



Ka'ana's pool and my beloved "room frog"

Ka'ana aims to keep this song going. In addition to using **low-energy lightbulbs, recycled paper products and local hardwoods**, the resort now employs a Sustainable Adventure Tourism Director. Eager to take guests to parts of the nearby Mopan River and surrounding broadleaf forest they might otherwise miss, the SATD also aims to encourage replanting of the area's over-harvested forest corridors, giving wildlife a chance to move more freely between habitats. A resort plan is forming that would allow guests to make a lasting contribution to the community by planting some of these trees themselves.

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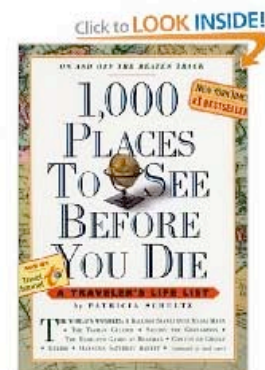
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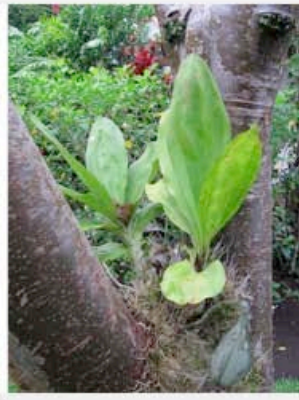
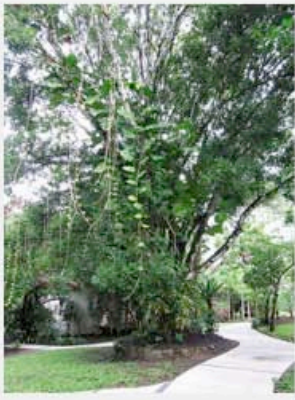
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Ka'ana's landscaping and organic garden

I loved being a sponsored guest at Ka'ana, and hope to return someday in a spirit of pure romance. Who knows...maybe in December 2012, in honor of *Mayan Doomsday*. Wouldn't mind one bit if this was the last place we ever saw on Earth.

See also

Xunantunich: Unearthing Belize

Ka'ana Boutique Resort's Un-Belize-able Organic Garden

(guest post on Gardens to Tables)

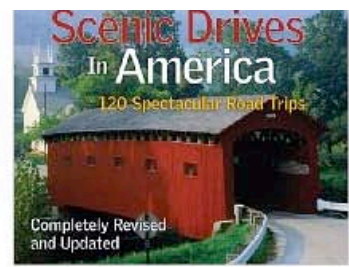
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