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11/19/09 at 03:11  
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## Authentic, Culturally Appropriate and Unique Tourism: Does it exist?

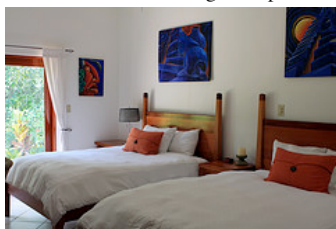


We were having dinner with Ian, the one of the owners of [Ka'ana](#), a luxury spa resort in the Cayo District of Belize. He was talking about his vision of transforming not only the food, but every detail—to the tours offered (more culture, less glitz), to food sourcing (think local), to community involvement (replanting an important area), even to the type of soaps they offer to their customers—to become not just a fancy spa resort that attracts well-heeled foreigners (although that is the intent) but to actually define the authentic Belizean experience.

He used those words again and again, “Authentic, culturally appropriate and unique” and it’s hard not to share his excitement. One of the things that had disappointed me in my first visit to Belize, eight months prior, was the distinct lack of “Belizean” flavor. Of course, I had spent my time on Caye Caulker, not exactly the least touristy place available, but when I went into restaurants, it was more American/Italian/French food and none of those local dishes I had hoped to find. The activities were mainly water sports. I had come from Guatemala, where you lived the culture, to Belize, where they produced this tourist experience for you.



This time, at Ka'ana, we ate cochinita pibil tacos, a pulled pork taco with spicy sauce and pico de gallo. It was the first time I had anything in Belize that I couldn't find back home. There were no expat waiters, nearly everyone seemed (at least to my eyes) to be local. As Ian described his long term plans, I wondered... is this type of



tourism possible? Can you have 500 thread count sheets and learn how to make Mayan chocolate, like you would if you stayed with a local family? Can you spend the day at the spa, but know that the products used support local businesses and profits are helping to restore a forest? As an independent traveler, these values appeal to me, but would someone paying full price for the Ka'ana experience want something more than to be rubbed down and pampered? Is the only way to go “authentic” to forgo comfort? Can luxury and culturally appropriate go hand in hand?

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After the tacos, I had the sere, a coconut based soup with plantains and fresh fish. I was taking notes about the food. I was listening carefully to Ian. I love the idea of it, to give people both worlds. In a few years, I'll have to check in with the folks at Ka'ana to see how it has worked out. Right now they're offering a [2012 doomsday package](#) (visit now and visit again in 2012 when the Mayan calendar runs out) which includes: "The immersion into the Mayan culture will include intimate interactions with the people of a village in Southern Belize. Guests will become familiar with the age-old practices of washing clothes in a local river, cooking a meal on an open fire hearth, learning to play the Marimba or Mayan harp, tribal dancing, basket making, and story-telling with a village elder." How many luxury hotels offer packages like that? If it works and gets adopted by others, can you imagine? Instead of San Pedro being a smaller version of Cancun, you'd have the families learning about Mayan culture and reef ecology. Luxury hotels would focus on products produced locally. The best way to make money wouldn't be to sell knick-knacks on the beach, but to become an artisan.

Truly, it would define sustainable tourism.

I'm curious, have any of you seen this model in action? Any ideas about how well this works, or what it takes to be successful and local?

(Disclosure: I didn't pay for my stay at Ka'ana, I was a guest of the Belize Tourism Board as part of last week's blogger trip)

3 Comments on "Authentic, Culturally Appropriate and Unique Tourism: Does it exist?"



By [James Martin](#) 11/19/09 at 03:55

All you have to worry about tasks like clothes washing cameras stuck to their eyes

[James Martin's last blog](#)



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By [Bob Redpath](#) 11/19/09 at 04:45

When I first visited San Pedro in 1972, I believe there were only two hotels on the island. We went there for many years, and watched as the island grew. Now, as you note, it's a smaller version of Cancun. There's probably not much left of the local fishing industry today. When I was a kid visiting San Pedro, a local fisherman would take a day off and take us out on his boat. At the end of the day, back at the dock, we watched him or even helped him clean them, and then that night for dinner our hotel cooked our catch for us. In the evenings my parents might find themselves in a local bar while us kids ran up and down the sandy street or the beach with the local kids. Maybe we'd go to the "Teatro Arenas" to see a Spanish language movie or to a dance in the center of town.

The life cycle of a tourist destination is interesting. Once a destination becomes "discovered" it follows a trajectory to becoming a more homogenized tourist attraction (which is of course good for the local economy), but something of the culture is lost. The "local" feeling might even have to be manufactured to get some semblance of it back.

About 10 years ago my wife and I went to Maruba, a spa resort on the mainland of Belize. They were doing a good job of keeping an emphasis on "local". The products they used in their spa, in their building construction, and in their restaurant, were all local. They're still in business. Maybe it's working for them?

I love the concept of locally biased and sustainable tourism. It sounds like Ka'ana is working hard to get it right — to make it authentic. When done wrong it can feel like Disneyland.

[Bob Redpath's last blog ..You Say Porridge, I Say Oatmeal](#)



By [Chris](#) 11/19/09 at 09:22

I am currently in Italy, the "agriturismo" here are places that offers genuine food with ingredients from their backyards: basically the agriturismos are also farms. Some agriturismos also offer tours where you can visit farms and see how the locals run the family business the same way as years ago. In this way they are self efficient and they involve locals in the family business.

[Chris's last blog ..How to go RTW when you hate flying?](#)

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