

DREAMSCAPES

TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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Where does one even begin to explore this Central American country where English is the official language?

Our adventure begins with Ian Lizarraga, co-owner of the Ka'ana Boutique Resort, who happily escorts us through the Old Belize Museum and the Belize Zoo en route to San Ignacio located in the Cayo District in Western Belize. The 48-kilometre trip to Ka'ana takes us through three ecosystems: the coastal ecosystem made up of swamp and mangroves gives way to savannahs with pine trees and scrub until we reach the Maya Mountain Range where the rain-forest takes hold. Ka'ana sits just four kilometres beyond the town of San Ignacio.

ELEGANT RETREAT

Described as thatched-roof, rustic elegance in a jungle setting, Ka'ana—Yucatec Maya for “heavenly place”—is aptly named. This 15-room, high-end boutique hotel offers everything guests desire: excellent cuisine created by Belizean-born executive chef Sean Kuylen; an impressive wine cellar; spa treatments; a pool; an eclectic collection of Belizean artwork; free Internet access; and luxurious guest quarters complete with mini bar, coffee-maker, TV, iPod stations, bathrobes and large washrooms. Soothing colours, textures and materials throughout the resort were carefully selected to create a friendly, easy-going sort of place.

By 7 p.m. we're in the wine cellar sampling *Craboo*, a local liqueur, with fellow guests. Later, chef Kuylen dazzles

us with his legendary culinary expertise: conch *sere* soup, a variety of appetizers, an ever-softener beef entrée, followed by an array of scrumptious desserts accompanied by a chocolate martini.

INTO THE JUNGLE

Ka'ana Boutique Resort is at the centre of the Maya civilization and Xunantunich is only minutes away. To reach this ancient city, we take a rope-tethered, hand-over-hand ferry across the Mopan River, then climb to the top of the intricately carved, 37-metre-tall temple. Nearby, howler monkeys screech angrily from the treetops, warning us that this is their domain.

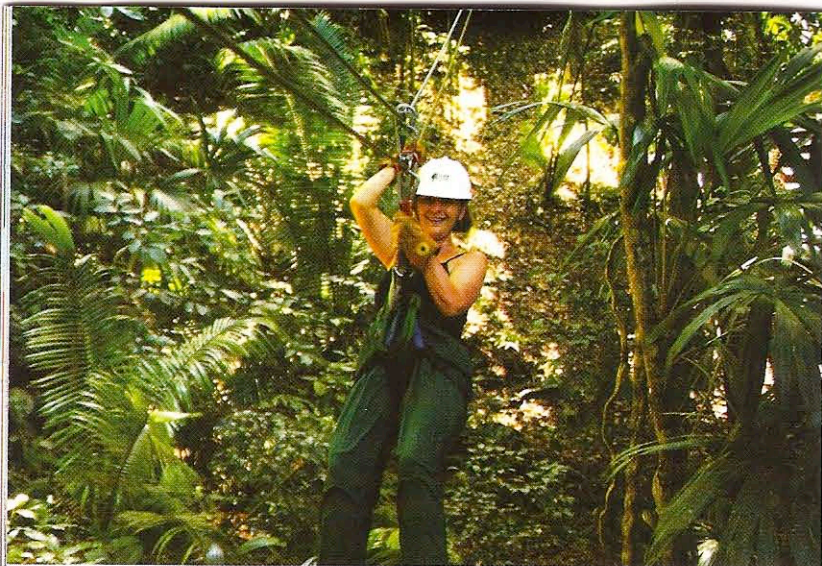
Midday finds us at the Jaguar Paw Lodge for our zip-lining adventure. We've forgotten our insect repellent, an opportunity not overlooked by mammoth, blood-thirsty mosquitoes. Thankfully, there are no cruise ships in port today and, therefore, no lineups. Following a very quick briefing, we are leaping off wooden platforms and swinging like monkeys from cables strung across the dense jungle canopy. Although Jungle Paw also offers the “jungle tumble,”

opposite, left: Casa Ventanas, an intimate and romantic over-the-water bungalow on Cayo Espanto, is the most popular accommodation on the island. Cayo Espanto

top left: Located on Ambergris Caye, the beachfront resort of Tranquility Bay features 10 individual cabins. V&V Hospitality & Media Services

top right: Our villa at Ka'ana Boutique Resort features luxurious guest quarters complete with mini bar, coffee-maker, TV, iPod stations, bathrobes and large washrooms. V&V Hospitality & Media Services

above: The Maya temple known as Xunantunich is just minutes from Ka'ana Boutique Resort. Tony Rath Photography



Zip-line through the Belizean jungle at Jaguar Paw Lodge. V&V Hospitality & Media Services

A HOTEL EXPERIENCE CAN DEFINE AN ENTIRE TRIP.

a thrilling ride inside a giant inflatable ball, we opt for a slow cave-tubing expedition that has us floating down a river on rubber tubes through pitch-black caves.

Back at Ka'ana, seeking relief from our jungle bites, we gleefully accept an invitation to partake in a wine-tasting session and settle on a bottle of Santa Margarita Pinot Grigio, hoping the grape elixir will distract us from our itchy welts.

TRANQUILITY DEFINED

It's a quick flight from Belize City to San Pedro, a funky village on Ambergris Caye, off the coast of Belize, where we board a motorboat for a high-speed transfer to Tranquility Bay, a resort developed by a group of 21 investors who use it as their private playground. Perfect for families, scuba divers and small wedding parties, this beachfront resort offers a variety of water sports and diving excursions to Belize's world-renowned Hol Chan Marine Reserve.

A swath of fine white sand beach presents the only barrier between 10 oceanfront two-storey cabins and the gentle Caribbean Sea. Each villa consists of two bedrooms, a washroom and a sitting room. Guests can help themselves to kayaks, sailboats and snorkelling equipment at no charge, paddle out to the nearby reef teeming with marine life, tie the kayak to a buoy and snorkel to their hearts' content. Hardcore divers rejoice in the fact that one-, two- and three-tank excursions depart daily from the fully equipped dive shop just steps from their front porch. Next door, the dockside Tackle Box Sea Bar welcomes all for meals, refreshments, camaraderie and relaxation between scheduled activities.

BAREFOOT CHIC

A hotel experience can define an entire trip and elevate a mere trip to a travel experience. Cayo Espanto does it with panache.

Chances are you won't find Cayo Espanto on any map. Nothing prepared us for this top-secret private isle that delivers the ultimate in service and seclusion. Former castaways have included Tiger Woods, Leo DiCaprio, Penelope Cruz and Robert De Niro. Not bad for an island once known as "Haunted Island."

In 1998, real estate executive Jeff Gram realized a lifelong

desire to own a private island and opened this ultra-private resort consisting of six secluded villas that accommodate a maximum of 14 guests serviced by a staff of 25.

Upon arrival, the island staff—including resident manager Tessie Tenaco and our personal houseman Obed and runner Lester—greet us with refreshing cold towels and frosty drinks. Obed escorts us to Casa Olita, our one-bedroom turquoise and white villa, which, like all others, is strategically positioned to ensure maximum privacy. Front and centre under a cathedral ceiling, like a colossal dedication to the goddess of love, an enormous teak bed is draped in gossamer netting. Our new digs include a private dock, plunge pool, indoor and outdoor showers, storage galore, a refrigerator stocked with our favourite beverages and an armoire that conceals satellite TV and stereo systems. Even insect repellent and suntan lotion are provided. The "walls" are in fact folding shutters that open on three sides to reveal panoramic views of the Caribbean Sea and let in the sounds of the sea.

Morning, noon and night, Obed and Lester cater to our every wish. We—and our villa—are their sole concerns. Every afternoon head chef Patrick Houghton and Obed drop by for serious consultations about food and wine selections for that evening. Come 7 p.m., Obed and Lester prepare our table for a lamp-lit dinner. "Where do you wish to dine tonight?" Obed asks. "In the villa? Out by the pool? On the dock?" We could get used to this.

Difficult as it may be to venture away from this enchanting sanctuary, underwater safaris and excursions to Maya ruins and wildlife sanctuaries are easily arranged. Golfers find a nicely maintained course on nearby Caye Chapel and guests can always take the seven-minute boat transfer to San Pedro for shopping and a drink or decadent chocolate dessert at Mango's.

Jeff Gram says he built Cayo Espanto as "the perfect getaway." I say, "Mission exceeded!" ■

TRAVEL PLANNER

For more information, visit or call:

Belize Tourism Board:
travelbelize.org; 1-800-624-0686

Ka'ana Boutique Resort:
kaanabelize.com; 1-877-522-6221

Tranquility Bay Resort:
tranquilitybayresort.com;
1-888-843-2293

Cayo Espanto: aprivateisland.com;
1-888-666-4282

Jaguar Paw Lodge: jaguarpaw.com;
1-877-624-3770

Old Belize Museum: oldbelize.com
Belize Zoo: belizezoo.org