

GETAWAY

COSMIC BALANCE IN BELIZE

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY KATIE DEJOMA

After a couple days relaxing on the beach and snorkeling in aquamarine waters from our thatched huts at Ramon's Village in the island town of San Pedro, we are in a 13-seat Cessna on our way to discover the interior of Belize.



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Most Americans stick to the islands and coast of this small Central American country to dive its famous reef, the second longest in the world. But with English as the official language of this former British colony, it is easy to explore the exotic interior as well — linguistically anyway.

From Belize City it's a two-hour drive northwest into the Cayo District. The landscape changes abruptly from savannah shrubs to jungle trees. We pass Mayan school children, the T'Wain Shopping Center, and Mennonite men in horse carts, attesting to the diversity of this area where most people speak three or four languages. Speed bumps near homes slow down an already cautious drive along the final stretch of gravel road.

Allspice trees fragrant as pumpkin pie.

Thatched cottages of varying sizes and shapes scattered on the hillside above the banks of the Macal River welcome us to the Lodge at Chas Creek, a private 365-acre nature reserve in the foothills of the Maya Mountains.

After settling in, we take a guided tour up a steep incline behind the cottages to discover allspice trees fragrant as pumpkin pie and the "tourist tree" whose peeling red bark — like a tourist peeling after a sunburn — is used to cure poison ivy. At the top of the hill, blue morpha butterflies are



studied at the butterfly farm, and the Chaa Creek Natural History Center educates visitors on local wildlife, insects, archeology, and Mayan culture.

Chaa Creek offers a variety of activities for guests from horseback riding and mountain biking to tubing down the river. But its popularity is primarily due to its proximity to the Mayan ruins at Xunantunich, our destination the next morning.

A hand-cranked ferry transports us across the Mopan River, where El Castillo towers over the excavated portion of six plazas, surrounded by more than 26 temples and palaces, most of which are still buried in the jungle.

The 130-foot pyramid is an easy climb as pyramids go, with stairways winding around to reach the platform on top. Sitting down to rest and commune with the 1,800-year-old stones while enjoying the view across the border to Guatemala, I feel an amazing sense of groundedness. I sense magnetic energy flowing in waves through the structure to the earth below. Our guide points out that I am sitting at the energetic center around which the temple was built. Cosmic!

Lunch is at duPlooy's Lodge, a few miles up the Macal River from Chaa Creek. As we dine on nouveau-local cuisine on a wooden deck in the rainforest, a collared aracari snacks on watermelon from a bird feeder nearby. We can't resist a stroll through the Belize Botanic Gardens, which started as a hobby for the lodge owners and has become an educational tool for local schools, showcasing exotic plants from all over the world.

Rather than return via the bumpy road, we borrow a canoe from duPlooy's and paddle lazily down the river back to Chaa Creek Lodge, watching the yellow-breasted social flycatchers flutter and egrets preen.

The spa at Chaa Creek is the perfect end to a day of physical exertion. Ana's massage is a dance choreographed to the strains of New Age harp music. With the rainforest canopy as a backdrop, I give in completely to the rhythmic motions of her healing hands soothing away the aches of the day, leaving me completely refreshed. Jungle nirvana. ■

BELIZE INFORMATION

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