

Visiting the “Forgotten Land” of Southern Belize

BY VANESSA ORR

There's nothing quite like waking up with a start, realizing that you're under mosquito netting in the middle of a jungle, and that there's only a thatched roof above you to protect you from some really angry monkeys. And while this may not sound like everyone's idea of the perfect vacation, I highly recommend spending a week in an eco-lodge in southern Belize for an unsurpassed, once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The howler monkeys, which by the way are considered the loudest land animal in the world, start their symphony at about 3 a.m., with the noise rising in volume until it seems like their cries will crack the sky. The good news is that they're just defending their territory from other monkeys; the bad news is that those monkeys will answer back in the same ear-splitting barks and roars until somehow, the matter is settled. What you probably won't believe is that after an hour or so, when your heart has stopped thumping out of your chest and your blood pressure has returned to normal, you will learn to sleep through these tirades as if it was just the neighbor's dog barking next door.

Last spring, I traveled to the Cotton Tree Lodge in the Toledo District of Belize, the southernmost and most remote district in the small, Central American country. While northern Belize is better known for its beaches and scuba-diving opportunities, southern Belize, called “the forgotten land” by many Toledans, is just beginning to welcome tourists to this far lesser-traveled area. But while it may be remote, it is well worth the effort to get there.

Sheltered under the arms of a massive cotton tree (hence the name) and on the shores of the Moho River in Punta Gorda, the lodge itself is beautiful, a round building crafted out of local woods, topped by a high thatched roof that lets in the air and light. Its founder, Chris Crowell, was sailing up the Moho River when he spotted the tree located on a farm for sale, and decided that he needed to buy it. Ten years later, he and business partner Jeff Pzena decided to create the eco-lodge, which now welcomes guests from all over the world.

Walking along the boardwalks that lead to each cabana, it's easy to feel as if you've entered another world. The lodge's welcoming committee is made up of huge iguanas which plod slowly along the ground

or hang from tree branches. Lizards skitter underneath hanging hammocks on the outdoor porches; colorful birds call back and forth across the river. You can spend an afternoon taking a horseback ride through the jungle or a sail up the Moho, or tour the Mayan ruins at Lubaantun, only a short distance away. If you prefer a more active afternoon, you can visit the Blue Creek Cave, where you'll swim upstream—in total darkness—to where the Moho River starts, your headlamp lighting stalagmites and stalactites along the way.

A visit to Rio Blanco National Park and a jump off of its waterfall is also a must in my opinion, though you'll probably appreciate the trip just as much if you stay on land. There's something truly special about being one of the less than 100 visitors who explore the park each year. The country is in the process of finishing the Southern Highway—literally building it while you're driving on it—so I expect that this gem will soon see a lot more traffic once the highway is finished.

For those travelers who have concerns about being in a foreign country, it's important to note that they do speak English in Belize and also accept both American and Belizean currency. The people are astoundingly nice; they are proud of their culture and are happy to share their knowledge with others. One of the highlights of my trip was getting to visit Eladio Pop, an organic cacao farmer who took us on a tour of his land where he explained how native animals, such as bats, ants and the agouti, a rodent for which he named his farm, told him where to plant his trees. I also got to meet his family and join them in chocolate making as a part of the Cotton Tree Lodge's Chocolate Week, which, if you're a fan of the farm-to-table movement—or for that fact, chocolate in general—is not to be missed. I should add here that one should also not miss the cacao wine made by Juan Cho and his family at Cyrila's Chocolates in the village of San Felipe, the only Mayan-owned chocolate making operation in Belize. While wine snobs may be put off by the fact that it's packaged in plastic soda bottles, I think that it only adds to its charm, and I'm sure, to its slightly fermented taste.

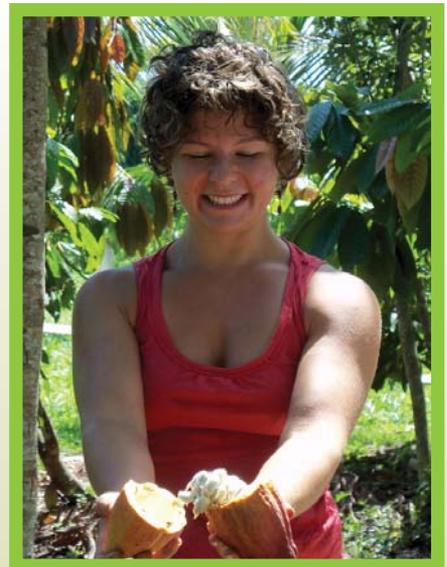
To learn more about all that southern Belize has to offer, visit www.southernbelize.com, www.cottontreelodge.com or call the lodge's U.S. number at 212-529-8622. ■



The cabanas at Cotton Tree Lodge.



Eladio Pop proudly shares his farm with visitors.



Our guide, Sam, breaks open a cacao pod—the fruit used to make chocolate.

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