



Canoeing beneath a rainforest canopy



Xunantunich, which means "stone lady," is an architectural treasure.

The Call

Belize's best-kept travel secret exemplifies veg-friendly serenity, with organic farms, botanical gardens, and eco-adventures galore. *By Ciara LaVelle*

I WOULDN'T HAVE BELIEVED IT IF I HADN'T seen it for myself: mile after square mile without a soul in sight. Here in Belize's Cayo district, a mere 80 miles from the industrial hub of Belize City, massive forests rule the landscape. Even the farms and jungle lodges in the area, some of which take up hundreds of acres, hardly seem to have marked the land by comparison.

The scope of this undisturbed verdant habitat where plants and non-human animals dominate inspires awe and shapes Cayo's culture. Don't get me wrong; tourists here won't be spending their days singing kumbaya (unless they really want to). Hiking, mountain

biking, canoeing, and temple climbing are just a few of the ways to amp up a Cayo vacation. But there's something spiritual about living in a place so lightly touched by man, and visitors sense that instantly. At the end of the day, it all comes back to the land.

Farm-Fresh Food

My trip to Cayo begins at The Lodge at Chaa Creek, a jungle resort with the distinct feel of a summer camp for grown-ups. Owners Mick and Lucy Fleming discovered the land in the 1970s while traveling through, fell in love with the area, and acted on their inspiration to turn the plot into a farm. "I'm not quite sure

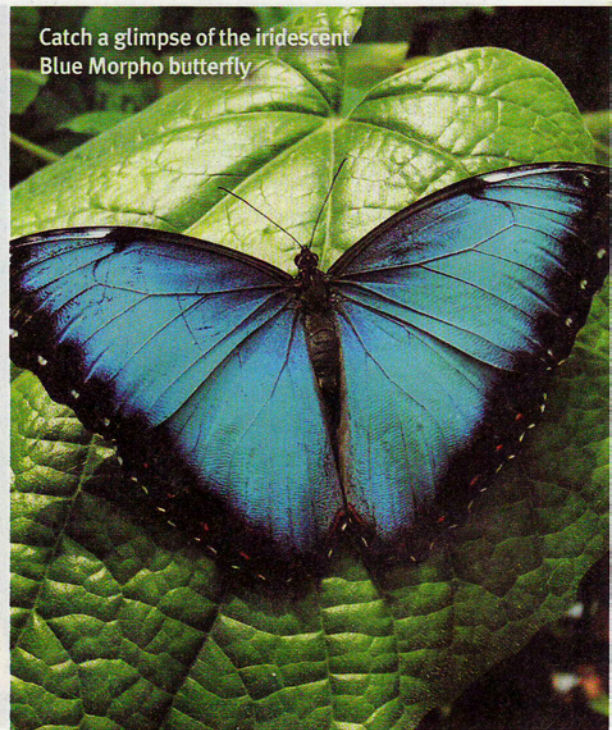
whether I fell in love or whether I ran out of money to leave," quips Mick. "But really, it is a wonderful little country. Where else can you go in the world where you have 87,000 square miles of land and only 300,000 people?"

The Flemings took advantage of all the free space, expanding their farm into a full-service jungle lodge—and one of the most environmentally sound tourist spots in the region. That's largely because of Mick's devotion to Chaa Creek's organic farm, which provides nearly all the food served at the resort's restaurant. Ask Mick what foods he's growing, and he'll list them for you, Bubba Gump-style: "We have bananas, we have plantains, we have pineapples. We have Suriname cherries, dragonfruit, okra. We have tomatoes, onions, we have cabbage, we have broccoli, we have all different kinds of lettuce, and of course the herbs and things"

You'll find all of these at Chaa Creek's



Xunantunich's detailed carvings are more than a century old



Catch a glimpse of the iridescent Blue Morpho butterfly

to Cayo

restaurant, providing plenty of variety for vegetarians. The chef specializes in Belize's traditional dishes, many of which are vegetarian in nature, such as refried beans, meat-free quesadillas, and tamales. A different vegetarian dish is offered each day at the restaurant, and the chef is open to special requests.

Back to Botanics

Devoted foodies can book a tour of the farm to learn its history and techniques firsthand, but I'm more interested in exploring the mountains and valleys surrounding the lodge. From kayaking to river tubing, mountain biking, and hiking, the options are overwhelming. First, I climb the short but steep slope to the butterfly garden, a mountaintop research facility devoted to studying the Blue Morpho. One of the fluttery creatures rests for a while on top of my head while I get a quick

education in the life cycle of the Belizian Blue. After the tiring walk back to camp, I book an inflatable tube and head down to the Macal River. Sinking into the cool current is at once rejuvenating and soothing, as I gently float past tall, tropical branches and locals' homes to a landing area at the far end of the resort. It's sheer relaxation.

I could float around all day, but I'm eager to see what lies beyond the green lawns of Chaa Creek. Plus, I'm hungry. My next stop, the nearby jungle lodge duPlooy's, satisfies both cravings, with a veg-friendly restaurant on site and a vast botanical garden that shares the organic philosophies of Chaa Creek. Spread across 45 acres, the Belize Botanic Garden grows native plants of all sorts, including fruit trees, ferns and palms, as well as specialized ornamental gardens. "There's one area that we call Ginger Alley where ginger, heliconia, banana, and exotic plants

grow just for beauty's sake," says Heather duPlooy, daughter of the resort's owners who took over the botanical gardens, her father's true passion, when he passed away in 2001. (The duPlooy's, like the Flemings, are another example of enchanted tourists-turned-eco-minded expats.)

BelizeBound

High season is November to May, coinciding with whale-watching season that boosts tourism all over Belize. If you want a Walden-esque solitary experience, travel between November and January to miss both the crowds and the seasonal rains. On the other hand, if you're looking for bargains and don't mind humidity, check rates during the summer.

Top Tours

Looking for more adventure? Check out these exciting tours:

➤ At Actun Tunichil Muknal cave, visitors can **wade, swim, and hike** their way through ancient Maya pottery, tools, and even skeletal remains. Visitors hike in parts, and swim through the cave in others.

➤ For **cave swimming** of a different sort, take a dip in the Blue Hole. Formed when an ancient cave collapsed, the swimming hole is filled with constantly refreshed, cool river water flowing from underground—so pure that the pond is a shade of bright blue.

➤ **Rappelling** into Black Hole Drop is one of Belize's most thrilling adventures. This sinkhole at Actun Loch Tunich reaches more than 300 feet down into a rainforest canopy, providing spectacular views, one serious adrenaline rush, and, of course, bragging rights.



ABird'sLife

The Belize Botanic Gardens are a lot more than just a collection of plants. It's also a spectacular birdwatching spot, thanks to the more than 300 species of birds that live among the gardens' 45 acres. Parrots, eagles, owls, falcons, hummingbirds, and woodpeckers are just a small sampling of the colorful creatures spotted amid the gardens' exotic branches.

Tart and plentiful starfruit are perfect refreshments



Schoolchildren take it easy in San Ignacio



Stopping into duPlooy's restaurant, I get another taste of the gardens: a juice made with starfruit plucked from its trees. It's sweet

standing structure. It doesn't look that tall from the ground, but climbing to the top turns out to be a challenge, with no support rails or

It's easy to imagine life as it was a thousand years ago, so far away from all things modern.

but not sugary, and after wandering around in the heat, it's the perfect pick-me-up. Like Chaa Creek, duPlooy's always serves at least one vegetarian meal, and has also adopted a stance against serving beef to save rainforest areas that could be leveled for pastureland. Heather, a fellow vegetarian, tells me the trend toward a meat-free diet is catching on, thanks to restaurants like Café Sol in the nearby town of San Ignacio, which serves up soy burgers and a meat-free Thai noodle salad. "Many places in town are broadening their vegetarian menus," she says. "It used to be just rice and beans—a bit boring. But now you can go out and have a bit of variation. You're not just served pasta primavera."

Up Close and Natural

Next stop: Xunantunich (pronounced "shoo-NAN-too-nitch"), the ruins of an ancient Maya city. Its palaces and temples make up some of the most complete ruins I've ever seen, standing proud and tall on a hill looking far younger than their 1,000-plus years. The main temple, El Castillo, is Belize's second-tallest

barriers, even at its tallest, narrowest point. I'm winded before I even reach the halfway point—this adventure is not for anyone with a fear of heights. On the way up, my guide points out gorgeous friezes adorning its outer walls, the stone carvings impressively preserved, and I climb up next to them for a photo op. I'm amazed that just anyone can get this physically close to so valuable a relic.

My steep hike pays off at the summit. Up here, looking out across the jungles and farms surrounding the ruins, it's easy to imagine life as it was a thousand years ago, so far away from all things modern.

On my last night in Cayo, I spend some time on the front porch of my cabin, listening to the noises of the jungle at night and thinking about the transformative nature of Cayo. I'm a city gal at heart, a gadget geek, a BlackBerry addict, and an accomplished Wii Sports athlete. But after just a few days here, I'm daydreaming about following the example of the Flemings and the duPlooy's, starting a new life on a Belizian farm based on nothing but a love of the land.

Lose yourself on a bamboo trail at Chaa Creek



Heather duPlooy says this is a common reaction. "It's the surroundings ... I was in San Ignacio the other day watching the Cowboys game and looking out the window from a bar there, and there were all these colored toucans. I was like, 'I can't believe I'm watching a football game, and right behind me is such beautiful stuff.'"

"Sometimes you just take it for granted and forget about it," she continues, "but right then it was all misty and beautiful, so it really brought it home."

I couldn't have said it better myself. **VN**

Ciara LaVelle has been traveling, eating, and temple-climbing her way through the Caribbean since 2005.

DestinationDetails

Where to Dine:

→ duPlooy's
duplooy.com

→ Café Sol
Far West St., San Ignacio

Where to Stay:

→ The Lodge at Chaa Creek
chaacreek.com



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