

ESCAPE



Personal PARADISE

Hidden among the untouched islets of the Belize Barrier Reef, private island resort Cayo Espanto is one of the world's last true HIDEAWAYS

By Paul Rubio

The water transitions from emerald to azure to turquoise in smooth, long brushstrokes. The palm trees sway in unison, rooted in pillows of powdery white sand. The Technicolor marine life illuminates the surrounding shallows like underwater fireworks. I'm completely immersed in the natural splendor of the world's second largest barrier reef, and for four days I'm privy to my own slice of this tropical dreamscape.

I've just set foot on Cayo Espanto, a private island retreat with a personality as grand as its surrounds. Located three miles off the Belize mainland and hidden among more than 450 islands of the Belize Barrier Reef, this four-and-a-half-acre cay (pronounced "key") hosts Belize's premier ultra-luxury resort. Its seven open-air villas serve as





ABOVE, LEFT, AND BELOW: BOATS DOCK AT YOUR VILLA TO WHISK YOU OFF TO EXCITING DAY EXCURSIONS. AFTERWARD, RETURN TO THE ISLAND FOR A FEAST INSPIRED BY YOUR FOODIE FANTASIES. RIGHT: THE NEW FOUR SEASONS RESORT AND RESIDENCES CAYE CHAPEL WILL DEBUT IN 2021 AND INCLUDE A 100-ROOM HOTEL.



CAYO ESPANTO COMPRISES SEVEN VILLAS THAT RANGE IN SIZE FROM 1,200 TO 2,600 SQUARE FEET AND INCLUDE AN ARRAY OF LUXE AMENITIES, SUCH AS PLUNGE POOLS, OUTDOOR SHOWERS, AND FULLY STOCKED BUTLER'S PANTRIES. SIMPLY DIVE IN TO EXPLORE THE WORLD-FAMOUS BELIZE BARRIER REEF.



panoramic windows to a Caribbean paradise, all in plain view beyond the billowing curtains of the canopy bed, private plunge pool, overwater deck, and from my exclusive swathe of beach.

The island's villas are positioned such that you'll never encounter another guest during your stay—and despite a full house, that's exactly the case for me. I do, however, interact regularly with my personal butler, Johnny, and his crew, who ensure that my every meal, every activity, pretty much every waking hour fulfills the utmost castaway fantasy. In fact, the entire island staff that greeted me upon arrival (with refreshing cold towels, fruity cocktails, and genuine smiles, no less) magically make Cayo Espanto seem like my very own during my short tenure here.

In four days, I want for nothing and have

everything. The preference forms I completed months prior have been painstakingly studied. Ceviche-and-Champagne lunches and lobster-laced dinners are inspired by my foodie wish list. The spa therapist, who performs treatments in-villa, already knows my sore spots and the deep-tissue deliverance I require. Moreover, the island team has organized an itinerary that's the perfect balance of relaxation and fun, allowing me to totally unplug—well, as much as any hyper Type A can.

For my first "busy" day, they've planned an excursion dubbed "A Day at Sea with a Little Luxury," which translates to spectacular snorkeling off a private yacht, gathering catch of the day (typically lobster, conch, and fish) alongside a local fisherman, and then enjoying that catch on a secluded white-sand beach with the seafood and libations made to order. Another day, I'm on a private charter to Hol Chan,



Belize's famed national marine reserve, where the coral reefs teem with awe-inspiring diversity and richness. No doubt, these underwater kaleidoscopes of marine life are the most visually rewarding in all the Caribbean.

Adding to the Hol Chan high is a detour to Shark Ray Alley to swim among massive schools of nurse sharks and stingrays in crystalline waters—and Instagram every second of it. It's also possible to visit the Mayan ruins on the mainland with a short Cessna flight, or dive the Holy Grail of the barrier reef, the Great Blue Hole, but I choose to keep close to the island instead.

Back on Cayo Espanto, languid days alter between sunbathing on

my deck, good reads in a hammock, kayak trips to nearby Ambergris Caye, and frivolous playtime on the oversized trampoline anchored a few hundred yards off the island. Each night is a fresh round of surprise and delight as Johnny and company serve dinner in swoon-worthy settings across the villa and island—from the deck to the beach to the island's windswept north corner.

Overall, the Cayo Espanto experience recalls the world-class private island vacations I've uncovered in the far reaches of the Pacific and Indian oceans. Yet I didn't have to cross the globe to get here; it's a simple two-hour flight from South Florida, a 10-minute puddle jumper, and a six-minute boat ride (equating to zero jet lag). Immersed in this world of complete escapism and raw natural beauty, it's hard to believe I'm so close to home. It just goes to show you—heaven really isn't that far away. (aprivateisland.com) ◀◀



ON THE HORIZON

*FOUR SEASONS
Resort and Residences
Caye Chapel*

With micro-resorts like Cayo Espanto and a handful of backpacker retreats, Belize's oceanic splendor has managed to float under the radar, even in today's age of travel know-it-alls.

All that's likely to change in 2021 when Four Seasons debuts a 100-room, eco-minded resort on its own private Belizean island, Caye Chapel, a short distance from the country's prized barrier reef. The resort, which will include Bora Bora-style overwater bungalows and its own airstrip, is set to be the centerpiece of a much-hyped, island-wide, 280-acre private resort community. Currently, Four Seasons devotees and investors are scrambling to buy a piece, with 35 private residences on offer in addition to 50 larger private estates, each on its own lot and with immediate beach and golf-course access.

Avid snorkelers and divers can look forward to a central location near the reef and a Fabien Cousteau Nature and Conservation Center, the first of its kind in Central America. Golfers can anticipate teeing off to endless sea views on the 18-hole White Shark Golf Course, designed by Greg Norman in consultation with Lorena Ochoa. There's also a chic beach club, a harbor, marina, and numerous food and beverage outlets in the works—plus the full gamut of the brand's hallmark luxury amenities and services. Be still, our jet-setting hearts. (cayechapel.com)