

THE WONDERFUL WEST

San Ignacio Town and Cayo District in Western Belize



Featuring

- Maya sites galore • Lodges for every budget in cottage country • Caving, hiking, rivering and horseback riding
- Friendly and non-touristy towns • Gateway to Tikal and Belize's Mountain Pine Ridge

Ratings

Ratings are on a scale of 0 to 10. Best is 10.

Natural Beauty:	8
Wildlife & Birding:	8
Hotels:	8
Restaurants:	4
Beaches (River):	2
Bugs:	9
Health & Hygiene:	7
Fishing:	2
Diving & Snorkeling:	0
Maya Sites:	9
Attractions:	4
Adventure:	9
Value:	7
Safety:	8
Cultural Tourism:	5
Shopping:	3
Overall Rating:	9

What to Expect

Cayo is the turf in the traditional “surf ‘n turf” visit to Belize: a few days on the cayes, typically Ambergris Caye, combined with some time on the mainland near San Ignacio, exploring ruins, rivers and rainforests. Although Cayo District has an area of more than 2,000 square miles, beginning near Belmopan and extending west and southwest to the Pine Ridge and into the Chiquibul wilderness and Maya Mountains, in this section we’re concerned mostly with the areas around the towns San Ignacio and Santa Elena to Benque Viejo and the border with Guatemala.

San Ignacio, population around 9,000, is an unassuming small town. Nothing here will knock your socks off. There are no big cultural sights or museums, and the shopping and other urban activities are limited. Its sister town of Santa Elena is even more unassuming. The area to the east of the Hawkesworth Bridge over the Macal River is Santa Elena and that to the west, San Ignacio. The one-lane, 1949-vintage Hawkesworth Bridge is the only suspension bridge in Belize. (At press time, the bridge was closed to west-bound traffic, with a short detour required.) Still, San Ignacio, often just called Cayo or El Cayo, is a pleasant little burg, not very touristy. Locals are friendly easy-going folk, mostly Mestizos with the usual Belizean mix of other, from Maya to Creoles to Chinese and Americans. Mennonites have a sizable presence in the Spanish Lookout area northeast of San Ignacio. El Cayo is generally safe, with the usual traveler’s precautions, night or day. Here you can buy groceries, check your e-mail and get a good cheap meal.

Around San Ignacio/Santa Elena, mostly to the southwest, are the green rolling hills of cottage country. Some of Belize’s best lodges are here. With a few exceptions, to call them jungle lodges is a misnomer. Most are set in partially cleared pastures or fields. Much of the land here is in cattle farms and citrus orchards. As you go west, you begin to see the influences of Guatemala. Maya women wash clothes in the river, and Benque Viejo del Carmen strikes many as a little more Spanish and little less Caribbean than most Belizean towns. But cross the border to Ciudad Melchor de Mencos, and you’re really in another world, one of much more intensive poverty and where English is rarely spoken.

Lay of the Land

As you drive west from Belmopan, you’ll see more hills, and the land becomes wilder and more rugged, especially looking southward. Two important rivers, the Macal and the Mopan, have their confluence in San Ignacio, where they become the Belize River, which meanders northeastward to Belize City. There are several different habitats in Cayo, including riparian forests, river valleys and transitional broadleaf forests. Much of the land has been extensively logged in the past, and today there are sizable areas devoted to brahma cattle ranching and to growing oranges and other citrus fruit.

30-Second History

Maya Indians settled the Belize River Valley thousands of years ago. By the time of Christ, sizable Maya cities and ceremonial centers dotted the land. Spanish churchmen first arrived in the area in the early 17th century, but they had a difficult time converting the independent-minded Maya. In the early 18th century, some Maya were forcibly removed to the Petén in what is now Guatemala. The first modern settlements were logging camps. Later, chicle — and then looting of Maya sites — became important sources of income. Today, citrus farming is a major industry. San Ignacio remained remote and fairly isolated until recent times. The Western Highway was built in the 1930s, but some sections of it were not paved until the 1980s. The first jungle lodges began operation here in the early 1980s.

Getting There

San Ignacio is about 67 miles, or about 1 3/4 hours by car, west of Belize City, and the Guatemala border is another 9 miles west. The Western Highway is a good paved two-lane road. Surprisingly, there is no regular scheduled air service from Belize City to San Ignacio, though some private planes use the Central Farm airstrip east of San Ignacio. **Novelo's** (tel. 501-2-77372), and **Batty** (tel. 501-2-72025) are the two main bus lines with frequent, inexpensive service from Belize City to San Ignacio and the Benque Viejo. However, the buses run from terminals in Belize City, not from the international airport. From the international airport, you'll have to take a taxi into town (US\$15) or lug your bags by foot about a mile to the Northern Highway, where you can catch a bus into Belize City and connect with a San Ignacio bus there. Buses from Belize City to San Ignacio run about every half hour. Travel time is about 2 1/2 hours, or 1 3/4 hours for an express bus. Batty has about a dozen buses a day on the route, most in the morning, and Novelo's has about 20 departures to the west, running in the afternoon. At press time, the first Batty bus departed Belize City at 4 a.m, the last Novelo's coach at 9 p.m. A couple of other smaller lines also run this route. Fare for regular service is US\$2.50 and for deluxe express service about US\$3. About one-fourth of buses on this route are express. In early 2000, Novelo's bought Batty, and changes could be ahead.

In addition, several hotels in San Ignacio, including **duPlooy's** (tel. 501-9-23101, fax 9-23301; e-mail duplooy@btl.net) have vans running from the airports in Belize City to San Ignacio. Fare is about US\$25 per person one-way. You need to book ahead. Even if your hotel doesn't have a set van schedule, it can arrange a van transfer from Belize City, typically for US\$25 to \$30 a person or US\$100 to \$125 for an entire party of up to five or more. **Linea Dorada** runs scheduled daily van service to Tikal (US\$25 one-way) from the Marine Terminal near the Swing Bridge in Belize City, and the van can drop you in Cayo, although if you are already in downtown Belize City

and only want to go to Cayo, you might as well save money and take a Batty or Novelo's bus (US\$2.50-\$3). Finally, some taxis at the international airport will drive you to San Ignacio. Bargain, but expect to pay around US\$80 to \$100 for up to four or five people.

What to See and Do

Sightseeing and activity ratings are based on a scale of one to five stars.

- ☆☆☆☆☆ Extraordinary — don't miss it.
- ☆☆☆☆ Outstanding — one of the best of its type in Belize and worth a detour.
- ☆☆☆ Noteworthy — worth your time.
- ☆☆ Interesting — above average of its type.
- ☆ Try to visit if in the area.

What's Special

Cayo has the largest collection of ☆☆☆☆ **accessible Maya sites** in Belize. It also has the greatest number of ☆☆☆☆ **bush lodges**, including several of the best in Belize. The ☆☆☆ **Mopan and Macal rivers** offer excellent recreational opportunities, including swimming, tubing and canoeing.

There are enough ☆☆☆☆ **caves, sights and activities** around Cayo to keep you busy for a week or more.

☆ San Ignacio and its sister town, Santa Elena, are pleasant, safe small towns. There's not much to do in town, but you can spend an enjoyable morning or afternoon just poking around, with a stop at one of the popular eating and meeting spots such as Eva's (*see below*.)

This part of Belize also makes an easy jumping off spot for ☆☆☆☆☆ **Tikal** (*see Tikal section*), which is the main reason to visit Benque Viejo del Carmen, the western-most sizable town in Belize.

One piece of good news about Cayo is that you usually don't have to worry about mosquitoes or other nasty little bugs. There's not a lot of standing water for the little pests to breed. The district is not absolutely, positively 100% free of mozzies, as a few find their way here especially following the start of seasonal rains in June, but only in Cayo will you find lodges with unscreened windows. The bad news is that it can be hot, very hot, in the dry season, generally February through early June. Temps can hit 100 degrees F., and it's rare when summer day time temps don't reach into the 90s.

Maya Sites

☆☆☆☆ Xunantunich

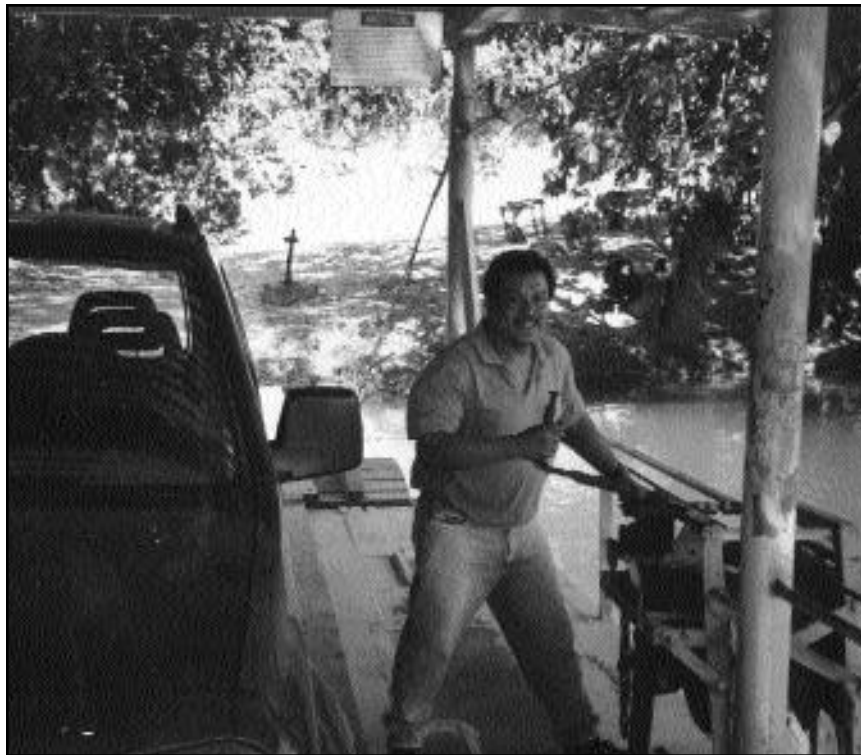
History: Xunantunich ("Stone Maiden" or "Stone Woman") and pronounced Shoo-NAN-too-NEECH is a Classic period ceremonial site. It was at its height

from around 600 to 1100 AD.

Excavations: The list of those who have explored or excavated Xunantunich reads like who's who of Belize archeology. The earliest modern excavations were done by Thomas Gann in the mid 1890s. Since then, Teobalt Maler, J. Eric S. Thompson, Euan Mackie, A.H. Anderson, Peter Schmidt, Elizabeth Graham and Pendergrast, among others, have worked at the site.

What You Can See Now: Though small in size, Xunantunich is one of the most interesting Maya sites for visitors in Belize. There are three graceful plazas, with the 130-foot El Castillo rising at the southern end, with its oft-photographed restored friezes. Climb this temple for wonderful views into Guatemala. The visitor center here is excellent, and there's a small tienda next to it where you can buy snacks, soft drinks and such.

How to Get There: From San Ignacio, take the Benque Road (extension of the Western Highway) about 6 miles west, near the village of San José Succotz. There is a hand-pulled free ferry across the Mopan River. It carries pedestrians and a couple of vehicles. As you wait for the ferry, you may be approached by



Free hand-operated ferry carries vehicles and pedestrians across the Mopan River to road to Xunantunich

guides who will offer to show you the ruins. They can be helpful, but it is not necessary to hire a guide to see the site. From the ferry landing, it is less than a mile to the ruins, up a dirt road.

Hours and Cost: Open 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission, US\$2.50 (pay at visitor center, not at free ferry crossing).

☆ Cahal Pech

History: Cahal Pech (“Place of the Ticks” in Mopan Maya) was, during Preclassic and Classic times, a ceremonial center which probably dominated the Belize River Valley. The first Indian settlers came here around 1200 BC.

Excavations: The first excavations were by Linton Satterthwaite of the University of Pennsylvania in the 1950s. Looting occurred at various times, especially during the 1970s and early 1980s. Teams from the University of San Diego and Trent University conducted excavations and restorations here, starting in the late 1980s.

What You Can See Now: To the layperson, this site is less interesting than Xunantunich, though the setting, at about 900 feet above sea level on one of the seven hills of San Ignacio/Santa Elena, provides some beautiful views. The present excavated site is small, only about two acres, and most of the structures have been restored with a layer of “stucco,” meant to replicate the Maya practice of covering buildings with layers of plaster. The tallest building here is about 77 feet.

How to Get There: From San Ignacio, take the Benque Road west about 1/2 mile. Watch for a sign on the left. The site is near the top of a hill, near Cahal Pech Village and other hotels.

Hours and Cost: Open 8 a.m. - 4 p.m. (visitor center hours are more haphazard.) Admission US\$2.50. Note: An unarmed security guard was shot and killed at the Cahal Pech visitor center in July 2000, in the course of an armed robbery of Maya artifacts and other valuables; since then, security has been increased at this and other visitor centers.

☆☆ El Pilar

History: The Maya began building at El Pilar (Spanish for “watering basin”) around 450 BC and continued to live in the city until 1,000 AD. The city had at least three large sections on the Belize-Guatemala border, connected by causeways, with at least 25 plazas and 70 major structures, along with hundreds of other buildings.

Excavations: Dr. Annabel Ford of the University of California/Santa Barbara mapped the site in 1984. Excavations were begun in 1993 by BRASS (Belize River Archeological Settlement Survey) and an international group of volunteers. The work has continued in the dry season each year since then.

What You Can See Now: Excavation is still underway (caretakers live on the site). Much of the site is uncleared. There are five trail systems, three focused

on archaeological sites and two on nature. In 1997, El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna was created; it covers about 3 1/4 square miles.

How to Get There: El Pilar is about 12 miles north of San Ignacio, beyond the village of Bullet Tree Falls. To get there, take the Bullet Tree Road. When you cross the Mopan River Bridge look for signs to the El Pilar Road. The site is about 7 miles from Bullet Tree on a rough but all-weather limestone road. As there is no bus service to the site, you'll need to go on a tour or in your own transportation — car, horse or mountain bike. By car, it's about 45 minutes from San Ignacio. If walking, take plenty of water.

Hours and Cost: Open daily, no admission charge at present.

☆☆☆ **Che Chem Ha Cave**

History: Caves all over Belize contain pottery and other Maya relics. This one, with pottery and other items dating back as much as 2,000 years, is one of the easiest to visit.

Excavations: The Morales family, on whose land it is located, discovered the cave in the early 1990s. By law the contents belong to the Belize government. Looters got into the cave in 1999, though much still remains.

What You Can See Now: After going through a narrow entrance, you can climb ladders to get a closer view of pottery, carved sacrificial stones and other items. The going isn't too difficult, although the cave can be wet and slippery, and it isn't for those fearful of tight spaces or fruit bats.

How to Get There: Take the Benque Road (Western Highway) and turn left on Hydro Road. A sign on the right, at about Mile 8 of Hydro Road, will lead you, down a rough road, to the Morales' farm. It's about a 45 minute drive from San Ignacio. Che Chem Hall waterfall is about 5 minute walk from the cave, and the larger Vaca Falls is about a 30-minute hike.

Hours and Cost: Open by private guided tour only, about US\$25 for up to four persons. Simple thatch cabaña accommodations (no electricity, kerosene lamps, tel. 501-9-22398, US\$44 double including meals) are available at the site. Local tour guides and operators also offer trips to Che Chem Ha (around US\$20 per person.)

There are many other small Maya sites in Cayo, many of them on private lands, including **Chorro** (about 1 mile from El Pilar) and ☆ **Pacbitun** (about 2 miles east of San Antonio village.) *Also, see information about Caracol in the Hill, Cool Hills/Mountain Pine Ridge section.*

Caving, River Riding and More

Cayo has plenty to keep you busy, including visiting caves, canoeing and tubing on rivers, horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking and sightseeing.

☆☆☆ Caving

Caving is a fast-growing activity in Cayo. In most cases, no special equipment or training is needed to visit local caves. However, going with a trained guide or tour operator is highly advised and in some cases as with Actun Tunichil Muknal, is required by law, to prevent looting of Maya artifacts. Note that after heavy rains caves may be flooded or underground rivers may be too high for canoeing. *For other caving opportunities in Cayo District, see the Hummingbird/Belmopan section and Mountain Pine Ridge sections. Also, see Che Chem Ha under Maya sites in this section.*

☆☆☆ **Barton Creek Cave** has become one of the most popular caves to visit in Cayo. You canoe about a mile through the cave, past colorful formations and Maya relics. David Simson of David's Tours pioneered tourist visits to this cave, and his is still the best tour (US\$25 per person, tel. 501-9-23674). The turn-off to Barton Creek is at Mile 5 of the Pine Ridge Road (also known as Chiquibul Road) and then another 4 miles through Mennonite farming lands.

☆☆☆ **Actun Tunichil Muknal** was rediscovered in 1989. It was featured in a 1993 National Geographic television program. The cave is noteworthy because of a large amount of undisturbed Maya pottery. **Mayawalk Adventures** (19 Burns Ave. San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23070, e-mail mayawalk@btl.net) is one of the companies that runs tours to this cave.

☆ **Flour Camp Cave**, near Black Rock Lodge, is a collection of caves with multiple entrances and exits. Considerable pottery from several periods.

☆☆ Horseback Riding

Several of the lodges in Cayo have horses, among them **Chaa Creek** and **M.E.T.** (*see below*). Other options include **Easy Rider** (tel. 501-9-23734, e-mail easyrider@btl.net) and **Horse of Course** (tel. 501-1-49486). Rates start at US\$25 per half-day, US\$40 full-day, usually with a two-person minimum. **Crystal Paradise Resort** (*see above*) does half-day rides to waterfalls or ruins (US\$40) and night rides (US\$35 per person) complete with dinner.

☆☆ Mountain Biking

Among the popular bike rides are those to El Pilar or Xunantunich Maya ruins, to the Mennonite community at Spanish Lookout (*see below*), to one of the lodges such as Chaa Creek or duPlooy's, or to the Mountain Pine Ridge (*see that section*.) **Mayawalk Tours** (19 Burns Ave. San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23070, e-mail mayawalk@btl.net) rents bikes for US\$10 a day. **Crystal Paradise** also does mountain bike tours and rents bikes at its San Ignacio office (Savannah St., tel. 501-9-22772). Some lodges also rent mountain bikes. **Chaa Creek** is one, with rates of US\$25 a day. Their bikes are in good shape, not always the

case with other renters. Keep in mind that in the “dry season” (February through May), temps in Cayo can hit 100 degrees F. or higher, with humidity of 70% or more. In those conditions, biking is hard, hot work.

☆☆☆☆ **Rivering**

Canoeing, kayaking or tubing on Cayo’s rivers, mainly the Macal and Mopan, are popular. It’s best after the rains start, usually in June, although after very heavy rains the rivers may be swollen, making trips through caves difficult or impossible. The Mopan has some class two to four rapids, depending on water levels; the Macal is generally more of a float trip. Tour operators usually arrange to pick you up at an agreed-upon point. Guided tours also are offered by **Tony’s RiverAdventures** (tel. 501-9-23292), **David’s Adventure Tours** (tel. 501-9-23674) and others. You’ll pay from around US\$12 to \$30 per person for a canoe or rafting trip. Some lodges also do river trips. **Crystal Paradise** (*see below*) does a kayak trip on the Mopan. **Mopan River Resort** (*see below*) provides canoes and kayaks free to guests.

Sights

☆☆ **Belize Botanic Gardens.** Adjacent to duPlooy’s lodge (*see below*), the gardens are a work in progress. Already there are some 450 trees and other plants, mostly collected by Ken duPlooy, the Zimbabwe-born co-founder of the lodge. The plantings are on about 45 acres. Most trees are identified, so you can do a self-guided tour. The long-range plan is to duplicate six of the eco-zones in Belize and to establish an orchid house, a visitor center and a research lab. Admission US\$5.

☆☆☆☆ **Butterfly Farms.** There are three butterfly farms in Cayo, Green Hills, Chaa Creek and Tropical Wings, all open to the public. (*For information, see pages 167-169.*)

☆☆ **Chaa Creek Natural History Museum.** On the grounds of Chaa Creek lodge (*see below*), this small museum has informative and expertly done displays on the Macal River Valley. Admission (which includes the butterfly farm) is US\$5 adults, \$3 students.

☆☆ **Rainforest Medicine Trail.** Formerly the Panti Trail, this small site next door to Chaa Creek has a self-guided trail with marked native medical plants. There is a small gift shop selling natural medicines. Admission is US\$5.75.

☆☆ **Maya Villages.** Several small villages around San Ignacio are predominantly Maya. Among these are San José Succotz, a vibrant Mopan Maya village, near Xunantunich on the Western Highway, and San Antonio, a Yucatec Maya village (population about 1,500) south of San Ignacio toward the Mountain Pine Ridge. An easy way to get a glimpse of Maya culture is to visit the ☆☆ **Tanah** art museum and gift shop operated by the Garcia sisters in San Antonio. The five Garcia sisters (one died a few years ago) are well known for their reintroduction into Belize of Maya art skills such as slate carving. Some

of these beautiful slate carvings are for sale, starting at around US\$15. Tanah is the Yucatec name for San Antonio village. The Garcia sisters also operate a small lodge, Chichan Ka Lodge, with rates from US\$15. (P.O. Box 75, San Ignacio; tel./fax 501-9-12023; e-mail tanah-info@awrem.com; www.awrem.com.)

☆ **Spanish Lookout Mennonite Community.** Mennonites in this area are “progressive” and use modern farm machinery and vehicles. You’d think you were in Iowa. To get here, turn north from the Western Highway at about Mile 63, just west of Georgeville. You then cross the Belize River on a hand-cranked ferry. The drive takes about one-half hour by car.

Crime and Personal Safety

Most visitors to Cayo feel perfectly safe, and for the most part this is indeed one of the lower crime areas in Belize. Local residents are generally friendly and helpful. However, Cayo borders the Petén area of Guatemala, where jobs are few, police authority is spotty at best and poverty is endemic. Not everything bad that happens in Cayo can be laid to Guatemalans coming across the border, however. Dr. Byron Foster, a noted writer on Belize archeology and anthropology, was killed at his farm north of San Ignacio by a rampaging band of Belizean outlaws. In short, take the usual precautions. We’ve heard of incidents where valuables were stolen from guest rooms even at remote lodges where one would think the only neighbors have four legs.

Water and Electricity

San Ignacio has a municipal water system with potable water. Some remote villages and lodges get water from wells or cisterns. Usually the water at lodges is fine to drink, but ask first. The towns of San Ignacio, Santa Elena and Benque Viejo are on the power grid, and even some remote villages have power, thanks to a village electrification programs. Remote lodges usually generate their own power.

Lodging

Price categories are for in-season double without meals, not including 7% hotel room tax or service charge, if any. To make comparisons equitable, rates for hotels which include meals or other items in the tariff are adjusted, reflecting an estimated cost for room only. However, specific rates shown in the listings below are actual rates but do not include 7% hotel room tax, 8% sales tax on meals or service charge, unless otherwise stated.

Most hotels listed, except low-cost budget places, receive a star rating of from one to five stars. Only a few hotels in the country are rated five stars. Keep in mind that, although there is no direct correlation between

the price of a hotel room and the hotel's star rating, three- to five-star hotels are likely to be considerably more expensive than average. Some travelers may be willing to accept a lower level of amenities and services in exchange for a lower price, or they may even prefer staying in inexpensive lodging to better appreciate the local culture.

- ★★★★★ One of the top hotels in the Caribbean, well-run with striking location and/or facilities.
- ★★★★ One of the best hotels in Belize, with a dependably high level of hospitality.
- ★★★ Excellent accommodations, with above-average amenities, service and/or hospitality.
- ★★ Good accommodations and often a very good value.
- ★ Functional accommodations, meeting basic needs, and often a good value.

San Ignacio and Santa Elena Lodging Under US\$125

★★★ **Mayaland Villas.** This spot, which opened in early 2000, is a nice compromise between being in town and being way out in the boondocks. Owned by the operator of Mayaland Tours & Travel, a well-known Belize City tour company, the hotel has 10 large units in duplex cottages with verandahs, breakfast nooks, fans and 24-hour electricity (but no air-conditioning), plus three rooms in the main lodge. Rates: Villas US\$105 double Nov. 1-May 15, US\$84 rest of year; rooms in main house, US\$85 double Nov. 1-May 15, US\$68 rest of year. AE, MC, V accepted. *Mile 69, Western Hwy., Cayo; tel. 501-9-12035, fax 9-12037; e-mail mayaland@btl.net; www.mayalandbelize.com.*

★★★ **San Ignacio Resort Hotel.** This is the closest thing to an international-style hotel in San Ignacio Town. But, in Belize, that can mean anything, and in this case it means cinderblock walls in the hall and a green iguana project out back, with 14 acres of bush. We'd like this hotel even more if rates were about a third less, but we admit the location is convenient, the more-expensive deluxe rooms are comfortable, the pool relaxing, the Running W Steakhouse satisfying, the Stork Club bar a good place to grab a cool one and watch a big-screen TV, and the management and staff accommodating. In the off-season, the hotel does have a pay-for-three-nights, stay-for-four special which helps a bit. Rates: Balcony rooms without air-conditioning, US\$91 double; deluxe rooms with air-conditioning and TV, US\$110 double. Plus tax and 5% service charge. Off-season specials available. AE, MC, V accepted. *18 Buena Vista St., P.O. Box 33, San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22034, fax 9-22134; e-mail sanignhot@btl.net; www.sanignaciobelize.com. From the police station in the*

center of San Ignacio, go up the steep hill and the hotel is on the left.

Under \$100

★★★ **Windy Hill.** This is another spot with a split personality. Windy Hill, with 25 cottages one of the biggest hotels in Cayo, has some elements of a jungle lodge, yet it's only about a mile west of town and right beside the highway. A bonus here is a small above-ground pool. The cabañas, which have fans, 24-hour electricity and mini-bars, are arranged up a low hill, and all have verandahs with hammocks. Inside, they're pleasant, with wood-paneled walls and ceilings, locally made furniture and hand-woven Guatemalan rugs. Windy Hill does a lot of tours, witnessed by all the vans parked out front. Three meals are served daily, though you'll get a better deal at Sanny's or one of the restaurants in town. Rates: US\$80 double, in-season, with discounts available the rest of the year. Meals are around US\$9 for breakfast, US\$11 for lunch and US\$19 for dinner. Windy Hill concentrates on packages, of which there are many, starting at US\$500 per person including meals and tours. AE, MC, V accepted. *Western Hwy. (Benque Rd.), San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22017, fax 9-23080; e-mail windyhill@btlnet.net; www.windyhillresort.com.*



Entrance to San Ignacio Resort Hotel

Under US\$75

★★ **Cahal Pech Village.** This hotel on a hill has been joined by several other cabin and cabaña lodgings, plus the rockin' Cahal Pech Tavern, making the hillside setting a little busier and more commercial than before, though the views over San Ignacio are still great. You have a choice here of traditional thatch cabañas (about US\$50-\$60) without air-conditioning or rooms in a motel (around US\$50-\$95) with air-conditioning. It's a steep hike back up the hill, and after dark you should take a taxi, as the traffic makes walking dangerous. Music from the tavern can be loud, but the walls are sound-proofed. From what some readers tell us, things aren't as good here as they used to be, but new ownership and management could bring this property back to life. AE, MC, V accepted. *Tel. 501-9-23740, fax 9-22225; e-mail daniels@btl.net; www.belizex.com/cahalpech/.*

★ **Caesar's Place.** On the Western Highway in the village of Unitedville, this spot, under the same ownership as Black Rock, has pleasant motel rooms and RV/camper sites. Bar (with live music at times), restaurant and large gift shop. Rates about US\$50 double. AE, MC, V accepted. *Western Hwy. at Unitedville village; tel. 501-9-22341; e-mail blackrock@btl.net; www.blackrocklodge.com.*

★★ **Log Cab-Inns.** Yes, these are log cabins, of mahogany, nine of them on a low hill on the outskirts of San Ignacio across the road from the Windy Hill lodge. Owners Carla and Iris Mahmud will do their best to make you comfortable. One of the best features here is a new pool, and there's a restaurant on site. Rooms have double beds, fans, private baths and are furnished and decorated from the family's woodworking shop. Doubles US\$55, with a 15% discount May 1-Nov. 30. If you ask, you might even do a little better than the published rates. MC, V accepted. *Mile 68, Western Hwy., San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-23367, fax 9-22289; e-mail logcabins@btl.net; www.belizex.com/log_cab-inns/cabins.htm.*

Under US\$50

★ **Martha's Guest House.** You can get a good night's sleep, enjoy a tasty meal, and get your laundry done, all at Martha August's little place in San Ignacio. Upstairs in the original section the three rooms, with fan and high ceilings, share a bath and a kitchen and living room. Recent renovations have added more rooms. Martha's pizza is good, but probably a little different than what you're used to. Rates around US\$17 to \$40. *10 West St., San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-23647.*

★ **Mida's Tropical Resort.** If you want a thatch cabaña within a short stroll of downtown San Ignacio, this is it. The thatch-roofed Maya-style cottages on

the river bank have private baths, 24-hour electricity and fans. The open-air palapa restaurant serves inexpensive lunches and dinners, from US\$3 to \$8. Rates US\$34 double in-season. MC, V accepted. *Branch Mouth Rd., San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-23172. fax 9-23845; e-mail midas@btl.net; www.belize.com/midas_resort.htm.*

★ **Piache Hotel.** The rooms here aren't much out of the ordinary, but the owners are. Godsman is highly knowledgeable about Garifuna culture and history. Daughter Zoila Ellis is a noted short-story writer (*On Heroes, Lizards and Passion*). The grounds and gardens here are attractive. Rates around US\$30 double, or US\$43 with air-conditioning. MC, V accepted. *P.O. Box 54, San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22032, fax 9-22685; e-mail piachehot@btl.net; www.belize.com/piache.html.*

★ **Rose's Guesthouse and Teagarden.** Another nice moderately priced choice, with five large rooms in a private home owned by a Rose Marin, a friendly Creole lady. Restaurant in a small garden serves dishes like moussaka (US\$7.50) and steamed or fried shrimp (US\$9). US\$40 double, including breakfast. MC, V accepted. *1178 Cahal Pech Hill, San Ignacio; tel./fax 501-9-22282; e-mail rosesguesthouse@btl.net; www.covely.com/rose/.*

Under US\$25

★★ + **Aguada Hotel & Restaurant.** This little motel — just east of San Ignacio in Santa Elena — is a real find. You can stay here in a clean, modern room with air conditioning for US\$25 double, or US\$20 if you just want a fan. Prices are a few bucks less off-season. Rooms are not large, but it has a swimming pool, bar and a good restaurant. The café is a friendly, casual place serving Belizean and American dishes at US\$3 to \$8 for a full meal. Owners Bill and Cathie Butcher — he's African-American, she's Belizean — are doing a super job here, in a quiet location just a short walk from the Western Highway and across the river from San Ignacio. A bus into San Ignacio is about a buck, and a taxi, US\$2.50. The commons room has cable TV and a collection of board games and books. Aguada will pick you up at either airport in Belize City for around US\$25. MC, V accepted. *Aguada St., P.O. Box 133, San Ignacio; tel. 501-92-3609; e-mail aguada@btl.net; www.belize.com/aguada.htm. Across the highway from La Loma Luz hospital.*

Central Hotel. Next to Eva's. Cheap, clean and centrally located. Doubles US\$11. *Burns Ave., San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-24179; e-mail easyrider@btl.net; www.belize.com/central_hotel.htm.*

Hi-ET Hotel. Not a Hyatt, the Hi-ET is a 5-roomer, a cheap, secure and

popular place to sleep. Doubles around US\$10. *12 West St., San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22828.*

Venus Hotel. This two-story, 34-room wood hotel, centrally located, caters to backpackers. Shared-bath doubles start at around US\$11, with bath US\$21, air-conditioning US\$5 extra. Ask for a discount if you're staying several days. Look at your room first to see if everything works and that the door locks. AE, MC, V accepted. *Burns Ave., San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-23203, fax 9-22225; e-mail emorfin@btl.net; www.belizex.com/venushotel.htm.*

Benque Viejo and San José Succotz Under \$150

★★★★ **Mopan River Resort.** The valu-o-meter got turned up to wow in Cayo when this all-inclusive opened in November 1999. Some visitors complain that Belize hotel rates seem reasonable enough, but at check-out the total tab is lot higher than expected, after adding the price of meals, drinks, transfers, tours, tax, and service charges. But here, owners Jay and Pamela Picon deliver everything for one price: transfers from your arrival flight in Belize City, room, all meals, daily tours (including trips to Tikal, Caracol and Barton Creek cave, plus kayaking on the Macal River), local beer and drinks, and even tips and taxes. And that one price isn't a budget-breaker, either, starting at around US\$115 per person per day. Fact is, it may be the best upmarket deal on the mainland. For the 2000-2001 season, the resort has loosened up a bit on its three-, four- and seven-day packages and now allows guests to start on any day, assuming there's room. The location is a bit, well, unexpected, across the Mopan River from the back streets of old Benque, but once you've taken the short ferry ride (Jay had the steel ferry built to his specs) to the resort's 10-acre coconut palm-studded grounds, you're in your own private paradise. The thatch cabañas are done up in high Belizean style, with cabbage bark wood floors and mahogany cabinets, and they come with most of the modcons, including cable TV, VCR, 24-hour electricity, some of the best beds in Belize and refrigerators stocked with complimentary soft drinks and Belikin. Three of the cabañas are larger suites, with full kitchens. We think these are worth the small extra cost. Breakfasts are to order, and dinners usually have a theme such as Thai night, with recipes Pam Picon picked up from cooking courses at the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. Pam is editor of the *Belize Report* newsletter, and she's put to good use what she's learned from visiting many of Belize's top resorts. Over drinks or a barbecue at the expansive, art-filled Picon home which occupies a prime spot on the grounds, Jay, who admits to his share of serious tax problems in the U.S., will regale you with tales of his days as a pilot and head of large U.S. aviation companies. The resort has good security: Guards with Rottweilers patrol after dark. So what's the down side? The location will be a turn-off for those expecting to be

in the jungle — this is NOT a jungle lodge. And it's not for those who want to do things entirely on their own, trying different restaurants, heading out on a whim, staying up late to sample local nightlife. As at many small lodges, the particular mix of guests when you're there has a lot to do with your total experience. A pool is set to open for the 2001 season, and other pluses such as welcoming fruit baskets, free use of canoes and kayaks and a 100% satisfaction guarantee are planned. We recommend you do not swim in the Mopan River here, as it is polluted by discharges from Benque and nearby Guatemala. Rates: Seven-night all-inclusive packages are US\$798 per person in a cabaña, or US\$973 for a suite with kitchen; four-nights, US\$548 and US\$648; three-nights, US\$426 and US\$501. Christmas, Easter and several holidays are slightly higher. MC, V, Discover accepted. *Benque Viejo del Carmen, Cayo; tel. 501-9-32047, fax 9-33272, e-mail mopanriver@btl.net; www.mopanriverresort.com. Closed July-October.*

★★★ **Royal Mayan Resort & Spa.** This 24-room spa hotel in Benque is literally upscale: It's located on top of one of the steepest hills in Cayo. If your car makes it to the top, and if you can find a space to park, you'll find that the rooms, along a motel-like corridor, are nicely outfitted with TV and carpeting. But the bad news is there are closets in Cayo bigger than some of these rooms. Apparently the renovation to the former budget hotel at this site didn't allow for much change in room sizes. The pool here is beautiful, the spa accoutrements are fine, and the views into Guatemala and around Cayo are fantastic. But guests paying premium rates may expect more in the way of service and space. The owners are the Feinsteins who also operate Blackbird Caye Resort and are looking to develop the Tourism Village in Belize City. Rates: US\$139 double Nov. 14-June 14, US\$97 rest of year. Combo packages with Blackbird Caye Resort area available from \$1,050 per person. MC, V accepted. *Benque Viejo del Carmen; tel. in the U.S. 888-271-3482 or 305-969-7947, fax 305-969-7946; e-mail info@royalmayan.com; www.royalmayan.com.*

Under US\$50

★★ **Inn at Xunantunich.** This 14-room hotel (formerly called Xunantunich Resort Hotel) is perched right on the Western Highway, across the road from the Mopan River and from the Maya site after which it is named. The better rooms (US\$40 double) have air-conditioning, private baths and satellite TV; standard rooms (US\$15 double) in the guest house have fans and shared baths. The hotel has a swimming pool with rock waterfall, small hot tub, and a restaurant/ bar with pool table. *Mile 72, Western Hwy. (Benque Rd.), San José Succotz, Cayo; tel. 501-9-32264; e-mail xunhotel@btl.net; www.belizex.com/xunhotel.htm.*

Under US\$25

★ **Trek Stop.** American expats Judy and John Yaeger and their Belizean partners opened this spot in 1998. It perches on a hillside near San José Succotz Village and the Xunantunich Maya ruins. Budget travelers will find cheap sleeps in six cozy, neat-as-a-pin cabins (US\$10 per person), with outdoor composting toilets and solar-heated showers. A small butterfly farm and nature center, Tropical Wings (admission US\$2.50) and a restaurant with inexpensive Mexican and Belizean dishes are also here. Camping is permitted. There's also a common kitchen. MC, V accepted. *San José Succotz Village; tel. 501-9-32265; e-mail susa@btl.net; www.tbcnet.com/dyaeger/susa/trekstop.htm. 6 miles west of San Ignacio, on the south side of Western Hwy.*

Cottage Country Lodging

Most of Cayo's lodges are on either the Macal or Mopan rivers. In general, the lodges on the Macal are more upmarket. With some exceptions (Ek 'Tun is one) don't expect to be in a "movie jungle" or rainforest. Most lodges share their locations with cattle ranches or citrus farms, though the bush is seldom far away.

Under US\$200

★★★★★ **Chaa Creek Resort and Spa.** Mick and Lucy Fleming started Chaa Creek in 1980 when tourists were almost unknown in Cayo. Over the years, they've expanded, improved and fine-tuned their operation until it has become one of the best-run, most-professional operations in all of Central America. Everything works here: The grounds, comprising a total of 330 acres on the Macal River, are beautifully planted and maintained. The 19 large rooms in whitewash-and-thatch duplex cottages, plus two upmarket suites, have high-quality furnishings set off with Guatemalan wall hangings and bedspreads, the perfect marriage of comfort and exoticism. The food and drink, if not of gourmet standard, are well-prepared and plentiful. Staffers are friendly, not fawning, and move quickly to solve any problem. There's electricity, plenty of hot water and cold beer, and, if you like, Chaa Creek will sell you a Cuban cigar to smoke after dinner. The latest additions are a fully equipped, modern spa, by far the best in Belize, offering everything from aromatherapy to seaweed wraps, and a new conference and meeting center. The spa, and a name change (from Chaa Creek Cottages), mark a repositioning toward a more-upscale, less "lodgey" lodge. Whether that's a good idea or not only time will tell. In any event, you won't run out of things to do here, either. You can visit the Chaa Creek Natural History Centre and Blue Morpho Butterfly Breeding Centre, tour the Rainforest Medicine Trail (formerly Panti Trail) next door, go horseback riding or canoeing, or take one of the many top-notch tours offered by Chaa Creek Expeditions. Chaa Creek helped reintroduce howler monkeys to the Macal River Valley. Birding is excellent,

with 247 species spotted on the grounds by Birds without Borders, which has an operation based at Chaa Creek. For those who want the Chaa Creek experience at a Filene's basement price (US\$100 double including meals), the Macal River Safari Camp has 10 small "cabinettes" on platforms, and Belizean-style meals that some say are better than meals at the main lodge. Rates: Cottage room, US\$165 to \$190 double, suites US\$200 to \$365. Meals are extra: US\$10 per person for breakfast, US\$8 packed lunch, US\$26 dinner. Summer packages are a relative bargain: Room with breakfast and dinner, plus some tours, goes for around US\$127 per person per night, double occupancy, on a four-night package. AE, MC, V accepted. *P.O. Box 53, San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22037, fax 9-22501; e-mail chaacreek@btl.net; www.chaacreek.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, go 4 3/4 miles west on Benque Rd. (Western Hwy.) and turn left on Chial Rd. (look for signs to Chaa Creek, duPlooy's and Black Rock lodges). Follow signs on this unpaved road 3 1/2 miles to Chaa Creek.*

Under US\$150

★★★★ **duPlooy's.** Since it opened in the late 1980s, duPlooy's has been seen by some to play second fiddle to its Macal River neighbor, Chaa Creek. But that's unfair, because duPlooy's has its own style — a little more casual, a little more oriented to birders and tree-huggers and nature lovers. On part of the lodge's 60 acres about 10 miles from San Ignacio, Ken and Judy duPlooy — he's originally from Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and she's from South Carolina — created something very special: the Belize Botanic Gardens, with plantings of some 2,500 trees from all over Belize and Central America. An orchid house also is planned, although at press time construction is stalled, pending new funding. For most guests, the focus of the lodge is the remarkable deck, which rambles off from the bar. From vantage points on the long walkway over the Macal River, you're sure to see a variety of birds, iguanas and other wildlife. Bring your camera and binoculars. About 300 species of birds have been identified within five miles of the lodge. In accommodations, duPlooy's offers something for anyone. For the top-of-the-market segment, duPlooy's has three large bungalow rooms, each with king-size bed, fridge and delicious hammock with a view down the hill to the Macal River, for US\$150 double in-season. For mid-level travelers, there are eight rooms in two lodge buildings, with double beds and screened porches, at rates of US\$115 double in-season. For the budget set, the lodge has six rooms, each with a double and single bed, sharing two baths in the Pink House, at US\$40 double in-season. Meals are an extra US\$35 per person. Note that duPlooy's does not serve beef, due to what the owners consider rainforest deforestation associated with cattle ranching, but it does serve pork, chicken and seafood, along with vegetarian dishes. The lodge also has a good selection of tours to Cayo and Petén sites. Rates US\$40 to \$150 double in-season, 15% discount

May 1-Nov. 30. Meal plans (including breakfast, lunch and dinner, US\$35). Package plans of from two to seven nights including meals and tours are available, from US\$350 to \$1,230 per person. AE, MC, V accepted. *San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-23101, fax 9-23301; e-mail duplooy@btl.net; www.duplooy.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, go 4 3/4 miles west on Benque Rd. (Western Hwy.) and turn left on Chial Rd. (look for signs to Chaa Creek, duPlooy's and Black Rock lodges). Follow signs on this unpaved road about 4 miles to duPlooy's.*

★★★★ + **Ek 'Tun.** Do you want a deluxe bed-and-breakfast type experience, with personalized attention and delicious home-cooked meals, but in a remote rainforest setting? Then Ek 'Tun may be for you. Owners Ken and Phyllis Dart, originally from Colorado, and their pet dogs have created a beautiful small lodge on 500 acres along the far reaches of the Macal River, about 12 miles upstream from San Ignacio. The two "rustically elegant" cottages can each sleep up to five. Hand built in the thatch Mayan style, each cottage has a large main room plus a loft and private bath with hot and cold water. Nearby are miles of hiking and horseback trails, river beaches and a stunning mineral water natural swimming pool. Birding here is excellent, and the serious birder is almost sure to add a number of rare species to the life list. Howler monkeys also frequent the area. Phyllis Dart calls the cooking at Ek 'Tun "guerrilla gourmet" featuring healthful Belize and international dishes with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. Rates: US\$217 double including breakfast and dinner and hotel tax. Package plans start at US\$426 per person double occupancy for a three-night package with meals, tours, transfers and tax. MC, V and Discover accepted with 5% surcharge. *Fax in the U.S. 303-442-6150; e-mail info@ektunbelize.com; www.ektunbelize.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, go 4 3/4 miles west on Benque Rd. (Western Hwy.) and turn left on Chial Rd. (look for signs to Chaa Creek, duPlooy's and Black Rock lodges). Follow signs toward Black Rock for about 6 miles. You cannot get all the way to Ek 'Tun by road, as there is no bridge across the Macal River. Ek 'Tun meets guests in San Ignacio or at the international airport, bringing them by Land Rover to the river, where they cross to the lodge on a skiff. Make arrangements in advance.*

★★★ **Mountain Equestrian Trails.** M.E.T. , as it's known, adjoins the Slate Creek Preserve of more than 3,000 acres. It's near, but not in, the Mountain Pine Ridge. The lodge has gone through a number of changes in recent years, but with the Bevis family back in the saddle things may be looking up again. Reportedly a cash infusion from a new investor will permit the building of additional cabañas and upgrades to the property. The four thatch cabañas here are some of the nicer ones you'll find at a lodge in Belize, though they don't have electricity and the lighting is from kerosene lamps. As its name suggests, the lodge long has specialized in horseback riding. The quarter horses here are

in good shape, and the guides try to match riders with horses. Rates US\$120 double in-season, US\$85 May 1-Dec. 14. Meals are extra, with breakfast US\$7, lunch US\$10, and dinner US\$18. For budget travelers, there's the Chiclero Trails safari tent camp, with rates of US\$15 per person including tent, mattress and linens. MC, V accepted. *Pine Ridge Rd., Cayo; tel. 501-9-23319, fax 8-23361 or 800-838-3918 in the U.S.; e-mail AW2trav2Bz@aol.com; www.metbelize.com. Directions: Turn south off the Western Hwy. at Georgeville (Mile 62.7) and go about 8 miles on the unpaved Pine Ridge Rd. Watch for M.E.T. sign on left, near Green Hills Butterfly Farm.*

Under US\$100

★★ + **Black Rock Lodge.** This lodge enjoys a beautiful, remote setting above the Macal River, about a mile upriver from Ek'Tun. The original dark and fairly basic cottages have been upgraded, and new units constructed. Rates US\$95 double. *Tel. 501-9-22341; e-mail blackrock@btl.net www.blackrocklodge.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, go 4 3/4 miles west on Benque Rd. (Western Hwy.) and turn left on Chial Rd. (look for signs to Chaa Creek, duPlooy's and Black Rock lodges). Follow signs toward Black Rock for about 6 miles.*

★★ **Crystal Paradise.** This is one of the few lodges in Cayo owned and operated by Belizeans, in this case by the Tut family. Many of the numerous



Maya figure points way to entrance to Black Rock Lodge

Tut family pitch in and help at the lodge, which is located near the village of Cristo Rey on the Macal River. You likely will be greeted by one of the junior Tuts. Mama and daughters do the cooking. Several of the older sons are guides. One, who goes to school in Cuba, even sells Cuban cigars at good prices. Granddad, now in his 90s, is an accomplished dugout canoe maker. With, or without? That's the question: Do you want a cabaña with a thatch roof, or a simpler and cheaper room without? Either way, you get a private bath with hot and cold water, ceiling fan and 24-hour electricity. The Tuts offer horseback riding (US\$65 per person for a full day), mountain bikes to rent, and a variety of tours. Rates: Thatch cabañas, US\$95 double; regular roof cabañas, US\$75 double, including breakfast and dinner, but not including tax or a 10% service charge. MC, V accepted. *Crysto Rey Village, Cayo*; tel. 501-9-22772, fax 9-12014; e-mail cparadise@btl.net; www. crystalparadise.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, take the Cristo Rey Rd. about 4 miles to Crystal Paradise. The lodge also has an office in San Ignacio, on Savannah St.

★★★ **Green Heaven Lodge.** Run by a young French couple, Dominique Agius and Anne-Karine Chappaz, and opened in mid-1999, Green Heaven has quickly established itself as a top choice among moderate-priced lodges in Cayo. Dominique and Anne-Karine, along with Anne-Karine's parents, frequent visitors from France, provide personal attention to guests and a friendly, casual atmosphere. The four wood and stucco cabins, scattered behind the main building on a low hill, are not deluxe, but they are attractively furnished with Guatemala fabrics and original art. After the generator shuts down around 11, you can light an oil lamp. There's no river swimming here, but Green Heaven has the best swimming pool in Cayo, plus badminton, volley ball and pétanque. Dominique runs the restaurant, La Vie En Rose, serving French classics like Beef Bourguignon and crepes. Rates US\$90 double Nov.-May, US\$70 rest of year. AE, MC, V accepted. P.O. Box 155, Chial Rd., San Ignacio; tel./fax 501-9-12034, e-mail ghlodge@btl.net; www.ghlodgebelize.com.

★★★ **Maya Mountain Lodge.** If you're confused about where to stay and how much to pay, Maya Mountain might be the answer. Can't decide whether to stay in town or out in the bush? Maya Mountain is in a quiet area, but it's less than a mile from San Ignacio. Want comfortable, family-friendly accommodations with several rate options, lots of tours available, and extras like a (shallow) swimming pool? That's also Maya Mountain. Bart and Suzi Mickler, Americans who have lived in Belize since the 1980s, have done a good job putting together something for just about everyone except those wanting the top-of-the-line jungle lodge experience or a party-hardy spot (there's no bar). In summer the lodge runs educational programs. The

restaurant serves healthful meals at moderate prices. The eight cottages were upgraded with tile baths and new curtains and other soft goods in 2000. Rates: Cottages are US\$89 double and modest rooms with private baths \$49 double in-season, cottages US\$59 and rooms \$35 May 1-Dec. 14. Some dorm-style accommodation is available for groups. Rates don't include 10% service charge or tax. There also is a somewhat bewildering selection of discount deals and package plans. AE, MC, V accepted. *P.O. Box 174, San Ignacio, Cayo; tel. 501-9-22154, fax 9-22029; e-mail adventure@mayamountain.com; www.mayamountain.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, take the Crysto Rey Rd. about 3/4 mile to Maya Mountain, on the right.*

★★ **Nabitunich.** You can see El Castillo at Xunantunich from this small lodge on the Mopan River just off the Western Highway. On the 400-acre cattle ranch are extensive Maya ruins, some excavated in recent years. Owner Rudy Juan is one of Cayo's gentlemen. This is one of the better values in Cayo, with doubles around US\$55. There's a small restaurant, but no bar. *Tel. 501-9-32096. Directions: From San Ignacio, take the Benque Rd. west about 5 1/2 miles. Nabitunich is on the right.*

Under US\$50

★ **Clarissa Falls.** This is a jungle lodge without the jungle, as it's located on a 900-acre cattle ranch, down by the Mopan River. Popular with Belizeans for weekend outings, Clarissa Falls is loved by just about everyone, mainly because of the people who run it. Within minutes, owner Chena Chalvez will have you laughing, and her charming sister, Anna, cooks up some of the best



A cattle ranch in Cayo

Mestizo-style food in Cayo. The lodge, at the end of a dirt path through a large pasture off the Western Highway, has 11 thatch cabañas, nine with private bath, in a shady setting by the river. Two of the units are big enough for large families. No deluxe furnishings or air-conditioning here, but everything is clean, and there's electricity and hot water. Most kids love Clarissa Falls, as they can swim, tube or canoe in the river, and then recharge with two soft tacos (US\$75 cents) and a red Fanta. Besides the big brahma cattle and occasional sheep, you'll see toucans and plenty of other birds; the resident parrot, Larry, slurps coffee. Rates start at US\$40 double with private bath, though the family-sized units are well over US\$100. MC, V accepted. Beds in a bunk house are US\$7.50, and camping is US\$3.75 per person. *P.O. Box 44, San Ignacio, Cayo, Western Hwy., tel. 501-9-23916. 5 1/2 miles west of San Ignacio — turn right at green bus stop with Clarissa Falls sign and go about 1 mile through cattle pasture.*

★ **Parrot's Nest.** Ever wanted to sleep in a tree house? Parrot's Nest at Bullet Tree Falls on the Mopan River, about 3 miles from San Ignacio, can make your dream come true. There are two cute tree houses, plus four cabins, all with outside facilities. Operated by a hard-working young couple, Chris and Theo Cocchi, Parrot's Nest is for those who don't mind a little rusticity. "High adventure at a low price" is the motto here. Theo is the daughter of Meb Cutlack, a noted writer and author on Belize subjects. Rates around US\$25 to \$33 double. No credit cards. *P.O.Box 108, San Ignacio, Cayo; tel. 501-9-37008; e-mail evas@btl.net and put "Parrot's Nest" in the subject line; www.parrot-nest.com. Directions: From San Ignacio, take Bullet Tree Falls Rd. about 3 miles.*

Under US\$25

Martz Farm. Simple accommodations on a working ranch owned by the Martinez family (there are 14 kids) at the site of a former chiclero camp. Horseback riding (about US\$65 for a full day's ride) and nature walks are available. Rates: US\$25 double (for another one of those "tree house" cabins), US\$7.50 for a room; get three meals a day for US\$13 per person. *Mile 8, Hydro Rd., tel. 501-9-23742; www.members.tripod.com/~vacabush/.*

RV Parks/Campgrounds

Cayo has more camping options than any other area of Belize. A number of the hotels and lodges in the area will permit overnight camping or RV parking.

Clarissa Falls. This popular Belizean-owned cabaña colony on the Mopan River (*see above*) also allows camping. Beds in the bunk house are US\$7.50, and camping is US\$3.75 per person. RVs and trailers are permitted to camp here, but there are no hook-ups. *P.O. Box 44, San Ignacio, Western Hwy.;*

tel. 501-9-23916.

Cosmos Camping. About 3/4 mile north of town, has tent sites (US\$4) and a swimming hole. Hammocks are available for rent. *Branch Mouth Rd., San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-22116.*

Hilltop Camping. Located in the village of San Antonio, about 1 1/2 miles from the Mountain Pine Ridge reserve boundary, this is a good choice if you are interested in the Pine Ridge. Sites are US\$2.50 each; hammocks or palapas may be available at no extra charge. *No phone.*

Inglewood Camping Grounds. A newer, more upmarket camping option is on the road to Benque just west of San Ignacio. Owners Veronica and Greg offer tent camping with hot and cold showers, rustic cabañas and hook-ups for RVs. *Mile 68 1/4, Western Hwy., tel. 501-9-23555.*

Midas Eco Resort. About 1/4 mile north of San Ignacio, Midas has 38 tent sites (US\$4 per person) and six thatched-roof cabañas (US\$34 double in-season) located near a sandy beach on the Macal River. Meals are available at US\$4-8. *Branch Mouth Rd., San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23172, www.belizex.com/midas_resort.htm.*

Trek Stop. At this friendly spot about 6 miles west of San Ignacio, on the road to Benque, you can rent a tent for US\$6, or if you just need a place to camp, it's US\$3.50. For meals, ask to use the common kitchen. *San José Succotz Village; tel. 501-9-32265; e-mail susa@btl.net; www.tbcnet.com/dyaeger/susa/trekstop.htm.*

Other Lodging

Among other lodging in the area, not rated by this guide, listed alphabetically:

Belmoral Hotel, San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-22024, under US\$25; **Bianca's Hotel**, San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23363; **Cahal Pech Cabins**, San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23740, US\$35 per cabin; **Casa Maya Eco Resort**, west of San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-12020; **Chiclero Camp Resort**, tel. 501-9-24113; **Cool Shade Resort**, on ranch off Pine Ridge Rd., tel. 501-9-23089; **Iguana Creek Resort**, near Ontario Village, tel. 505-865-6622 in U.S., cabañas US\$69, casitas with air-conditioning, stove and refrigerator US\$79; **Ixchel Guest House**, Chial Rd., tel. 501-9-23870; **Maxim's Palace Hotel**, Benque Viejo, tel. 501-9-32360; **Maya Hotel**, Benque Viejo, tel. 501-9-32116; **Hotel Pacz**, San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-22110, US\$18 for double with private bath; **Plaza Hotel**, San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23332; **Riverside Resort**, Bullet Tree, tel. 501-9-12007; **Riverwalk Guest Rooms**, tel. 501-9-23026; **Rose's Hotel and Cafe**; San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-22265; **Sandal's**, near Cristo Rey Village, cabañas

US\$20 per night; camping US\$1; **Slate Creek Canyon Eco Park, Mile 8, Pine Ridge Rd.**, tel. 501-1-47514, cabañas US\$50; **Snooty Fox Guest House**, Santa Elena, tel. 501-9-22150; **Three Flags Hotel**, Unitedville, tel. 501-9-23456; **Tropicool Hotel**, San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23052; **Woodlands Resort**, Benque Viejo, tel. 501-9-32553.

Restaurants

Eva's. This is a classic. It's a combination traveler's hangout, budget restaurant and bar, tourist information center and Internet cafe. You can arrange tours here, and even buy real estate, most of it grossly overpriced. Eva's (no one knows exactly who the original Eva was) has been around in its present incarnation since 1982, and, as it began offering e-mail and Internet access in 1995, it bills itself as "the first cybercafe in Central America." It's run by Bob Jones, a tattooed former Brit soldier and his Belizean wife, Nettie. *22 Burns Avenue, San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22267; e-mail evas@btl.net.; www.evasonline.com.*

La Vie En Rose at Green Heaven Lodge. Zounds! Cayo is getting sophisticated. You can even enjoy real French food cooked by a real Frenchman. French champagne is available, too, at around US\$5 a glass. We had the beef bourguignon and loved it. *Chial Road west of San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-12034, e-mail ghlodge@btl.net; www.ghlodgebelize.com.*

Sanny's. This place is a little hard to find, but it's worth the trouble. Sanny's does delicious things with pork chops, chicken and fish, using a hot grill and hot spices. Try the lime-thyme fish, prepared with red snapper and served with the flavorful rice and beans. Dine on the covered deck outside, or inside in a casual room. Sanny's motto proclaims "prices anyone can afford," and they are reasonable. Sanny's is in a house in a residential area off the Benque Road and is hard to find after dark. *23rd St. K, San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22988. Going west from San Ignacio, look for a sign on the right just beyond the Texaco station; turn right on the gravel road, go four blocks to a bar, turn left and go to the end of the block.*

Serendib. What?! A Sri Lankan restaurant in Cayo? Sorta of. You can enjoy authentic Ceylon curries, but most of the dishes here are what you'd find at any Belizean restaurant. Quiet atmosphere. *27 Burns Ave., San Ignacio; tel. 501-9-22302.*

Nightlife

Cahal Pech Tavern (near Cahal Pech Village hotel and the Maya site, tel. 501-9-23380) is where a lot of the action is, especially on weekends when there's live music. After dark, be sure to take a taxi, as the hillside traffic is

dangerous to pedestrians, and several visitors have been hit by cars. **El Cenote** (next to the Batty bus station in San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23173) is a kind of sports bar, with darts and pool, with a little garden in back. Upstairs, the **Culture Club** has live music on weekends. For just a drink and a chat, try the **Stork Club** at the San Ignacio Hotel.

Cayo District Practicalities

Banks: **Barclays Bank**, **Scotia Bank**, **Belize Bank** and **Atlantic Bank** have branches in Corozal Town.

Internet Access: Eva's is a pioneering cybercafé with Internet and e-mail access. Internet access is US\$2.50 per half-hour, or US\$4.50 per hour, during which time you can send or receive as many e-mails as you like. (Belizean students get free Internet access at Eva's, so your Internet access fees subsidize this service.) Many hotels and lodges have Internet access and may allow you to check your e-mail for a small charge.

Car Rental: **Western Auto Rentals**, Survey St., San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23081; **Safe Tours Belize Ltd.** Western Highway, next to the Public Works building, Santa Elena, tel. 501-9-24262; www.belize.com/safetours.htm.

Gift Shops: **Black Rock Gift Shop** (Burns Ave., San Ignacio, tel. 501-9-23770) has one of the largest selections in the area. Most of the jungle lodges also have gift shops; the one at **Chaa Creek** (tel. 501-9-22037) is especially good. For cheaper Guatemalan goods, go across the border to Melchor (*see Tikal section.*)

Groceries: **Celina's Superstore** (43 Burns Ave., tel. 501-9-22247) has a pretty good selection of groceries plus dry goods and other items. **Crossroads Supermarket** (18th St. and Benque Rd., tel. 501-9-23553) has better prices on some items.

Medical: A private hospital, **La Loma Luz Hospital** (tel. 501-9-22087) is in Santa Elena, with 24-hour emergency services. Among public facilities, there is the **San Ignacio Hospital** (tel. 501-9-22066) and the **Mopan Clinic** in Benque Viejo (tel. 501-9-32079). For dental care, best go to Belize City.

Real Estate: Among the local real estate offices are: **Cayo Real Estate**, 15 Burns Ave. San Ignacio; tel./fax 501-9-23739; e-mail cayo-info@awrem.com; www.awrem/belize.com. **Pleasant Homes Real Estate**, West St., San Ignacio; tel./fax 501-922007; e-mail realhomes@btl.net; www.belize.com/pleasantestate.htm. **Maxsell Realty Services Ltd.**, P.O. Box 29, San Ignacio; tel. 501-923381; e-mail info@maxsellws.com; www.maxsellws.com. Many of the properties listed with real estate brokers appear very optimistically priced. You may do better by talking with property owners directly.

Taxis: Taxis are fairly expensive in Cayo. Expect to pay about US\$15 to \$20 one-way to the border at Benque from San Ignacio, about US\$20 from San Ignacio to Chaa Creek or duPlooy's, about US\$2.50 between Santa Elena and

San Ignacio and around US\$80 for a round-trip to the Mountain Pine Ridge. Share taxis, or colectivos, are much cheaper — less than US\$2 to the border from San Ignacio. You just flag them down, like a bus.

Travel Information: The Web site www.belizex.com has useful information on area hotels, restaurants, tours and sightseeing.

What Readers Say

Most of our time was spent in the Cayo where we discovered GREEN HEAVEN LODGE. Dominique and Anne-Karine, the couple who run it, are from France. They have comfortable cabañas, a wonderfully big pool, a lovely bar and a French restaurant. We didn't think much of most of the food we ate in Belize, but I would recommend LA VIE EN ROSE without hesitation. The banana mousse is heavenly (I had it for breakfast the day we were leaving!) Dominique and Anne-Karine (aka Karina) are friendly and helpful and their resort offers all the usual trips to area sites. We visited both CHAACREEK and DUPLOOY'S for lunch. Both offered excellent food, friendly staff and beautiful surroundings. We spent one night at WINDYHILL RESORT outside San Ignacio and found the cabañas quite nice. The pool is very small and only about 3 feet deep and the dinner we had there (a set menu for \$17.50 US each) was



Green Heaven Lodge co-owner Anne-Karine Chappaz

dreadful - what another visitor called "chicken fried steak with wallpaper paste," white potatoes, zucchini cooked so long it had no color and a slice of white bread. The chocolate cake was okay but did not redeem the meal. We also drove over to Flores in Guatemala and spent a night. We had no trouble of any kind and found the road there (and to Tikal) much better than the guidebooks had lead us to believe. From the border crossing, there's about a half hour of unpaved, though quite good, road and then it's paved the rest of the way. The folks at Green Heaven can recommend some lovely places to stay in Flores. Our excursion to Guatemala was a last-minute whim and the people at THRIFTY were wonderful about faxing the permission we needed to take the rental car over the border to Green Heaven for us. *Nancy Adamson, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada*

On arrival at CAESAR'S PLACE we were shown to a beautiful, large cottage type room with large private bath (US\$50 double.) We were greeted by Caesar, and served a fantastic homemade pizza with salad US\$4, fresh limeade included. Caesar asked if we would like a tour, and we then visited Cahal Pech. At the site we were treated to a private tour by Otto, who works there and delighted us with the history of the Maya and guided us all through the ruins. This was the highlight of my friend's trip — she is blind, and he took very special care of her! We then went to the Blue Morpho Butterfly Centre at Chaa Creek before returning to CP. We opted for a day tour of Tikal the next day, so after a fantastic fresh snapper dinner, we finally retired. The tour to Guatemala and Tikal was far beyond all expectations. Again, Lois was given special treatment — when

the hiking was a little rough, she was transported by truck to the next site. Our guide, Juice, was excellent, and filled Lois in privately on what she had missed. We had lunch in Guatemala, and stopped for a shopping trip on the way back. All inclusive tour, including a Guatemalan soldier escort and lunch (US \$98). At Caesar's we had a bright, clean room, excellent homemade meals, drinks, charming company and hospitality. The family atmosphere is unbeatable. After three nights we transferred to Black Rock Lodge, visiting the Ix Chel Farm and the Medicine Trail on the way. I was thrilled to meet Rosita Arvigo, as I have her books at home. BLACK ROCK LODGE is on the Macal River and surrounded by the Maya Mountain rainforest. It is secluded with beautiful cabañas all overlooking the Macal and the waterfalls. Our cabaña was huge with slate walls and floor, a thatched roof and views in every direction, yet extremely private (US\$70.) This was truly paradise. The river is beautiful for swimming. I even tubed Vaca Falls and the Macal (US\$10), and went on endless walks through jungle trails. The meals were varied, all excellent, and served in an outdoor pavilion overlooking the falls and Macal River. John, a gracious host, makes the best rum punch I've had. I mentioned I loved milk; the next evening I was served an ice-cold glass of milk from the resident cow! This stay was just about perfect. Caesar owns both places, and everyone connected with Black Rock and Caesar's went out of their way to make our stay with them a dream come true. I am already planning to visit both places again.
Jeannie Finch, Moreno Valley, California

We stayed at EK'TUN for five nights. Ek'Tun exceeded our expectations, was a great adventure, had genuine hospitality, every attention to detail, and we hope to be able to return. Ken Dart picked us up at the airport. Ken and his wife Phyllis run Ek'Tun. They moved to Belize from Colorado 10 years ago, and lived in a tent for five years while they built Ek'Tun. They did a masterful job of planning their retreat in the jungle, with every attention to detail. Ek'Tun is on the opposite side of the Macal river from the road, so a boat is necessary to reach the property. The river was calm, cicadas were chirping, and the light was perfect for our 10-minute trip up the river. Once we reached the other side of the river, we were greeted by the official welcoming committee, Gus and Elwood, two very friendly mixed black labs. We walked up the hill to our cottage, which glowed from within with the soft light of oil lamps. The thatched-roof cabaña was furnished with hand-made furniture (desk, table and four chairs, in addition to the beds) made from local hardwoods. The cottage can accommodate four people, two downstairs and two upstairs, though during the warmer months the upstairs might be a little warm. Downstairs, the double bed is cooled by a nice breeze from well-placed screened window-openings. Though we were there during one of the warmest months (April), there was always a breeze and we never felt uncomfortably hot. The bathroom had a floor made from smooth river rocks, and a large, open shower with tiled floor. The water is supplied by a spring on the grounds. There was plenty of hot water, and we didn't miss having electricity one bit. Ken came by around dusk each day to light the oil lamps. Meals were great; dinner that first night was Szechwan chicken, which was great. Dessert was even better: warm bananas in a rum, butter and sugar glaze. During our stay, we had smoked pork chops, pasta, chicken and steak, usually served with a fresh salad. Ken also makes great margaritas, with fresh limes from their lime grove. Breakfast always included fresh fruits, lunches were usually sandwiches Phyllis packed us for hikes. In addition to the river view from our cottage, there's a distant view of the rock face of a small mountain/big hill. There is only one other cottage, which is located

more than 30 yards away, so that even if the other cottage were occupied (we were the only ones there for our whole stay) you'd have almost complete privacy. Mornings, hummingbirds almost swarmed around some lobster claw flowers five feet from the patio. There were absolutely no mosquitoes or other biting insects, even in the evening. During our stay, we hiked to several caves, swam in the river, hiked to Vaca Falls. The caves were magnificent, some with 150 ft. high ceilings, all with Mayan artifacts. Swam in a pool at the end of one cave that had albino fish. And since they own so much isolated property, we never saw anyone else on any of the trails. *Jim Hock, North Carolina*

My wife, my best friend, his girlfriend and I all just returned from the most exiting and entertaining trip we have ever had. I can safely say that this is a trip that we will definitely do again. We started our trip on TACA Airlines from Houston. I have flown several airlines in the States and they all could learn a thing or two from TACA. Both of our flights were right on schedule, the attendants were very courteous, the food was good (served with real silverware) and all drinks were complimentary. When we arrived at the international airport all of the employees were very polite and helpful and customs was no problem. It was very easy to get a cab — US\$15 to our next stop at Novelo's bus station. We were supposedly taking an "express" bus to San Ignacio but I believe that the express bus is actually a mythical beast of Belize (you can't complain though when it only cost US\$3 one way!) The bus ride was also an experience in itself as it gave us the opportunity to meet and converse with many different interesting people from the area. Once we arrived in San Ignacio we made our way from the bus stop right around the corner to MARTHA'S KITCHEN AND GUESTHOUSE. At US\$17.50 per night, we could not have asked for a nicer place to stay. The entire upstairs area, which was at our disposal, was spotless. The rooms are equipped with oscillating fans and have vaulted ceilings which really adds a comfortable spaciousness (particularly in the larger front room with a king bed and TV). The bathroom is shared by all three rooms upstairs and was also very clean and well maintained. Upstairs we had a full kitchen, dining room and living room with cable TV to use (though we were too lazy to cook for ourselves). The best feature though was the patio where we spent every evening downing cold Belikins (excellent beer with a European flavor) from the kitchen below while we watched the downtown activity below and planned our next activity. We ate several meals at Martha's and most were excellent but you are better off to order the local dishes (the pizza and buffalo wings were quite unlike what I am accustomed to). We also spent a fair amount of time at EVA'S RESTAURANT where, once again, we were met by friendly and helpful folks. Co-owner Bob Jones is an interesting guy though he gave me a hard time about my vacation from shaving. (What are vacations for?) When we reached the end of our reservations at Martha's, Martha recommended that we stay at MIDA'S resort and arranged for us to be picked up by Amelda who runs Mida's. At Mida's we stayed in quaint but spacious thatch roof cabañas which were very clean and set in a beautiful shady setting with plenty of hammocks for lounging. Emelda and family were very friendly and fun to visit with and they would even take you on the roof to feed Coca-Cola to their pet coati. My only complaint about Mida's is with the roosters which were not too concerned with the hour at which they began their calls. *Daniel Taylor, Houston, Texas*

"Five-star treatment at budget prices" — that's what we received on our stay at TREK

STOP, an ecotravel lodge west of San Ignacio. Our hosts Judy and John Yaeger could not have been more accommodating. We arranged our accommodations (a cabin at US\$10/person a night) via e-mail with Judy. When we arrived at Belize City International Airport, they had a van waiting for us. Our cabin was simple but comfortable: two twin beds with clean linens, mosquito netting and electricity. We occasionally ate at Trek Stop's restaurant where full meals ranged from US\$2-\$4. The cook is Mayan and uses the fresh fruits and vegetables of the season. She also makes her own flour tortillas. "So this is what a tortilla is supposed to taste like," we said, our previous experiences having been with the supermarket variety. In fact, the cook taught me how to make tortillas in two easy lessons, so good bye forever to store-bought. On other occasions we bought our own food at the local farmers' market and supermarket and cooked in the well-equipped kitchen that is available to guests. On other occasions, such as when we were out for the day, we ordered boxed lunches which were tasty and ample. Sometimes we ate at nearby restaurants. SANNY'S near San Ignacio has the best conch ceviche I've ever tasted. Tropical Wings Nature Center with museum (complete with an Unpetting Zoo) and butterfly house are on site. For US\$1.50 each we bused to the Belize Zoo to see its collection of native species. Our grand finale was a kayak (kayak rental US\$15) trip down the Mopan River from the Xunantunich ferry to Clarissa Falls. *Marcia Mascolini, Portage, Michigan*

We spent four nights at CHAACREEK. Expensive but worth it. Great food and the service is super. My husband was ill while we were there and they arranged to get him an antibiotic and we ended up paying US\$4 for it! We did about every activity offered and took several of the tours -- all pricey but again, we enjoyed them so much that we didn't mind. Rooms were beautiful and they put in an extra bed for one of our kids. Plenty of room for four people. My family didn't tell me until we were back in the U.S. that there was a bat flying in and out of our room every night! *Cindy Marsh, Woolwich, Maine*

My wife and I spent three days at DUPLOOY'S. We were very pleased with the setting. The expansive observation deck perched several hundred feet above the Macal River and at treetop level was a wonderful place to bird watch, watch the huge iguanas scamper through the brush under the deck and, at night, gaze at the dazzling array of stars. Our bungalow was large and beautifully decorated with Guatemalan handicrafts. The porch in front of the bungalow had a hammock, small table with two chairs and looked over the river. This was the perfect place to lounge, read and escape the mid-afternoon sun. Food was simple and tasty. Each night we started dinner with hot home baked bread that was delicious. Dinner always included a salad, choice of pork, vegetarian or chicken entree, and dessert. Meals were very good with the highlight being the best home made banana bread which my wife or I have ever tasted! We occupied ourselves by canoeing and horseback riding. The clear, calm waters of the Macal River were ideal for lazily paddling down the river as we attempted to identify the dozens of colorful birds we saw. It was also a lot of fun to watch iguanas scale the limestone bluff on the opposite shore as they tried to catch the last rays of the setting sun. Horseback riding was also great fun. Arnold, duPlooy's stablemaster, was a charming guide. He is a genuine cowboy who has worked on ranches and who competes in local rodeos. The duPlooy's horses were smaller but hardy and sure footed. We rode across the river and up the paths of the mountain across the river from the

resort. The views were glorious. Our only adventure away from the resort was a shopping trip to the nearby town of Melchor. Guatemalan crafts were very inexpensive. We found a beautiful large rug for US\$40. *Paul and Angela Shibley, Birmingham, Michigan*

Very highly recommended: INTERNATIONALARCHAEOLOGICAL TOURS, San Ignacio. Ramon Silva is the principal guide for International Archaeological Tours, e-mail iatours@btl.net. He has a 10-passenger A/C van and can get it most anywhere. We visited 9 archaeological sites. He is a certified guide in Mexico and Belize but not in Guatemala which requires citizenship for certification. However, he coordinated well for



Detail of restored relief at Xunantunich

our visits to four Guatemalan sites including Tikal, Uaxactun and Yaxha — an undervisited but especially scenic site not too far off the road between San Ignacio and Flores. He greatly enhanced our trip; we saw far more than we would have without him. We would probably have missed Yaxha had he not suggested it. Further, our arrangements were “hassle free” once we got there. We had extensive e-mail back and forth first where we indicated our interests and budget which he then matched quite well. Incidentally, he is a birder and member of the Audubon Society with a very keen eye for wildlife. The group he escorted before us was a bird watching group which spotted 187

species of birds in 8 days. *Eric Swanson, San Diego, California*

We spent four nights at CLARISSA FALLS and enjoyed Chena’s warm hospitality. Chena gave us terrific advice on the best way to enjoy the Cayo. We started with a trip up the Macal in a canoe furnished in San Ignacio by David’s Rentals and a great young Mayan guide named Giavanni. The next day we visited Tikal, (under the auspices of a Windy Hill Tour that was accompanied both ways by two armed guards - they had been stopped the week before by banditos). On our last day, we had a car from SAFE RENTALS and a driver named Lenny. He knew every back road in the Cayo and got us to Cahal Pech, lunch at Spanish Lookout, over to the awesome 1000 Foot Falls, and the Rio Frio. His good driving gave us time to have a series of slides down Rio On’s cascading falls. Our 60-year-old bodies left the Cayo on the 7:20 a.m. express Novelo’s bus to Belize City. Although Clarissa Falls is not opulent luxury, it is very comfortable and extremely friendly. Chena, her sister Anna and son Mark coupled with their terrific cooking and the quiet beauty of Clarissa Falls made this visit wonderful. *Lee Brewer, Middletown, New Jersey*

We stayed at the AGUADAHOTEL in Santa Elena. This hotel is a great place to stay. The owners, Bill and Cathie Butcher, welcome everyone as if they were family and the rooms are very clean and comfortable with optional A/C. We paid only US\$27.75 per night for a double room, including tax, which I feel was very reasonable, even for the

off season. They also have a lovely pool and a garden frequented by iguanas and many bird species. A nice touch is that they met us at the airport in Belize City with a cool drink (they called it an “Aguada Colada”) and a really posh Mercedes van. The transfer cost was US\$25 each, which we found much better than relying on the bus or the expense of a taxi all the way to the Cayo. The manager, Lenny Wragg, was wonderful about arranging anything we needed, whether it was a rental 4x4 or a tour of any of the area’s many attractions. He arranged a wonderful caving experience called the “Ultimate Jungle Tour” that was absolutely amazing for US\$75 each. We found the food at the Aguada to be very good and reasonably priced. You can get a nice breakfast for US\$4 and a good steak or seafood dinner for about US\$7.50. Another thing that I liked about the Aguada was that it was very quiet. It is within 5 minutes of downtown San Ignacio which is just across the river, but it is out of the hubbub of the noisy bars and roosters crowing. *Susan Shaffer, Kenai, Alaska*



This Land Rover has been on one too many rough roads