



Rambles Around Belize 2008

REPORTS & OPINIONS
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Banging Around Belize

I'm not an old Belize hand like many of you, but I've been banging around Belize for going on 18 years. On my latest visit, in January and February, I put nearly 1,500 miles on a rental car and many rough miles on a golf cart, along with flying. The rental car this trip was a Toyota Prado diesel from Avis. It proved to be a pleasure to drive, even on rough roads. For the first time, diesel fuel prices in Belize and the U.S. are about the same.

My daughter, Rose, in between stints in Bolivia and Argentina, came along for the

entire trip, and my son, Brooks, flew in from Harvard Yard for a few days of R&R in Placencia and Toledo.

Much of this visit was devoted to updating, revising and expanding *Fodor's Belize* for 2009. For this, I stayed at almost 20 different hotels and toured scores of other ones. Most of these I'd seen or stayed at before; a few were new to me. *Fodor's Belize 2009*, published by Random House/Fodor's Travel, will be out in late summer of this year.

I didn't get everywhere I wanted to visit in Belize, but I did travel from the northern tip of the country – Corozal Town, Copper Bank, Sarteneja – to Orange Walk Town, Indian Church, Blue Creek and Gallon Jug,



A mural in Corozal Town

over to Belmopan, San Ignacio and the Mountain Pine Ridge, with some time in Belize City, and then down to Dangriga, Hopkins, Placencia and on to Toledo before going out to the cays. I appreciate the gracious hospitality and friendship of so many – sometimes I think I know more people in Belize than in my home country of the USA – and I apologize for missing out on seeing other people and other places I should have seen. Maybe next time.

I'd like to share with you a few of the things I saw and heard on my latest rambles around Belize.

What's New?

Tourism is Up ... and Down: As always, the well-run places with something unique to

offer, such as **Victoria House, Chan Chich, Hidden Valley Inn, Blancaneaux, Turtle Inn, Hamanasi, Jaguar Reef and Inn at Robert's Grove**, were heavily booked and doing well. In January, many other places were slow. There's always a dip in January, but even so this dip was a little deeper than usual, and besides, with the high season so short this year (Easter is early), nobody can afford a slow month. February and March are much better for most places, but two or three months of strong bookings is not enough.

What's we've got here, as the fellow says, is a failure to communicate. In my opinion, Belize is just not marketing itself and its hotels as it should. Maybe the new Belize Tourism Board and Tourism Ministry folks will do a better job than in the past. Resorts are too small to do the job on their own; Belize



The new pool at Blancaneaux Lodge



Robie's Restaurant in Sarteneja, at night

needs a better cooperative promotional strategy. There are too many new hotel rooms, especially new condotels and lodges. The pie is the same size, but it's being sliced thinner. Belize is not getting the new airlift it needs, especially not from Canada, the U.K. or Europe, and so far as I can tell the promises of new foreign air service will simply not materialize anytime soon. Finally, and I hate to say it because one of the things I love about Belize is its many small, owner-run inns and lodges, but Belize needs some international hotel brands – major flags that are recognized worldwide, that can help bring in new tourists and even new air service.

Bunch of New Lodges in Cayo: Several new moderate-level lodges that have opened around San Ignacio. A couple of others are

under construction. I stayed at a couple of these (**Mariposa Jungle Lodge** and **La Casa del Caballo Blanco**) and visited most of the rest. I'm not sure how they're all going to make it, given the locations and the fact that some don't offer a real differential advantage, something unique in price, setting, service, food, activities, etc. compared to existing lodges in the area. There are several new lodges on the Cristo Rey Road on the way to or just beyond San Antonio village. These include **Table Rock Lodge**, **Macaw Bank**, **Mango Walk** and Mariposa. Of these, Table Rock and Mariposa are the more upscale. Mariposa is asking US\$155 a night for lodging in attractive thatch cabanas, but food (over BZ\$60 for dinner) is pretty expensive. On the Chiquibul Road (Mountain Pine Ridge Road) from Georgeville, **Gumbo Limbo Village Resort**

opened a few months ago. I would say it offers more for less - nice new rooms (not thatch) for US\$120 a night in-season, US\$85 off, a swimming pool and decent prices at the restaurant. Up near Mountain Equestrian Trails is **Moonracer Farm**, which will have a unit or two, and near Macaw Bank will be a new lodge with a projected 20 cabanas. On the newly paved Bullet Tree Road, about 1 1/3 miles west of San Ignacio, is **La Casa del Caballo Blanco** (House of the White Horse, named after a horse belonging to the previous owner, which remains on the property). Though close to the road, the setting on a hill offers great views of San Ignacio, and the Unique Selling Proposition here is that it has a bird rehab center on-site. Though not a lodge, **Ka'ana Boutique Resort and Spa** on the Benque Road just west of San Ignacio is an interesting experiment in upscale accommodations. The new owners, associated with Belize Natural Energy, have turned a failed roadside hotel into a charming top end property. You'll enjoy it, but you won't get out of here cheap; for example, a regular breakfast in the hotel's restaurant is US\$20. The owners here are also planning to open a large new resort in Placencia, on the site of the old Luba Hati and some adjoining properties.

Upscaling the Upscale: As has been the case for years, Belize tourism is continuing to move upscale. Everybody is adding a swimming pool, or a second or third pool. For example, **Blancaneaux** just added a new infinity pool, to supplement their heated pool and several private splash pools. **The Lodge at Chaa Creek** is closing for a month in September to build a pool near the conference center. There are new spas everywhere, even if in name only. More places have fancy designer toiletries in the baths. Happily, there are still places that just offer good accommodations at a fair price. For example, **Hickatee Cottages** near Punta Gorda. Or **Coral House Inn** on the water-

front in PG. Or **D'Nest Inn** in Belize City. **Maxhapan Cabanas** on Caulker. All of these have attractive rooms at prices in the US\$65 to \$85 range, or less. And, they're run by people who enjoy what they're doing, which makes a big difference.

Impact of the U.S. Recession: That the U.S. is now in recession is clear. What's not clear yet is what impact that will have on Belize. The link between the U.S. dollar and the Belize dollar is a plus, because for American tourists the weak U.S. dollar means little when they visit Belize. Americans will continue to visit Belize, though I don't think we'll see any growth in tourism in 2008 or 2009, and likely there will be some contraction in U.S. visits. Possibly this will be offset by increased tourism from Canada, Europe and Latin America, though without additional air service from these areas a significant increase is unlikely. The U.S. slowdown, however, certainly will impact real estate sales in Belize. It's a fantasy to think that a recession, plus the housing bust in Belize's largest supplier of property buyers won't have a considerable impact on sales.

Condomania Continues: In the face of the U.S., Canadian and U.K. housing problems, developers in Belize continue to pour concrete for new condo developments, especially on Ambergris Caye and in Placencia. They're also building bigger projects. For example, **Grand Caribe** on North Ambergris is doing 74 condo units, **Las Terrazas** (a project of the **Journey's End** owners) is building 78 units in two phases, **Placencia Resort** has asked for approval to do 152 units just north of the Inn at Roberts Grove, and **Bella Maya** in Placencia with 60 units has finally opened (though 30 of the units are incomplete). The controversial **Ara Macao** in Placencia is going to build 50,000 units (or something ridiculous like that.) And the list goes on and on. Real estate

agents and developers tell me that sales were pretty good until a few months ago, when they started slowing down, in some cases significantly. This obviously is the impact of the U.S. economic problems. My gut is that Belize is going to see a glut of condos over the next couple of years. Expect some bargains, much like what we're seeing in Florida now, with discounts of 20% to 30% off the original asking prices.

Hotel Highlights

Without exception, the places where I stayed this trip were delightful. If I had to single out a few spots, it would be these:

Blancaneaux Lodge (www.blancaneaux.com) looks better than ever. It has a gorgeous new pool, where the croquet lawn used to be. There's also a new, dinner-by-reservation only, *Guatemalteca* restaurant next to

the pool. The "Enchanted Cottage" is a lovely tile-roofed stone house that will open soon, a bit away from the main lodge grounds.

Chan Chich Lodge (www.chanchich.com). It had been several years since I was last at Chan Chich. All I can say is that the lodge has only gotten better under the management of Ben and Amanda Dodge, who before taking this assignment were teachers at a nearby village school. The new two-bedroom villa (complete with air-conditioning) is a nice addition for families or a two couples traveling together. Meals at the lodge are superb. The setting, as ever, is wonderful.

Inn at Robert's Grove (www.robertsgrove.com) thrives by understanding what their guests want and by delivering it flawlessly. While I was enjoying luxurious beachside digs at



The reef from the rooftop of Azul villa

Robert's Grove, owners Robert and Risa Frackman traveled to Belize City to accept the Belize Tourism Industry Association's top honor – being named Hotel of the Year for 2008. Much deserved! This is truly one of the most enjoyable and best-run beach resorts in the region.

D'Nest Inn (www.dnestinn.com) is the kind of place you wish Belize City, and indeed Belize, had more of. It's well run, safe, fairly priced and very comfortable. You get little extras like a full breakfast, cable TV and free wireless. Gaby and Oty make their guests feel welcome, and it's no wonder D'Nest Inn stays busy.

Brits Ian and Kate Morton opened **Hickatee Cottages** (www.hickatee.com), located about a mile from PG, in 2005. This little lodge is living proof that you don't need to stay in a big, fancy resort at high prices to have a great vacation experience. Rates for the three cottage rooms, set in lush foliage, are an affordable US\$70 to \$85, plus hotel tax, and include airport transfer and continental breakfast. There's a small swimming pool – actually, more of a splash pool. Delicious meals made with fruits and vegetables from the owners' organic nurseries next door are available (dinner is around US\$15). A special treat: On Wednesdays and Saturdays, you can go with Ian to visit the nearby Fallen Stones butterfly farm, which he manages. Fallen Stones is one of the largest commercial butterfly operations in Central America, and closed to the public, except for guests of Hickatee.

At Hidden Valley Inn (www.hiddenvalleyinn.com), guests in just 12 cottages have access to 7,200 private acres. That's perhaps 300 private acres per person, with miles of trails to explore and hidden waterfalls to discover. How cool is that? I first stayed at Hidden Valley years ago, when Mr. Bull Headley owned it. I didn't know him well but did

break bread with him a time or two, and he was quite a colorful character. (His son still lives near the lodge.) The prominent Roe family of Belize City bought the lodge in 2001 and made many small but important improvements, including adding a gorgeous swimming pool. New in 2007 is an airstrip. The new GM, Flavien Daguisse, appears to be doing an excellent job.

Azul Resort (www.azulbelize.com) about 5 miles north of San Pedro is in that rarified category of small resorts for those guests for whom, as it's said, money is no object. For a price, your every expectation is met: There's a gorgeous stretch of beach, a circular pool shared by just two beach villas. And what beach villas these are, with 3,000 sq. ft. of luxury and good design. They have flat-screen plasma TV, a projection TV to turn your villa into your own movie theater, and a Bose sound system. Beyond the electronics they have two luscious bedrooms with king beds with Egyptian cotton linens. They also have a private hot tub, day bed and dining area on the roof, with amazing views of the water. Of course, you're just steps from perhaps the best restaurant in Belize, Rojo Lounge. You could wake up here and think you were in St. Barths, playground of multimillionaires and billionaires. Yet, I have to say that there's a nice, down-to-earth touch at Azul. Nobody's putting on airs. The owners' sizable menagerie of dogs and cats seem to enjoy the place as much as the guests.

At Victoria House (www.victoria-house.com) south of San Pedro, we stayed in one of the new condo villas, which are gorgeous. Victoria House is peaceful, serene, beautiful, everything that an island resort should be.

At Cotton Tree Lodge (www.cottontreelodge.com) near Punta Gorda, you can play Tarzan and swing into the Moho River on a rope swing. Opened in late 2006, Cotton Tree is right beside the river about 15 miles from PG. Guests are

usually brought in by boat, though you also come by road, and stay in one of 10 thatch cabañas set among wild fig trees along the river's edge. You walk around the property on raised walkways. I've not been there in the summer rainy season, when the Moho floods, but it's got to be an interesting experience, with the lodge grounds becoming a large lake, water lapping at the walkways. There are still some rough edges here, but I suspect it will make it, thanks to the dramatic riverside location.

La Casa del Caballo Blanco (www.casacaballoblanco.com) in San Ignacio, with its bird rehab and birding focus, may find its niche. The owners were away when I was there, but the friendly staff did a good job. And, as I say, the setting on a hill overlooking San Ignacio and nearby hills offers lovely views.

Mariposa Jungle Lodge (www.mariposajungle.com)

(glelodge.com), near San Antonio village on the way to the Mountain Pine Ridge, was built by two attorneys who retired to the adventure of running a lodge. The cabanas are very attractive, and the owners provide personal attention and customized activities.

Belize's Best Eating

Restaurants in Belize keep getting better and better. Here are some of my most memorable meals from this visit. **Riverside Tavern** in Belize City has the best burgers in Belize. Period. The dining room isn't open to the public, but if you want a great breakfast in Belize City, I know where you can get it – at **D'Nest Inn**. Oty is a great cook. In Corozal Town, I still love **Patti's Bistro** and the **Y Not Grill** at Tony's Inn (the fajitas are great, as is the bayside atmosphere), but the new **RD's** (aka R'nD's) near Patti's is also



Travel writers at breakfast at Estel's in San Pedro: (From left, Lan Sluder, Josh Berman of Moon Guide Belize and Marty Casado of AmbergrisCaye.com)

Photo courtesy of Josh Berman

excellent. At the half dozen or so lodges where I stayed this trip, the best meal I had was at **Chan Chich Lodge**, and a close runner-up for best lodge meal was at **Blancaneaux Lodge**, where we had a wonderful dinner with the beautiful Anne Wood, who heads up Mr. Coppola's growing hotel operations. In Placencia, the best meal I had was ... at **Tutti-Frutti**. Start with a cup of banana gelato, then a double scoop cone of mango and coconut, and for dessert a scoop of tiramisu. Tutti-Frutti has moved up a few doors to the new center across from the **Purple Space Monkey** (where breakfast was excellent) and just in front of the new BTIA office. Tiziana and Laurent's authentic Italian ices are alone worth a special trip to Placencia. The Saturday poolside barbecue at **Robert's Grove** was fantastic, as usual. **Maya Beach Hotel Bistro** was bustling, and I like the expanded new menu at this charming spot, though I can't recommend the Lobster Shooter – sorry, Ellen and John, but I don't get off drinking lobster-flavored tequila! In Punta Gorda, I was happy to find out that an old favorite, **Mangrove Inn**, had reopened after an absence of several years, but this time on the second floor of **Casa Bonita**, up at Cattle Landing. Iconie Williams is still the culinary force behind it. The best meals of the entire trip were at **Rojo Lounge**, 5 miles north of San Pedro on North Ambergris. Oh, those crab cakes, those guava-glazed baby back ribs, that rich, thick hummus. Owners Jeff Speigel, a former punk rock record producer and self-taught chef, runs the back of the house, and Vivian Yu runs the front. The one place I wished I would never have to leave was breakfast next to the pool at **Victoria House**. With a view of the sea and the barrier reef, with a gentle breeze from the water, it was idyllic. The third time's the charm for **Capricorn**. On its third set of owners, the restaurant has regained its sea legs and is again one of the top restaurants on the island. Reservations are essential. By

chance, I was at Capricorn the day its original owners, Clarence and Annabel, held their grand opening party. There's also a lot of buzz about the new **Blue Lotus**, on what is being called the "bayside" of San Pedro. The word is that it has Indian food, top-flight service and a stunning setting.

Up-and-Coming Sarteneja

We arrived by car in Sarteneja on a rainy, cold day. A norther had swept in, causing heavy rains and chilled temps. For a while, I put on a cotton sweater. But when the sun came out, the little village of Sarteneja came to life. Kids play on the dirt streets or swim off the docks. Villagers hang out on the porches or yards of small, plain, but well-maintained houses, speaking Spanish, or stroll down for a cheap bite to eat at Robie's.

This is Belize like it used to be. Safe. Friendly. Inexpensive. A picturesque setting on the water.

There's not much to see or do here, except for the Shipstern Reserve. The crocodile crèche has closed, due to the death of its founder, and the baby crocs have been released. Sarteneja is a place just to hang and maybe finish that novel you've been working on.

Sarteneja has only a few small guesthouses, a handful of restaurants. We stayed this trip at **Candalie's Sunset Cabañas** (email can-daliescabanass@yahoo.com), next door to **Krisami's Guesthouse** and owned by members of the same family. For value and comfort, you can't beat Candalie's. A roomy cottage, perched just a few feet from the sea, with cable TV and A/C, is only US\$40 double. The owner of **Fernando's Guesthouse**, down the street also on the water, has done some upgrading of the rooms there. **Backpackers Paradise** (www.cabansbelize.com) has funky little cabins

for budget-minded travelers. The double beds take up almost all the space, and the baths are outside and shared, but they're a deal at US\$10 double. The owners are a Canadian-Swiss couple.

In my opinion, Sarteneja is Belize's next Hopkins. It's already attracting attention from real estate buyers. The only thing that's holding it back is that it still takes a little effort to get there. The route from Corozal Town is a little faster these days, now that there is a second hand-pulled ferry over Laguna Seca, but it's still a long sloshy drive, especially after rains. There are several buses a day from Orange Walk Town, and one from Chetumal and Corozal Town. Tropic Air has a scheduled flight (if there's demand) to Sarteneja's airstrip, and the twice-daily Thunderbolt water taxi between San Pedro and Corozal Town stops, on request, at Sarteneja. You can also take a skiff from Chetumal to Sarteneja, and have your passport stamped at the police station.

Tiny's is the new Internet café in Sarteneja.

PG Is Peachy

Peaches may not grow in Toledo, but nonetheless Punta Gorda is peachy. The town has such a lovely waterside setting, comparable to Corozal Town. It's small, it's friendly, it's safe, it's pretty. There's so much to do around Toledo – caving, hiking, visiting the many Maya sites – and offshore, where the permit and other fishing is world-class, and where the reefs and water are virtually pristine. It's a shame more visitors don't come down and discover it.

Blue Belize Guest House

(www.bluebelize.com) is a welcome new addition to the list of PG hotels. It has views of the water, and rates are an affordable US\$55 (plus 9% hotel tax) for a double.



The eponymous white horse at La Casa del Caballo Blanco in San Ignacio

There's also a new small guesthouse on Front Street next to **Beya Suites**. It's called **Tropics Inn B&B**, but it was never open when I went by. Another guesthouse is opening in town soon. If you can believe it, it combines guest rooms and a pit bull kennel. Yeah.

My favorite hotel in PG proper is **Coral House Inn** (www.coralhouseinn.net) You'll recognize it by the vintage VW van parked in front. Americans Rick and Darla Mallory renovated this 1938 British colonial-era house and turned it into one of the best small guesthouses in the country. It's near the sea at the end of Front Street. The four guest rooms – rates US\$82.50 to \$100 — have tile floors, excellent beds, A/C and Wi-Fi. There's a small pool, recently upgraded.

Breakfast is included in rates. The owners also manage a nearby, newly renovated private rental home, available for US\$100 to \$125 nightly, depending on length of stay, plus tax.

For those driving down, work on preparing the last 9 miles of the Southern Highway for paving has actually begun.

Don't Cry for Me, Placencia

Those of us who have been going to Placencia for 15 or 20 years, who remember when the peninsula was a little bit of the South Pacific in Central America, the changes in Placencia are disconcerting. Everybody and his brother have plans to



Aerial shot of Azul Resort, from Astrum's Bell helicopter

build condos or sell building lots. But, with the best beaches on the mainland, it had to happen. I just hope that development occurs with sensible, long-range planning for reliable infrastructure, building codes and restrictions, tasteful signage rules and limitations on how the lagoon and sea beaches can be developed.

A model for this is Stewart Krohn's **Coco Plum** development. It's a blueprint for what a well-conceived and well-executed development should be. The paved roads are amazing. There are only a few houses built there as of now. Katie Valk (www.belize-trips.com) just moved into her stunning new beachfront house, and Krohn has a new house farther inland.

Unfortunately, on most of the peninsula I don't see this kind of project being repeated. There is a hodge-podge of development. There is no master plan. It's a free enter-

prise free-for-all.

As to the infamous Placencia road, every year the word is "we've got the money, we're letting bids, work will start later this year." Yep, that's the word again in 2008. Maybe it will actually happen this year. But don't hold your breath.

San Pedro Sizzles

I've written a guidebook to San Pedro and have been reporting on Ambergris Caye for 15 years, but I can't keep up with all the changes on the island. New condos are going up everywhere you look. Dear old Front Street and also Coconut Drive, down to Victoria House, is now paved with concrete cobblestones down. There's a brand new gas station south of town – a gas station, just like in the 'burbs! Driving past the airstrip and the high dark walls Ramon's Village has put up to shield the resort from



Mennonite boys near Little Belize

street noise and up the drive, the traffic is terrible, and I feel like I'm in the middle of a concrete canyon.

But there's an energy in San Pedro that's missing in most other tourist destinations in Belize. Every block there's a new shop or a new bar or a new restaurant. Not everything works, but a lot of people are making money.

Of course, the timeshare assholes are trying to ruin the island. **Captain Morgan's** is the worst. **Reef Village** also hassles tourists, but anyone who buys at this ugly place deserves what they get.

Handicap Access

This may come as a surprise to some of you, but I'm not as young as I used to be. (I know it surprises me.) Neither am I exactly a poster child for the South Beach Diet.

On the positive side, this gives me a new insight into the issues of handicap access in Belize. On this trip, touring hotels and moving from one hotel to another every day or so, it seems like I spent half my time climbing up and down stairs. Steep stairs. Stairs up four or five stories, in some cases. Steps up the side of hills. "Easy" hiking trails that rise and fall hundreds of feet in a mile or so. Boats that dock three feet below the level of the pier. Little airplanes that require you to bend double to get down the aisle.

The fact is, most of Belize simply isn't accessible for people with limited mobility. Or just for those of us who aren't as spry as we used to be.

Hotels almost invariably are built elevated from ground level. Walkways at jungle lodges or even at regular hotels are cobblestone or rough boards or loose gravel. Often the best rooms, those with the views, are on the top floors, up several flights of stairs.

I can count the number of hotels in Belize with handicap-accessible rooms on the arthritic fingers of one hand – **Calico Jack's** in Placencia, the original **SunBreeze** in San Pedro, **Hok'ol K'in** in Corozal Town, and maybe a couple of others. Aside from elevators in the high-rise hotels in Belize City, the **Radisson Fort George, Renaissance Tower** and the **Princess**, and the little one at **Corona del Mar** in San Pedro, here are almost no elevators anywhere in the country.

Even the new condo developments in Placencia and Ambergris Caye are going up two, three or four stories without elevators. (Surely, developers will figure out the average buyer of a US\$600,000 condo is not going to be a 20-something marathon runner, but more like a retired couple with a hip replacement or two?)

I understand the problems of building in a hurricane- and flood-prone environment, on sand, on remote hillsides. I realize there are no laws requiring access for those with less than perfect mobility.

In today's world of aging Baby Boomers with bum knees, though, there's a market for hotels and condos with easy access. Somebody is going to figure out that wide doors, access ramps and elevators sell. (In one of the guidebooks I write, *Fodor's Belize*, a standard requirement now is to state whether or a not a listed hotel has an elevator.) Even if it's not mandated by law, it can make good economic sense to make new construction in Belize accessible to everyone.

Election: Fi U, Fi Me, Fi All a We

My rambles around Belize coincided with the run-up to the general election, and to the election itself on February 7, which saw the United Democratic Party sweep back into

power, winning 25 of 31 House seats. As I'm not a Belizean citizen, I stay out of Belizean politics, but I have to congratulate Belize and all Belizeans on the election. It was peaceful, fair, well run and as full of political vim and vigor as any election I've ever seen. This was an election run by and for Belizeans – no need for a bunch of outside political consultants. It's a sign that Belizean democracy has matured. Almost three-fourths of registered voters participated, an involvement rate that Americans and

many others should envy.

As I traveled around Belize before the election talking to both Belizeans and expats, I did hear a lot of nonsense – about how it was going to be a close race, about what the PUP would do or the UDP would do, about how violence would rip through the country



after the election. But one guy who had it all figured out was **Stewart Krohn** of Channel 5 TV. Three weeks before the election, over

dinner one night, he quietly explained what would happen in the election. He said flatly that the PUP at most might win six or seven seats, and he was dead right. Hey, Stewart has his own Wikipedia entry – I'm impressed!

I can only hope that the U.S. presidential election turns out half as well. George W. Bush and his incompetent pals have done their pathetic best to destroy the economy, the military, the moral power and the great democratic traditions of America. After near eight years of Bush-Cheney, the dollar is the world's 98-pound weakling, the trade and budget deficits are at historical highs, the housing and credit markets are in tatters, the stock market is tanking, the economy has entered a scary recession, we're in an energy crisis, we're trapped in an endless three trillion dollar war, and most of the six billion people in the world are disgusted with the U.S. Bush doubtless will rank with Buchanan and Harding as the worst president in U.S. history.

Trip Advisor: Power and Problems

Trip Advisor (www.tripadvisor.com) has become a force in the hospitality industry. A series of top reviews of a hotel can boost its occupancy considerably; several bad reviews can really hurt it.

While Trip Advisor is a great resource for travelers, there are problems with it. It's no secret that some, perhaps many, of the reviews are spiked. Some glowing reviews are put by the hotel owner or by friends of the owner. Hotel operators take pains to encourage happy guests to post reviews, which skews the statistics. Owners of units in condotels juice their investment by posting anonymous glowing reviews. On the other side of the coin, some negative reviews are posted by competitors. Sometimes, a bad review is just the way a vindictive guest has

of getting back at a hotel that didn't live up to perhaps unrealistic expectations.

But aside from these issues, you have to take some of the reviews with a grain of salt. Many are extremely detailed and helpful. But others show a total lack of knowledge about the area. If anything, many of the reviews are overly positive. Guests ooh and aah over the view of the barrier reef, say, or the fact that the hotel puts decorative flowers on the bed. The reviewer may not know that scores of hotels in Belize put fresh flowers out (it's still a nice touch, of course), and that nearly all the resorts on the northern cayes have views of the reef. But it's the lack of comparative knowledge and lack of context that makes many of the reviews less valuable than they otherwise would be.

Look at the hotel properties that are currently (the popularity index does change frequently) listed as the "most popular" on Ambergris

Caye. The top three in "specialty lodging" of 17 properties are, in this order, **Pedro's Inn**, **Belize Tradewinds Paradise Villas**, and **The Palms** condotel. Wow, what a group! I don't know what "specialty lodging" actually is, but I can't imagine comparing Pedro's and The Palms.

In a different category, of Ambergris Caye's 45 hotels reviewed, **White Sands Cove** and **Xanadu** both receive # 1 ratings for popularity. Not sure how that's possible, as they're not shown as tied, just both # 1. Not to be picky, but why wouldn't Paradise Villas, The Palms, Xanadu and White Sands Cove all be in the same category? They're all properties that have individually owned condo units, managed by a management company. Both White Sands Cove and Xanadu are excellent, well-run properties, but if you were betting on the "most popular" hotel on the entire island, would you say it was White Sands Cove? In Trip Advisor's Ambergris



Caye B&B category, **Salamander Hideaway**, **Caye Casa**, **Blue Tang Inn**, **Changes in Latitudes** and **Turtleman's House** are the five listed B&Bs. Huh?

Bottom line for me: Trip Advisor is a powerful tool, but it is run by people who know almost nothing about hotels in Belize or how to group them. The reviewing process is inherently skewed by competing commercial interests and by the self-selected nature of the reviewers. As more and more people do reviews, Trip Advisor will become more valuable and reliable. You can throw out the very negative and very positive reviews, along with the obviously naïve ones, and get a good feel for the sense of the majority of guests. But judging hotels based on a handful of reviews (most Caye Caulker hotels, for example, have fewer than 10 reviews and three of 18 hotels listed have only one review each) is not necessarily a good idea.

Andy Palacio

I shouldn't have been, but I was surprised at the outpouring of feeling of so many Belizeans at the untimely death of Andy Palacio. Thousands came out to mourn him, and at his funeral the population of Barranco probably tripled.

Helicopters

Astrum Helicopters

(www.astrumhelicopters.com), based at the Cisco Yard at Mile 3 1/2 of the Western Highway, is run by a hard-working family from Guatemala. They are making this business work, offering transfers to resorts like Cayo Espanto and Azul Resort (US\$1,200 to \$2,250 for four to six people), real estate tours, and sightseeing tours for cruise ship passengers and tourists. They operate dependable Bell 206 equipment, including a new 7-place Bell 206 L Long Ranger.



Detail from woodstork mural at Candalie's Cabanas in Sarteneja



One of the guests at Rojo Lounge on North Ambergris

Value Rant

Pardon me while I rant for a moment on the problem of value in Belize tourism. Belize has a reputation, partly undeserved and partly deserved, for being an expensive destination.

Belize has many great tourism buys. I've mentioned a few in this Ramble – places like **Candalie's Seaside Cabanas** in Sarteneja, where a big cottage with A/C and cable TV is just US\$40 for two. Or many of the budget hotels and B&Bs you'll find in Caye Caulker, Placencia, Belize City, Corozal Town, Orange Walk Town or downtown San Ignacio. Or little local restaurants, such as **Patti's Bistro** in Corozal Town or **Anijitos Santelmo** on Ambergris Caye, where you can get a tasty full meal for a few bucks.

But to prospective visitors and to those who come to Belize, some costs stand out like an ugly sore thumb. Examples: US\$200 for a one-way transfer from Belize City to Cayo. Sure, it's for up to four people, which on a per-person basis isn't bad, but the fact is

that most come to Belize as a couple, so they're pay US\$200 round-trip just to get to a lodge.

Or the jungle lodge that charges US\$35 to \$40 for dinner, plus 10% service and maybe 10% tax. The dinner might be great, or it might be mediocre. The guest without a rental car really doesn't have an option, and so feels ripped off. The guest-focused lodge would provide an alternative, much as concessionaires at U.S. national parks do, with a snack bar or other less expensive option for those that don't want to pay US\$100 a couple for dinner and drinks.

Too many Belize hotel owners figure if they're not making money, they've got to raise rates and prices. Every year, I look at hotel prices, and rates at many spots go up 5, 10 or 15%. The operators complain about the high cost of food, the high cost of gas, the burden of social security taxes. So, start your own organic gardens and get a hybrid that gets 50 miles per gallon. Belize labor costs are still dirt cheap compared with the



Beach and pier at the Inn at Robert's Grove

developed world, so don't complain about that.

For too long, when the question is value, the answer has been to raise prices instead of finding a way to cut costs and to become more competitive. The result is Belize's current reputation as the most expensive destination in the region. Increasingly, even in comparison with the U.S. and Canada, Belize is seen as expensive. Hotel rates, meals, gas, groceries and car rentals are viewed as MORE EXPENSIVE than in the average U.S. destination. That, my friend, is not good!

On the other side of the coin, if a hotel operator can't or won't cut rates, at least he or she should try to offer a real differential advantage. Too many Belize properties are "just good enough." They don't offer something unique and special, in place, people, price or product that is totally superior to that the guest can get anywhere else. **Chan**

Chich, to use an obvious example, is expensive, yet due to its location, its setting, its unique style, its unmatched birding and animal spotting, guests feel they get value for the money.

Wild Creatures in Cages

I finally had a chance to see **Croc-O-Dile Isle**, which is a few miles off the Southern Highway, on a dirt road near Silk Grass village. Although I had a pleasant meal at the Snap Jaws restaurant there, I was a little taken aback by the crocodile displays. The whole place reminded me a little of some roadside alligator zoo in 1950s Florida. A few pathetic-looking small crocs lay in the sun in small ponds of muddy water. I don't recommend it.

In late January, I also stopped at **Indian Creek Lodge** and met Ken Karas, who runs this and the other **Belize Lodge and Excursions'** three lodges in Toledo. That's

another story, but Mr. Karas did show me **Balaam Na**, which means “House of the Jaguar” in K’etchi Maya. It is about a 10-minute drive from Indian Creek. Balaam Na has attractive, upscale suites in a lodge that is built over a fenced enclosure where, I was told, two jaguars would be placed. The idea is that guests can look down from their suites or the raised walkway and see the jaguars. When I was there construction was still going on in at least one of the suites. Supposedly, according to the web site, this place has been open for a while, but it obviously wasn’t open when I visited.

Karas asked if my daughter and I wanted to see the two jaguars. We said yes. The jaguars, beautiful young males, one black and one spotted, are being kept in a small cage at Indian Creek Lodge. So far as I can see, they have no place to exercise, no way to be out in the open. Now, I understand the idea is that at some point they will be put in the fenced enclosure at Balaam Na. When I don’t know. But even to be kept in such a cage for a few weeks or few months — I have no idea how long they’ve been in there, but it hasn’t been just a few days — is disturbing.

When we finished the Balaam Na tour Ken



Lan Sluder is the author of more than half a dozen books on Belize, including Fodor’s Belize, Living Abroad in Belize and San Pedro Cool. He also has done other travel guides for Frommer’s and Fodor’s. His travel articles have appeared in many magazines and newspapers, including Caribbean Travel and Life, The New York Times, Where to Retire, Globe & Mail, and the Chicago Tribune. He founded Belize First Magazine, now available as a free Internet magazine at www.belizefirst.com. His eBooks on living and retiring in Belize, including Easy Belize and Island Living in Belize, are available from eBooks for Expats at www.EscapeArtist.com.

Brooks Lambert-Sluder and Rose Lambert-Sluder, in Placencia

Photo by Lan Sluder

