

Where to stay

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The roof terrace of a villa at Azul Resort



Belize Azul Resort

My blue heaven

Playwright Christopher Hampton finds an out-of-this-world resort in a pristine corner of Belize

FIFTY YEARS AGO, the great travel writer Norman Lewis said: 'I cannot think of any better place for someone seized with a weariness of the world to retire to in Gauguin fashion, than Belize.' Lewis's devout hope that the country would somehow remain untouched by the tourism explosion was, of course, destined to be dashed; but there are some grounds for supposing that way up in the north of Ambergris Caye only a dozen miles from the Mexican border, cooled by the perpetual breeze from the Caribbean and lulled by the distant roar of

the longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere, even Lewis – overcoming his monkish distaste for comfort – might have found Azul sufficiently out of the world.

When Jeff Spiegel and Vivian Yu first arrived here in 2000 from San Francisco, where Spiegel had been running a small punk record label, the property consisted of a modest blue (hence the name) beach house. When they opened for business five years later, this had been replaced by a most original cluster of buildings: a restaurant (the Rojo Lounge), already gathering an >

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There is a hot tub up on the roof, from which you can watch the sun set over the mangroves


► international reputation; and two blindingly white villas, one on either side of a circular, infinity-edged pool. They are open-plan and tiled in cool, Champagne-coloured travertine marble speckled with fossils from the Mexican seabed, whitewashed, and furnished in beautiful local woods (bamboo, dark zericote stippled with blond streaks, sturdy jabin for the doors and window frames and grey mylady for the beams). The high ceilings allow for a second bedroom and bathroom in a raised gallery area. A flat roof is reached by a spiral staircase narrow enough to demand caution after one too many of Bernie the bartender's excellent frozen Mojitos. You can have dinner there under the stars, and there's a hot tub from which you can watch the sun set over the mangroves and the lagoon behind.

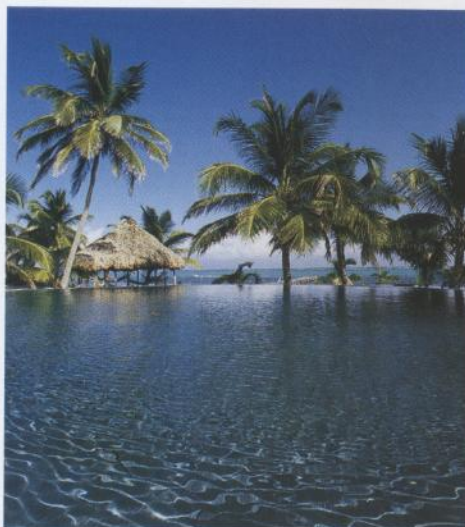
The villas are equipped with state-of-the-art Viking kitchens: but it's hard to imagine anyone with the chutzpah to make use of them with Spiegel on the premises. Quite simply, he's a superb cook. Using only local ingredients which are fresh and in season (the huge lobster I saw complacently strolling about the nearby seabed would be safe until June), Spiegel produces one delicious treat after another: grouper stuffed with crab and scallop; lime-and-coriander linguini with shrimp; and, something I foolishly resisted at first, a glorious roasted garlic and grilled shrimp pesto pizza, the pesto made with cashews rather than pine nuts, the crust perfectly judged. Spiegel

Left, one of the two villas at Azul Resort in Belize. Below, the resort's large, circular swimming pool

is not in the least proprietorial about his kitchen (Master Lee, the slightly fearsome-looking Chinese masseur who came to cure my writer's neck, stayed on to make dumplings and drunken chicken), and he is constantly improvising. One evening, for example, he invented cashew-crusted dates stuffed with chorizo, as good a starter as I've tried in ages.

Whether you need a day's snorkelling

in the wonderful Hol Chan Marine Reserve or a supply of fresh aloe to apply to the resulting sunburn, nothing is too much trouble for the staff. They are charming without exception, from Francis, who greets you at the airport and whose so-laid-back-it's-almost-horizontal air in no way compromises his efficiency, to Ella, a former Miss Garifuna, who serves in the restaurant. It's a romantic enough getaway to suit anniversaries or honeymoons (two pairs of newly-weds arrived as I reluctantly prised myself away). And if your particular vice happens to be writing, an ideally tactful balance is struck between a total respect for your privacy and the convivial pleasures of conversation and the table. 



FOUR MORE ISLAND RETREATS

KEIKAHANUI NUKU HIVA PEARL LODGE, FRENCH POLYNESIA

Nuku Hiva is in the Marquesas Islands, where Gauguin died in 1903. The lodge is set in beautiful gardens overlooking the tranquil bay of Taiohae. This isn't a place for a beach holiday (there aren't any to speak of), but the interior is lush, and there is a rich cultural heritage to explore. www.pearlresorts.com. Doubles from €167

VAMIZI ISLAND, MOZAMBIQUE

The Quirimbas Archipelago in northern Mozambique is far more remote than the Prince Harry-approved Bazaruto Archipelago in the south. New hideaway Vamizi, below, has 10 big villas; the diving is brilliant, and there is whale-watching from June to November. 00 258 272 21299; www.vamizi.com. Doubles from US\$740, including all meals and activities



TAJ DENIS ISLAND, SEYCHELLES

Now managed by India's Taj hotel group, Denis Island has lost none of the relaxed ambience that made it so popular, with many guests returning year after year since the late 1970s. There are 25 airy cottages on 375 acres, and the cuisine is considered some of the best in Seychelles. 00 248 321143; www.denisland.com. Doubles from £465, half-board

DOLPHIN ISLAND, FIJI

With just two traditional Fijian houses – one for eating and lazing about, the other for sleeping – this could be the ultimate private-island fantasy. Owned by the people behind Huka Lodge in New Zealand, this 13-acre island is only ever rented out exclusively. 00 64 7 378 5791; www.dolphin-islandfiji.co.nz. Minimum three-night stay from NZ\$2,900 per night for one or two people PETER BROWNE

AZUL RESORT, NORTH BEACH, SAN PEDRO, AMBERGRIS CAYE, BELIZE (00 501 226 4012; WWW.AZULBELIZE.COM). DOUBLES FROM US\$839; VILLAS FROM US\$1,890