

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## Luxurious Belize getaways

Francis Ford Coppola's new island retreat is among a swath of hotel openings encouraging visitors to explore an alternative side of the Caribbean



*Coral Caye, eight miles off the Belize coast*

3 HOURS AGO by: **Nigel Tisdall**

“What music would you like?” asks my private attendant, Sucely. When you rent a tiny island eight miles out in the Caribbean Sea, there is a temptation to play something very loud indeed. But I demur: “I’m happy with the sound of the wind and the waves.”

Relaxing on Coral Caye, a precarious speck of sand lost in the turquoise waters of the Belize Barrier Reef, one feels too humbled by nature to risk upsetting the elements with some high-volume heavy rock. I sense the ocean gnawing relentlessly at the mangrove-stitched shore, and watch the casuarina trees bowing to the unforgiving winds. Beneath me, the ground rises no more than a couple of

feet above sea level, and when it's time for a stroll it takes a mere three minutes to walk the length of my castaway paradise.

Fortunately, there's also a large, welcoming and tastefully decorated Great House, with a sand floor and pink conch shells on the walls — which is just what you'd expect from Francis Ford Coppola, the film-maker, passionate winemaker and maverick hotelier. Opened in October, Coral Caye is the latest example of Ford Coppola's commendable and long-running interest in creating characterful getaways that offer, in his words, "barefoot elegance with a luxurious wink".

Back in 1981, the director was way ahead of the pack when he purchased Blancaneaux Lodge, a lofty property in Belize's Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, as a writing retreat. Some 12 years later he opened this to the public and it remains an enchanting and soul-soothing 20-cabana inland escape. A decade on, this was complemented with Turtle Inn, a tranquil beachfront resort in Placencia with 25 Balinese-style cottages, which now acts as the mother ship for Coral Caye.



*Inside Coral Caye's Great House © Nigel Tisdall*

A 25-minute speedboat ride east, this island hideaway — which comes with a price

tag more suited to Croesus than Crusoe — has two wooden cottages tastefully painted in salmon and taupe that can squeeze in 12 guests (if you want to party) but which are also popular with couples and families looking for peace, warm breezes and digital nothing under the Caribbean stars. Two resident caretakers, Alberto and Paulina, provide unfussy meals — including unlimited fresh lobster — while Thunder, a handsome dog of indeterminate breed, lopes around.

This is all good, restorative seaside fun, but the all-conquering reason to check in here is the emphatic sense of release that comes from being marooned, albeit temporarily and with some fine Coppola wines to see you through the balmy nights, on a remote desert island that is all yours. Soon after Something's Fishy, our transfer boat, sails away I feel an immense psychological unburdening that makes me think, incongruously, of a huge lump of melting snow falling from an Alpine roof. Suddenly, at last, there is time and space to retune the mind, to lie in a hammock admiring the numerous Wilson's snipe that assiduously examine the shore like detectives at a crime scene, to marvel at a three-inch seahorse Alberto uplifts from the mangroves, to snorkel from the jetty in my own private underwater sanctuary radiant with corals and tropical fish.

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Such blissful moments no doubt explain why so many of the 200-plus cayes and atolls sprinkled along Belize's 185-mile, World Heritage-listed reef — the second longest in the world — have been appropriated for human use. From the air they look like a long, dribbled line of green paint splashes that God might have dropped when he was building Florida. Some bear names that sing of tougher times — Drowned Caye, Deadman's Caye, Man of War Caye — but today most are given over to vacation homes, resorts and choice spots to snorkel, dive and fish.

Stretching north to the Mexican border, Ambergris Caye is the best known and where more than 40 per cent of visitors to this English-speaking nation touch down. This 25-mile-long island is just a 15-minute flight north-east from Belize City, the country's international gateway, but San Pedro, capital of Ambergris Caye proves hard to love.



Crammed with tourist-wooing shops, bars and restaurants, its narrow, dusty streets are congested with golf carts (there are more than 2,000 on the island). The sense of overcrowding is repeated on a snorkelling trip I take to the Hol Chan Marine Reserve. The underwater sights here are terrific, but sharing them with 13 boatloads of trippers, with the inevitable kick in the head from an alien flipper, is frustrating. The nadir comes at the nearby Shark Alley when our guide starts wrestling strenuously with a six-foot nurse shark, eventually flipping it upside-down so it lies supine in his arms, its white belly flat as an ironing board, all for our supposed delight.

Belize's northern cayes enjoy the finest weather and are only a short ride from the reef, so are prime targets for developers. The country's largest resort, the 205-room Mahogany Bay Village, is set to open on Ambergris Caye this spring. To the south, Caye Chapel, which already boasts an airstrip, marina and a Greg Norman-designed golf course, will unveil a 100-bedroom resort in the autumn, while to the west lies Blackadore Caye, Leonardo DiCaprio's private island, where "the greenest luxury development ever built" is due to launch next year.





*Belcampo Belize, an ecolodge and farm near Punta Gorda*

Major changes are also taking place on the 18-mile Placencia peninsula in the south of the country. Opened this month, Naïa Resort and Spa is Belize’s first destination spa resort, an attractive ensemble of 35 white villas with a mile-long beach and six wooden treatment suites set amid tropical gardens and lily-covered ponds. Close by, Itz’ana is an upscale mix of resort and residences straddling both beach and lagoon that will open in May with a contemporary Great House “as funky as hell”, according to managing director Colin Hannan. Interiors are by New York designer Samuel Amoia with flamboyant murals by wallpaper artist George Venson, and treats include a speakeasy-style rum bar and rooftop deck for sunrise yoga.

With so much growth in the pipeline, coupled with improved flight connections from the UK and Canada launched this winter, it makes sense to pay a visit to Belize sooner rather than later — while its roads and Mayan ruins remain enjoyably empty and you can still be the only dive boat on the reef.

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Today the place to feel the unspoilt magic of the country as Coppola must have found it more than 30 years ago is the southernmost Toledo district. Down here

the Barrier Reef lies almost 40 miles away across the Gulf of Honduras and there is serious rain — an average 160 inches a year.

Both these factors could well be saving graces that keep the resort-builders at bay, but they are by no means negatives to the discerning traveller. Abundant rainfall is precisely what you need to grow cacao, and the shade-grown heirloom chocolate handmade at the luxury ecolodge Belcampo Belize, near Punta Gorda, is just one of the many pleasures of visiting this lush and fertile coastline. Set on a ridge with a heartening vista of pristine rainforest where gloriously coloured butterflies make their weaving journeys and howler monkeys fill the air with horror-movie calls, this impressive 12,000-acre property is a model example of agro-tourism. Here you can kayak down jungle rivers, go horseriding, visit caves and waterfalls and enjoy hearty farm-to-table meals prepared with organic produce from the estate.



*The main lodge pool at Belcampo*

And go fishing. “Permit Capital of Belize” declares a large sign outside Garbutt’s, a small family business that offers some of the most challenging fly-fishing in the world. Looking like huge silver shields, permit are caught here using specially adapted shallow-draft boats that are poled silently through the mangrove-wrapped flats of the nearby Port Honduras Marine Reserve.

“They’re tricky, they’re sneaky, they fight real good . . .” Scully Garbutt explains as he takes me out to try my luck in a 23ft boat called Unity. He teaches me how to cast and shows me the realistic flies he makes himself, which are shaped like tiny crabs and masterpieces of piscatorial deception. Tarpon, snook, bonefish — there’s plenty of sport to be had around these waters, although the permit prove elusive on this trip. It barely matters, because the greatest joy is being out in a vast, heavenly arena where herons and pelicans rule and manatees get right of way. Over the whole day, as I reel in some compensatory horse-eye jack and cubera snapper, we spy just three other boats.

The fishing here is strictly catch-and-release, and I’m impressed by the way Scully handles our harvest, spurning gloves (this can harm their slimy skin), which results in some nasty pricks and cuts. “There you go, buddy,” he whispers to my prize landing, a 15lb barracuda with jaws like pliers, as he gently returns it to the water with the reverence of a father placing a newborn baby into a bath. It’s a touching moment that reveals the deep respect for nature that many Belizeans hold, and as tourism grows here I dearly hope they can hold on to it.

## **Details**

Nigel Tisdall was a guest of the [Belize Tourism Board](http://www.travelbelize.org/) (<http://www.travelbelize.org/>) and [Audley Travel](https://www.audleytravel.com/) (<https://www.audleytravel.com/>). Audley offers an 11-night trip including three nights each at Blancaneaux Lodge, Turtle Inn and Belcampo Belize costs from £4,085 per person including flights from London Heathrow to Belize City via Miami, internal flights and transfers, and breakfast. [Coral Caye](https://www.thefamilycoppolahideaways.com/) (<https://www.thefamilycoppolahideaways.com/>) costs from US\$1,065 per night for two, including breakfast

*Photograph: Nigel Tisdall*

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