

TRAVEL

# ESCAPE ROUTES

WELCOME TO THE  
JUNGLE

BLANCANEUX LODGE:  
THIS IS HOW MONKEYS  
THINK THEY LIVE



## TAKE TO THE TREES IN BELIZE



**Anna Hart finally makes it to Central America, and wonders what took her so long...**

We all have our globetrotting blindspots; the regions that we've never quite made it to, even though friends keep unhelpfully insisting, "What, you haven't BEEN? Oh, you MUST go, you'd LOVE it." For me, my blindspot has been Central and South America.

I know Laos better than I know Wales, I've lived in Ireland, Singapore, Scotland and New Zealand, and I can order a beer in Polish, Croatian and Czech. But when it came to the Americas, I'd never been south of Nashville. People loudly proclaimed that I'd adore it and I knew they were probably right, but somehow I always wound up booking another holiday to Thailand.

Last month, however, I finally made it, and I didn't

even take the well-trodden tourist trail to Brazil, Costa Rica or Peru. My first experience of Central America was Belize; a perfect introduction to what all the fuss is about. Belize is petite compared to its neighbours and bordered on the north by Mexico, to the south-west by Guatemala, and the east by the Caribbean Sea. If the geographical position makes it perfect for the intrepid traveller – delivering beaches, rainforest and Mayan ruins all

in close proximity – it also makes it perfect for the intrepid eater. Caribbean, Mexican and Guatemalan influences have got to make for an interesting menu. The best time to visit is January to April; try and steer clear of October and November, because when it rains in Belize, it *really* rains.

A word of warning: getting around a jungle-dense, population-sparse region like Belize requires you to be on friendly terms with Tropic

Air's 14-seater Cessna Caravans. I love small planes, so I'm thrilled to learn that Belizeans regard Tropic Air as local buses, with flights costing as little as £20 one way. On one we soar out of Belize International Airport (having plugged an obligatory rum punch at Jet's Bar, a brilliantly non-airportlike airport bar and national institution) and 30 minutes later land on a dusty runway at Blancaneux Lodge. This seriously luxurious





eco-lodge is nestled within the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, with 20 standalone cabanas perched on both sides of the canyon leading down to the turquoise, mineral-rich waters of Privassion Creek, which is sufficiently close for you to skip showers entirely and take bathtime to the river.

The views that greet you are nothing short of cinematic, which makes sense, given that the owner is film director Francis Ford Coppola, who discovered the site in 1981 when looking for an inspirational jungle hideaway in which to write. He still keeps a two-bedroom villa here, with his own personal artwork and antiques, and a full-time butler.

I'm not in the Coppola Villa, but instead in one of two honeymoon cabanas, with soaring thatched ceilings, rainbow-coloured Guatemalan fabrics, my own screened porch and a private infinity slate-lined plunge pool overlooking the valley.

Being handed the keys to my very own jungle home in the trees makes me giddy with excitement, and I'm not sure whether to do yoga on the deck like something straight out of Miranda Kerr's Instagram feed, or simply to order a Wild Hibiscus Daiquiri and jump in the plunge pool.

Tempting as it is just to hang around and play house, I'm in an area renowned for its outdoor activities, so I join a group for a horseback trek to the local Big Rock Falls. Nothing banishes jet lag like swimming at the foot of a 150ft waterfall.

Food at Blancaneaux is a highlight; when you mix Belizean food (part Caribbean, part Guatemalan, with some El Salvadorian and Mexican influences thrown in) with Coppola's Italian heritage, you've got yourself a long night of feasting ahead. We eat on the open air terrace of the resort's Italian-Mayan fusion Montagna restaurant, and a few hours later I'm a superfan of

shrimp ceviche and jocon, a Guatemalan chicken dish simmered in coriander and tomatillos. Wine comes straight out of California, where Coppola owns a number of vineyards. Next up is a day of caving. There's the eerie beauty of Barton Creek, where we're paddled on a three-man canoe, by torchlight, to gaze at stalactites and stalagmites within this limestone maze. Entirely different is our experience at Actun Tunichil Muknal (known locally as ATM) caves, where we part-clamber, part-swim

## "NOTHING BANISHES JET LAG LIKE SWIMMING AT THE FOOT OF A 150FT WATERFALL"

through a gushing river, guided by our headtorches, and then find ourselves in a Mayan archaeological site, wandering among skeletons (thought to be human sacrifices), ceramics and stoneware. I'm terrified; not of the skeletons, but of *stepping* on the skeletons, particularly after our guide explains that cameras are banned because last summer a tourist fractured a 1,000-year-old skull by dropping his camera on it. I do manage to stop panicking enough to be genuinely overwhelmed by getting so up close and personal to the relics of a human existence so different to our own.

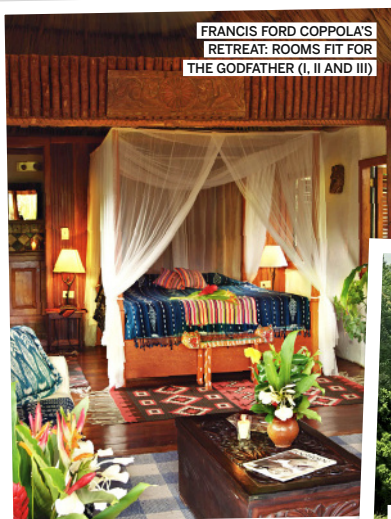
My favourite history lessons are the ones where you really see how people

lived, and so our trip to the ancient city of Xunantunich (pronounced shoo-nan-too-neech), is another highlight. Perched atop a level hilltop, accessed by hand-cranked ferry across the river Mopan, Xunantunich is a dramatic complex of plazas and temples dating back to the 7th century. Climb to the top of El Castillo, which dominates the complex, for a 360-degree view of the overgrown city and the surrounding jungle. On the way back, we stop in a city that is alive and kicking, San Ignacio, to taste streetfood

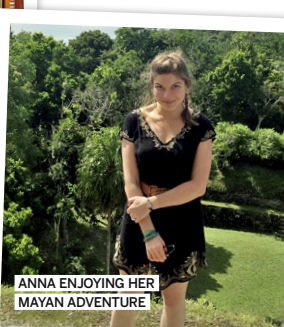
like fry jacks (savory donuts with a seemingly endless variety of fillings) and wander the restaurant-lined Burns Avenue. Try to visit on a Saturday for a bustling street market; but you won't go hungry any day of the week.

As a traveller I have a woefully short attention span, and so I'm always on the lookout for destinations that offer variety and the perfect blend of outdoorsy action and urban bustle. Borneo and New Zealand are high on this list, but Belize goes straight to the top. So let me add my voice to the chorus demanding, "What, you haven't BEEN? You MUST go, you'd LOVE it..."

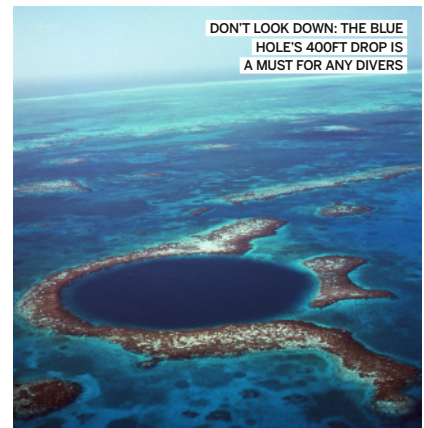
**Cabanas at Blancaneaux**  
Lodge start at £170 per night; [coppolareorts.com](http://coppolareorts.com).  
**American Airlines (aa.com)**  
offer return flights from London Heathrow to Belize, via Miami, for £650 return.  
**The London-Miami flight takes nine hours; Miami-Belize is a two-hour trip**



FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA'S RETREAT: ROOMS FIT FOR THE GODFATHER (I, II AND III)



ANNA ENJOYING HER MAYAN ADVENTURE



DON'T LOOK DOWN: THE BLUE HOLE'S 400FT DROP IS A MUST FOR ANY DIVERS

## BELIZE: A HITLIST

*Make the jet lag worth it by exploring these additional Belizean highlights*

### DIVE THE BLUE HOLE

You'll be hard-pushed to have a boring dive or snorkel in Belize; Jacques Cousteau named it as one of the best diving locations in the world. But the big-hitter is the Blue Hole, a circular drop of more than 400ft decorated with colourful coral formations and populated by sharks, barracuda and turtles. There are numerous budget to luxe options in the Northern Cayes, but the name to know is Cayo Espanto, a six-villa 'private island' that has played host to Robert De Niro, Harrison Ford and Leonardo DiCaprio.

**Villas at Cayo Espanto start at £600 per night, including meals and snacks; [aprivateisland.com](http://aprivateisland.com)**

### KICK BACK IN PLACENCIA

There's a reason Coppola positioned a sister hotel to Blancaneaux, Turtle Inn, in the small seaside village of Placencia: you get a taste of beachy Belize you can't experience in the jungle. Earn that coconut mojito by trying stand-up-paddle-boarding on the calm waters, visit a local organic chocolate factory, or scuba-dive the reef.

**Cabanas (sleep two) at Turtle Inn start at £195 per night; [coppolareorts.com](http://coppolareorts.com)**

### DANCE ALL NIGHT AT BELIZE CARNIVAL

Every September, Belize city gets even more colourful than usual as each neighbourhood steers its own extravagantly decorated float through the streets, topped by dancers in dramatic costumes shaking along to Caribbean beats. Stay in the stately, neo-colonial Great House just a block back from the waterfront. Room one is the biggest; room eight is small but has the best view.

**Doubles at Great House start at £95 per night; [greathousebelize.com](http://greathousebelize.com)**