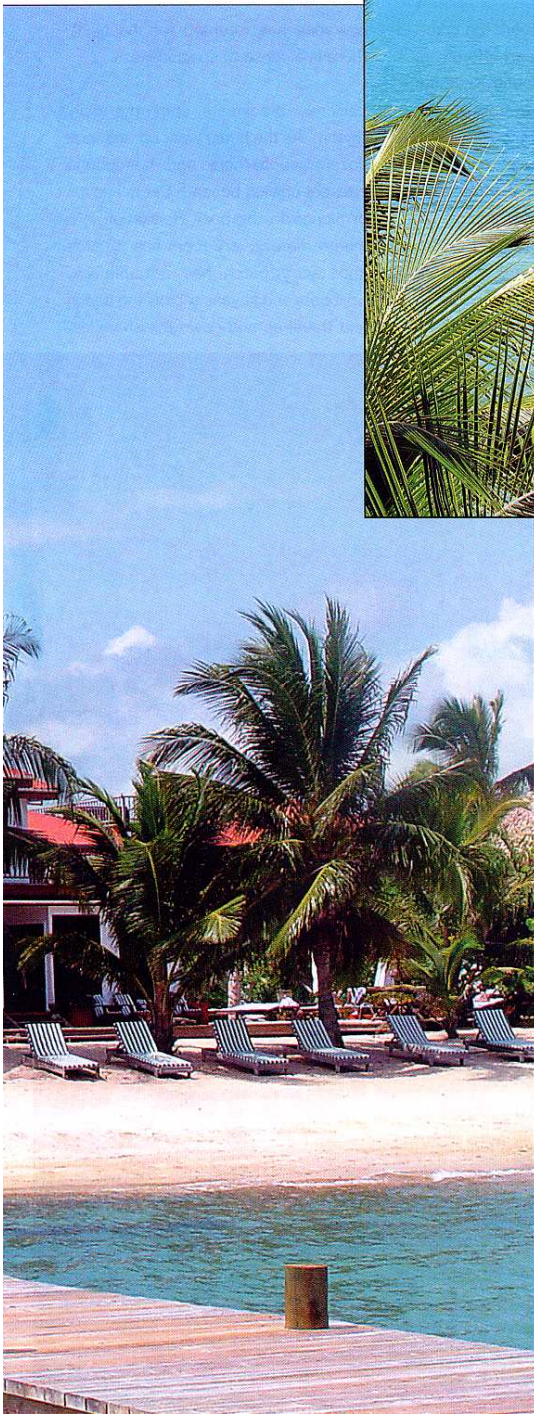


# Living a Dream in *Southern Belize*

by Emilie C. Harting

At the hacienda-style buildings of the Inn at Robert's Grove, every room has a porch, every porch has a hammock and every roof has a Jacuzzi. Hammocks are also the relaxation of choice on the nearby dock.





Just south of Mexico and east of Guatemala, Belize is a tropical haven replete with barrier reef, rainforest and Mayan ruins. This, our third trip to the tiny independent nation, would be spent on the southern coast, a few miles north of the fishing village of Placencia, at The Inn at Robert's Grove, a five-star beachfront resort with ties to Long Island.

From our window we looked out on the Caribbean Sea. A short walk in the opposite direction took us to Placencia Lagoon surrounded by mangroves filled with frigate birds, sea turtles, fiddler crabs and flowering bushes. Just around the bend toward the Monkey River, we watched dolphins and manatees pop up through the glistening waters then, just as quickly, disappear.

When our stay was coming to a close, I thanked Risa and Bob Frackman, the congenial resort owners, for the exquisite time. "You've created a joyous, on-going house party," I said.

Risa laughed. "That's exactly what we want. We started the inn from our own private home, and we still think of our visitors as houseguests."

Bob and Risa, who grew up in Great Neck, built the main part of the inn as a vacation house in the mid-'90s. As it became harder and harder to leave their oceanfront paradise, the couple decided to shift careers (he in real estate development, she in public relations) and become innkeepers.

## Belize

"I've always loved to cook for dinner parties," Risa explained, "and Bob has always loved hosting. At first we had two rooms. I prepared the meals and sent Bob driving back and forth to the grocery store for supplies, and we ate with the guests. Right away we knew running an inn was for us, and we've been adding on little by little ever since. We entertained a lot at our house up in New York. What could be better than sharing what you love with others and making sure everyone is having a good time?"

The inn now has two chefs, one for the ocean-view Seaside Restaurant and another for the Habanero Mexican Café, which overlooks the mangroves at the marina. They have also added 30 more rooms.

Spread out along the ocean, the comfortable colonial-style resort affords an excellent opportunity for both solitude and socializing. We floated from one to the other depending on whim, the tides and the angle of the sun and soft winds. We swam in the pool and ocean, walked the beach to the village of Seine Bright, read and relaxed under the trees and took advantage of four of the inn's day trips. Even when all 32 guestrooms are filled to capacity and

everyone has returned for the night, there is a sense of spaciousness.

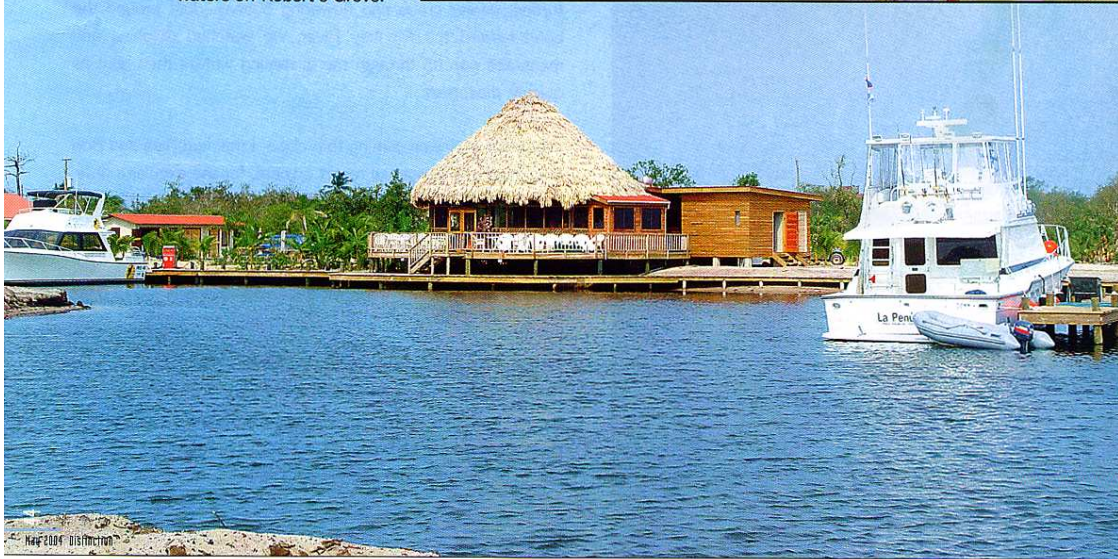
Leisurely breakfasts start the daily rhythm. As the hours wear on, readers, dozers, sunbathers and headphone wearers unwind beneath the tall palms or alongside the pool. Relaxation is a mantra here. Every room has a porch and every porch has a hammock. Sailboats and kayaks slip off the beach and travel up and down the shoreline.

Swimmers in the Cave at Blue Creek, a popular day trip for visitors to Belize.

Fishing and diving boats are familiar sights in the waters off Robert's Grove.



Adrian De Bruijn Photography



May 2009 Distribution

## Belize

Windsurfers and swimmers play games with the waves.

Late in the afternoon guests mingle and exchange stories about the day's adventures. We conversed about the sergeant majors, parrot fish and the rare spotted eagle stingray we'd seen while snorkeling on the reef and the challenging climb over a rocky streambed to a cave where we swam with headlights up to a waterfall.

Guests discussed medicinal plants seen on walks through the rainforest, the ancient Mayan ruins at Labaantun, the schools of bonefish on Ranguana Caye, and the permit, also a type of fish prized by fly fishermen, in the rivers. On Saturday, barbecue night, we listened to a local Garifuna (African-Indian) band at poolside.

On other evenings we walked through the main veranda, past the great room,

and inside bar to the spacious dining room and outdoor patio. Both public and private areas of the inn are decorated with Caribbean sculpture, paintings and furniture, plus artwork brought from the Frackman's former home in New York. A number of the vibrant paintings and masks are by local artist Lola Delgado, who has a studio just down the road. Outdoor and indoor wooden and stone sculptures, facsimiles of images from Mayan ruins, are the work of an artist from St. Ignacio. Most of the furniture is crafted from local mahogany.

The Frackman's aren't the only Belize innkeepers with a connection to Long Island. Another former Great Neck resident, Francis Ford Coppola, also turned a private residence into a



The route to the Mayan ruins at Labaantun leads through an eerily beautiful landscape. Belize is now believed to have been the heart of the Maya Civilization and has a wealth of archeological sites, many open to tourists.



Widman DeBraun Photo

May 2011

## Belize

resort. His Turtle Inn, a walled compound, is several miles down the road. "He went to Great Neck High, but was eight years behind me," said Risa.

Coppola built his inn near Placencia because the area reminded him of the Philippines, where he had filmed *Apocalypse Now*. Turtle Inn was destroyed by Hurricane Iris in 2001 and has been totally rebuilt with a Balinese theme. There are 18 luxury thatched cabanas, including Coppola's own.

The Turtle Inn chefs use local seafood and pick their vegetables in an organic

garden on the grounds. Scuba diving, snorkeling, fishing and jungle tours are popular, though many guests prefer to relax by the pool or lounge under palms on the long stretch of beach and watch the sailboats go by.

Both Turtle Inn and The Inn at Robert's Grove draw their share of film celebrities. Last year alone, Risa and Bob Frackman hosted Lauren Hutton, Dennis Quaid and Dylan McDermott.

I asked Risa Frackman if she saw any parallels between Long Island's North Shore and the seacoast of Belize. "The

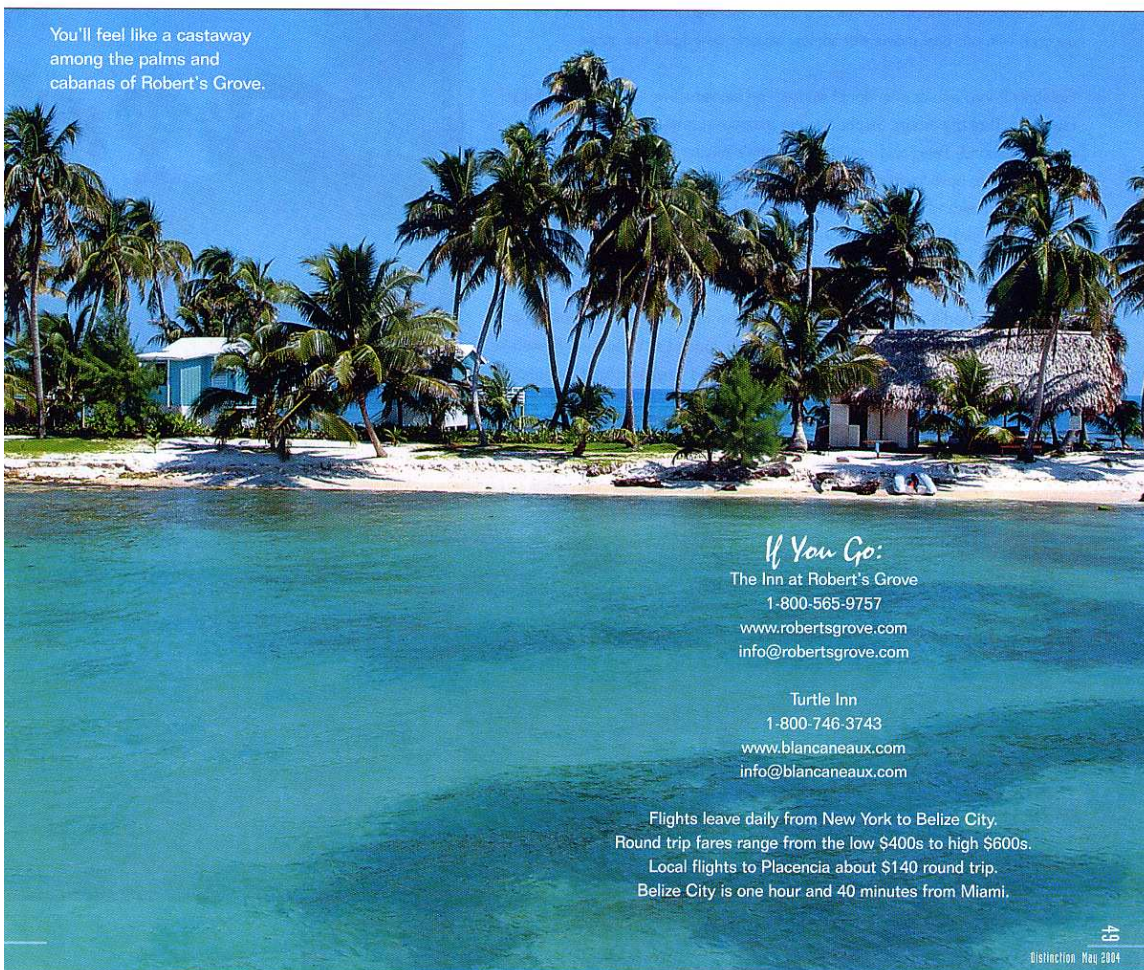
sea, of course," she said, "but here we have the exotic mangroves and rainforests, and a fishing village."

We looked over at the tables on the outside porch. There was a pleasant buzz of relaxed voices. Gentle warm breezes made the candlelight cast flickering shadows on the faces of the diners. Through the palm and coconut trees, you could see the ocean. The waves rolled up and slipped away, adding sublime background music. Paradise indeed.



*Philadelphia-based Emilie C. Harting writes on culturally-based travel and ecotourism.*

You'll feel like a castaway among the palms and cabanas of Robert's Grove.



### *If You Go:*

The Inn at Robert's Grove  
1-800-565-9757  
www.robertsgrove.com  
info@robertsgrove.com

Turtle Inn  
1-800-746-3743  
www.blancaneaux.com  
info@blancaneaux.com

Flights leave daily from New York to Belize City.  
Round trip fares range from the low \$400s to high \$600s.  
Local flights to Placencia about \$140 round trip.  
Belize City is one hour and 40 minutes from Miami.