

# The Impact of Expatriates on the Development of Resorts in Western Cayo District, Belize

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## ABSTRACT

During the 1970s a small group of Americans and Europeans independently moved into western Belize. After trying a variety of occupations in an attempt to remain, many of them serendipitously fell into tourism, opening up small but successful resorts. By the mid-1980s, they had established the beginnings of a unique, nature-oriented resort industry that still dominates the region today. Although owned and run by expatriates, they have integrated their resorts into the local economy, employ Belizeans at almost every level, and in a sense, have become Belizeans themselves. It can be argued that they do not portray most of the negative aspects of foreign-owned tourism developments so often touted in the current literature.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of international tourism into Central America and the Caribbean has received increasing scrutiny in the past few decades. Originally viewed as perhaps the best economic option for areas that had few other choices, the 1960s and 1970s saw the majority of the academic research in this area centering on the positive economic effects of tourism development. The alleged multiplier effects were the most often touted advantages (Bryden 1973), which in traditional Keynesian theory "measures the relationship between an autonomous injection of expenditure into an economy and the resultant change in incomes that occurs" (Archer 1977,1).

By the end of the 1970s, however, the social and cultural disadvantages of international tourism, along with unperceived economic disadvantages become increasingly the topic of research. Formerly optimistic projections of two or more spin-off jobs being created for every job in the local resort proved to be gross overestimations. Capital leakages, low pay, social stratification of employment, seasonality, external control, and becoming enmeshed in a global system beyond local control became glaring disadvantages. The most prevalent complaint from the nations receiving tourists is usually that the resorts are built and operated by outsiders. Often expatriates from the former colonial days (and increasingly American corporations) design, finance, build, staff, and ultimately withdraw most of the profits.

As a result, research (and it could be argued tourism development programs and indeed one's overall perspective of international tourism in the developing world) has become divided into two distinct camps:

... a pro-tourist position is held by many planners of marginal economies who look to tourism as a new way of making money: an anti-tourist position is held by many urban and modernized liberals and third world radicals who question the value of touristic development for the local people ... (MacCannell 1976, 162).

Culler may have identified tourism's biggest weakness in stating that "tourism has so few defenders, constitutes an embarrassment, and seems such an easy target for those who would attack modern culture" (Culler 1988, 153). [end p. 67]

The purpose of this research is not to promote or criticize international tourism development in the specific region of Western Belize, but rather to assess the reality of its expansion into this area. International tourism receipts have accounted for approximately six percent of the total world trade over the past two decades, and this figure is increasing (Will and Martin 1987; Turner and Ash 1975). Growing at almost ten percent annually over the last half of this century, it is viewed by many as a major growth industry of the future (Murphy 1985). With few other options and a perceived natural advantage in attracting a new and even more rapidly expanding sub-group of tourists, individuals in Western Belize began developing a resort industry in the 1980s.

Several labels have been applied to this new sub-group of tourists, including adventure tourists, nature travelers, "travelers" (as opposed to just tourists), and most recently, ecotourists. The term "ecotourism" made its appearance in 1987 as a result of the increasing popularity of adventure and nature travel during the 1980s. It is defined as

"traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas ..." (Boo 1990, xiv).

Until recently, Belize has attracted a relatively small number of international tourists. The interior has been even less popular, although this began to change in the early 1980s. This study traces a small group of primarily expatriates who lived in this region, and formed the base of what has become a viable and expanding resort industry.

## TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENTS IN CAYO

Belize is the newest country in the Western Hemisphere, having only gained its political independence from Britain in 1981. Similar to most of the region, it has virtually no industrial development, limited resources, underemployment, and few options for competing in the world's competitive marketplace. Therefore, like many of its neighbors, it views international tourism as potentially a major source of income and employment. Belize has several natural attractions that would imply an advantage over other destinations within Central America and the Caribbean. The longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere is famous with snorkelers and scuba divers. Sailing, fishing, Mayan sites, and jungle tours are also options for tourism within the country. Considering its proximity to the U.S. market, English as the national language, and its remarkably safe and easy-going atmosphere, it is surprising that Belize entered the tourism market so much later than its neighbors.

Belize was never a popular place for Europeans. The Spanish avoided its swampy jungles. The English, though harvesting log wood and later mahogany and using it as a base to raid Spanish shipping, never came in large numbers. As a colony, British Honduras was intensely unpopular with Governor Generals and was considered almost a punishment to be posted there.

On the other hand, U.S. involvement and investment in Belize has been growing steadily. Beginning with gun-running during the U.S. Civil War and rum-running during prohibition, American investors have expanded their purchase of landholdings so that today an estimated 80 percent of all privately-owned land in Belize is owned by U.S. nationals (Education Task Force 1987). Much of this real estate was purchased for recreation and tourism speculation and

includes some of the best oceanfront parcels.

While the majority of tourism development and travel has been along the coast of Belize during the past two decades, there has been a growing number of international tourists that have ventured into the interior in search of a more "adventurous" and perhaps "authentic" experience than the traditional Caribbean sand, sea, and sun type of vacation.

Belize, being perceived as unspoiled and perhaps one of the few "natural" places left in this hemisphere, has tied into this market and has begun to exploit it. The access provided by the Western Highway has allowed the western region of the Cayo District, centering around San Ignacio, to become the center of this new and rapidly growing tourism in Belize (Figure 1).

Though the potential of tourism as a source of revenue and employment had been recognized earlier, prior to the 1970s, tourism in Belize consisted primarily of a few exclusive fishing camps along [end p. 68] the coast and the occasional jaguar hunter (Robinson 1961). Tourism development was promoted, if not economically funded, by the Belize government throughout the early 1970s, as indicated by its mention in almost every issue of the government publication, *The New Belize*. Tourism articles and promotions were conspicuously absent from 1974 through 1976, however, though this may have been a result of problems with and a general rethinking about the advantages and disadvantages of international tourism that many Caribbean countries were experiencing at that time. By late 1976, the government appeared to be cautiously promoting tourism again, but pushed for its development by the private sector rather than the government.

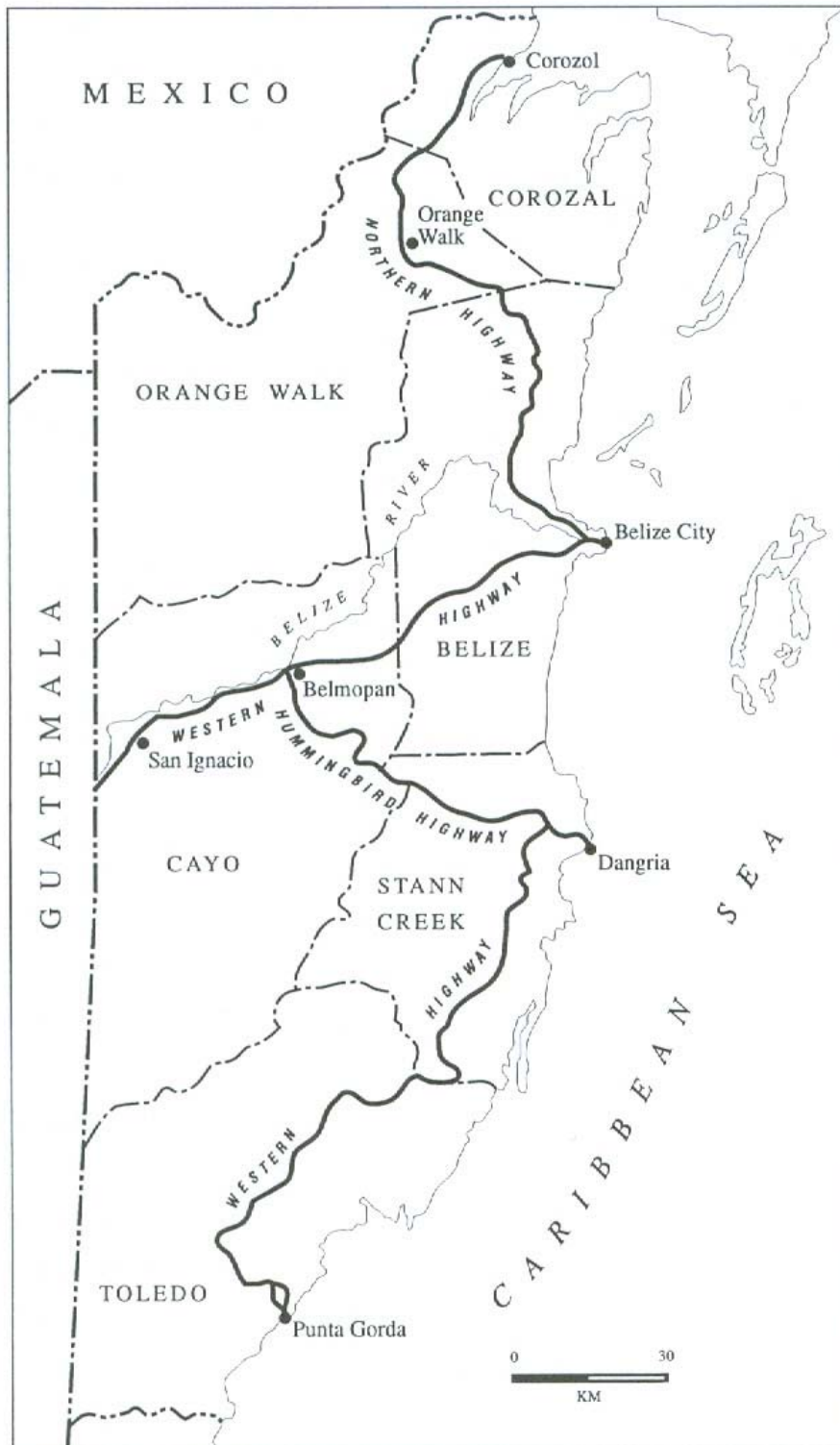


Figure 1. Belize and the Western Highway.

Discussions with private and public officials involved with tourism along with informal surveys throughout the country confirms the trends indicated each year in the annual Abstract of Statistics, namely that the number of hotel (and resort) beds is increasing faster in the interior Cayo District than along the coast. All the evidence suggests that this interior region, specifically the area around San Ignacio, has been the fastest growing tourist areas in Belize during the past decade.

The promotional tourist literature in Belize also reflects this trend during the 1980s. Numerous advertising brochures promoting Belize on display at the National Archives of Belize documents a shift from primarily photos and descriptions of cays and coastal sports, with the occasional picture of Altun Ha or Xunantunich (two interior Maya sites) and perhaps the newly located interior capital of Belmopan during the early 1980s, to many more pictures of the interior, including jungle, parks, Maya ruins, and similar promotions by the end of the decade. Whether this represents an intentional attempt by the government and private developers to diffuse the development of tourism, a way of relieving the occasionally overbooked coastal resorts and keep tourists in the country longer, or just the economic good sense to tie into the increased market for adventure tourism is not clear. However, the trend of increased movement of tourists into the Cayo District is obvious.

The Cayo District is the largest of the six districts in Belize and is the traditional hub of trade in western Belize. The Belize River, navigable for almost 190 km by canoe and shallow draft motorized launch for long gave access to this area, which was later greatly enhanced in the 1950s upon the construction of the Western Highway which generally follows the course of the river (LePage 1985). San Ignacio has been the major city and trading center in Cayo District for the last 150 years. Once a "wild and wooly" frontier town of mahogany cutters and later "*chicleros*," its regional prominence is evident in the unofficial, though common, name of Cayo. If a Belizean says they are going to Cayo, they mean the town of San Ignacio more than the district.

With the demise of logging and chicle harvesting early in this century, employment options for most of the San Ignacio's population became limited. Some logging still continues to the south of San Ignacio in the Mountain Pine Ridge area, but it represents only a fraction of its former prominence. Although the flat areas north of the Belize River have [end p. 69] been developed for agriculture, especially eastward towards Belize City, the area immediately around San Ignacio and into the hills to the south and west does not appear too well suited to agriculture. Even the Maya that once densely populated the country seem to have, with few exceptions, avoided this area (Hartshorn 1984). Therefore, the most rapidly expanding employment sector in this region appears to be tourism.

The Cayo District, specifically the San Ignacio and Mountain Pine Ridge area, has attracted visitors from the coast for several decades. Having a higher elevation, fewer insects, and several cool, rushing streams and rivers for swimming and recreation, it has been a weekend retreat and picnic area for the Belize City residents since the all-weather roads of the 1950s were completed (Cayo District Commissioner 1950,1). However, the area was not adequately prepared to cater to the visitors during this period, since no acceptable overnight accommodations were available until the 1970s and visitors were told by friends to "bring their own food or eat rice and beans from grubby plates with age-old dirt" (Cayo District Commissioner 1951, 5).

#### **THE EVOLUTION OF THE HOTELS OF SAN IGNACIO**

Until the upgrading of the Western Highway and the gradual influx of tourists into Cayo in the 1970s, there was little need for hotels or restaurants in the region. By the late 1970s, however, there had developed two distinct types of lodging which have evolved into the two representative types of resorts and hotels in Western Cayo today.

As business and early "travelers" (as opposed to the tourists that came later) began to move through the San Ignacio area during the 1970s, several hotels began operation. These were inexpensive, located in the town, and offered minimal amenities such as a bed, sheet, towel, and shared cold water bath. The Central Hotel was the first in the mid 1970s, followed by the Hi-Et in 1978, the Belmoral in 1979, and the Imperial in 1981. Mike's Grand Hotel opened in 1985, Bob's in 1988, and the River View in the following year (Figure 2). They all catered to a clientele of student/travelers on a limited budget as well as Belizean and Guatemalan businessmen. With the exception of Bob's (which has since ceased operations) they were all begun, owned, and operated by Belizean nationals, charged similar moderate prices, and had similar offerings.

There were two earlier establishments, but their history is rather shrouded in conflicting information, innuendo, and uncertainty. The Orange Grove Hotel in San Ignacio and the Blancaneaux Lodge in the Mountain Pine Ridge area were both open in the 1970s, but are not operating today. They were both built and operated by Americans and were described by past employees and San Ignacio residents as first-class hotels or resorts that did not receive enough business to stay open. Numerous interviewees throughout Belize (including some past employees) have indicated that perhaps they may have been, at least partially, built with "drug money" and used as a front for drug trans-shipment operations. These types of "rumors" are common throughout San Ignacio, as the town and surrounding region had the reputation as being a marijuana growing and shipping area. This type of information is impossible to verify or disprove, but the rumors along these lines are prevalent throughout the area.

The first, first-class hotel in San Ignacio that is still operating is the San Ignacio Hotel. Opened in 1976, it was built and is still operated by Escandar Bedran, a prominent Belizean businessman. The hotel is located just out of town, roughly one kilometer south of the town on a hill. As the central area of San Ignacio can become hot and dusty in the dry season, this hilltop location has an obvious locational advantage. Unlike the other hotels in town, it is higher priced, has air-conditioned rooms, a pool, and attached restaurant and bar. The clientele are primarily more affluent businessman or governmental officials working in the region. The tourists are also more affluent than those staying at the in-town hotels, reflected not only by the prices paid, but also the fact that they usually drive their own or rented cars, whereas the in-town hotels attract almost exclusively the bus-riding student/traveler.

The Piache Hotel, across the street from the San Ignacio Hotel, falls somewhere between its neighbor and the in-town hotels in service and prices. It enjoys a small, predominately Belizean clientele and is rather an enigma in the region's hotels. Several other hotels in both Belmopan to the east and Benque Viejo Del Carmen on the Guatemalan border to the west also serve the area, but are far enough removed to be considered separate from the San Ignacio area. [end p. 70]

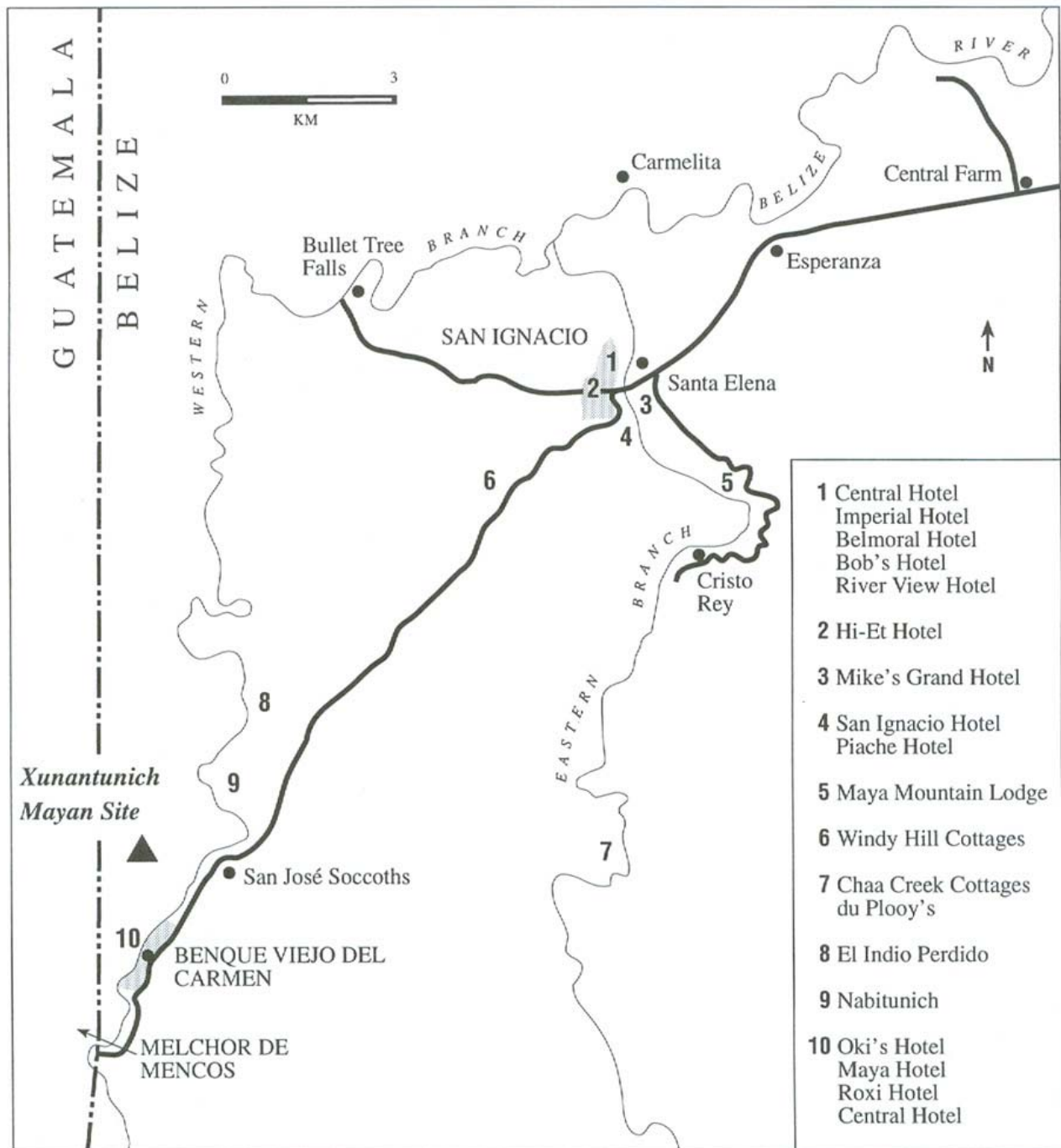


Figure 2. Tourist sites in western Belize.

#### THE ALL-INCLUSIVE RESORT OF CAYO AND THEIR EXPATRIATE ORIGINS

Perhaps the most interesting regional development in tourist lodging evolved in the mid-1980s with the establishment of several resorts. Their history is quite distinct from the development of the hotels in San Ignacio, and today they cater to a substantially more affluent clientele of international travelers than the in-town hotels.<sup>1</sup>

While the development of each of the resorts has a particular history, there are a number of similarities. Each is located some distance from San Ignacio (Figure 2) and is therefore "all-inclusive," offering lodging, meals, expeditions and trips to local attractions, and often recreational activities such as canoeing and horse rentals. They are also substantially more expensive than the in-town hotels, even for just lodging, and are classified at a higher level of quality (with the exception of the San Ignacio Hotel). It is somewhat surprising that although these [end p. 71] resorts are considered "first class" an important part of their mystique is the quasi-primitive accommodations. Thatched roof huts, screen less windows (lack of biting insects allows this) and until recently, only cold water showers seem incongruous with the prices, but are quite popular with ecotourists. The majority are also owned and operated by expatriate Americans and Europeans.

The first to develop, and still a leader in innovations and occupancy rates is Chaa Creek Cottages. In many ways, its history of entry into the tourism industry is typical of several of its neighboring resorts.<sup>2</sup> The owners, Mick and Lucy Fleming (English and American), visited Belize in 1977, looking for a "third world experience." They liked the Western Cayo District and decided to stay. They tried ranching, dairying, farming, and several other occupations, having "less than a roaring success" at each. In the early 1980s, friends and backpackers started showing up at their farm, looking for a barn or shed in which to spend the night. For a few dollars they would let them stay in their back shed and eat with them. As the only regular lodging was in San Ignacio or Benque Viejo del Carmen at this time, they represented a more adventurous and less expensive alternative for the young backpackers and travelers moving through the region.

As their reputation grew by word of mouth, they built a second shed, then a third to handle the increasing traffic, gradually adding bathrooms, improvements and amenities. The growth had been steady until 1985, when they realized that without any planning their marginal farm had evolved into a successful resort. They have since given most of their attention to developing and improving the resort facilities.

A similar situation was experienced by Americans Bart and Susie Mickler of Maya Mountain Lodge. They were invited to Belize by homesteading friends, and after a variety of occupations tried lodging in 1982. Like Chaa Creek, they have expanded to several huts and over twenty beds, offer all-inclusive packages with meals and tours. Like Chaa Creek, most of their business is from pre-arranged tour groups. Bart is the founder of Explore Belize Tours, which provides them with most of their business. El Indio Perdido offers similar services and had somewhat similar origins, but with a few notable differences. The owners are not as involved with group tours and are not expanding to meet the increasing demands. Though co-founder Colett Gross had worked in the hotel industry in France and Switzerland, it was not her intention to open a resort when she and her partner came to Belize.

These three resorts represent the oldest and most successful in the Western Cayo District. By the late 1980s they were all well-established and at least breaking even if not making a profit. Chaa Creek remains the leader with sixteen rooms and thirty beds. They also have by far the greatest name recognition of any in the area and have the highest occupancy rates, often close to 100 percent during much of the year.

By the end of the 1980s, the expanding tourism market and resulting profits attracted three new resorts to open in the region. In 1989 du Plooy's, a new resort adjacent to Chaa Creek, opened. Built by Americans who moved to Belize specifically to enter the resort trade, it seems to have survived its first few years primarily from the overflow of Chaa Creek. It represents the first of the resorts built by non-Belizeans who came specifically to compete in the resort industry.

A more important trend developed at the same time with the entrance into the resort market of two Belizean families. Windy Hill Cottages were developed by Belizean Bob Hales of San Ignacio. Using family farm land just to the west of San Ignacio, it is unique in that it is the only resort that does not have river access.<sup>3</sup> Tying in with travel companies in Belize City has helped to create a growing a clientele and, although not as developed as Chaa Creek, it is expanding.

Nubitunich, a resort developed by Rudy and Margaret Juan, is the newest of the Belizean owned resorts that developed during this period of resort formation. Rudy is Belizean and Margaret is British, and the resort is located next to the locally popular Maya site of Xunantunich on family farm land. Opened in 1988, it is also developing a clientele, primarily through groups sent by tour operators experimenting in the area.

Other non-Belizeans have developed non-residential tourism related establishments in the region. Mountain Equestrian Trails, developed by Americans Nancy and Larry Holtzman, offer guided horseback tours into the Mountain Pine Ridge. Like **[end p. 72]** several other Americans, they too came in the 1970s and eventually took up their present occupation. A canoe rental for the Belize River was started by American Scottie Cass in 1986. Although recently deceased, his business is continuing under Belizean ownership. Rosita Arvigo, also an American, has developed a natural herb and botany trail adjacent to Chaa Creek and receives much of her business from Chaa Creek and du Plooy's, as well as tour groups.

Although restaurants are not abundant in San Ignacio, one deserves mention since it is closely related to the resorts in both history and promotions. Eva's restaurant, in the center of San Ignacio, is by far the most popular place to eat and drink in town. The restaurant is owned and operated by Bob Jones, an expatriate Englishman who married a local Belizean. His restaurant, while offering traditional Belizean food at moderate prices, has become the place for both tourists and locals to meet, drink, and plan trips to Tikal.

The attitude of the local Belizean population around San Ignacio towards these expatriates is difficult to quantify. As would be expected with any group of entrepreneurs, a few are not popular with the locals, experiencing little employee dedication and high turnover rates. The majority, however, appear to have been accepted and have even become popular with the locals.

This overall popularity, if not acceptance, may be the result of two factors. First, having lived and raised their families in the region has given them the time to become known and accepted. They did not come in as rich "Americans" but in most cases came with no capital or experience and worked hard at many of the same occupations as Belizeans. After almost twenty years of living and working with the local Belizeans, they have, for the majority, been accepted as "Belizeans."

Second, as employers, they are quite popular with the local population. Interviews with dozens of their workers indicated that they were better paid, given more benefits, and had better chances for advancement at these resorts than at most other available occupations in the area. Employee loyalty, especially at places like Chaa Creek was very high and they considered themselves family members as much as employees.

It was interesting to note that of the roughly 75 Belizean and Guatemalan employees working in the resort industry, only one was a Creole from the coast. Every proprietor interviewed much preferred hiring local Maya or Guatemalans to Creoles. Often, the relatives of existing employees were hired for new positions and for many of the small Maya towns near the border, the local resorts represent the major employer. The only animosity appears to relate to the fact that the resort owners would often hire Guatemalans for the hard work or part-time jobs. They were reputed to work harder and receive less pay, but overall they did not seem to pose a serious threat to employment for Belizeans.

Many of the problems associated with international tourism seem to have been avoided here. While some of the resorts are full most of the year, all experience a slow period. The seasonality of tourism employment is a problem in much of the world (Greenwood 1972; Jordan 1980), but in most instances, the Belizean workers are kept on year round. This may be the result of the continued expansion of the resorts, where the workers can shift to maintenance and construction during occupancy lulls.

The owners see their industry as growing, but are well aware of the limits to ecotourism. The recent entrance into the market of numerous small, perhaps poorly-planned and administered resorts may have the double negative impact of oversaturating the market for resorts and reducing the quality reputation they have earned so far. The old Belizean proverb "one sell rice and beans, all sell rice and beans" may well apply to this industry.

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of the positive or negative perceptions of international tourism, virtually all researchers and industry officials agree that tourism is "here to stay and that it [is] now impossible to restore the empty spaces which were once a feature of this diminishing globe" (Welsh 1988, 18). Belize is no exception, with its rapidly expanding tourism industry throughout the country and especially in the interior of Cayo District. The "Integrated Tourism Policy and Strategy Statement," issued by the government of Belize in 1988 outlines the government's view of tourism development. It notes that the industry is [end p. 73] labor intensive, has an employment multiplier of two, and that the direct and indirect taxes may exceed 40 percent of the revenues of a stay-over visitor. The government "realizes that tourism can provide important links with other sectors of the economy as well as provide foreign exchange" (*The New Belize* 1985,1).

Current research indicates that from the perspective of the destination, ecotourists may be the best possible type of tourist to attract. These tourists consider their experience to be more important than the cost, therefore the nature tourism market is relatively price inelastic (Laarman 1987), and it may be more resistant to fluctuations in the international tourism market than traditional types. Ecotourism also attracts a higher-spending traveler than traditional tourism (Sullivan 1989; Boo 1990).

Ecotourists are more tolerant of primitive facilities, poor roads, and less infrastructure than other tourists, which lessens the demand on the host country. Indeed, the more primitive the conditions, the more enjoyable and "authentic" the experience. Living under local conditions and eating local foods is a vital part of the experience, and may result in fewer revenue leakages than traditional tourism. This type of tourist demands more literature and information about their destinations, however, and have higher expectations of their guides (Boo 1990). Overall, nature tourists seem to have a greater impact on the local economy (Durst 1987).

Nature tourism does have critics, however. It has limited growth potential, both because of the small carrying capacity of the remote areas it occurs in and the universal feeling, even stronger among nature tourists, that tourists dislike other tourists. Nature-oriented tourists do not like to see other tourists on their trips (Durst 1987). Too many visitors or too large a resort can destroy a region's image as primitive or wild and can make it less attractive to other nature-oriented tourists. However, to date no model exists to describe the maximum level of tourist numbers above which degradation of the environment, wildlife, or culture occurs (Boo 1990).

Two other negative aspects of nature tourism are voiced by the opposite ends of the spectrum of those involved with tourism analysis. Large corporate developers see smaller resorts and personalized services as difficult to package and sell, although this is viewed as an advantage by the resorts of Western Cayo District, promoting smaller, family-run developments over large, impersonal, and often foreign financed resorts. Social scientists may see nature tourism as a deeper invasion into the previously protected remote areas of the developing world.

Trends indicate that tourism development in the Cayo region around San Ignacio will continue to expand, but probably remain ancillary to coastal and cay tourism. Increasingly, native Belizeans are entering the tourism industry in Western Cayo, but the founders and leaders today remain a small group of expatriates. While international tourism research is filled with critiques (often scathing) of foreign ownership of the resort industry, it appears that the situation in Western Cayo is different. The majority of these expatriates have lived in Belize for close to two decades. They came both seeking the "good, simple life" perceived to exist in Belize as well as to avoid the hectic, industrialized world. After deciding to stay in the Western Cayo District, they attempted numerous occupations in an attempt to survive. It was only serendipitously that they fell into tourism. They have since integrated their family-run resorts into the local society and economy, are raising their children as "Belizeans," usually pay and treat their workers better than Belize nationals, and are actively re-investing their profits into their resorts and the local economy. Foreign-born though they may be, most of this group can be viewed as patriotic Belizeans, helping their adopted country develop an important part of its economy. [end p. 74]

## NOTES

1. The majority of statements in this section, specifically about the hotels and resorts, were gleaned from several months of personal interviews in 1988 and 1989. While some resort owners and employees were more open (and perhaps honest?) than others, the author was able to procure a large amount of data about the history and operations of each establishment. To draw qualitative statements about these persons or developments, or potential effects beyond basic economic information is neither the intent nor within the ability of the author. The caution of James Clifford is most appropriate: "one should resist the temptation to translate all meaningful experience into interpretation. If the two are reciprocally related, they are not identical." (Clifford 1988,35)
2. Although the author interviewed all of the resort owners and/or their staff, the owners of Chaa Creek were by far the most open and helpful. Lucy Fleming spent many hours with the author and made available log and tax records as well as a variety of information that is very rarely seen in tourism research. The interviews of the other resort owners often indicated similar situations, developments, and occupancy rates, but without specific data to support it, parallel conclusions were drawn by the author.
3. Although Maya Mountain Lodge owns river frontage, it is a steep, muddy bank and no trails were developed to reach the river.

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## RESUMEN

Durante los años 70 un pequeño grupo de americanos y europeos se trasladaron independientemente al interior del oeste de Belice. Después de tratar una variedad de ocupaciones en su intento por quedarse, muchos de ellos se dedicaron al turismo, abriendo exitosos centros turísticos. Para mediados de los años 80 habían iniciado una industria excepcional --turismo orientado hacia la naturaleza-- y que aun hoy domina la región. Aunque los dueños y administradores son expatriados, ellos ya han integrado estos centros dentro de la economía local, empleando belicianos en casi todos los niveles, como también convirtiéndose en belicianos ellos mismos. Puede argumentarse que estos expatriados no muestran la mayoría de las imágenes negativas que normalmente están relacionadas con el turismo manejado por extranjeros, aspecto tan comentado en la literatura. **[end p. 75]**