

EXPLORATION

The Best of Belize
Black Rock Lodge

Tom Wallace

A squadron of green parrots zoomed through the gorge in the first light of morning, their raucous cries bouncing off the cliffs. Seemingly in response, a family of three howler monkeys launched a verbal barrage that drowned out all other sounds. As we lounged in our porch hammocks with our coffee, I asked myself, “Who needs an alarm clock in the rainforest?”

A mid-October wedding was the occasion for my wife, Candy, and I to take our first trip to Belize. This tiny Central American country, formerly known as British Honduras, enjoys a great reputation as a destination for scuba diving and snorkeling. Once inland, the topography changes rapidly from rolling hills to tropical rainforest, and our two-hour trip from the airport seemed much faster than that. Our destination was Black Rock Lodge, in the Cayo District of west central Belize, about five miles from the Guatemalan border. Black Rock is an eco/adventure lodge that offers a wide array of activities managed by an enthusiastic and professional staff.

We hopped an easy two-hour flight from Miami to Belize City, and were greeted by our drivers. The Black Rock Lodge is nestled in the rainforest a short ride from the twin towns of San Ignacio and Santa Elena. The ride becomes more interesting once you leave the highway. The remaining six-mile trip is a bouncy, off-road experience that takes you through citrus orchards, teak groves, and a roadside waterfall. Black Rock sits on 242 acres along the Macal River. The spacious, thatch-roofed common area overlooks the



The natural facial expression of the emerald toucanet is one of seeming curiosity. This fellow supervised most of our meals.

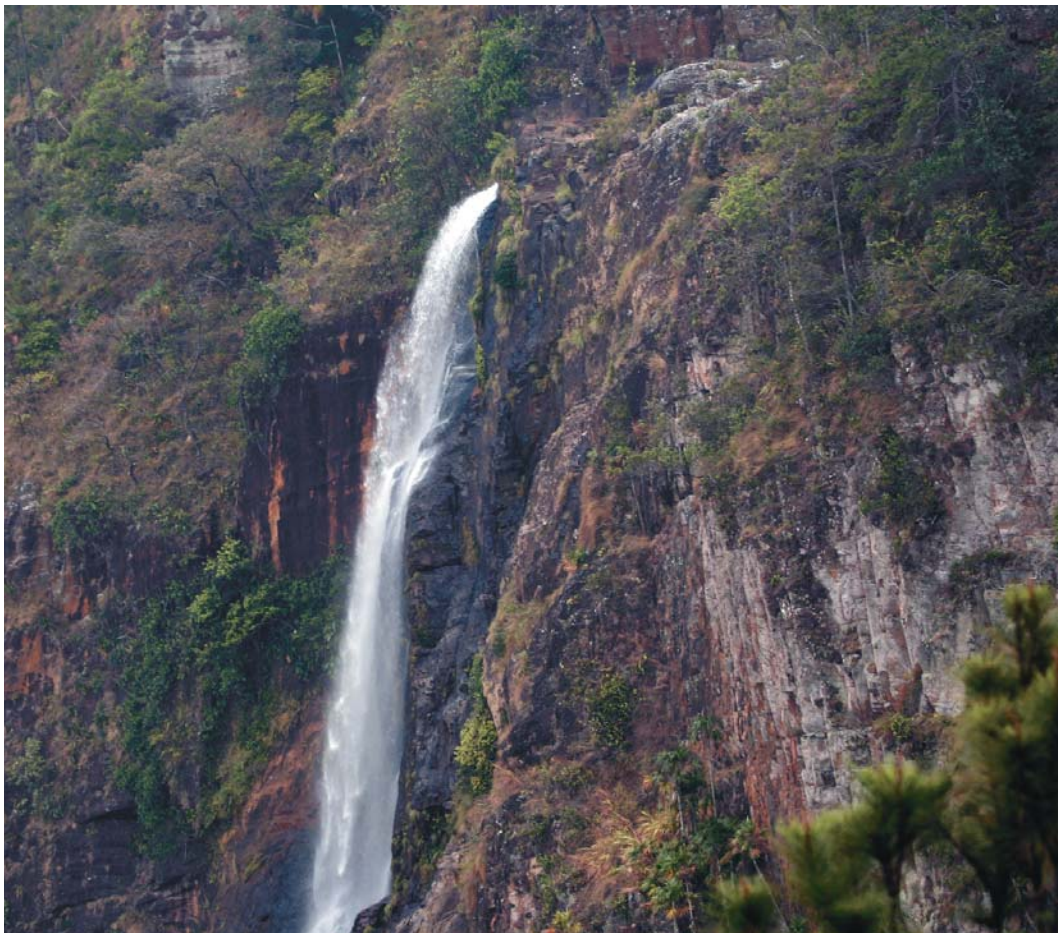
Arrival at Black Rock gives guests pause to inspect their accommodations which are seamlessly woven into the jungle.





Birds of Belize are brilliantly colored and abundant. From top left, clockwise: Violaceous trogon; red-capped manakin; orchard Orioles and red-legged honeycreeper.

In addition to being spectacularly beautiful, this 800-foot waterfall powers a min-hydro plant, which supplies electricity to the lodge.



river basin and is centrally located among 13 comfortable cabins. Originally built in 1987, Black Rock is run by Cameron and Kelley Boyd, who are realizing their dream to live completely off the grid.

The Boyds are a formidable couple who cheerfully embrace the challenges of developing a sustainable eco-destination in the rainforest. Solar energy is harnessed and stored in banks of batteries. Guest cottages are comfortably cooled by low-energy ceiling fans. A mini-hydro plant takes advantage of nearby 800-foot waterfall that powers a small turbine and feeds into an inversion system to supply alternating current. While guests have access to power their appliances, they are reminded to guard their consumption.

The organic farming practiced at Black Rock yields an amazing abundance of delicious fresh fruits and vegetables. The staff incorporates the seasonal produce into daily meals. The hundreds of fruit trees that dot the property include banana and plantain, mango, several species of orange and lime, breadfruit, jackfruit, passion fruit, avocado, Barbados cherry, and papaya. In addition, the lodge cultivates sugar cane, coffee, gooseberry, and pineapple. The rest of the foods are produced on a very local level. Guests can expect to be treated to a wide range of meals, from a simple yet delicious taco lunch (the fresh watermelon juice and guacamole were unbelievable!) to the full Belizean barbecue.

The Macal River offers a choice of water sports – a five-mile canoe trip through a very scenic stretch of river basin, or a tumultuous tubing ride, which we decided to experience during our visit. Most tubing experiences conjure images of a lazy ride on a slow-moving stream – this was not to be the case. The first chute dropped about 12 feet, with a small cauldron waiting at the bottom. Any expectations I had of finishing my ride in an upright position were quickly erased, and the lesson was repeated on the second series of rapids. I took smug satisfaction watching my



The lounge, or common area, at Black Rock. This open-air structure almost appears to be suspended in the rain-forest canopy.

fellow tubers enjoy similar dousings. Canoe paddlers are advised to watch the water and the trees as well – snakes and green iguanas that inhabit the overhanging tree limbs occasionally drop into the river, and the unlucky canoe can pick up an unwanted passenger. Fishermen can target catfish, perch, and a native species of pike.

A number of other activities are available in the immediate area. Horseback rides may vary from a sedate trail ride to a brisk gallop down to the waterfalls. An early morning hike to the summit of the cliffs opposite the lodge is a spectacular way to start the day. We visited the local Mayan ruins at Xunantunich, a unique example of that architecture not to be missed. The temple and outlying buildings are 45 minutes from the lodge, including a river crossing on a hand-cranked ferry. Our guide, Don Eduardo, was helpful, hospitable and entertaining as we climbed the steep and narrow steps of the temple. He also had the insight and knowledge that you would expect from a retired archaeologist. Our group of eight weaved through passages and ledges to emerge on top of the ancient structure. As we looked over the village square and surrounding jungle canopy, I could imagine 10,000 Mayans gathered for ritual sacrifice! For a full-day trip, adventurers can also visit the larger

ruins at Caracol in Belize or Tikal across the border in Guatemala.

But the main event is birding. It is a veritable feast for bird watchers, or twitchers, notable for both the abundance and variety of native species. From the majestic Jabiru stork with its seven-foot wingspan to the swarms of hyperactive purple-crowned fairy hummingbirds, the birds of Belize present outstanding opportunities for bird watching.

The early morning hours find the birds on center stage. Our group included several experienced bird watchers. As a complete novice, I was lucky to benefit from their collective expertise. Parrots and parakeets were easy to locate, as their voices give away their location – they simply cannot keep their peace. Flycatchers, black-birds and tanagers darted through lower-level tree limbs in search of prey. Crested eagles, a variety of hawks and falcons and osprey kept a watchful eye from the treetops. Woodpeckers arrived in a variety of dress attire, none understated. You are sure that you are in the rainforest when you see a keel-billed toucan, with its distinctive “hood ornament.” An amazing 245 species of birds have been sighted within five miles of the lodge.

Some bird sightings require more work than others. Our trip was fairly

pedestrian, lasting a short three hours. Day trips to more isolated portions of the rain-forest and river basin involve travel by car and motor launch, and greatly increase the numbers of avian species available. Any twitcher lucky enough to spot a spectacular scarlet macaw would surely count the sighting as a crowning achievement and well worth the effort.

For those interested in a custom package, contact Kelley Johnson Boyd at kjohnson@blackrocklodge.com, or phone at 011-501-820-4049.

Tom Wallace is a tennis professional at The Country Club of Virginia in Richmond. He and his wife, Candy, live in the far West End with their two chocolate labs. Tom loves waterfowling, all types of fishing and just being outdoors. He graduated from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, and majored in journalism.

EXPLORE THE WILDLIFE & RAINFOREST OF THE MOUNTAINS OF BELIZE

BLACK ROCK LODGE

RESERVATIONS
blackrock@blackrocklodge.com
 San Ignacio, Cayo, Belize, +011-501-820-3929
www.blackrocklodge.com