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Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report®

March 2009 | Our 30th Year

OPINIONATED REVIEWS BY A WRITER WHO TRAVELS INCOGNITO AND ALWAYS PAYS HIS OWN WAY

Beyond the Bay to the Pacific Coast and Sonoma



EACH TIME we return to Northern California, we reflect on the area's near-perfect combination of pristine nature and civilized pleasures. Our recent 10-day circular itinerary began as we crossed the Golden

Gate Bridge, a transition that always prompts a mood of heightened expectation.

We planned to head north along Highway 1. The stretch of this fabled road between San Francisco and Los Angeles may be far better known, but we were keenly anticipating our journey toward Mendocino, through the redwood forests and along the dramatic Pacific coastline. Later, we planned to venture inland, returning to one of our favorite U.S. wine regions, Sonoma County, to

meander on quiet country lanes between the vineyards. Finally, we would drive south to Sausalito.

After crossing the bridge, we headed for Inverness, a hamlet on Point Reyes, where we had a reservation at **MANKA'S INVERNESS LODGE**. Several years before, we had met the owner, Margaret Grade, and were intrigued by her description of a 1910 hunting lodge constructed in the Arts and Crafts style, surrounded by outlying cabins. Alas, in December 2006, we heard the sad news that both the main lodge and the well-known restaurant had been destroyed by fire. Recently, however, we discovered that despite delays in reconstruction, the rooms and cabins were once again open for business.

At present, visitors may choose among four rooms in an annex, "Manka's Cabin," "Fishing Cabin," and two suites in "The Boathouse" on Tomales Bay. Annex rooms (of which the largest is #7) are cozy and atmospheric, with log fires. The spacious two-room cabins feature paneled walls, overstuffed leather chairs and big couches for stretching out before the ocean-stone fireplaces. Baths have soaking tubs, and the outdoor decks are appointed with showers and hot tubs.

The most desirable of the accommodations, however, are unquestionably those in The Boathouse, which is built

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over the water and has a deck with a long pier. Although it is plain on the outside, its first-floor interior has a dramatic Great Room with beamed cathedral ceilings, an enormous fireplace, a collection of artwork by prominent local painters and a baby grand Steinway. In addition, there is a cozy library with a collection of antique globes and a bright sitting room (with a pull-out couch) that leads into a fully equipped kitchen. The master bath has a claw-foot tub and a stone-lined shower. Upstairs, the snug “Boatman’s Quarters” is a one-bedroom suite with a fireplace, club chairs, a soaking tub and its own deck with an outdoor shower.

The property has no gym, no spa and no television (although WiFi is provided), just a wonderful feeling of tranquility and comfort. The kitchen is still open, and guests may eat dinner in their rooms on Friday and Sunday nights. Otherwise, it is an easy drive to the nearby Olema Inn, a charming, white-clapboard property, with a pretty dining room where you may enjoy dishes such as Hog Island oysters, scallops and pork belly with a honeyed pork jus, and pan-roasted sea bass with tomatoes, peas and locally foraged mushrooms.

We very much look forward to revisiting Manka’s when the lodge and restaurant have been rebuilt. But even without them, this is an enchanting place. 🌿 89

Annex Room, \$335–\$385; Fishing Cabin, \$545; Manka’s Cabin, \$615; The Boatman’s Quarters, \$465; The Boathouse, \$715. Tel. (415) 669-1034. Email: reservations@mankas.com

CONTINUING NORTH ON HIGHWAY 1, we spent a relaxing morning in the small town of Point Reyes Station, which boasts a charming bookstore, a fine casual restaurant,



Station House Café, and Tomales Bay Foods, which highlights the area’s justly famous culinary products (don’t miss the Cowgirl Creamery for cheese heaven).

Approaching the top end of the bay, we spotted what looked like an old roadhouse perched on pilings over the water. A sign confirmed we had reached our destination: **NICK’S COVE**. The settlement was established in the 1930s by Nick Kojich, a Slavonian fisherman. Without the assistance of an architect, he and his friends built a number of cabins, creating a distinctive vernacular style. Fast forward to 2008, when the visionary San Francisco restaurateur Pat Kuleto — among his best-known city establishments are the highly regarded *Farallon* and *Boulevard* — brought them back to vibrant new life, modernizing both the restaurant and the accommodations while preserving their essential character.

The 12 cabins come in three categories: “Waterfront,” “Water View” and “Creek Side.” Predictably, the five cabins set over the water are the most desirable. All are charming, some with honey-stained pine paneling, others with white walls and wainscoting. Homey decorative touches include shell boxes, antique fishing rods and framed vintage photographs of Tomales Bay. The furniture includes old leather couches and time-honored rocking chairs. All the cabins have woodburning stoves, luxurious bedding, baths with heated marble floors and, in many cases, soaking tubs. Amenities include small flat-panel TVs and WiFi.

The restaurant has been renovated just as skillfully as the cabins, and the bar with its original 20-foot mahogany counter is a particularly welcoming spot. At the handsome white-marble shellfish bar, piles of ice shavings are heaped with the superb oysters, crabs and mussels for which Tomales Bay is deservedly renowned. Among the signature dishes are barbecued oysters, something of a local specialty. We generally prefer our oysters with nothing more than a squeeze of lemon, but these were delicious. Our favorite main course was the house take on cioppino, San Francisco’s answer to bouillabaisse. This came with clams and mussels on the shell, big pieces of crab, shrimp and chunks of fresh tomato, all in a spicy broth. The only drawback to an otherwise delightful meal was the amateurish service. Our waiter returned twice to confirm our choices, brought the oysters before the wine, and then arrived with the main course while we were finishing our appetizers. Fortunately, breakfast room service in our cabin worked without a hitch. 🌿 89

Creek Side Cottage, \$355–\$445; Water View Cottage, \$355; Waterfront Cottage, \$495–\$745. Tel. (866) 636-4257. Email: relax@nickscove.com

THE NEXT DAY, we found ourselves skirting the Pacific coast, sometimes cliff-edge close. This stretch of Highway 1 twists and dips, so we drove cautiously. After a little under two hours, we came to a place we had long wanted to visit. The Sea Ranch was the vision of architect Al Boeke, who dreamed of building a residential community in harmony with its peerless setting. Construction began in the late 1960s on 5,200 acres of clifftop land stretching along 10 miles of unspoiled coast. Most of the structures were built with shed roofs to deflect the Pacific gales, and shingles that would fade to an appropriately delicate gray. Perimeter fences were banned, non-indigenous plants severely restricted and a flock of sheep engaged to keep down the grass.

Many of The Sea Ranch's homes can be rented, but we had opted to stay at the **SEA RANCH LODGE**, located at the community's southernmost tip. Like its residential cousins, it is a low-slung building with weathered walls and an angled roof. The interior has high ceilings and a discreetly neutral color palette. The overall effect is one of Shaker-esque elegance and restraint. The 20 rooms are spacious and light-filled, with high ceilings and windows that overlook the Pacific. Baths are small, however, and in need of updating. Most of the rooms do not have television, but Internet access is provided. We particularly recommend the "Panoramic Ocean View Rooms," which have irresistible window seats.

Public areas of the lodge include a very handsome lounge with an inviting gas fireplace, a cozy bar and a simple dining room with lofty ceilings and glorious sea views. Alas, in the dining room our otherwise pleasant stay was seriously derailed. The chronic understaffing would have been bad enough, but our main course of local Petrale sole with a pesto of arugula proved borderline inedible. The fish was grossly overcooked and had anyone suggested that it had spent too much time in the freezer, we wouldn't have demurred. The so-called pesto was bitter and unpleasant. During the rest of our trip, we made inquiries and several people confirmed that regrettably, our experiences were representative.

Fortunately, nothing can detract from the lodge's magnificent setting, and each night we fell asleep to the plaintive sound of barking seals. 🌿 **85**

Panoramic Ocean View Room or Ocean/Garden View Room (with hot tub), \$349. Tel. (800) 732-7262. Email: info@searanchlodge.com

FROM THE SEA RANCH, WE TURNED inland and made our way past many appealing wineries down Dry Creek Road to Healdsburg. **MADRONA MANOR** dates from 1880, when it was the estate of wealthy businessman John

Alexander Paxton. The fine three-story Victorian manor house boasts intricate gingerbread details and a handsome mansard roof. Its gracious interior is decorated in soothing shades of cream and is furnished with a collection of fine antique furniture. The accommodations are spread throughout the eight-acre estate, which is a delightful mix of woods and landscaped gardens. The 23 rooms

Perimeter fences were banned,
non-indigenous plants severely
restricted and a flock of sheep
engaged to keep down the grass

and suites are housed within five buildings, including the old carriage house and the school that once educated the children of the estate.

Each room has been individually decorated with sumptuous fabrics and wallpapers. Concessions to modernity include WiFi Internet access, but no TVs. We particularly recommend the large bedrooms on the second floor of the main house, which have their own balconies and fireplaces. The "Garden Cottage" is the most secluded of the suites and offers a private deck and its own garden. The two newest suites are in the old schoolhouse and have Jacuzzis and private decks.

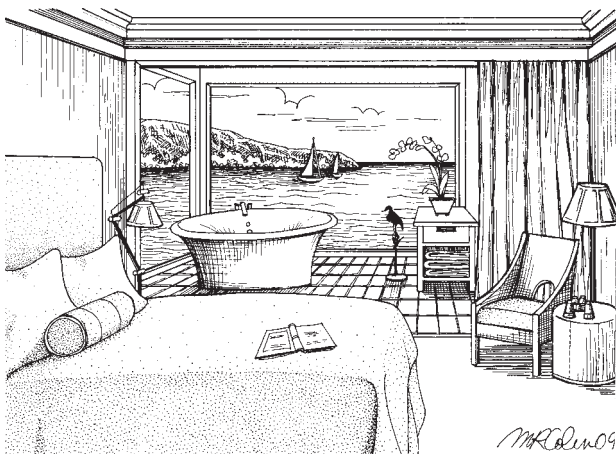
The main dining room has rose-colored walls and elegant floral curtains. It is easy to believe that you are in some charming country hotel in Europe. The menu, however, is a reminder that you are still in California, thanks to listings such as Sonoma chicken breast, Cloverdale rabbit and Golden California Estate caviar.

We opted for a four-course plan with selected wine pairings and enjoyed an absolutely superb meal. The standouts were an appetizer of Dungeness crab tempura, which consisted of generous chunks of battered deep-fried crab served with tangy slices of grapefruit, cooling avocado and fiery jalapeños. This was followed by light yet satisfying potato gnocchi with an inspired mix of black truffles and black trumpet mushrooms with mascarpone. Cloverdale rabbit came in two preparations: the tender loin wrapped in bacon, and a crisp confit of the leg. Both were perfectly cooked, moist and flavorful, and complemented by ricotta ravioli and a sumptuous pumpkin consommé. The brilliant chef at Madrona, Jesse Mallgren, is a Sonoma native whose pedigree includes work with luminaries such as Gary Danko and Jeremiah Tower, as well as a stint at *Syzygy Restaurant* in Aspen.

Visitors to Healdsburg are nowadays spoiled for choice, as Madrona Manor is just a short distance from the equally distinguished Les Mars Hotel, with its superb adjoining restaurant, *Cyrus*. On your next trip to Sonoma, we suggest that you try both places since, frankly, we find it hard to choose between them. 🌿 95

Mansion Room, \$335; Garden Cottage Suite, \$310; Schoolhouse Suite, \$390. Tel. (800) 258-4003. Email: info@madronamanor.com

LEAVING HEALDSBURG with considerable regret, we headed directly down Highway 101 to Sausalito, a drive of just over an hour. This charming small town of 7,500 inhabitants is known for its galleries, fine restaurants, colorful houseboats and exquisite views of San Francisco Bay. **THE INN ABOVE TIDE** (29 rooms and suites) is tucked away on a little cul-de-sac steps from the commuter ferry terminal and the shopping area. Its modest three-story brown-shingle exterior belies the exceptional accommodations within. In the attractive small lobby,



Panoramic view of San Francisco Bay, The Inn Above Tide

the front desk resembles an arrangement of carefully balanced *tansu* chests, and there we were greeted by an exceptionally capable and amiable receptionist.

Our “Grand Deluxe Room” felt like a cabin on a cruise ship, with the waters of San Francisco Bay sparkling through a glass door that led onto a private deck. Inside, the room was efficiently and stylishly designed with furnishings that were elegant and understated in the Scandinavian manner. Amenities included an iPod docking station and a DVD player. The bath came with handsome granite counters and was appointed with a soaking tub. Most of the inn’s rooms have gas fireplaces but Grand Deluxe Rooms have real woodburning fireplaces.

The inn has no restaurant, but as well as an extensive breakfast buffet, wine and cheese are served in a small lounge off the lobby late each afternoon. For dinner, the

neighborhood provides numerous restaurant options. Although there is no gym or pool, in-room spa services are available and many guests opt for massages on their private decks in the sea air beside the harbor. 🌿 92

King Deluxe Room (with fireplace), \$365; Grand Deluxe Room, \$545; Suite, from \$675. Tel. (800) 893-8433. Email: stay@innabovetide.com

FIVE MINUTES SOUTH of Sausalito, **CAVALLO POINT LODGE** is a handsome new resort built on the site of historic Fort Baker. Arrayed around the former Parade Ground are 13 restored Colonial Revival buildings, which now house 68 rooms and suites. All have original walnut furnishings and gas fires. Many have crown moldings and punched-tin ceilings. On the hillside above, 74 contemporary accommodations come with floor-to-ceiling windows, gas fireplaces and individual patios or decks.

Although a great deal of effort has gone into this project, we were slightly disappointed by the result. An avalanche of publicity had raised our expectations to a level where they were perhaps bound to be deflated. Much of the problem was created by the hotel’s promotional materials, which foster the impression that there are views of the Marin Headlands and the Golden Gate Bridge from all over the property. This is simply not the case. From most of the historic quarters all you see is the Parade Ground. Having just stayed at The Inn Above Tide, which is right on the water, we felt strangely let down.

Of course, Cavallo Point is not a directly comparable property. It is a sizeable resort with a 11,000-square-foot spa, a cookery school and a superlative restaurant, *Murray Circle*. The latter is the domain of chef Joseph Humphrey, formerly of Meadowood and the Auberge du Soleil in the Napa Valley. His Michelin one-star dining room is a lovely space with wooden floors, leather-backed chairs, gas fireplaces and subdued lighting. Humphrey’s menu features “Bay Area cuisine with a French accent” and makes the most of the superlative local ingredients. We particularly enjoyed Pacific swordfish wrapped in smoked bacon and grilled over a wood fire, as well as suckling pig served three ways: as a bacon-wrapped loin, a slow-roasted belly and a spicy *morcilla* sausage. Our favorite dish of all, however, was the caramelized gnocchi with king trumpet mushrooms, topped with buratta cheese and enlivened by the briny tang of sea urchin. In our view, even if you do not stay at Cavallo Point, a visit to *Murray Circle* should be mandatory. 🌿 87

Bayside King Deluxe Room (city view), \$384; Golden Gate Junior Suite (Golden Gate view), \$480. Tel. (888) 651-2003. Email: reservations@cavallopoint.com

New Developments in the Food Capital of America



SAN FRANCISCO is undeniably one of the world's great food cities. With rich agricultural lands, fabled vineyards and the Pacific Ocean all close at hand, the city's chefs have now been at the forefront of culinary innovation for more than three decades.

We began our recent visit by spending a delightful morning in the **Ferry Building Marketplace**. Opened in 1898, this elegant structure with its iconic 245-foot tower quickly became the hub of transportation at a time when ferries played a crucial role in the city's life. Everything changed after the openings of the Bay Bridge in 1936 and the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937. And in 1957, the construction of the Embarcadero Freeway cut the Ferry Building off from the rest of the city. But ferries started to come back into favor and in 1989, an earthquake so badly damaged the freeway that it was torn down. In 2003, after an extensive restoration, the Ferry Building opened to a glorious new life as a vibrant market bringing together more than three dozen of the Bay Area's finest producers and purveyors of food, along with other shops and restaurants in a handsome arcade setting.

Among our favorite stores is The Acme Bread Company, founded by Steve Sullivan, whose interest in fine bread was aroused while working for Alice Waters at *Chez Panisse*. Having purchased a loaf of tangy San Francisco sourdough, we strolled over to the Cowgirl Creamery (based in Tomales) for some great cheese. Nearby, Boccalone Salumeria had an unusually fine selection of salamis. Finally, we picked up some patisserie at Miette and some fine chocolate at Scharffen Berger. A bottle of wine from the Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant made our picnic complete.

A wonderful alternative for lunch at the marketplace is **The Slanted Door**, located at the northeast corner of the Ferry Building, where the specialty is Vietnamese cuisine. A wall of windows makes this a bright spot during the day and provides a wonderful view of the glittering harbor at night. Here, chef/owner Charles Phan produces superlative Asian food using fresh ingredients from the Bay Area. We began with the signature spring rolls of pork, shrimp and mint wrapped in translucent

rice paper. And for a main course, we opted for the marvelous caramelized tiger prawns with ginger and garlic in a slightly hot chili sauce.

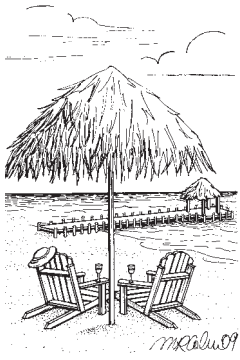
Another highlight of our recent stay was **Chez Papa**, a relatively new restaurant that showcases the talents of chef David Bazirgan. Tucked away in Mint Plaza just off Fifth Street, it is a quick walk from the big Westfield mall on Market Street. When the weather is favorable, the outside seating area is a delightful spot for an alfresco meal. Inside, it is wonderfully atmospheric, with dark walls, striking black-glass chandeliers and accents of persimmon in the tabletops.

Bazirgan's food is California-Mediterranean, with dishes such as a tart of caramelized cipollini onions with goat cheese and pistou, and filet of Loch Duart Scottish salmon, cooked slightly rare, with orange-braised fennel and a mix of citrus fruits. There is an appealing list of more than two dozen wines by the glass, with selections from both California and France.

Few San Francisco restaurants have created such an immediate stir as **Coi**. Pronounced "kwa," its unusual name is an archaic French word meaning "tranquil," an adjective that accurately describes the serene, windowless brown/beige interior with grass-cloth walls. Here, chef Daniel Patterson creates a remarkable 11-course tasting menu that is served every night in the 29-seat dining room. Not feeling in the mood for such indulgence, we opted for a smaller à la carte experience in the handsome front lounge. Although the dishes are unmistakably from Northern California, the presentation is almost Japanese, with each course offered on a different style of plate as would be the case in an elevated *kaiseki* meal.

We began with Patterson's signature pink grapefruit mousse seasoned with tarragon, ginger and black pepper. It is unconventional but utterly delicious. For our main course, we selected the "Field to Family" chicken stew. This may sound plain, but Patterson and plain do not exist in the same kitchen, and the silken broth was rich with added flavors of matsutake mushrooms, wheat berries and thyme. In our judgment, Patterson is a chef of the very highest order, and we were glad to see this opinion confirmed by several laudatory reviews. Be forewarned, however, that *Coi* is in a seedy neighborhood surrounded by strip clubs, from which the restaurant's calm interior is a welcome refuge.

Belize: The Tropical Pleasures of Ambergris Caye



THE FLIGHT TO BELIZE CITY from either Houston or Miami takes less than two hours, but it effects one of modern travel's more bizarre transitions. As you come in to land at the tiny, ramshackle airport, you can see a dark-green mass of dense jungle extending west for 70 miles to the border of Guatemala — a forest that still sustains a sizeable jaguar population — while from the other window, the Caribbean coastline appears as a primeval tangle of mudflats and crocodile-infested mangrove swamps.

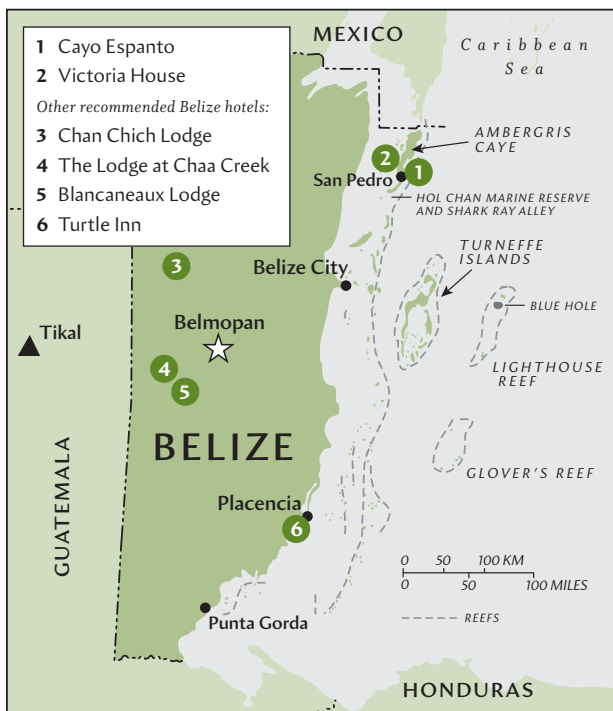
On our recent trip, we immediately transferred to a 13-seat Cessna Caravan for the 20-minute flight to Ambergris Caye. As soon as you cross the coast and leave the mangroves behind, the sea changes to a glinting turquoise expanse, patterned by swirling sandbars and dotted with tiny atolls. Whether you have come to Belize to watch its dazzling jungle birds, to explore its Mayan

ruins, to scuba dive or to fly-fish for bonefish and tarpon, it is likely that you will first come to Ambergris Caye, which functions as a base camp for these activities.

LOCATED TWO OR THREE MILES south of the engagingly scruffy town of San Pedro, **VICTORIA HOUSE** is a serene and orderly enclave of white colonial-style buildings, linked by raked sandy paths and surrounded by tropical gardens that are daily primped and trimmed. It had been three years since our previous visit — since when the resort has added some spectacular new suites and villas — so we went for an exploratory stroll through the grounds, crossing the white-sand beach to a long pier jutting into the Caribbean. There, we sat gazing at the line of surf, half a mile distant, breaking on Belize's barrier reef, an immense 180-mile-long rampart of coral that stretches from Mexico's Isla Mujeres to Sopadilla Cay in the Bay of Honduras. As we savored the soft tropical trade wind, two huge rays and a barracuda cruised slowly past.

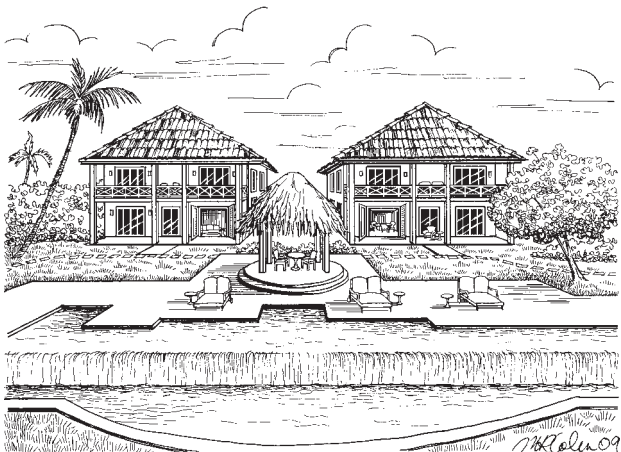
The expanse of sea between the reef and the eastern shore of Ambergris Caye is effectively a gigantic lagoon and, as a result, it nourishes thick beds of turtle grass. Although staff members at Victoria House tirelessly sweep the sand, it is impossible for them to keep it clear of weed. For this reason, the hotel does not provide a beach experience comparable to that of, say, Mexico's Riviera Maya, which lies immediately to the north. Rather, it is essentially a place to relax and a congenial base from which to dive or to fish.

The 42 guest accommodations are divided among several buildings, but those most likely to be of interest to *Hideaway Report* readers are the spacious new "Infinity Suites" and Villas, which occupy a self-contained area of the property and look out across a striking horizon pool, ideal for swimming laps. The duplex Infinity Suites come with one or two bedrooms, and each offers a sizeable living room, a dining area and a full kitchen on the ground floor, plus a large master bedroom with a canopied king-size bed upstairs. Stylish modern baths provide travertine surfaces and large walk-in showers. Throughout, the interior design is elegant and understated with neutral colors, natural fabrics and expanses of polished wood. The combination of generous proportions and a refined aesthetic creates a profoundly calm and relaxing atmosphere. The adjacent two-bedroom Villas are similar in style, but are arranged on one level, beneath traditional palapa roofs. The baths



provide outdoor showers in private garden areas, and their furnished terraces overlook the horizon pool and an expanse of neatly mown lawn.

The cuisine at Victoria House, both in the *Palmilla Restaurant* and in the more casual dining area next to the bar, is varied and delicious. Chef José Luis Ortega was born in Mexico City but trained in California and worked in San Francisco and Houston before returning to Central America. He calls his cooking “Mayan Bistro Cuisine,” and his menus make imaginative use of local fish and fruit, enhanced by flavors and techniques from both



The new “Infinity Suites” and horizon pool at Victoria House

Mexico and the American Southwest. His ceviche San Pedro, made with mixed seasonal seafood, is outstanding, and accompanied by a bowl of tortilla chips and an icy margarita, makes an exceptionally memorable snack.

Staff members at Victoria House are cheerful and infinitely obliging. Overall, this is a delightful hideaway resort that is attractive, well-maintained and exceptionally hospitable. 🌿 89

One-bedroom Infinity Suite, \$595; Two-bedroom Villa, \$875. Tel. (800) 247-5159 or (501) 226-2067. Email: info@victoria-house.com

AN UPSCALE ALTERNATIVE IS provided by **CAYO ESPANTO**, a three-acre private island, 10 minutes by speedboat from the west coast of Ambergris Caye and hence oriented toward the mainland, not the barrier reef. This unusual and distinctive property, which was comprehensively renovated in 2007, has a two-to-one staff-to-guest ratio and just six sumptuous villas, each with a plunge pool and a private dock. The most remarkable of the accommodations is the new “Casa Ventanas,” which has been constructed over the water at the end of a 150-foot pier.

Guests tend to come to Cayo Espanto for extreme privacy and many never venture out of their villas during their entire stays. The island has few communal areas,

and a personal butler is summoned by walkie-talkie to orchestrate lavish meals or to arrange in-room spa treatments. If you are in search of seclusion and wish to be thoroughly indulged by extremely friendly and obliging staff, then Cayo Espanto could be for you. It is emphatically not, however, a place to make new friends, or to learn about the people and culture of Belize. 🌿 89

One-bedroom Villa, \$1,695–\$1,895, all meals, non-motorized activities and boat transfers to and from San Pedro included. Two-bedroom Villa (four guests), \$2,095–\$2,495. Full island rental (16 guests), \$12,000. Tel. (888) 666-4282. Email: info@privateisland.com

Saltwater Fly-fishing

PARADOXICALLY, THE GREATEST DRAWBACK of Cayo Espanto is also one of its primary assets. Although the surrounding seawater ranges in color from peacock to pea-green and looks extraordinarily inviting, it is actually very shallow and littered with jagged coral blocks. This makes it unsuitable for swimming, but ideal for bonefish. World-class saltwater fly-fishing is one of the principal reasons people venture to Belize, and the flats around Cayo Espanto are home to huge shoals of bonefish, from one to five pounds in weight. It is quite literally possible to catch them from the end of your private deck.

Bonefishing is a sport that has grown exponentially over the past 10 or 15 years, its increasing popularity due chiefly to the astonishing strength and speed of the quarry. (Bonefish are edible and some fishing guides will prepare bonefish sashimi, but in the main they are released because, unsurprisingly, they are extremely bony.) When hooked, even a small bonefish will take off at 20 mph or more, ripping line off the reel with the high-pitched scream that is the stuff of fishermen’s fantasies on cold winter nights back home. Larger specimens routinely smash graphite rod tips and leave their owners weak with excitement and drunk with adrenaline. Another attraction of the sport is that it requires a relatively high degree of skill with a fly rod. This is not a pursuit for the novice angler, as you must be able to cast a long way (because the fish are shy) and with a great deal of accuracy (because they are constantly on the move).

The finest saltwater fly-fishing in Belize is around Turneffe Atoll, located about 50 miles southeast of Belize City (90 minutes by speedboat) on the outside of the barrier reef. There, a number of lodges cater to avid fishermen and provide reasonably comfortable accommodations, though none is of the standard that *Hideaway Report* readers customarily require. (For further information, call the Andrew Harper Travel Office at (800) 375-4685.) Turneffe is renowned as a place where it is

possible to catch a “grand slam” of a tarpon, a permit and a bonefish all on the same day. However, virtually anywhere along the coast of Belize provides exceptional fly-fishing, and there are sizeable shoals of bonefish within sight of the ferry dock in San Pedro. So you can fish during the day and then return to the comfort of Victoria House or Cayo Espanto when your enthusiasm wanes or the action subsides. (Both properties will readily arrange guides and boats.)

Nor is the sport around Ambergris Caye confined to bonefish. The fly-fisherman’s greatest challenge, tarpon, can be found in channels amid the mangroves at the southern tip of the island. Tarpon of up to 50 pounds are resident in Belizean waters year-round, but between June and September, 200-pound migratory monsters turn up. Such huge fish are extremely powerful, take hours to land and are famous for their aerial acrobatics. Aficionados of the sport gleefully insist that trying to land a big tarpon on a fly rod is the closest known approximation to accidentally snagging an Ohio-class nuclear submarine.

On our recent trip, we had time only for the bonefish. Our guide, Luis, arrived at 8 a.m. in a flat-bottomed boat looking appropriately grizzled and Hemingway-esque. And half an hour later, we were drifting serenely across the flats, surrounded by pelicans and frigatebirds, searching the water through polarizing glasses for the telltale disturbance caused

by bonefish digging in the seabed for clams and crabs, or the elusive shadow of a shoal, which for a few fleeting seconds darkens a patch of the glimmering water.

Fishing for bonefish is a kind of spiritual exercise, as it inevitably prompts a good degree of humility. Standing on a raised deck, peering at the water 40 or 50 feet away, you look and look and see nothing. Your guide, however, down in the bottom of the boat managing its drift with a long pole, invariably sees shoal after shoal, his voice reflecting an ever-increasing level of despair and exasperation. “Over there! No, there! 10 o’clock; 40 feet. Cast NOW!” Fortunately, Luis proved a phlegmatic and tolerant fellow, thoroughly accustomed to the incompetence of clients.

Eventually, you do see, or think you see, a shifting shadow passing over the sandy bottom. You cast more in hope than expectation. Seconds pass. Then there is a violent tug, you stumble, nearly fall in, recover, and look down in amazement to see that all of your fly line has vanished and that you are already well into the backing.

The thrill is alarmingly addictive. The fortunate bonefish is released when caught, but the bonefish angler is generally hooked for life.

For information about scuba diving and jungle wildlife lodges in Belize, read this month’s Hideaway Report Online at www.AndrewHarper.com.

Napa Wine Tour



I HAVE VISITED the Napa Valley numerous times and it is always a delight. However, the most rewarding trips have always been those on which I have had the opportunity to sit down with winemakers, to sip a glass of their favorite vintages and to hear about their trials and their triumphs, as well as all the fascinating lore and history of the valley.

I therefore decided that we should put together a Signature Tour, so that a small group of Harper members could enjoy precisely this experience. We have now finalized a five-night itinerary beginning on September 20.

Participants will be flown by helicopter from either San Francisco or Sacramento to Meadowood, one of my longtime favorite resorts. Highlights of the tour will include a tasting of “cult” wines, choreographed by Gilles de Chambure, Master Sommelier and Director of Wine Education at Meadowood; a private tasting with Hugh Davies at his family’s renowned Schramsberg estate; and a blending with the extraordinarily talented winemaker Philippe Melka of Vineyard 29.

We have also been able to arrange a private lunch at Thomas Keller’s legendary restaurant, *The French Laundry*. And on the final evening, several prominent Napa vintners will join a farewell dinner for which they have selected wine pairings to accompany chef Christopher Kostow’s sensational Michelin two-star cuisine.

I do hope that you will be able to join this exclusive tour, which promises to deliver the ultimate Napa Valley experience. For details, visit our web site or contact a travel advisor at (800) 375-4685. Email: signaturetours@andrewharper.com

—Andrew Harper

✦ For an explanation of hotel ratings, check the *Hideaway Report Online* on the member web site.

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