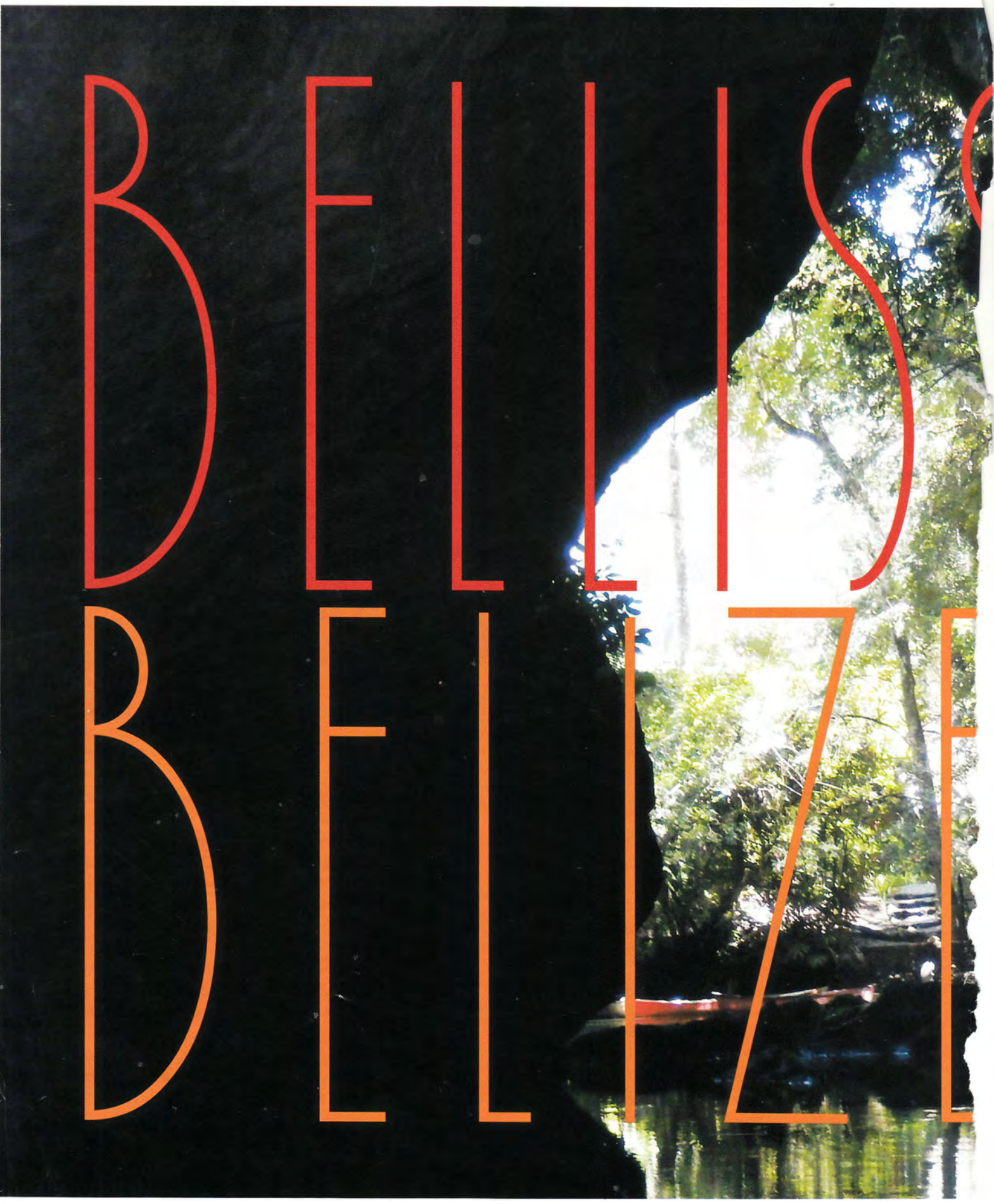
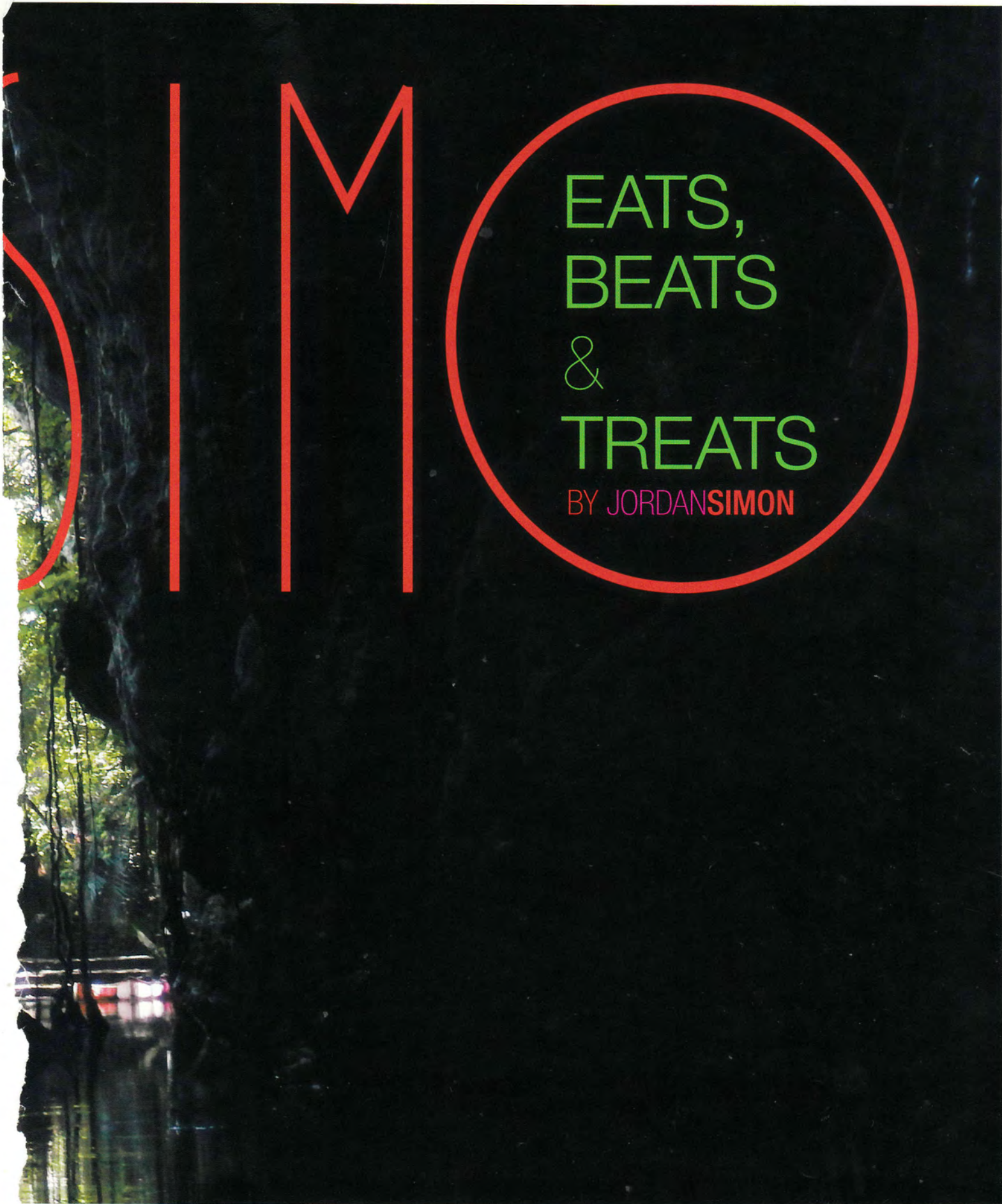


BELLIS

BELIZA





SIMON

EATS,
BEATS
&
TREATS
BY JORDAN SIMON



Then it's on to the magical Hidden Valley Inn & Reserve, an intimate luxurious resort set within a vast, 7,290-acre private reserve exclusive to guests, bridging two national parks (Tapir and Mountain Pine) in the Cayo District. Its motto is "For love of the wild." Here you get back to Nature but not back to basics, with posh pampering sans pretension in the wilderness, offering everything from spa treatments to gourmet cuisine by candlelight. A symbiotic relationship exists between the resort and the environment; all guest profits help sustain the reserve's ecosystem.

Access is via a long, bumpy dirt road that would make chiropractors blanch. Finally, we pull up to a welcoming hacienda. We arrive in time for High Tea, served every afternoon with luscious local specialties like empanadas and coconut tarts, as well as the inn's own coffee (grown, roasted and ground onsite) and cooling lemongrass ginger honey tea. The best part of check-in? A wonderfully restorative five-minute hand massage in the 1970s neo-Victorian main lodge, exquisitely accoutered with beamed slanted wood ceilings, terracotta tiles, stone fireplaces, throw rugs, fabulous local photos. Outside, a fountain pool and hot tub gurgle on the stone patio overlooking the lavish gardens of orchids (the reserve contains over 80 species), lilies and bromeliads.

The six surrounding cottages with green corrugated tin roofing each hold two suites. Pails of kindling sit on the patios, to feed your private fireplace. Other comfortable appointments include full bathrooms, writing desk, closets, in-room safes, plush bedding and terrycloth robes. Handsome decor features mahogany furnishings, cushy leather armchairs and such local accents as machete scabbards on the walls (no actual machetes, just in case there's trouble in paradise), polished wood balls and Mayan tapestries. Two Estate Suites boast alfresco showers and a separate enclosed patio with an inviting hammock. Rooms have phone but no TV or AC (the ceiling fans are usually sufficient), though those in dire need of "civilization" can access Wi-Fi throughout the resort.



The innkeeper/owners of Hidden Valley Inn & Reserve – Trevor and Jacqui Roe, son Andrew (alas, his charming wife Rachael must attend to business stateside), daughter Simone, and Michael – greet us in the clubby lounge at the mahogany bar. We also meet Peter Durhager, former HVIR manager, who'd conducted his own exhaustive photographic forays and research of the reserve; he regales us with anecdotes throughout our stay. The bartenders whip up wondrous nightly cocktail specials like Jaguar Juice (succulent prickly pear-like pitaya and rums). Small wonder British soldiers on jungle maneuvers have made it their base.

The Roes and Peter animatedly discuss the property. Recognized as a "managed resource protected area" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), HVIR draws researchers from around the world to study the ecosystem. Currently HVIR sponsors the Peregrine Fund's onsite research monitoring rare raptor species. Virginia Tech University operates a grid of camera traps throughout the area monitoring the abundance, health and habits of the fauna. Thanks to its diverse landscape, spiraling to 2,000-foot elevation, from lush broadleaf tropical jungle to pine forest, mountain peaks to ravines plunging like Nature's neckline, the reserve is home to many of Belize's native cats, threatened raptors and wildlife (over 100 species). The reserve includes miles of trails, crystalline creeks, spectacular waterfalls, verdant ravines, and granite escarpments... all habitats teeming with biodiversity.

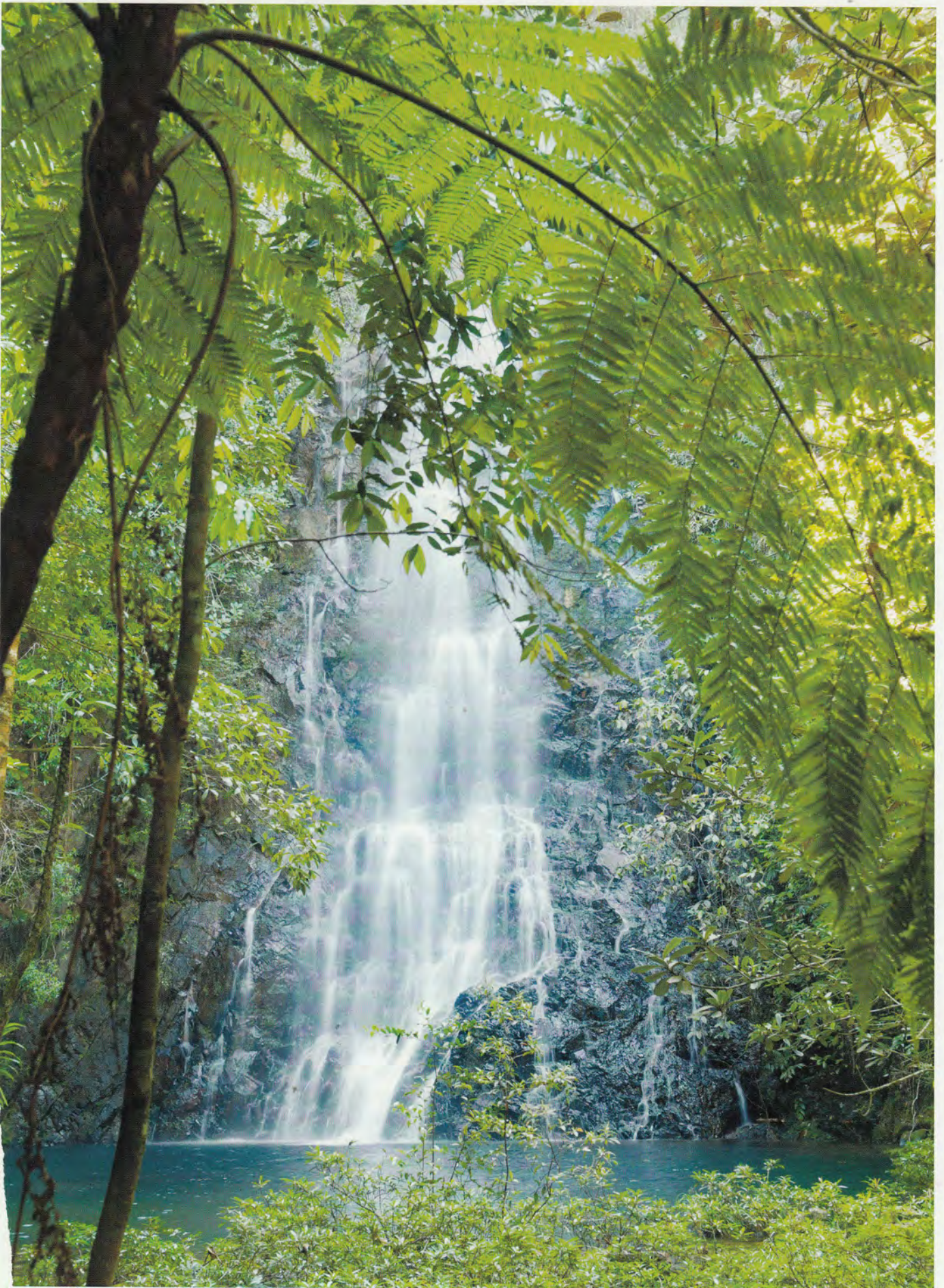
In addition to rich flora, conservationists believe that Hidden Valley Reserve is home

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to approximately half of all Belize's endemic avifauna, including exceedingly rare birds dubbed the "Big 5." The property hosts 20 of Mesoamerica's 33 known breeding pairs of the dramatically declining Orange-Breasted Falcon, the world's second fastest flying bird after the peregrine, sustaining speeds of over 200 km/hour. The other four are the sternly avuncular-looking Stygian Owl, the Solitary Eagle, the distinctively marked Black & White Hawk Eagle and the surprisingly multi-hued King Vultures (who hang out at the namesake falls).

Overall, Hidden Valley Reserve hosts 239 confirmed vertebrate species and a total of 419 species nearby, several globally threatened. Over 40% of Belize's non-marine mammals make their home here, including Belize's five feline species: puma, jaguar, ocelot, margay and jaguarondi. The abundance of these predators suggests there's a healthy prey base. While hiking you're likelier to see a fox, peccary, coatimundi, boa constrictor, perhaps the massive Baird's Tapir... or hear the barks and roars of the howler monkeys.

We adjourn to the adjacent restaurant. That night is a buffet, showcasing lip-smacking suckling pig. Most dinners are four-course plated affairs, fusing bright Mayan and Mestizo flavors and techniques. The main menu rotates weekly, but the chefs ring daily changes depending on what's fresh. Ingredients are grown onsite or sourced at the daily produce markets in neighboring villages. Signature dishes include butterflied prawns with truffle sauce and lemongrass-infused rice and grilled chicken in sesame oil, bacon, feta and wild greens with smoked aioli.





The next day we venture off property: HVIR is ideally located for numerous adventures, including zip-lining, rappelling, cave tours, canoeing and Maya ruin expeditions. You can canoe down the gentle Macal River, where villagers go about their daily chores and enormous six-foot-long black and orange iguanas roll over from the tree canopy. Or kayak the Mopan, a tributary of the Belize River with easy Level I rapids, that passes the Xunantunich Maya ruins. Kristin and Mollie opt for Barton Creek Canoe Caving. The guided paddle cruises along Barton Creek and into the Barton Creek cave with flashlights. Mayan artifacts such as pottery and skeletal remains from human sacrifice nestle amid its rock and crystal formations. They then head for the Green Hills Butterfly Farm, visitors can observe the life cycle of the blue morpho butterfly, known locally as the Belizean Blue.

Doug, our most intrepid outdoorsperson, selects Belize's most famous cave tour, the more adventurous, arduous Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM), exploring part of the extensive Chiquibul subterranean system, Central America's longest. He later details the 45-minute hike into the jungle, followed by a swim with headlamps into the cave. Pottery, artwork and flints from the ancient Maya, and the skeletal remains of human sacrifice reveal the heart of Xibalba (the underworld of the Mayan spiritual tree of life).

Fredy escorts Kay, Susan, Kitty, Walter and me to Caracol (The Snail), the largest Belizean Maya site, deep in the Chiquibul Wilderness and cloaked in jungle. Along the way wild turkeys flit, red and green flashes, across the road. Since it's just four clicks from the Guatemalan border, we receive a military escort (to prevent wildlife poaching and ruin looting, as well as drug running) to the entrance. The site's 4,000-plus structures cover 177 square kilometers and may have boasted 80-120,000 inhabitants at its height.

Excavation and preservation of Caracol began in 2000 with the restoration of the magnificent 143-foot Caana, The Sky Palace, comprising 98 steps and three tiers, still Belize's tallest man-made structure. The views – and climb – are breathtaking. We admire "Water lily Witz monster," another famed sight: two friezes of masks. One represents Tlaloc, a borrowing from the Aztec rain god added around 800AD, the other a jaguar, dating from circa 500AD. They sit along the east-west meridian, wishing the sun a good journey to the underworld. Further along, a large hieroglyphic panel describes solstice rituals conducted by Lord Kan II in approximately 7AD, part of an astronomical observatory.

Fredy also regales us with tales of Maya creation myth along the tour and discusses nature. The back trails are birding hotspots; a scarlet macaw colony would have provided plumage for headdresses. Hollow trumpet trees were used to make pipes and flutes, as well as a tea for diabetes. "Horseballs" pulp could be used like "crazy glue," a mortar for buildings. The *cepal* tree, whose resin was tapped at the full moon when the sap runs highest, yielded incense.





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On our way back, we pass the British soldiers camped at the Inn, frolicking naked in a stream. They wave like little kids. We stop at the Rio On, forming swimming pools and waterslides and natural "Jacuzzi" tubs amid giant granite rocks, flanked by vaulting Caribbean pine. Next, Cave Rio Frio boasts a wide opening at either end of its half-mile length. The entrance, 100 feet high, is Belize's largest. Stalagmites and stalactites form columns under its enormous cathedral dome. Artifacts such as pottery shards dating from 250AD provide evidence that the site was used in Maya ceremonies.

The next day, Peter, Trevor and Fredy leads hikes into the reserve: over 90 miles of well-maintained and -marked hiking and biking trails (21-speed mountain bikes are complimentary), ranging from short strolls to more strenuous full-day expeditions. Each trail focuses on areas of outstanding natural beauty. The staff customizes daily expeditions to taste and ability. The inn can provide pack lunches or set up a feast at a pre-designated point (very popular with lovebirds, a more common non-avian sighting here). This is especially popular at the majestic waterfalls (rent one for the day!) or by the limpid pools and streams filigreeing the reserve.

At King Vulture Falls, I feel above the clouds, gazing down on the escarpment that runs through the property. Blue morphos flit and flutter through the idyllic Butterfly Falls, a single 80-foot cascade tumbling into an emerald pool flanked by orchids. It's a fairytale wedding spot, especially when dozens of iridescent morphos are released after your vows. The 30-foot Secret Falls and Pool hold a small platform with slate floor and thatched roof which can be set up for romantic dining à deux; it's the site of many a proposal.



On our return, Trevor explains about vast ongoing repairs and maintenance, including controlled burns of vegetation. Surrounding natural resources like felled trees are used to craft stairs, bridges and ladders, as well as resting places. We savor lunch on the Yokol Chen platform (one of many such strategically placed structures providing exhilarating views) extended over a stream. After a coffee tour and demonstration provided by the indefatigable Fredy, we end with an elegant dinner featuring wondrous pulled pork with guacamole alongside the usual bon mots and bonhomie.

And before I knew it, the next morning we were in the airport departure lounge. One shop sells a fearsome-looking statue whose sign reads "Di Big Kahuna Stress God Tek Mi Picha and I Wan Tek Yu Stress."

But I didn't need to snap a photo to relieve my stress. Belize the beautiful had managed that already.