



PEOPLE AND PLACES

## Guatemala & Belize - the director's cut

He's one of the biggest names in Hollywood but making movies isn't **Francis Ford Coppola's** only skill. He also runs successful hotels. **Julie Eagleton** finds out about his three resorts in Central America

**A**pocalypse Now was filmed in the jungle on Luzon in the Philippines. For all the problems we had filming, I found it a very peaceful and safe place and I acclimatised easily. I wanted to buy a small island retreat there, but, as my wife rightly pointed out, it was pretty far to travel to from where we lived in California. So I went looking for a jungle paradise closer to home.

A couple of years later, in the early 1980s, I visited Belize, just after it gained independence. I wanted to talk to the government about establishing a satellite address that would provide a link between North, Central and South America, but it was too much too soon for them. While I was there, someone told me about a

lodge that was for sale in the west of the country. I discovered what is now my hotel, Blancaneaux Lodge. It was beautiful, tucked away in the Maya Mountains, overlooking the Privassion River. It had been abandoned and needed a lot of work, but I peeked through its windows and thought: "I could write here."

I first used the lodge as a summer retreat for the family, but over time we expanded the property and made improvements. And, urged on by visiting friends, we thought about opening it as a resort for paying guests.

Blancaneaux Lodge has a tranquil atmosphere, which envelops you as soon as you shed your city clothes and your worries. The spa, the hot pool, the sound of the river all lull you into a peaceful state that lets you recon-



Act one: Francis Ford Coppola, inset, far right, went looking for a jungle retreat after filming 'Apocalypse Now'. He found the Blancaneaux Lodge in Belize

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Go Christmas shopping in style. From tomorrow, flights on the business-class airline **Silverjet** (08448 55011; [flysilverjet.com](http://flysilverjet.com)) to New York and its latest destination, Dubai, go on sale for £999 return - saving 10 per cent - for journeys made before 31 January



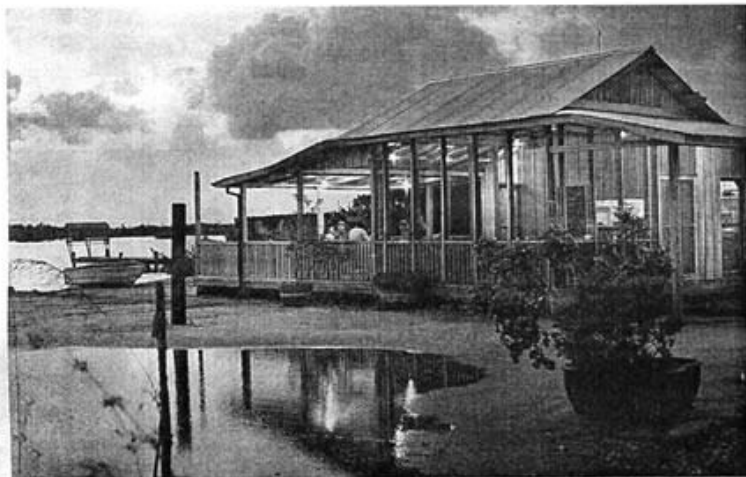
## The restaurant

Just open, **The Landau** (020-7965 0165; [thelandau.com](http://thelandau.com)) at The Langham hotel is London's hottest new destination restaurant. Chef Andrew Turner is the creative spirit behind the delicious grazing menu while David Collins designed the exquisite surroundings



THE INDEPENDENT  
ON SUNDAY  
2 DECEMBER 2007

67



On location: the new, post-hurricane Turtle Inn, Belize, has 'Shellphones' - giant conch shells that act as intercoms - in its cabanas, above left. The more rustic La Lancha, in Guatemala, is close to the ancient Mayan city of Tikal

nect with yourself and your companion, and stimulates creativity - I find it easy to write there. The riverfront cabanas have expansive decks with wrap-around walkways that ensure a dramatic view of the river. The garden cabanas have large, screened porches with hammocks. All are themed with native art and local textiles and hand-painted tile baths.

Following the success of Blancaneaux Lodge, I realised that a lot of guests also wanted to visit Belize's coast. So I started looking for property on the beach and found Turtle Inn, in southern Belize, which we opened in late 2000. I had intended to renovate the property, which was pretty basic, but Mother Nature moved the timeline up when Hurricane Iris swept the resort into the lagoon. When I asked if it

had been severely damaged, they told me that it wasn't there anymore.

I created a new Turtle Inn out of the rubble in just one year and I am delighted at how much our guests enjoy the place and how much critical acclaim it has received. The Balinese-inspired cabanas have artisan-crafted furnishings, luxury private baths and broad, screened decks to welcome in the tropical sea air. It fulfils my vision of a beachfront paradise, providing the ideal balance between luxury and nature. It's all about the beach - swimming, snorkelling, boating, letting the waves become the soundtrack of your stay. There are things to do, or guests can just do nothing. I've enjoyed adding lots of detail, but my favourite is the Shellphone - a giant conch

shell on a wooden base that acts as an intercom. Just call and your heart's desire will appear. I like to joke that we are the leader in shellular technology...

Belize has so much to offer, it's difficult to choose what to do. Diving and snorkelling are magical; there are so many beautiful, uncrowded places where you can explore the undersea world, and trained guides know exactly where the best spots are. Belize is one of the top diving locations in the world and our dive shop offers scuba and snorkelling and a wide range of Padi courses. The cays, atolls and the barrier reef - the longest in the western hemisphere - are the main attractions.

Belize's wonderful coastline has many small caves to explore too. But the country also has a vast network of rivers and waterfalls - such as Thousand Foot Falls. Take a ride in a canoe - captained by a guide - and you will see lots of bird life, large iguanas and monkeys. During iguana mating season you might see two iguana males fighting over a female. Who knows, one may land in your boat as it did on one of my trips downriver (neither iguana nor passengers were hurt!).

And don't miss the ancient Mayan city of Caracol - the largest in Belize. When we first

### COMPACT FACTS

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

All America Holidays (08701 616 646; [allamericaholidays.com](http://allamericaholidays.com)) offers seven-night breaks, including return flights, transfers and b&b accommodation, from £1,395 at Turtle Inn, £1,275 at Blancaneaux Lodge, and £1,225 at La Lancha. Prices are per person, based on two sharing.



visited, many years ago, the site had hardly been excavated, and the work continues today. The Sky Palace - the main temple - soars out of the jungle and just takes your breath away. It is still the tallest building in Belize.

Our third resort, La Lancha, in neighbouring Guatemala, was a natural progression. I was looking for somewhere a little more rustic and stumbled on this place run by a French couple who were ready to get out of the hotel business and the jungle. It is also near the ancient Mayan city of Tikal.

We have spent the past two years upgrading La Lancha, adding more casitas and buying wood carvings, furniture and locally handwoven textiles. (Guatemalan women produce the most beautiful handwoven textiles in intricate patterns and jewel-like colours. Bring an empty suitcase so you can take home a patchwork quilt - it will become a family heirloom. The town of Flores is a good place to buy them.) Winding paths lead to the secluded casitas. Each is brightly dec-

orated, inspired by native art furnishings. The "rainforest casitas" have views of the surrounding rainforest, and the "lakeview casitas" offer a breathtaking panorama of Lake Peten Itza.

La Lancha offers guests the chance to step back to an earlier, mystical time: sit on your deck and listen to the primeval call of howler monkeys and other wildlife, or take a swim, or a boat ride on the lake below the resort - if you're lucky you'll see a troop of howler monkeys.

And there's Tikal, which has been more extensively excavated than Caracol - if you fly over it you get a sense of how massive it is. The ceremonial centre contains superb palaces and temples surrounded by lush vegetation. It is Guatemala's most famous cultural and natural reserve and contains fascinating archaeological remains of the ancient Mayan civilisation.

Guatemala is heaven for birdwatchers, early morning and dusk are the best times to spot dozens of species - among them toucans, motmots, parrots, oscillated turkeys and iridescent hummingbirds. You can join the birds in the trees if you take a canopy walk on bridges between the treetops - it's exhilarating and a little scary.

When I visit the resorts, I cast a critical eye. What

needs to be added, how is the food and so on. We grow all our fruits and vegetables in our own organic garden, so we can guarantee the quality. We raise our own chickens, and local fishermen bring their catch to the chef. I have a great deal of input with the menus. For La Lancha, we wanted to serve Guatemalan fare using staples such as tamales, beans, chillies, plantains and fresh vegetables. At Turtle Inn, the menu is based on the sea; we serve river lobster or a conch cooked on the beach. And, at Blancaneaux Lodge, it's Belizean dishes on the menu - rice, beans, chicken and fresh fish, including white fish pickled in lime juice. We also have a wood-burning pizza oven plus espresso machine and coffee roaster imported from Italy.

When I originally discovered Blancaneaux Lodge, I'd been looking for some kind of tropical Utopia and I immediately knew that this was the hideaway I had been looking for. Even now, once I've been there a couple of days, the laptop comes out and I write - after all, that's why I bought the first resort in the first place.

**Further viewing** Francis Ford Coppola's new film, 'You're with me now' ([www.coppola.com](http://www.coppola.com)), featuring the director's memoirs, will be released in the UK on 14 December. For more details about the director's memoirs go to [blancaneaux.com](http://blancaneaux.com)

- 1 Buy textiles in Flores on Lake Peten Itza ([belizez.com/tikal-Flores.htm](http://belizez.com/tikal-Flores.htm)).
- 2 Don't miss the Mayan ruins of Tikal ([ajg.co.uk/destinations/tikal.htm](http://ajg.co.uk/destinations/tikal.htm)).
- 3 The Mayan city of Caracol is the most extensive Mayan site in Belize ([belizez.com/caracol.htm](http://belizez.com/caracol.htm)).
- 4 Take a canoe to Thousand Foot Falls in Belize. ([moon.com/planner/belize/mustsee/thousand\\_foot.html](http://moon.com/planner/belize/mustsee/thousand_foot.html)).
- 5 Dive in the Great Blue Hole - it's more than 200 feet deep ([scubadivingbelize.com/DL.html](http://scubadivingbelize.com/DL.html)).



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## This week in Sport

**Lords of the ring:** Alan Hubbard talks to Manchester's Ricky Hatton and WBC welterweight champion Floyd Mayweather before they clash in Las Vegas next Saturday in boxing's biggest fight of the year



**FULL STORY** PAGES 76-77

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