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## Local Culture as Part of the Green Experience



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

A cabana at the Cotton Tree Lodge in Belize. A number of rain forest ecolodges are offering visitors hands-on experiences to get a sense of life in the rain forest.

By BONNIE TSUI  
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OPENED on New Year's Day in Toledo, the southernmost region of [Belize](#), the [Cotton Tree Lodge](#) has all the hallmarks of environmental sustainability: an off-the-grid existence, solar power, an organic [garden](#) and a reforestation program that plants teak and mahogany trees. The resort has also created a composting system with flush toilets and a self-contained reservoir that uses banana plants to return nutrients to the soil.

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to cooking chocolate and discussing fair trade with members of the Toledo Cacao Growers Association.

Ecology-minded lodges have opened in rain forest settings everywhere from Cusco to Cairns. But like the Cotton Tree Lodge, the most "eco" of them go beyond construction materials and power sources to authentic, place-specific offerings that highlight — and benefit — the local environment.

Whether it's a Belizean getaway offering chocolate-making seminars grounded in Maya

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Michael Nagle for The New York Times

A local farmer demonstrates how to crack open dried cacao beans for guests of the Cotton Tree Lodge.

traditions or a remote Amazonian complex that began as a scientific research station and supports visiting scholars on wildlife surveys, a few jungle ecolodges are distinguishing themselves from the rest by inviting guests to get a taste of the local culture and environment in substantive ways.

“We have a few producing cacao trees and have recently planted about 500 new ones,” said Jeff Pzena, who heads up the chocolate-making operation at Cotton Tree.

His interest was piqued three years ago at the Punta Gorda farmers' market, where he bought what he thought were almonds but turned out to be cacao beans. He began visiting local growers, learning traditional techniques and the significance of Belize's cacao economy (beans were a currency for the ancient Mayas). He says chocolate is still a medium for cultural exchange.

“What I really love is the personal interaction with these farmers, getting a sense of what their lives are like,” Mr. Pzena said. “Our program is all about exposing guests to this and about the reverse — exposing the farmers to people from another culture.”

A partner of the lodge's founder and manager, Chris Crowell, Mr. Pzena led the resort to add special chocolate week trips.

Cotton Tree is also working with Sustainable Harvest International to establish a demonstration farm to introduce the neighboring community to agricultural practices that have lower environmental impact, like organic pesticide-free growing and smokeless stoves for roasting cocoa beans.

While Cotton Tree focuses on the unique cultural heritage of its region, [Ecolodge Rendez-Vous](#), on tiny [Saba](#) in the Dutch West Indies, focuses on its unusual geographic environment. Saba is not a conventional [Caribbean](#) destination — it is just five square miles and has no sandy [beaches](#) and no big resorts. But it does have spectacular [diving](#) and terrain that ranges from arid scrub to lush mountaintop rain forest.

In the 1980's, Tom van't Hof was instrumental in developing and managing the first three (of five) marine parks of the Netherlands Antilles, including Saba's, and his work as a conservationist and marine biologist has influenced the character of the lodge that he runs in Saba with his wife, Heleen Cornet, an artist.

Set in Saba's high rain forest — near [hiking](#) trails that lead up to 2,910-foot Mount Scenery — Rendez-Vous has 12 solar-powered cottages with waterless composting toilets and a cafe supplied by an on-site organic garden. All of the buildings are constructed with recycled and environmentally friendly materials.

Most visitors to Saba are divers, and the owners' active work in reef preservation was one of the most attractive elements for Henry Lovejoy, who last visited Rendez-Vous two years ago and describes it as a “salt-of-the-earth-type lodge.” He plans to return to the ecolodge this month with his wife, Lisa.

“Saba is the kind of place you want to keep to yourself — the coral reefs around the island really make it what it is,” said Mr. Lovejoy, the owner of a sustainable seafood company in Dover, N.H. “The diving is mostly volcanic pinnacle diving — you'll see sharks and turtles out looking for food, which is pretty stunning. We like to dive in the morning and then hike the rain forest in the afternoon, especially the amazing rain forest at the top of the island's volcano.”

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The big lure of a jungle ecolodge is, of course, the jungle. The Amazon remains one of the world's most undisturbed wildernesses, and some of its most remote tracts are in southeastern [Peru](#). The area is notoriously tough to reach, but the [Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica Lodge](#) is only about an hour in a boat down the Madre de Dios River from Puerto Maldonado.

Inkaterra sits in the middle of a 40-square-mile private ecological reserve, which was founded as a scientific lodge in 1976 by José Koechlin, a Peruvian film producer who had worked with Werner Herzog on a film set in the rain forest. Since then, visiting biologists have conducted pivotal surveys there; in the last 20 years, 14 species new to science have been discovered, including orchids, frogs and a butterfly. In the 1980s, the lodge started welcoming the public and in recent years has become an upscale destination lodge with 35 cabanas, adding luxury suites and a trail network that crisscrosses the surrounding jungle.

In 2005, it opened a stunning treetop canopy walkway — a 1,135-foot-long complex of seven hanging bridges, six treetop observation platforms and two 95-foot-tall towers. Financed by the [National Geographic Society](#) and the [World Bank](#), the walkway allows visitors access to the rare plant and animal species of the delicate treetop ecosystem.

A new interpretation center discusses rain forest ecology and community projects spearheaded by Inkaterra's own nonprofit organization.

Inkaterra continues to support ongoing research efforts in southeastern Peru, implementing a wildlife rehabilitation project, a new research facility and [global warming](#) studies of the Trans-Amazonica Highway. [Cornell University](#) Press has published a study of reptiles and amphibians based on 15 years of research at the property.

"We decided to learn about the environment here and work for it," said Mr. Koechlin, who is an emeritus director of Conservation International and whose company also owns a lodge in Macchu Picchu. "What we have done with Reserva Amazonica is to bring along awareness to the local community, the scientific community and, increasingly, to the tourists."

## VISITOR INFORMATION

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**Cotton Tree Lodge**, (866) 480-4534; [www.cottontreelodge.com](http://www.cottontreelodge.com); from \$198 a person, double occupancy, including all meals, activities and transfers.

**Ecolodge Rendez-Vous**, (877) 416-3888; [www.ecolodge-saba.com](http://www.ecolodge-saba.com); double rooms start at \$65.

**Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica**, (800) 442-5042; [www.inkaterra.com](http://www.inkaterra.com); from \$153 a person, double occupancy, including all meals, activities and transfers.

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