



featuring Sports

Today Show

Nightly News

Dateline

Meet the Press

MSNBC TV

NBC

Travel / Destinations / Tropical getaways

Categories

- U.S. news
- World news
- Politics
- Business
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Health
- Tech & science

- Travel
- News
- Tips
- Destinations
- Deals
- Seasonal
- Cruising
- Active
- Family
- Business travel
- Luxury
- Travel photos
- Weather
- Local news
- Browse
- Video
- Photos
- Community

Disable Fly-out

Marketplace

- Shopping
- Credit Score \$0
- Refi & Save

On the chocolate trail in Belize

Mayan farmers cash in on world's growing appetite for specialty chocolate



Joshua Berman

After fermenting and drying the cacao seeds, the next step is to remove the shells by hand.

By Joshua Berman

Budget Travel

updated 2:00 p.m. ET, Wed., Oct. 15, 2008

Belize's remote southern Toledo region doesn't make it onto many tourist itineraries, but it was at the top of mine this summer. The guidebook I write was due for an update, and I was eager to check out reports of chocolate tours and hands-on lessons offered at farms spread across Toledo's lush hills and valleys. My wife and mother-in-law didn't take much persuading.

In San Felipe, a village of about 65 homes, we meet up with Cyrila Cho, whose family has been farming chocolate for generations. She quickly disappears among the cacao trees and emerges with an oblong yellow pod from a trunk. She splits it open with the whack of a club and presents me with the goo-covered seeds. I imitate her by removing one, placing it in my mouth, sucking off the sweet-tart pulp, then spitting the seed to the ground. The pulp doesn't taste at all like chocolate, which is made from the seed.

Cyrila leads us into her cramped concrete kitchen, where a pile of dried, roasted, and peeled cacao beans lies on an old grinding stone. "With this *matate* I raised six children,"

More from Budget Travel

- See 9 hotels you won't believe
- America's 38 favorite restaurants
- Trivia quiz: Think you know New York City?
- 105 supersmart travel strategies
- Scoring tix to Oprah, Ellen, Tyra

Search Flights

Round Trip One Way

From: To:

Leave:

Return:

Adults: Cabin:

1 Economy

SEARCH

More Airfare Predictions and Deals

Sponsored Links

Costa Rica Real Estate
Pristine Property for Sale, Ocean View Lots, Central Pacific Coast
www.wamcr.com

Swiss Chocolate
vanilla, truffles, gourmet foods, butcher boxes, cutlery and more
www.chefdepot.com

Costa Rica Travel Experts

We'll customize your Costa Rica Vacation. Since 1992.
1-800-4...
www.jdwatersports.com

Costa Rica Deals
Fresh, handpicked travel deals from Travel Ticker Deals posted hourly
www.Travel-Ticker.com

Costa Rica Vacations
Discounts and deals on hotels and resorts in Costa Rica.
www.resortvacationstogo.com

Resource guide

Get Your 2008 Credit Score



Find a business to start



Affordable auto insurance



Try for Free



Search Jobs



Find Your Dream Home

[Start a business](#)
Entrepreneur.com

[Netflix](#)
Try for Free

[Career Center](#)
via Monster

[Homes for Sale](#)
via HomePages.com

[Investments](#)
\$7 online stock trades

[Autos](#)
via MSN Autos

she says, as she leans into the stone with all her weight. The beans shatter and mix with the wild vanilla, allspice, and sugar she has added. A savory odor lingers in the air.

[Story continues below ↓](#)

advertisement | [your ad here](#)

The Chos have found a way to connect ancient cacao farming with the modern craze for quality, fair-trade products. Their five-hour chocolate tour begins with a visit to son Juan's organic cacao farm. He sells to the Toledo Cacao Growers Association, a nonprofit coalition of about a thousand small farms that sells to acclaimed chocolatier [Green & Black's](#). The tour then moves to Cyrila's home, where she and her daughter lead a Mayan chocolate-making session.

Just down the road, on the banks of the Moho River, the Cotton Tree Lodge produces its own brand of chocolate. The one-room, 100-bar-a-day operation has refrigerators and special chocolate-blending ("conching") machines powered in part by solar panels. Cotton Tree runs weeklong chocolate packages and day [trips](#) that give guests a chance to tour a nearby cacao farm before heading to Cyrila's to peel toasted cacao beans while sipping on *pinnul*, a traditional cacao-and-corn drink.

ALSO ON THIS STORY

[Slide show: Follow the Chocolate Trail in Belize](#)

The work is slow going. My wife, my mother-in-law, and I need more than 30 minutes to peel enough beans to be ground into a single bar of chocolate. Afterwards, we take turns on Cyrila's *matate* until the oil of the seeds adds a shiny luster to the brown paste. When it's sufficiently creamy, she will pour the thick substance into molds and set the bars out to harden. But we've got to press on. We buy some previously made chocolate and cocoa powder, say goodbye to Cyrila and her family, and continue down the trail.

Chocoholics, take note

Toledo is about a 50-minute plane ride from Belize City. The alternative, a roughly five-hour drive, isn't bad now that the Southern Highway has been improved. The final nine-mile stretch of dirt is being paved, and daily express bus service is offered on school buses painted with Rasta colors based in Punta Gorda.

[CLICK FOR RELATED CONTENT](#)

Live Search Forecast

FIRST PERSON



[Gorgeous fall foliage](#)
Readers capture the change of the seasons.



[True to their school](#)
Readers show school spirit, send in campus photos

Most popular

Most viewed Top rated Most e-mailed

UPDATED [O.J. Simpson sentenced to long prison term](#)

[Craigslist baby sitter used tot in porn film](#)

[Mom goes undercover to get dirt on juror](#)

[Horrible parasitic illness on the wane](#)

UPDATED [Record 1-in-10 Americans in mortgage trouble](#)

[Most viewed on msnbc.com](#)

Scottrade
Member FINRA, SIPC

\$7 trades, no fee IRAs

msn autos

Find your next car

**See the Best Places You've Never Heard Of
50 States, 50 Great Escapes
Zoo Babies 2008: Cutest Pictures Ever!**

The **Third Annual Cacao Fest**, May 22-24, 2009, will celebrate all things chocolate by offering a host of local products—from cupcakes and kisses to cacao wine and chocolate cocktails—as well as numerous cultural events.

The Chocolate Tour at Cyrila Cho's includes a traditional *caldo* (stew) lunch and hot chocolate (011-501/663-9632, juan@theorganicchocolatemaster.com , five-hour tour \$60).

Nature's Way Guest House offers eclectic wooden rooms with a fan and shared bath (one room has a private bath). This is Punta Gorda's best backpacker option, with its own links to cacao farmers and Mayan villages (011-501/702-2119, natureswayguesthouse@hotmail.com , double from \$17).

Hickatee Cottages is an award-winning, green bed-and-breakfast almost two miles outside Punta Gorda, right up against the jungle (hickatee.com, cottage from \$75).

Coral House Inn, on the highest point of Punta Gorda's shoreline, has four rooms overlooking the Caribbean, a small pool, and a bar area (coralhouseinn.net, double from \$83).

Cotton Tree Lodge hosts day tours year-round (\$79) and two Chocolate Week packages annually—one coinciding with Valentine's Day, the other with Cacao Fest in May. The weeklong packages cover [accommodations](#), meals, cooking classes, dessert making, background on the Fair Trade certification process, and airport transfers (cottontreelodge.com, \$1,365). The tree house-like accommodations start at \$170 per person per night, with a day tour, all meals, and airport transfers included.

Joshua Berman is the author of "Moon Handbooks Belize".

DON'T MISS THESE TRAVEL STORIES FROM MSNBC.COM


**Forget your inhibitions: World's sexiest islands
Carriers cram to obey obesity ruling | Discuss
Israelis can't escape troubles in world travels
Hell on wheels: World's worst taxi rides
Good to go: Travel gifts for tight budgets**

Copyright © 2008 Newsweek Budget Travel, Inc.

 Discuss Story
On Newsvine

Rate Story:  Low High
View popular 4.5 after 7 ratings

 Email

 Instant Message

 Print

MORE FROM TROPICAL GETAWAYS

Next →

[Legends of Hawaii: Big Island has story to tell](#)

UPDATED [Most romantic Caribbean sunsets](#)

[Economy crisis hits paradise](#)

[The Caribbean's 15 best hotels](#)

UPDATED [Jamaica to invest \\$11 million in tourism projects](#)

[Kenny Chesney spills his island soul](#)

[The Caribbean's all-time top 10 classic resorts](#)

[On the chocolate trail in Belize](#)

[Legends of Hawaii: Big Island has story to tell](#)

[Hawaii promoting its 'value' to visitors](#)

[Top 10 Central American beach escapes](#)

[Tropical Getaways Section Front](#)

Add Tropical Getaways headlines to your news reader:



[More RSS feeds from MSNBC.com](#)

Top msnbc.com stories

UPDATED [O.J. Simpson sentenced to long term](#)

[High court to rule on terror detentions](#)

[Economy shed 533,000 jobs in Nov.](#)

UPDATED [Record 1-in-10 Americans in mortgage trouble](#)

[Short on cash, some sell own body products](#)

NBC News highlights

[Prop. 8 debate resurrected online](#)

[Ambush! Hates to shop, loves new look](#)

[Home sellers trying wacky tactics](#)

[Big Three must become 'efficient'](#)

[Images: Americans at home](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

[Get listed here](#)

1 flat stomach rule: obey

I cut out 2 lbs of stomach fat per week by obeying this 1 old rule

[AmysDietingBlog.com](#)

Explore North Carolina

Find where to stay and what to do. Order your free travel info today.

[www.VisitNC.com](#)

2 Rules for Stomach Fat

Obey these 2 Easy Rules & Drop 9 lbs every 11 Days Effortlessly.

[RealSimpleDiets.com](#)

Looking For A Job?

100% Free. View thousands of local local jobs today!

[NewJobInfo.com](#)

Looking for a vacation home?

Free, Custom Photo Email Listings. Search by Bed, Bath & Price Range

[www.JustListed.com](#)



Featuring [Today](#) [Nightly News](#) [Dateline](#) [Meet the Press](#) [MSNBC.TV](#) [Newsweek](#)

Categories [Top stories](#) [Local news](#) [U.S.](#) [World](#) [Politics](#) [Business](#) [Sports](#) [Entertainment](#) [Health](#) [Tech & science](#) [Travel](#) [Weather](#)

About [About us](#) [Contact](#) [Site map](#) [Jobs](#) [Terms & conditions](#)



Alerts via IM



E-mail updates



RSS & feeds



Mobile headlines



Podcasts



Widgets