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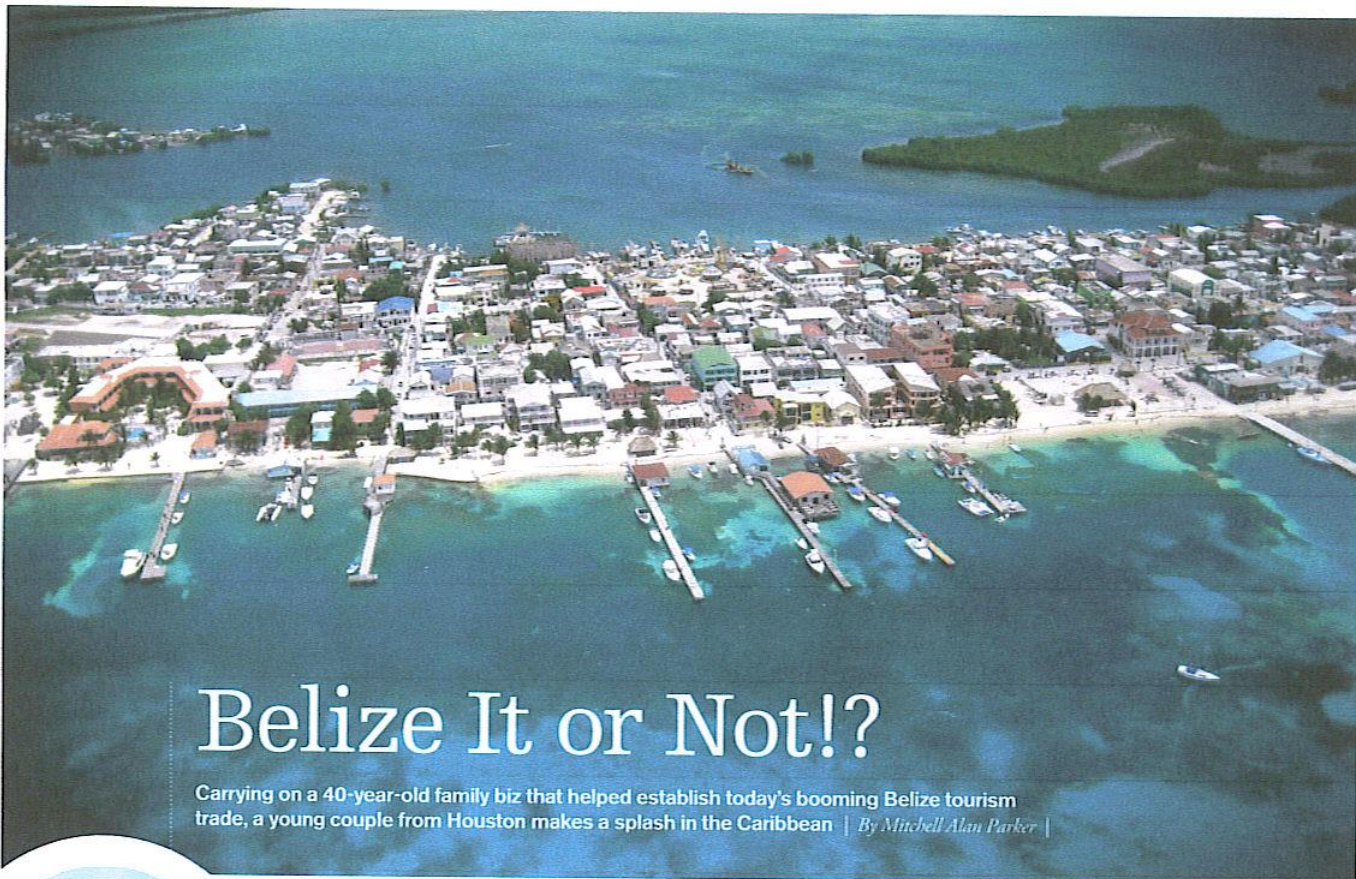
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Belize It or Not!?

Carrying on a 40-year-old family biz that helped establish today's booming Belize tourism trade, a young couple from Houston makes a splash in the Caribbean | *By Mitchell Alan Parker*



HOPPING ISLAND

Kelly and Mukul Kanabar just completed the construction of Phoenix Resort on the island of Ambergris Caye, off the coast of Belize. It's the only high-end resort within walking distance of the town of San Pedro, pictured far above, and its bustling dining and nightlife scene. They also own three restaurants and a hip new wine bar in the area. "This is what I've always wanted," says Kelly.

Black-swimsuit-clad Kelly Kanabar takes a breath, pinches her nostrils and plunges 30 feet into the gleaming Caribbean, kicking her flippers and soaring past nurse sharks, a rainbow of fish, sea turtles, coral and stingrays as big as your coffee table. She disappears into a tunnel inside Belize's barrier reef—the second largest in the world after Australia's—and emerges from the other side after what seems like an hour, ascending gracefully to the surface.

"My dad taught me that," says the Belize-born, Houston-raised 31-year-old, not the slightest bit out of breath. And it's not the only thing the late Jerry McDermott taught her. The Irish-immigrant-turned-Texas-oil-exec—who moved to the small island of Ambergris Caye off the coast of Belize in the late '60s to open the Paradise Hotel, progenitor of the isle's currently booming tourism industry—educated her on how to sustain a travel-biz empire.

Ambergris, which her father developed with his wife Linda, is less than a mile from Kanabar's diving spot. In the old days, the likes of Lynn Wyatt and Joanne King Herring would take the two-hour flight from Houston to Belize City, then hop a puddle jumper to the island (where Herring was referred to affectionately as the Pink Panther after showing up to go snorkeling with McDermott in an all-pink ensemble of wetsuit, flippers and mask).

Today, Kelly and Houston-born hubby Mukul, 32, carry on the dynasty and play host. They built the 30-suite condo-style Phoenix spa resort (877.822.5512) on the seaside site of the old Paradise, whose thatched-roofed cabanas were removed to make way. They also own and operate a slew of nice restaurants.

The privately owned suites at their Phoenix are rented hotel-style to visitors. The smallest units—each of which is owner-decorated in bright, rather spare, tropical-tilting motifs incorporating local mahogany and teak—are 1,325 square feet

with huge sea-facing balconies. Guests, mostly from the Southern U.S., lounge by the geometric-mod pool area sipping local Belikin beers, mojitos and dark rum-sodas while gazing through palm trees out toward the reef. The vibe is casual, the pace slow.

But for Kelly and Mukul, who met in high school in H-Town, life is busier, and they divvy up their many duties. Tall, tanned and trim Mukul, a former basketball star and econ major at Haverford College in Philadelphia, runs the family's real-estate consulting firm, and its seaside Mexican-Caribbean restaurant Caliente, where the fresh conch is used in tender, spicy ceviche.

Petite Kelly—the sparkly blue-eyed picture of laid-back cool, no doubt the result of having grown up barefooted on an island—manages the crisp, casual outdoor sushi resto Blue Water Grill, which sources many ingredients from Houston, and which was the first fine-dining place on Ambergris when she opened it at age 22. The local "snook" fish, which is white and flaky in the way of sole, is crusted in dried black beans and sauced with caramelized-banana curry. She also runs elegant, splashy-art-filled Red Ginger, an Americas-Caribbean seafood fusion affair at the Phoenix. The Georgetown poly-sci grad, who begins her days with a golf-cart commute, often ends them by strolling, glass of wine in hand, through her restaurants chatting up customers.

Every six weeks the couple and their infant daughter Mia return to Houston to relax in their Tanglewood mid-rise, take in a rock concert or a Texans game, and check out new restaurants. But they love returning to Belize, where Kelly's dad once taught her to hold her breath and touch the seafloor. "After a hard day, we'll sit on the porch and say, 'We're lucky to live here,'" Kelly says. "We own a business on the beach in Belize; it's hard to complain."

Mukul chimes in. "Well, it's easy to complain," he corrects. "But we don't find very sympathetic listeners." ■