

ROAD WARRIOR

THE UN-BELIZE-ABLE EDITION

Our 14th Annual Road Warrior Contest winners head to Belize for some life-changing adventure: zip-lining through the rain forest, climbing ancient Mayan ruins, swimming with sharks and a whole lotta rum

BY JACQUELYNE FROEBER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT WINTROW



FROM LEFT Road Warrior winners Emily Williams Knight, Eric Nandato, Andrew Bolt, Becky Ahlgren Bedics and Luis Ayala

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STANDING ON A WOODEN PLATFORM 200 FEET ABOVE THE BELIZEAN JUNGLE, the emerald tops of swaying palm and mangrove trees stretch from the surrounding area to the border of Guatemala and beyond. Two silver zip-line cords reach into the rain forest and disappear. The tour guide asks for a volunteer, and Emily Williams Knight doesn't hesitate. She hooks up, sits back in the harness, grabs the pulley and pushes herself off the platform, whipping into the foliage. Her delighted scream rises above the sound of howler monkeys and howling people.

For Emily and the four other winners of *American Way's* annual Road Warrior Contest, this year's trip to Belize starts at Calico Jack's Village on a zip-line excursion that winds through more than 3,200 feet of private jungle reserve in western Belize. It's a first-time experience for these five winners, who beat out more than a thousand entrants: Luis Ayala from Austin, Texas; Becky Ahlgren Bedics from Fishers, Indiana; Andrew Bolt from Miami; Emily Williams Knight from Southlake, Texas; and Eric Nunziato from San Diego.

Each Road Warrior has their own story about the countless hours spent flying around the world, but everyone has two things in common: an innate curiosity and a passion for exploring, both of which make Belize a perfect destination for this particular crew. One-of-a-kind experiences abound, from



PHOTO: SCHAPIRO/SHUTTERSTOCK IMAGES



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Emily Williams Knight zip-lining; the gang at Ka'ana Resort; trekking through the jungle in Calico Jack's Village; arriving via Tropic Air; the exotic wildlife of Belize



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viewing the second-largest coral reef in the world to traveling to the center of the archipelago, dotted with cultural and historic sites dating back to ancient Mayan inhabitants.

Back on the final zip platform, Emily is sporting a different, more confident demeanor than she had before she flew through the jungle at an estimated 50 mph. "I never would have done that on my own," she says. "This has been an experience of a lifetime." As vice president of global enrollment for a collection of private colleges around the world and a mother of twin 10-year-old girls, Emily admits she's not usually one to throw caution to the wind. Her husband, Alec, a real adrenaline junkie, applauds her new, daring side. "I have a feeling I'm going to be saying that a lot here," he says.

DESCENDING FROM THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN at Calico Jack's, a bumpy gravel road winds down the lush landscape to a 1,000-year-old Ceiba tree that the Mayans believed held seven layers of heaven in its branches. While we're not sure about calling it "heaven," it's also the site of Mike's Place and the Barton Creek Cave. The former is a wooden bar under the large, open-air, thatched-roof hut, where Big Mike (as he's affectionately known), wearing his trademark black-leather cowboy hat and tropical button-down shirt, welcomes everyone with a bit of history about the cave excursion, which was the site of ancient Mayan ceremonies and ritualistic sacrifices. "You'll see amazing things," he says. "It's one of the most interesting experiences you'll ever have in your life," he says.

If the talk of sacrifice in a cave while canoeing in 10 feet of water has added an air of apprehension to the group, Road Warrior Andrew Bolt does not notice. He's the first one in a canoe. The admitted extreme-sports aficionado is a project manager in the IT-consulting industry. He has traveled extensively for his job, including stops in 12 countries in the past two years. Leading the first canoe into the cave, Andrew's spotlight illuminates the slender waterway that threads through the cathedral chamber past giant stalactites and stalagmites that take on characteristics of their own: one resembling a profile of a falcon; another a sparkling white formation reminiscent of Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*. Sporadic hand-size bats flutter hundreds of feet above the canoes; tour guides Brandon and Andy slowly paddle under limestone bridges and around boulders until they point out a skull embedded in the rock, the ivory features jutting out of the stone. Andy says the Mayans believed that the god of water, Chac, lived in the cave, so when they needed rain they would perform sacrifices and rituals for Chac.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
the Road Warriors
and their guests
leaving Barton Creek
Cave via canoe
THIS PAGE: Andrew
Bolt enjoying a local
Belikin brew after the
tour; Emily Williams
Knight and Andrew
Bolt at the beachfront
Victoria House resort





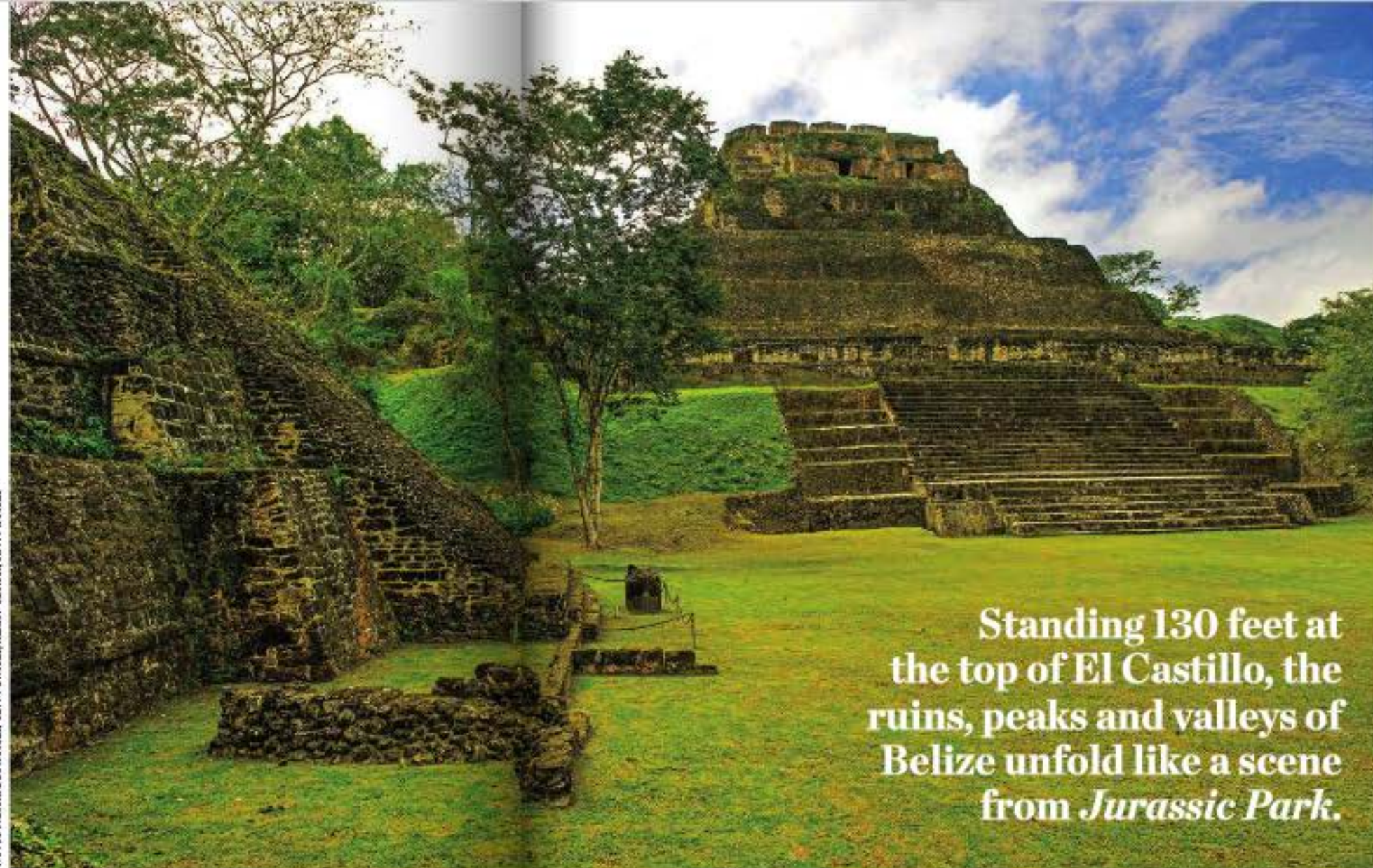
An eerie calm permeates the cave as Andy notes that ceremonies like this were common in the Mayan culture; some 1,400 ceremonial temples and sites have been found throughout the country. "This is unforgettable," Andrew says, the light from his GoPro and spotlight leading the group out of the cave and back to Big Mike's Place. "To describe this feeling — to be in that ceremonial cave — there's just nothing that does it justice."

THE NEXT MORNING AT THE KA'ANA RESORT (about an hour from zip-lining and Barton Creek Cave, excursions which are set up through the resort), General Manager Wolfgang Brandl is getting ready to take the group to the ancient Xunantunich ruins. He notes that Ka'ana — the master suites, casitas and villas — feel self-contained, like a remote retreat surrounded by the jungle, but the location is actually quite accessible. Guests fly via Tropic Air to the private runway at Maya Flats, about 10 minutes from the resort. There's an on-site helipad for helicopter tours, and Ka'ana is the closest luxury resort to both the Tikal Maya ruins in Guatemala and the popular Xunantunich (pronounced shoe-nan-too-nitch) ruins 10 to 15 minutes from the resort. "We are near everything you want to see in Belize, but you also feel secluded here, like you're on your own private getaway," Wolfgang says.

Walking up the vibrant green hills of Xunantunich, tour guides Wolfgang, Brandon and Andy explain that the land was first used as a ceremonial site some 1,400 years ago, with 25 stone temples and plazas; even seating for spectators to watch warriors fight to the death. Navigating up the stairs of the tallest ruin at Xunantunich, El Castillo, Wolfgang says it was a multiuse facility for royalty and one of the first work sites in Belize. He runs his hand over stone slabs that were once piled high with animal fur for beds. A wide frieze of astrological signs, including the face of a jaguar (said to be the god of the



PHOTOS: MARGARET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; HENRY GOROUNEY/ITTY IMAGES



Standing 130 feet at the top of El Castillo, the ruins, peaks and valleys of Belize unfold like a scene from *Jurassic Park*.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Luis Ayala at Admiral Nelson's Bar at Victoria House; Xunantunich ruins; enjoying Travellers rum; the view from the ruins; one of the master suites at Ka'ana Resort; horsing around town



SPECIAL THANKS TO ALL THOSE WHO MADE THE 14TH ANNUAL ROAD WARRIOR SHOOT POSSIBLE:

American Airlines
AAAdvantage, Belize
Toucan and Ka'ana Resort for lodging, meals and tours to the Barton Creek Cave and Mayan ruins; **Victoria House** resort for lodging and meals; **Serious Adventures** for the snorkeling catamaran tour; **Tropic Air** for island transportation; **Travellers** rum for specialty mixed drinks; **Belikin** beer; and **ginnybakes** cookies. For prizes, **TAG Heuer** for gifting winners with Aquaracer 300 M Calibre 5 automatic movement with ceramic bezel for men and Aquaracer Lady 300m dial with 11 top Weselton diamonds for women; **Avis** for providing Rental Rewards Days; **Bose** for the QuietComfort 25 Acoustic Noise Cancelling headphones and SoundTouch 20 Wi-Fi music system; **Roddi & Gunn** for the outfits and swimwear for the men; and **Everything But Water** for the swimwear and accessories for the women.



underworld), mirrors the original markings here that have been excavated.

Standing 130 feet at the top of El Castillo, the ruins, peaks and valleys of Belize unfold like a scene from *Jurassic Park*. "It's particularly mind-blowing — humbling — what we are seeing here about society," Luis Ayala says. Luis knows about building something from the ground up: As the founder and CEO of Rum Runner Press Inc., Luis is responsible for creating new rum brands and setting up bottling plants, aging warehouses and distilleries around the world. He knows the process, from the workers who chop the sugar cane to aging and blending and the export plan that puts the bottles on our shelves. He gestures to the intricate concrete steps carved into this man-made pyramid. "It makes you think about how we will be reflected thousands of years from now."

FROM THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE MAYANS to bare feet in the sand, the following morning starts at the beach-chic Victoria House on Ambergris Caye. Situated along a stretch of private shore shaded by tall palm trees, most rooms and suites overlook the neon-turquoise

sea. At the end of the wooden pier, a catamaran from Searious Adventures awaits. First stop: Hol Chan Marine Reserve. With fins secure and masks in place, the crystal-clear water is teeming with new friends. A platter-sized stingray floats gracefully along the ocean floor. A school of vibrant blue-and-yellow fish relax along the reef; lavender sea fans and bright-orange coral illuminate the water. One guide, Captain Jim, pulls a piece of chum from his pocket and feeds an eel like he's offering a treat to a skinny puppy. A swim toward the boat finds Margaret, Luis's wife, winking at a medium-size green turtle with a patient personality, posing for underwater photos.

At Shark-Ray Alley, less than a 10-minute boat ride away, the water is fully chummed as Becky Ahlgren Bedics jumps in. The owner/president of Ahlgren Bedics Consulting, a leadership and student-athlete development consulting firm for collegiate athletics, blends in with the nurse sharks, her fins gliding around the

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: the men chilling out in swimwear by Rodd & Gunn and the women modeling Everything But Water; snorkeling with Searious Adventures; Eric Nunziato at the Victoria House; Becky Ahlgren Bedics at the Victoria House; TAG Heuer watches that were gifted to the winners

water in sync with their movements. Stingrays float past her mask as some of the larger sharks edge their way toward the chum.

As the mother of two boys, ages 7 and 10, Becky and her husband, Mark, are involved in sports year-round, but snorkeling with sharks has given them a new favorite pastime. "That was the best part — I could have stayed in there all day," she says. "Everything in Belize has this mystery and intrigue — everything here is an experience."

Back at Victoria House, the sunset paints the sky violet. Eric Nunziato and his wife, Carolyn, are paired up on loungers on the beach before dinner. A small seaplane flies by, prompting Eric's curiosity. "I'm an aviation enthusiast," he says. His training as an aviation mechanic in the Marine Corps started his passion for servicing planes. His current position as a technology consultant for Accenture has him flying more than 5,000 miles a week, though not to locales as memorable as Belize. "From swimming with turtles — Carolyn had never seen one — to zip-lining through a jungle, we've done things here we would never do anywhere else," Eric says. After sunset, the Road Warriors travel as a pack to the Victoria House Admiral Nelson's Bar for fresh grouper and lobster and Belikin beers before rotating back to the real world. But they'll always stay friends. You can Belize that. ☺

IF YOU GO

GET AROUND

Tropic Air
Island hop from Belize City via Tropic Air.
Tropicair.com

STAY

Ka'ana Resort, San Ignacio
A paved path weaves through the manicured tropical foliage to the suites and villas at this five-star resort. Inside each room, ridiculously plush beds (California kings in the villas and master suites), flat-screen televisions and air-conditioning are a few of the amenities that make life comfortable here in the jungle. Bonus: Master suites and villas have outdoor showers to embrace your true island spirit. Rates start at \$315.
Kaanasort.com

Victoria House, Ambergris Caye

A collection of whitewashed Colonial-style villas, casitas, rooms and suites make up the Victoria House resort; a beachfront retreat with thatched-roof palapas, seafront pools and towering palm trees sit on a private stretch of shore. From one-bedroom suites with private verandas to state rooms with canopy netting, all of the accommodations are outfitted with custom-made mahogany beds and Belizean furnishings. At the on-site Admiral Nelson's Bar, the rumrunner and dirty-banana cocktails are sweet specialties; gourmet island cuisine — conch ceviche, grilled lobster and snapper — is served in the fine-dining Palmilla Restaurant. Rates start at \$199.
Victoria-house.com

PLAY

Calico Jack's Village
In the Mountain Pine Ridge region of central Belize, Calico Jack's has zip-lining adventures, ancient jungle garden-trail tours and cave exploration on the grounds.
Calicojacksvillage.com

Mike's Place at Barton Creek Cave
Canoe through the Barton Creek Cave — with the help of spotlights and a guide — to learn about the ancient Mayans who once lived here, and then enjoy a traditional Belizean meal of rice, beans and chicken with the owner, Mike.
Bartonscreekcave.com

Xunantunich Ruins

The ancient Xunantunich Mayan temples and plazas are a 10-minute drive from Ka'ana Resort, or a six-hour horseback-riding exploration through the tropical jungle and farmland (includes lunch).
Kaanasort.com

Searious Adventures

From the Victoria House pier or in town in Ambergris Caye, Searious Adventures specializes in finding the perfect spot to snorkel with ocean friends (green turtles, nurse sharks and stingrays) via catamaran. And they make a mean rum punch.
Seariousadventures.com

EAT

Mayan Cooking Class

At Ka'ana Resort, sign up to learn how to cook authentic Mayan dishes — traditional corn tamales stuffed with achote chicken and Mayan Dulceno (spicy pork sausage) — from a local Belizean chef.
Kaanasort.com

Rainbow Grill & Bar

Located on the island shore of Caye Caulker, this bright-blue beach shack serves mainland favorites like burgers and fries and fresh seafood — everything jerk and Cajun will make you sweat.
Rainbowhotel-cayeaulker.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON BELIZE, VISIT TRAVELBELIZE.ORG

