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Industry Insiders: Jeff Gram, Island Man

By Marcy MacDonald

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Jeff Gram, owner of Cayo Espanto -- a private island off the coast of Belize -- reveals how you go about buying your own island, what to do once you've picked up three, and the new destination you need to hit up in the Bahamas.

What do you do? I manage and own the Cayo Espanto in Belize, and my US reservations office is in North Carolina. I also live in Atlanta, so I do marketing, PR, and oversee the property

How did you come to own an island? I bought the island raw, a swampy little island in the mid 1990s, and built it from scratch. It had one coconut tree, and now it has 600. I had a mail-order company, and that's how I could afford an island. I was so lucky to have the design team that did everything from the Four Seasons to the Beverly Hills Hotel and my little island -- and from that point on until 1998, all I did was work on it.

What mainland establishments do you frequent? My favorite restaurant is La Famiglia in Paris. It's an Italian restaurant with high-end food, and it's a family restaurant. The maitre d' tells you that mama's in the kitchen making pasta. I used to go there a lot when I went to the French Open. Another great one is Nava in Atlanta. I love the southwestern food, and the service is great.

Who do you admire in your industry? I would say Bill Marriott and his father. I just think that they are in it for the right reasons, and they like to make money. They combine the two and the family style, and they now own the Ritz-Carlton and respect the brand. They're definitely among the best in the industry. In addition, they offer the lower and the higher ends of the market. And there's Richard Branson. He has an island. He does it his way and does what he wants to do. He can afford to take a big leap of faith, bigger than I wanted to do. When I bought my island, the most expensive room there was \$150 a night, and now we do it for \$1,200 a night.

What positive trends are you noticing in the hotel industry? Service. The future is all service. Technology is the exciting part, but service reminds us that we do things that are ridiculously wonderful. When the waiter brings an iced towel and a warmed towel, it's ridiculous. Your staff is proud to work there. I would say the biggest trend we are seeing right now is an increase in family travel. Due to the private, secluded nature of Cayo, it's always been a popular romantic getaway, but now we see things shifting. People want to experience luxurious travel accommodations and superior service with the whole family. Parents want to snorkel with the kids and teach them how to fish. It's not only about an escape, but about the experiences they can have together. Because Cayo Espanto offers such guest-specific amenities, it always helps to have more time to plan for our guests. Each villa has a personal houseman who creates personalized meals and beverages for the guests. We like to go over and beyond for our guests, more time to prepare always helps. I'll celebrate the New Year in Exumas, Bahamas. It's an up-and-coming Caribbean destination with authentic island beauty. The Exuma islands span over a hundred miles of blue water with spectacular underwater preserves. The national land and sea park there has underwater caves, blue holes and limestone reefs. It is quite a place.

What is something that people might not know about you? That I took my first vacation on Cayo Espanto this past summer with my daughter and her friends. It was the first time in ten years I took a vacation—I went to the office for five minutes.

What are you doing tonight? Tonight, I have just said goodbye to my daughter. I'm recently divorced, but tomorrow I'm taking a look at another island for sale. I own three islands, and I'm doing a new project in the Bahamas. Tomorrow is another island.

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