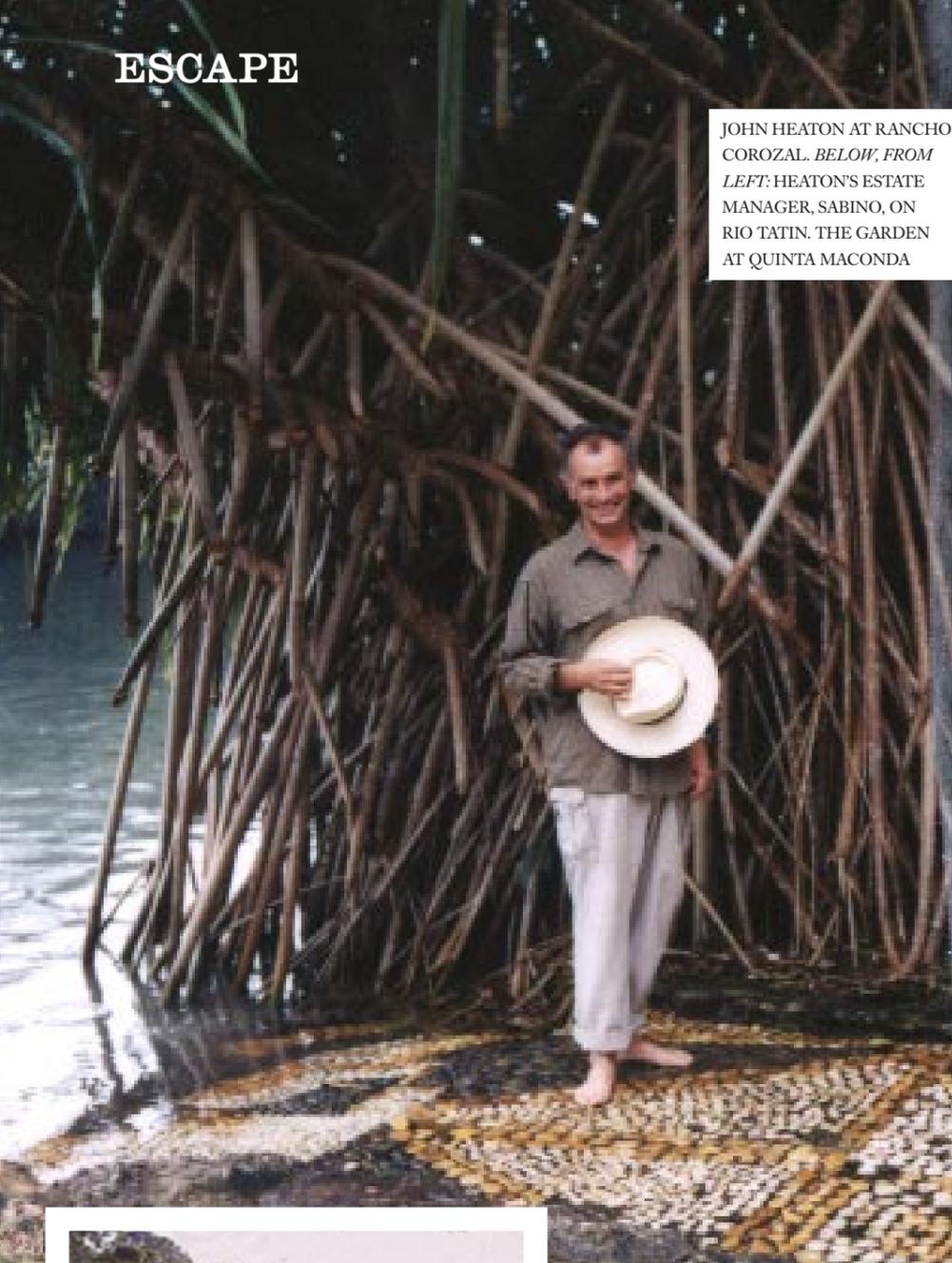


# Spirit guide

*Guatemala aficionado John Heaton is a born adventurer and a dream holiday companion – well-connected, charismatic and mysterious, he will conjure up an unforgettable experience with his inspiring vision, says CARINTHIA WEST. Photographs by SEBASTIAN PEARSON*

JOHN HEATON AT RANCHO COROZAL. BELOW, FROM LEFT: HEATON'S ESTATE MANAGER, SABINO, ON RIO TATIN. THE GARDEN AT QUINTA MACONDA



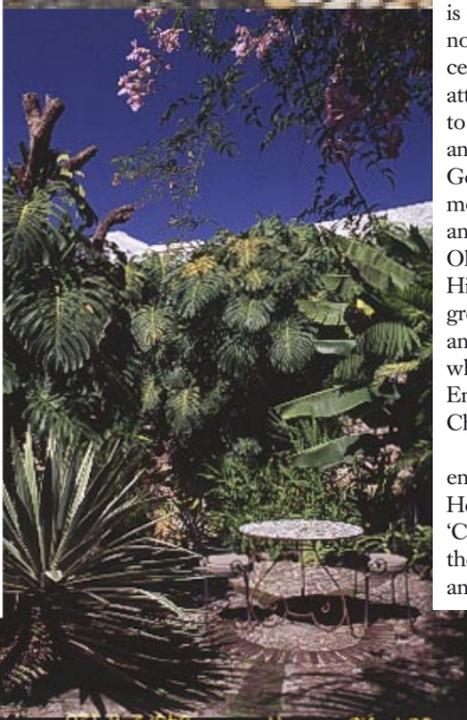
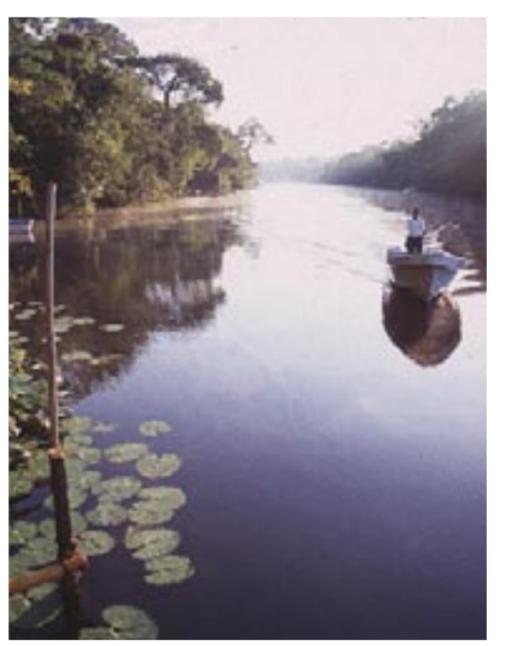
What the guidebooks don't tell you about the jungle is the silence. The glorious, pregnant silence punctuated by the odd yellow-feathered oropendola's shrill cry, or the barely perceptible ripple of an oar hitting the water as a Kekchi Indian glides by in his dugout canoe. We have forgotten the authentic sound of silence in the West; there is so much unnecessary noise and distraction in our lives. Here, one learns to attune one's ears to nothingness, and to adjust one's eyes to the colour and quality of the light. It is this meditative aspect of the rainforest that astounds one the most, observed from the perspective of John Heaton's extraordinary jungle hideaway and ecological retreat, Rancho Corozal, on the banks of the Rio Tatin, a tributary of the larger Rio Dulce on Guatemala's Caribbean coast.

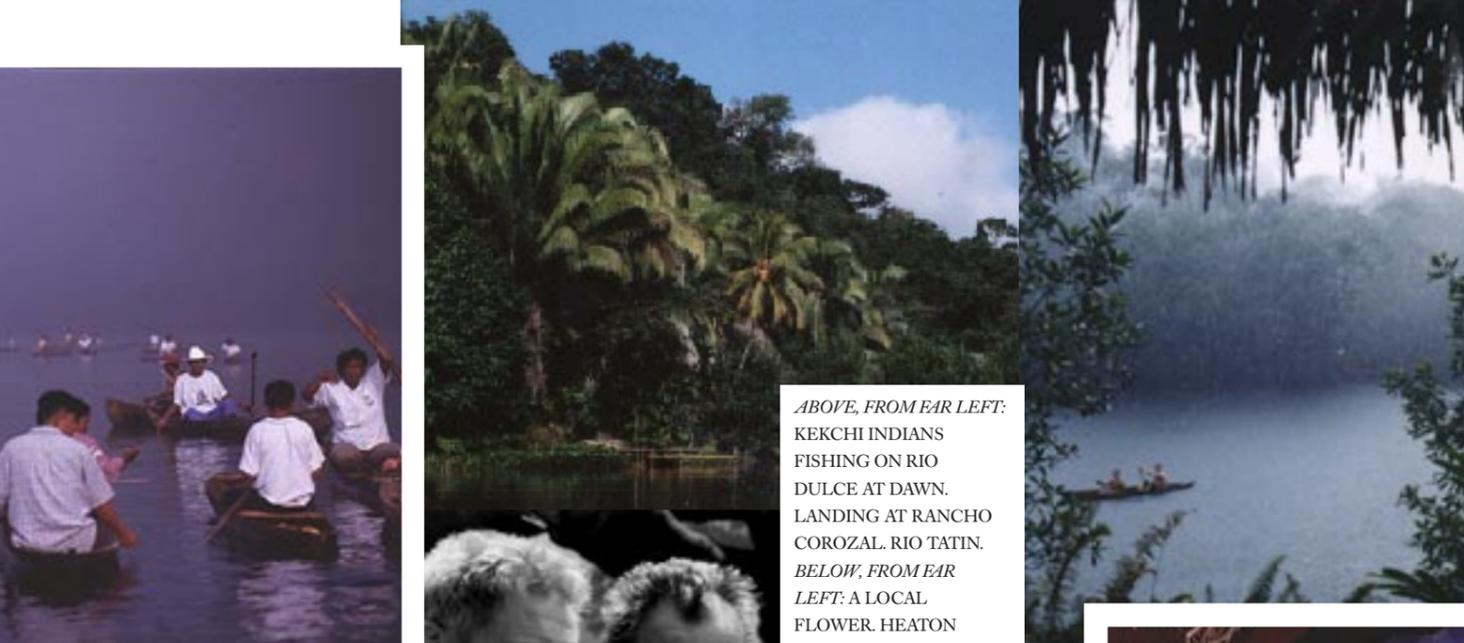
If you travel under a lucky star, you may meet the one person who can open up a country for you, and who can make your trip truly unique. Of transplanted Westerners in this category, Peter Beard springs to mind, at the height of his love affair with Kenya; and Mark Shand, when he was exploring India on the back of an elephant. You are even luckier if these people count you as their friend, as they are not just guides or lecturers but life-enhancers, steeped in the culture and traditions of the country they have adopted. They do not do what they do for money or career objectives, but for the love of their subject. They speak the language, but more than that, they understand the subtle nuances of the culture they live in. You feel safe in their company; they are respected, and they are usually handsome devils who flirt with danger and give everyone they meet a little twinkle in their eye. One such person is Heaton in Guatemala.

A tall 54-year-old Anglo-Frenchman with a wide grin and tousled hair, Heaton is one of those charismatic men who does not answer to anyone. A bit of a maverick, certainly, but one with enough charm to attract a group of influential friends, and to have been known for escorting beautiful and spirited women, including actresses Clio Goldsmith and Marisa Berenson. Heaton's mother was a French beauty, and his father and uncle were key figures in St Moritz, and Olympic champions of the Cresta Run. His adventuring genes go back as far as his great-great-grandfather Henri Trowbridge and great-grandfather Edward Heaton, who plied the trade routes between New England, the Juan Fernandez Islands and China, buying silks, porcelains and spices.

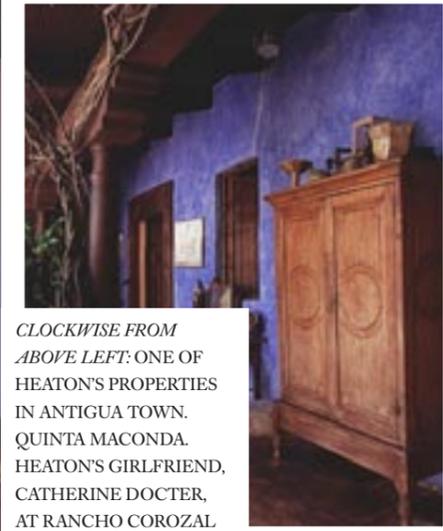
After his father's death, eager to experience life outside of his Parisian upbringing, Heaton set out to explore Mesoamerica. 'Central America is the lithe waistline of the Americas - wild, seductive, mysterious and challenging,' he says. 'She captivated

A BEDROOM IN ONE OF THE GUESTHOUSES AT RANCHO COROZAL





ABOVE, FROM EAR LEFT: KEKCHI INDIANS FISHING ON RIO DULCE AT DAWN. LANDING AT RANCHO COROZAL. RIO TATIN. BELOW, FROM EAR LEFT: A LOCAL FLOWER. HEATON WITH HARRISON FORD



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: ONE OF HEATON'S PROPERTIES IN ANTIGUA TOWN. QUINTA MACONDA. HEATON'S GIRLFRIEND, CATHERINE DOCTER, AT RANCHO COROZAL



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW LEFT: A VIEW OF RANCHO COROZAL FROM RIO TATIN. TWO VIEWS OF ANTIGUA TOWN. THE COURTYARD AT QUINTA MACONDA. HEATON'S FATHER WITH LANA TURNER. EAR RIGHT: HEATON WITH FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA



me, and back then I had her all to myself. Some years later, he sold his family house on the Avenue Montaigne to invest in various property ventures in Guatemala, where he has lived for almost 20 years.

'He belongs to the great tradition of travellers,' says Richard Lavers, the British ambassador in Guatemala. 'More than a dilettante, he relishes encounters with remote people, and is inspired by the beauty of the places where they live. There is hardly a corner of Guatemala he does not know.'

Heaton is also a legendary host. Arriving at Quinta Maconda, his comfortable, antique-filled colonial home in the historic town of Antigua, Sebastian, the photographer, and I were welcomed with log fires in the bedrooms and hot showers, and served a gourmet dinner by guest chef Nicolas Palomo. Like all of Heaton's other properties in Antigua, he has restored and decorated this house himself, and filled it with fascinating tribal art and objets d'art from his travels. Here he welcomes paying guests and friends alike, as the guestbook testifies: there are tributes from names as diverse as Lee Radziwill; Ashley Judd; Francis Ford Coppola, who was inspired enough by the visit to build his own lodges; Harrison Ford, who was in Guatemala for a conservation conference; and Helen Fielding, who began to write *Bridget Jones's Diary* here. Quinta Maconda is the base for the adventures tailored by Heaton: expeditions to remote Indian villages in the highlands by helicopter (the house specialty), or to the ruined Mayan cities surrounding Tikal. He also runs trips into the rainforest, such as the one we embarked on a few days later.

After a fortifying lunch at Jake's, a restaurant in Guatemala City owned by Heaton's great friend Jake Denburg, we set off. Accompanying us on the hair-raising five-hour road trip was Heaton's girlfriend, the delightful American academic Catherine Docter – herself a long-time lover of Central America and Mayan history and culture. With her Grace Kelly-like beauty and warm demeanour, she is the perfect foil to Heaton: calm and grounded, where he is boyish and exuberant. Boarding the launch steered by Heaton's estate manager, Sabino – a Kekchi Mayan Indian – we pull out into the main stream. It was a plot of land belonging to Sabino that Heaton came across and then bought 15 years ago, after scouting for a riverside spot on which to build his house – the two men have been friends ever since. Sabino still lives in his own house on the site, with his wife and eight children. 'We are keepers of the gate,' says Heaton, visibly concerned about conservation issues in the area.

We cruise into the extraordinary jungle canyons of the Rio Dulce, spotting parrots

overhead and egrets, grey herons and cormorants on the banks. 'The discovery of such a paradise is bittersweet,' says Heaton, 'as its safekeeping is gruelling, and in this part of the world, paradise found is often paradise lost.'

At first sight, Rancho Corozal takes your breath away. Made of local hardwoods, palm fronds, wicker, stone, gravel and bamboo collected from the surrounding jungle and rivers, it was, says Heaton, designed to blend harmoniously with the environment 'like an organic sculpture growing silently and unobtrusively from the undergrowth'. Here, luxury comes in the form of suspended time. The building of Rancho Corozal was challenging: everything had to come to the site by water – more than 500 trips by dugout canoe, propelled by an outboard motor, were needed to complete the process. 'It was hilarious, exhausting, and sometimes scary,' says Heaton, grinning. 'I refer to Rancho Corozal as my *Fitzcarraldo*-esque folly.'

Corozal's exotic jungle compound consists of three separate thatched houses, surrounded by hardwood decks and stunning tropical flora. White-cotton netted tents placed under the thatched roofing of the two main houses create safari-style bedrooms; in-between are open-plan sitting rooms and terraces with enormous hammocks. There is no electricity: rooms are illuminated by hurricane lamps, and the decks glow with torches from dusk to dawn. The majolica-earthenware bathrooms use fresh rainwater; both the kitchen stove and refrigerator are fuelled by propane gas. Docter turns out gourmet meals from the limited ingredients we have brought with us, with the addition of local fresh fruit and fish.

Five years before she met Heaton, Docter had rented Rancho Corozal for a romantic surprise break with her then boyfriend, and had been entranced by the style and beauty of the way it had been put together and decorated. 'I thought, "I have to meet this man one day"', she says. It was only last Christmas that she actually met Heaton, after renting Quinta Maconda with friends. 'I already knew his wonderful taste and style before I met him. When we did finally meet, I hugged him like an old friend, and I've never stopped since.'

Together, Heaton and Docter offer a different sort of travel experience. They have coined the phrase 'signature journeys' to describe the highly personal breaks they

organise. 'For us, creating a journey is like writing a symphony, with high or low notes, commissioned by our guests,' says Heaton. 'We are not tour operators, but quintessential travellers, and we share our knowledge with guests or friends. My favourite part is to see our guests transformed by an incredible trip.'

He and Docter go out of their way to make their personal vision of paradise resonate for us. We watch the Kekchi Indians gathering in dugout canoes for an early-morning catch of palometa, the mist rising eerily off the river and the cormorants diving for cast-off fish. We make the 20-minute trip to the small, funky town of Livingston and walk among its Garifuna inhabitants, many of them hung over from a night spent enjoying a potent, rum-based drink, as part of their annual festival. That evening, we eat crab and coconut soup at Heaton and Docter's favourite riverside restaurant, Doña Lola's. We also visit caves said to have once been shrines to ancient Gods. Heaton points out rare orchids in the multitude of endemic flora, and draws our attention to the telltale ripples created on the water by the shy manatee, an amphibious and almost mythical creature that is a locally protected species.

Heaton's knowledge of the jungle is matched only by his storytelling and he has us in stitches with tales of adventures with his many friends, and with anecdotes, such as the

one about a new year's eve when he shared some foie gras, which he had been saving for months, with Sabino's family, only to see them spitting it out discreetly into the bushes when they thought he wasn't looking.

We didn't want to leave, even when an army of jungle ants decided to march through our sleeping quarters one night (we simply moved ourselves over to the other house). They were gone as swiftly as they

*Heaton points out rare orchids in the multitude of endemic flora, and draws our attention to the telltale ripples created on the water by the shy manatee, an almost mythical creature*

arrived; and, sadly, so were we. □  
 Quinta Maconda (+502 7 832 1480; [www.quintamaconda.com](http://www.quintamaconda.com)), is available as a private house rental, from about £375 a night for two rooms, about £495 a night for three rooms and about £625 a night for four rooms, including breakfast, but not including tax and service. Rancho Corozal (contact details as above), from about £50 a person a night, excluding tax and service. Cazenove+Lloyd (020 7384 2332; [www.cazlloyd.com](http://www.cazlloyd.com)) can arrange flights to Guatemala City from £470 including tax, and can also arrange detailed itineraries.