

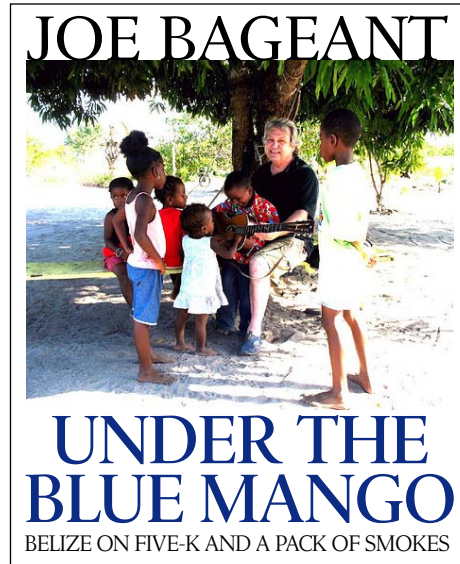
JOE BAGEANT



UNDER THE BLUE MANGO

BELIZE ON FIVE-K AND A PACK OF SMOKES

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of a forthcoming book from Random House Crown on working class America, scheduled for Spring 2007 release.

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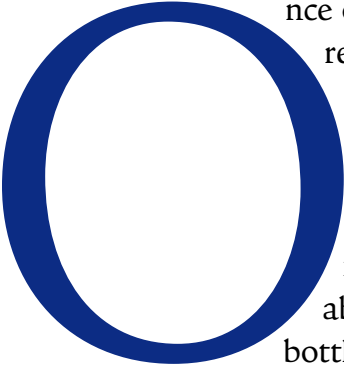
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There are superficial people everywhere, but a whole section of the human soul is simply missing in Americans. Most foreigners can never understand it unless they have lived inside America's total dominance of the material slave-state — Fritz Lang's Metropolis. — Gui Rochat



nce one becomes aware of that babies die in the third world as an indirect result of our simplest choices such as buying Ziploc plastic bags or bottled water or driving a car, life changes for any approximately moral American. Restlessness sets in, a nagging guilt that only swells with time until finally night thoughts grow so damned anxious and black something has to be done. It's been that way with me for a long time. About a year ago I decided to do something more about it than pat myself on the back for recycling the mountain of bottles and unread magazines our household seems to generate. So last fall I vowed to find a decent third world family and put up the money to do something together to better their lives and my own. The issue was so unbearable by spring this year that, by god, I was determined to get it done.

Consequently, I found myself at the Belcove Hotel in Belize City, Belize, that town being the place visitors on discount are most likely to find themselves when flying in or out of the country. The hotel is situated in the gritty core of the city and as good a place as any to stew over the next move. Rooms run as low as twenty US bucks a night and the Belcove is conveniently located by the waters of Haulover Creek, right next to the Blue Marlin bar where a man can drink with Mayan Indians and DEA agents or catch fish right off then deck if he cares to. Most nights at the Belcove you'll find several Americans on its balcony drinking Beliken beer and watching the boats pass under old manpowered turnbridge in the heart of this not-so-gently rotting British colonial town.

During my first night on the balcony all the city lights went out in another of the city's power outages, which usually last about an hour. From more affluent sectors across the water came the sound of generators kicking in. An American developer, checked into the hotel's only air conditioned room for a break during a yachting trip through the Caribbean, looks at his trim, fiftyish wife who is wearing about \$500 worth of Henri Lloyd casual boating wear, and says, "I guess the looting will start shortly." "Do you think we should ask the owner to lock the big

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Castillo”*

doors down front?” asks his deeply tanned mate. Another American, a chubby young guy with a shaved head, joins the conversation, telling the Henri Lloyd clothes rack: “The night clerk must surely have a gun. In this city, who wouldn’t?” The automatic assumption was that Belize residents, being mainly black, would loot their own city at the slightest opportunity. Personally, I’d rather be in Belize City during a power outage than in New York or Los Angeles.

Rommel drives on deep into Hopkins

Fortunately for my quest in Belize, fate is sometimes expedient. It was on the balcony of the Belcove that I found the family I had come looking for. A Garifuna (also known as Black Carib) couple sat in the darkness. And as I listened to them talk I actually had tears in my eyes, such was their plain honesty and dignity in their obvious poverty and mutual love. An hour later I knew they were the people I’d come to meet — Luke and Marzlyn Castillo.

A couple of days later I was in their home village of Hopkins, originally settled by descendents of escapees from a West African slave ship run aground in 1635. Having escaped, the Garifuna people have never been slaves and are proud of it. Soon I was sleeping in their 600-square foot house with ten other family mem-

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bers, six children, a cousin and a friend who met up with me at the hotel, and enjoying every minute of it, every human sound and smell of a natural boisterous native Caribbean household. Roosters crowed outside and pots rattled and kids squalled inside.

The next couple of weeks showed the village life to be both inspiring and somewhat heartbreaking at times. Days are sleepy and blissful. Time for the most part vanishes and only the hard bright sun and the sea prevail. Chickens wander the lanes and the babies roll and play with one another amicably. It is well-known here that children nursed by ganja smoking mothers are more easygoing and socially adjusted. And why shouldn't they be? It's hard to imagine anything better than a toke and a tit rolled into one. (Obvious as this is to anyone with common sense, it has nevertheless been supported in a study by Dean of the University of Massachusetts College of Nursing, Dr. Melanie Dreher, as well as a research by United Nations health workers.)

Life revolves around the kitchen table and the blue mango tree in the backyard. During the day when it is hot we sit under the "beeg mingo" where a stiff sea breeze always blows. So there are almost no insects. The skeeters can't grab any skin as they blow by on their way inland to Belmopan. In the evening we wash the sand off the kids with a hose and soap and go inside to cook coco root (which is rather like a potato and also known as arrowroot) in coconut milk with sweet pepper and onion. And of course fish of every imaginable kind.

Getting back to get back to that project I came to accomplish, it turned out to be a dwelling. With some cash on my part, Luke is building a traditional Belizean cabana. It sits six feet up on strong posts facing the ocean so it can catch the breeze at night, and has a bath and a balcony from which one can look across Hopkins or down on the children playing under the fruit trees. Luke and Marzy will rent it out to eco-tourists for extra income. We've agreed that he not charge more than \$15 a night. That way students and retired folks on small budgets can afford to stay there. This may sound like small bucks but it will more than double the family income. And if this old fat gringo comes to visit, he can stay in it as long as he wants, sleep late, write, and play guitar on the balcony. If it happens to be rented at the time, then I sleep on the family couch until it is available. And if I choose to retire in Hopkins or am driven there by the upcoming US economic collapse, then I build them a second one to replace the lost income of the first.

No paperwork is involved. Luke Castillo owns the house. Period. No legal stuff,

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no bullshit lawyers. We looked each other in then eye from two different worlds and shook on it. At some point good men the world over must trust one another. It only takes one look at both our faces to know which one of us has the most corrupted soul. I am lucky to have his trust, not the other way around.

In any money relationship there is power involved when one party has all the dough. For the first week I worked hard at trying to convince them that I am not rich, which was ridiculous because any American is rich by village standards. So I finally said, “Just think of me as a rich American uncle then.” This is more comprehensible since many Belizeans have relatives in the US sending back money. So now I am Uncle Joey and we call what we do a partnership. For me though, it is more like having a new son and daughter and best of all, grandkids at last.

To be perfectly straight with you, what I get out of it is a feeling of direct accomplishment that a man can never have in this country. We just picked something and did it. And it got done for a mere \$5,000 US. First the posts, then the floor. Being a working man in America means that, no matter how much you earn or how hard you work, it is never enough and the job is never done. Never do you feel the immediate satisfaction, much less security, from your labors as a citizen of the empire. Pay and work and grind and pay some more as everything drags on forever extracting ever increasing sums of money just to hang onto what you’ve already paid for. And always there is the specter of retirement and all the geet that is supposed to require. When I was a kid I read an article that said a person needed \$50,000 in savings to be safe in retirement. Not long ago I read a money magazine column that said a million was not quite enough. I have no doubt that I could easily live in Hopkins for about \$400 a month — double what Luke supports a family of eight on — and manage to have some left over for rum, guitar strings and a little ganja.

Dogs of the Conquerors

This evening the light winds carry the smell of Gumbo Limbo and Allspice leaves, and this evening, like all others, the children, the dogs, Luke, Marzy, are sitting under the blue mango, adults sipping the contribo bitters while the kids hang upon us sleepily, washed by the last faint red light. Suddenly the oldest dog, Rex, stands up rigid with every nerve alert and there is dead quiet as a young man dressed in all black walks down the village lane leading several pit bulls. He has found a fine niche in the white man’s new global economy by selling the guard

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dog services of his eight pit bulls. As a black friend in Detroit warned me before I left, “Don’t expect to find nigger nobility in poverty.”

The resort owners and the gringos who’ve built mansions here know they cannot legally keep the villagers off the beachfront of their sanitized air conditioned compounds inside which they sip mohitos and nibble at conch before launching forth in their white cabin cruisers or catamarans or go sail gliding over the great coral reefs. So they buy or rent the services of pit bulls and dobermans to patrol “their” beaches. The beaches that by Belizean law are open to all citizens. Recently a pit bull chewed up the head of a village child, enough to require serious medical treatment at the hospital in Belize City, two hours away from this village where only ten of the village’s 2000 people have vehicles, most of which are not around of course during the day when their owners are off to work. No charges were filed against the dogs’ owner, who happened to be the young fellow in black. In a village where dog owners scrupulously pay for chickens killed by their animals, everyone looked the other way at the mauling of a child. Two centuries of British colonialization was not for nothing. I cannot help but think of the European conquest of the Carribean, and think of Jean-Baptiste’s Rochambeau’s dogs in Haiti during Napoleon’s reign. Rochambeau imported from Cuba fifteen hundred dogs trained to hunt and eat blacks. On the day the dogs arrived, priests blessed the occasion and offered prayers for the dogs’ success. Young French girls bedecked the hounds with flowers, kissed their necks, clapped and cheered to see the first negroes thrown to these savage animals and devoured. The dogs of the conqueror are still here. Just less obvious.

Can the Americans who build the pastel stucco palaces on the beaches here be called mean? I suspect they are just provincial in that strange insulated American way, so completely conditioned they can never feel anything for people who do not thoroughly resemble themselves. Conditioned to fear black people even as they look down upon them, they can never truly recover from the consumer state’s conditioning. In all fairness, there are as many culturally respectful Americans — inasmuch as Americans understand the concept — as there are assholes. Sensitive visitors, usually young and carrying a backpack. They now have one more place to stay in Hopkins.

Contribo, tapeworms and star navigation

Marzy’s father, Old Charlie, who is 56, talks of the days not so long ago when he

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supported his family from the sea. The days when he sailed the big dugouts forty feet long and deep as a man is tall. “There was no roads to Hopkins den an if a man wan to buy so much as a fish hook he had to sail to Dangriga. No way but the sea.” Old Charlie and men of his generation sailed entirely by the stars and could tell the time within ten minutes of accuracy just by looking up. “Charlie, he still has the clock of the sea inside his head,” Luke says. Charlie smiles and tells of sailing into the big waves, “when you have to make tack in de troughs, an rudder back straight as de wave comes so you get lifted by de wave, not swamped. Tack, cut, tack, cut for hours an hours.”

Not only can Old Charlie sail a hundred miles to Honduras with just the stars and two sails, but he is an herbalist too, and can brew the *contribo* bitters that strengthens the bodies and souls of men. Bitters starts out as a mixture of herbs soaked in a small amount of 180 proof rum to dissolve their essential oils. This rum is then mixed with five or six parts water, so it is not a really something you can get drunk on, being both earthy and bitter tasting and so highly diluted.. There are many bitters recipes but all contain the vine, *contribo*, which according to Charlie, “makes you piss all de poisons out.” So three times a day I drink the bitters, which the Cuban doctor in the village clinic says do have preventive medical value, though not all that are claimed. It will not give you the legendary everlasting bitters boner. Between the Cuban doctor and bitters, I found myself breathing like a 30-year old, and even walked four miles one day, some of them carrying a baby on my back!

The Cuban doctor at the village clinic attends those maladies that herbs or bitters cannot prevent or cure. In the States I take five medications a day, but the advice of the Cuban doctor got me down to two (for blood pressure). “No *lassix* (a diuretic for my lung condition) because in this heat you sweat so much the problem is keeping water, not getting rid of it. As for the *Prevacid*, the Cuban doctor agrees with the herb doctors here: “You eat too much, especially meat. Eat fish, not pork. Pork is for celebrating. And coffee is good but too much is not.” I began to drink only one cup of coffee daily, and that one in the morning brewed with “fever grass,” which makes an excellent lemon grass-like tea in itself.

Still, there are plenty of sick people in Hopkins. Many here cannot even afford aspirin, much less medical care. And many women will not go to the Cuban doctor because the villager managing the clinic gossips about their maladies. In such a small close-knit cultural group village gossip is deadly stuff. Consequently, you find children with tapeworms, ringworms, adults with untreated high blood pres-

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sure. Villagers get dysentery just like gringos, but it goes mostly untreated. So when Luke and I rode the bus into Dangriga to shop, we bought a good supply of liquid baby aspirin, tapeworm medicine, antifungals — over the years locals get a skin fungus from swimming in the sea — diarrhea medicine, ringworm medicine, Tylenol. We got the kids a soccer ball, no small thing among children who own no toys and never expect to.

Not that shopping is a leisure activity as it is in the States. There is little work left fishing and employment at the resort is a tainted blessing. On one hand it feeds the family, but barely so at \$1 to \$1.50 an hour US. Groceries and commodities are no cheaper here than in the US because they are shipped from the US. So Luke cares for his family of eight on about \$50 a week US. Electricity alone takes one week's pay and drinking water takes nearly another, and telephone takes another, a telephone being a necessity when you have a boss at the resort, no car, etc. So that leaves \$50-\$60 US for food for eight. It also leaves nothing for clothing, soap etc. Somehow though, they manage to come up with the things they need. They remain proud enough, and even with so little they are generous to a fault.

Said generosity does not come easy when you pay proportionately as much of your income for mere drinking water as Americans do for major utilities. As in much if the third world, drinking water here is controlled by foreign criminal syndicates incorporated in Canada, France or the US. It costs about two dollars for five gallons, now that water has been effectively privatized by the very companies that sell you and me bottled water in the States. Crystal, is the big one here and none of Luke's six children can so much as wet their lips without paying Crystal for it. Washing and bathing are done with raunchy water from the village well, which suspiciously has been allowed to become fetid. The heavy concrete cap has been left open for ages so the bugs, dead mice and slime could accumulate. The town's three water maintenance guys, who, besides having not one lick of training, are lackeys of the rotten PUP political party now in power. Wanna bet that Crystal is a contributor to PUP? Still, political corruption is not as bad in the US, just more obvious, and is not institutionalized as it is in America. Belizian democracy, sloppy though it be, is still effective. Belizians have kicked crooked administrations out on their asses before and PUP will be thrown out in the next election. This ain't Ohio. Votes still count here.

Luke and Marzy are among the finest young couples in the village, moreover middle class by local standards. They have a TV, a small Commie-chink-made

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washing machine that amounts to a sloshing plastic bucket with an electric motor. They own a small fridge and a microwave. Such displays of wealth are sure signs of connivance to some of the village's old farts.

Unarguably Garifuna culture is being destroyed by these small luxuries, particularly processed foods from "the Chinaman's store" down the road, especially television, which the kids watch in the mornings before school. Television surely has something to do with the Abercrombie & Fitch and Victoria's Secret magazine ads clipped out and pasted on the Castillo family's cottage walls. And in the background of everything there are the village's practitioners of the Dugu religion, which is fascinating and scary African stuff whose ceremonies are conducted in long dark thatched buildings wherein pigs are sacrificed at night amid smoke and drumming as the dead come back to instruct the living. Some Dugu practitioners believe the whites are stealing the soul of the Garifuna and they are right. I have seen it myself in Luke's children as the television spins its pornographic consumer holograms in their minds. Already they understand deep inside that without an X-box they are nothing.

Return to the dead zone

Three weeks back in Fritz Lang's Metropolis and I'm once more walking like an old man, my throb and my gut burns. There are malignancies of the body and soul that are purely situational. Things that no amount of contribo bitters can ever heal. The nine pounds I lost in Belize is now shading my dick again. And once more I am keeping my wife up too late railing against the empire — the unholy rottenness of it all, including the style in which she and I live, and "Why inna fuck can't we sell everything and leave for more humane climes?" You get the picture. It's the kind of stuff that, left unresolved, can lead to divorce.

Now I know what some male readers are thinking: "*I'd leave this country in a heartbeat if it were not for my wife. What about the wife?*" I've received scads of emails asking just that. It has been my experience that women are almost never up for the escape from America and generally don't feel the anxiety so many liberal and leftish men do in these times. Please spare me chauvinist charges on the grounds that "Women feel the same political outrage that men do." Perhaps so, but most married women in America sure as hell don't take risks about it. I've had scads of emails asking me the question: "How do you get your wife to go along with it?" You don't. Like a divorce, you just give them everything you own, the house

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(which we never own in this country, mortgage being a form of rent. Who the hell ever pays off a house these days?) cars and all, then hope for the best. It's the same as with Luke Castillo. At some point you have to trust. And if it all goes to hell, so what? A third world family has a small house they can rent out and eventually leave to their children. Or an American woman goes down with the American economy clutching at a very large house. Interestingly, Luke and Marzy own their tiny house and plot of land outright.

As the Belizians sometimes say, "Let me leave you wid dis, my friend." If you should ever find yourself at the Belcove Hotel in Belize City, step out the front door onto the pot holed, trash strewn pavement and look to your right. A dozen yards down Albert Street you will see an immaculately dressed, wizened little man sitting patiently on the steps of the Beer and Bingo Hall (which is more fun than it sounds). The little old man makes his living going for cigarettes, beer or anything else tourists are seeking (except whores.) Locals call him The Gentleman of Principle. "Because he is a man of the old school?" I asked the Hindu grocer on the corner. "No, my brother" the Hindu answers. "He is called that because he will always return with your beer and the right change." The Gentleman of Principal, Mr. Harris is a Creole man of the old school who has seen governments rise and fall, chopped banana stalks, picked oranges and waited on the tables of diplomats. He knows plenty. Enough that, out of respect, I felt obliged to share a drink with him and buy him a pack of smokes. Thus we sat on the wooden steps talking and after his initial gentlemanly reserve was lifted by a couple shots of Old Masters overproof rum the conversation turned to my people, the Americans.

"Americans hab only one eye," he said.

"One eye?"

"Jah. Dey see only what anudda man do not own. And dey look upon demselves wid great pride because dey own so many things. Den dey go on to de next man to see what he does not own dat dey own. Americans here got big pride in demselves cause most of us got nothing."

"Someday the other eye is going to open."

"Maybe in hebben. Maybe when dey die and God pry dey eye open wid his own finger. But right now dey living in de false light."

On my first day back at work I proudly showed the pictures of my new Belizian family to a co-worker, pictures of the children playing under the blue mango tree, Marzy with the baby of the family, Little Luke, on her hip by the tiny cottage in

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the sand. The co-worker looked at them carefully, then looked up at me and said, "I just don't see how people can live like that!"

Perhaps one day, if she is very lucky, God will pry her eye open "wid his own finger."

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