

# Creating a Coffee Culture in Placencia, Belize

By Ann Kuffner

**K**eith Morrison, 58, scoured two continents for the perfect place to start his coffee shop: an English-speaking country with a laidback, affordable lifestyle, warm weather, good sailing, and low taxes. He found all these in Placencia, on Belize's southern coast. Now he enjoys a terrific Caribbean lifestyle when he's not overseeing operations at his Above Grounds Coffee House.

For years Keith had been intrigued with the idea of opening a coffee shop. "I have always been a coffee shop person," he says. "I liked the energy of the place. I always wanted to be in the coffee business, so I studied all the independent shops on my travels and came to understand what worked well.

"I started a search, traveling to Belize, London, Scotland, and the west coast of Canada, looking for the right spot to set up shop."

In each place, Keith kept a few questions in mind. "First and foremost, can I start a business here? Then, what product would fit? Finally, can you make a living at this? Well, after looking at rents, tax rates, and income in each location, it boiled down to one conclusion: I would not make a lot of money... So why not set up in Belize? The taxes are low, the sailing is great, and I wouldn't have heating bills... I can't deal with the cold anymore."

Tired of Canada's bitter winters, Keith moved to Bermuda in 2003 to help manage a small, independent ceramic-tile warehouse. He lived and worked there for seven years before he was ready for another change. "I had been living on a 34-foot sailboat, so the idea of moving back to a Western world lifestyle was a bit too much to accept."

Belize's lifestyle influenced Keith's decision to set up shop there. "I enjoy the laidback lifestyle. Conveniently, English is the first language, which makes it a lot easier to immerse myself

in the local scene and engage in fun and interesting conversations with people who grew up here. The lifestyle here is more of a Caribbean one, rather than Central American. That means things cost more than they do in neighboring Latin American countries, or the inland communities of Belize. But the cost of living is still probably 50% less than it was for me in North America. Take beer economics: A beer here is just \$1.50 in the local supermarkets."

Keith launched the Above Grounds Coffee House in Placencia Village, Belize, in January 2011. First he found an affordable one-bedroom apartment in the village that hadn't been used for years, which he converted into his coffeehouse. "The landlady gave me the go-ahead to renovate to suit my purpose. I liked that it is on the main road, with a nice setting, and that it is shaded from the sun."

Keith learned the business from the ground up. Now his business has grown enough to support his lifestyle. He admits that he's expanded his business in ways he had not expected. "I do not sell just any kind of coffee at my shop. I'm selling coffee that I get directly from independent farmers

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Keith Morrison loves the great sailing and Caribbean lifestyle in Placencia.

working in the highlands of Guatemala. I never thought that I'd reach a point where I was selling world-class coffee and also promoting sustainable farming and direct trade."

Keith's coffee house is now a major social hub on the peninsula. "I am very proud that Above Grounds continues to attract a wide range of customers, including locals, expats, and visitors. People come here to land business deals, chat about the latest developments on the peninsula, read the local papers, and catch up with their lives back home. Since we open at 7 a.m., many of our early bird customers include visitors and fisher-folk who stop by for coffee and grub before heading out for their tours and adventures."

Placencia peninsula is home to less than 4,000 people, including a sizable population of expats. As well as having easy access to the rest of the country, residents here can also benefit from the deep, natural harbor and barrier reef just offshore. These make Placencia one of the best spots for boating and diving in Belize.

When not working, Keith enjoys the activities that attracted him to the Caribbean and to Placencia. "During my spare time, I live the Caribbean dream. I crew on boats when the opportunity arises. I travel through the Toledo district and Guatemala up the Rio Dulce and visit the farmers in the highlands of Guatemala. Here in the village, I take my dog Java for walks. We visit the local establishments, where I enjoy great food at the restaurants and live entertainment and good drinks at the bars."

He has these wise words for anyone looking to run a business in a new country. "Everyone comes down here thinking that they know everything. Just because they come from an educated or successful background doesn't mean they'll make it here. My advice is to listen—even if it's bad or good advice, just listen. Be patient."

He also suggests that expats do their homework and take a hard look at what services are needed where they plan to settle. "You would not believe how many people want to open a pizza shop here. Find out what is missing. Supply a need. Another 'me too' product just dilutes the marketplace; it's just more people fighting over the same dollar. Create something new and fresh. When I came here, I couldn't get a good cup of coffee.

"And, lastly, show respect. If you don't give it, don't expect to receive it." ■