



From <http://www.themayantraveler.com/The Best of the Maya.htm>

## My Mayan Adventure

by Larry Johnson

Glenna, my dear wife, is as modest as they come. She rarely spends money on herself. Maybe she spends \$30-\$50 a year on clothes and a few bucks on make-up and a couple of more bucks on her quilting hobby, but that's it. She doesn't drink or smoke; she's plenty happy if we occasionally eat out at Denny's or the cheap neighborhood Mexican restaurant.

So when I got another hint from Glenna, dropped over the years, that she really, really would like to some day see the Mayan ruins before it was too late (translation: before I croak), then I figured I ought to look into what tours were out there. For a number of years, I tried to persuade her to go with a small tour group by herself. She speaks fluent Spanish, is in better shape than I am, and I could hold down the fort and take care of the dogs; I wouldn't be slowing her down by going along.

But each time I tried that dodge she insisted she wouldn't want to go alone, she really wanted me to come along. It wasn't until we actually finished the tour (I know, I'm getting a little ahead of myself here) that she gave me what I think was her reason she wanted me along (besides my natural charm and manly heft to fend off foreigners): my brash gregariousness breaks the ice in any group, whereas her tendency to shyness might have isolated her.

So, anyway, with our anniversary coming up and it again proving impossible to find any object she'd want as a gift, I said, "OK, let's go. Let's do the Mayan ruins. Just don't expect me with my bum knee to climb up and down those damn pyramids." And with that easy concession, the deal was done. And I felt good. I was finally not a jerk about the one and probably only thing she has ever asked me to do for/with her in 12 years.

I was going to slog it through, and, wherever possible, nod and smile.

Her enthusiasm over this new project immediately translated into a flurry of emails to me with links to web sites she was happily browsing in her "home office" adjacent to mine: "How about this tour? See the nice places we can stay at?" "How about this one – oh, wait a minute, on the third night we'd have to stay in a place with no electricity, that's no good for your sleep machine."

I have sleep apnea and a machine that keeps my air passages open at night so I don't snore or accidentally stop breathing and die.

I love my sleep machine. It is a permanent part of me.

And then came the closer: "Here's one," the email said. "It is called the 'Best of Maya' and goes to all the really major places I have always wanted to see. Even Bonampak. Eight days, seven nights. Look at the places we get to stay at and google them. What do you think?"

I was touched that she thought I'd know the significance of "even Bonampak," which apparently is far enough off the beaten path so that the other tours don't usually include it.

I went to the "Best of Maya" web site. OK, 8 days, 7 nights. I figure the first of those days is the flight down to Mexico, to a city I never heard of (Villahermosa) but which is bigger than Greater Seattle, which is where we live. The last day would be spent driving three hours from Copan Ruinas (name of the town next to the Copan Mayan ruins) to the airport in another place I never heard of before, San Pedro Sula, in Honduras, for the flight back to Seattle.

I looked around the rest of the web site. So figure the tour is just 6 days, really. There would be a lot of time spent in an air-conditioned van, driving through the Yucatan part of southern Mexico, then a whole lot of Guatemala, then a chunk of Honduras. The van would have another plus: plenty of time out of the 90+ degree heat and 90%+ humidity predicted for the March 10-17 week, and a sanctuary away from snakes, bugs, wild pigs, monkeys, spiders, rodents, panthers and various creepy jungle things. One could even nap when the van was driving from one place to the next.

So maybe this would be OK. "Our most popular tour!" the web site clucked. Okay. Let's do it.

Still, there was something cheesy about the web site itself, [themayantraveler.com](http://themayantraveler.com), harboring a hidden quiet warning somewhere in there. It looked like those really geeky html web sites that first appeared on Mosaic and Netscape back in the day: a kind of pie-crust webbing around the windows to frame the pages; diamond-shaped bullet points; funny-looking, meaningless horizontal divider graphics; and a clunky maroon Helvetica font. And though it looked from pictures found elsewhere on the Internet like all the lodging would be clean, air-conditioned and comfortable, with no "electricity-free" nights, I wasn't too comforted with the Best of Maya's description of the boat trip the tour would take down the widest river in Central America to one of the sites, Yaxchilán: "This incredible boat ride through the rainforest with its huge trees and abundant wildlife makes you feel like you're in an Indiana Jones movie!"

I really didn't want to be in an Indiana Jones movie.

I checked [traveladvisor.com](http://traveladvisor.com), my usual reliable source for the real skinny on travel destinations from the customers themselves, not the management or some PR flacks. About "The Best of Maya": there was nothing, *nada*. That wasn't a good sign. "Our most popular tour!" didn't even make it on the radar screen at one of the biggest travel sites on the Internet.

I checked YouTube, surely there'd be something there after searching for "Best of Maya Tour" or "The Mayan Traveler," somebody's home movies would surely surface. But nope. Zip.

I went back and looked around The Mayan Traveler web site, and eventually to their FAQ page, and found this: *“How long have The Mayan Traveler and Tropical Travel been in business? Twenty five years! These companies began operating as Belize Promotions in 1984. We began expanding the scope of our operations soon thereafter. Since then we have received so many references and kudos that we have become the most highly recommended travel service in all of our areas of expertise. We now serve thousands of clients to our growing list of destinations.”*

I wondered why none of these “thousands of clients” had made their kudos known online. The Mayan Civilization, you may already know, just disappeared virtually overnight some 1,100 years or so ago, and nobody knows for sure why. Maybe what ever happened to the Mayans happens to the people who take this tour, I thought.

Then I found something on the FAQ page that was truly ominous: *“Are your tours for everyone? Not necessarily. It is the responsibility of each client to select a trip that is appropriate to their health, physical abilities and interests. Certainly we will offer advice, but the final decision to travel on any particular itinerary is ultimately with the individual traveler.”*

The Best of Maya Tour would take in the Mayan sites of Palenque, Bonampak, Yaxchilán, Tikal, Yaxha, Quiriguá and Copan – most of the top ones. But I really had no idea at all whether going to and trudging around them would be “appropriate to my health, physical abilities and interests.” Well, yes, you could drop the “interests” part there, because I already knew no pile of ancient rocks, however arranged or their historical value, was going to get *my rocks* off. But the health and physical abilities for a fat old guy like me are indeed known to me, and they stink. I smelled a big stinky Mayan rat.

So I called the tour company up on their 800 number so I could get some straight dope from a real person and not their vague web site. A genial Texan with a pleasant husky twang answered the phone and sounded like an old guy just like me, though hardier, somewhere in his early 60s maybe would be my guess. Doing this tour gig from an East Texas home office, making money to supplement his pension. That was how I pictured him, in suspenders and a knotty-pine den with dead animals mounted on the wall, guns in a glass case. He told me to call him Tommy.

“Tommy,” I said, “how physically challenging is this tour? I got a bum knee and am overweight and will probably need a cane to do all this walking. I don't plan to do any climbing up and down the pyramids, and I don't plan to see everything there is to see, just what I feel like seeing, then I can meet people back at the bus if that's how it can work. Can I do that? Would that work? Whaddya think?”

“Oh,” Tommy said, “that should be no problem, we have people as old as in their 80s go on this tour, and we've been doing this tour for years, it's our most popular one. You have to be the judge of what you can handle, but we can work with you on it. You don't have to do everything, no, a lot of people don't. We do most of the walking around with the guide in the mornings while it's not so hot, then there's plenty of time in the van and free time in your hotel.”

A perverse part of me wanted to have him tell me I'd be a damned fool to go on this thing. Give me a good excuse to stay home, Tommy. And yes, I would have many an occasion later to think back on this sales pitch of his, and compare it to some stark realities. But now there was nothing for it, I was in, there was no going back. Tommy got my MasterCard info to get our deposit and us reserved as guests 9 and 10. He said we were the last ones to make it aboard. I think I was supposed to feel lucky about that.

Glenna was truly excited and gave me a look that said, “You really do love me, don't you?” I felt guilty for hoping Tommy would sabotage the deal for us just a few moments earlier.

Indiana Jones, here I come.

I daydreamed of heavy rain forest clouds and ancient Mayan spirits overhead as we walked the ruins in misty mornings before we would travel on in the afternoons. I recalled the photos of pools at the hotels we would be staying at, the three-star reviews of most of them at traveladvisor.com. The hotels had bars. Ah, good. With booze and a large Ibuprofen bottle and only 6 days of slogging, I could do it. I could boot camp it.

Tommy mailed us our vouchers after I forked over the rest of the dough for the trip and sent him our flight numbers with arrival and departure dates and times. The “vouchers” arrived: just a couple of computer color print-outs of our flight arrival and departure times on thick paper, and the same Denny's-menu-formatted brochure as found on themayantraveler.com's web site.

Strange or not, with vouchers in hand we were now committed. There was no going back.

\* \* \*

## Day 1

To get from Seattle to Houston to Villahermosa took 14 hours, including sitting around a lot and surviving the mindless surreal business with TSA, numbing my mind with airport tedium and playing iPod solitaire. Four others who would be in our 10-person tour, Cherik and Lia from Wisconsin, transplants from Holland, and Mark and Teresa from upstate New York, were also on the Houston-to-Villahermosa flight, a fact we'd discover after arrival.

Immigration and customs were mercifully quick. Our tour guide, Juan, a short but stocky guy of Mayan descent, and our driver, Gaspar, were in the waiting area in the cute, bright little airport in Villahermosa, holding up a small sign for us.

I was tired, and while we still waited for the other two tour couples to clear Mexican customs, I said to Juan, pointing to a row of chairs nearby, “*yo me voy sentirme allá.*” Glenna followed me, smiling, and bent towards my ear to say, “You just told him you are going over there to feel yourself up.” “Sentirme,” alas, means “to feel myself up” – I should have said, “sentarme,” to sit down.

Oh, well. I was tired and airplane-drained. Flying is torture. My bum knee needs at least a day of inactivity to quell its rebellions. Actually, at this point, I wouldn't have minded *both* sitting down *and* feeling myself up.

I went over to an ATM machine to get some pesos. Trouble is, the dollar sign on the screen is used both for dollars and for pesos (somebody, Glenna probably, told me later that that is not so: the Mexican dollar sign has just one vertical line through the big S, whereas the gringo dollar has two such lines; I still have yet to check that out). So I didn't know if my debit card had just bought \$300 US in way too many pesos, or 300 pesos, way not enough, about \$21. I would later figure out I bought way too many. About \$250 worth of those pesos now sit in my top dresser drawer, optimistically hoping for repatriation in some future South of the Border trip.

Glenna found me at the ATM machine and said the others were waiting. I stuffed the crisp colorful Mexican bills into my Robber's Wallet. That's a second wallet I carry around when traveling abroad, with the lesser amount of cash in it, and with no driver's license, some business cards, and an expired credit card. I figure if ever I'm robbed abroad, I am counting on the robber thinking I would have only the one wallet, the Robber's Wallet, with enough cash in it to satisfy him. I hope I never have to find out whether this strategy would actually work.

The six newly acquainted tour guests all eventually climbed into the small white van that would be our mobile home for more hours than I think any in the group anticipated, often over deep potholes, dirt roads at 10 mph, and through crazy death-defying oncoming traffic where it's best you just don't look. The air conditioner was on high, which was great for about 10 seconds after coming out of the heat. I was glad I still had my Seattle jacket on to deal with the cold air.

Back at the hotel, already checked in from the day before or earlier today was Mark from London (soon to be known as “Mark 2”), and John from Florida. They both were traveling alone and on their own. After the trip, I had to concede to Glenna she was right about not wanting to travel alone. These two guys always seemed alone and apart from the rest of the group, though they would engage in conversation at mealtimes when we would usually all sit at one long table.

Mark 2 was a congenial, smart and polite young Brit, a London City high finance guy in the working world, and a world traveller. He had a great sense of humor.

John, on the other hand – well, he was usually a pain in the ass. A tall graying guy, about in his late 40s, would repeatedly tell anyone who would listen that he used to work for the airlines, it was a great job, and now he is a middle school teacher and teaches this and that lesson of life to “my kids,” his pupils. He'd say his divorced wife used to say these things and that, and now his girl friend says these other things and that.

John had a big fancy Nikon camera that would always take three shots in quick succession whenever he took a picture – *wheeze! wheeze! wheeze!* – which was pretty much all the time. He took photos of anything and everything all the time: rocks, children in the street, oncoming traffic, the hotel elevator. Then he would talk on and on like a little old lady. I don't think anyone liked John.

A friend of mine once said a long time ago that every group of people, every family, had to have a dog to kick. John was that dog. The Family Dog.

An inevitable thing about tours and their busses or vans: people pick their seats, and then somehow those become their permanent reserved seats. So Glenna and I sat far enough from John in the van that we rarely could hear him. Others, like Mark 2, took to listening to music through earphones. Bob and Judith from San Juan Capistrano, California, who would soon join the group, were around my age and nice to everybody, including John. When they didn't want to talk, or they just wanted to do something else, they took out their binoculars and looked at birds, helping each other find the bird he or she was now looking at.

It was sweet how they would take turns tapping each other on the shoulder, pointing to a bird off in the distance somewhere, so they could both see it together through their binoculars. They were like turtle doves.

For the first day of the tour, Tommy's “Best of Maya” brochure says:

*Day 1 - Villahermosa Mexico arrival, meet and greet - As the tour members arrive in Villahermosa and are welcomed by our tour operator partners they will be transferred to the appropriate hotel for a welcome orientation, reception and dinner.*

Well, there was no orientation, no reception, no dinner. Juan offered to take us to what sounded like a Mexican version of 7/11 to get sandwiches and soft drinks, because our hotel's restaurant closed at 9:00 PM, and it was now 9:30 PM.

“I tried to talk them into staying open just a little bit longer, but they wouldn't do it,” Juan said, with a hint of shame in his voice. This was, I would come to discover, the only time in the Latin countries we were to visit where an exact time was precisely adhered to: quitting time. Quitting time seems to be a universal priority regardless of culture.

Juan was embarrassed. We were bone-tired and thirsty. Glenna had packed some energy snacks, enough to tide us over to morning. So we and the other two couples passed on the fare at the 7/11. Bob and Judith had yet to arrive because their flight from Mexico City was cancelled; they would arrive

tomorrow. The tour would have to double back and get them after our first site visit tomorrow morning. So everything was already starting off kind of all screwed up.

But then I realized we were in Mexico where somehow everything gets screwed up all the time but everything somehow works out OK anyway, so go with it, relax.

And in the warm air, relax I do. That old let-it-loose melted butter Mexico feeling comes over me and I look around at the overhead fans, the colorful walls, the tiled floors so easy to clean, and I hear the gentle muffled quiet Spanish murmurings that most Mexicans speak and we gringos cannot hear because we talk too damned loud.

I slow way down.

From the hotel lobby where Juan finally bids us a good night after making sure our luggage is safely in our rooms, I could hear nearby the loud disco noises of a Saturday-night bar. Glenna and I go to our room and unpack our bags, check our emails and drink some bottled water. The place is called Quality Inn Villahermosa Cencali, and it's much nicer than many hotels I have stayed in in the States. OK, the tour starts with a good foot forward.

I tell Glenna I want a beer. Good sport that she is, she comes along, even if she herself doesn't drink. The hotel bar is full of well-dressed, well-coiffed Mexican young people. No gringos in sight. The lights are low and the decibels from the over-miked band make all conversations around us sound just below the scream level. My ear drums rattle around in my head.

I pull up the only empty tall wooden stool to the bar so I can have eye contact with the two cowboys behind the bar, busily mixing all kinds of drinks and making wisecracks to each other, cool guys at work.

They make a studied effort of completely ignoring me. And, of course, I probably do look like an asshole, letting Glenna stand behind and to the left of me, not letting her have my chair. They didn't know she wouldn't be drinking anything, and I had just come out of two TSA feel-ups and 8 hours of sardine life in two tin cans called airplanes, and I fucking wanted – no, *needed* a beer. Make that two beers.

A waitress finally noticed me while standing in front of the cowboys, waiting to get her customers' drinks, and she asked me what I wanted. I said if they have Corona that would be good, actually any cold beer would be fine. Then she had to yell at the cowboys "Corona! Corona!" about five times until they finally paid attention to her. She asked what Glenna wanted, and I tried to talk Glenna into a Coke or something, but she said "*Nada para mi, gracias*" to the lady, and then the waitress looked at me, too, like I was some kind of asshole. I was in no position to disagree.

I put down enough pesos for a second Corona plus the waitress's tip, so I ordered another. Some guy working at the front of the bar found a stool for Glenna, and she sat down. I hadn't finished my first Corona completely, there was about a half inch left, so I put that in front of Glenna when I ordered the second one, just so she had something in front of her and I wouldn't look so much like an asshole for not buying anything at all for my date. But one of the cowboys saw what I did, and he gave me the double asshole look. At least I had gotten his attention.

We left the bar and the decibels. Glenna said something but I couldn't hear anything anymore. The hotel was big and we got lost trying to find our room, then there it was. We went to bed. I fell into a deep coma sleep. Day 1 – had this been only *one day*? – was over.

Holy crap, there were seven more to come.

## Day 2

We had to get up at 5:30 AM in order to make breakfast by 6:00 AM at the Hyatt Hotel about three blocks away, because the restaurant in our hotel wouldn't open until 7:00 AM. We had a lot of kilometers to cover, and we had to add the time to come all the way back to collect The Lost Couple, Bob and Judith, the bird watchers.

The Hyatt was palatial, popping with five-star pride and showoffyness. We eight plus driver and guide were the first ones in for breakfast. The hotel workers slowly set about laying out the buffet that would have everything you'd want for breakfast, plus a number of mystery gruels and oddly-shaped items in covered tureens. I sampled pretty much everything there was, including various pastries and lots of pink papaya with a taste unique to Mexico.

Glenna tells me at breakfast that "papaya" in some Spanish-speaking countries means "pussy." She knows these things. She interprets the words of bewildered incarcerated Hispanics before a number of state and federal courts in the State of Washington. She is known among her fellow court interpreters as an authority on every dirty word there is in Mexican Spanish.

She lived in Mexico City for 10 years and was married to a Mexican. Her Peruvian, Colombian, Argentinian, Cuban and Ecuadorian colleagues call from time to time to ask her what some unusual filthy word in Mexican means. She always has the answer, usually accompanied with raucous laughter. This talent is a source of delight for her. A stranger would never catch on to her dirty mind, though. She looks like a bookish librarian. A lovely one, yes, but still a librarian.

Not that there's anything wrong with librarians. Don't get me wrong.

I check my "voucher" Juan didn't bother to collect to see what is on for Day 2:

*Day 2 - Kolem Jaa, La Venta Park and Palenque - After breakfast, tour members are transferred to Kolem Jaa Natural Park and Reserve where zip line, jungle canopy, mountain bike, jungle walking trails and waterfalls adventures are all available. Lunch will be served at Kolem Jaa. The tour will then return to Villahermosa, visiting La Venta Park, a magnificent exposition of Olmec Culture. The Parque-Museo La Venta is an open-air museum that contains most of the stone sculpture excavated at the Olmec site of La Venta...Coatimundis, agoutis and other tropical wildlife wander the grounds among some of the last native vegetation in the area. The tour then continues to Palenque for check in at the Villas Kin Ha and dinner.*

Looks definitely like this will be a nice day to goof off and relax before the serious stuff with the ruins begins.

We drive 75 miles to a popular campsite-and-outdoor-fun center that can be reached only by boat. Those who want to, when we get to this place called Kolem Jaa Natural Park and Reserve, can get all geared up with cables and helmet and what look like mountain climber belts and clips, and go zip-lining.

Juan tells us we can zip-line over the jungle tree tops, from one tree-top station to another where waiting muscular young men will catch us and send us on to the next station. I think Juan is joking, but

that is what is on the agenda for the morning, or one can also go hiking down various trails and see jungle flora and fauna.

Or one can, as I planned to do, sit in a chair under indoor shade, and wait for this part to be over. Gaspar the driver said he had the same idea, take a work break.

But it was no easy thing getting to the destination of what I thought would be a relaxed day off. To get from where the van parked to the remote Kolem Jaa turned out to be a mighty ordeal.

First, there was the long walk from the van down a trail to an open expanse above a river that looked down a steep hill to where a boatman and his shallow skiff, powered by an outboard motor, were waiting for us. There were upended cut logs embedded in loose soil that served as steps to make it down the hill. You could see from the soil that there were times – definitely in the rainy season – when it would all turn to mud, and the only safe way down was by carefully sticking to these log-steps.

Even though the dirt was now dry, I gingerly moved from one log-step to the next, since I didn't feel very sure about my footing in the open terrain itself. I was glad I packed a cane for this trip; the third leg added a lot of stability, and equally important, less fear.

I was the last one down the long, steep hill. Fortunately, the others were too busy taking pictures to notice, chatting each other up and enjoying the sun and heat. All I could think of was: *How the hell am I going to make it back up that hill when we return?* I was already pretty tired from just going down it.

So now we are putt-putting down the Oxolotán River thanks to the boatman and his outboard motor, with about 5 or 6 miles to go. On the banks of either side of this medium-sized river there was nothing but scruffy bushes, a lot of white birds and some yellow ones, howler monkeys in the distance, sandy beaches with dead trees, and jungle off to the sides.

Everybody remembered to wear hats and sunscreen as recommended by the tour company. The loud buzz of the outboard motor put a damper on conversation, which was fine with me. The occasional splash on the face, the sometimes humanoid features in some of the boulders above us on the shores, brought back memories of when I was a kid cruising down the St. Croix River that divides Minnesota and Wisconsin, with the launch captain announcing over the P.A. System what we were about to see on our right “The Devil's Chair:” big chiseled rocks atop each other that really did look like a big chair.

On this Oxolotán River, I saw the Devil's Chair once again, and I wished Capt. Bob Muller were still alive and there to announce it through his Elvis microphone: “*The Deeevvviiillll's Chaaiirr!*” Bob Muller was one of my parents' few family friends.

We arrived at our destination, a set of stairs that rose to a landing. Arrgh, *climbing*. But it didn't look at first like too much to handle. Until I got to the landing. Then there were more of these embedded cut-log steps, and then another platform and a turn to the right to a swaying rope bridge with wooden planks heading uphill again, some of the planks broken, some cracked, some of them missing. Strands of frayed rope serving as handrails were all that kept one from slipping over into the stoney brook and gurgling waterfalls 20 feet below. *Damn.*

After the bridge came a downhill slope, then an uphill one, then a downhill one, and then an ever

longer uphill one, with the log stepping stones marking the way. The cane became useless, since now the log steps were not optional, and outside of them there was no purchase for the cane. *Where the fuck is this Kolem Jaa?* How much more of this?

I was panting and sweating heavily by now, not just because of the exertion that was making my right knee scream.

My pulse was racing, and I started to feel faint from the incredible heat and humidity. Everybody else was way ahead of me, but Gaspar the driver held back, behind me, to make sure I made it. I don't know what he would do if I didn't make it. Yell really loud for help?

I made it to a flat area where somebody had the kindness to place a nice park bench in front of a beautiful tableau of cascading waterfalls. A person was meant to sit here and absorb the view. I gratefully sat down to catch my breath.

Glenna came back to check on me. I told her to move on without me, I'd wait out the morning here in this fine place and they could do whatever was planned at the building at Kolem Jaa everybody was anxious to get to. I'd be fine.

She gave me a concerned look, but it was one we were both used to by now in our travels; the look was short-hand for this: "Yeah, you probably should take it easy and stay here [usually a bar or cafe or park bench], and I can then walk on in a comfortable double-time, and I'll tell you later what you missed, poor dear." So we made the usual wordless deal.

But Gaspar wouldn't leave me. He wouldn't sit with me on the park bench either, which meant either he was not supposed to do that as part of the hired help, or he was thinking after I catch my breath we can trudge on, and he can then pee and have a cup of coffee at our destination and have a more decent work break.

So after my pulse returned to something less than 150 I reluctantly stood up and said to Gaspar, *vámonos!* More uphill. Another rickety rope bridge. More stairs. And finally there emerged a flat terrain and before us the yellow hacienda-looking building, surrounded with flowers and shrubs, and all around there were hiking paths, cabins for summer adventurers, and colorful tents pitched by youthful backpackers.



Zip-liners getting their gear



Kolem Jaa ("The Greatness of Water")



My table with lip balm, water and Glenna's hat

Juan saw me arrive and flop heavily into a big chair, exhausted. The chair had a kind of leather sling for a seat, so what I had settled into was really a butt hammock. It occurred to me I might never be able to get out of this chair. Which was fine with me, I could use this as an excuse to stay here until the trip was over. Just call me a cab next week.

Juan asked if I was OK. I lied. He looked at me, then at Gaspar, who kind of shrugged, and back at me again, with a look that said: "Oh boy, looks like I got me another one."

I sat and reflected while others in the group busied themselves in a distant corner within this open-air hacienda. There was no way I was going to be able to retrace the trail back to the van. I would have a heart attack or stroke first. Or a heat stroke, whatever that is.

I tried to remember if it was Chief Sitting Bull or Geronimo or Crazy Horse who said, "Today is a good day to die." I know who *should* have said it. General George A. Custer. I felt like Custer.



Breathless Jungle Boy

I thought I must have already suffered some kind of brain impairment, because I could see Glenna standing in the distant corner with the others where all manner of zip-line gear was laid out on tables. Sturdy young men were outfitting everybody with stuff that looked identical to what a coal miner would take along on a big mountain climb: buckles, cinches, cables, hard hat, heavy gloves.

I couldn't believe my eyes: Glenna is going to zip-line and then "spelunker" down a cave at the end of her tree-top travels? I think to myself, *Wow, that's not like her.*

But then: Why should that *not* be like her? I wouldn't do it in a million years, but Glenna can be gutsy. She can be full of surprises.

Juan brings bottles of water. I drink one down with much gratitude.

As the zip-line folk suit up, I reflect on how I love the innate gutsy lawlessness of the Mexicans, too. You see it in their architecture: build anything just about any way you want, make it look like a twirling banana with twisted windows, make windows any size you want, paint it gaudy colors, build staircases in it that go nowhere. Anarchy!

And when it comes to zip-lining, where the first thing you do is climb high up a rickety aluminum ladder to get above the jungle and up onto a platform that starts your ride, there is none of the usual lawyer-driven nonsense: no signing meaningless Release and Hold Harmless Agreements, no having to read and agree to a long list of silly warnings like you might fall and hurt yourself, or a swarm of bats

might give you rabies, or a snake might fall out of a tree and poop on you, or you can't do this if you flunk the 5' height test. *Ay, hombre, just go, go! Ánde!*

For a while, I am left alone with Gaspar, who leans back in his butt hammock and closes his eyes. I close mine.

Moments later, I suddenly hear Juan behind me say, "How would you like to take a ride in a bucket back across the river, and then we will come and get you in the van? I saw you had trouble getting here, so this would be a better way, I think."

I thought he was joking, so I said, "That would be really nice, Juan." But then he said, "Come on, I will show you."

We walked through a garden path of beautiful flowers and the flights of several colorful butterflies to a clearing on the high river bank, where I see a rusted-out rectangular tub sat on the ground with two young Mayan men standing next to it. On either end of this tub were large hooks rising from it, and pieces of cardboard covering its floor, either to forestall further rusting, or to cover up holes already rusted through it. Above it was a rusted steel cable that was attached to something on the other side of the river. It drooped heavily over the middle of the Oxolotán River like the sad tired belly of an old man. Just below and parallel to this cable was a yellow nylon rope on its own set of pulleys.

It all looked pretty scary.

Juan: "What do you think? Do you think you can get in this and go to the other side? It would be easier for you."

Me: "Really? Are you serious? People ride in this?"

Juan: "Yes. For losers like you."

Well, no, he didn't say "For losers like you," but his facial expression and body language did. And then I had a sensation I never felt before: If I don't hesitate, if I don't do this right now and get it over with quickly, if I don't hesitate or think about it, then this crazy idea will succeed. The key thing was not to even think about it. Just go, man! *Ánde!*

And that's what I did.

In retrospect, trying to piece together my scrambled thinking at the time, I believe what I wanted most was a *fait accompli*, to get this quickly done before Glenna would know about it and object. Or for me



*Glenna, The Cable Gal*

to avoid the embarrassment of the rest of the group staring at me with disdain, or to go before anyone had the chance – *wheeze! wheeze! wheeze!* – to get off some snapshots of me tumbling headlong into the river and my ignominious death.

I had no idea if this bucket was meant just for supplies, and no human being had ever been foolish enough to try this flimsy-looking tub before as transport over a river so far below that any fall from above would be fatal. I had no idea if this rust bucket would be able to hold my considerable weight, the equal of two small Mayans. But just the mere thought of having to go back up hill and dale over the route that took us here to Kolem Jaa was enough for me to throw all caution to the wind.

“OK, Juan, let's do it!”

“You sure?” Damn, now Juan was getting cold feet on this. I thought this was his idea.

He summoned a third small wiry Mayan guy who appeared out of nowhere.

“What should I pay for this, Juan?”

“Don't worry, Larry, I already took care of it.” Tommy's Full Service Touring Company. “But you might want to tip this guy who will ride over with you.”

So I would not be alone when I die.

Two guys lifted the tub in place onto upside-down-question-mark hooks attached to the pulleys on the steel cable. I got in, causing the tub to wobble violently to and fro like a swing. I parked my ass on the cardboard sheets that looked like they had been hastily torn from boxes. Rust immediately covered my black pants.

Two-thirds of me rose above the sides of the tub. I felt like I had been moved by a time machine back into a mocking caricature of the Red Ryder wagon of my childhood.

Chuy, which in Spanish is a nickname for Jesús, deftly climbed aboard like a very limber spider and took up the small space in front of me. In a squat, he steadied us by holding onto the steel cable above us. I had to bend my neck in a permanent duck in order to avoid hitting my head against the cable. The two other Mayan guys positioned themselves, one ready to push the tub, the other ready to pull the nylon rope.

And we were off!

I felt stupidly abstracted from the swift ride, in an out-of-body experience watching me do this thing. There was this sudden open-space feeling of freedom, gravity pulling us down and over the river. The propulsion into the suddenly completely open air all around was thrilling, like flying.

I looked down. One of the thrills I had as a kid in Minneapolis in the 1950s was going to the top of the 32-story Foshay Tower to look down at the tiny cars from atop the building's Observation Deck and fight a weird nerve revulsion in the pit of my stomach. A vertigo, a fear of falling. The slow-moving river was a Foshay Tower's distance below. The out-of-body me calmly took note of the fact, then

looked at how well the tub was still holding on to the overhead pulleys. So far, so good.

We were now half-way across. Chuy turns to me and says, "The first time I do this, I prayed!" Gee, thanks, Chuy.

Two-thirds the way across the river, and we stop. A dangling gondola, the opposite bank from here now an uphill climb. Chuy turns and says, "Now is the hard part. The guys on other side now pull us up. I hope they can do it!"

You know, Chuy, I hope so, too. Because if they can't pull us up the hill here to the other shore, then they won't be able to pull us back to where we left, either. I think I now pray.

We slowly make it to a clearing where I see a dirt road ends, and I see a rusted steel beam firmly rooted in a blob of cement, the terminus of the steel cable and nylon rope for this side of the river. Juan told me to just sit there and wait for the van to come; I am under no circumstances to wander away from there.

Hooo, boy, we made it. The out-of-body me is replaced by the real me, and a delayed-action kind of adrenalin explodes. *Holy shit! Why did I do that?!*

Chuy jumps out, again the nimble spider, and turns to lend me a hand. But now I can't get out. The tub is about two inches wider than me, and I can neither stand up (overhead cable prevents that) or swivel around (lard ass). Oh holy shit again. I am here and not here. They will probably have to send me back over the river, and then take three or four guys to upend the bucket so I can plop out. What an ignominious defeat! Yes, Juan, I am truly a fucking loser.

Faced with the prospect of humiliating failure in not being able to execute this final maneuver, I marshal strength in me I thought I didn't have. I somehow manage to use all arms and legs at once to propel me upward and sideways, all at the same time. A human vertical Harrier Jump Jet. I land with a hard thud on the back of my thighs on the side of the tub facing Chuy, and he manages to grab both my hands and pull just as I begin to slide back. I again use muscles and moves I didn't think I had to start the tub swinging, and at the right moment I leap off, knocking Chuy over as I do so. He's a good sport about it. I land in a tumble of weeds and dirt, and barely keep myself from rolling down the steep bank to the river below. I stand up and turn tables on Chuy: I extend my hand to lift *him* up.



Chuy and the Rusty Bucket



The ecstasy of having survived this crazy adventure in one piece, and now standing on solid ground and truly free of the rusty tub, is beyond description. Like a governor's last-minute reprieve from the electric chair.

And here is the really perverse part of this: I knew I now had a great story to tell. This would be my Mayan Adventure. I took my iPod out and took a picture of the bucket with its cardboard bottom, and of Chuy standing next to it. I took a picture of the steel post at the terminus, firmly in place above its mound of poured cement. I will return to civilization with my story, and the pictures to prove it!

I tipped Chuy with some pesos in my pocket, not really sure if I was giving him enough of the colorful money or too little. Polite as most Mexicans are, he didn't look at the bills but put them in his pocket, thanking me, and he spider-jumped back into the tub and yelled across the river to his pals to pull him back.

I turned to sit down on the cement slab, catching my breath, and lamenting I forgot to bring any water with me. Suddenly I hear Chuy scream, "*Ayúdame, ayúdame, por favor, ayúdame!*" He was screaming for me to help him. I could see he had gotten a finger stuck between the steel cable and one of its overhead pulleys. I ran towards him, downhill, while at the same time grabbing on to the nylon rope to stop the bucket's descent back over the river.

I don't know if that helped or if Chuy freed his finger on his own, but he was now like a cringing little boy, he held up his bleeding index finger as if to get me to fix it somehow. I got closer and could see that while there was blood over the skin, he had not crushed or broken the finger. He decided to continue on over to the other side where there would be first aid. I bid him farewell. He slunk lower into the tub, a reduced ball of pain, as he was slowly tugged to the other shore where he disappeared into the jungle.

There would have been no sense for me to accompany him back. But I did feel a pang of guilty conscience for his having to come along on my trip, and somehow I wanted to at least give him more money. He had said he was a college student working part time at this camp/fun place to pay for his studies, that to get to work he had to walk every day 4 miles each way. I now wanted to pay his tuition. I wanted him to come to America and bring his whole family.

I sat now alone on the cement slab. I had a commanding view of the river. At one point I could see little specks of people on the shore: our group gathering for the boat ride back up the river and to our little white tourist van. I figured in about 40 minutes they would find their way back to me, and all would be well.

I could make out Glenna among the specky people, with her purple blouse, tan pants and 1930-ish round straw tourist's hat. *Hi, Glenna.*

Meanwhile, as if from some huge stereo system spread out over the other side of the river, groups of howler monkeys announced their presence. I remember troops of monkeys like these from trips to Costa Rica, where they made their *ow, ow, ow, ow!* sounds. But these howlers over there were making deep, husky, scary lion sounds – *rowl! ROAR! ROWL! AHRL! Rowl!* Above and below the river, other troops responded in kind.

It was hot and the sun dropped in the sky to shine right into my face. I had forgotten sunscreen, too, but had my camouflage hat on. Big birds with white flecks on broad wings swooped in bunches to grab prey out of the river, then flew on.

I didn't have a watch on, either, because I don't own one. But it was getting on an hour now. My musings about life and death and the river – my Dad's love for a melancholy book called *Time and The River*, something I keep telling myself I will read someday but know I never will – all that comes to a sudden halt. *Hey, where the hell are they? Where's the van?*

I decide to disobey orders and walk a bit up the dirt road. Well, I say to myself, I could walk up this road and meet them on what hopefully will be the main highway. But no, I better do as I was told. Stay put. Maybe, if this gets too late, something or somebody will come back my way again on the Rusty Tub.

I try to stretch out on what looks like a barren piece of dirt, but I am soon overrun by little ants and other bugs. The howlers across the river sound louder and ominous. There are trees on my side of the river hosting saggy gauzy bags full of something. I wonder, should dusk come, whether these would burst open, releasing armies of spiders or bats or baby monkeys or who knows what.

It is very quiet on my side of the river. Dang, what do I do if they can't find me and I spend the night here? If I spend the night here, will something devour me?

Then I hear a faint honk from the horn of a vehicle off in the distance to my right. Could that be them? Should I go see? I wait some more. Another honk. I get up and walk swiftly up the dirt road.

And there it is, the white van, and Juan next to it! He failed to mention – or didn't know – that the road here had a locked gate across it, preventing their driving further towards me. Why would anybody bother to put up a gate here, and then bother to lock it? Ah, Mexico. A thing here becomes in place once it is out of place with all the other things out of place. Absurdity lies deep within its soul.

Yes, the van did get lost, Glenna tells me, as I retake my implied-reserved seat next to her. "We had to drive back and forth past this road a couple of times because we kept getting wrong directions on how to get here." The other passengers in the van are mute. They are either recovering from their own cardiac arrests from the trek back to the van, or they are pissed that they had to endure the wild-goose chase to find me. I suspected the latter, because the van seemed frosty from more than just the A/C turned on too high.

On the 75-mile trip back to the Quality Days Inn hotel in Villahermosa to pick up the stray Bob and Judith, people either slept or kept quiet. I began formulating in my mind the story I would tell people about my tub adventure. And how stupid I was, risking my life that much. How stupid I was to be on this trip, for chrissake. Not thinking at all of how incredibly lucky I was.

Somehow, before or after making the brief stop to pick up the last two members of the tour group, we had lunch. Lunch almost invariably involved some form of chicken: fried, boiled or rubber. Breakfasts were always OK because there would usually be a buffet with some kind of eggs, lots of fruit, cereal, coffee and juice. Dinners were bland but, again, OK. You don't come to Central America for the cuisine.

With Bob and Judith now in tow, the van drove about a mile to La Venta Park and Museum, where on display along a well-trodden path, amidst a jungle-like setting, were various artifacts – mostly big stone heads – of a pre-Mayan culture, the Olmecs. It seemed a bit off-topic for the tour, but there it was in Villahermosa, a city most Internet travel sites call dull, boring, dirty, unfun, etc.

I liked Villahermosa because of its happily anarchic architecture, lack of any apparent building codes, and a sense of a certain happy insanity and criminality lying just beneath the surface. The area in and around Villahermosa had prospered from the discovery of lots of oil among the marshes where the ancient Olmecs used to live. And oil definitely trumped Olmec here. An ancient Olmec pyramid – and the only one, from what I could tell from the exhibits at La Venta – had been bulldozed by the Mexican government-owned oil company, Pemex, in order to build a refinery there.

We arrived at the park at 4:00 PM, way off schedule no doubt because of me and my tub, and we had an hour to double-time it through this park.

I sensed Juan cut out a lot of what he would normally see as we dutifully stopped at each stone monument, remnant of ancient tomb or temple, or just big giant Buddha-like heads. Soon some of the park personnel started following us, one of them pointing at his watch when Juan noticed him. Five o'clock would be park closing time.

Everyone in our group was taking pictures, as if that would help them remember what these things were when they got home. John was taking pictures of everything: the relics, the paths, the occasional coatamundi that darted in little groups around the edges of the paths – *wheeze! wheeze! wheeze!* – went his Nikon – taking pictures of his shoes, pictures of people on the street outside looking through iron bars at us on the inside, pictures of us taking pictures.

I was tired. I knew there were 28 relics, 28 stations of the cross where Juan would have to say something. We were on 26 going on 27 when the park attendants were close to giving us the bum's rush. After a quick run through Relic 28 most of the employees rushed ahead of us for the main exit and Miller Time.



*Teddy Roosevelt's Olmec Ancestor*



*Juan and an Olmec Giant Head*

In Mexico, distances are always “just 100 meters” or “just 200 meters,” regardless of the actual distance, and “just 10 more minutes,” regardless of how much more time something might take. But, once again, I observe their exact precision in knowing the exact moment for quitting time.

Mercifully, the park closed and with that we were done for touring that day. I longed for a bed to stretch out in. We now had another 60 slow miles to our next hotel. It would be near tomorrow's big site visit, perhaps in some ways the most spectacular of the Mayan ruins we would see: Palenque.

I remember from YouTube videos that our next hotel had a pool – though I was too tired for that – and individual cabañas, not rooms but individual blue-painted “cabins” that would house us.

In the van, Juan turned around in his front passenger seat to address us: “Tonight, right after dinner, we have a special addition, a lecture from an archeologist who works at Palenque who will tell us about the history of the site and what is going on there now.” Oh, no. A lecture. I would surely find some excuse to dodge that. I hoped I hadn't reflexively groaned out loud.

When we arrived at Villas Kin Ha, a swarm of hotel employees dressed up in army-like uniforms and field hats grabbed our luggage and knew where to take it all. We got our keys and went to our rooms. I turned on the air conditioning and flopped on the bed. *Aaaaahhhhh*. I drank from the free bottles of water. Home at last.

I got out of my rust-colored pants and switched to a pair of shorts. Glenna informed me I had bruises on the back of my thighs. Ah, the wounds from combat. More detail to add to my Rusty Tub story.

Juan had told us to go to the tallest building in the complex for dinner. It has to be the world's tallest palapa. The thatched roof must be some 10 stories high, a huge useless dome, and I wondered why anybody thought to build something this silly-looking. A giant shredded-wheat thimble.

Underneath this roof was a vast dining area, a circular expanse of colorful tables with wide windows all along its circumference. This chow dome could accommodate what must be several busses of tourists that come to Palenque every day in the dry season. But aside from a couple of German tour groups, we were the only ones there. I ordered beer and tequila and – what the hell – a hamburger and fries. On the second beer I was beginning to feel normal again.

I felt good enough to take in the lecture after all. I didn't want to do anything more to stand out from the group as the resident cripple. I was also determined to prove to Glenna I could be a good sport. And in truth, the lecturer was pretty good. A woman around my age, i. e. old, dressed in Mayan blouse and skirt, gave us a slide show of the guy who dug up much of the place in the 1950s and found the king in his tomb deep in the biggest pyramid, his sarcophagus sealed off by a 4-ton slab of rock some 1,200 years ago that was removed by resourceful modern-day Maya using car jacks.

This king was buried with all sorts of jade jewelery, a jade mask, urns, rare bird feathers, and so on. How like the Egyptians, I thought. How like the Aztecs. Hmm, how like the North Koreans. Give people enough power, and they think they will live forever, keep it all to themselves and bleed their subjects dry by forcing them to build giant monuments to them. Assholes all.

The lecture was held one level up from the lobby in a long, cavernous meeting room. The only other

people downstairs at this time of night were hotel employees.



*Lecture on the excavation of the Palenque site*

About fifteen minutes after the lecture was over and Glenna and I had sat in the restaurant for a while, Juan appeared, holding up Glenna's purse. "Anybody here missing a purse?" he asked. "Somebody left this upstairs."

Glenna recognized it and thanked him, then noticed all the cash she had in it, some \$100, was missing. It could have been worse. There were still her passport and credit cards in there.

So, another thing that moves fast in the Latino world: theft. Glenna didn't bother to make a fuss about it. If the authorities got involved, it

would be only for show, and maybe they'd just add to the problem on purpose in order to extract a bribe to make them go away. Glenna lived in Mexico City for 10 years and knew how corrupt Mexican cops can be. She knew better to just take her lumps and move on.

I hobbled back to our cabin, Glenna politely slowing her pace to stay with me. We passed by the pool again, this time lit up from interior floodlights. I could see what looked like colonies of green slimy algae or mold that had settled in the pool; so that the pool, too, gave off a whiff of jungle rot that seemed to be everywhere.

Well, no way I was going for a swim now, anyway.

Sitting at poolside in tables joined together with ashtrays crammed full of cigarette butts, about a dozen chain-smoking, drunken Germans were laughing and yelling at each other, nobody listening and everybody jolly. They reminded me of student days long ago spent in Berlin, when I once did what they're doing now. That past now more distant to me than the Mayans, who, for all I knew, never really existed. I certainly never knew any.

This was just Day Two, our first full day on the tour. Our one day, I thought glumly, when we would *relax*.

We would get up at 5:00 AM tomorrow to catch breakfast and have an early start at Palenque. The idea was to see the ruins in the morning before the heat and humidity got to be too much in the afternoons.

I remember my brother Paul once told me about the horrors of boot camp, his first weeks in the U.S. Air Force. He said the one thing that got him perhaps more than anything else was how incredibly long the days were, they seemed to drag out forever. Now I knew what he meant.

## Day 3

*Day 3 – Palenque - After breakfast, there will be a walking site lecture of Palenque Archaeological Park, one of the best preserved of all the Mayan ruins... We leave the site along a delightful trail that follows a series of waterfalls, including the Queen's Baths that flow past the homes of the people of ancient Palenque. The tour will then continue to Misol Ha waterfalls for time to swim and refresh. Lunch will be served at the falls, and then it's on to the Hotel Cabanas Valle Escondido at Bonampak.*

We arrive at Palenque. I stay briefly with the group after we exit the van and are immediately surrounded by Lacondons, a tiny tribe of Mayans numbering 450, who look like little Jesuses in white robes and long, flowing black hair, selling bows and arrows to the tourists. I wonder if they're made in China.

At the entrance to the park, Juan shows me a winding route to the top of the hill where Palenque begins, rather than the shorter set of steep stairs that the group takes, so I part from the group. Glenna is eager to see what many experts consider the finest of the Mayan ruins. I am glad to set her free to fly like a bird with the others.

I stroll happily, knowing the tempo for the day will be mine, and come to the ridge of a hill and am struck with awe at what I see. I have seen pictures and videos of Palenque, but to be right there on a beautiful sunny day and see these huge edifices laid out before me, bigger than I would ever have imagined, was akin to the awe I once felt as a high school sophomore seeing the United States Capitol for the first time. Big, powerful, proud, awe-inspiring.

You had to hand it to the Mayans. This was truly something, and it must have been overwhelming to those who came from other Mayan cities to visit this place. It was meant to be impressive.

I am grateful to see placed all over the broad fields that make up this site a number of park benches, most of them placed under big trees with lots of shade. I move from one to another as I stay in this main plaza area, where I can see the pyramid where the head honcho king was buried, and to my left, what they call The Palace with a commanding unusual structure, certainly unusual for the Mayans: a three-story observation tower, used no doubt for recording astronomical observations.

A French guide leading a group standing next to me explains that The Palace used to be open only to the priests and nobility. This elite kept the knowledge they gained to themselves in order to manipulate the masses; at certain times of the year, he said, the nobles would predict the sun would line up with the temple at such and such a date, and sure enough it did, with a pinhole of light landing right on the king, "illuminating" him. Only those with ties to the gods would know this, so it went, and so once again, knowledge proved to be power, and keeping people ignorant was the other side of that coin to holding on to that power.

Maybe what caused all of Mayan civilization to implode was the day when somebody figured out the official bullshit and blew the whistle on the priests and nobles. Nice if that could happen today. Just sayin'.

I wandered around, fascinated with the tourists as much as the piles of rocks. The tourists came and went in waves, with the inevitable silly hats, shorts and cameras. I had a silly hat, shorts and camera.

Then for a few minutes, strangely, I was suddenly all alone among this expanse of ruins before me and the vast main plaza of grass and trees. I could commune with the ancient spirits all by myself.

Which didn't last long, because I had to take a leak. I didn't notice anywhere provision for toilets for the visiting masses. As luck would have it, there was a kind of U-shaped enclosure at the base of The Palace; a person could go in there and hide. Or pee.

I had seen from time to time uniformed people with radios on their belts who must have been the guardians of this historical site, but none were within sight at the moment. I sauntered over to the U-shaped enclosure, taking pictures, looking like a rube (not hard to do), then headed straight for the far corner, unzipped my shorts and let loose with a pleasurable stream. As it flowed down the wall, Parisian pissoir style, I noticed there was still some red color to some of the stones, which was what the Mayans did, they had painted these walls red, but the sun and the rain had taken almost all of that away. So here the old Mayans and I were joined briefly in time in a nice pristine, private moment.

I took full advantage of my temporary seclusion. Up on a ledge next to me was an isolated piece of rock. It was about the size of a pack of cigarettes and smooth to the touch. I put it in my pocket, certain I was committing some kind of crime. Later, after we got home from our trip, I gave it to Glenna. She seemed glad to have it, even after I told her how I got it.



*My private little corner pissoir in Palenque*

There were all kinds of ruins of buildings everywhere, including an ancient “ball court,” where (there may be some disagreement about this among experts) the best player or the winning team would be sacrificed to the gods as a reward. If only there were such a rule for the NFL. Anyway, I had heard about this before, when I visited an ancient ruin called Chichen Itza back in the 1980s, and I figured this had to be wrong, who would want to win a game just so they can be sacrificed and “rewarded” by being reunited with the gods?

That was, of course, before 9/11 and the inexhaustible supply of suicide bombers since then. So maybe all the Mayans disappeared by doing themselves in one way or another, hoping to pacify the gods.

I wondered whether especially this year there was an uptick in Mayan ruins tourism, what with all the hype about the supposed Mayan “long calendar” prediction about the world coming to an end on December 21, 2012. I guess that would be one way to avoid Christmas this year, so that wouldn't be all that bad.

But be that as it may, I could not get myself into that end-of-the-world Mayan buzz of it all. I tried to sit

there and soak in the atmosphere and imagine life as it must have been when all of this was a bustling hub of some kind, with the smells and sounds of daily life. But it wouldn't come. This was all too alien and far too old and dilapidated now. A time rot lay over it all. I have lived long enough to know you cannot even recapture your own past if you go back and visit places that are still intact after decades. You and they have so distanced yourselves over time that to attempt reviving that sense of Back Then is futile, delusional. So how could I do that with things millennia old and not part of my memories or culture?

The day before, Juan took a vote from the group. Should we skip the famous Misol Ha waterfalls and visit a lesser one nearby, thereby gaining more time to spend at the museum at Palenque, where many of the hieroglyphs and a reconstructed tomb of the king could be seen? The vote in favor was unanimous. So now while the others walked the long way back to the museum, by pre-arrangement I was picked up by the van and dropped off at an outdoor restaurant next to the museum. Gaspar drove off to be alone by himself someplace else. I happily sat and waited at a vinyl-covered table and fooled around with games on my iPod.

The restaurant was empty except for the one girl there to take orders and a young American backpacker hitting on her. When I discovered the place had no beer and wanted, really, nothing else but to sit, she appeared glad not to have to do anything, and she went to sit and flirt with the backpacker. I played Solitaire and Scrabble until the rest of the group showed up. An hour or two had passed since Gaspar had dropped me off. I was glad to be sitting, doing nothing. I failed to notice that there were no people going into or out of the museum next door, which would explain why the restaurant had no customers, too.

Glenna was at the forefront of the first in our group to arrive. She headed straight to me, laughed and said, "Guess what, the museum is closed. It is always closed on Mondays." Hmmmm. The tour had set this up for Monday, and Juan had shorted the Misol Ha waterfalls so the museum would get extra time. Juan seemed surprised and said something about how this must be a special holiday, but Glenna pointed out to him that a sign she had just passed on the way down the trail said the museum was open Tuesdays through Sundays.

Juan frowned and lost face again. Mark from upstate New York seemed quite pissed off. "You mean we don't get to see the Red Queen? That was one of the things we were really looking forward to!" The Red Queen consisted of the bones of a queen who I think was the mother of the Big Guy who got the Number One burial chamber in Palenque, and the Mayan custom was, after a major person's body had rotted away, to paint their bones red, using mercury as the main part of the paint. I am sure a number of scholars have puzzled long over why the Mayans thought certain bones needed a red paint job. To my way of thinking, I think in many ways the Mayans were pretty fucked up.

"No museum?" I said. "Oh, gosh darn." Actually, I was a happy guy. I hate museums.

We drove off in the van about two miles until we got to a local restaurant, again with a thatched-roof palapa style, but a roof with a normal height. Juan offered to pay for everybody's drinks, normally not part of the package tour deal, and we ate well. Not knowing chicken would be on the menu for most of the rest of the tour, I ordered *milanesa*, chicken that is pounded flat, then breaded and fried in oil, much like *wienerschnitzel*. It was delicious.

We drove on to the waterfalls that would substitute for Misol Ha, exactly what they were called I don't remember. Again, still traumatized from the day before, I was glad the trek to the waterfalls had a stopping point for me: after gamely walking with the group for a stretch, we came to long, long stairs down to the river bank, way down there where one could see, I assume, the cascading falls that roared to my left on the path taken thus far. I bid the group farewell.

I saw Glenna after she made it to the river bank below, her camera pointed right to where I was. I waved and yelled, but she obviously could neither see nor hear me because of the roar of the falls. Later, in the van, going through her digital photos, I zoomed in on the place where I had been standing, next to the top of the falls. "There, that's me." She stared at this pixelated possibility of me and generously said at the blur, "Oh, I had no idea."

I also saw down there two of the women in the group who felt obliged to honor the brochure and jump into the cold river in their bathing suits. They laughed and seemed happy to be in the water.

I went back to where the van had parked, beside a lazy cantina with open-air walls, its few wares for sale on display: bags of chips and candy bars on a counter, and various bottled beverages in a cooler. I asked for a beer, and a boy about 10 years old fetched me an ice-cold can of Tecate beer. I sat down at a table and started to fool around again with the games on my iPod.

There were a lot of empty tables on the big slab of a cement floor, with cement columns holding up the thatched roof. There were two nearby buildings that looked like places to change into swim suits. This whole complex was what Mexicans call a *balneario*, roughly translated as "seaside resort," though, of course, this was riverside. I'd call it more like a swimming hole with a refreshment stand.

Two groups of young Mexicans at vinyl-clothed tables nearby spoke in that quiet, sweet way that I find almost all Mexicans tend to speak in. I love these soft murmurs. I have never heard Mexicans yell at their kids. In Mexico, a place usually gets noisy only when a bunch of loud Americans or Europeans enter it.

I savored the cold beer and being once again alone, away from the group. They could take all the time they wanted. I would daydream among the murmurers.

Another hour or so passed, I didn't note its passage. "100 meters"; "ten more minutes." I didn't care, I was in Mexico where time stops.

The group returned and assembled where I was sitting. Back to the van. It took us over long, lonely, potholed roads through Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico and home to a dwindling rain forest being chopped away by a rapacious agriculture. Poor people definitely don't give a shit about saving the planet; it's all they can do to save themselves.

In 1994, Chiapas was the site of the Zapatista uprising, an indigenous armed rebellion against the national government. I have no idea what it was about. It was resolved eventually with the natives obtaining a few concessions from the government, essentially five areas of semi-autonomous government.

Glenna and I caught sight of a handwritten, primitive sign warning all who could read it that we were

now in Zapatista country, one of “their” zones. Every now and then we passed slowly through military checkpoints. The border with Guatemala was only a few miles away, and the Mexicans were just as severe about keeping their southern border free of illegal immigrants as we gringos were at our southern border. One rather obvious irony there, I thought.

We never actually stopped at any of these checkpoints. The chief *federal* would look into the windows of our van, see all these pale-faced, odd-looking people, and wave us through.

As the sun began to set, we arrived at Hotel Cabañas Valle Escondido (“Hotel Cabins of the Hidden Valley”), which really was neither hotel nor cabins, but rather an interesting mix of working farm and various outbuildings nicely furbished into modern and spacious living quarters: big beds, big fans, big bathrooms, big tiled floors.

The buildings were spread out around the farm. We were literally in the middle of nowhere, and perhaps the only place a tourist could overnight and be close to our next set of ruins, Bonampak. For Glenna, it was a plus that Bonampak was included in this tour, since it is too out of the way for most of the other ones.

We unpacked in the “cabin” closest to the van and the outdoor area where we would eat dinner, Juan now concerned that I do the least amount of walking around as possible.

Again, young muscled men appeared from nowhere to grab our bags and deliver them to our rooms. I plopped on the big kingsize bed and was glad once again to be off the tour for a moment, so to speak. I discovered that our being near the business office of this operation got me a WiFi signal, so I did what I now always do whenever on a trip: I take a photo of my right foot flung over my left knee as I am lying down, and I email the photo to my daughter, Sarah, who appreciates my goofy sense of humor.



*Hotel Cabins of the Hidden Valley*

These photos to her are always entitled, “Wo ist mein Fuss?” which in German means: “Where is my foot?” That’s because that is all the German Sarah knew as a kid, and how she learned that is beyond me. But these foot photos from everywhere I go have become a tradition for us.

Then the power went out. Fortunately, we had all been advised by Tommy to bring small flashlights along. Now I could see why. The manager of this rancho and his wife stopped by with candles, and asked us whether we wanted fish or chicken for dinner. I went for the fish. We would have dinner outdoors, and no problem with the food, they said, they cooked with gas or grilled with an open fire.

Mark and I ordered a bottle of tequila from the manager. Mark was very definite about wanting tequila, and plenty of it. Was I in? I was in.

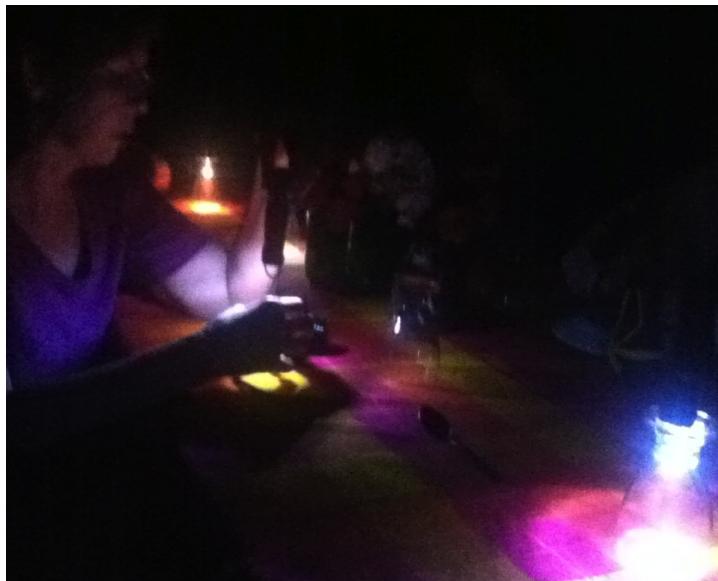
When we all found our way with the help of flashlights to the picnic table where dinner was to be

consumed, the group was in a festive mood. Only later would we discover how much little chiggers or other tiny insects had devoured our exposed legs. Glenna doesn't drink, and the other women partook of the tequila only sparingly or refused with barely disguised looks of disapproval. Mark and I helped ourselves to generous portions. I was really in Mexico now and thus did not give a shit what anybody else thought about anything.



*"Wo ist mein Fuss?"*

Cherik from Wisconsin, a genius scientist, devised a cool strategy for maximizing the light from our flashlights while freeing up our hands at the same time: turning our drinking glasses upside down, then placing the flashlights atop the glasses to beam down into them.



*Dinner by flashlight*

That had the effect of diffusing and spreading the light both downwards and sideways, like those little candles they put on tables in Italian restaurants. Cherik was once the chief scientist at GE. He knew a lot of things.

My fish came, and one bite in the darkness was all I needed to know it was some godawful slimy thing with a gelatinous texture. I would limit myself to the vegetables, bread and tequila.

I should have ordered the chicken.

As Day Three came to a close, I thought again of Paul's boot camp days.

This week was going to last a month.

## Day 4

*Day 4 - Bonampak and Yaxchilán - First the tour travels to Bonampak, home of famous Mayan murals. To reach Bonampak, the tour travels through the Lacandonian Rainforest Reserve, some of the last of the uncut jungle in this area. Here, within a palace, the "Templo de los Frescos", are three rooms containing the remarkable murals telling of the accession of a new king of Bonampak... We will then move deeper in to the remote area of the Petén and travel by boat down the Usumacinta River to the mysterious site of Yaxchilán. This river contains the largest volume of water flowing in Central America. This incredible boat ride through the rainforest with its huge trees and abundant wildlife makes you feel like you're in an Indiana Jones movie!*

Roosters outside our “hotel cabin” wake me at 5:00 AM. At 5:15 AM the alarm on my iPod goes off. The shower is hot and good. We pack up our stuff, and the invisible boys are back to cart it all into the van.

Somehow, as we later discover, Glenna fails to pack her medications. Nothing life-threatening to worry about, however, *gracias a Dios!*

It's off to breakfast at a nearby restaurant that opens early just for us. We are all seated at the same table. *Wheeze! wheeze! wheeze!* John is walking in circles, taking pictures of the breakfast, the wooden picnic-style table with tree stumps for chairs, the people cooking, birds he thinks are in the trees.

As we leave, Juan reminds me that Mark and I still have to pay for the bottle of tequila we ordered last night. The owner of the hotel cabins also owns this restaurant. A young waiter says we owe 700 pesos for the bottle, 300 more than what we bargained for.

I balk. “*Si, señor,*” he says, “but this one is a different brand from the one you ordered, and bigger.” Off to the side I could see his boss watching the conversation. I got a little testy. “Well, sorry,” I said, “but we ordered a bottle that we were told would cost 400 pesos, and nobody said anything about a different brand costing more. So this is not my problem.”

The young waiter did another thing I have often encountered in Mexico when confronted with an unwanted response: he ignores what I said. “But this is a bigger bottle, *señor*, and a better brand.” I stood my ground: “Nobody told us about this last night. The price was 400 pesos. This is not our problem.” At that point, sensing an unpleasant (Mexican) standoff, the bigger, older man behind him intervened and, clearly the boss here, settled the issue. “OK, it is OK,” and waved both his hands as if wiping an imaginary slate clean. “This no problem.” And so it no longer was. I paid the 400 pesos and left.

To get to the Bonampak ruins, the van had to stop at its outskirts and change to a vehicle driven by the Lancondon Indians who would then take the group the five or six miles into the park itself. This was their territory and they had the monopoly on getting tourists into the site.

These particular Lancondons were not dressed in Jesus garb and hair; they didn't need to. Here the standard dress was blue jeans, gringo T-shirts and flip-flops. For a tribe of 450 surviving members, they sure knew how to survive by squeezing a buck out of things.

Our van stopped at a run-down set of buildings in a parking area for old busses once painted white, now in various shades of exposed metal, rust and white, except for one dead hulk of bus that looked like it had survived the A-bomb at Hiroshima, with only the cloudy windshield as its lone surviving window. One of its doors was also missing.

That was, of course, the bus we would take. The first step to go up and into it was rotting, with a jagged hole in the center. Teresa sees it and says "Watch your step, that one's rotten." A booby trap.

The cushion on the driver's seat had worn away long ago, exposing layers of ragged, dirty foam rubber. A jump seat at the front of the bus, turned to face the passenger area, was equally rotten and frayed. A big, tall gear shift extended from a massive gear box. The Chevrolet logo on the steering wheel could still be just barely made out.

I wondered what backup plan the Lacondons had if this thing crapped out halfway to the Bonampak National Reserve, or if it could even make it out of the parking lot.

First, however, we were to take a potty break. Alas, here as in many places, there were no lids on the crappers, and no toilet paper. The toilets themselves were in various shades of stain and stages of disrepair. Outside the men's and women's toilets were two sinks and a plastic tub filled with caked-together powdered soap. Some in the group, fatigue setting in, got a little grouchy about all this. John took pictures for posterity.

I avoided the first rotten step up into the Hiroshima bus, and Glenna and I sat right up front on hard metal seats. When we got going, I held onto the metal safety bar in front of us to keep from falling out of my seat, as the whole stretch from the Lacondonon bus barn to the Bonampak ruins was over about 10 miles of poorly maintained dirt road with protruding rocks, ruts and potholes. It took skill to navigate this road, often requiring the driver to stay on the wrong side of the road for stretches at a time to avoid getting stuck or driving/falling off the road itself.

We were now deep into the famous Lancondon Rain Forest. I had expected to see something like the jungle in the Tarzan movies, with tall, lush trees with vines, palms and fronds, brilliant flowers and venus fly traps under a heavy canopy of vegetation, and so on. Instead, there was no canopy over the red dirt road, and only short scrubby trees clumped in a sea of other short scrubby things, though some of them with vines, but basically on both sides of the road there was just this mass of green wall of impenetrable vegetation. And arising out of it, at first in a subtle, low-tone kind of way, was the smell of organic things rotting. A distinct sweet-foul rot smell. It would be present for the next days to come, and in Guatemala even stronger.

It would stay in my nostrils and on my clothes. It was the smell of an abundance of living and dying things, all closely piled in together. I saw nothing romantic about the Rain Forest.

Juan and the Lacondon driver tried speaking Mayan to each other, and from what I could tell, each knew a couple of the different Mayan dialects and were trying to see if any of them worked, but apparently they didn't, because they were soon back to speaking Spanish.

The Mayans, like people from past glorious civilizations, hope to keep their language alive, like the Irish and the Basques. But Spanish is their *lingua franca*, and I can't imagine there are any Mayan

words for “cell phone” or “reality TV,” anyway. But their clinging to cultural identity is surely encouraged by the growing Mayan ruin tourist industry – especially in 2012, with the hype about the world coming to an end. Lots of talk about that on this trip, and lots of debunking from the guides.



*Hiroshima Bus as it might have looked when new*



*...and more like the way we saw it*



*Driver's side*



*Jump seat*



*Steamy rain forest*

The bus pulled into a parking area next to some empty buildings, what looked like simple quarters for people working at the Bonampak park. There would be a walk, Juan announced, “about a 100 meters,” to the ruins themselves. I figured that meant more than a mile. *Groan*. I told Glenna and the others to trudge on ahead, I would catch up. My right knee was screaming.

I took my time. As with Palenque, there was a clearing, and then suddenly there they were, the big tall broken structures, somehow intimidating in their much-bigger-than-the-pictures-would-let-on size. The main structure had the tiered pyramid, but adorned with little buildings perched at different levels. In a couple of these were faded murals of scenes of a Mayan king and his nobles taking prisoners, beheading others, making human sacrifices, and other violent things, much against the hippie 1960s version of the peaceful, organic, earth-loving Mayans imagined and glorified by lefties back in my college protest days. We of the 60s generation got just about everything wrong. Sorry about that!

Glenna had seen reproductions of these murals in Mexico City years ago that were more distinct and colorful than the originals here. She told me the murals here were faded and hard to see. I myself would not know, because the original deal was I wasn't going to climb up and down these big stone piles. I wondered why none of our group had had a slip and fall yet, these big blocks of stone were often slippery, uneven and wobbly, in some cases, crumbly.

What I noticed here in Bonampak and again in Palenque, and would again in sites coming up: these “rooms” that were built at the top of the pyramids, or atop a tier of steps, had great acoustics. I could hear clearly what Juan was saying about the history and significance of whatever room they were all in. I wondered if maybe this was part of an ancient Mayan loud speaker system; a head poobah could shout a speech and everyone gathered in the main plaza below would be able to hear him. Maybe that thought is worthy of study by Mayan scholars. Maybe I am onto something there.

I walked around for a while, dutifully reading plaques in English, Spanish and Mayan about the stellae in the plaza, tall slabs of stone used to sculpt figures of gods or kings, and with hieroglyphs containing animal and mythical figures. These told of important dates, usually the birth or death of a king, in numbers according to the Mayan math, not based on a decimal system but on a root-20 number system. A dot was one, four dots was four, a horizontal line was five, so two dots and a horizontal line meant 7. There's more to it than that, but I don't want to bore you.

There is a great documentary on Netflix about how the Mayan code was broken, about how now in recent years it has become possible to read these hieroglyphs and understand what they mean. And wouldn't you know it, this was the original Facebook: all about when King So-and-So was born, then who his ancestors were and when they died, and who followed them, and what great things they did, blah, blah, blah. It would have been great if just one of these sets of chiseled glyphs had been jokes. “Two guys walk into a tomb and order a beer...”

There were a couple of guards here, as at other ruins sites, but they weren't doing anything and didn't care what anybody else was doing here, either. So it wasn't too hard for me to find some trees behind which to take a leak. I decided that my mission on this trip, in honor of my dogs back home, would be for me to personally mark each of the Mayan sites we visited. To have a piece of me and my DNA forever linked with the great Mayan kings of the past.

Towards the entrance to the park, we had all passed a pretty small-looking pyramid. There was speculation in the plaque about what or for whom this old structure was. Three men were working hard, steadily clearing out weeds, cleaning the stones and – a little odd in this place – mowing the grassy parts about four steps up from the base of the pyramid. One of the workers was an albino. I couldn't help staring at him, wondering if he had pink eyes. He must have had pink eyes, no?

I have my own oddball theory about the Mayans. They and the Egyptians had been aliens from outer space, pre-programmed to do the same sorts of architectural and theological nonsense, eons and thousands of miles apart. All this exploitation, violence and glorifying of kings is hard-wired into our DNA. We delude ourselves into thinking we have choices in these matters, or that we evolve. We all are creatures of some far-away, long-ago failed civilization that once thrived on another universe that disappeared.

I said it was oddball, didn't I? Anyway, the albino fed my hunch. He had a kind of Outer Space glow about him, one of the original aliens. I thought I better leave before he caught me staring. I figure I will get a head start on the group and start sauntering back to the Hiroshima bus. I time it right, and we all get back at the same time. I notice on the way back that there is a long field of mown grass that looks like an airstrip. Somebody in our group says that is exactly what this is.

He wondered if it is now used by drug smugglers. I wondered if this is where the aliens landed.

After Bonampak we needed to make a stop at Bethel, a Mexican border town, to get something I thought was a thing of the past, buried with another fallen empire, the Soviet Union: an exit stamp for our passports. You can't just leave Mexico, at least at its southern border, without an exit stamp. But I wondered: How would the Mexicans know if you left without the stamp? You'd be in somebody else's country by then. And why would the Guatemalans care? But back to basics: Things don't have to make sense here.

Juan hates going through this. At the entrance to Bethel we are stopped by a road barrier controlled by man in a little hut. The van has to stop and pay tribute to the local authorities, or you don't get into the town and you don't leave the country.

As we wait, Juan tells us the story about the time he wanted to know what the entrance fee was used for. The official *bandito* told him it was for various improvements around the town for tourists and municipal projects. Juan pressed him: "Tell me where these improvements are here, so we can all go see them." After various evasions, and Juan remaining persistent, the gatekeeper finally said, "Look, it's like this. You pay the money and you get in, if you don't, then you don't get in."

"So you see," Juan continues, "just as the Mayans fought among themselves for the power to demand tribute from those using the Usumacinta River to ply their trades, so you see that practice still goes on today."

With the payoff to Bethel accomplished, the van lumbers into town and stops at an official-looking building with flags out front and bureaucrats hunched behind windows with little windows of their own for the exchange of documents and money. It will cost us \$3 US per person to leave Mexico. We climb out into the sun and heat and dutifully stand in line with our passports in hand. The heat is reflected by the big concrete slab that forms a forecourt to this little one-story building painted a bright blue.

And we wait and stand there. Nothing happens. Inside, I see two officials sitting and staring into the same computer monitor, oblivious to us and the guy standing in line ahead of us when we got there. A third official in a T-shirt and jeans walks back and forth behind the other two, occasionally taking his turn to stare into the abyss of the mesmerizing computer.

This goes on for about 10 minutes. The guy in the line ahead of us holds a stack of U.S. Passports. This does not look good. Juan is unhappy.

Juan manages to get the attention of the guy who's pacing back and forth. Juan comes back to us and explains what is going on. Apparently the computer network is down, or it's down and up and then down again. To me it all looks and sounds like the great ambiguous, lazy, absurd Nowhere in a Mexican blur of numb attitude. Some in our group drop out of line and sit in the shade of trees; others start to grumble. Mark cracks jokes. Cherik and Lia let it be known they do not want to surrender their passports to anybody, no matter how this thing shakes out.

Finally, Juan manages to get Pacing Guy to come confer over at a side window (not unlike the drive-through window at McDonald's, and probably for the same purpose). Their heads come close together as they speak, and it dawns on me that a deal is being struck about which we will, of course, know nothing.

Trying to disguise his triumph in breaking the logjam, Juan runs back to us and asks for our passports; he won't take no for an answer when Cherik and Lia balk. "I will take care of all of this and meet up with you a few blocks from here, no sense you're having to stand here and wait. I will take care of it and meet you where we are supposed to take the boat to Yaxchilán."

Gaspar drives us all to the drop-off point, leaving Juan behind. In another 25 minutes, Juan shows up and says everything is taken care of. We are now outside a restaurant and near the boat landing, and I wonder if we are going to have lunch first. But I can tell Juan is again looking harried, running behind schedule, if indeed one can speak of schedules in Mexico. "We will now go to the boat, it is waiting for us," he announces, "and your luggage and box lunches will catch up with us later at Yaxchilán."

Pointing to where all our passports are securely in his backpack he hugs close to his chest, he says, "I will hang on to your passports until our boat gets to the Guatemala border and your next guide picks you up." Cherik and Lia are now really unhappy, but they don't say anything. In my cynical mind, I mentally tip my hat to Juan: if you don't give him a decent tip at the end this part of the tour, he just might "misplace" your passport.

So now we say good-bye to Gaspar, who has been a steady presence and, in his own sardonic, laconic way, a funny guy. Everybody tips him (with possible exception of John), and he and his white van disappear.

There's "about 100 meters" to the place where our boats are waiting for us, one of which will haul our luggage to Guatemala, our next stop. The others soon are way ahead of me and out of sight. I'm glad Glenna doesn't stay behind with me, I didn't want the feeling of holding her back; that wasn't our deal. I trudge along, about a mile or so, I figure.

The Usumacinta River serves as the border between Mexico and Guatemala. I see a beach below me and our group cluttered around an area where a number of narrow, canvas-roofed boats, resembling those narrow Thai river boats, are moored. They all have an open area in the back where the boatman stands so he can see the river ahead of him, and he can balance himself by holding onto the tiller of an outboard motor with one hand while grabbing the canvas roof in front of him with the other.

The group climbs aboard by agilely stepping up onto the bow of the boat, then pivoting to duck under the canvas roof to sit down on one of two long narrow wooden benches inside that face each other. I'm the last one to get in, because once again there are a bunch of stairs I had to go down, and then a stretch of sandy beach to traverse before I reach the boat that itself is partly beached.

Taking the high step up onto the bow, even with the assistance of a couple of strong guys to prop me up, looks risky, so I execute a nifty maneuver: I manage to turn my back to the bow and pull my butt up onto it, then swivel round with my legs raised to meet the lower interior of the boat. I am sure it looked silly but it worked. Soon I am perched at the end of one of the benches, almost into the boatman's space.

It's cramped in here. If I stretch my legs out they will get tangled in the legs of those across from me, or I'll be playing footsie with the boatman. We are handed boxy, orange-colored life jackets, and with some effort Juan and two other guys on shore push the boat all the way into the river, then Juan does an

impressive leap into the boat as it starts to pull away.

The Usumacinta River is the biggest river in Central America. We will now go on this “Indiana Jones” voyage for about 20-25 miles to the Yaxchilán ruins, set in an “oxbow” or hernia-like land protrusion into a wide turn in the river.

From the brochure's excited language, I thought we would be moving slowly under heavy canopies of overgrown jungle, with noisy parrots and monkeys coming right up to the edge of our boat. Instead, there were about 50 yards of fast current on either side of us, the sandy banks mostly barren of vegetation. Above and behind the banks were scrub brush, marshes, various weeds and white-barked trees in fascinating sculpted shapes. On the shores and randomly in the river itself were numerous dead trees and branches, among which there were often several pretty white birds. Bob and Judith were busy at the front of the boat like German shorthaireds, pointing this way and that at vultures and herons, smiling beneath their binoculars.



*The boatman*

Danger did, in fact, lurk in the river. At various places there were outcroppings of rocks that jutted above the surface of the water, a number of them appearing in parallel rows, rocky cornrows put there eons ago by some whimsical geological event. I could see why we now had these life vests on.

The boatman was skilled in keeping us clear of these dangerous trip spoilers. I saw him now and then pick up and put down the plastic jellyfish-type gas bladder that fueled the outboard motor. Maybe, I thought, he is doing something to keep the air-to-fuel mixture right. I hoped he had filled the thing up before taking off, it didn't sound like there was much liquid sloshing around in there. It would be a real bitch, in the midst of all these treacherous rocks zooming at us with the current, to run out of gas here.

And then we ran out of gas.

First there was that sickly (and sickening) sound of the motor's angry sputtering from too little fuel and too much air, and then – nothing. The boatman seemed cool about it. As soon as he knew he was going

to be without gas he deftly turned the boat out of the current and beached it on a sandy point along the Guatemalan side.



*Juan and Glenna on the Usumacinta River*



*Bob and Judith*

Though he had no more gas, the boatman did have a cell phone. He called back to base port and was told the boat with our luggage on it would soon catch up, and it would bring gas and lunch.

Juan, once again truly embarrassed, decides to use this hiatus to give us our passports back. My incessantly cynical brain tells me this is an act of atonement, he won't use the hand-back of our passports to shame us into tips he may now think he no longer deserves. A better part of my brain scolds me for thinking that and the previous thought about his using the passports as leverage for tips. *What's wrong with me?*

The luggage boat arrives about 20 minutes later, and with it gas for our boat plus several white boxes with lunches and bottles of water. Some of the people in our boat move over to the luggage boat, and now we are less crowded and my aching right leg can stretch out into an open space in front of me.

Everybody is hungry, but we all try to act polite and slow as we gratefully dig into the box lunches. Inside each box is something like a cupcake with no frosting; a hard-boiled egg, some salt and a sandwich with three pieces of plain white bread over two layers of filling. The filling: chicken, of course, but shredded and mixed in with some kind of tasty red liquidy sauce, with a slice of American processed cheese added. It all tasted great.

I find out later that the luggage boat behind us hit a log in the water, sending people off their benches. So I guess you could say *they* really did get an Indiana Jones experience.

Refueled, our boat makes it to Yaxchilán. The small boat landing is just a clump of wet sandbags and some wooden steps, but again with the inevitable help of young men on shore who take my hands, I make it out of the boat, again the last one out. There are also the inevitable steps to climb up to the entrance to the park, but this time there aren't that many. As usual, the others get well ahead of me. On reflection, I think maybe it is I and not the shutterbug John who may be the Family Dog on this trip.

And somehow – this could have been an illusion – I started feeling a little stronger in the legs from my own small version of middle-aged boot camp. Some long-dormant muscles were coming on line. I was going to do this, dammit. I was going to give this trip my best shot.

Juan keeps the group together outside a small building at the entrance of the park where tickets are sold and collected. Juan gets the tickets, then counts us out in the presence of the person behind the window.

We were cleared to move on, and soon I was once again happily alone among the now familiar-looking piles of rocks and hieroglyphs and surrounding jungle. The faint sweet smell of organic rot was there again, and there was nothing to do about that.



*Yaxchilán ruins*

I sat on the remnant of a ledge of something that was once important and imposing, and I felt rain beginning to fall. In my knapsack were some power candy bars, binoculars and a fold-up poncho in a little plastic bag that I bought on the Internet for this trip. As the drops got bigger and more frequent, I took out the poncho, unfolded it, and put it on.

Soon I was inside what amounted to a heavy-China-plastic-smelling tent with a small hole for my face in the hood, and two exits for my hands in the long, droopy sleeves. Other groups of tourists clumped around ruins nearby simply shot up some brightly colored umbrellas and seemed just fine with the rain. And, really, it was not raining that hard.

In my mushroom outfit I felt like a dork and wondered if the umbrella people would start staring at me, but they all seemed to be listening and looking at something intently together instead. Something had them riveted. By their postures, walk and clothing they were obviously Americans, and though they gathered in clusters, the clusters formed a semi-circle around somebody authoritative, their leader, that seemed fairly clear, a man reading from a book, projecting his voice like a trained actor. He was reading, or *claiming*, something important in a sonorous voice, but I couldn't make out what he was saying, as the sound of the drops hitting my ridiculous hood drowned him out.

The sound of rain drops on my hood and the tent smell reminded me of many hated camping trips and boring Boy Scout outings I was forced to be a part of in my childhood. The endless cold, wet, fatiguing discomforts and senseless macho risks came back to me. Now as then, I yearned for a dry room, a warm bed and something cozy to read. Why are all these people here? What is that guy under that really huge tree over there saying that is so interesting? Why do all these people *care*?

The rain grew in intensity and then, as quickly as it came, it left. I rolled up the poncho, but now it would no longer fit in its plastic container. It was too wet to put back into the backpack. I would eventually throw it away when I got back to the building at the entrance of the park.

I could hear the leader of that group now, his voice clear of my poncho and rain. He was reading from the Bible. He would read some scripture for a while, then flip some pages and start reading some more, and then do that again. I thought I was having a hallucination. This can't be real – a Christian service going on here at a site of pagan Mayan ruins?

And then I remembered something I had read somewhere in preparation for the trip, something about how the Mormons feel they have an historical link with the Mayans, how their religion and the Mayans are connected in the Book of Mormon. So this just added more grist to my mill that the Mayans were aliens, because aliens to and from some very weird planets figure into the Mormon religion as well. At least I think so. I am shaky on the details.

This ceremony going on in front of me, before various sizes and ages of colorfully clad tourists in shorts and T-shirts, praying in places where people and animals were once sacrificed to appease the gods – I needed to get out of there. This was too much like a Star Trekkie convention.

I went back to the entrance building, chucked the poncho in a garbage bin in the men's room, where to my delight I found crappers with lids



*Mormons praying in the rain at Yaxchilan*

and plenty of toilet paper. I made ample use of the facilities and marveled again how the simple pleasures in life are the best.

There was a concrete bench in a waiting area outside the ticket booth, and I sat down and waited for my group to come back. Glenna was among the first to return, and she told me about all the temples and pyramids and so on that I had missed. She seemed very happy to be in Central America, happy in the Mayan debris, looking at these ruins, doing this here, the dream come true. Her being happy made me happy. She said it was just the way she hoped it would be.

Juan came up and stopped cold, then shouted “Look, look, there's a peccary!” A peccary is a kind of wild pig. I got up to look where he had pointed, right along the side of the building, and for a few seconds this shiny fat little animal waddled into and then out of view. John fumbled for his Nikon, but he was too slow to capture the moment.

So, besides an Indiana Jones adventure, I also did indeed encounter some wildlife in the voyage down the Usumacinta. The brochure hadn't lied.



*A peccary*

We resume the boat trip further down the river, and on the Guatemalan side there is a small landing, and not too far up from the shore there are a number of white tour vans all parked on the side of a road. A small crowd of kids in their teens are standing around, looking at us in anticipation like prey as we disembark.

Juan bids us farewell at this steeply sloped patch of sand, and we all hug and tip him (with the exception – I am now quite sure about this – of John).

Juan introduces us to our new guide, Julio Tot from Flores, Guatemala, a pleasant young Mayan, who, Juan tells us, is like me, a lawyer, a *licenciado*. “So watch out!” We laugh and scramble up the hill.

I need help getting up the steep and sometimes slippery incline; as usual, a muscular young man appears out of nowhere to grab my arm and assist me to one of the waiting vans, similar to the one we left in Mexico. Julio tries to gather us.

The assembled teenagers descend on us, wads of cash in one hand and a calculator in the other. They are ready to exchange dollars or Mexican pesos for Guatemalan quetzals, pretty money, so named after the colorful bird whose feathers once adorned the headdresses of Mayan kings. They get no customers despite their aggressive approach. What were we to do with quetzals, and how many are there to a dollar, anyway?

So here we were in Guatemala, with no fence, no signs, no immigration or customs officials. That's still a few miles further down the road. Talk about a porous border!

Julio gets us all in his van, introduces us to the driver and proves to be instantly charming. He is a law student with a year to go in his studies. He has a wife and two sons, and he later tells us a funny story about a big pig he once smuggled out of Honduras but hasn't the heart to slaughter. It is now a family pet, one with a voracious appetite.

His English is excellent, but often interrupted with the Spanish word for "that", "este." Glenna tells me later this is simply a common mannerism, the equivalent to our "umm" or "uh." I think of Hilary Clinton who says "ah" and "um" about 10 times in every sentence, then I imagine her saying "este" all the time instead. I smile at my little private joke to myself.

Standing near his front passenger seat opposite the driver, he faces us. Mark and I have taken a few swigs from the tequila bottle that still hasn't been emptied yet from the flashlight dinner, and I can tell Julio is a little taken aback by that, and Teresa behind me says something to Mark in a tone of disapproval. So I stash the bottle back in my knapsack.

Julio makes a point of giving us all Spanish-equivalent names and memorizing them. I am Don Lencho. Glenna is Doña Glenna. The van moves slowly through the outskirts of a village where you can already tell the people here are a whole lot poorer than the Mexicans on the other side of the river. Life seems more deflated here.

We arrive at a small blue building with flags, and there are about four other tourist vans parked there. Above the building is a sign: *Delegación de Migración*. This is the local immigration office. All around this lonely outpost are pastures of open land, with the usual number of random chickens free to run about anywhere. Two men in sleek black uniforms and guns stand behind a table supporting a big manual orange juice squeezer. On the table is a pile of oranges, with nobody else around. I wonder if these officers supplemented their wages by selling freshly squeezed orange juice. Weirder things I have encountered in travels; it's the weirdnesses I especially cherish. But I thought better not to ask, though fresh orange juice would have hit the spot.

Julio mother-hens us into the building. "Just go up to the people, show your passport, and you pay \$3 US per person for the entry visa, then we drive on," he informs us. But once inside, a middle-aged woman in peasant dress stood over an ancient computer, shuffling various forms and stamps laid out before her on her desk. She said we needed to pay \$6 per person, and we had to have exact change. So I did what she told me and got our passports stamped.

Back outside, I told Julio, "Just so you know, Julio, we had to pay \$6 per person, not \$3."

"What! You did what?", he practically shouted. "No, no, come with me!"

So Julio marched Glenna and me and Mark and Teresa back in there. Julio was adamant with the woman: "You are charging too much, it should be three dollars, not six," he said in Spanish, "these people need refunds." And as if this were something that had never happened before, the lady simply says, "Oh, oh, all right, fine," and she handed each of us half our money back. She shrugged with a blank face that seemed to say, "Some days this works, some days it doesn't."



*Immigration building in Guatemala*

Julio stayed in the building to watch the rest of our group get processed to make sure there would be no further "misunderstanding." I, in the meantime, needed to relieve myself, and since there was a long line outside the women's rest room, the women from the various tour busses had starting using the men's room as well, so there was a long line in front of that, too. Women speaking French announced to the world in general that despite what was written on the doors of these crappers, these were now liberated unisex facilities. Except no men dared line up outside the women's room. There's the makings of an allegory there.

Needing not to wait, I decided to think outside of the box, so to speak, and I went up to one of the black-uniformed police-type men, who seemed to be neither policing nor selling orange juice at the moment. He gave me a useful tip when I asked him if there was another rest room around here. "Oh sure, *señor*, just use the big toilet behind the building, there are acres of it!" We all laughed.

So sure enough, there were only a couple of incurious cows who noticed me peeing behind the *Delegación de Migración* building.

As that wonderful sensation of relief coursed through my body as I turned part of the side of the building a darker blue, I thought how wonderfully therapeutic it would be if every now and then the American taxpayer could be granted a chance to pick a government building of his choosing and be allowed to piss on it.

Like a dog marking his territory, I started to realize that My Mayan Adventure could easily wind up being little more than a succession of pee stories. Well, OK, what of it? I now had a *theme*, a through-line. Yes, even more: an *agenda*. My trip now had contour and dimension to it.

Finally legally in Guatemala with the right paperwork done, and nobody interested in what was in our luggage, we returned to our van. Everyone followed like imprinted ducklings the same seating pattern there that we had in the other van, although Glenna and I were prompted to sit closer to the door, in deference to my bum knee, which now could stretch out into the stairwell. Disability has its perks.

For the next four hours (Julio: “it’s be about two hours”) we drive at what seems less than 10 mph over a red dirt road with some very significant and frequent potholes. We are literally thrown from side to side like in an amusement park ride, often having to hang on to our seats, even at this slow speed. I try to keep from squishing Glenna against her window.

As we move along, pedestrians, on-coming trucks and busses in our lane, chickens, cows, children, women carrying things on their heads, donkeys and bicyclists with no reflectors weave into and out of our path, seemingly at random, all somehow according to rules and rhythms unknown and indecipherable to gringos. I watch all this through the windshield before me, with a degree of awe mixed with controlled panic. I decide it is best not to look.

After about three hours into this, Mark pipes up, “Julio, how much longer do we have before we leave this kidney-jarring road?” I am glad he asks. This is apparently the only road from the river to our destination 80 miles away, Flores, a city near the next set of ruins on the tour, Tikal. “Oh, just about another 10 minutes,” Julio says, and by now everybody in the van knows this means: “How should I know?”

As the sun sets and growling stomachs can be heard again, we finally get onto a paved road, and some of us cheer. The van speeds up, and darkness falls. Two hours later we arrive at what promises to be a swank hotel in a modern tourist town where we can unpack for two days, the Hotel Petén Espléndido. And *espléndido* it does seem as we finally approach it, right on a big lake, with, the Internet has informed me, a swimming pool and big dining area, and WiFi and elevators. I long for a bed.

But Julio makes the mistake of telling the driver to bypass the hotel for a short tour of the touristy part of Flores, the flashy resorts and eateries. There are groans, but nobody has the gall to tell him we don’t want to see this right now. Julio then makes a second mistake by bragging about two great new additions to Flores: Burger King and Walmart. Nobody in this particular group thinks these are improvements at all. The bird-watching Californians Bob and Judith don’t bother to suppress their groan.

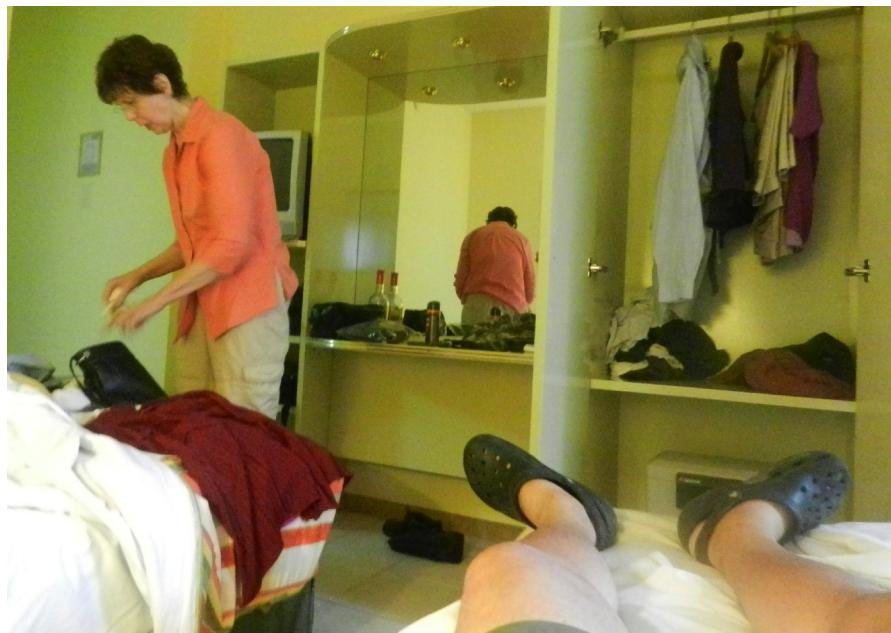
Finally, finally, we arrive at the hotel, and waiting for us atop our name tags are a free fruit beverage and our room keys all laid out on a table in the lobby. Julio and somebody from the hotel wants to make a welcome ceremony and toast out of this. But without waiting I rather rudely gulp down my drink, grab our room key and head for the elevator with Glenna in tow before the others fully assemble for the welcome ceremony.

We thus are the first ones in our rooms, trusting our luggage will follow. I throw myself on the bed and am induced to come off it only by the prospect of dinner.

Which, again, is a choice of fish or chicken. I pick the chicken this time.

I sleep like a log, unaware that unseen bedbugs now get to have their dinner on my legs.

Just three more days. Just three more eons.



*Crashed out on a bed in the Hotel Peten Esplendido*

## Day 5

*Day 5 – Tikal and Yaxhá - Today the tour visits the spectacular Mayan ruins at Tikal. One of the most famous and beautiful of Maya sites, Tikal's massive and steep pyramids (one is over 200 feet high) loom above the lush jungle of the Petén where one can observe spider and howler monkeys and numerous bird species such as toucans, parrots and macaws...After lunch this special attraction of the tour continues to Yaxhá...situated on the shores of the beautiful Yaxhá lagoon, home of Moreletti crocodiles, and half-way between Flores and the Belize-Guatemalan Border.*

On to Tikal, considered by some the most majestic and beautiful set of Mayan ruins. The two main temples in what may be the main plaza of Tikal are among the most photographed structures of the ancient Maya.

But I am already getting “Mayaned out,” as Teresa would put it towards the end of the trip. I am hoping I can just sleep in today, skip Tikal altogether in order to take in the modern architectural wonders of the new Burger King and Walmart. Glenna seems OK with that, but she then comes back to the room to tell me Julio has made special arrangements for me: I can take in what I want of Tikal in the morning, and then he'll have me brought back by taxi at lunchtime. So OK, I go along with that, but now I must scramble to get ready. Again, I am the last one into the van.

When we get to the vast national park that contains the Tikal ruins, I am blessed with getting a ride from the parking area to the ruins themselves; the others will trudge bravely ahead on foot, for what on the map looks like three miles. For me and other *Untermenschen*, the park provides a flat-top truck sporting open-air metallic seats on the platform and horizontal safety bars in front of the seats to hang onto. I climb aboard, again being hoisted into place by big arms and hands.

Different tourists groups have assembled at this odd-looking vehicle to put their lamest members aboard. I recognize some of the Mormons whom I last saw praying under a gigantic tree in Yaxchilán. The lady settling herself next to me tells me her name and where she is from, and I ask her about her group. “It's called 'Fun For Less,'” she says. “It's an LDS group of people from all over the country. The leader on this group is the famous [I instantly forget the name], he's a very spiritual man. We were lucky to get him.”

“Fun For Less” sounds like an unsexy name for a tour company, if you ask me. Sure, the “Less” has to be about money, but to me it says: “We don't give you all the stuff other tours do, but you're gonna have fun, anyway.”

Maybe the Mormon preacher's name is Less, and he's the one who gets to have all the fun.

I ponder how LDS is just a short dyslexic slide to LSD, and what a Mayan tour on LSD would be like. *That* would be novel.

I fear the LDS lady might want to convert me at any moment, so I mumble in her direction something like “wow” or “good for you,” then notice a portly, squat woman plop down on her metal seat in front of me. She looks tired and scared, her face looking worried in a way that could best be described as permanent confusion. She does not respond to two men telling her where she is going to be dropped off. I sense there is a language problem here, because she doesn't seem to understand in either English

or Spanish that she is being taken on this ride to the ruins in order for her to avoid having to walk the three or four miles to get there.

Polyglot that I am, I try explaining to her first in French, then in German, what the plan is for her. The German works, and she calms when I explain to her what is going on.

She tells me she is from the Alsace region of France, where German is still predominantly spoken. Alsace has exchanged hands between the Germans and French over a number of wars, and now, in that non-country called the European Union, nobody cares anymore.

She has a strange name I have never heard before, something like Mooka, so it disappears in my brain just like that LDS – what, minister? priest? Vulcan? I shall call her Mooka. *Call me Ishmael.*

Mooka wears a funny Mr. Magoo jungle hat like mine. I try to cheer her up, but she is deep in that special anxiety known only to the elderly lonely and abandoned. I suspect she is not having Fun for Less, and I suspect she has been traveling with a large group of French tourists – two big busloads – whom our group has bumped into a couple of times on potty breaks, places where tourists are unloaded into a favored store to buy various trinkets, water, booze, dolls, rings, Indian pottery, blankets, and so on.

These French folks I figure Mooka is with are mostly fit-looking seniors with none of the American obesity, and much better dressed than us gringos, but they all strike me as pretty grouchy and flinty. They have a grim earnestness about them, and in the stores a lot of them elbow ahead of their fellow countrymen instead of queuing up to pay for their purchases. Rummaging myself among the trinkets, I would grumble “Quoi? Quoi? Quoi?” under my breath, in a duck-quacking way, which is my favorite perverse thing to do when in France. But I have to restrain myself, because it annoys the hell out of Glenna. She is a lot nicer than I am.

The modified flattop fills up, and its unmuffled engine roars to life. Fortunately, neither Mooka, the LDS lady nor I can talk anymore once the flatbed-truck-taxi veers onto the bumpy dirt road cleared in the jungle for only this and a couple of utility vehicles. There are big bumps and holes in the road. The truck has no suspension, and I wonder how often some of the weaker passengers get bucked off this thing. We hang onto the safety bars for dear life. Mooka's mouth holds open in panic.

We are jostled hard to the left and right. We hit some bigger bumps and are popped up in our seats like jacks-in-the-box, which I think must look pretty funny to anyone watching us. We cling harder to the safety bars. The driver and his pal are safely encased in the cab, doing another day's work, chatting.

We drive up and down steep hills pretty fast, past forward-trekking tourists walking in groups of two or three. I am glad I am not among them. We pass some groups seated at the base of tall trees offering shade and temporary rest. They drink from water bottles, fending off the heat and humidity. Some look very dusty and tired. Their boot camp.

There are about ten of us old fogeys being tossed around on this flattop platform. We duck being hit by trees as we pass underneath them. To the right and left, every now and then spread out suddenly in a cleared area, we see small and large pyramids, tombs, uncertain piles of randomly strewn rocks, stellae (vertical slabs of rock with carved images of animals, kings or hieroglyphs), and signs and plaques that

explain things. This is turning into a Disneyland rodeo ride. I am actually enjoying it.

We arrive at the main plaza, and as if by pre-arrangement, each passenger descends and tips the driver a dollar. I follow suit and walk a path for a few minutes, then come to an area where two pyramids of impressive grandeur and height face each other across an expanse of grass about the length of two football fields. There are benches in a shady place off to one side of the perimeter. I sit down on one and take the sight in. It is impressive. Big things must have happened here.



Tikal

Mooka goes off to her own bench several yards away, signaling she wants no more of me. *I want to be alone.*

There are big colorful birds high up in the trees here that shriek and fly off at each other. There are circular, raised platforms here and there with residues of incense and offerings used in Mayan religious ceremonies that they continue to practice today. Smoke still rises from one of them. The fact that modern Maya continue their religion here gives this place a certain vitality and meaning otherwise absent in the ghostly hulks of stones eroded over time and overgrown by robust jungle fauna.

There is something of soul still intact here at Tikal.



*Smoldering recent Mayan religious ceremony at Tikal*

I like this place. I like the breezes blowing through the tall, majestic trees. There is a reverent calm here.

I notice that little groups of guided tourists are each treated to their guide's clapping of hands, performed in the middle of the plaza, apparently in order to show off some acoustical phenomenon of the place. I don't know what that is or why they do it, and I am too far away to eavesdrop. I am not curious enough to ask Julio later, but this little show gets repeated in front of me about every 15 minutes. People take pictures of it. They take pictures of everything.

The rest of our group, with of course Glenna included, are hither and yon, tromping over a massive expanse of land to see all the old buildings and temples and ball courts etc. that are strewn all over this huge national park.

Before seeing the real Tikal, there had been a huge model to scale of the layout and all the buildings as they once looked in their heyday, white wooden models reproduced with impressive detail, under the roof of a large building at the entrance to Tikal. Using a laser pointer to isolate each structure he was talking about in his orientation lecture, Julio described the history and function of how and why things were laid out the way they were, primarily so as to line up with repeated astronomical events, such as solstices and equinoxes and so on.



*Julio orienting Tikal with help of overview model*

To see it all would be too daunting. I would see my piece of it and be happy with that.

Of course, driven by my new agenda to leave my DNA to mingle with the dust of the ancient Mayan past, and with the excuse that again I saw no public restrooms anywhere, I walked behind one of the pyramids. I kept a watchful eye on two bored guards several yards away who took to the shade to sit through their shift in comfort. They seemed unconcerned about the tame tourists busily taking pictures of everything.

I was thus able to slip through a narrow corridor between one of the giant pyramids and a stone wall, and once away from the crowd I was able to relieve an ever-pressing bladder that I suspect many an ancient Mayan had done likewise eons ago. A tiny lizard smaller than my little finger seemed to approve of the show before disappearing into a crack in the wall.

My group, led by Julio, eventually appeared in the plaza. They were going to go from here to other places, so it was time for me to get back on the Tikal Express, to repeat the wild ride. For the return trip there was, to my surprise, Mooka once again. She said hello, her worried look still there.

I thought I'd be taken back to the parking area, and from there by taxi back to the hotel. I thought that was the plan. Instead, Mooka and I were taken to a massive palapa-covered, open-air restaurant with at least an acre of rows of long tables with picnic-type benches and plastic tablecloths.

The two of us arrived as the first guests of the day, greeted by a waiter who handed us each a damp, refreshingly cold towel to wipe the dust and heat from our faces. A nice touch.

Mooka was told by the maitre d' that her French group would be in a far-flung corner of the restaurant, whereas I could pretty much decide where our group of 10 would sit. I was grateful for that, and I suspect Mooka was, too. I think there was something about me she didn't like.

I sat down and gratefully ordered a beer that had been kept very cold. God invented thirst and hot weather so that a cold beer could be fully savored.



*Tikal restaurant prepared for the arrival of tourist hordes*

At first I was occupied with musings about Mooka, sitting an acre away with her back to me. Why would she bother to cross the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico with a bunch of strangers like an unassimilated grain of sand, with no apparent interest in anything she was seeing? Why was she here?

Then it dawned on me I should ask myself the same question. Was I having a good time? And I thought some more: That really isn't so much the question, certainly not for what I would call an adventure vacation. This was the first time I took an extended guided tour of anything. I had never taken one of these before. And I had to admit, as I started assembling the memories of what I had experienced so far, this would be one for the books – I would never forget what happened this week. I would write about it. I had been challenged, tested, tossed about and confronted with truly strange and alien things from a truly foreign past.

I have always held that the real tonic of travel is how it shakes up the salt shaker, makes you see things fresh, makes you observe people in other lands doing the weirdest things that are perfectly natural to them. Travel can reset the brain. You realize you yourself could just as easily be seen by these foreign peoples in exactly the same way, as challenging strangeness. That realization humbles and uplifts at the same time.

Travel educates in ways no school can. And maybe much more effectively.

I was glad I came along. And glad for something else also just now dawning on me: Glenna and I had shut down everything for a while and had plenty of time for each other. A lot of time in the van going from one place to the next was spent just jabbering with each other. At home, ironically, we did less of that, because we like our separate pursuits, our work, our hobbies, and we don't need the other person to entertain us. But here, away from it all, and doing something Glenna was truly enjoying, just this time together – who cares where? – was incalculably valuable.

She is such a continuing treasure. More than all the gold and jade the Mayans ever hoarded.

I sat in this jungle cavern of a restaurant as waves of tour groups came and left, all eating the same fixed fare, some happier than others. The people all seemed dusty and tired despite the welcoming wet towels, but nobody complained of the food, of which there seemed to be plenty.

I ordered another beer and took out my iPod for more solitaire. It was now about two hours since I last saw Julio and the rest of our group, and the tables were thinning out. So much for me going back to the hotel. The afternoon was waning.

At last the group arrived, took the damp towels, we ate, and then we drove on to the next place, Yaxha. More dirt roads, then another parking lot, then the ruins. Again the group trooped off to ruins spread out over a wide up-and-down terrain. I find a bench placed nicely in front of a pyramid. Two guards lounge near a small building at the entrance to the park. One comes over to me and points out parrots in nearby trees, and a macaw. I thank him.

A little later I am joined by Lia, who also has stayed behind because she can't stray too far from the ladies room. She asks if she can sit with me, and I am glad to have her company. She tells me she has never had such awful stomach cramps. I tell her we should probably go see a doctor. She goes back to the ladies room.

The guard comes back and takes me to a tree, and he pulls something from off one of its branches, a flower-like, herb-looking thing. "This is what we take for stomach pain," he said, handing it to me as he rubbed his belly to reinforce his point. "Add this to boiling water and it will cure you." I figure he is

telling me this so I can help Lia. To make a long story short, I convince Lia to shred this plant into her water bottle, shake it up, and drink it. She saves half the plant to make it into a tea later, when we get back to the hotel. Miraculously, this folk cure worked. We didn't need to get her to a doctor. So my dawdling at Yaxha turned out to be a positive thing.



*Lia and Guard, a Medicine Man*



*The magical herb, allspice*

We return to the Hotel Peten Esplendido, where the management has arranged a new set of rooms for us. They said it was so we could have better views of the lake. I think it had more to do with some of us complaining about bed bugs. They certainly didn't want that kind of information finding its way to tripadvisor.com.

Dinner was chicken or fish again. I had neither. I thought of taking a swim later and having a relaxed moment in the hot tub. But the water in the pool was cold, and the hot tub was broken. I went to our room, fell on the bed, and went into a deep sleep.

## Day 6

*Day 6 – Quirigua – After breakfast the tour's day begins with a drive through the Southern Petén region of Guatemala and a brief stop in the lush tropical rainforest area of Rio Dulce. From there the tour continues to an exploration of the old United Fruit Company plant in the banana plantation surrounding the ruins of Quiriguá. Upon arrival at the Quiriguá Archaeological Park the tour will begin.*

On the way to Quirigua, the plan is to stop and admire acres of bananas along the way. At one point two cowboys ahead of us on the road open a fence, and we are suddenly surrounded on all sides by a herd of emaciated cattle. The cows are being moved from one pasture to the next, so all traffic, north and south, moves at a snail's pace while the cows completely take over the road.

It's now just another Third World thing to take in stride, and I feel sorry for the little calves who try to keep up with their moms and every now and then get a whip on their ass from one of the cowboys.



*Cows commandeer the road*

Eventually we get to the banana plantation, once United Fruit Company, today Chiquita Banana and probably owned by China. Banana trees as far as the eye can see in every direction. Julio tells us a banana tree produces bananas only once in its life, then it is burned or its leaves boiled for use in making a kind of Guatemalan *tamal*.

We get out to watch the mechanized harvest of bananas. A mobile conveyer belt is in operation at the place where we stop. Huge bunches of bananas hanging from hooks on this machine zoom past us like a fast-moving commuter train, the green bananas on their way to trucks to take them to a container ship in Honduras. The engineers on the trip, Mark and Cherik, fiddle with the levers and cogs of the mobile conveyer belt, happy to have something to fiddle with. John's Nikon captures it all.



*Banana chorus line*



*Cherik fiddling with the machine*

The cows and bananas are welcome relief from the fields of broken rocks and the rotting jungle smell.

We arrive at Quirigua, and it is smaller in size than the monster parks we have been at. This site is famous for its stellae, the vertical slabs of human and animal figures and glyphs. Across from where the vans park is an open-walled out-building where there's a small TV playing a continuous tape about how the Mayans found jade and used it as money, and how the little shop inside the building had some for sale.

I make a bee-line to the men's room. Again, no lids on the crappers, but *homo sapiens* is an adaptive creature, and I gotta go. Outside both the men's and women's rooms is one large communal roll of toilet paper. I take it and do my business while the rest of the group wanders off with Julio. I put the toilet paper back where I found it. Then I look at the jade video for a while and notice there is nobody in the jade store itself.

I catch up with the group and do a good part of the park with them, listening to Julio explain what the various objects are. I wonder how much of what he says will be retained by any of us. I know I am already retaining none of it. Truth is, I'm thinking I just don't give a shit about the ancient Mayans.

I return to the building off the parking lot and watch the video again, this time from the beginning, while the others walked out of sight in search of more stellae. The video says this was the general area where Mayans came from all over to mine the best jade. Jade is apparently a real bitch to cut, and the top quality jade is more expensive than diamonds. I wonder if the word "jaded" has anything to do with jade, and if so, why. I plan to google that when I get home.

I think I peaked in the restaurant at Tikal, and I want to go home and see our dogs.

Nobody else in our group seems bored, though, with the possible exception of Teresa. I wasn't so much bored now as numbed by it all.

But I am getting bored writing this, as you may be reading it, so let's fast-forward. We get to our hotel in Honduras after a chaotic border crossing not worth getting into, the nicest hotel of the trip, where Glenna and I have a huge suite with a cathedral ceiling. Our last stay is to leave us with a final good impression and memories of luxury. Good move, Tommy.

The place has what looks like a great restaurant (tripadvisor.com says so, too). So when Julio announces the "surprise" that we will all be having that evening, a dinner and lecture by some retired professor who has a slide show on our next set of ruins, Copan, I beg off. *I want to be alone.* They leave. I order a prawns and pasta dish at the restaurant, with fresh rolls and several glasses of wine, and I am in heaven.

Glenna returns from the lecture and says it was very long. Julio tried to get the professor to cut it short because everyone, including him, was dozing off, but the professor would hear none of that. This was his show. The old fart was also a jerk to his young Honduran wife, Glenna said, whom he ordered about like a maid. I'm triple glad I didn't go.

Ah, dear God, one more day to go. The day after that is the trip to the airport and home, so that really did not count much as Day 8.

We can do this.

## Day 7

*Day 7 – Copan – Today it's time to experience a true jewel of a Mayan ruin - Copan! This UNESCO World Heritage Site represents one of the most spectacular cultural achievements of antiquity...The site of Copan is perhaps best known for producing a remarkable series of portrait stelae, most of which were placed along processional ways in the central plaza of the city and the adjoining "acropolis" (a large complex of overlapping step-pyramids, plazas, and palaces). The stelae and sculptured decorations of the buildings of Copán are some of the very finest surviving art of ancient Mesoamerica. The site also has a large court for playing the Mesoamerican ballgame.*

I was pleasantly surprised by Copan, which turned out to be my favorite place, and I had to take back (only to myself, mind you) a lot of the negative stuff I had been thinking about Mayans and Mayan ruins. I was really charmed by the art which seemed so advanced to me: three-dimensional sculptures of impressive human beings – be they gods, kings, nobles, priests, warriors – I really didn't care. The main thing is here were real arms and legs, in 3D space, from people who lived over a thousand years ago.

There was one guy who we were told was dressed to dance, and if you looked at two renditions of him in stone, placed not far from one another, you could see that on one he was ready to bend to the right, and on the other, he was ready to bend to the left. So it was meant to be a slow-motion animation of a dancer!

He has a headdress of feathers and various whatnot as tall as him, and various objects in his hands and dangling off his clothes. He smiles. He's a dancer. I love this guy!

He smiles because he knows something I don't know. But someday, I just might.



3D Dancing Guy

I am tired. I find my way back on a three-wheeler taxi made in India, a "Tuk-Tuk." A very India Raj thing.

I sit in a little square of the town where the hotel is. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Julio comes running towards me. There has been an accident. Glenna slipped and fell on one of the pyramid steps and cut her upper lip on the inside. I run back with him to the hotel where Glenna is in the back of a Tuk-Tuk, holding a bloody ball of Kleenex on her mouth and looking very shaken. Blood is splattered all over her blouse and slacks. A tourist cop is at the wheel. Julio slides in beside him, and we are off in search of a clinic where she can be treated.

I feel helpless and useless. Glenna prefers to deal with her injury by keeping quiet and sliding into herself. She seems very stunned. The wound keeps her from talking.

I wonder if she'll need stitches, dental work, maybe having to stay here beyond when we are scheduled to fly out.

Everything in town is closed for a holiday, and in the first clinic we try the doctor isn't there, and the second clinic we go to is closed. A caring and concerned Julio sticks with us, doing what he can to calm Glenna and offer her support. We are driving around a lot, but it doesn't look like Glenna is losing much more blood. For the moment, though, I think I should keep that observation to myself.



*Where I was sitting when Julio found me*



*A Tuk-Tuk, interior*

Fortunately, at the third clinic we try the doctor is in. He is a buff guy dressed in T-shirt and jeans, and he is able to clean the wound, numb it and pronounce it a "bad blow" but nothing worse. Glenna, probably more fearful of a bad diagnosis than anything, visibly brightens and regains strength. She is to take three Ibuprofen every six hours. And that's it.

He charged \$30 cash, I paid him, and we could leave. No paper work, no waiting around, no insurance claim stuff. Medicine the old-fashioned way.

Thank God, Glenna hadn't broken anything or needed stitches. This would be a trip she would never forget, too.

## Day 8

Getting home was a nail-biter. We barely make it to the airport on time, driving the “three hours” to get to the airport promised by the brochure that became four after our delayed departure from the hotel due to stragglers, potholes and potty breaks, even though the driver pushed it over the speed limit and navigated road obstacles like a pro.

The surprisingly big airport in San Pedro Sula turned out to be jammed with travelers from all over. Chaos reigned. A young jerk at the check-in line for United Airlines tells Glenna and me that our flight closed two minutes ago, seeming to enjoy our shocked reaction, though my iPod says we are still two minutes ahead of the one-hour cutoff before flight departure. Unimpressed, he repeats himself.

I argue in vain, until Glenna fortunately points out our tickets are First Class – “Doesn’t that mean we can still get on?” Through some preternatural, fateful moment, she had apparently hit the wrong key on the computer when she reserved our plane tickets for the homeward segment. We were in First Class. The check-in jerk relented and said First Class passengers could still go on board.

So there is one big High Five for Glenna on that one! Where we would have been stuck for the night, San Pedro Sula in Honduras, was, from all rumors and accounts, one big shithole. Having to spend the night would have been the camel’s straw, especially after having dodged a bullet on the possibility Glenna might have had to stay for further medical care. And I missed the dogs, dammit!

Julio had said farewell the night before, so after we got dropped off at the airport, we were all on our own. With time running out for our departure, we were told we had to pay an “exit tax.” Julio said there would be no exit tax in Honduras, so I was pretty pissed off to find there was yet another potential wrench to prevent our getting out of here. We faced another very long line of unhappy travelers, all waiting to pay their \$32 apiece for the privilege of leaving the country before their plane took off.

Half out of panic, the other half out of rage, I grabbed Glenna’s hand and moved us to the front of the line, with a look in my eyes that must have scared people. Instead of telling me to go back to the end of the line, an official-looking young man in a white shirt greeted us and asked, “Houston?” To which I answered, “Si, Houston.” He took us to a cashier, knowing we were cutting it close.

I saw Cherik and Lia standing back at the end of the line, and I waved and yelled at them to come over to us. I knew I was pissing off other people in the line, but they said nothing. Cherik and Lia hurried over, and the same nice young official put them right behind us.

We were going to make it. We were going to go home.

Once home, I wrote a nasty email to Tommy Thompson, telling him about the several things I thought had gone wrong on the tour. Mark chimed in with his own email with criticisms, being especially unhappy about the museum in Palenque being closed that Monday, the tour company being apparently unaware that the museum is closed every Monday. He wanted a refund of the admission fee we had paid as part of the tour cost.

Tommy wrote back with several excuses and dodges, but he was also man enough to apologize for the screw-ups. He offered to pay each of us a \$30 refund for the \$8 admission fee, plus the extra \$22 for

the disappointment in not having seen the museum.

Okay, I thought, sixty bucks pays for two nice dinners at our local Mexican restaurant, I'll go for that.

Yesterday, some weeks after those emails, Tommy's check showed up. It was for \$50.

I laughed. Yet another thing off, so emblematic of this tour. And somehow so purely Mayan, too, their kind of math with its hidden dimensions and mystical balances and doomsday calendars, again having its way, where sometimes two plus two could very well make five.

I could try to explain that to you further, but I prefer not to. I'd rather put on some feathers and baubles, hear the sound of an ancient drum off somewhere in a jungle, and dance.

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Thanks to my brother Paul and sister Sylvia for encouraging me to write this. It was great fun trying to recapture the trip. In writing this I am reminded that many an experience needs to ferment and mature for a while before it can be fully understood or appreciated.

And, of course, eternal thanks to Glenna for believing in higher potentials for me than I often think possible, only often to be proven wrong. I hope.

Thanks also to go to Keith Karmon, a Brit who calls himself a Freelance Hot Rod Journalist and maintains a blog on old busses at [keithshotrodjournals.blogspot.com](http://keithshotrodjournals.blogspot.com), for permission to use his photo of a 1942 Chevy tour bus reproduced on page 29.