

Spelunking in a den of Mayan human sacrifice

By Eryn Carlson

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CAYO, Belize — Shoeless and shivering cold, I'm halfway through a subterranean triathlon of wading, swimming, and climbing through Belize's Actun Tunichil Muknal, a portal to the sacred underworld according to ancient Mayan lore. Locals still call the cave Xibalba, or "place of fear," and as I tiptoe past yet another human skull, it's not hard to understand why.

Three hours before, the cave looked welcoming — refreshing, even. A river flowed from the vine-draped grotto, and a swim across a 15-foot pool was required to access the inner depths. Jumping into the clear, minnow-filled water was the closest I and my Northeastern University classmates — volunteering in western Belize over our spring break — would get to scuba diving off the country's Caribbean coast. Eager for semi-aquatic adventure, we may have overlooked the fact that we were venturing into what was once a den of human sacrifice.

Not far from the cultural hub of San Ignacio, Actun Tunichil Muknal is closer to Guatemala than to Belize's tourist-heavy eastern seaboard. Famous for its skeletal sovereign, a young woman whose calcified remains have earned her the epithet the Crystal Maiden, the cave is one of a number of prehistoric sites in the mountainous Cayo District, where the Mayan civilization thrived more than a millennium ago. The skeletal remains of 13 other humans, as well as many ceramic and stoneware pieces, have been discovered in the limestone abyss.

Our archeological adventure began after a bumpy backroads drive and a 45-minute jungle hike that included fording a waist-deep river three times.

At the mouth of the cave, we abandoned our packs and strapped on miner's helmets. Split into two groups, three of my classmates and I — joined by a middle-aged American

couple and two visibly nervous French-Canadian women — put our trust in Martin, a guide from San Ignacio's Mayawalk Tours. Headlamps shining, we plunged into the aqueous aperture and followed Martin into the dank, dark unknown.

Not for the feeble or claustrophobic, navigating the cave required spurts of doggy paddling in between traipsing shallow waters, clambering over slick boulders and squeezing through tight passages with names like "the guillotine" — all obstacles of adventure or of peril, depending on one's intrepid spirit.

Along the way, sights of fluttering bats and gigantic spiders, plus the occasional crab, reminded us spelunkers that life survives underground. Seeing fellow tourists slipping and colliding, helmet-first, with overhanging rock slabs reminded us that, amazingly, we had never signed liability waivers.

About a mile in, we climbed away from the clammy stream to a dry upper space called the Cathedral. The white flowstones and massive stalagmites and stalactites of the soaring chamber looked more like Gaudí creations than natural occurrences.

There, we removed our shoes and kept an eye out for artifacts blocked off by nothing more than strips of orange tape. Past foot traffic had damaged the haphazardly scattered bones and bits of broken pottery found in the chamber, and our wearing only socks was meant to prevent further harm. Cameras have not been allowed in the cave since, in 2012, a tourist dropped his and shattered a centuries-old skull.

Sitting below jagged stone altars, most of the pottery had calcified into the cave floor. Martin pointed out the "kill holes" in some of the ceramics, evidence of the bloodletting ceremonies and hallucinogenic quests that Mayan priests and royalty would engage in to connect with the deities of the underworld.

We saw four partial skeletons before scaling a rickety ladder, wedged precariously between boulders, to a small separate chamber that was the Crystal Maiden's resting place. The only female found in the cave, her skeleton — sprawled and facing upward, jaws gaping — was also the only one that was fully intact. The sparkling remains were deceiving, showing no indication she had been the victim of human sacrifice. It's believed she was killed with a club.

As I looked at her calcified skeleton one last time before descending the ladder, ready to make my way back above ground, I couldn't help but think how lucky I was. I would be leaving Actun Tunichil Muknal alive.

Eryn Carlson can be reached at eryn.carlson@globe.com.

Left: Stalagmites in an upper chamber of Belize's Actun Tunichil Muknal. Below: The cave's entrance.



MAYAWALK TOURS PHOTOS



PHOTOS BY BRIAN IRWIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Ecotourism a natural for Belize

By Brian Irwin

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PUNTA GORDA, Belize — This place is hard to leave. It's unvarnished and un-hurried, where residents sell handmade goods, local organic produce, and experiences for visitors that exhibit the trophy natural wonders of Central America's smallest country. It's a new country, gaining independence from Britain only in 1981. So when it could do as it wished, Belize made a very forward-thinking decision: Lock down most natural resources and use these protected reefs, jungles, and mountains for responsible, sustainable tourism.

My wife, Lori, and I visited Punta Gorda in February. Our odyssey started on a brilliant day. We spent the next few days fly-fishing for permit, arguably the most coveted gamefish. We were guided through Garbutt's Fishing Lodge, a down-to-earth business run by four brothers and a sister.

In their youth, the Garbuts harvest fish from the sea and take them to market. Dennis Garbutt quickly realized that their way of life was depleting resources. "We would find that there was no way to expect that every finfish we caught and took to the market would sell; this was wasteful. Extremely wasteful. Overfishing was obvious." So he started a guided fly-fishing company.

Since 2005, Garbutt has worked with numerous conservation groups. He's helped institute reef protection, catch-and-release-only practices, and has been a steward for ecotourism.

Leaving Garbutt's lodge, we moved inland to explore southern Belize's bounty of cultural and natural offerings. We started at Belcampo Belize, where an expansive agricultural project not only supplies the lion's share of food for the on-site lodge and spa, but visitors can participate in the production of chocolate and coffee.

The entrance to Belcampo's property is flanked by expansive fields of sugarcane, which will be used for rum and whiskey production starting next year. In the interim, guests comb cacao trees, helping harvest the sweet fruit's seeds, which will later be dried, ground, and fermented to make some of the richest chocolate I've ever tasted. There is also a coffee roasting



building, where guests make their own to brew.

There's an entire grove of spice plants and an area dedicated to the ingredients in Belcampo's signature cocktails — the aptly named Cocktail Garden. Employees serve up wonderful drinks made with these ingredients each evening on the open veranda.

The next day we took a 45-minute trip to Nim Li Punit, Mayan ruins discovered in 1976, when Esso was digging for oil in the region. Today, Nim Li Punit is a protected archeological cultural resource.

Many people would say it's illogical to jump off a perfectly good waterfall, but here, the pursuit of fun takes over. We were standing 25 feet above a 90-foot-deep pool into which the Rio Blanco crashes, and we leaped. We did this many times, after which we clambered our way up a series of pour-overs and trickles, dodging small river fish and enjoying the cold rain forest water pounding our shoulders.

That evening we took Belcampo's tram to the dock, where a river boat took us into the sunset in search of tropical birds, crocodile, and rolling fish. Kingfishers and heron, toucan, and slaty-tailed trogon swarmed cotton and giant palm trees. These same trees flank Belcampo's open dining room, where on the porch, and over breakfast, a family of howler monkeys hung out. Just down the street, one week prior, our driver, Desmond, spotted a jaguar on the hunt.

The morning brought more jungle birds, their sounds and the distant

Top: Fly-fishing on the Sapodilla Cayes off the coast of Belize. Above: Mayan monoliths at the Nim Li Punit archeological site.

shrieks of the monkeys filling the silence. Fresh farm eggs and cheese served atop adobo salsa and beans filled our tanks for a day spent at the remote Sapodilla Cayes, a group of tiny islands about 40 miles east of Punta Gorda. The allure is manifold, including fine sandy beaches and abundant conch shells, and incredible snorkeling and fishing.

The Sapodillas exist because of the Mesoamerican Reef, the second largest barrier reef in the world. To the west, shin-deep water is full of bonefish, a svelte, missile-shaped gamefish that is a true prize for anglers. As I cast for these "gray ghosts of the flats," Lori combed the beach for conch shells, sea sponge, and polished sea glass.

I asked our guide, a native, what he thought about the tourism industry in Punta Gorda. "We're 20 years behind the rest of Belize [in terms of development]," he said. "And the rest of Belize is 20 years behind Costa Rica."

He smiled. "You guys came at the right time. Parts of Belize are changing," including a new cruise ship port to the north in Placencia. "But not P.G. It's still as real as when I was a little boy."

Brian Irwin can be reached at irwin08.bi@gmail.com.

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