My Route of the Maya Trip
(El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Belize)

I developed my passion for ancient civilizations while teaching world history during the 1980's. As a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines I had been assigned to teach a Western Civilization class at a small teachers' college on the island of Leyte, but when the only other history instructor went on maternity leave I found myself teaching all six history subjects offered at the school, including a class on the ancient empires of the Americas. Five years ago, when I embarked on my ambitious 'see the world' plan, I decided to start with Mexico, touring some of the more prominent Maya and Toltec archaeological sites scattered throughout the southern regions of the country. I walked the ruins of Teotihuacán, Palenque, Uxmal, Chichen Itza and saw the enormous Olmec statue heads in Villahermosa. I knew the Maya kingdoms that once controlled Mesoamerica extended all the way down to Honduras, and I vowed to see more of these fascinating ruins in the future.

A year ago I came across the website for Overseas Adventure Travel (or OAT) and read about a specific tour they did in Central America called *The Route of the Maya* that focused on both the ancient history and modern culture of the Maya people. I was ecstatic. This was exactly the kind of tour I had been looking for in order to round out my Mayan experience. I immediately booked this trip a year in advance (OAT is one of the few travel companies not charging a single supplement fee, but they do limit the number of solo travelers per tour so it's prudent to book in advance). In addition, I convinced a couple I had met in Turkey the previous year – Kathy and Alan Cunningham – to book the tour with me. I was looking forward to reuniting with them. As the leave date loomed near I began day-dreaming about pyramids and jungles, my thoughts morphing into an Indian Jones movie reel. *Boy, was I excited*!

Prior to the trip I checked with my doctor to see if I needed any new vaccinations. I was pretty much up to date (because of my frequent travels) so I decided to just get a flu shot. I also began Googling the weather for each of the four countries a month in advance. It was the tail end of a very wet rainy season in Central America, but aside from some severe flooding in the southern regions of Belize, an area we would not be visiting, the overall weather forecasts did not seem alarming. And as I always do, I registered my trip with S.T.E.P. (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) on the State Department's official web site. This is a service any U.S. citizen can use; it notifies the American embassies abroad of your impending visit, so in case there is an in-country emergency (for example, an earthquake, civil unrest or a zombie plague) *they will know to evacuate you.* I'm surprised more Americans do not sign up for this free and vital program.

Another advantage of registering with S.T.E.P. is the constant travel advisory updates the State Department sends via email. Although, depending on the country you're visiting, these reports are not for the faint of heart. The El Salvador advisory cautioned would-be visitors about the high gang-related crime rate and advised against venturing

out alone at night. To drive home this point, they listed the murder rate in El Salvador as being thirty times that of Massachusetts (an area with a similar population and land size). *Gulp*. Well, I reasoned, at least we're only spending one night in El Salvador. But when I read the travel advisory for Honduras I nearly choked on my morning coffee. According to the United Nations, Honduras had the highest per capita murder rate in the world; since the late 1990's, almost 150 Americans have been murdered there (including at least *three* this year) with very few of these murders having been solved. One of the underlying problems seemed to be the endemic police corruption permeating the country. In fact, in 2012, the Peace Corps suspended its program in Honduras due to safety concerns. *Double gulp*. When I opened the travel advisory for Guatemala, I did so with great trepidation. For a moment I thought I spotted a positive trend: the murder rate between 2009 and 2012 had actually *decreased* in Guatemala… (*Whew!* I thought briefly)…but this was followed by a report outlining the 160% increase in disappearances for the same time period. I guess they were just hiding the bodies better. The only favorable report I read concerned Belize, with its tiny population of only 320,000 people. I figured if I could make it to Belize in one piece, I was home free.

As usual, though, my worries were for naught. This was one of the best guided tours I have ever taken. The combination of archaeological sites and cultural interaction was beyond what I had expected. The local folk were warm and friendly everywhere we went. I came away from this trip with a new understanding and deep appreciation for the people and cultures of Central America. The only sad note happened prior to the tour. Alan Cunningham died in a tragic accident at his home; as a result, Kathy canceled her reservation. This would have been my third trip with the Cunningham's, and I missed them dearly. When I spoke to Kathy to offer my condolences, she made me promise not to chicken out of the zip-line excursion near Lake Atitlan. I told her I wouldn't.

On Tuesday, November 5th, 2013 – after months of waiting, preparations *and daydreaming!* – I took a taxi to nearby Miami International Airport to begin my Central American adventure…

Day One

I arrived at Miami International Airport at 9:45 am, about two and a half hours before my flight was scheduled to leave. I always enjoy eating breakfast at the airport and reading the day's newspaper prior to takeoff. Actually, this ritual calms me down. As much as I love to travel I am also a claustrophobic with a fear of heights, and the idea of being enclosed in what is essentially a flying aluminum can really scares the bejesus out of me.

American Airlines Flight 925 took off on time at 12:25pm for what turned out to be a pleasant two hour and twenty minute non-stop flight to San Salvador. On the plane I sat next to fellow OAT traveler Ann Ritzer, retired educator from New Jersey, who was traveling with Jean Dean, retired nurse from Connecticut. The two women were dear

friends who met in the late 1980's after their husbands passed away, sharing a love of skiing. These two gutsy, adventuresome ladies had traveled (and skied) the world over. I enjoyed their company immensely throughout the trip.

We touched down at the El Salvador International Airport just before 2:00pm. After queuing up at the immigration lines and paying our $10.00 entry visa fee, we proceeded to the luggage carousel to retrieve our bags. I met Ron and Barb Yanko from Viera, Florida. Both were retired. Ron worked for IBM; Barb was a secretary. With luggage in hand we headed to a waiting area near the front entrance of the airport where our tour guide, Luis Alberto Felipe Guerra, was waiting for us holding up an OAT sign. Two weeks prior, Luis (as he preferred we call him) sent us each an email outlining some of the tour details and what to expect when we arrived in San Salvador, including the area where the group would meet once we cleared customs. The thing I love most about escorted tours is how every detail is covered. My backpacking days are long behind me; nowadays I need certain creature comforts and someone pointing the way. OAT (or Luis) did a fairly good job on this trip making sure everything went smoothly from start to finish. Not that there weren't snags from time to time, but overall the planning was thorough considering the extent and pacing of the tour.

Luis suggested we use the bathrooms in the airport before leaving for our hotel, which was a good 45 minute drive away. I met another couple from our group at this time: Jerry and Sheila Silverstein from Spring Valley, New York, both were retired educators. After using the rest rooms and purchasing bottled water from airport vendors we grabbed our luggage and followed Luis outside the airport terminal to an awaiting mini-bus. I had a moment of dread when I took my seat. I am just under 6'1 and need a lot of leg room. The seats on the mini-bus were cramped, with very little space between my knees and the back of the seat in front of me. This proved to be a problem throughout the journey, especially when we rotated seats and I would end up in an even smaller sitting section. Luckily, our group size consisted of only fourteen travelers (plus Luis) and I was able to sit by myself the entire time, spreading my legs wide open. Two other members of our group (Ron and John) were even taller than me; I imagine they had a tough time of it, too.

We spent the better part of an hour reaching the Hotel Alicante, our small lodge located in a nice residential neighborhood not far from the San Salvador business district. The drive from the airport gave us our first glimpse of the awesome landscapes we would experience throughout this trip. San Salvador lies in the Boqueron Volcano Valley, roughly 2200 feet above sea level, surrounded by the majestic hills of the Balsam Mountain Range to the south, the imposing Boqueron Volcano and the *Cerro El Picacho* mountain peak (6200 and 6300 feet, respectively) to the west, and the San Jacinto Hill and Lake Ilopango (the largest body of water in the country) to the east.

On our way into the city we passed the *Monument to the Divine Savior of the World*, a large statue depicting Jesus standing on a globe. We also passed some very colorful graffiti murals painted along the main traffic avenues that Luis called the *Brothers Mural*, dedicated to Salvadorian workers abroad and the struggles of everyday folks back home. Apparently, graffiti murals have become a large part of a growing local art movement,

and they can be seen all over this tiny nation, sometimes to the chagrin of the people in power. We headed north along the famous Boulevard de los Heroes, one of the two widest boulevards in all of Central America, dotted with statues of soldiers who died during a brief war with Honduras in 1969. We arrived at the Hotel Alicante just before 3:30pm.

In recent years I have used numerous tour companies in my travels. Depending on the package, the hotels can be of the 'hit or miss' variety. Luis told us we would be staying mainly in lodges throughout our trip. From my own experience a 'lodge' denotes a three star hotel, at best. The Hotel Alicante certainly lived up to this billing. It was not a bad place, just *three stars*. I knew upfront that OAT was not going to be putting us in fancy hotels; at least, not for the price I paid for this trip. During our orientation meeting later that evening Luis said we should be 'open-minded' about our accommodations, and to remember we'd be traveling through relatively poor countries with different standards than back home. No argument there. When I finally hauled my luggage up to my second floor room (no elevator) I discovered that my bathroom was so small the door actually hit the sink when I tried to enter it. The toilet bowl was literally inches from the wall; to use it I had to squat over the seat with both legs draped over the sides like I was riding a horse. But the room suited its purpose: a clean, one-night accommodation in a relatively nice section of San Salvador.

We had about an hour and a half to unwind before our scheduled 5:00pm orientation meeting in the pool lounge area of the hotel. I took this time to sort out the clothes I would be wearing for tomorrow. Contrary to popular opinion, 'world traveling' is not a leisurely paced endeavor. Unlike seaside resorts or cruise ships, where the vacationer can put away his belongings and relax for a week at a time, the 'world traveler' is constantly on the go. Our mission is to see and do as much as we can in our allotted time, and rarely do we unpack our entire suitcase during the course of the trip. Most days, our schedule requires that we get up very early and leave for a new location. I have become the consummate packer. I place everything in layers; as I remove one set of clothing from my bag I rotate the used clothing to the bottom. This usually works pretty well up until about the seventh day, by then all sense of organization goes out the window as I try to figure out how to cram my souvenirs in my suitcase amidst my growing pile of dirty laundry.

At 4:15pm I stepped into the second floor lobby and sat with several other members of the tour. Ron and Barb were there, along with another couple named John and Freddie (Fredricka) Remza from Apalachin, New York, both retired. Freddie told me she was a former educator (who also writes novels) but I'm not sure what company John retired from; I think he and Ron both worked at IBM during the sixties. In fact, the two couples have known each other since then, and have traveled together many times. This was a sort of reunion for them; they hadn't seen each other in over two years. We spent the next forty minutes talking about our travel experiences before heading downstairs to the pool lounge area for our orientation meeting. It was here I met the rest of the tour group:

Beverly Cogan, retired educator from Baltimore; Connie and Casey Willems from New Orleans (originally from Holland), Connie is an attorney, while Casey is a semi-

retired ceramic artist; Howard and Barbara Boose from Dayton, Ohio, he is an ex-colonel and retired manager for NCR, and she is a retired educator. Fourteen of us in all, the smallest group I've ever traveled with since I began doing escorted tours. We bonded almost immediately and during the next two weeks I felt as if I'd known these people my entire life. *What a great time we had together*!

As we sat in a circle around the pool lounge area – with a staff from the bar handing out pineapple drinks (some laced with heavy doses of rum) – I studied the group in silence. The previous day, November 4th, I had turned 53 years old. I seldom celebrate my birthdays and I am known for turning off my cell phone so as not to receive calls on those days. I mean, who needs a constant barrage of 'well-wishers' reminding you you're another year older, *right*? For me, birthdays are nothing more than a rite of passage, a depressing day I endure once a year. But studying my 'new found' friends I came to the realization that I was the youngest person in the group. I must confess, this buoyed my spirits considerably. And not just because I felt suddenly younger, either. Looking at this gathering of retired world travelers inspired me. First off, this was an attractive bunch of people; *nobody* looked their age. Everyone seemed physically fit (and even the ones who suffered from age-related disabilities like arthritis and chronic back pain were still *very* active). All were highly intelligent individuals who still clung to their sense of adventure. The more I got to know them, the more I realized these folks filled their 'golden years' with constant activities and travel, displaying a vigor and vitality not seen in people *half their age*. As the tour unfolded I felt like I was with a group of forty-year-olds! Everyone had a great sense of humor. By the end of the trip I was feeling like a youngster, and not because of any age difference but rather the contagious youthful spirit they exuded. Thanks to this wonderful group of travelers I came home with a renewed sense that the best years of my life are yet to come. This alone was worth the cost of the trip.

Luis began the orientation meeting by formally introducing himself and then made a toast, welcoming us to Central America. He spoke briefly about his family, his years with OAT, and then went over the itinerary, addressing some of the daily issues we might face during our visit. We then took turns introducing ourselves to the group. Luis asked us to express our individual expectations for the trip. Some of us (like me) were really interested in the archaeological sites, while others were looking forward to experiencing the local art or culture. Luis said he would do everything possible to make sure we were not disappointed, all the while reiterating his earlier comments about keeping an open mind throughout the journey.

When the orientation meeting ended, we followed our guide through the now-darkened streets adjacent to our hotel for several blocks, to a popular *pupuseria* for dinner. No visit to El Salvador is complete without sampling *pupusas*, a traditional corn meal tortilla cooked on a pottery griddle over a wood fire. Although tortillas are made throughout Mexico and Central America, the pupusa is unique to El Salvador. They are similar to the South American *arepas* but are made with *nixtamal*, corn dough that has been exposed to an alkaline solution which peels away the grain and releases more nutrients. They are a meal unto themselves, and, judging from the numerous *pupuserias* we passed on the way to our restaurant, a primary staple in the Salvadorian diet. Luis led

us to his favorite joint – located within a bustling little neighborhood – accompanied by one of the hotel staffers (for added security, I think). The narrow streets were filled with locals, the smell of cooking tortillas wafting through the air from the many restaurants opened along the sidewalks.

After a ten-minute walk we reached our restaurant and sat down along a series of bench tables. There was a large **Got Pupusas?** sign along the wall as we entered (a take on *Got Milk?* which many of us found amusing, having our photos taken standing next to it). From the large menu hanging in front of the kitchen I gathered the only thing they sold in this establishment were pupusas, which are traditionally filled with soft cheese but can be made with any combination of fillings. The most popular are *chicharron* (a pork mixture ground to a paste consistency), refried beans and *locoro* (a local flower bud). We each ordered several different types of pupusas. I had one called the pupusa *revuelta*, which consisted of a mixture of cheese, pork filling and refried beans, and another one with just cheese and locoro. On the tables were the two basic condiments: *curtido* (a lightly fermented cabbage slaw with added chilies) and a watery tomato salsa. We dug in! They were tasty, as far as tortillas go, and many of us ordered more. I sat next to John Remza, a tall lanky fellow who possessed an enormous appetite. He ate several pupusas, piling on the salsa and *curtido*. On every trip there is always one guy who'll eat anything they put in front of him. And, curiously enough, they tend to be among the thinnest in the group. *Darn their metabolisms*. John was our designated eater. I would observe him at meal times and be amazed, thinking that if it were possible to eat the ceramic off a plate this man could do it.

We had a great time at the restaurant, sampling the tortillas and laughing it up in the process. Afterwards, we made our way back to the hotel and called it a night. I tried to watch some local television before going to bed but the reception was terrible. Besides, the pupusas had settled in my stomach like a dose of Ambien. I soon fell asleep.

Day Two

I tend to be an early riser (more so on trips) and was awake by 4:30am. I am also a man of routine who needs to have his cup of java shortly after waking. Unfortunately, this lodge did not provide coffee makers in the room. I shaved, showered and dressed, and by the time I went downstairs to the lobby an hour later the restaurant staff had their coffee machine up and running. I tipped them generously and brought two cups of the soothing elixir back to my room. By 6:30am I headed to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. It was a small buffet but adequate. I had scrambled eggs, fresh fruit, one large pancake, fried plantains and a small cup of yoghurt. Whenever I travel abroad, I always make yoghurt a part of my breakfast routine. I have found that the added probiotics in the yoghurt helps me ward off bouts of diarrhea. Following breakfast, I returned to my room to brush my teeth and by 7:30am I brought my luggage downstairs.

This is when I met our new bus driver, Herman, a diminutive, boyish-looking Guatemalan man in his mid-forties who could barely speak English – and rarely said a word in Spanish – and got by on his warm smile and friendly attitude. I don't think he weighed more than 110 pounds but he somehow managed to hoist our heavy bags up to the roof of our mini-bus each morning, securing them inside the luggage rack with thick rope and a blue nylon tarp. Herman was an awesome driver, one of the best I've ever seen, and was always willing to assist us in any way. He accompanied us up until the 10th day of the tour, when we flew to Petén in northern Guatemala. Well-liked by the group, I'm certain he was more than adequately compensated for his great service.

By 8:00am sharp we boarded our mini-bus and embarked on a driving tour of San Salvador, passing the central park we had traversed the previous evening on our way to the *pupuseria*, admiring its huge ceiba tree in the light of day. We continued through some rather nice, quiet neighborhoods for a while, and could see the enormous Cuscatlán soccer stadium in the distance (it is currently the largest soccer venue in all of Central America and the Caribbean). As is customary in any city tour we headed to the historic downtown area, crossing some grittier-looking neighborhoods with buildings covered in graffiti. Throughout our driving tour we continuously went back and forth through San Salvador's urban landscape, witnessing what were obviously poverty-stricken areas as well as large boulevards lined with chain stores, fast food joints and fancy car dealerships that reminded me of any midsized American town. One thing we *definitely* did not see were the infamous street gangs I had read so much about in the travel advisories. Go figure.

San Salvador was founded in 1525 by Spanish conqueror Pedro de Alvarado, about 30 kilometers from where it now stands. It was moved to its present location three years later and declared an official city. When Central America became independent from Spain in the early 1800's, the city emerged as the capital of the united Provinces of Central America between 1834 and 1839. Shortly afterwards, the region was carved into a group of sovereign nations, and San Salvador became the capital of the newly minted country of El Salvador. But for a city named after the Savior it sure has had a lot of bad luck. A multitude of natural disasters – from devastating earthquakes, to the eruption of the San Salvador Volcano nearby, to massive flooding – has besieged this poor city throughout its existence. San Salvador has been destroyed at least *four* times since 1854 by these natural calamities. And even until recently (1986 and 2001) earthquakes continue to do damage to its infrastructure. Each time, though, the city seems to bounce back.

San Salvador also served as the flashpoint in the country's bloody 12-year civil war (1980 – 1992) between the military-led government and the *Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front* (FMLN), a coalition of left-wing guerrilla groups which banded together following several coups orchestrated by the Salvadorian military. The coups were likely carried out on behalf of the handful of wealthy families who still control the majority of the nation's real estate; apparently, they felt threatened by populist land reform legislation and the increasing influence of workers' unions. As civil wars go, this one was a particularly brutal one, punctuated by the assassination of the very popular Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, the massacre of public protestors by government

forces and the use of death squads on both sides. Sadly, the American government played a prolonged role in this battle. Fearing another Nicaragua (the communist rebels there had just toppled the dictator Somoza in 1979) the U.S. began heavily arming the Salvadorian army. In November of 1989, the FMLN led a 'final offensive' on the capital and the military actually bombed the poorer neighborhoods where the rebels were believed to be holding out. Hundreds of rebels, soldiers and civilians were killed during the 26-month stalemate, leading to the peace accords that finally ended the civil war in 1992.

The result of all these natural calamities and the more recent socio-political upheavals has created a unique landscape in San Salvador. Few colonial buildings survived intact the centuries of earthquakes and other disasters, yet the streets, especially in the downtown area, are still very narrow, built along the typical grid-like pattern of Spanish colonial towns, which causes tremendous traffic jams. Most of what is considered 'old' San Salvador is actually restored buildings dating no further back than a century. The modernization of the capital was halted during the 1980's due to the country's civil war, and much of the urban growth since then has been 'disorderly', concentrated mostly on public housing in the eastern and northern parts of the city. There aren't many modern structures in San Salvador higher than 20 floors, and I'm certain that has to do with the earthquake activity in the region. One can look up from just about anywhere in the city and have an unfettered view of the mountainous valley surrounding it….which, for me, was part of San Salvador's appeal.

We drove by the National Palace building (rebuilt in the early 1900's after the previous one burnt down). Following the earthquake of 1986 the palace was no longer used as the seat of government, and now most of the 105 rooms are open to the public as a museum. It was built with Italian marble in a classical style favored at the time, and occupies the west side of the Plaza Barrios, which I imagine was the *original* city square. Facing Plaza Barrios on the northeastern side is the grand Metropolitan Cathedral of the Holy Savior, with its blue-and-yellow checked dome. This is the principal church of the Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador and the seat of the Archbishop. The church was damaged by fire in 1956 and officially renovated in 1999. It was built over the site of the old colonial Temple of Santo Domingo. The body of the assassinated archbishop, Oscar Romero, is entombed within the church. During Romero's funeral, held on Palm Sunday in 1980, gunmen opened fire and caused a stampede that killed forty-four mourners. Pope John Paul II twice visited the cathedral and knelt and prayed before Romero's tomb, which is now a draw for Catholic pilgrims in the region. We also drove by the National Theater, just east of the cathedral along Francisco Morazán Plaza, inaugurated in 1917; it is considered the most elegant theater in all of Central America, designed in a French Renaissance style with modern architectural touches.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing we saw while in San Salvador (and not to be missed if visiting this city) was the ultra modern Catholic church called the Iglesia El Rosario (the Church of the Rosary), built in 1971 by artist and architect Ruben Martinez, who threw the book of traditional Catholic church-building out the window and created a spiritual center that is truly a unique *work of art*. This structure doesn't resemble any Catholic church I have ever seen…and believe me, I have seen plenty! It has a tall, single

arched roof design that one Internet webpage described as a 'derelict airplane hangar'. You will not find any pillars or columns here, and the stain glass windows are actually chunks of colored glass seemingly embedded into the bare concrete walls and ceiling in a random pattern, creating a most unusual rainbow effect whenever the sun shines through it. The stark, plain altar is on the same level as the simple wooden pews. The Stations of the Cross have been artfully recreated in modern abstract sculptures (some quite dramatic) using wrought iron, stone and re-bar. Several historical figures from the Central American and Salvadorian independence movements are buried here, as well. Which is just as fitting: in 1979 a group of students who were part of an organized protest march were shot dead by government forces while taking refuge inside this church. The metal doors still contain the bullet holes from the massacre. Across the street from the church is the *Plaza Libertad* (Liberty Plaza) with its huge Monument to the Heroes statue commemorating the 1811 call for Central America's independence from Spain.

We spent about thirty minutes touring El Rosario and then re-boarded our bus and continued driving through the downtown area, passing the bustling marketplace of San Salvador. We also came across the enormous U.S. embassy compound, which our guide told us not to photograph for security reasons. Hundreds of people were lined up at the gate trying to get visas. As our tour of the capital concluded, I was reminded of something I learned during my first history class in college. Most cities or towns grow around *three* distinct centers, usually within close proximity to each other: the *political* center (the initial municipal hall, palace or governing building), the *religious* center (the main church or temple building) and the *economic* center (the marketplace). Government, religion and economics, the building blocks that give life to any city. Incidentally, this engineering 'blueprint' hasn't changed in the thousands of years since humans began forming large communities.

We began driving towards our next location, a small but important archaeological Mayan site known as *La Joya de Ceren* (the Pearl of Ceren) approximately 36 kilometers west of San Salvador. Discovered in 1976 – and still being excavated today – Joya de Ceren is a unique archaeological site. This was not the typical ruins of a city-state, but rather a simple Maya farming village from around 600 AD which was covered by ash following a volcanic eruption. The inhabitants managed to flee in time but left behind their belongings and a wealth of information on how the Maya used to live. The site is often referred to as the "Pompeii of the Americas" because the dwellings, cookware, utensils and even textiles of these people were preserved intact within the ash. Adjacent to the site is a small museum which offers a good collection of the artifacts uncovered at the village. I couldn't wait to see the place.

Before leaving San Salvador we made one final stop to visit *El Arbol de Dios*, the art gallery of famous Salvadorian artist Fernando Llort. Long considered "El Salvador's National Artist", Llort's artwork is world-renowned and hangs in many international art galleries. His paintings have been compared to that of Spanish artists Joan Miro and Pablo Picasso. His art style, which he developed while living in a small town in the mountainous region during the 1970's, reflects his theological training and incorporates nature, simple colors and religious symbology. As El Salvador plunged into civil war

Llort's artwork also began to include revolutionary themes concerning the people's struggles. In 1997, Llort created a beautiful mural façade for the recently renovated Metropolitan Cathedral consisting of 2700 ceramic tiles. But in December of 2012, without warning, Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar Alas ordered the entire façade to be removed. This led to a massive public outcry. Archbishop Alas later claimed the tiles were chipped away in order to repaint the church exterior, but few Salvadorians believed that excuse. Sadly, the divisions created by the civil war still persist today. Our group spent roughly forty-five minutes touring the small art gallery and purchasing souvenir replicas of Llort's work painted by in-house student artists. I bought a nice ceramic tile for my wall.

From here it took about thirty minutes to reach the Joya de Ceren site. Unfortunately, the front gate was locked with a thick chain. A sign attached to the gate announced in Spanish the site was temporarily closed due to a workers' dispute. When we saw this, the group let out a collective gasp. We were really looking forward to this stop. In fact, the only reason we even came to El Salvador was to see the Joya de Ceren, the first of five major Mayan archaeological sites on the tour. Luis spoke briefly with the guards at the site, hoping they might at least allow us entry into the outdoor portion of the ruins but they refused. *Dammit*. Luis smiled weakly, reminding us that we had to be flexible, and then told Herman to get moving.

We proceeded along a national highway towards the Guatemalan border. Our next stop was the city of Copan, Honduras, but instead of traveling north through the more mountainous roadways leading into Honduras, we headed northwest to the Guatemalan border. According to Luis, if we used the winding highways in Honduras it would take us well over thirteen hours to reach Copan, whereas a shortcut through Guatemala would get us there in less than *half* that time. We kicked back and enjoyed the view. The lush tropical forests and hillsides of El Salvador were simply beautiful.

Roughly thirty minutes into our drive we stopped to have lunch at a place called Rancho Alegre, a roadside eatery overlooking the spectacular Lake Coatepeque, a volcanic lake created about fifty to seventy thousand years ago following a series of massive eruptions. Known as a *caldera* – a geological term referring to a cauldron-like hole caused by the collapse of land following a volcanic eruption – Lake Coatepeque gradually filled with water over the ensuing millenniums, and is now a gorgeous, sparkling blue lake situated on the eastern slope of the Santa Ana volcano. With a width of over six kilometers and a depth of 120 feet, this is one of the largest lakes in El Salvador. The name 'coatepeque' means *snake hill*, and along one side of the restaurant's railing there was a large snake statue. The owner had befriended several OAT guides years earlier, convincing the company to use his restaurant exclusively. He has since renovated his establishment to accommodate the endless stream of foreign travelers who pass through on a weekly basis. We sat at wooden bench tables – beneath an enormous thatched roof – on top of a platform built *over* the hillside, with a stunning panoramic view of the lake. What a great lunch! Before we left a few of us posed with the security guard's shotgun along the side of the mountain road, ala guerilla-style.

As we continued heading northwest through El Salvador, Luis took this time to give us a brief lecture on the current state of affairs within the country. The following are some of the things he touched upon:

El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America, with a population estimated at between six to seven million. Although, according to Luis, it is hard to pinpoint exactly how many Salvadorians exist today since roughly one-third live abroad. One-fourth of the country's GDP is based on foreign money from these overseas workers. There is actually a shortage of able-bodied young men in El Salvador since so many look for work elsewhere. A large, disproportionate share of the current population is made up of women and children, and the government, to avoid an impending labor shortage disaster, has been trying to entice big international corporations and industries to invest in El Salvador in order to keep their young men at home.

In 2001, after years of currency fluctuations and out-of-control inflation, El Salvador switched to the U.S. dollar. This has kept inflation in check, but the low wages paid to the *typical* Salvadorian (approximately $300 a month) has created an incredible wealth gap; basically, there is no middle class within the country. Saving money for a rainy day (or to invest in something) is not a common practice here since most of a Salvadorian's income is used to live from month to month. There is a 12% sales tax on all goods (which is already built into the price of each item) and a 12% income tax, although the poor can avoid paying taxes if they can show they spend most of their income on daily living expenses (everyone keeps receipts here). The wealth of the country still seems concentrated in a handful of very rich families who are the descendents of the powerful Central American landowners who initially carved the region into separate nations. Some of us asked Luis about the multitude of security guards we saw in the country (with their shiny silver-colored shotguns), and if this was due to the high crime rate. Actually, the armed guards have little to do with crime and more to do with socio-economics. Following the peace accords that ended El Salvador's civil war many soldiers were let go from the military and to avoid the inevitable problems a large band of armed *and* unemployed men might pose, a law was inked requiring businesses to hire ex-soldiers as security guards.

Shortly before 2:00pm we entered Guatemala via the border crossing at Nueva Anguiatu—La Ermita, and spent the next two and a half hours traveling north through the lush, mountainous valley of Chiquimula (one of Guatemala's 22 departments, or states), at one point veering eastward beyond the town of Vado Hondo towards the Honduran border. We passed the occasional farming community, but for the most part the view consisted of heavily forested areas surrounded in the distance by the hilly formations of the Sierra Madre mountain chain which runs through the central and southern sections of the country.

During this portion of the drive, Luis, a Guatemalan, gave us a somewhat spirited lecture on his own country. The purpose of my journal is not to write a thesis, but rather *recollect* what I saw and experienced. I will, from time to time, include comments made by Luis or the other guides as part of the overall experience of the trip. I will also include

some historical facts based on my own research, just to keep the journal informative. I'm assuming the information our guides gave us was accurate. Those of you wishing to learn more are encouraged to do your own research. Besides, my 'journals' are lengthy enough (my best friend calls them *tomes*). Anyway, some of the things Luis mentioned about Guatemala:

The country is just over 42,000 square miles in size, with a little more than 15 million inhabitants. Its capital is Guatemala City. The government is a constitutional democratic republic with a unitary president and a congress, elected by popular vote from amongst a multitude of constantly bickering political parties. Sixty percent of the entire population is considered *mestizos*, people of combined European and native heritage. There are, according to Luis, 22 different ethnic groups within Guatemala, often times fighting with one another over which direction the country should move. Spanish is the national language, but in recent years the Maya language (and dialects), together with the indigenous customs, are being taught and preserved throughout the country. Currently, thirty percent of the GDP is based on tourism. Textiles are another huge industry, employing mostly women. Guatemala is also the largest producer of fruits and vegetables in all of Central America due to the fertility of the soil along the highlands region. (At this point, Luis passed around a chart outlining the various agricultural, butterfly and animal species found within Guatemala; I was a little creeped out over the large variety of *bats* in the country).

Guatemala has twenty or so different micro climates as a result of its unique geography. Two mountain chains, running from west to east, divide Guatemala into three distinct regions: the central mountainous highlands, the Pacific coastal areas to the south, and the wet lowlands of Petén in the north. The vast majority of the population, though, lives within the highlands region due to its fertility (Petén, for example, makes up nearly one third of the land space of Guatemala but only has 600,000 inhabitants). The biodiversity of the country is incredible. We actually passed a patch of barren desert known as El Horno (the Oven) nestled within the lush forested mountain valley of Chiquimula.

The last thing Luis talked about before we reached the border was the crime rate in Guatemala. Like much of Central America, Guatemala was mired in a bloody civil war between groups of leftist guerillas and a despotic military-led government that only ended in 1996. Continuing hardships and low economic prospects endured by the country's poor created ideal conditions for drug lords smuggling cocaine and other narcotics from South America on to Mexico. Most of the violent street gang activity centers around this illegal drug trade. But during our entire stay we never encountered anything even remotely resembling the 'mean streets' of Guatemala. I'm sure there are many gang members here – and some very scary neighborhoods like we have back home – but OAT did a nice job of steering us clear of them. Not once did I feel threatened or fear for my safety during this trip (um, with the possible exception of the zip-lining excursion!).

Around 5:00pm we crossed the border into Honduras from the small town of El Florido. We had to get off the bus and go inside the immigration building and have our

passports stamped, paying a $3.00 entry visa fee. It took us another forty minutes or so to reach our hotel in Copan. The Honduran countryside looked pretty much like the Guatemalan countryside: beautiful forested valleys. But then again, after a long bus ride, everything looks the same. We were booked at the Clarion Hotel near the Copan ruins. While it was a little far in terms of walking distance from the downtown Copan area, I actually thought this was the best hotel of the tour. The rooms (and bathrooms, in particular) were big and modern and contained (*Hallelujah!*) a coffee maker. The restaurant and other facilities were good, and the pool/lounge area was quite large and opened up in the center of the hotel. For those who enjoy serene, relaxing environments, the Clarion is situated on a scenic hilltop overlooking the Copan valley, surrounded by nature trails.

After checking in and squaring our luggage away, we gathered in the hotel restaurant at 6:30pm for a nice, leisurely dinner. The staff had put several tables together for us. Luis had taken our dinner orders on the bus and phoned them into the restaurant so they would have everything prepared when we arrived. Of the group, I was the only one who ordered the steak; everyone else had fish. I sat next to Howard, Jerry, Bev, Jean, Luis and our driver, Herman. We spoke about our travels (which is common for tour members) and shared jokes and otherwise had a pleasant time. At one point during our dinner a large moth did a swan dive into Barbara Boose's mashed potatoes that led to quite a few chuckles. By 8:00pm I was back in my room, thoroughly exhausted. I put out my clothes for tomorrow and recharged my camera batteries. The electrical system in Central America runs on the same 120 volts we use back home so I didn't need the two separate converters I had brought with me. After calling the front desk to request an early morning wake-up call I tried to watch some television but soon fell asleep.

Day Three

I awoke early – by 4:30am – and made several cups of coffee in my room. After showering I wrote in my journal for about forty-five minutes before heading downstairs for breakfast. It was 6:30 and the only other person I found in the restaurant at that hour was Howard Boose. He was an early-riser like me and we became breakfast buddies from that moment onward. We were always joined later by some of the other tour members, but Howard and I 'opened' the hotel restaurants each morning. I treasured his company. A retired manager with NCR, following a successful career in the military, he and his wife, Barbara, were both well-traveled (more than fifty countries and counting) and I enjoyed hearing all his stories. In his late seventies, Howard was very active, despite a bad back, volunteering as a docent for a museum back in Ohio (probably why he is so interesting to listen to). I always looked forward to our breakfast chatter, even when we quibbled over politics (he is a staunch conservative Republican; I'm a more liberal-minded Democrat).

I returned to my room after breakfast to brush my teeth. Before heading to the lobby for our full day excursion, I rechecked to see if all my camera batteries were properly charged and then put my blue plastic rain poncho inside my backpack (the weather forecast called for intermittent showers throughout the day). By 8:00am we were onboard the mini-bus heading to the Copan archaeological ruins. It was a short drive to the entrance and by the time we arrived it was already drizzling. The sky was gray and overcast. I prayed it didn't rain all day. Waiting for us at the entrance was a local tour guide named Rodolfo Alvarez who led us through the ruins. Luis told us on the bus that we were lucky to have Rodolfo as our tour guide since he is considered one of the best in the region. Besides his expertise on the ancient Maya, Rodolfo also serves as a guide specialist whenever important groups or scholars visit the site.

We got off the bus in the parking lot area and followed Rodolfo to a visitors' center where he advised us to use the bathrooms before we entered the actual site (there are no public facilities within the park ruins, so it was essential to go *now* before we went inside). It was drizzling steadily, and most of us put on our rain gear. Rodolfo showed us a detailed site map of the Copan ruins outlining just how big this former Mayan city was. It originally extended the entire length of the valley, with a burgeoning population pushing outward from the main city, creating various suburbs and urban extensions. Once we cleared the gated entrance we marched along a natural trail towards the main plaza section of the site, colorful macaws flying above us. On either side of the trail were forested mounds that actually concealed Mayan temples or buildings, and judging from the amount of earthen mounds we saw there was plenty of excavating yet to be done here.

People have been living in the Copan valley for over three thousand years; the first record of a stone structure dates back to the 9th century BC. And while little is known about the actual pre-dynasty culture of Copan, from 426 AD onward there is a *fairly* precise recording of its history, chiseled on steles and temples throughout the main plazas of the city. These stone markings indicate that a Tikal king orchestrated a coup here and established the first line of what would become a great Maya kingdom which lasted between 400 and 900 AD, controlling the southernmost reaches of the Maya world in Mesoamerica. The first ruler of Copan was actually a foreigner, a warrior named *K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'*, who was not only sponsored by the king of Tikal but also had links to the kingdom of Teotihuacan in central Mexico. In a statue found in Copan, *K'uk Mo'* is depicted as a Teotihuacano warrior with goggle eyes and a war serpent shield. He also ordered the construction of buildings with architectural designs similar to those found in Tikal and Teotihuacan. The dynasty founded by *K'uk Mo'* produced 17 kings spanning four centuries. During this time, Copan expanded throughout the valley and grew to encompass over 20,000 inhabitants, a very sizeable city-state for Central America during the Late Classic period. Although not as grand as Tikal, the remarkable sculptures and hieroglyphics found here have provided archaeologists with an invaluable historical background of the Maya political world.

The decline of Copan occurred gradually. As the population grew, more and more arable land within the valley was uprooted and turned into residential centers. The city increasingly relied on its vassal states for food and supplies, losing its economic

independence at a time when its neighboring states were becoming stronger through trade. In essence, Copan had become too big to support itself. Perhaps the biggest blow to the kingdom occurred in 738 AD when the long-ruling king, *Uaxaclajuun Ub'aah K'awiil*, was captured by the vassal city-state of Quirigua and beheaded. This led to Copan's decline as a military power, forcing the city to be bullied or subjugated by its neighbors. The lack of food and the spread of disease amongst the poor eventually took its toll on the elite, as well. With the decline of the royal family's prestige (following the death of *K'awiil*) and the constant food shortages and ensuing plagues, the social order of the city unraveled and people began to abandon Copan. By the end of its rule, in the early 9th century, the city had fewer than 5,000 inhabitants.

We spent the next several hours touring the Copan ruins. Rodolfo led us first to the Acropolis, the royal complex of the city on the south side of the site encompassing the West and East Plazas. The West Plaza is bordered by two elevated temples (numbered 11 and 16), and contains a sculptured altar known as Alter Q built by the last credible king of Copan, *Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat*, in 776 AD (he was the 16th ruler; very little is known of his successor whose brief reign saw the disintegration of the kingdom). We sat along the bottom steps of Temple 11 while Rodolfo gave us a 15-minute lecture on the ancient Maya. In order to better understand what the temples of these Mayan cities signified, archaeologists had to dissect the Maya's philosophical view of the world. Using a stick pointer, Rodolfo outlined a circle on the mud before us, and drew a line through it. The upper part represented the sky, from where the creators (gods) of the universe exist. The bottom part represented the underworld, the realm of the dead. The purpose of the temple pyramids, in a nutshell, was to show the local population that the kings were 'in touch' with, or descended from, the spiritual world, thus legitimizing their rule. The height of these temples signified contact with the sky gods, and the underground tombs or chambers were designed to deal with the underworld. This was the overall gist of Rodolfo's lecture. Most of us found his explanations quite simple to follow…*um, in the beginning*. Later on, he began spewing information like we were prepping for a mid-term.

The West Plaza seemed to be a ceremonial center where kings were crowned or rituals pertaining to their legitimacy were held. Some archaeologists even believe the West Plaza was periodically flooded to form a small lake, representing a body of primordial water in their cosmic worldview, to give the place a real ethereal appearance during important ceremonial dates. Alter Q, which rests at the base of Temple 16, is carved in superb relief with the features of the 16 great kings of Copan. Beneath the altar is a sacrificial vault that contained the bones of 15 sacrificed jaguars and several macaws, further evidence this place was used to coronate the new rulers. Temple 16 is the highest structure in the Acropolis, and was built to honor the first ruler of Copan, *K'uk Mo'*, who is entombed inside the pyramid. In the middle of this temple are six skull carvings. Subsequent rulers continued to build new platforms over the original structure, a concept used by all Maya kingdoms: each pyramid was actually built over an existing pyramid.

We made our way around the West Plaza, passing a section which contained the foundations of what archaeologists believe may have been the dwellings of the royal family, and entered the East Plaza, known as the Plaza of the Jaguars. This court was

enclosed by stepped structures resembling a stadium. Rodolfo told us this place might have been used as a theater. Atop the northern section of the East Plaza is the throne building of *Uaxaclajuun Ub'aah K'awiil*, the 13th ruler of Copan, known as 18 Rabbits, probably the most prolific builder of the city. His steles and structures are among the best carved and preserved. Inside the East Plaza are two tunnels that run underneath the Acropolis and can be accessed by paying an additional fee; the guidebooks suggest avoiding them, though, since they are very narrow and unspectacular.

Rodolfo had us sit along the bottom steps of the East Plaza while he lectured us again on the glories of 18 Rabbits. This was the great Mayan king who was captured by his vassal, the ruler of the city of Quirigua, and beheaded. Surprisingly, the death of the king did not lead to the immediate downfall of the city. In fact, life pretty much continued as before for the commoners. But psychologically, the shock of the king's death shook Copan to its political core, and for the next 17 years there were no major royal structures built. At this point Rodolfo passionately reiterated the theory of how Copan became too big to sustain itself, comparing the over-population of the city to modern day metropolises like Tokyo, Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro. Before our very eyes, Rodolfo morphed from tour guide to radical Green Peace activist, launching into a tirade against big business and global warming that would have made Al Gore proud. I'm not sure about the others, but his impending 'gloom and doom' predictions were a real bummer, and I began to tune him out. I'm not trying to be insensitive here, but if I wanted to spend my vacation in a whirlpool of depression and fear… *I'd go visit my ex-wife*.

After his lecture we split up and started to explore the East Plaza. We climbed the steps of the courtyard structure along the eastern side, enjoying a phenomenal view of the thick jungle surrounding the ruins. The Copan River was just below us (due to the forest canopy we could not actually see it); a large portion of the city was once washed away by this river, and engineers were brought in to re-route the waterway to avoid further erosion of the site. Many of us had our pictures taken standing in the carved entranceway of 18 Rabbits' palace throne. It resembled the open mouth of a large serpent complete with stone teeth and fangs. From here, we made our way behind the throne building and descended into the enormous expanse of the Great Plaza, probably the largest court I've ever seen in my visits to Mayan city-states.

There are various structures surrounding the Great Plaza. One of them is the actual front side of Temple 11 (from the West Plaza we could only see the back of it) which is also known as the *Temple of the Inscriptions*. This structure is believed to be the palace of the 16th ruler of Copan, *Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat*, built over the tombs of some of his predecessors. The top of the stairway is carved with groups of hieroglyphics, probably depicting the ascension of the king. At the foot of Temple 11 is a large stele (a stone carving) commemorating the life of *K'ak' Yipyaj Chan K'awiil*, the fifteenth ruler of Copan (believed to be entombed here, as well). We gathered around this stele while Rodolfo lectured away.

From here, we walked eastward across the grassy open courtyard to Temple 26, known as the *Hieroglyphic Stairway*, perhaps the most famous building at the site.

Although built in sections over several decades, the main construction is credited to the 13th and 16th rulers. The structure contains 63 steeply inclined steps covered in thousands of carved glyphs detailing the history of the royal house of Copan from the 12th ruler onward. Along the border of the stairway are ramps inscribed with more reliefs and glyphs. Not all of the history is understood, though, since portions of the stairway were damaged and the stones jumbled. We sat around the large stele at the foot of the temple (which depicted the feather-cloaked image of *K'ak' Yipyaj K'awiil* with glyphs describing a solar eclipse) in front of a stone altar showing a plumed serpent with a human head emerging from its jaw. To prevent further erosion of the carvings the stairway is completely covered by a long tarp roof. Rodolfo launched into another very lengthy (and most of us thought, *unnecessary*) lecture about the stairway that included so much detail he ended up losing his audience. Group members began yawning, looking about in boredom. I'm sorry, but there is only so much information a group of tourists can absorb in one sitting. My suggestion for tour guides: *keep it simple*!

We continued walking north towards the area known as the Central Plaza, passing the enormous Ball Court, the second largest in all of Central America. The actual rules of the ancient ball game are not known. It was played, in one form or another, since around 1400 BC. Apparently, different regions throughout Mesoamerica had different rules and the game gradually changed in scope. Based on carvings, archaeologists believe the game probably resembled modern day racquetball to the extent that it required keeping a solid rubber ball in play against a wall while points were scored. These Mayan ball courts can be found as far north as Arizona, and as far south as Nicaragua. They vary greatly in size, but most had long narrow alleyways where the ball could be bounced from side to side. The stone rings used as goal posts were actually a late addition to the ball courts, most of the older versions just had two walls. There is an on-going, often controversial debate over the purpose of these games in the ancient Maya world. The game was played recreationally by Maya communities, but they also had a ritual component during sacred ceremonial days and events. Some scholars believe that the players may have been sacrificed afterwards. Rodolfo adamantly 'hog washed' most theories concerning the ritual sacrificing of the Maya, stating this was a European-inspired myth created to portray the indigenous population as barbaric, justifying their conquest and utter subjugation.

We entered the wide-open courtyard of the northernmost section of the Great Plaza. Copan is known for its series of portrait steles situated in a processional fashion along the central plaza and the royal Acropolis. Just beyond Structure 4 – a large platform with four stairways in the middle of the square – is a large group of these steles, most of them are intricately carved depictions of the 13th ruler – the great 18 Rabbits – and his life. One of the most striking is Stele C, which has remarkable carvings of 18 Rabbits as a young man on one side, and his image as an older man on the other. This particular stele still retains some of the original red coloring from the 8th century. Near the Structure 4 platform is another interesting stele with glyph markings representing the four great kingdoms of the Classic Era: Palenque, Calakmul, Tikal and Copan. Rodolfo stopped at several of these individual stone monuments, giving us more information. By now the group had splintered off, wandering around the Great Plaza taking photos. I was kind of

embarrassed for the man, seeing as how he was so knowledgeable and passionate about his work. To his credit, he took it all in stride, shrugging his shoulders at one point and stating, in a humorous tone, *"I'm surprised they stuck with me this long…I usually lose my audience back in the Acropolis*."

The tour was now officially over and we headed for the parking lot. Most of us tipped Rodolfo well (some out of guilt, I assume). We were exhausted from the site visit…and utterly famished. It was around noon; we drove to the heart of the colonial town of Copan for lunch (this is the small village near the ruins established by the Spaniards). The place had the familiar feel of every colonial town I've ever visited: narrow, grid-like streets paved with cobbled stones and lined with balconied two-level structures. We ate at an establishment called Don Udo's. I sat with Bev, Jerry and Sheila. The food was pretty good: macaroni salad, grilled chicken with veggies and yellow rice, and yogurt topped with fruit for dessert. Like me, Jerry and Sheila are huge fans of live theater (I think Sheila's family has a history on Broadway). We spent a great portion of our lunchtime discussing the shows we'd recently seen, and I told them about the theater venue in South Florida. Following lunch, the group took a stroll to the town plaza about three blocks away. Luis gave us an hour (although we ended up taking longer) to walk around the downtown area or shop for souvenirs. I was able to take some nice photographs of the streets radiating out from the main square. Copan is a small, sleepy town with a laid back atmosphere; its economy is based on the tourism trade associated with the ruins.

By 2:30pm we were back at the hotel. The afternoon's horseback riding excursion had been cancelled due to the rain. Luis felt it wouldn't be safe riding horses along wet or muddy trails (although, we saw other tourists doing just that on our drive back). To compensate, he offered to take those of us who were interested to two *additional* archaeological sites not normally seen by tourists. By 3:00pm, nine of us (Jerry, Sheila, Howard, Ron, Barb, Casey, Connie, Freddie and I) joined Luis and Herman on the bus; we drove up a bumpy dirt road through the wooded hills near our hotel, to an archaeological site called *Rastrojon*.

First identified by a group of archaeologists in 1979, this site just recently opened to the public. Located in the densely forested hillsides approximately 2 kilometers from the main ruins, Rastrojon has been labeled a warrior settlement; its primary purpose seemed to be defensive in nature. Archaeologists believe the structures here may have been used as a fort to protect the Copan valley. Obsidian spears and flints found at the site indicate a military barracks. Strategically situated in the mountains, Rastrojon had a commanding view of the valley from both sides, making it easier to spot potential enemies and prepare for combat. The site also had a continuous flow of mountain spring water, which made it an ideal place to live. The name 'Rastrojon' was given to the area by locals more than 60 years ago. The word refers to stubble, in this case the dense undergrowth which covers the surrounding hillsides, hindering access and providing excellent cover from attackers. So far, about 14 structures have been unearthed here, but most are still being restored and amount to nothing more than heaps of stone blocks. Apparently, this area is prone to earthquakes and over time the resulting mudslides breached the walls and caused many of the structures to sink or collapse, forcing the inhabitants to abandon the settlement.

Considering the inaccessibility of the site, archaeologists marvel at some of the buildings found here; they were constructed of high quality materials, with some of the best intricately carved reliefs in the entire valley.

Rastrojon is not a large site, and we followed Luis from structure to structure, mostly over a hilly dirt path, as he enlightened us on the history of the area. Structure 3 consisted of what looked like a sizeable stone block home that sunk into the ground due to geological activity. In the center of the site is a mass of crumbled stone blocks, part of another collapsed building called Structure 10, which represents one of the finest homes in the valley. A group of archaeological workers were in the process of restoring and/or reassembling this building, which was covered by a tarp roof. Sections of this home have already been restored. The central carved image on both the north and south sides of Structure 10 are of a supernatural feline, combining elements of the puma and the serpent, and displaying large ear flares and butterfly wings and heavy-lidded mountain eyes (symbolizing Witz, a Mayan god and the origin of the first mountain that gave rise to creation). As a result of these carvings archaeologists believe the Maya may have referred to this area as the Precious Puma Hill. We took a group photo posing in front of one of the restored walls that had an image of a royal ancestor (possibly the 12th ruler of Copan) emerging from the mouth of this feline figure (symbolizing that from the mouth of the Sacred Witz Mountain this king appeared).

We spent thirty minutes at Rastrojon – more than enough time to see the entire place – and quickly boarded our mini-bus. The second archaeological site we saw that afternoon, the *Sepulturas Group*, was closing soon, so we hurried down the mountain road to get there before it did. The Sepulturas Group is a series of elite residential homes located in the woods immediately surrounding the ruins of Copan. At one time, a kilometer-long *sacbe* (a raised paved road) connected this community to the Great Plaza. When we arrived at the site the workers were preparing to shut down for the day but Luis schmoozed them into giving us forty minutes or so to explore the ruins. We walked down a dirt path until we reached the main dwellings, along the way we saw other hiking trails that extended into the valley. The site was beautiful, surrounded by the serenity of the forest.

We gathered in the courtyard of one of the structures while Luis gave us the historical low-down on the Sepulturas Group. This particular area of the valley had been used since the Early Pre-Classic days (2000 to 1000 BC) as a settlement site. Roughly 2500 years ago these early settlers began constructing large platforms here made with cobbled stones and started building elaborate tombs (suggesting an elite class of people). By the 800 AD, the Sepulturas Group became a large well-to-do complex or neighborhood of about fifty structures arranged around 7 major courtyards. Archaeologists also believe a subdivision of this group included wealthy non-Maya traders from central Honduras who brought goods to Copan.

In one section of the courtyard Luis showed us an exposed underground tomb. Apparently, the courtyard was built over the burial sites of the previous owners (in the Mayan tradition of honoring your ancestors and keeping them close by). Many of the

exhumed skeletal remains turned out to be children believed to have died during epidemics plaguing the city (especially towards the end of Copan's mighty rule). One thing was definitely clear as we walked from one platform dwelling to another: this place was obviously the domain of rich people. We even saw a fairly large, communal kitchen structure with the remnants of a stone cooking area. Behind this particular building archaeologist found discarded garbage, giving them an insight into the diets of the Maya elite. These folks ate a wide variety of food, as opposed to the simple staple of the poor, enabling them to have a longer life expectancy. We finished our tour inside the main courtyard of the largest dwelling at the Sepulturas Group site. It is called the *House of the Bakabs*, a palatial home owned by a powerful nobleman from the time of the 16th ruler. On both sides of the main courtyard entrance we saw intricately sculpted exteriors (including statues, now headless, holding a bird in one hand), inside was a magnificent stone bench carved with hieroglyphics detailing the life or importance of this nobleman and/or the king.

From the Sepulturas Group we returned to the hotel shortly after 5:00pm. I went to my room and wrote in my journal. At 6:15pm I joined the gang in the hotel lounge area. They were celebrating 'happy hour' with bottles of wine and hors d'oeuvres ordered by Luis. I do not consume alcohol, so I joined the group late. This, of course, led to a series of questions like "where were you?" and "why don't you have a drink?"…well, the simple truth is that I am a recovering alcoholic who has been sober for many, many years. I have nothing against partying, or having a good time, I just do not like being around the smell of alcohol (or intoxicated people). It's the same for cigarette smoke; I used to smoke one pack a day, but when I quit I became intolerant of the smell and now I can't be around smokers. Again, it was nothing personal, and I hope the group did not take offense when I missed these happy hour sessions throughout the trip.

At 6:45pm we boarded the mini-bus and drove into town to have dinner at a unique restaurant called *Carnitas Nia Lola*. The exterior of the two-storey wooden building was completely decked out with decorative string lights, reminding me of Christmas. The inside was just as festive, the walls covered with all sorts of cool memorabilia resembling a typical sports bar back home. We went upstairs where they had put several tables together for us. The specialty of the place was grilled meats and on Luis' recommendation most of us ordered the mixed kebobs (chicken, pork, beef and veggies). Our waitress brought us our drinks and tortilla appetizers balanced on her head ala Mayan tradition.

At my end of the table were Jean, Howard, Ann, Casey and Barbara. It took a long while before our main course arrived; meanwhile, the conversation became very lively, filled with humorous stories from everyone. Casey talked about a trek he and his son made through Europe almost forty years ago, which, at one point, included a three-legged dog and a horse carriage! Howard and Ann launched into a hilarious recounting of their college years (Howard graduated from Princeton; Ann from Drew University). They sang their school songs and remembered bygone shenanigans. *I loved it*. Howard told us fascinating stories about some of the famous people he went to school with, including Thomas Kean (the former governor of New Jersey) and Carl Icahn (former corporate

raider). I had a sentimental moment with Jean when she showed me a picture of her son that she kept on her smart phone. He passed away earlier in the year after a bout with cancer. When I saw it, I did a double take; he looked just like me, a bit chunky with a shaved head. She leaned against me – giving me a one-armed hug – and with tears in her eyes mentioned that every time she looked at me she thought of her son. Um, I got a little misty-eyed myself.

Our food finally arrived, and while it was good it didn't quite live up to the hype (or the wait). I thought my grilled meats were a little dry and the portions rather small. Luckily, Jean and Ann shared some of their plate with me and I was able to fill up. We got back to the hotel by 9:15 pm. It had been a long day. I was thoroughly exhausted, but I didn't go to bed immediately. I began to watch the impending disaster developing in the central Philippines on CNN. Typhoon Haiyan would become one of the strongest such storms in recorded history to make landfall, with sustained winds of well over 200 miles per hour. I had served as a Peace Corps volunteer for almost one year in the city of Tacloban, on the island of Leyte, where the eye of the storm was reportedly heading. I couldn't help but think about the people there, and the friends I had made during my stay. I said a prayer for them before going to bed.

Day Four

I was awake by 4:30am. I shaved, showered and made several cups of coffee in my room. By 6:30am I was sitting with Howard for breakfast in the hotel's restaurant. They had a nice buffet spread. An hour and a half later we were all aboard the mini-bus for our long drive to Guatemala City. The sky was overcast, with low-lying clouds blanketing the mountains. When we reached the outskirts of Copan, we stopped briefly along the side of the road to visit an art shop. The owner, and head artist, is a local sculptor whose work included the stele replicas used at the Copan ruins. Luis introduced the man to us but I forget his name. He was middle-aged with a considerable paunch, and was busy sculpting a small stone piece when we arrived. According to Luis, this man has taken it upon himself to teach local poor kids his craft so they can learn a vocation and support themselves later in life. His son is also a fairly good sculptor. We saw several carved stone pieces on display; tiny, intricately detailed replicas of the steles we had seen the day before at the Copan ruins, the stone material supposedly coming from the same nearby quarry the Maya used to build their ancient kingdom. I purchased one for my souvenir case.

We continued heading west for about thirty minutes, crossing the border at El Florido. We were now back in Guatemala, driving down highway CA-11 through the mountainous valley of Chiquimula. The Copan River was to our left. From time to time, in the more remote areas, we had a police escort. Luis grandly told us this was due to OAT's prominence in the Guatemalan tourism industry, and how grateful the government

was for all the business the company generated. *Hmmmmmm*. I can usually spot a guide's malarkey a mile away, and this one seemed like a doozy. First, the math didn't add up. OAT conducts only a half dozen or more Route of the Maya tours each month (for 11 months) and even with a maximum number of 16 tour members per group, that's just over a thousand tourists a year. Even if my math was off, and you doubled the figure, it's just a tiny fraction of the overall tourism draw in the country. I suspected, and so did many of my traveling companions, that the *real* reason we had a police escort was probably due to increased robberies in the more rural areas. After all, each tour bus is clearly labeled with the word 'Turismo', signaling to the entire countryside that we're a bunch of money-carrying foreign yokels, a veritable cash cow on wheels. Don't get me wrong, nobody minded the police escorts…heck, I wish I had one everywhere I went…but I would prefer a little more *honesty* with my security because it made me wonder what else I was not being told.

This was a long driving day, and in between scheduled stops Luis enlightened us with some cultural tidbits. He spoke briefly about religion, stating that Catholicism is no longer the main religion of Guatemala (although, my own research seems to indicate otherwise; I believe Luis' comments were based on his own conversion to Protestantism). Catholicism was first imposed on the local population by the conquering Spaniards, but in the past several decades there has been a growing Protestant movement within the country. Today, more than 30% of Guatemalans consider themselves either Evangelicals or Pentecostals. Recent census reports indicate a total (but growing) protestant population of just over 40%, so the Catholic Church definitely has a run for its money here. Continued missionary work by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has led to an increase in *their* following, as well, with just over 1.5 % of the country identifying themselves as Mormons. In addition, there are small communities of Jews, Muslims and Buddhists found in Guatemala.

One interesting thing Luis mentioned was the practice of *inculturation*. This is a term referring to the adaptation of Christianity to initially non-Christian groups, and the influence these groups later had on the evolution of Christian teachings. This is a phenomenon more noticeable within the Roman Catholic Church. While Jesus instructed his disciples to spread his word throughout the world, he never told them how to accomplish this. Historically, whenever Christian missionaries came across different (and defiant) cultures they tended to allow certain adaptations of the theology to incorporate local belief systems as a way of winning over new converts. Later, as Christian teachings took hold, the indigenous peoples began to add some of their own customs and previous beliefs to certain rituals. This was evident in most of the small Mayan towns we visited; symbolic Maya icons and images were incorporated into the Catholic churches, and certain ancient practices have been intertwined with Catholic rituals and events. I experienced the same thing traveling through the Peruvian countryside a few years earlier.

Someone in the group asked Luis about courtship practices in the countryside. I will paraphrase his response:

In traditional Mayan villages throughout Guatemala there is no concept of casual dating like we have back home. But there are social norms concerning courtships which generally apply to everyone. As an example, Luis gave us a hypothetical situation. Young women usually wash clothes by the river or at a community washing fountain. If a young man wishes to court a woman, he will usually wait for an opportunity to 'run into' his potential mate as she returns home with the laundry, offering to carry the heavy load for her. If she accepts, a gesture that signals interest on her part in the young man, this will become public knowledge soon enough; in these tight-knit Mayan communities news travels fast. Once the girl's family finds out about the young man, she is not permitted to leave the house for a period of two weeks (to quell any 'amoral' rumors which may arise from public gossip). During this time the boy has made his intentions known to his own parents, who now pay the girl's family a friendly visit, bearing traditional cigars and rum (symbols of friendship and good luck). While the visit is deemed neighborly in nature, its real purpose is to bring the families together. There is no talk of the courtship whatsoever. If the parents hit it off, the girl is later asked if she wants to marry this boy. If she says no (usually not likely at this stage) then the village elder breaks the news to the boy (who must accept the decision and leave the girl alone). If she says 'yes', then the courtship becomes official, and the boy can now visit her on a regular basis. During this courtship phase she begins making her wedding dress. There is an official engagement party paid for by the boy's parents. The whole village is invited, so it can be an extremely expensive affair. Throughout the engagement party the boy must be at his future father-in-law's side, catering to the man's every whim, showing loyalty to the head of his soon-to-be extended family. Once the wedding is over (I'm not certain who pays for this) the girl goes to live with her husband's family for two to three months. During this time, the marriage is consummated and the girl cannot visit her family. After this short period, she returns home and is asked by her parents if she still loves this boy and if she wants to stay with him. If she answers 'yes', the marriage becomes official; if she says 'no', the marriage is dissolved as if it never happened (even if she is pregnant). As for my view on all this? *I think I'll stick to eHarmony…*

We made a thirty-minute stop at a modern shopping mall within the city of Chiquimula (the state capital) where we used the bathroom facilities and exchanged money into *quetzals* – the Guatemalan currency – at a local bank. The current exchange rate was 7.8 quetzals for one US dollar. I took a photograph of the McDonald's sign overlooking the valley from the food court area. Every McDonald's I've visited around the world usually incorporates a local specialty into its menu; this one offered a chicken salad spread and cheese melts. Before leaving Chiquimula, Luis stopped the bus beside a roadside fruit vendor and purchased some *Chico Zapote* for us to sample. This native tropical fruit (technically a large ellipsoid berry) resembles a smooth-skinned potato. The sap of its tree (*chicle*) is used to make chewing gum. It was very sweet and mushy, with a malty taste.

We left the city of Chiquimula heading north on highway CA-10, crossing into the state of Zacapa. The scenery rarely changed along our drive; for the most part it was lush mountain valleys as far as the eye could see. In the small town of Estanzuela we stopped to visit the Museum of Paleontology and Archaeology founded in 1974 by Woolfolk

Saravia, the engineer who discovered the fossil species on display here. Not very large, the museum had a modest collection of fossils ranging from the Cenozoic to the Paleozoic eras, and an underground level dedicated to ancient Mayan artifacts, including burial vases, pottery, tools, carved stones and handicrafts. Along the staircase leading to the underground section were several painted replicas of the Maya myth creation depicting the *Sacred Twins Battle in the Underworld* (I'll explain more about this mythology later in the journal). It took us less than an hour to see the whole thing. The coolest exhibits, by far, were the assembled bones of a large Mastodon and Giant Sloth, and the laid out fossil remains of an ancient whale.

Back on the bus, we continued our journey towards Guatemala City, turning southwest along highway CA-9 shortly after leaving Estanzuela. We could see the Motagua River just to our right. The sky was still gray, but the mountain scenery more than made up for it. Around 12:30 pm we stopped to eat lunch at a very nice restaurant located inside the Hotel Longarone in the town of Teculutan. After lunch, we continued our drive down CA-9, through a very fertile fruit-producing valley. Most of the local farmers have contracts with the Del Monte Corporation.

Shortly after crossing into the state (or department) of El Progresso we made another brief stop in the town of San Cristobal Acasaguastlan to see the famous colonial cathedral erected in 1654. The church has been restored and is absolutely beautiful, on par with any of those we saw in Antigua. Situated along the northern banks of the Motagua River, the old Maya-Nahuas settlement of Acasaguastlan was once considered a very holy and sacred place. Following the conquest of the Spaniards, the local inhabitants were forced to flee into the surrounding mountains and the colonial city of San Cristobal was established in its place. Today, the small town is known as San Cristobal Acasaguastlan. During its heyday, this was a very big hub in the Spanish colonial empire of Central America, becoming a great trading center. In 1812, one of the first pro-independence riots broke out in its town square.

We toured the inside of the Church of San Cristobal, admiring the tall arched ceiling – painted a brilliant white – and its intricately carved wooden altar. The religious statues displayed along the sides of the nave were dressed in costumes. As we left the church, Luis spotted a young man who worked with the municipality and he asked him to show us the stored marimbas the town uses on festival days. Marimbas are wooden percussion sets played by striking a mallet against the keys or bars to produce a musical tone. Resonators are attached to the bars to amplify the sound. These bars are arranged like on a piano. The young man took us to a municipal storage room adjacent to the church and played both marimbas for us.

Thirty minutes later we made another quick stop along CA-9 to buy ice cream cones at a place called Saritas, a famous national restaurant chain known for its delicious ice cream. As we continued towards Guatemala, the affects of the sugar did most of us in. At one point, I turned around and found everyone snoozing. As we approached the outskirts of the capital we began ascending a narrow two-lane road. Along the way we passed the remains of the last railroad bridge built by the historic United Fruit Company more than

100 years ago (now abandoned and rusting). The higher up we drove the more incredible the view of the valley. Luis made Herman pull over by the side of the road near an obsidian quarry known by the ancient Maya as *Shayal*. According to Luis, the obsidian produced by the mountain wall across the road from us was considered the best in the region, and obsidian jewelry and artifacts quarried from this place have been found as far north as Teotihuacán in central Mexico.

We must have resembled an odd-looking lot hunched over the side of the highway trying to pick up obsidian pieces from the ground. I palmed a dozen small black rocks only to discover they were not actually obsidian. Luis eventually crossed the highway and brought back some large pieces of obsidian lying next to the mountain wall and broke them along the ground, producing smooth, sharp glass-like souvenirs which he then handed out to everybody. As we were standing by the roadway, a truck bearing a *U.S. Mail* sign pulled up behind us. Ann saw it first and immediately brought it to my attention. I am a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service, and when I looked up from my obsidian scavenger hunt I did a double take. *What the f*---, I thought, half-expecting to see one of my supervisors! Turns out that many of the used trucks on the roadways of Guatemala are actually purchased in the U.S. Apparently, nobody bothers to remove the logos; we saw many trucks bearing other famous brands, as well.

The closer we got to Guatemala City, the worse traffic became. A vehicle breakdown on the two-lane road ahead of us brought movement to a crawl. Angry drivers would zip in and out of lanes, cutting off other motorists. When we cleared the site of the breakdown the traffic conditions didn't improve. It was the beginning of rush hour in the nation's capital and the streets were utterly congested. Making matters worse was the absence of stop signs or traffic lights on most street corners, creating a gridlock situation that would make any New Yorker cringe. Luis instructed Herman to take a shortcut underneath a tall steel bridge that led us past one of the worst shanty towns in the city, a sprawling ghetto of makeshift dwellings erected along the steep sides of the valley. But no matter what path we took into the capital, the traffic was horrific. It took us nearly an hour and a half to reach the Hotel Stofella, located in the ritzier Zone 10 section of the city.

After checking into our hotel I put away my suitcase and washed up. Dinner was on our own that night; Luis recommended some restaurants in the immediate vicinity. At 6:30pm I rendezvoused with Ron, Barb, John and Freddie in the lobby and we walked two blocks to a place called San Martin's Restaurant, a very popular eatery known for its sandwiches and soups. When we arrived all the tables inside were full, so we had to sit in the patio section. Because of the altitude, the temperature had dropped and I felt quite chilly. Most of us ordered soup served in a pretzel bread bowl. John and I also ordered the Nano Sandwich, the house specialty. To drink, I opted for a traditional Guatemalan hot chocolate. It was Friday night and the city was hopping. The sidewalks and restaurants were packed with weekend revelers. Although the portions were small, the meal was very satisfying. By 8:00pm we were heading back to the hotel when I suggested we visit the area casinos. John was too tired and retired to his room, but the rest of us

spent the next hour walking around the neighborhood in search of the gambling establishments.

Crossing the streets here proved to be a challenge even at this hour; traffic was still heavy and there didn't seem to be a pedestrian right-of-way anywhere, so once we decided to cross a road we did so with considerable alacrity. This particular section is considered the more high-end part of the city, with many famous international hotels nearby. We asked the concierge at the Intercontinental Hotel where the casinos were located, and he directed us to the Westin and Holiday Inn. We entered both, but I found them disappointing; they were not very large and contained mostly slot machines. On the way back to our hotel I stopped to buy a large coffee at McDonald's. I wanted to stay up for a while and write in my journal, but despite the coffee I soon became sleepy and went to bed.

Day Five

I was awake by 5:30am. I went downstairs to the lobby and inquired if there was any way I could get a cup of coffee at that hour. The sleepy-eyed clerk manning the front desk directed me to a service area in the back of the hotel where they had a coffee machine. When I got there, the coffee pot was nearly empty so I decided to make a fresh batch. I dumped the remains of the pot in a nearby sink, washed it and then rummaged through the counter draws until I found paper filters and a can of ground coffee. For some stupid reason, though, prior to replacing the pot and filter, I flicked the 'on' button thinking the machine wouldn't work until I put water in the reservoir. Only, this thing didn't *have* a reservoir; it was hooked up to a faucet or water tank hidden beneath the counter. Scalding hot water came pouring out instantly. In my haste to turn off the machine I inadvertently tipped over both the can of coffee and the glass pot, sending them to the floor, the pot shattering on impact. Steaming hot water was now cascading over the counter and mixing with the broken glass and coffee grounds. And no matter how many buttons I pressed I couldn't stop this infernal thing. As the pool of black water spread rapidly across the service area I managed to locate the electrical plug and yanked it out of its socket. I took one sobering glance at the mess I just created and decided it was time to 'get out of Dodge', returning to my room by clandestinely avoiding the lobby and taking the staircase. *Um, not one of my finer moments, I grant yo*u.

I took a lukewarm shower and waited patiently until 7:00am for the restaurant to open, meeting up with Howard for breakfast. I had placed my luggage out in the corridor for pick up; we were leaving for Lake Atitlan later that morning. By 9:00am the gang was assembled on the bus for a tour of Guatemala City, or *Guate* as the locals are fond of calling it. Located in the south-central part of the country, Guatemala City is the most populous urban area in Central America, with approximately 2.5 million inhabitants. The city is divided into 22 zones and continues to grow rapidly. Many of its new residents

tend to be poor folks from the countryside who move here in hopes of finding some kind of sustainable employment, living in the ever-expanding shantytowns along the edges of the valley. The crime rate here is high, especially at night, and certain zones should be avoided at all costs. Our hotel was situated in Zone 10, considered one of the safest sections of the city, a wealthy neighborhood of high-rise condos, ritzy hotels and modern museums and shopping areas.

We began our tour by traveling south along Las Americas Avenue, a wide two-way street divided by a well-maintained island dedicated to the countries of the region. Every nation within the continents of North and South America has been invited to erect a monument in the center of this avenue. We passed interesting memorials from Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, the U.S. and so forth. At the end of the Las Americas Avenue is a large statue of the very popular John Paul II who visited the region three times during his tenure as pope. He canonized Pedro de San Jose Bentacur in 2002, a Guatemalan, creating the first Central American saint. Just beyond the statue we stopped at the Plaza Berlin, a small park in Zone 13 rendering a magnificent view of the southern portion of Guatemala City. On one side of this plaza is a piece of the infamous Berlin Wall brought here by members of a German community residing in the city.

From the Plaza Berlin we turned around and went back north along Las Americas Avenue heading towards the historic district. Along the way we passed more interesting monuments, including one entitled the Statue of the Mother (breast feeding) and a bronze likeness of the famous exiled Nobel Prize-winning poet, Miguel Angel Asturias, inaugurated in 2012, showing him in formal suit with his head held high and arms thrown back. We also passed the Jerusalem Plaza with its big Star of David, and, curiously enough, the official Muslim mosque of Guatemala City nearby.

As our bus turned up La Reforma Avenue we stopped briefly to photograph the Our Lady of the Anguishes Church, a private Catholic chapel built between 1927 and 1941 by Felipe Yurrita, a very wealthy coffee plantation owner. Legend has it that in 1902, during the eruption of the Santa Maria volcano in the western highlands, Yurrita's plantation was littered with falling debris and he prayed fervently to the patron saint of Arevalo, Spain (where he was born) to spare the lives of his family and neighbors. The chapel was built years later as his votive offering to the Virgin Mary for saving his life. The design of the church is quite unusual. Yurrita incorporated everything he liked best about current European architecture into its construction, using a Baroque style mixed with Roman, Byzantine and Moorish elements. A large cross sits atop a sphere at the tip of the main tower, but for some reason it is tilted to one side, giving the impression that something is askew with the entire building.

We continued north along 7th Avenue, crossing into the *Centro Civico* (Civic Center) area of Zone 4. Most of the city's government buildings – built in the 1950's and 1960's – are found here within close proximity to each other. Some are adorned with works of art. The Municipal Hall and the Social Security Building have mosaics by Carlos Merida, and the Bank of Guatemala is covered with fascinating relief murals by Dagoberto Vasquez depicting the history of the country. Further north we passed the Supreme Court

Building and the National Library, and several more monuments, including the bizarre-looking Italy Plaza monument, with its statue of what looked like two babies suckling from a bear. We drove around the bustling central market area, and even passed the notorious National Police Headquarters where, according to Luis, detainees during Guatemala's civil war simply vanished. We headed south on 9th Avenue, turning right onto *12 Calle* (street). We got off the bus to admire the beautiful archway of the *Palacio de Correros* (the national post office building) now host to the Metropolitan Cultural Center. From here, we went west for several blocks and turned right onto the historic 6th Avenue, making a large U-turn back to 7th Avenue via *9 Calle*, passing the famous Hotel Pan America (where artists like Picasso once congregated).

Our final stop in Guatemala City was at the *Parque Central* (the Main Plaza) in the heart of the historic district of Zone 1. We had to get off the bus quickly because traffic was very heavy in this area. On the north side of the Main Plaza is the National Palace (now a cultural museum) where the former presidents of the republic once lived. It was built between 1939 and 1943, with an architectural mix of Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-Classical styles. I'm not sure why the palace was turned into a museum, but today it houses a wide collection of works from various Guatemalan artists.

We toured the Metropolitan Cathedral located on the east side of the Main Plaza. Municipal workers were busy building some kind of platform near the church for an upcoming festival. Luis told us to be leery of pickpockets here. The Cathedral serves as the main church and Archdiocese of Guatemala City. Its main body was built combining Baroque and Neo-Classical designs between 1782 and 1815, with the towers added fifty years later. This structure has withstood several earthquakes, and while the inside is sparsely decorated it still impresses due to its massive size. The ornately decorated altars and saints found here, together with a collection of paintings, were originally taken from the Cathedral of Antigua (which once served as the Spanish colonial capital). There is a statue of a Black Jesus hanging on a cross next to the main altar that draws thousands of pilgrims monthly. When we were there a couple of devotees made their way from the entrance of the Cathedral to the image of this Black Jesus on their knees in order to pray. Outside, in front of the Cathedral, twelve pillars have been erected in tribute to the thousands of civilians murdered or disappeared during Guatemala's civil war.

Back on the bus, we drove through the historic district and made our way out of the city along a famous street called the *Periferico* which connects Zones 7 and 11. We traversed the Incienso Bridge – the highest road bridge in all of Central America – over a very deep ravine. To one side of the bridge, nestled tightly along the edges of the valley, we could see one of the largest, and grittiest, shantytowns in the city. So many distraught Guatemalans have jumped off this bridge that the city had to build a tall chain-link fence along its edges. This sobering fact was the last tidbit of information Luis imparted about Guatemala City, and it got me thinking about my own personal feelings concerning our brief visit. My guidebook described the city as being "big, dirty, dangerous and unforgettable" or, "big, dirty, dangerous and fascinating" depending on one's experience. I was not overly impressed with the capital, perhaps I needed to spend more time here,

but I definitely felt the rest of the country had more to offer the first-time visitor than Guatemala City.

We were now on our way to Lake Atitlan, traveling on CA-1 (known also as the Pan-American Highway) through the mountainous highlands of Guatemala. On our way out of the city someone asked Luis about homeownership in the country. He told us the real estate market in Guatemala is different than in the U.S.; parcels of land are usually handed down through the family and not purchased. The difficult part is obtaining the money to build a home on this land. The ongoing rate for a government bank loan is 13%. If you think this is high, consider that the alternative is a private bank which can charge up to 50%. Luis said most folks (like him, for example) borrow or save enough to build a simple dwelling, and then later add extensions and/or refinements as the family-size warrants or the monetary situation improves.

Roughly an hour into our drive along CA-1 we crossed into the department or state of Chimaltenango, passing its capital, a small municipality with the same name. Known for its textiles, pottery and brick-making, Chimaltenango had the hardscrabble feel of a border town, and I took some very interesting photographs of the place as we drove by, including one picture of what looked suspiciously like a brothel. According to Luis, the garage mechanics here are famous for their skills, especially in restoring used cars to practically new. This led to questions concerning the unique buses we saw zooming down the roadways throughout much of our trip. Called *chicken buses* by the locals, these are actually retired American school buses imported into the region and then restructured into public transportation vehicles.

The chicken bus undergoes an incredible metamorphosis from yellow school bus to mighty road warrior: the engine is completely revamped and souped up, the body is either lengthened or shortened, the interior is gutted and new seating put in, a holding rack runs along the top, and the whole thing is painted bright new colors and decorated with chrome trim and fancy lights. They come in many different designs and *all* are marvelous to look at. The operation of the bus requires two people, the bus driver, who is normally hauling-ass from one stop to another, and his helper, who does everything else, including collecting money from the passengers, storing away luggage and cargo on top of the bus, and announcing stops along the way (most of this done while the thing is still in motion!). The name chicken bus derives from one of two sources: the live animal cargo (chickens, pigs, goats, etc) that is normally secured on the roof of the vehicle during transport, or the fact these buses are often crammed with locals resembling ‘chickens on a truck’. The drivers are absolutely amazing, traveling at astonishing speeds – sometimes through very tight quarters – rarely getting into accidents. This is the main transportation mode in Guatemala, responsible not only for taking large numbers of passengers from one point to another but also moving farm products and other goods to nearby markets, keeping the local economies afloat. They travel quickly on the roadways because they must maintain a strict schedule, reaching main destination points within a certain time frame or else face steep fines by local municipalities who monitor and license their business.

By 1:00pm we stopped for lunch at a nice restaurant near the hillside town of Tecpan, owned by Guatemalans of Swiss descent. In fact, the place resembled a Swiss ski lodge, complete with a raging fireplace (to ward off the increasing chilliness). An hour later we continued on our journey towards Lake Atitlan. We were climbing higher into the mountains, at one point reaching a maximum height of 8,800 feet, heavy fog and mist shrouding the roadway. When it started raining, Herman's driving visibility was reduced to maybe a few yards but that didn't slow him down one bit; he kept pressing forward, expertly maneuvering the winding road (while I fidgeted nervously in my seat, silently praying we didn't drive off the hillside in the blinding fog). Eventually, as our elevation lowered, the fog and rain (*and my own personal anxieties*) dissipated.

Somebody asked Luis about the bottles of gasoline we occasionally spotted in the middle of the road. He told us they were for sale by someone in the village. Apparently, Mexican gasoline bound for the larger cities is sometimes diverted en route to these rural towns (usually through pilferage or hijackings) and the fuel is later sold at a reduced price to motorists and truckers. A bottle of gasoline is usually placed on a stand in the middle of the road with a sign denoting the price. What we found odd was that there was no one around; at least, not that we could see. Luis told us if somebody wanted to purchase the fuel all they had to do was pull over and honk their horn and the seller would appear from somewhere. How often was the bottle of gasoline stolen, we asked. I mean, for crying out loud, it was just sitting in the middle of the highway! Luis smiled knowingly and said, *"Would you like to see how f*ar *you would get if you stole that bottle? These Mayan communities are very close, if someone were to take the bottle without paying for it, they wouldn't make it to the next village before a group of men stopped them."* This led to a discussion on local crime and punishment. Since almost all of the people in a Mayan town belong to a similar tribe or group, the elders can usually mete out justice. Everyone knows one another, so committing a crime against a neighbor would bring about swift repercussions, which may or may not involve the *actual* authorities. For example, you wouldn't want to be a rapist in these parts…not unless you like having your testicles sheared by a machete.

We reached the city of Solola shortly after 3:00 pm. This is the capital of the state or department of Solola which encompasses the Lake Atitlan area, nestled just 600 feet above the actual lake. Our first stop here was the enormous market place. Solola is the economic center for this highland region, and hundreds of vendors congregate here daily to sell their goods. According to Luis the busiest day of the week is Sunday, when the market is jammed pack. We followed our guide through the seemingly endless stalls and connecting aisles and alleyways, much of it under corrugated tin roofs, witnessing an army of colorfully-clad vendors hawking their wares from tables or baskets laid on the ground. The selection of goods here was amazing; fresh and dried fruits and vegetables, an incredible assortment of fish, fresh and salted (some from the lake and others brought in from the coastal areas), butchered meats and poultry, live stock, textiles and clothing, shoes, electronic gadgets, toys, paper products, household and basic toiletry items. This was a veritable one-stop shopping center!

Luis cautioned us not to take photographs of the vendors unless we ask permission first. Often times they will request some kind of remuneration (a few *quetzals*) to allow their picture to be taken. Luis interviewed several of the vendors, relaying questions from us. He would either give them money or buy something in order for us to photograph them. One of the persons he interviewed was a middle-aged Maya woman named Paulina who was sitting on the ground selling vegetables. She told us she rents the small square lot (roughly a few meters long and wide) for 25 quetzals a week, and sells vegetables from either her home town or that she buys wholesale from other vendors. She brings her goods to the marketplace via the ole reliable chicken bus. We met another Maya vendor, a weathered-looking older male who was patiently knitting while waiting to make a sale. Many of the residents of Solola are *Kaqchikel Mayas,* a subgroup of several hundred thousand, and as we made our way through the market area I could hear them speaking in both Spanish and in their own distinct language.

From the market place we went to the main plaza to visit the Catholic Church of Solola. When we arrived, a large group of people had assembled around a makeshift stage across from the church where two clowns were performing. They were telling jokes through a microphone and from the reaction of the crowd they were quite funny. We toured the inside of the church for a few minutes. It was a simple structure, not a large or particularly interesting one as far as Catholic churches go, but the reason Luis wanted us to see the interior was to show us the stained glass windows. Actually, I don't think they were stained glass, at all, merely painted over. What was unique was the design, which at first was not so evident until Luis pointed it out to us. The windows were outlined in the shape of bats. To the local Kaqchikel Mayas, the bat is a symbolic animal in their culture, representing good luck or protection from evil spirits *or something like that*…its use within the construction of a Catholic church is a prime example of enculturation, of how indigenous people incorporated their own belief systems into the Catholic faith. There were also numerous plus-sign symbols on the church columns that I originally assumed were crosses. The plus sign is another Mayan symbol representing the universe (the four compass points: north, south, east, and west).

We got back on the bus and drove a short distance to the Solola cemetery. The above ground tombs and crypts were painted in bright colors, some with elaborate designs resembling a house or a mini-pyramid. The entire cemetery was perched along the side of a hill rendering an awesome view of Lake Atitlan. I couldn't help thinking that if you had to spend eternity somewhere, you couldn't pick a nicer spot than this. The view, considering the solemnity of the surroundings, was magnificent. Luis showed us one tomb in particular where a previous OAT tour member had gotten himself locked inside. Apparently, the door to the tomb was open and this curious tour member went in to have a look around, inadvertently pushing the door shut which locked instantly, entombing him temporarily with the corpses. The caretaker did not have the keys to open the tomb, so someone had to notify the family who owned it. Like I mentioned earlier, news travels fast in these Mayan communities, and by the time the OAT member was 'rescued' from his predicament, half the town had shown up to catch a glimpse of this American *genius*. According to Luis, the incident became the object of much merriment throughout the city, even making front-page news in the local papers the following day.

We drove down a two lane winding road to the small lakeside tourist town of *Panajachel* where our hotel lodge was located, stopping briefly along a cliff's edge to take photographs of the spectacular view. Panajachel survives exclusively on the tourism trade surrounding Lake Atitlan. The entire town seemed to be made up of nothing more than hotels, lodges, hostels, restaurants, bars and souvenir shops. We checked into the Regis Lodge – situated on a narrow street lined with stores and packed with pedestrians – around 5:30pm. The place was nice, with a hot tub and sauna. I spent the next hour or so writing in my journal and sorting out my clothes for the next two days. By 7:00pm the gang was seated in the hotel's dining room for an included dinner. I had a huge and hearty bowl of tortilla soup (a house specialty). Afterwards, I accompanied Bev down the street adjacent to the hotel looking for souvenirs, but soon had to return to my room because my stomach began 'acting up'. Prior to going to bed, I needed to use the bathroom several more times. I hesitantly chalked this up to the soup.

Later, I dreamt I was a human sacrifice being chased by Kaka, the diarrhea god …

Day Six

I awoke several times throughout the early morning. My stomach still felt queasy. I had scheduled a 5:30am wake-up call with the front desk the night before, but since my room didn't have a phone I wasn't sure how they would actually wake me. Luckily, I was already up when the bellboy knocked on my door; he tapped so softly I barely heard him. I decided from then on to use my trusty wind-up alarm clock. I've had it since 1985 – a gift from my mom as I left for the Peace Corps – made in China when products that said "Made in China" were rare and usually sucked. But this ragged-looking little square piece of plastic and metal springs has traveled the world with me, never once letting me down.

After showering and shaving I wrote in my journal and watched the devastating news coming from the Philippines on an international news network. Typhoon Haiyan had torn through Tacloban City (where I had spent a year teaching world history at a small college) killing thousands. The town was completely wiped out. I said a silent prayer for the survivors. At 7:00am, with my stomach still a bit unsettled, I decided to brave some coffee and breakfast. As usual, my buddy Howard was there, along with several other members of the group. Apparently, I wasn't the only one suffering from intestinal discomfort; several other members were complaining of stomach issues, as well. After breakfast, I returned to my room to use the bathroom one final time before our daylong sightseeing excursion around Lake Atitlan. I ran into Sheila just before we got on the bus and she showed me a cage in the back of the lodge filled with beautiful peacocks. We also checked out the sauna and hot tub (the water generated by thermal springs) which some of the others had used the night before. Since I anticipated chilly weather in the

mountainous areas I didn't bother packing a bathing suit. It hadn't occurred to me there might be hot springs.

We drove a short distance to a lakeside pier and boarded a small motorized passenger boat captained by a man named Vicente who Luis praised as the best skipper this side of Magellan. At first, I thought, how hard can it be to navigate a lake? But then, as we got further out, there was actually a strong current, and the waters, according to Luis, could get quite choppy and nasty at times, requiring the skills of a seasoned boat man like Vicente. It took us almost 45 minutes to reach the Mayan town of Santiago, our first stop that day. The morning was gorgeous – a relatively clear, blue sky – as we crossed the great expanse of Lake Atitlan.

Lake Atitlan is a caldera, formed by massive volcanic eruptions over a long geological period. Although the lake does not flow directly to the sea it provides water to two nearby rivers (via considerable seepage) that do. With a maximum depth of over 1,100 feet, it is the deepest lake in Central America, with a surface area of roughly 52 square miles. The name *Atitlan* is a simple Nahuatl word meaning 'at the water'. Several Mayan towns and villages exist around the lake, descendents of the tribal groups that have lived here for centuries prior to the Spanish arrival. Mayan traditional dress, customs and languages (predominantly those of the *Tz'utujil* and *Kaqchikel* groups) are still used and observed in this area.

As we traveled across the lake, the beauty of this body of water was marked in the distance. Lake Atitlan is uniquely molded by deep escarpments, and ringed by three majestic volcanoes on its southern flank. Two of these volcanoes – *San Pedro* (the oldest and dormant) and *Toliman* – lie within the caldera, while *Atitlan* is a relative new-comer, forming over the last 10,000 years along the southern rim and still active today (its last eruption was in 1853). The volcanoes here are part of a chain known as the Ring of Fire, a horseshoe-shaped geological area encompassing most of the Pacific Ocean which accounts for the vast majority of all earthquakes and eruptions within the hemisphere. This might sound frightening, but believe me, being in the middle of that lake and looking up at those volcanoes was absolutely breath taking. As we approached the town of Santiago, we saw a section of secluded yet elaborate lakeside summer homes built by wealthy Guatemalans. There were also fishermen in the lake, casting nets from small motor-equipped rowboats. Along the edges of the water several local women were washing their laundry. Most of the lakeside towns have community washing fountains for this purpose, to prevent pollutants from entering the lake, but some Maya women do not like to break with tradition, preferring to wash their laundry in the same fashion as their ancestors.

When we docked at the Santiago pier we were met by a young man wearing traditional Mayan dress named Roberto, who assisted Luis during our visit. Roberto was studying English in school hoping to land a job as a tour guide one day; in the meantime, he supported himself by making interesting souvenirs on the side. Sitting next to Luis at the front of the boat, Roberto removed a regular plastic ball point pen from a bag and then began whirling different colorful threads around it until the pen was completely

covered in a beautiful design with the name 'Jean' on it (Jean could not make this excursion because she was feeling ill – something intestinal – and Luis thought this would make a nice gift for her). What was amazing about this process – which took all of three or four minutes – was that Roberto rarely glanced down at the pen as he was wrapping it in the different intertwining threads; instead, he was looking at us and fielding questions. Most of us ordered several pens for souvenirs at a cost of about $2 apiece, writing our requested names on a sheet of paper. During the tour of Santiago, Roberto walked beside us keeping a watchful eye on the group, all the while weaving his souvenir pens, managing to finish all of them (several dozen, at least) by the time we boarded the boat to leave. Incredible.

We disembarked and assembled on the pier where Luis asked an elderly Maya street vendor if she wouldn't mind showing us how she puts on her headdress. She was wearing a colorfully woven *cintas* on her head, a long textile ribbon (often four or five feet in length) that is carefully wrapped in a circle until it forms a disc-like hat. She kindly undid the *cintas*, allowing it to unfurl along the ground like a snake before reattaching the ribbon to her head in minutes. Luis tipped her for her service. From the pier we walked up a brick-paved street lined with shops, congregating momentarily on a corner while Luis and Roberto commandeered several tuk-tuks for us. These are motorcycles equipped with carriages that are used as taxis in much of the Third World. We splintered into groups; I rode with Ann and Roberto for about ten bumpy minutes through the narrow, crowed streets of Santiago. Our destination was a private home in the middle of a nondescript block where a deity statue known as the Maximon (pronounced ma-shee-mon) was currently being kept. This turned out to be one of the most *bizarre* religious experiences I've ever encountered in my years of travel.

Maximon is a folk saint venerated by the local Maya people in the western highlands of Guatemala (although we found evidence of his following everywhere we went on this trip). His origins are a bit murky, since no one is really sure how this deity came to be so highly-regarded amongst the highland Maya. Maximon is thought to be an incarnation of the pre-Columbian Maya god Mam, who represented different things to different tribes, but mostly is associated with mountain spirits, earthquakes and rainfall. So this is both a deity to be worshipped and feared. Amongst the *Tz'utujil* Maya of Santiago, Mam is seen as the deity of merchants and travelers…*and of witchcraft*. Locals will often request a shaman to perform a special ritual asking for Maximon's help or intervention in a personal matter. Typically, an offering is made to his effigy in these cases. Many scholars also believe Maximon might be an enculturation of the Catholic St. Simon (for the record, the Catholic Church does not approve of this deity). In fact, the name *Maximon* is probably derived by combining *max* (a Mayan word meaning tobacco) and Simon. Tobacco is an important part of any Maximon ritual, as I will explain shortly.

Here is where the story of Maximon gets really weird. Maximon is not necessarily regarded as a saint in the traditional Catholic sense of the word. He is often associated with Judas Iscariot. How so? Well, let's look at the folklore legend surrounding this deity: his claim to fame was that one day while the village men were working the fields *he slept with all their wives*. Enraged, the village men lobbed off Maximon's arms and

legs (the reason his effigy is small, consisting basically of a head and torso). Somehow, despite his terrible deeds, Maximon became a revered deity, possibly because he was already believed to be a spirit. This is what baffles outsiders. He is not seen in the benevolent light of Christian saints, but rather as a bully one wouldn't want to anger, often associated with powerful deities from the Underworld and Heaven. Supposedly, requests concerning revenge or success at the expense of others are things Maximon is believed to be able to grant; he's like the patron saint of the mob, a spiritually 'connected' *goodfella* who can get things done if the price is right. And what tickles the fancy of this incorrigible spirit besides sex? *Maximon loves tobacco and rum*! During rituals, the shaman puts a lighted cigar or cigarette in his mouth and pours rum down his wooden throat. And he is something of a fashion hound, often decked out in colorful shirts or a nice suit jacket, covered with scarves and a spiffy hat given to him as offerings.

The current Maximon – a wooden effigy carved decades ago (every 52 years a new one is made) – is moved yearly from house to house. No one is certain when this tradition started, but it seems to stem from two sources: the fact the Catholic Church outlawed his image during colonial times and it was necessary to keep him hidden, or maybe it was to prevent the holder of Maximon from becoming too powerful. Either way, elders of the order within the community who worship Maximon decide who will keep him for the year. Usually, a designated shaman is selected for the task. During the twelve months that Maximon is under his care, the shaman cannot work (and sometimes will not venture outside) in order to tend to the deity, performing rituals for anyone who requests a favor.

The house we visited belonged to a fellow named Nicolas, the current caretaker/shaman in charge of Maximon. He greeted us when we arrived and led us to a special hall where the effigy was propped up at one end of the room. We sat on benches arranged along the sides of the wall and stared at the statue. Maximon was wearing a cowboy hat, a suit jacket with multiple scarves around his neck, traditional Maya pants (which fit him nicely since they are usually just below knee-length and the bottom of his legs are missing), and fine leather boots (tucked underneath the pants). His wooden facemask, carved separately, had deep furrows in it…not unlike that of a man who spends his entire life smoking, drinking and chasing women! In front of Maximon was a table containing nine sets of three candles which Nicolas lit when we sat down.

Luis officially introduced Nicolas to us before the shaman performed a blessing ritual, asking Maximon to protect us during our trip. He lit some kind of incense inside a metal plate and quickly the room filled with almost suffocating white smoke. Prior to the ceremony a lighted cigarette was placed in Maximon's mouth, and at one point a half-pint bottle of rum was poured down his gullet; the torso has a hollowed out section with sponges to absorb the liquid. Nicolas knelt in front of the effigy and prayed for us in Spanish (he may have uttered some words in Maya, as well; although I'm not absolutely certain about this). I understand one must be considerate of others' religious beliefs, especially when visiting their country. And believe me, I am no stranger to bizarre rituals; my own neighbors in Miami practice *Santeria* – a religion which mixes West African tribal influences with Catholicism – and sacrifice goats and roosters on a near weekly

basis in their backyard! But, quite frankly, I didn't know what to make of this Maximon, with his sinful ways and bullying reputation being so revered and worshipped. I tried to take in the solemnity of the moment; I tried to understand. *Really*. But all I could see – and forgive me for being so politically incorrect – was this overdressed wooden midget with a lighted cigarette in his mouth. During the ritual I had to focus hard *not* to make eye contact with my fellow travelers for fear of developing a serious case of the giggles.

When the ceremony was over Nicolas briefly went over the legend of Maximon and fielded questions from us while Luis interpreted. Along the wall hung other masks, some hundreds of years old, mostly from former Maximon effigies, including one of his wife (yes, this horny scoundrel is married!). According to Nicolas her mask is sometimes removed to another place whenever they have a fight (*I kid you not*). I was curious to find out how Nicolas would know when these two fought. Although, judging from the perpetual scowl on her facemask she looked as if she was pissed at him all the time. In a way, she kind of reminded me of my ex-wife. Afterwards, most of us thanked Nicolas for the blessing and placed donations (just in case) in a vase on the way out.

From here, we headed over to the town square to visit the local Catholic church. It was Sunday, and based on the crowd packed inside the whole town seemed to be attending mass. The women wore colorful skirts and shawls; the men wore cowboy hats and traditional short, white, pinstriped pants fastened with a sash. Luis told us the origin of this traditional clothing stems from colonial times. Supposedly, hacienda owners forced their workers to dress in a certain way so they could be easily identified. After independence, many Maya groups proudly adopted the clothing as a form of *cultural* identity, signaling which group or town they belong to (each area's traditional dress is different, kind of like a team's uniform).

We arrived at the church as the priest was giving communion. Afterwards, the mass let out and the church plaza rapidly filled with people. We took this opportunity to tour the inside of the church. The magnificently carved wooden altar had images of Maximon all over it – some subtlety hidden within the iconic Catholic images – further evidence of enculturation by the locals. There was a specific carving of Maximon tied to a pole, which is a symbolic ritual performed by highland Maya during Holy Week (I think it has something to do with subduing evil things or spirits). We asked Luis why the Catholic hierarchy would permit such images of Maximon within the church, and he said it was because the church here had been abandoned for a while and when the priests returned to perform mass they decided not to offend the townsfolk by having the images removed. He mentioned the incident of a priest who found the effigy of Maximon on the church steps and promptly threw it off the property, only to incur the wrath of the locals who then threw *him* off the church grounds, as well. From that point on, Maximon was tacitly accepted as a means of keeping peace with the Catholic faithful in Santiago.

We walked the short distance through the church plaza to what appeared to be the city's main square and the adjoining town market, which was bustling with people. This was a smaller version of the market place we saw in Sololá, but more intense due to the Sunday crowds. I took many clandestine photos of the women, who looked so interesting

in their colorful clothing. Our tour of Santiago completed, we began walking the three city blocks to the pier. Luis gave us some time to shop in the stores lining the streets. I purchased two beautiful hand-woven scarves in one of them. I decided not to hard bargain and pretty much paid what the vendor requested. Luis reminded us these vendors hail from very poor families, and the price they get for their products help them survive on a day-by-day basis. After hearing *that*, I could hardly bargain without feeling like an exploitative asshole. To my chagrin, I soon discovered the 'exploitative nature' of the whole bargaining process didn't seem to apply to the locals. I'm certain my gringo guilt got me reamed on many of these prices!

Back on the boat, we paid Roberto for the pens he weaved for us and said our goodbyes. Our next stop was lunch in the small lakeside town of San Antonio Palopo. It took us thirty minutes to get there; the water was very choppy by now. The restaurant where we had lunch did not have a name. It was a private establishment situated over a souvenir shop overlooking the lake. We sat on a balcony while the staff put bowls of food before us: beef and chicken dishes, veggie soup, baked tomatoes, mixed yellow rice, refried beans and warm tortillas. What a feast! For dessert we had cookies and ice cream. Afterwards we spent thirty minutes shopping in the downstairs souvenir store before re-boarding our bus. Herman was waiting for us at the San Antonio Palopo pier when we arrived for lunch. We drove along a two-lane isolated perimeter road around a portion of the lake back to Panajachel. When we reached our hotel Luis instructed those of us who were doing the zip-lining excursion to please assemble on the bus in fifteen minutes. Only Ron, Freddie, Casey, Connie and me had signed up. We were back on the bus by 3:30pm heading for the *Reserva Natural Atitlan* (or Atitlan Nature Reserve). I had never been zip-lining before, and while the others assured me it would be fun I was inwardly shaking like a leaf.

The Atitlan Nature Reserve is nestled within the San Buenaventura Valley about a quarter of a mile outside of Panajachel. A former coffee plantation several hundred acres in size, it has been reclaimed by vegetation and wildlife and is now a nature park complete with botanical gardens, winding trails and even a butterfly pavilion. We arrived at the park shortly before 4:00pm. At this late hour there didn't seem to be any other groups scheduled for the zip-line canopy tour except us. Two park guides, who accompanied us the entire time, supplied us with plastic helmets, thick leather gloves and zip-line harnesses, adjusting and securing the straps to our bodies. I silently prayed these guys knew what they were doing. My weight hovered around 245 pounds; I was afraid the nylon straps and metal rings would not support me. In fact, I envisioned my fat ass plummeting to the bottom of the forest where a puma (or something just as carnivorous) was waiting to pounce on my paralyzed body, eating my face as I screamed in terror. The guide fastening my harness saw my nervous expression and said, in Spanish, *"Don't worry; these harnesses are designed to hold up to 2,000 pounds."* Whew. I made a mental note to give this guy a good tip.

Prior to ascending the trail we were given a demonstration on how to control our speed and stop our movement on the zip line. Initially, having never done this before, I assumed there was some kind of brake lever on the pulley apparatus that whisks you

along. Imagine my dismay when I discovered my actual *hand* would be the braking mechanism (hence the thick gloves). Luis showed us how to do it. He got on top of a small boulder where a short zip line (maybe ten or twelve feet in length) had been set up for demo purposes. Once you took off on the zip line your hands were to be resting lightly on top of the pulley, as you reach the end of the line – prior to stopping – you're suppose to take your primary hand (in my case, the right hand) and starts tugging on the line behind the pulley. But Luis warned us not to tug *too* hard at first or we would stop abruptly, leaving us dangling over the valley. If this happened, he cautioned, we would then have to pull ourselves to the ledge with our hands, a very tedious and apparently nerve-wracking endeavor. My anxiety level rose exponentially. We each did exactly *one* practice run on the demo line; Luis kept assuring all of us we'd done great. I wasn't convinced. I mean, the demo line was low to the ground and only a few feet across, nothing compared to the height and speed we would actually be traveling once we reached the top.

We slowly ascended one of the nature trails; Luis and one of the two park guides leading the way while the other one brought up the rear. The scenery was beautiful. We climbed higher up a dirt, rocky path, above the local fauna and the canopy of the oak forest. We reached a platform and saw several spider monkeys swinging playfully in the trees. The sounds of exotic tropical birds could be heard everywhere. I was glad I had brought along my plastic bottle of water because I began perspiring heavily from the hike. We continued climbing, coming across the first of a about half a dozen suspension bridges we needed to cross on our ascent. Maneuvering those swaying, rickety wooden boards added a new dimension of fear to this whole exercise. I wasn't the only one who felt this way, either; a few of us decided to cross the later bridges individually just in case they couldn't support all our weight. We passed a beautiful waterfall while crossing one particularly long and frightening 'gang plank', and although the view was phenomenal I must confess I was too busy gripping the sides of the suspension wires to really enjoy it. We made several rest stops along the way to catch our breath. The park valley was approximately 600 feet high; the first zip-line point about half that distance. The combined hiking and altitude was taking its toll on me. I was breathing as if I just ran a marathon.

Finally, we arrived at the first zip-line jump point. *Whoa*. I took one look at the canopy below and balked. We were not zip-lining from tree-to-tree as I had previously thought; we were literally careening across the entire San Buenaventura Valley, from rocky ledge to rocky ledge. I was beyond scared at this point; I was terrified. My fear of heights – pardon the pun – reached *new* heights. I was about to say "no way" but Connie beat me to it. She refused to zip-line off the ledge by herself, saying she was afraid she could not stop her descent. When I heard this I smiled inwardly and thought: *At least I'll have company on the hike back down*! But almost immediately one of the park guides volunteered to go tandem with her. She discussed it over with her husband Casey and reluctantly agreed; suddenly, I felt like Charlie Brown when Lucy pulls the football away at the last moment and he lands flat on his back. *Aaaargh!* I had no choice now but to proceed. And let me disabuse my readers right now from any notions you might have concerning my bravery, for it was not backbone that propelled me to do this. I was 53

years old, the youngest member of my group. Or, to put it another way, Casey was 77, for crying out loud! If I decided to go back down the trail by foot I would never have heard the end of it. As a matter of fact, I'm certain the rallying cry as they slung themselves over the ledge one-by-one would have been: "See you below, *YOU PUSSSSSSY*!"

The first to zip-line was one of the park guides. He set himself up on the other end, waving a red towel to let us know when to start slowing down. Luis went next, carrying our cameras in his back pack so he could take our pictures as we went across. He suggested I go third. His rational was that I was scared and if I waited to go last I might chicken out. A perceptive man, our tour guide. The zip line cable was so long (over a thousand feet) I couldn't see when they reached the end; both Luis and the park guide simply vanished in the foliage on the other side of the valley. *Gulp*. The second park guide hooked me to the cable. I dangled momentarily while I placed my hands gentle over the pulley as I had been instructed. The guide inquired if I was ready, but before I could reply he shoved me on my way.

I was flying through the valley 300 feet above the forest canopy, to my left was the waterfall cascading down the face of the mountain wall and to my right a spectacular open view of Lake Atitlan and its surrounding volcanoes. I only know this because Luis, when I reached the other side, asked me if I had seen the waterfall and the lake. I was too embarrassed to tell him I spent the entire ride (which felt like an eternity) repeating "God, please don't let me fall" over and over again while peering straight ahead, trying to catch a glimpse of the waving red towel. When I saw it, I panicked. I tried to slow myself down but when I tugged on the cable the speed of my body lurching forward jolted my arm backwards, momentarily stunning me. Meanwhile, I kept propelling faster and faster to what seemed like my eminent demise. This is when the park guide implemented PLAN B, a thick rope wrapped around the cable wire used to slow down zip-liners who couldn't do it on their own. He yanked so hard on the rope I stopped abruptly several feet before the ledge, the harness straps between my legs riding sharply up into my crotch. Thankfully, I was not yet afflicted with what I like to call *Old Man Balls Syndrome* because this would have been an extremely painful experience, indeed. Even still, the jolt was terrific. I didn't have time, though, to dawdle over my testis; Ron was careening down the cable just behind me and I needed to pull myself to the ledge and get the heck out of his way before the bottom of his shoes became permanently embedded in my backside.

Everyone else came in for a smooth landing. I think Ron and Casey were probably the best at this thing. Followed by Freddie. I became less nervous the further down the valley we descended. There were a total of eight zip-lines we had to take which zigzagged the park and brought us back down to the entrance. By the time we reached the bottom I was starting to feel like an old hand at this. The second cable proved to be the longest, and I managed to take in the whole view of the valley as I rode it. There were a few more scary moments, as well. During the middle of the descent some of the cables were at a steeper incline, which meant we came in faster than usual. And on one occasion I turned to get a better view of the lake and ended up spinning around. The same thing happened to Freddie. I was able to straighten myself out by extending my legs. All in all, despite my

fear, the excursion turned out to be a fun…or, better put, *exhilarating*…experience, one I am glad to say I did and can now (gratefully) scratch off my Must Do list!

As we were removing the harnesses, we thanked and tipped the two guides generously for their service. At the welcome center we each received a certificate stating we had been 'properly' trained on how to use the zip-lines. I guess they only hand those out if you make it down alive. On the ride back to the hotel, Luis had Herman stop the bus along the road so we could get off and take in the wonderful sunset over Lake Atitlan. A yellow glow illuminated the peak of San Pedro; lightening strikes flashed from the clouds suspended over the top of Toliman. Absolutely beautiful.

Before we arrived at the hotel we stopped at a local pharmacy to buy packets of Pedi Flora. Several tour members (including myself) were still feeling a bit queasy in the stomach and Luis suggested we use Pedi Flora to boost the natural flora in our intestines to prevent diarrhea. I purchased four packets, dissolving one in a glass of water each morning. By the following day my stomach was fine. In fact, everyone who took this stuff recovered nicely from their intestinal malaise. I had no more problems throughout the trip so I will give this product my wholehearted recommendation.

By 6:45pm, I met Ron, Barb, John, Freddie and Bev in the hotel lounge and we walked up *Calle Santander* (where our lodge was located) to the aptly named Main Street (the town's main avenue) and ate dinner at a restaurant Luis had earlier recommended called Los Chicos. They made great specialty pizzas here. John and I each ordered a large pepperoni; everyone else shared. There was also live entertainment; a young, three-man band playing awesome Spanish tunes. When we first arrived the place was empty, but by the time we left – around 8:45pm – the restaurant was hopping, attesting to its local popularity. The night was cool, a light drizzle started to fall as we made our way back to the hotel. Ron's stomach began acting up as soon as we left Los Chicos, and he had to make an emergency bathroom stop along the way. The previous evening he told me about a trip to Syria him and Barb took a few years ago where he'd contracted a terrible case of 'explosive diarrhea' after eating in a local restaurant and was not able to reach a bathroom in time. Based on his urgency now, I thought for a moment the poor guy was going to have a similar experience. Luckily, everything turned out fine. When I got back to my hotel room I found a TV station broadcasting the Sunday night NFL game. I watched some of it before falling asleep.

Day Seven

I was up by 5:00am; the bellboy knocked a little harder on my door this time. I showered, dressed, wrote in my journal and repacked. I also took another packet of Pedi

Flora (dissolving it in water). My stomach was feeling much better. At 6:45am I placed my luggage outside my door and headed for the hotel restaurant for breakfast. I sat with Howard, Barbara, Sheila and Jerry. Everyone wanted to know how the zip-lining went; I told them that it was fun, *but scary*. Jerry hardly ate. Apparently, he was coming down with something and had not slept well during the night. Over the next couple of days his condition worsened until a local doctor was brought in to see him at our hotel in Antigua. Luckily, it was just a bacterial infection (I think) and he was given medication which seemed to clear up the problem.

By 8:00am we were back on the bus heading towards Antigua, the old colonial capital of Guatemala. As we drove out of Panajachel we made two quick stops along the mountain highway to photograph the waterfall we'd seen the previous day at the park, and to get our last commanding glimpse of Lake Atitlan. There is a scenic spot just over the San Buenaventura Valley where you can fit all three volcanoes in one photo. From this vantage point, those of us who had gone zip-lining could also see the entire area we traversed from above. Unbelievable! Afterwards, we continued eastward on CA-1 towards Antigua, traveling through mountainous valleys and farmlands.

In the small town of Patzun, about an hour into our drive, we made two additional stops. The first was to witness how chicken buses are loaded with goods for the marketplace. We parked across from one of these colorful buses and watched as trucks of produce and other goods arrived from the nearby communities and a group of men quickly formed a line hoisting the goods from truck to bus in just minutes. Meanwhile, the bus assistant went about storing and coordinating everything onboard. Despite the overburdened cargo they still managed to squeeze passengers in, as well. To keep with their harried schedule, the bus was loaded non-stop the entire time we were there, with trucks pulling up every few minutes. Once the chicken bus was packed to capacity it would speed off on its destination and another bus would take its place in the loading area. It's interesting to note that the owners of the goods usually do not accompany their products to their final stop. There is a long-established 'honor system' between chicken bus operators and local merchants. The goods are delivered and payments are entrusted to the bus driver. According to Luis, this system works well since these are tight-knit communities where everyone has known each other for generations. For me, it was fascinating to watch this slice of the local economy in action.

Further into the town of Patzun we made our second stop at a communal washing fountain built next to a playground. This was another interesting cultural experience. Before getting off the bus, Luis handed us packages of cookies so we could give them to the children in the playground (and to the mothers if we wanted to take their pictures). The mothers were busy washing clothes along the edges of a large square-shaped concrete fountain. Doing laundry in this way affords the women of the community an opportunity to socialize and gossip. Because tour buses stop here regularly, bringing snacks and soda, they're usually happy to see us. We had a chance to talk to the women and find out about their busy day. The children were so adorable and gladly posed for pictures.

About forty-five minutes later, in the town of El Tejar, we visited a local tile and brick maker named Santiago, a gregarious 79 year-old who has been running his family business for decades. The town of El Tejar is known for this industry, although modernization has seen a sharp decline in family-run enterprises like this, as larger factories produce tiles and bricks at a lower cost. Santiago's enclosed compound consisted of his own home and a workshop area together with a large kiln to bake the tiles and bricks. His son, who I imagine probably runs the business nowadays, was out on an errand when we arrived and the only one working was a nephew named Reynaldo. This young man demonstrated how bricks are made from different-sized molds using clay he mixed himself. Not to be outdone, Santiago showed us how he makes curved roof tiles, molding two of them for us with a wooden paddle. Afterwards, we toured the kiln area where they had just baked a fresh batch of tiles and bricks; it was still warm, and the family was waiting until it cooled properly before they could unload it, a process requiring five men and one and a half days of labor. Reynaldo told us they needed to stack the kiln with 19,000 pieces in order to cover the cost of the firewood needed to keep the furnace burning and make a profit (which amounted to only $300 for all that work!). Realizing that this was a dying business, young Reynaldo was currently attending school preparing for another vocation.

From here we drove through the small towns of Pastores and Jocotenango, passing colonial-style buildings and town plazas, before finally reaching the cobbled-stone streets of Antigua. Our bus left us off in the town square where most of us had lunch at a famous restaurant called the Café Condesa. It was 12:50pm. Luis accompanied the luggage to Los Pasos, our lodge for the next three days, together with Jerry and Sheila. Jerry was feeling worse and wanted to go directly to his room, the poor guy. Luis instructed us to rendezvous at 2:00pm in front of the town square for an afternoon tour of the city. I had lunch with John, Freddie and Bev. Café Condesa was popular for its soups and sandwiches, and I believe that was what most of us ordered. The portions were not large, but the soups were magnificent, and the sandwiches were served on thick crusty bread baked right on the premises. After lunch, some of us walked around the main square taking photographs.

If it were possible to be transported back in time simply by strolling down a street it would be here. Remove the cars and buses and replaced them with horses and buggies and you would be hard pressed to tell the difference between the Spanish colonial capital of yesteryear and the present-day city of Antigua. All the streets were narrow, covered in cobbled-stones, and set up in a tight grid-like pattern radiating out from the main square. Most of the homes, or the facades at least, were wonderfully maintained colonial structures with massive wooden doors and small-gated windows, concealing the marvelously restored inner sanctums that are the amazing thing about this town. While all the streets look the same – neat rows of similar colonial dwellings – behind each enormous wooden front door is an architectural surprise: a lavish hotel, a hole-in-the-wall bar, a large restaurant or nightclub, a fascinating museum or an elegant boutique. One could spend days here exploring each building and never get bored. I loved this town from the moment we arrived, and I would gladly revisit it in the future. There are many foreigners living here, as well. In fact, Ron and I had the chance to interview one retired

American from Boston who'd been living here for nearly twenty years. We ran across him sitting on a park bench in the main plaza on our last day in the city. He told us his $1600 a month pension goes a long way in Antigua. I found him to be a little paranoid and evasive, though; Ron chalked that up to old age, but I suspected he might be a crafty fugitive on the lam!

By 2:00pm our bus pulled up to the main square and we climbed on board. A local guide named Sergio was waiting for us. Luis, as usual, praised the man's knowledge and told us we were lucky to have him guiding us that afternoon. As we drove to our first stop, La Merced Church, Sergio welcomed us to Antigua and gave us a brief background on the origin of the city:

Antigua Guatemala (the official name) was actually the *third* capital of the old Spanish colonial government in Central America. The first capital was established in the *Kaqchikel-Maya* city known as Ixmche. It was founded on July 25, 1524, St. James day, and was called *Cuidad de Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala* (City of St. James of the Knights of Guatemala). St. James, naturally, became the patron saint of the city. Continuous uprisings by the Kaqchikel Maya forced the Spaniards to abandon the first capital and move to a quieter location within a valley of the adjacent state of Cuidad Vieja. Massive flooding in 1541 destroyed the second capital and the Spaniards were forced once again to move. Third time's the charm, they say. The capital was *re-founded* on March 10, 1543, in its current location – about five miles from the second site – in the Panchoy Valley of present-day Antigua. The new capital was still known as the City of St. James of the Knights of Guatemala, and for the next 200 years this city served as the seat of the military governor of the Spanish colony of Guatemala (a region that included the southern portion of Mexico and most of Central America). A series of devastating earthquakes during the 1700's destroyed much of the city, and the capital was moved yet again to what is now Guatemala City. The new capital did not retain its former name, and was called the Nueva Guatemala de la Asuncion (the New Guatemala of the Assumption), as a result, the nearly abandoned former capital was referred to as Antigua Guatemala (or Old Guatemala), a name it has kept until today.

Dominating the horizon around Antigua are three *still* active volcanoes. To the south is the *Volcan de Agua* (Volcano of Water), towering at over 12,300 feet. In 1541, a massive *lahar* discharge from this volcano unleashed an avalanche of mud and water which inundated the second capital forcing its evacuation. To the west of the city are two more commanding volcanic peaks, *Acatenango* and the *Volcan de Fuego* (Volcano of Fire). Acatenango last erupted in 1972, and the Volcano of Fire is constantly active at a low level, spewing steam and gas on a daily basis (a large eruption occurred in 2012, but it did not damage any of the surrounding cities). Between the active volcanoes and the seismic activity of the region I'm surprised the townsfolk get any sleep at night!

If there is something lacking in Antigua, it certainly isn't churches. Branching out from *parque central* (the main square), this historic town encompasses only ten square city blocks, an area that can be easily covered on foot in one afternoon. Within this radius are more than 35 churches (both abandoned and in use) which amounts to about one on

every other corner. These religious structures really showcase the Spanish baroque architecture throughout the city. Some of the larger, abandoned Catholic churches (ruined by major earthquakes more than two hundred years ago) stand today as monumental reminders of a bygone era, their crumbling façades carved with fine religious sculptures. Because the city was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979 these hollowed out buildings have not been torn down, and some have been restored in sections.

Our first stop was La Merced Church, an active beautiful church first built by the Order of Merced as a male-only monastery back in the middle of the 1500's. In the late 18th century the church was reconstructed to withstand damaging earthquakes; the new design included a building of low height supported by wider arches and columns. But the beauty of this elegant church lies in the Spanish baroque façade, flanked by two bell towers also of low height, with its intricately decorated yellow and white walls containing religious statues imported from Europe. On top of the façade sits the statue of San Pedro Nolasco who founded the Order of Merced in the 1300's. This church is probably one of the best examples of baroque architecture in all of Guatemala. Inside the atrium of the attached ruined monastery is an enormous fountain (the largest in the city) with a stone cross which dates amongst the oldest surviving structures in Antigua.

We stood before the gigantic wooden entrance of the church (a huge rosary was suspended above the doorway) while Sergio launched into a very lengthy lecture about La Merced. He often spoke quickly, and with an accent that made him difficult to understand at times, and I think many of my fellow tour members soon lost interest in what he was saying. I know I sure did. He finally stopped talking long enough for us to actually go inside. The most striking thing for me was the effigy of Jesus Christ carrying the cross (carved in 1650) concealed in glass behind the main altar.

From La Merced we proceeded on foot, turning south on Fifth Avenue to see a famous landmark known as the Santa Catalina Arch, an enclosed passageway above the cobbled-stone street built in the 17th century connecting the old Santa Catalina convent to a school. The cloistered nuns would pass back and forth between the convent and school without ever having to step outside. This arch was the inspiration for the one we saw at the post office building back in Guatemala City. We continued walking south for two more blocks, reaching the central plaza where we toured Saint Joseph Cathedral. The original cathedral that once stood on this ground, an enormous structure named the *Catedral de Santiago* (the Cathedral of St. James, the patron saint of old Antigua), was constructed around 1542, but was damaged so severely by various earthquakes throughout its history it has only been partially re-built. Unfortunately, the richness of the baroque architecture has been lost following the post-earthquake re-construction. Only the facades' two towers remain intact; everything else has been re-created. Oddly, just half of the original cathedral was saved (the other half lay in ruins in back of the building). As a result, the main altar is actually to the *right* of the entranceway, creating a bizarre feeling as soon as you enter the church that something is terribly askew.

After touring the Saint Joseph Cathedral we walked around to the back of the structure to visit the ruins of the *original* cathedral. This was quite a contrast. In its heyday, the

Cathedral of St. James had more than two dozen domes, but today this hollowed out relic is missing much of its roof section. If you look up you're greeted with a surreal view of the sky through round holes were the domes used to be; along the edges of these domes, as if framing a portal to the Heavens, are carvings of angels. The large, empty stone altar has markings of what appears to be a stepped pyramid, which Sergio said was evidence of enculturation. Beneath this altar was a crypt where the bodies of the elite were once buried, including a famous Spanish historian who died in 1581. Despite its current state, with knocked down walls and columns strewn about like in some Hollywood disaster movie, you could still sense the grandeur of this cathedral. Sadly, the building cannot be reconstructed – due to its World Heritage Site status – so it just sits there like a giant undisturbed religious fossil.

By the time we were ready to leave, Sergio had exhausted almost everybody's patience with his non-stop chatter about every single item in sight. I know this sounds ignorant or ungrateful, but Sergio truly overdid it. There comes a moment when the tour guide has to 'wrap it up' and allow ample time for sightseeing and photo-taking. Sergio didn't understand this, or perhaps it was because his time with us was so brief he felt compelled to cram as much information in as possible. At one point, things got a little snippy when he asked some of the women if they were enjoying his tour, and Bev was honest enough to say she wasn't. I think Sergio's feelings were hurt; he countered by stating how historically important his city was and how most people found his tours interesting. To which Bev replied, "Hey, don't ask the question if you don't want to hear the answer." It led to an awkward moment, but her point was right on the mark. From here, we got back on the bus and drove to the San Francisco (St. Francis) Church and Sanctuary about a block from our lodge. The festive mood had dampened somewhat due to the earlier incident with Sergio, and a few members stayed on the bus, claiming they were 'exhausted', preferring to head straight to the hotel to check in. The rest of us followed Sergio onto the enclosed church grounds to finish our tour.

The members of the Franciscan Order that built the first church in Antigua (in 1541) were also the first Spanish settlers in the Panchoy Valley. The small chapel they constructed was later ruined and they began collecting donations to build the large sanctuary we see here today. Its original construction dates back to 1579, but it has been expanded and rebuilt over the centuries due to severe earthquake damage. The façade of the church is typical Spanish baroque, with twisted salomonic columns across its entranceway. There are sixteen vaulted niches extending all the way up to the large cross on the roof, each containing a statue of either a saint or a friar. The Bell and Clock Towers (dating from the 17th and 19th centuries) remain in ruins, although the bell is still rung. The altar is decorated with beautiful murals painted by famous artists. About midway through the nave is a rather large mural depicting San Pedro de Jose Betancur, the first Central American saint canonized by Pope John Paul II. This church is his sanctuary, containing a large shrine situated in a separate hall to the left of the main altar; beneath it lies his actual tomb. Thousands of Catholic pilgrims converge here monthly to pay their respects and make votive offerings to the saint. Since this is probably one of the oldest churches (if not *the* oldest) in the valley, the annual Procession of the Cross originates from here.

Our tour for the day completed, we said our awkward goodbyes to Sergio and proceeded to our lodge, the Los Pasos, situated just down the street. Like most structures within the city, our hotel was a renovated former colonial dwelling, the nondescript exterior resembled every other building adjacent to it, but the interior was quite elegant, with a rustic and charming ambience. All of the rooms (there were two floors) were situated around a well-maintained garden courtyard. I was very pleased with the lodge until I actually entered my room. It was so small the single full size bed took up practically the entire space. Wedged into one corner beside the bed was a clothes cabinet and on the other corner a night table. That was it. The separate bathroom was just as tiny. I nearly had a panic attack when I closed the door. The vaulted wooden ceiling had two light bulb fixtures hanging down from it, emitting an eerie yellow glow that depressed me even more. There was also a funky mildew smell in the room that began to irritate me. I threw my luggage onto the bed and sat down beside it, looking drearily up at the four walls closing in on me. I got the impression that perhaps this used to be a storage closet that someone decided to convert into a hotel room. Whatever rustic notions I had about Los Pasos quickly, um, *paso'd*. To make matters worse, Ron and Barb showed me their room (which was next to mine) and it was *at least* three times the size! I immediately went downstairs to the front desk and asked to speak to the manager, a young Guatemalan woman who had the cheery disposition of an undertaker. I told her I could not stay in my room, that I suffered from claustrophobia and I needed to be moved immediately. Without blinking, she told me all the rooms were occupied. I asked to speak to Luis, but he had stepped out for the moment so I left a message with her to have him call me when he returned.

While waiting for Luis to call I actually measured the room by putting one foot in front of the other (I have roughly 12 inch feet) and determined it was only 11 feet wide by 10 feet across. I was certain the tombs we saw in Sololá were more spacious than this! When Luis finally rang my room I was livid (mind you, not at him, just in general) and I made some comments I wish I hadn't. Regrettably, the first words out of my mouth were: *"I can't stay in this f—king room!"* This may have been followed by a few more choice expletives said at an increasingly higher voice level. Again, in my *indefensible* defense, I was in the throes of a panic attack and I did not mean to take it out on Luis, who was anything but helpful and accommodating on this trip; unfortunately, it did not sound that way. Thankfully, Luis kept his wits about him (I'm certain he's had to put up with more than his fair share of irate, whiny tour members over the years) and repeatedly told me to stop using profanity and to calm down. At that precise moment, though, my North Jersey upbringing would not allow me to calm down, so I hung up the phone rather than continue to unload on our poor tour guide. This was not my finest hour, and throughout the rest of the trip my bad behavior haunted me. I later apologized *profusely* to Luis (and the hotel staff), and even though he was very gracious and told me to forget about it, I couldn't shake the feeling that my relationship with him was irreparably tainted from that moment forward. To top it off, Luis was not having a good day, *overall*. Bev also was quite upset at the size of her room and wanted to move. And John and Freddie's room smelled like a day-old wet towel.

I'm not sure what sort of persuasion Luis applied on the hotel manager; suffice it to say he made it incumbent upon her to fix the situation *ASAP*. She called a small lodge located across the street named the San Nicolas and booked rooms for Bev and me. In fact, we were given a tour of the lodge and our new (much larger) rooms beforehand to make sure we were happy with the accommodations. John and Freddie agreed to split up and took our old rooms (which didn't smell as bad as their previous one). In the end, everyone was satisfied to one extent or another. At 7:00pm, we boarded the bus for a short trip to a nearby hotel for dinner. It was another colonial home converted into a lodge; we dined in the main hall. On the bus ride over, Luis addressed our complaints, and told us to please not let our emotions get the better of us. He reiterated that if we had any issues to please just let him know so he could remedy them. Again, I felt terrible. Dinner seemed somewhat subdued, probably because of the earlier incident with Sergio and the situation concerning our hotel rooms. As if to underline this, Luis sat with Herman at another table and didn't mingle with us as much that evening (I guess to let things simmer down).

Prior to dinner being served, we sang 'Happy Birthday' to Jean and she blew out the candles of a cake we later had for dessert. At my end of the table I sat with John and Barb who told me a fascinating story about their trip to India. They had been stranded in Bhutan when the king needed to use their commercial plane for a personal matter, and after making it to a border town in India they continued to the nation's capital by bus through a region wracked by tense political demonstrations; on more than one occasion angry protestors blocked their bus and threatened them with violence. Eventually, the Indian government sent in a military convoy to get them through the area safely. What an experience! By 8:30pm we were heading back to our hotel (or hotels). I sat up for a little while writing in my journal and watched the international news on CNN before falling asleep.

Day Eight

I was awake at 5:00am. There was no coffee maker in the room, but there *was* a small microwave oven. I was able to boil some hot water and make a cup of instant java (I always bring a stash with me). I showered, shaved and later wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast, which I ate at the Los Pasos Hotel across the street. I sat with Howard, Bev, Freddie and John. We talked about the day's itinerary; an excursion OAT calls *A Day in the Life*. This was my first trip with OAT, but the others told me this was a common thing on all of their tours. At least one day is dedicated solely to sharing in the activities of a community, followed by either lunch or dinner with a local family. I was very excited by the prospect of interacting with members of a genuine Maya community; after all, this is why world travelers endure such harried schedules and challenging accommodations, to witness and experience the culture of others. After breakfast, I quickly went back to my hotel across the street to brush my teeth and grab my backpack

and camera. By 8:30am we were on the bus ready to begin. Howard's wife was not feeling well, something intestinal, and opted to skip the day's tour. Jerry and Sheila also stayed behind; his condition seemed to have worsened overnight and they decided to contact a local physician.

Our first stop was Antigua's large marketplace located in the far western part of the city, on what technically would be 8th Avenue (judging from the simple tourist map I picked up at the hotel). It appeared to be mostly an outdoor bazaar – with some sections roofed – containing vendor stalls and some larger stores spread out over several blocks, divided into an arts and crafts section catering basically to the tourism trade and a *general* market area where you can buy just about everything else. When we arrived, many vendors were opening shop, but even at this early hour the alleyways and streets of the marketplace were filled with both pedestrians and annoying city traffic. Luis led us to the middle of the produce section and promptly gave us an assignment. He divided us into three groups, giving each group ten quetzals and a piece of paper with a local produce item written on it. Our mission was to buy ten quetzals worth of whatever was written on the paper and bring it to him. We had fifteen minutes to accomplish this task; first group back was the winner.

Ann and Jean were in my group; they each thought this would be a fairly easy contest since I speak fluent Spanish. But I took one look at the piece of paper and frowned. *Jocote maduro*? I knew that *maduro* meant ripe, but what the heck was a *jocote*? We crossed the alleyway and approached a young woman vendor sitting on one of the concrete platforms surrounded by fruit and vegetable displays. In Spanish, I asked her if she knew what a jocote was. She glanced up at me as if I was stupid, and then pointed to a pile of round, purplish fruit next to my feet. I later discovered this fruit – which is fleshy like a plum – comes from a tree in the cashew family. I inquired as to the price. She held up her palm and said, *"dos quetzals por un mano"* (two quetzals for a hand). Huh. I stared down at her momentarily before realizing she was not showing me her hand, but rather her fingers. Two quetzals for *five* jocotes. We completed our purchase and walked back to Luis in under five minutes, triumphant in our victory. (Um, there was no prize for first place…just bragging rights). Casey's group showed up with a plastic bag filled with a gooey pulp-like spice often used as a food coloring called *achiote*. Ron's group got snookered. They were instructed to buy *ocote*, which are pine wood chips or sticks used as charcoal, but their crafty vendor (probably thinking, *why would these gringos need charcoal?*) sold them a bag full of green beans, instead. That was good for a laugh!

We followed Luis to a wholesale grocery store within the marketplace where we purchased food supplies (cereals, powdered milk and sugar) to be donated to the elementary school we visited next. All of us chipped in and when the money was counted, it was enough to buy several months' worth of food for the school's pantry. Luis told us the students, who hail from very poor families, seldom eat a nutritious breakfast, so these supplies would be greatly appreciated by the teachers and administrators. Some of us also purchased soccer balls for the kids and others brought along school supplies.

From here, we boarded a local chicken bus for the ride to Santa Catarina Barahona, a small town several kilometers away. This was my first glimpse inside one of these buses. It was very clean, with a narrow aisle and two rows of brown cushioned bench seats extending all the way to the emergency door in the back. What immediately impressed me, though, was the sturdiness of the construction. This vehicle had the solid air of a tank! I sat with Howard; there was not much leg room if you were a tall person (my knees pressed up against the seat in front of me). The bus was half-empty when we departed, but along the way it made several stops and soon it was standing room only. I have no idea how fast the driver was going; we were definitely hauling ass. We zipped bumpily along a countryside road for about fifteen minutes, at times passing within inches of other speeding chicken buses. I have traveled on local buses in the Philippines where I was nervous the entire time, praying fervently we didn't get into an accident. But sitting on this chicken bus, packed with passengers, I did not feel anxious at all. This battle-ax could probably slice through most other vehicles like a warm knife through butter!

When we entered the town limits of Santa Catarina Barahona, Casey, Ron, Bev and Luis climbed onto the roof of the bus for the remainder of the trip. I'm sure the locals were amused by this, seeing a group of American seniors riding shotgun. We arrived at the town's main plaza a few minutes later. Santa Catarina Barahona was not a large municipality. The square was surrounded by most of the important government buildings (and the ever-present Catholic church). Behind City Hall was the recently built public school we were visiting. According to Luis, the Grand Circle Foundation (OAT's famous international charity organization) 'adopts' schools in poor foreign communities and makes repeated donations, bringing wave after wave of tourists to these areas to mingle with the locals and try and improve the school system. As a result of the Grand Circle Foundation's efforts, the town's mayor allocated funds to build a new elementary school. Continued financial support by the foundation provides additional supplies throughout the year (like computers and books, or monies for necessary constructions), and frequent tour stops bring food and other donations. I have made similar stops to public schools with other tour companies, but nothing like this; Grand Circle Foundation seemed determine to make a *real* difference within this community. And judging from the reception we received their efforts was greatly appreciated.

We waited for a few minutes while a group of kindergarten students accompanied by their school principal and several teachers made their way to the town square to escort us to their classroom. *It was absolutely adorable*. The students were decked out in traditional Maya dress (the boys even wore straw cowboy hats). They grabbed each one of us by the hand and led us to their classroom. Currently, school was not in session, but the administration runs a day-care for the younger kids whose parents are working during the day. Inside the classroom we situated ourselves in chairs arranged along the side of the wall while the students sat at two tables (separated by boys and girls). The principal welcomed us to her school and then introduced the teachers; this was followed by a traditional song and dance number performed by the children that was just too cute to describe in words. Our tour group then got up and sang for the children (laughable renditions of 'If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands' and 'La Cucaracha'). Casey and Connie sang 'Happy Birthday' in Dutch to the school principal. And then

everybody danced for a while, finishing with a disorganized (and hilarious) conga line. The students returned to their tables to finish their souvenir projects; colored butterfly drawings they made for us. We spent some time mingling with the kids, asking questions and helping them with the coloring. Bev brought along decorative stickers which the students enjoyed putting on their drawings. Then Luis asked me to make a presentation to the school in Spanish on our behalf. I nervously got up and thanked the principal, teachers and students for their hospitality and presented them with our donations. Afterwards, we handed out cookies and juice to the kids, and when they were done eating they handed us their paper butterflies. I must confess, I still have mine. (Yes, I'm a sentimental softie).

The principal gave us a brief tour of the school, telling us about upcoming renovations to the building and future planned events. She also acknowledged and commended the efforts of the Grand Circle Foundation, pointing out the many things they've been able to accomplish through the organization's generosity. It was now approaching noon, and the day care session, along with our visit, had come to an end. Students let out into the main plaza where many parents were waiting to pick up their children. We thanked the principal and her staff once again and proceeded to the town square. Luis divided us into two groups for our home-hosted meal. My group consisted of Ann, Jean, Connie, and Casey. Celeste, one of the kindergarten students, and her father, Tino, were waiting to escort us to their home for lunch.

We would be on our own for the next two hours; Luis and Herman (who followed us to Santa Catarina Barahona in our tour bus) stayed behind in the main square. We boarded two separate tuk-tuks and drove to Tino's home on a quiet residential street. The home was actually an enclosed compound containing three structures, two simple one-room homes and a separate cooking area with an adjacent workshop, much of this covered by corrugated tin roofs. Judging by my American standards they seemed poor, but perhaps by local standards this may have been a middle-class family, it was hard to say. One thing for sure, they were extremely friendly and inviting. Tino escorted us to the back of the compound where his mother-in-law and a female cousin were busy making tortillas for our lunch. Tino's father-in-law – the actual owner of the compound – was also there. I became the interpreter for the group, which really helped facilitate the conversation between us and put everyone at ease immediately. From what the other group told us later, they had a hilarious time trying to communicate with their host family, using a vocabulary list provided by Luis. Knowing the language, at least in our case, definitely made the visit go smoothly.

The women invited us to try our hand at making tortillas. Each one of us took turns trying to shape a doughy ball of corn flour into a pancake-looking tortilla; most came out lumpy and misshapen no matter how many times we tried. But we had a great time doing it. We moved to the courtyard in front of the kitchen where the family had set up a long table for lunch below a corrugated tin awning. The tasty meal they prepared for us was called *pepian*, a traditional Guatemalan dish combining both European and Mayan culinary influences. It traditionally comes with chicken or turkey (since both are native to Central America) but can be made with pork or beef, as well. Our host family mixed

chicken and beef together. The meat is slow cooked (it takes many hours to prepare) and served with rice and *guisquil*, a green fleshy potato-like vegetable, and smothered with a rich gravy called *recardo* made from roasted tomatoes, cinnamon, chilies, sesame and squash seeds. You need plenty of warm tortillas to soak up all that gravy. This is a uniquely Guatemalan dish and can be ordered in any restaurant or even purchased from street-side stalls across the country. I asked Tino how often does his family eat *pepian*, and he told me they only make it during special occasions since the dish requires ingredients that are somewhat expensive for the everyday family budget. Our group was very impressed; the meal was absolutely delicious.

We exchanged questions throughout lunch. The family wanted to know what we did for a living, and why we had chosen Guatemala to visit, and our impressions of their country. We asked the men about their livelihood and inquired about the women's daily routines. Turns out Tino is a casket maker; next to the kitchen was his workshop with several unfinished caskets and funeral baskets stacked in a corner. At one point, Casey, who makes ceramic artware, presented the family with a ceramic piece he made in his own shop back in Louisiana. They were quite taken with it. The women showed us how they put on their sashes and weave their clothing; the cousin displayed a gorgeously embroidered *huipil* (traditional square-cut blouse) she was currently in the process of knitting to later sell at the marketplace. We asked if we could see the inside of their home. They seemed reluctant at first, but acquiesced when they saw how eager we were. I think they may have been slightly embarrassed by the condition of their dwellings. Basically, the one we entered was a large, one room cinderblock structure with a dirt floor. The ceiling was still covered in white dangling paper decorations from a wedding reception several years earlier. Although we all smiled and put on a good face, I'm certain the group was inwardly dismayed at the condition of the home. Before we left, Connie asked if she could try on a traditional sash and the two women delighted in wrapping her up in a typical (and colorful) Maya skirt and blouse. Connie posed (front and back) with little Celeste, who wore a similar combination.

By 1:20pm the tuk-tuks which brought us to Tino's compound had returned to take us back to the main square. Just before leaving, Tino's wife appeared; she'd been running an errand in town. We thanked the family for a lovely time, saying our heartfelt goodbyes and taking our final photographs with them, and then returned to our tour bus in the main square. Tino and Celeste accompanied us. Fifteen minutes later we were leaving Santa Catarina Barahona. *A wonderful cultural experience I shall never forget*. On the bus, we excitedly exchanged stories with the other group; apparently, they had just as good a time as we did despite their language barrier.

We drove for about twenty minutes to reach our next destination: the Valhalla Macadamia Nut Farm, owned by one of the most interesting characters I have ever come across, an American by the name of Larry Gottschamer. Prior to arriving at the farm, Luis cautioned us about Larry. He told us that while Larry was one of the smartest and nicest men he's ever met, he also possessed a wicked (and often ribald) sense of humor, and to please not be offended by anything he said. With such an introduction we couldn't wait to meet the man. And, boy, did he live up to the hype. Larry, among other things, was a

onetime firefighter from California who had served in the Vietnam War before eventually settling in Guatemala during the 1970's following a stint in Coast Rica where he learned to farm macadamia nuts. Besides the commercial aspect of farming macadamia nuts (and coffee, which is also grown on his plantation), Larry, and his beautiful wife, Emily, are conservationists, and his Valhalla Project is at the forefront of a movement to provide ungrafted macadamia seedlings to indigenous people around the world as an alternative to slash and burn farming, which contributes to global warming. Larry told us that it takes roughly a pound of carbon dioxide to make one macadamia nut, so planting these sturdy trees around the world would go a long way in cleaning up the Earth's atmosphere. We met Larry shortly after arriving at his plantation and he gave us a personal tour of the place. He resembled a bald, older version of the late actor Warren Oates, with the same kind of scruffy voice. He was very knowledgeable about the agro-science industry, and very passionate about preserving the environment. And *very* funny. As we walked around the macadamia trees, he would make us laugh with such colorful comments as, *"Please don't step on my nuts."*

Larry led us to an outdoor lounge area where he invited us to sample delicious pancakes made with macadamia nut flour, topped with macadamia nut butter and chocolate. His staff also served coffee from beans grown on his plantation. While we were eating, he continued to lecture us about global warming and the current state of the agro-industry, which seems to be relying more and more on GMO technology (genetically modified organisms). He told a cautionary tale about large corporations' attempts to continually create seedless crops for the purpose of controlling the price of the seeds, which they would have a monopoly over once old strains of crops die out. Seedless crops cannot reproduce, so the farmers would have no choice but to buy seeds from the agro-businesses. A potentially devastating side effect of all this GMO technology could be the eventual elimination of many different types of crop species as they are genetically mutated to produce themselves out of existence, largely disrupting the world's food supply. I nearly choked on my pancake.

After our snack, we continued to tour the plantation. Larry showed us a simple machine he invented that can sort macadamia nuts by size and another that cracks the incredibly hard shell casings by using a regular car tire and a small portable engine. The simplicity of these machines was intentional; they were designed to be built anywhere, by anyone, with easily obtainable equipment. Larry never bothered to patent his inventions; he just showed other farmers how to build them. His main purpose has never been about enriching himself, but rather to protect the environment and help save this planet before it's too late. When our tour of the farm was completed, he led us to a building where visitors can get facials made from oils and creams derived from the macadamia nut (Lancôme and Nivea use them in their anti-aging creams). One can also purchase oils, creams or other products grown on the farm, including coffee. Most of us opted for the free facial, a five minute soothing massage performed by two staff members (who we tipped afterwards). Larry told us he created the beauty creams for his wife, Emily, using the nut oils, and when she made a brief appearance to say hello to the group, this 71 year old woman was so stunningly beautiful everyone immediately went over to the counter to

buy the product. (Um, in case you're wondering, I put macadamia nut oil on my face nightly).

From the Valhalla Macadamia Nut Farm we drove back to the hotel to pick up Barbara, Sheila and Jerry and then proceeded to the Jade House in the center of Antigua. Jerry was looking much better having been attended to by a local physician who gave him a thorough examination in his room and determined he was just suffering from a simple bacterial infection. He prescribed medication that helped Jerry improve remarkably throughout the rest of the trip.

The Jade House is one of the two largest jade jewelry shops in Antigua, situated just off the main square. We were given a 20 minute tour of the shop, which included a brief lecture on where jade is found, how it is mined and its different qualities (turns out, Central American jade is the best in the world). The Jade House also has a small museum displaying exhibits including tools, ceramic pieces, and various types of jade jewelry found throughout the ancient Mesoamerican world. When the tour of the shop concluded I won a prize – a small polished jade stone pendent – by answering one of two trivia questions poised to the group by the store guide. He'd told us earlier to pay attention because he would be giving away prizes to those who could answer questions based on the tour. For some reason, I suspected he would ask about Zacapa, the city in the eastern part of Guatemala where the world's best jade is mined. And I was right…well, to be totally honest here, I asked one of the salesmen if he was going to be asking about Zacapa and the man gave me a wink. (Yes, yes, add 'cheater' to my long list of faults!)

We spent almost an hour in the Jade House, browsing and shopping. All of the exquisite jewelry on display was made right there in the store. I bought a nice jade, silver and gemstone ring for a female friend back home (at a good price, I think). Others in the group purchased some really nice items, as well. We got back to the Los Pasos by 5:20pm and after putting away my things I met up with Ron, Barb, John, Freddie and Bev for dinner. We walked down to the corner, to a unique restaurant called *Porque No?* (Why Not?) recommended by Luis. When we got there we weren't even sure if this was the right place; the nondescript building only had a large wooden door and no sign. We knocked and a waitress opened the door. They were just opening for business. When we stepped inside we were taken aback. The place was incredibly small with a bar running along one side and maybe two small round tables and some chairs beside it. The actual dining 'hall' was an even tinier attic space just above the bar and kitchen which was reached by climbing a wooden ladder-like stairway. A thick rope hung down the side so you could steady yourself as you climbed. There were three tables upstairs (a very tight fit), we put two of them together and sat down. The entire place was decorated with knick-knacks and old items (much of it hanging from the ceiling) and the walls covered top to bottom with both graffiti and pen scribbling. Our waitress, a very pretty American college student studying in Antigua, took our order. How she climbed those steps with our food and drink is beyond me. We had a great time here, the food was good (I had a delicious burrito) and the atmosphere was fascinating. Apparently, the place is very popular because when we left a group of people was crowding the downstairs area and customers were hanging around the outside of the establishment waiting to be seated. We

also met a couple from England who arrived as we were leaving; the space was so confining we had to vacate the upstairs so the couple could reach their table.

Ron, Barb, Freddie and I decided to take a stroll around Antigua after dinner. It was already dark, and quite cool. We headed towards the town square, walking along the cobbled-stone streets getting somewhat disorientated at first. It was a nice hour-long exercise (walking on cobbled stones does not make for a leisurely stroll) and we made it back to the hotel by 8:15pm. I was thoroughly exhausted and fell asleep soon afterwards.

Day Nine

I was awake by 5:00am and made several cups of coffee in my room. I turned on the TV but the news dominating the headlines was the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan and it was just too painful to watch. I showered, dressed and wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast. Bev left me a note saying she was exhausted and not feeling well and would skip the day's excursion. By 9:00am we were on the bus and drove over to the *Casa Santo Domingo* on 3rd Street to tour the museum and grounds.

The Casa Santo Domingo is a 5-star hotel built around the ruins of the Santo Domingo Monastery, once considered among the grandest convents in all of the Americas. A large section of the monastery was destroyed by the earthquake of 1773; I'm not exactly sure when the grounds were vacated, but during the 1980's the wealthy family that purchased the property converted it into a 128-room hotel combining the ruins with modern architecture and creating a visually stunning masterpiece, an eclectic mixing of new and old which is one of the highlights of the city. Besides the luxurious hotel, the Casa Santo Domingo is perhaps the best museum in the region, containing exhibits that span thousands of years, from archeological artifacts to Pre-Columbian art to colonial and Catholic relics. The museum itself is situated within the grounds of the old monastery, so as you walk from one structure to another (some preserved; some in ruins) you catch glimpses of the baroque architecture and get a feel of how life was like in colonial Central America.

We entered the museum through the Colegio Santo Tomas de Aquino entrance. This portion of the museum was part of the actual St. Thomas of Aquinas University founded in the mid-1500 by a papal bull, making it the first university in the Western Hemisphere. There is a preserved archeological section of the school found in this section of the museum. We passed several exhibition halls displaying both Mayan cultural artifacts (like kites, masks and traditional dress) and a series of modern paintings by featured artist Sergio Valenzuela (known as Valenz) who paints angular versions of tables and chairs and faceless people in bright red colors. The wooden floor in one hall had a glass display showing the original cobblestone street which led to the front of the building. One particularly intriguing gallery had a collection of Pre-Columbian artwork side-by-side

with more contemporary pieces from around the world to show the similarities in subject matter throughout the ages; there were ancient Mayan sculptures of cats, birds, snakes and deer right next to more modern renditions from around the globe.

The Archeological Museum adjacent to the Main Cloister and Fountain contained ancient Mayan artifacts like pottery, statues and funerary pieces. From here we entered the ruins of the Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary (still used to perform mass on Sundays) and toured the Colonial Museum next door filled with religious icons and statues, some of it quite dramatic, like that of a woman anguishing in Hell. We went below to see the Conventional Crypt; replicas of skeletal remains were displayed underneath glass along the floor (at least, I think they were replicas). We finished our tour in a section that led directly to the courtyards and lobby of the Casa Santo Domingo Hotel, an absolutely beautiful (and expensive) place. I highly recommend this stop to anyone visiting Antigua, you will learn much about this city's history here.

By the time we concluded our tour of the Casa Santo Domingo it was already 12:00pm. Herman dropped us off at the main plaza for lunch. John, Freddie, Ron, Barb and I opted to return to the Café Contessa for their delicious soup and sandwiches. After lunch, we spent thirty minutes searching the stores around the plaza looking for souvenir dolls that Barb had promised her grand kids. At 2:00pm, Luis and Herman returned to pick us up for the afternoon's optional cultural excursion. Everyone went except Bev who was still recuperating at the hotel.

We drove several kilometers to the small village of *San Juan del Obispo*, nestled on one side of the Volcano of Water in the department (or state) of Sacatepéquez. Our tour bus parked next to the town plaza. Judging from the condition of the square this didn't seem like a prosperous town. Its only real claim to fame was that Guatemala's first Catholic bishop, Francisco Marroquin, lived here (*Obispo* means bishop). His 16th century palace is open to the public, and run by an order of nuns. The convent and church (one of the earliest in the country) have been beautifully restored. Our purpose here was not to see the palace *or* church, but rather to visit a local chocolate maker. According to Luis, this area has many family-owned chocolate shops. The one we visited was directly in front of the square, a private home with a sign outside that read: *Se Vende Chocolate D'Carmen* (We Sell Chocolate by Carmen). We were met by Lucy, Carmen's daughter-in-law, who led us through the small house to a covered patio (with a magnificent view of the valley) where the family made chocolate bars for local consumption. The chocolate I am referring to is not the elegant kind produced by chocolatiers and sold in fancy boxes on Valentine's Day. I'm talking about hot chocolate. In Guatemala, the drinking of hot chocolate has been a traditional pastime since the ancient ancestors of the Maya first invented it. I'm certain there may have been some sort of ritual involved surrounding its use back then. Today, the drink is still prepared as it was in ancient times. *How do we know this*? Because one of the oldest Mesoamerican vases recovered at an Olmec burial site more than two thousand years ago had drawings that contain the recipe and instructions on how to make hot chocolate. A replica of this vase sat on a table in the middle of the patio next to samples of Carmen's chocolates.

Luis formally introduced Lucy to us and acted as her interpreter. She spoke briefly about the local chocolate industry and its consumption in Guatemala and then went on to show us how chocolate bars are made. She held up a carved wooden pan filled with cocoa beans that had already been roasted over an open grill. To separate the bean from its outer casing, she tossed them repeatedly in the pan and then put several handfuls on a wooden grinding board and proceeded to grind them with a stone roller. Most of the equipment she was using, the pan, board and roller have been in the family for more than eight generations. She asked for volunteers to help grind the beans. Freddie went first, but the results were quite comical after Lucy suggested she bend her knees and push forward as she ground the beans; the end result was that Freddie looked like she was trying to dry-hump the cocoa!

Once the beans were grounded into a sticky paste it was transported to a table top covered by what looked like a plant-woven mat. Lucy once again asked for volunteers (this time Casey and Ron) to help her take small chunks of the paste and mold them into flat round pieces of chocolate (which are later dried and then wrapped in packaging to be sold to the public). The pressing of the chocolate mold into the mat produces a decorative design on the finished chocolate discs. And nothing goes to waste, every part of the bean is used; in addition to chocolate discs and powder, the cocoa shell casings are bagged and sold to make tea. When the demonstration was over, Lucy treated us to a sample, making a fresh batch of hot chocolate by boiling some water and stirring in several discs of chocolate. Rum was added for those who requested it.

Our next stop on this optional cultural excursion was in the village of *San Felipe*. We headed north for several kilometers and stopped at the home of an internationally famous sculptor by the name of Enriquez Cruz Espana. Senior Cruz, as Luis referred to him, has traveled around the world to promote his art. He is one of Antigua's finest artisans, specializing in ceramics, and in particular, clay birds. He greeted us at the door with a warm smile and invited us into his home (which also doubles as his workshop). Judging from the newspaper clippings on the wall I'd guess he was in his sixties. Many years ago, Senior Cruz developed a knack for making replicas of local birds out of red clay. This became his stock and trade. We gathered around him in his workshop while he made for us – *in less than ten minutes* – a small bird sculpture from a ball of fresh clay. The finished product is later baked and painted. He can make just about any species of bird. Along the shelves of his cluttered workshop are examples of his other specialty: sculptures of everyday Guatemalans. There are periodic exhibitions of his art throughout the country. Before leaving, we had the opportunity to browse his small gift shop. I purchased a sculpture replica of an indigenous bird known as the Northern Royal Flycatcher.

Before leaving town, we made a brief stop to tour the San Felipe Church, the only gothic church in the Antigua area. When we got there the blue sky became suddenly overcast by very dark clouds and the contrast of the church's gothic tower against that ominous backdrop was striking. From here, we continued to the town of *Jocotenango* (which is adjacent to the city of Antigua) to visit La Fabrica de Manzanas (The Apple Factory). This was another home and workshop, belonging to a popular local wood

sculptor named Tomas Cardenas. His specialty is making authentic looking fruit sculptures made from pieces of wood he either buys or gathers from the surrounding areas. His work looks so real that if you placed a bowl of his fake fruit next to an actual bowl of fruit, chances are good you'll get splinters in your teeth! While he specializes in fruit sculptures he makes other items, as well (statues, bowls, wall ornaments, etc). His workshop and home were completely cluttered with the products (and by-products) of his trade. I took a photograph with his beautiful daughter, Alexandria, a school teacher, who was busy making a class room project for her students and was gracious enough to pose with this smitten middle-aged tourist.

Tomas gave us a demonstration on how he carves and shapes a piece of wood into a lime sculpture using an ancient-looking lathe. He actually turned the machine on by crossing two live wires. The group members exchanged nervous glances as the sparks from the wires flew all over the sawdust-covered work table. Luis told us he marveled at how this place hasn't burned down yet. But more amazing was the skill of this master wood carver. In less than two minutes he had carved a wooden lime from a lump of wood! And he didn't stop; in fact, if Luis hadn't told him it was time for us to go, Tomas would have carved us an entire bowl of fruit while we stood there watching. Incredible. Before leaving, some of the group members purchased souvenirs.

We reached the Los Pasos Hotel by 5:30pm. The manager told me she had a very nice room available in case I wanted to switch back. On the day we checked in, after my 'emotional meltdown' over the size of my room, the manager paid the hostel across the street to put Bev and me up for three nights. This was an expense borne directly by the hotel and not OAT. Feeling bad about my behavior, I promised the manager that if a larger room became vacant I would be more than happy to return. Well, she now had two large rooms and offered them to me and Bev. I had given this woman my word and I felt I couldn't back down now, especially since Luis had brokered the whole thing. Deep down, though, I didn't want to leave my comfortable accommodations at the San Nicolas Hostel (which was just as beautiful as our original hotel, only smaller). But a man's word is a man's word; I stoically hid my disappointment and moved back into the Los Pasos. Bev told the manager flat out she was not budging. As it turned out, the room I received must have been the suite because it resembled an apartment, with a small living room section including a comfortable sofa and coffee table, an ample sleeping quarter with a king-size bed, and a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. I took one look at my new room and made a mental not *to throw more tantrums in the future*!

At 6:45pm, the entire gang assembled for a dinner show included in the day's optional excursion. In keeping with the 'art and culture' theme of the excursion, we went to La Posada de Don Rodrigo, a very popular restaurant in Antigua that puts on a traditional Maya dance show. The restaurant was built inside the walls of a former (wealthy) colonial dwelling. The front wooden doors were very tall, which allowed the colonial owners at one time to enter their premises on horseback. The dining hall was beautiful, with a level wooden dance floor set up in front of a band playing marimbas and other local instruments. Our tables were situated around the dance floor. I sat with Bev, Ann and Jean. I ordered the grilled steak which came with rice, refried beans, guacamole,

slices of local cheese and soup. Delicious! Later, they wheeled around a dessert cart and I selected a *tres leche* pudding. Thank goodness my pants had an elastic waistband.

The show consisted of one very long dance number known as the Dance of the Deer. Five dancers dressed in very colorful Mayan costumes and masks, sporting deer antlers and shaking maracas, performed this traditional number. The dance itself is an artistic rendition of the Twin Mythology (the ancient Maya story of Creation which I will explain later in this journal). How the dance originated is an interesting story. According to Luis, the Spaniards prohibited the indigenous people from practicing their old religion, so to camouflage the real meaning of this dance the Maya used subterfuge, telling their 'new masters' that the white masks represented the colonists and the antlers indicated the deer they loved to hunt. My dopey Spanish ancestors fell for this. When the number was over, the dancers handed out their maracas to individual audience members, inviting them to come up and dance with them. Many pictures were taken posing with the dance group. It was a fun night. We got back to the hotel by 9:00pm. Thirty minutes later, with this heavy meal still digesting in my gut, I was snoring soundly.

Day Ten

I was awake by 5:00am. A half hour later I went downstairs to the kitchen and tipped the staff for a thermos of hot water. Before returning to my room I climbed the central outdoor stairway to the hotel's roof top and took some pictures of the sun rising over the nearby volcanoes. Back in my room I made several cups of instant coffee. I shaved, showered and wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast. My buddy Howard was already waiting for me. We were later joined by Ron and Barb. The rest of the morning was free to explore Antigua on our own; we would be flying to Petén, Guatemala's largest and northern-most state (or department) in the early evening. A group consisting of Ron, Barb, Freddie, John, and myself requested that Herman drop us off at the marketplace. Several other members decided to explore the center of the city. We spent roughly an hour walking around the arts and craft section of the marketplace shopping for souvenirs. At this early hour many vendors were just opening their stalls for business. Barb was finally able to buy the native dolls for her grandkids. I purchased a nice hand-embroidered blouse for the female supervisor back home who approved my vacation leave (Barb was the same height and weight as this woman and was nice enough to model it for me). I also bought five beautiful shawls and scarves to hand out as souvenirs for only $15. The marketplace was not yet crowded, allowing us time to walk leisurely around its maze of stalls and cover most of the area in the short time we were there.

Ron and I wanted to photograph the really old (and mostly abandoned) churches of Antigua, and using a small tourist map provided by the *Casa del Jade* jewelry shop we convinced the others to join us. From the marketplace, we slowly made our way down Fifth Street (or *Cinco Calle*), stopping to tour the inside of the nicest McDonald's I've ever seen in my life. This was not a typical franchise. It was built within a colonial

dwelling with beautiful courtyards and various rooms for dining and playing. We came upon our first church, the ruins of *San Agustin*, just before reaching 6th Avenue (*Avenida Sies*). This structure dates back to the middle of the 17th century, and while the inside was a hollow shell – the high-vaulted ceiling, valuable paintings and ostentatious altars now gone – the outer walls still retained the elegance of its Renaissance architecture. Currently, a municipal-run vocational school was utilizing the inside of the ruins. We were able to go inside and see groups of students learning various trades (carpentry, plumbing, electrical and so forth). This was one of the few church ruins we came across that was actually being used, most of the others stood abandoned – like archeological monuments – scattered throughout the city.

We headed north on 6th Avenue, walking four blocks to La Merced Church (which we had already toured on our first day in Antigua). We turned east on 1st Street and then made a right onto 4th Avenue to photograph the ruins of *Santa Teresita*, a church founded in 168o. It was run by a group of nuns, the Order of the Barefoot Carmelitas, who arrived in Guatemala in 1677 from Peru. As with most of the other very old churches in Antigua massive earthquake damage over the centuries led to its abandonment. You can glimpse into the ruined interior from the gated façade entrance, which is always left open. Only one portion of the façade remains intact, and much of it is cracked or broken, including the existing statues. From here, Ron and I continued east along 2nd Street. The rest of the group lost interest in our 'church hunt' and decided to head back to the central plaza do some more shopping. We agreed to meet up with them later.

Ron and I walked further east until we reached the large enclosed structure of *Las Capuchinas Convent*, founded in 1726. It served as the home of a very strict order from Spain known as the Capuchin nuns. Their numbers were limited to only 28 members, and were required to live a very austere life, sleeping on wooden beds with straw pillows and shunning the outside world. They took their meals from a turntable, and only spoke to visitors from behind a grille. The convent's church is a rather simple one, consisting of a single nave lacking side aisles. The grounds are now a preserved museum. The original convent was largely destroyed by the earthquake of 1773 and the restoration that began in 1943 is still ongoing. We debated whether or not to pay the entrance fee (which came to about $5) but then decided against it since our time was limited; we needed to be back at the main square by noon. This particular site, an enclosed compound with beautiful courtyards, came highly-recommended by all the travel guides. With some regret, we continued on our quest.

We walked north along 2nd Avenue and hung a right onto 1st Street again, following it for two blocks through a very nice residential neighborhood until it ended in front of the ruins of the *Santa Rosa de Lima Church*. This was another of Antigua's grand abandoned churches (although in back of it are gated upscale apartment units). The Santa Rosa de Lima Church complex (originally dating back to 1570) formally served as a cloistered convent until it, too, succumbed to the ravages of Mother Nature during the late 18th century. It is now closed off to the public but its crumbling façade still retains some of its ornamental and baroque architectural features. From here, Ron and I backtracked all the

way to 3rd Street, about a block from the main square, to photograph *El Carmen Church*, founded in 1638. This wonderful ruin – one of the most interestingly designed churches we came across – suffered repeated earthquake damage throughout the 1700's and was abandoned (probably out of frustration). But even as it now sits decaying with age, its architectural magnificence is still evident. Built in the traditional baroque style of its day, this church is unique in that it contains 24 sets of columns detailed with fine stucco floral patterns instead of religious images. We were able to take photos of the crumbling interior through the wrought-iron gate barring the open front entrance.

It was 11:45am and we hurried back to the central square where Luis told us to rendezvous. We didn't see our tour bus or any of the other members yet, so we walked around the park and met the retired American from Boston I mentioned earlier in the journal. It was a beautiful day, and many locals were sitting on park benches or gathering socially in small groups. By 12:00pm Herman pulled up in the bus. Everyone was there except Ann and Jean who had been left at the marketplace with us but wandered off to explore the city on their own. Luis seemed concerned that they were missing, and he stayed behind in the square searching for them. Meanwhile, Herman took us back to the Los Pasos. When I climbed the stairs to my second floor room I glanced down into the courtyard and saw a very funny scene. Sitting around the small ornamental fountain, with their feet soaking in the water, were a very tired-looking Ann and Jean. I couldn't resist taking their photo. They told me they had gotten lost and had wandered the cobbled-stone streets of Antigua for two hours! I instructed Herman to call Luis on his cell phone and let him know the ladies had re-emerged.

I repacked my suitcase and placed it outside my door for pick-up, leaving behind some of my dirty laundry. When I toured China a few years ago I met a couple who only brought along their oldest or rattiest clothing when they traveled, and would simply discard them as their trip unfolded. This way, they told me, their suitcases became incredibly lighter by the end of the tour, enabling them to buy all the souvenirs they wanted without worrying about excess baggage fees on the flight home. Thinking this was a brilliant idea I decided to do the same from that trip forward. Believe me, I have left a pile of undergarments and threadbare plaid shirts in hotel rooms all over the world! Inevitably, though, an embarrassing situation arises when some conscientious hotel maid finds my discarded clothing and thinks I absentmindedly left the items behind. The hotel maid feels compelled (probably because of the tip I left in the room) to chase me down – sometimes even onto the bus – holding up my dirty underwear. The staff at Los Pasos did one step better; they actually went ahead and laundered my junked clothing. I found out during lunch, when Luis told me my laundry would be ready within the hour, to which I replied, "*What laundry*?" I realize this practice can cause some confusion, especially in a less developed country. It's bad enough Americans have this world image of being spoiled, rich people; here's one who throws away his clothing every day!

We had a delicious lunch inside the hotel's restaurant. I ordered the chicken fillet cooked with lemon and cilantro and served with rice, fresh veggies, crème of cilantro soup and fruit crepes for dessert. During lunch we asked Luis to explain the ancient Maya religious theory of creation as described in the *Popol Vuh* ("the book of the people" or

"the book of counsel") which many now refer to as the Twin Mythology. He launched into a very lengthy and passionate narrative which I shall condense for the purpose of this journal. The *Popol Vuh* is the oldest Maya myth to have survived in its entirety, a document discovered during colonial times passed down through generations of K'iche' Maya in the western highlands of Guatemala. It is the story, among other things, of the mythical twins who, through their heroic actions, gave rise to the 'modern' world. It is likely the twins' story was used to legitimize the ruling lineage of the Maya kings (in other words, all of the rulers were supposedly descended from them). Mention of the twins is evident not only in written form but also in iconographic art work dating from the Classic Maya period (between 200 – 900AD). In a nutshell, the legend goes like this:

We begin with the father and uncle of the twins who were summoned to the Underworld for playing ball (the famous Maya ball court game) too boisterously. They were both killed and the twin's father decapitated. Along comes the maiden Xquic who gets impregnated by the skull of the dead father when he spits on her hand. She gives birth to the twin brothers, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, and they go live with their grandmother (their father's mom) and her two remaining sons who resent the twins from the moment they arrive, mistreating them constantly. Supposedly, the twins grow up and do not harbor any ill will towards their half-siblings, but there is an instance when the young twins use supernatural powers against their older brothers to teach them a lesson, transforming them into howler monkeys.

As the twins grew older, the Maya god Huracan (a powerful Maya deity of wind, storm and fire; the world 'hurricane' is derived from his name) asked the twins for their help in defeating an arrogant god named Seven Macaw and his equally obnoxious children. This seems to be a side story in the longer narrative. Eventually, the boys become young men who tend to their grandmother's fields. Because of their supernatural powers and strengths they can clear a field in minutes and then spend the rest of the day relaxing, fooling their grandmother into thinking they've been hard at work all day. They end up chasing the animals from their fields so as to not disturb the work they've done. A captured rat, to save his life, tells the twins where the ball game equipment used by their father and uncle was hidden. Actually, the equipment was stashed away by their grandmother, who blamed the ball game for the deaths of her sons. The conniving twins again used their supernatural powers to trick the old woman, retrieving the equipment. Soon after, the twins commence to playing ball in the same court their father used, becoming excellent ball players in the process. But, once again, the noise created by the constant ball playing angered the gods of Xibalba (the Mayan Underworld). The twins were 'invited' to play in Xibalba, the same guise used against their father and uncle to kill them.

The twins, knowing the tricks of the Underworld gods beforehand, accepted the invitation and proceeded into the bowels of the Underworld to avenge their father and uncle. They outwitted every deadly test the gods threw at them, and cleverly lost some games along the way as a deception. One of the brothers (Hunahpu) was eventually decapitated by a bat, and his head was to be used as the ball in a final game against the remaining brother. But before the game, Hunahpu's head was restored by Xbalanque and

the two ended up winning the game and defeating the gods of Xibalba. Humiliated at their loss, the Underworld gods tricked the twins into going inside an oven where they were burned to dust and bones and their remnants tossed into a river. But this turned out to be another clever ruse by the twins, who rose from the river regenerated – first as catfish and then later young boys – and lived amongst the people of the Underworld incognito for several years, performing miracles and making a name for themselves as entertainers who would kill and sacrifice one another then bring themselves back from the dead.

When the Underworld gods heard of these two 'miracle-makers' they were summoned before them and ordered to perform their magic. The twins put on such a fascinating show that the two most powerful gods of the Underworld insisted they perform their regeneration trick on them. The twins slyly agreed, but when the gods were killed the twins did not bring them back to life. Instead, they revealed themselves as Hunahpu and Xbalanque, forcing the remaining (and now cowering) gods to confess to the murder of their father and uncle. For their crimes, the twins banished the realm of Xibalba, freeing the people of earth from giving them tributes. The Underworld was effectively defeated. Prior to leaving Xibalba they retrieved their father's corpse from the ball court where he'd been slain and regenerated him, but he was too weak to continue so they made him a deity of Hope, whom people could pray to. The twins then ascended into the sky, one became the sun while the other became the moon…*and thus the world blossomed*. Yeah, I know, it's a bit of a stretch, but you have to admit, it's an entertaining tale.

At 2:00pm we made the hour-long drive to the International Airport in Guatemala City. We said our heart-felt 'goodbyes' to Herman, who got somewhat emotional and teary-eyed as we gave him hugs and wished him well. Luis advised us to tip him back at the hotel since Herman had already been robbed once after leaving the airport. Apparently, would-be robbers scout the terminals targeting bus drivers who are given envelopes by tourists. Herman had a long and lonely ride back to San Salvador. I said a little prayer for his safe passage.

By 3:30pm Luis had checked us all in and we proceeded through the security protocol. Initially, we would have departed from the domestic airport but the government was renovating the terminal building and we had to leave from the adjacent international airport, which took a bit longer due to the more heightened security measures. We had to wait almost two and a half hours before we could board our flight to Petén. The terminal building was practically empty; we spent the time browsing the many shops and boutiques (normally, airport goods are pricey, but in Guatemala they were quite reasonable). I sat next to Howard and we discussed everything from politics to world travel to his life in retirement. By 6:00pm we walked across the tarmac and boarded a turboprop jet airplane for the one-hour flight to Petén. I was able to sit by myself since the plane was less than half-full. This was only the third time in my life riding a turboprop plane, and while the ride was comfortable, albeit a bit noisy, I would glance nervously from time to time out the window to make sure the propellers were still spinning. The stewardess handed out sandwiches, trail mix and juice on the flight. Ron

lent me his Atlantic magazine that had an interesting article about the 50 greatest inventions of all time.

When we touched down at the small international airport in Petén it was already evening. The airport seemed deserted. We boarded our new tour bus, which, to my dismay, was even smaller than the one we'd left behind (although the aisles space was larger). Our new bus driver was also a bit of a disappointment. After the smiling, warm, friendly demeanor of Herman, getting used to the humorless, non-communicative Sammy was not easy. I got the suspicious feeling this man did not like Americans – or perhaps tourists in general – and only tolerated us because we were his sole source of income. We arrived at La Casona del Lago Hotel in the small town of Santa Elena by 8:00pm. This was a cozy three-story structure overlooking Petén Itza Lake. It had an aqua-colored, wood panel façade; the large rooms had balconies overlooking the enormous pool and lake. The place reminded me of the hotels one finds in the small island communities along the Jersey shore. Dinner was on our own that night, but I did not feel like eating. Besides, I had a family-size bag of stateside trail mix I always keep in my luggage in case I get hungry (or don't like the food being served). I called the front desk and had them bring me up a thermos of hot water to make instant coffee. After reorganizing my luggage (and setting aside the clothes for tomorrow) I sat on my bed and watched a Spanish sub-titled version of the movie 'Grease' until sleep overcame me.

Day Eleven

I was awake by 4:30am. After showering and shaving I called the front desk and had them send up a thermos of hot water for coffee. An hour later I was sitting with Howard, Ron and Barb for breakfast in the hotel's restaurant. We would be starting out early this morning to see the famous Maya archaeological site Tikal, considered to have been one of the greatest Maya Kingdoms during the Classic Period (200 – 900 AD). The night before Luis told us we needed to leave early in order to avoid the large crowds. By 7:30am we were on the bus (except for Bev who was not feeling well) heading towards the famed ruins.

During the one and a half hour road trip we made several stops; the first was in the town of El Remate to photograph the eastern part of Lake Petén Itza. With a surface area of roughly 99 kilometers, it is the second largest lake in Guatemala. Historically, the abundance of natural resources surrounding this lake has attracted groups of migrants throughout the centuries. Besides the more than 100 indigenous species found here – from the lake's bounty of fish (and crocodiles) to jaguars, pumas, white-tailed deer, other exotic animals and an assortment of tropical birds – this area produces good lumber, oil and excellent grazing and farming lands. More than two dozen Maya archeological sites have been found around the lake, attesting to its popularity as a settlement area.

The state (or department) of Petén encompasses one third of the total land size of Guatemala, yet only a small section of the population lives here. This is due in large part to the still mostly underdeveloped geography of the region. Bordered in the north and west by Mexico and to the east by Belize, Petén consists of lowlands formed by a densely forested low-lying limestone plain; across its center are a chain of fourteen lakes which often become interconnected during the rainy season. To the south of the central lakes is a broad savannah – a grassland ecosystem – featuring a red clay soil unsuitable for heavy cultivation which is probably why the majority of the current and past populations of Petén have been concentrated around its central lake region. The further away we drove from Flores, the capital of Petén, the more rural and untamed the countryside became. We passed a few isolated villages and isolated farmhouses along the way, but mainly it was flat grasslands or thick forests on either side of us for the entire trip. In the small town of Caoba we stopped to see a unique hanging fruit known in these parts as *estropacho*, a zucchini-looking thing containing a fibrous inside used as a sponge by the locals.

By 9:00am we reached the arched gated entrance (*Garita de Socotzal*) leading into Tikal National Park. The actual ruins of Tikal are situated in a vast natural preserve, a protected area of more than 570 square kilometers (roughly 220 square miles) of dense rain forest teeming with wildlife. We had to drive twenty minutes (approximately 17 kilometers) along an isolated two-lane road just to reach the visitors' center. We stopped once to photograph some colorful macaws perched in the trees. Inside the thatched-roof visitors' center was a scale model of the ancient city of Tikal, giving us a real perspective on how grand this kingdom was. Luis suggested we use the restrooms here prior to entering the site. He was able to commandeer an official park truck with passenger seats so we didn't have to hike up to the ruins. Due to recent rainfall the trails were very muddy and the rocks protruding from the ground were covered with slippery moss. Luis cautioned us to be careful, and not to take wide steps. As if on cue, Casey slipped and fell. Luckily, he was not injured. At this point, everyone who had a collapsible walking stick promptly took it out. It was a bumpy ride up to the main ruin site, but we were grateful we didn't have to walk the distance. When we reached the *Gran Plaza*, the center of the site, we climbed off the truck. Luis tipped the driver so he would come back for us when we were through. And thank goodness he did, most of us were exhausted by the time we finished the tour four hours later, hiking and climbing a good portion of the time.

Before I describe our tour of Tikal, let me give a brief background on the ancient city itself:

First, Tikal is not the actual name of the city. Back then, the Maya called it *Yax Mutal* or *Yax Mutul* (which translates into First Mutul; the meaning of which remains unclear). Depending on which historical review you read, Tikal means "at the water hole" in Yucatec Maya, and could refer to one of the large water reservoirs found at the site, or it could mean "the place of the voices" in the Itza Maya language. Either way, the name *Tikal* was given to the site only after it was discovered hidden in the tropical rainforests of Petén during the 1840's. It has undergone excavation to one extent or another ever since. In 1979 the ruins were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Because of the

glyphs on the tombs, monuments and palaces found here, Tikal is one of the most documented and best understood of the large lowland Maya cities of Mesoamerica. It had a long list of rulers, attesting to its continuous prosperity and strength, with a population that reached almost 90,000 during its apogee. The city would grow to encompass over 16 square kilometers (or roughly 6.2 square miles) and come to dominate much of the Maya region militarily, economically and politically. There is also ample evidence that the city traded or had political ties with such far away kingdoms as Teotihuacán in central Mexico.

An interesting fact about Tikal is that it had no significant water source other than the tropical rainfall (which deposits 76.6 inches annually). They built ten huge reservoirs to trap this rain water. Because of their low salt diet, it is estimated that Tikal imported tens of thousands of pounds of salt annually, which led to trading pacts with other city-states in the region. One of the reasons Tikal was able to expand militarily (and dominate most of the Maya world in Central America) was due to an invasion by Teotihuacan in 378 AD that installed a new ruler who served as a vassal for the next 47 years. From this point forward, Tikal became a kingdom to be feared and respected. It expanded its influence not only in the Guatemala region, but further south, establishing a new ruling dynasty in Copan. During the 9th century the Maya world underwent a seismic and almost systematic downward spiral, as continuous warfare led to greater population shifts towards the larger cities for safety. Tikal, in essence, became too big to support itself, with dwindling agricultural goods and raw materials, eventually giving way to shortages, discontent, disease and riots. The city was slowly and then rapidly abandoned during the 9th and 10th centuries. For the next thousand years the jungle reclaimed the city.

It is physically impossible to tour the entire site in four hours. Luis has conducted official tours for visiting archaeological students and he told us it normally takes about three full days to see the whole thing. The site has been completely mapped out and contains a staggering 3,000 structures (many of which are crumpled heaps of jungle-covered stones). Not to mention that it sits in the middle of a national rainforest filled with exotic animals. There are many natural trails here, and hiking from one structure or complex to the next is quite a chore. What we saw in our brief time at Tikal was the center of the city – considered to be the most important part – containing the grandest structures and pyramids. For this, we had to begin at the *Gran Plaza* (or the Great Plaza).

We entered the *Gran Plaza* from the north and stood in its center, surveying the amazing structures surrounding the wide open courtyard. To our immediate right, or north, was Temple I (also known as the *Gran Jaguar* pyramid) that is over 150 feet tall. It was the funerary temple of a ruler named Jasaw Chan K'awiil (nicknamed Ah Cacao), one of the most celebrated kings of Tikal (who defeated the rival Maya city of Calakmul in 695 AD and oversaw the re-emergence of Tikal's influence over the region). His tomb was discovered inside the temple, adorned with jaguar skins and fine jade jewelry. The structure itself is a nine-stepped pyramid (probably symbolic of the nine levels of the Underworld), with grooved moldings and inset corners, and a steep staircase leading up to an elaborately carved wooden lintel shrine topped by a typical Mayan roof comb. Opposite Temple I on the other side of the courtyard is Temple II (known as the

Mascarones Temple) which was the smaller funerary temple of Jasaw Chan K'awiil's wife, also built around the same time as Temple I (700 AD).

In between these two temples, on the northern side of the *Gran Plaza,* is the sacred structure known as the *Acropolis Norte* (the North Acropolis).This is one of the oldest sections of the city, built as a necropolis for Tikal's rulers dating back thousands of years. There is evidence here of settlers from 800 BC. Essentially, the large structure consisted of an artificial terrace upon which succeeding generations built temples on top of one another. Archaeologists have uncovered layers of royal tombs from kings as far back as the dynastic founder of Tikal who ruled around 90AD. In addition to the temple structures, there are dozens of stele and altars adorning the Acropolis Norte sculpted with hieroglyphic texts outlining the achievements of Tikal's greatest rulers. We climbed the steep steps of the *Acropolis Norte* and Luis showed us a pit containing a large excavated stone mask of a long-nosed god from the very first temple. He showed us the various layers of buildings and gave us a brief description of the kings buried here.

Directly across from the *Acropolis Norte,* on the south side of the Great Plaza, is the larger *Acropolis Central,* a 3.5 acre complex housing the former residential and administrative palaces of the royal families. It is made up of 45 structures with 6 courtyards and a maze of halls, doors and stairways connecting the entire thing. Because of the recent rains, and the slippery moss covering much of the stone flooring, Luis advised us against exploring the *Acropolis Central,* saying it was too dangerous. Most of us walked up to the outer edges and took photographs from there.

From the Gran Plaza we moved westward and came upon the side of Temple III (also known as the Great Priest Temple) a tall – more than 190 feet – pyramid mostly obscured by grass and jungle. All we could see was the top of this mighty temple. To the right of Temple III, heading south, was the *Palacios de la Ventana* (Window Palace) a sprawling structure on a hilltop with many interconnecting rooms (and windows) and some rather elaborate stone face carvings on the outer walls. We discovered four wild turkeys along its steps. From here we continued west, heading towards Temple IV (the Two Headed Snake Temple), not just the tallest structure in Tikal, but one of the largest pyramids in all of Mesoamerica at a height of 212 feet. To reach Temple IV we had to actually trek through the forest with thick vegetation on all sides and a mud-dirt trail at our feet with thick tree roots protruding out of it. At one point we had to side-step an army of red ants carrying pieces of leaves across the trail. We finally arrived at a clearing in front of the towering Temple IV, the bottom portion of the structure covered by dense foliage. Luis told us beforehand that we could climb to the top of this pyramid and get a phenomenal view of the park, but the thought of making my way up the steeply inclined steps of a traditional temple – designed for tiny Maya feet and not gigantic American hooves like mine – did not necessarily thrill me, especially after the hike we just took through the woods. So I was elated when I saw the wooden staircase running up the side of Temple IV. *God Bless these Guatemalans*!

Most of us climbed the 190 plus stairs to the top of the pyramid, sharing the staircase with a large group of tourists. The highest point we could reach was the section just

below the enormous roof comb (a hollowed honey-combed structure usually put on the top of funerary temples, allowing sunlight to filter through it and cast unique shadows along the ground). This was an impressive pyramid by all accounts; it was built around 740 AD by Jasaw Chan K'awiil's son – whose tomb is believed buried inside – constructed over a massive platform with seven stepped levels including slanting walls and multiple corners. Just below the roof comb is a series of very steep stairs which many visitors were sitting on – nobody wanted to get too close to the edges – just taking in the magnificent view. *And what a sight*! We were clearly dozens of feet above the park's canopy and could see the tops of Temples I, II and III in the distance protruding from the rainforest like the brontosauruses in the movie Jurassic Park.

After taking our photos, we descended the staircase and continued along a different nature trail, coming across a site known as *Complex N* that offered an example of the 'twin-pyramid' formation popular during Tikal's late Classic Period. These structures were built to commemorate the completion of a katun (20 year cycle) on the Mayan calendar. A replica of a stele nearby depicts the king responsible for building *Complex N*. Next to the stele is a large round stone tablet (what appeared to be a Mayan calendar). Sheila and Jerry stood behind it while I took their photo. Suddenly, Sheila let out a yell that scared the bejesus out of us. She was smiling and posing for the camera when her hand came to rest on the stone monument which, unbeknownst to her, was covered with ants. That was good for a chuckle.

From here we continued further south until we reached a large complex known as *Mundo Perdido* (the Lost World). This is possibly the oldest site area within Tikal, dating back to the pre-Classic Period. Archeologists theorize this may have been the original center of the city, established around 500 BC. It has been re-built many times throughout its history. *Mundo Perdido* was basically a ceremonial complex, constructed along a strict architectural line for the purpose of astronomical observation; the buildings were aligned to correspond with the sun's solstices and equinoxes. The complex is divided into two sections known as the High Plaza and the Low Plaza. In the High Plaza is a tall stepped temple called the *Great Pyramid*, the main structure, with a ceremonial platform to the west of it. The Low Plaza is separated by a group of smaller structures just to the east of the *Great Pyramid* and contains a series of temples known as the *Plaza of the Seven Temples* built during the late Classic Period.

As we walked through this area Luis pointed out various sections on the pyramids where excavations exposed previous pyramids beneath the existing one, and clear evidence of the *talud-tablero* style of slanting wall pyramid-building developed in Teotihuacán (signifying their influence in Tikal). It's interesting to note that besides being the oldest section of the city, the *Mundo Perdido* complex was also the last area to be abandoned. As Tikal withered and collapsed, the activities surrounding this complex intensified. Archeaologists are not sure why, but possibly because it held a very sacred position within the community, going all the way back to their original ancestors. At one point it served as a royal necropolis and even had a causeway connecting it to the *Acropolis Norte*.

Our tour of Tikal officially ended at *Mundo Perdido*. We trekked back to the *Gran Plaza* over a very muddy trail, cautiously making our way along the edges so as not to slip. We were in for a 'cultural surprise' when we reached the *Gran Plaza*; a group of visiting Maya had gathered near the foot of *Temple I* and were dancing in a circle around a fire. The men wore red bandanas and passed around a lighted cigar. We took numerous photographs of them as they performed their sacred ritual, until a tribal elder protested to Luis and he told us to stop. We observed them for about fifteen minutes before heading back to our awaiting truck. Wearily, we climbed aboard (Casey and I rode in the cab with the driver) and headed towards a restaurant located inside the park near the visitor's center. The restaurant resembled an enormous gazebo in the middle of the woods with a thatched roof and wooden benches and tables. Most of their dishes were grilled outdoors, and when we arrived the aroma was absolutely heavenly. This turned out to be one of the best meals I had while on the trip. I ordered the grilled pork chops (with an orange glaze sauce) which came with rice, grilled veggies, and plenty of hot tortillas. On the side was a delicious vegetable hot sauce I sprinkled on everything. For dessert they gave us grilled bananas covered in sweet syrup.

By 2:00pm we walked about twenty minutes or so back to the visitor's center. The trail was very muddy (back at the hotel I ruined a bath towel cleaning the muck off my sneakers). Along the trail we stopped to take photographs of an unusual-looking ceiba tree; its gigantic trunk rose straight up with branches spread out like gnarled fingers. By 2:30pm we were on the bus heading towards Santa Elena. The combination of lunch and four hours of hiking and climbing took its toll on us; one-by-one everybody nodded off on the trip back. When we reached Santa Elena, Luis had our driver take us on a thirty minute tour of the Isla de Flores (Island of Flores), a picturesque little town situated on Peten Itza Lake, connected to Santa Elena by a causeway. This tiny island village resembled a smaller version of Antigua with cobbled-stone narrow streets and colorfully painted colonial-style dwellings. It is a tourist magnet, featuring many shops, great bars and restaurants, and offering a host of water sport activities for those who want to enjoy the lake. There is a perimeter road that goes completely around the island (which might take all of fifteen minutes to navigate even if you drive slow), but due to the elevated level of the lake some parts were actually underwater and we had to cut through the inner, very crowded streets of Isla de Flores. Luis pointed out several restaurants where we might want to have dinner (which was on our own that night).

We arrived back at the hotel by 4:30pm. I took another shower and changed clothes. We had done and seen so much that day I spent the next hour jotting it all down in my journal while my memory was still fresh. At 6:30pm a small group of us gathered in the lobby. Luis was there with his shy year and a half old son (he lives in nearby Flores) and a fellow tourism friend named Wilson (who was learning the 'tour guide' trade according to Luis). They drove us across the causeway into Isla de Flores for dinner, dropping us off along the perimeter road. They said they'd be back for us at 8:00pm. Sheila and Jerry went off on their own to try a seafood restaurant up the street recommended by Luis (perhaps they wanted a little romantic downtime); Howard, Barbara, Casey, Connie and me opted to eat at a place called *Raices*, a quaint, thatched-roof grill joint built on a private pier over the lake. The food was pretty good. I had the ribs with all the fixings.

After a nice dinner and great conversation we made our way back to the rendezvous point where Wilson was already waiting to pick us up and bring us back to our hotel. I was thoroughly exhausted and was asleep less than thirty minutes later.

Day Twelve

I awoke at 4:00am and could not go back to sleep, so I watched CNN news and then an Animal Planet episode on Nepalese elephants. When the hotel's kitchen staff came on duty about an hour later, I called to have a thermos of hot water brought to my room. With two cups of rejuvenating java juice flowing through my veins, I showered, dressed and repacked my suitcase. I had breakfast with Howard. His back was acting up and the subsequent aching down his right leg was starting to bother him. During our tour of Tikal he managed to keep up with the group even though it was obvious he was in much discomfort. He told me he was planning on having surgery soon to repair whatever it was that was troubling his back. I really admired the man, at 77 he was not going to let his ailment get in the way of his travels. *Kudos, Howard, you're my inspiration*!

By 8:00am we were on the bus heading towards Yaxha, another of Petén's famous archaeological sites. Later in the afternoon we would continue to the border and enter Belize. Joining us for the rest of the tour was an OAT travel guide trainee named Pablo, who assisted Luis but rarely spoke. On our drive to Yaxha we passed the beautiful Macanche Lake. We also stopped briefly to photograph a roadside butcher in one of the small towns. The man and his wife were selling freshly carved beef or pork from a wooden stand without any refrigeration whatsoever. The meat was just piled on top of the table. We also passed an area where *Survivor: Guatemala* (the popular American TV show) was filmed. Many of the homes in the area had large, blue plastic drums in their front yards donated by the show's producers for the purpose of trapping rain water; a goodwill gesture to the locals for their support. Luis pointed out some variations of strangler figs, trees which have been enveloped by the thick roots of other plant species, common in tropical or subtropical climates where the competition for sunlight is intense between the forest canopies. Our driver Sammy, who had an excellent eye for spotting wildlife, pointed out several laughing falcons along the way (snake-eating birds with distinct white and brownish feathers and large heads).

I don't know how many kilometers Yaxha is from Santa Elena, but it took us well over an hour to get there on the access road we were using. We drove along a main two-lane highway – passing several rural farming villages – before entering a thickly forested area leading to the site. The unpaved access road was very muddy from recent rains and meandered up and down incredibly bumpy hills. We saw a few commercial trucks which got stuck in the mud (some could not continue and had to turn back). One truck driver even warned Sammy about the road conditions up ahead as he passed by; but Sammy mustered on, stepping on the gas whenever we had a muddy hill to climb, our bus sliding momentarily but making it over the hump each time. Back in El Salvador, Luis told us

the reason OAT uses a mini-bus in Central America (as opposed to a full-size tour bus) was because of muddy roads such as the one we were now traveling across. He said it was easier to push a mini-bus out of the mud than a bigger bus. I thought he was joking – the idea of a group of retired tourists pushing their own bus out of the mud seemed preposterous – but now that I saw the possibility of such an occurrence taking shape before me, it didn't seem ludicrous at all (nor appealing!); we were in the middle of another natural preserve, isolated in the rain forest, and who knew *how long* we'd have to wait in order to get roadside assistance? Luckily, Sammy's driving skills prevailed and we reached the entrance of Yaxha a short while later.

The site is located on a ridge overlooking the north shore of Lake Yaxha within the *Yaxha-Nakum-Naranjo National Park* system of northeastern Petén. This natural preserve encompasses roughly 143 square miles of wilderness and includes the archaeological sites of four ancient Maya cities – Topoxte, Nakum, Naranjo and Yaxha – along with over 200 smaller settlement sites. People first arrived at Yaxha between 1000 – 350 BC. By the Late Preclassic Period (350 BC – 250 AD) these settlers had transformed Yaxha into the largest Maya city in the eastern Petén lakes region. Yaxha continued to grow into an enormous city-state by the Early Classic Period (250 – 600 AD) reaching a size of 92 square miles with a population hovering around 90,000. As was the case with most large city kingdoms in the region, the temple ruins at Yaxha show evidence of a strong influence from Teotihuacan, suggesting close ties to the central Mexican powerhouse.

At one point during its heyday, the nearby city of Naranjo emerged as the more influential city in the region, but Naranjo was never able to fully dominate Yaxha, which remained a strong, vibrant city well into the Late Classic Period (600 – 900 AD) before it suffered the same death knell downward spiral of other great Maya kingdoms and was completely abandoned. The ruins were first reported by the famous German explorer Teoberto Maler in 1904. Over the next several decades the site was mapped, and during the 1980's excavation was begun in earnest. The ruins include 500 or so structures – some linked by causeways – with about 40 steles positioned throughout the site (half still retain their sculptures) containing important information concerning the rulers and history of Yaxha. We had to stop at a military barricade before we could enter the site. Several years ago a group of armed men entered Yaxha in a truck and hauled off one of the better stele which was later sold on the antiquities black market, forcing the government to establish military checkpoints in the region to prevent any more looting of their national historical treasures.

We entered the site through the southeast entrance and quickly came upon an astronomical complex called *Plaza C* designed in a typical lowland Maya formation known in archaeological terms as an E-Group, a cluster of specific building types arranged around a plaza and separated from other structures usually for the purpose of astrological observations or public rituals. There are three Early Classic steles on the east side of this plaza, only one of which is not badly eroded, bearing a sculpted image of a figure standing atop a grotesque head; hieroglyphic carvings appear to the left of the figure's knee. One glyph is of the emblem of Yaxha. We took the *Calzada Lincoln* (the Lincoln Causeway, one of several dirt pathways linking the entire ancient city) and

headed towards the *South Acropolis* (also referred to as the Main Acropolis). Unlike the muddied, jungle-enshrined trails at Tikal, the Lincoln Causeway was a well-cleared path through the forest. There were howler monkeys in the trees yelling down at us. Apparently, the males are very territorial. According to Luis, if a man urinates in the woods around here the male howler monkeys will pick up the scent and become quite irate, bellowing threateningly. Luis told us to ignore them since they're more bluster than actual threat. Although, I must confess, I imagined we were going to get pelted with feces at any moment.

The *South Acropolis* dates back to the Middle Preclassic Period (before 350 BC) with construction continuing until the Terminal Classic Period (when most of the Maya city-states collapsed). It is a huge complex consisting of six patio groups built over an artificial platform atop a high karstic hill. The buildings here are separated by corbel-vaulted structures (arches common in lowland Maya cities) and probably served as a palace compound or the dwellings of the elite. On the north side of the acropolis is a *ball court* with more stone structures just behind it and a temple with the ominous name of the *Pyramid of the Sacrifices*. Just to the south of this, between the *South Acropolis* and the nearby *Northeast Acropolis* we came upon the *Plaza de los Pajaros* (or the Plaza of the Birds, also known as Plaza E). There are two large steles here which have been damaged or broken, and the main building within the plaza has been excavated in parts to reveal previous temples or structures buried inside, in one section the original paint is exposed. We continued walking westward and reached the *North Acropolis*, a complex with three restored pyramids (two of them fairly large). I believe Luis told us the three pyramids were symbolic of the Maya creation mythology involving the jaguar, water and the snake, although I am not positive about this. This particular group of pyramids had rounded edges as opposed to the angular corners of most Mayan temples.

From the *North Acropolis* we made our way back to the center of the site and proceeded along the *Calzada Este* (the East Causeway) until we reached the largest complex in Yaxha, the *East Acropolis*. Occupying the highest area of the city, this section is surrounded by three plazas, including *Plaza C* (the E-Group complex I mentioned earlier when we first entered the site) and *Plaza A*, a twin-pyramid complex built around 800 AD. Some archaeologists believe the twin-pyramids indicate close ties between Yaxha and Tikal where those kinds of structures originated. The *East Acropolis* underwent major reconstruction from when it was first conceived in the Preclassic Period. Back then it was a simple *triadic* pyramid (a main structure flanked by two smaller inward facing buildings), but throughout the Classic Period it received major uplifts, finishing as a closed complex with twelve adjacent structures encompassing over 87,000 square feet.

There are several major palace structures found in the *East Acropolis*, but the most impressive building has to be the temple pyramid known as *Structure 216* (also called the *Mirador Pyramid*); this is the highest structure in Yaxha, offering the best view of the surrounding jungle and nearby lagoon from its summit. Like in Tikal, there was a wooden tourist-friendly staircase built next to it and most of us climbed to the top to take in the magnificent view. *Structure 216* has eight stepped levels that were constructed over

existing smaller pyramids, with rounded corners and a steep projecting stairway running up the front. At the very top of its base rests the remains of the temple shrine. Ron and I walked around the edge of the entire top section taking photographs of the Yaxha Lake and the forest canopy below. From this vantage point we had a commanding view of the *East Acropolis*.

From here we exited the site and re-boarded our bus, heading back to the main highway via the muddy, bumpy access road. We stopped for lunch at a local restaurant that was established originally to cater to the staff and crew of the Survivor show and has remained in business ever since. Most of us ordered the *kakik* on Luis' recommendation. This is a traditional Guatemalan dish similar to the *pepian*; a soup mixed with potatoes, polenta and veggies and served with a piece of chicken in it, accompanied by yellow rice, black beans and tortillas on the side. Very tasty. We had watermelon wedges for dessert.

Shortly before 2:00pm we were back on the bus heading towards Belize. It took us only thirty more minutes before we reached the Guatemalan border town of Melchor de Mencos. At the border crossing we had to take all our belongings off the bus and fill out immigration forms. Two local men removed our luggage off the rack and helped us carry it across the border to the Belize side while customs personnel inspected the inside of the bus. According to Luis, a long-standing land dispute between Belize and Guatemala has led to occasional problems at the border. In the past, trainees like Pablo have been turned away (Belize only allows so many foreign travel guides on each tour). Luis definitely put on the charm, going beyond his normal friendly self to be *extra* polite towards the Belizean customs personnel. Once we and our luggage were back on the bus, we could only proceed if a Belizean tourist guide accompanied us. His name was Manuel Mendez (nicknamed M&M by Luis), a very nice and informative man who gave us a brief background on Belize. Under Belize law, a native tour guide must be present on each guided tour, but this regulation is only enforced at the border; an hour later we dropped Manual off at our first rest stop before continuing on to Belize City.

Belize is only 180 miles long and 68 miles wide, and by the time we finished our tour it almost felt as if we'd driven the entire territory. We entered from the west and cut straight across the center of the country on a major roadway known simply as the Western Highway. It took us two and a half hours to reach Belize City, which is situated on the east coast. The country's rectangular shape is bordered on the north by Mexico, the west and south by Guatemala and the east by the Caribbean Sea. While Belize has the lowest population of any Central American country – just over 330,000 inhabitants – it also has, curiously enough, the second highest population growth rate in the western hemisphere at almost 2%.

Because of its unique position between North and South America, the rugged geography of Belize offers up some incredibly diverse ecosystems. Along the western border there is a mix of lowland forests and highland plateau. To the north the country is mostly flat, swampy coastal plains, heavily forested in sections. The south is made up of the low mountain range of the Maya Mountains (a chain which runs through eastern Guatemala). And along much of its entire coastline, Belize is flanked by the second

longest barrier reef in the world. Since much of the country is unpopulated, more than 5000 plant species grow wild here and hundreds of different types of animals roam free. Overall, 60% of the land surface is covered by forests; the rest is made up of savannah, scrublands and wetlands.

The ancestors of the Maya were the first to settle in the country around 1500 BC; eventually several great city-states flourished with close ties to the kingdoms in Guatemala and Mexico. An estimated 400,000 – 1,000,000 Maya may have lived in the area prior to 800 AD when most of the great Maya cities began to be abandoned. By the time the Europeans arrived in the 16th century, the only significant group of indigenous people living in Belize was the Mopan branch of the Yucatec Maya. Spanish conquistadors claimed the area of Belize for Spain, but did not settle here because of the roughness of the terrain, the lack of gold and the spirited defense by the indigenous people. Eventually, British pirates established strongholds along the coastline and settled down, establishing lucrative logwood trading posts run by African slave labor. The logwood of Belize yielded a fixing agent for clothing dye that was in much demand by Europe's woolen industry. Initially, Spain granted the British pirates the right to settle on their colony in exchange for a cessation of piracy acts against Spanish ships. But in 1798, as the British settlements grew in size and prosperity, a decisive battle broke out off the coast of Belize known as the Battle of St. George's Caye and Belize came under British rule. The new colony was called British Honduras. By the mid 1960's, a pro-independence movement garnered self-rule from Britain and in 1973 the country switched its name to Belize. It became an officially independent country in 1981. Guatemala does not recognize Belize, arguing a long-standing claim to the country's territory. This has led to bitter disputes between the two neighbors, hence the sometime unfriendly treatment of Guatemalans trying to enter the country.

The ethnic makeup of Belize is as diverse as its geography. There are three distinct Maya groups still living in the country which constitute about 10% of the population: the Yucatec, Mopan and Kek'Chi. Another 21% are Creoles (also known as Kriols) who are the descendents of the slaves brought to work the logging industry, hailing from West and Central Africa. This group also includes the descendents of the slave owners and mixed African-Native Central Americans. It is important to note that calling oneself 'Creole' is not necessarily a racial designation since even white Belizeans often include themselves in this category. Almost 5% of the population is Garinagu; this is a mixed race of West/Central Africans with indigenous tribal people from the Caribbean. Another 9% of the population consists of foreigners and their descendents who have settled in Belize over the last 150 years, including an adventuresome mix of enterprising Chinese, Indians, German Mennonite farmers, people from the Caribbean, whites from North America, Lebanese and Syrians. Half the population is considered Mestizos, a mixture of mostly Spanish and Maya people. As we drove to Belize City we witnessed the unique ethnic make-up of the country firsthand in the different neighborhoods we passed along the way, but none was more striking than the closed community of blond haired, blue-eyed Mennonite farmers who seemed so out of place here yet are an integral part of the country's well-being. According to our Belizean guide Manual, Mennonites grow most of the food. And Chinese and Indian Belizeans tend to be the majority of the store owners.

The official language of Belize is English, but with such a diverse ethnic mix, the *real* language spoken here is Belizean Creole, a combination of English and Creole which originated with the former slaves and is now the most popular dialect or form of communication in the country (roughly 75% of the population uses it). When dealing with foreigners, Belizeans will speak English, but amongst themselves they usually revert back to Belizean Creole, which, together with the accent, I found almost impossible to understand. The same is true of the Spanish language here. Since half the population is of Spanish-Maya mix, the Spanish language (which is spoken by roughly 30% of the people) is considered an unofficial second language and even taught in school, but it, too, has undergone some linguistic changes, and what is spoken is more like a *Kitchen Spanish*, a mixture of Spanish with Belizean Creole.

The two and a half hour drive along the Western Highway was uneventful; we did cross several waterways (the Mopan, Macal and Belize rivers) and could see the forests and hills of the Mountain Pine Ridge off in the far distance, but for the most part the journey consisted of flat, grassy landscape and farmlands. Gone was the lush, exotic mountain valley scenery we experienced throughout Guatemala. After a while, everything pretty much looked the same. Belize did not have what one could describe as a booming economy; the small villages we passed along the highway were dotted with run-down single dwellings sitting atop stilts (due to flooding conditions). The people in these villages appeared to be poor rural folk idling the time away. I saw no major factories, industrial complexes or big cities. Periodically, a cluster of small stores or groups of stilted homes would indicate that you were passing an actual town. These rural communities had interesting names like Blackman Eddy, Teakettle and Camalote. The capital of Belize is Belmopan, situated along the Western Highway in the center of the country. I was looking forward to seeing it, imagining a large modern city. When we finally drove by it, though, I could barely distinguish the capital from the other nondescript towns we'd already passed.

Near the town of La Democracia, not far from the Belize Zoo, I dozed off for thirty minutes and awoke as we drove by the village of Hattieville, a tiny community which grew from the refugee camp established to house the homeless victims of Hurricane Hattie in 1961. Today, Hattieville contains the country's only prison. A short while later we reached the outskirts of Belize City and had to drive through the historical Yarborough Cemetery (the Western Highway cuts right through it) which contains thousands of above ground tombs. In 2009 this cemetery – established by the British in 1787 and used until 1896 for members of the colonial Anglican Church – was officially designated as an archaeological reserve. At first I thought it was a little creepy that a centuries old cemetery would be the first thing greeting visitors to the city (from the west, anyway). But when we reached the downtown area it kind of made sense; Belize City was about as lively as a funerary ground. We arrived near sunset, just after 6:00pm, and from what I could see in the diminishing light was a poor, somewhat disheveled provincial town with many unpaved streets and an odd mix of citizenry milling about. To be perfectly honest (and this is why I write these journals) I would have been more nervous walking the streets of Belize City at night than just about any other place we

visited on the tour. Granted, first impressions can be deceiving, and the people here were very friendly, so I'll just chalk up my unease to the long bus ride and my normally cautious jitters.

We stayed at the Best Western Belize Biltmore Plaza located in the north section of the city. Whenever I conjure up the image of a place called *Biltmore Plaza* I rarely associate it with Best Western. But the hotel was very nice, a two-story structure with most of the hotel rooms located around the pool lounge area. After checking in, I immediately put the coffeemaker in my room to good use and then recharged my camera batteries. My room was very comfortable, with a large bathroom and a wide tiled shower area. The only drawback was the swarm of mosquitoes that hovered for some reason behind the bathroom door. They were big, black and moved in a slow cumbersome manner; I was able to kill a good portion of them before dinnertime…only to come back and find they had somehow regrouped!

At 7:00pm we gathered for dinner in the hotel's restaurant. The meal was great. I had another pork chop (smothered in a tasty barbecue sauce), white rice, coleslaw, a delicious broccoli soup and a thick slice of rich chocolate cake for dessert. By 8:30pm I was back in my room and began repacking my luggage but soon tired of the task and laid down to watch a boxing match on HBO. I don't know how long the fight lasted; I, on the other hand, was 'knocked out' by the third round.

Day Thirteen

I awoke earlier than usual – 4:00am – and could not go back to sleep, so I prepared two cups of coffee in my room, watched CNN and wrote in my journal for the next two hours. After shaving and showering I joined Howard, Ann, Jean, Jerry and Sheila in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. They had a nice buffet but the real treat was the exquisite made-to-order omelets prepared by one of the chefs as you waited. Today was the last day of our trip, and it would be another long one. During the beginning of the tour (with the exception of Copan) I was surprised that we had not seen more Maya archaeological sites. Granted, we missed seeing the Joya de Ceren site in El Salvador due to the workers' strike, but after Copan we basically toured the highland cities and towns of Guatemala. Well, let me tell you, we sure made up for it at the end of the trip. Both visits to Tikal and Yaxha were exhausting, with several hours of walking and climbing (not to mention the bus rides getting there), and today's visit to the archaeological site known as Lamanai would be equally exhausting. It was a daylong endeavor, but definitely worth it.

At 8:00am we were all on the bus, joined by a local ecotourism guide named Eddy who would also serve as our boat captain later on. Before leaving for Lamanai we did a

thirty minute drive-by tour of Belize City. If you think thirty minutes to see the country's largest city is not sufficient, think again. As the former capital of the British colony, Belize City definitely has a colorful history, but in 1961 Hurricane Hattie – packing wind speeds of up to 240 mph – tore this city apart, leaving nothing in its wake but utter devastation and a think layer of black mud. Judging from the condition of the city today, its recovery from that storm has been a slow and ongoing process. We drove by many dilapidated wooden structures built practically on the edge of the roads offering pedestrians no place to walk but on the crowded streets, and many of these inner neighborhood streets were either not paved or badly in need of repair. The only difference between the urban blight I saw in Belize City as opposed to other poor countries I've visited was the attitude of the people. Earlier in the year I had traveled through the north-central part of India, and despite the country's strong economy the look of misery and desperation was clearly evident on the faces of the poor who congregate on the streets to beg or sell trinkets to tourists. The people in Belize did not have that look. On the contrary, there is a laid-back culture here that is downright infectious. Belizeans, regardless of their economic status, seemed to be a genuinely happy lot. Maybe in the future I will return to the country and take a closer look…hopefully, they would have paved the streets by then!

After driving by the city's coastal area and seeing some of the historical buildings and monuments we proceeded north on the aptly named Northern Highway towards the small river town of Carmelita where we would travel by boat to Lamanai. I'm not sure why we took this long, seemingly roundabout way since there are tours which drive to Lamanai directly. Perhaps recent storm flooding – which inundated parts of the country prior to our arrival – had made those roads impassible. Or, maybe, this was a good way to see other parts of the country seldom visited by tourists. Either way, it took us an hour and a half by bus to reach the pier at Carmelita and then an additional hour by boat to reach the site. On the drive north Eddy gave us the geographical lowdown on his country, mentioning the six districts that make up Belize. Much of what he said we had already heard from Manual the day before. The scenery consisted of flat, marshy lands with occasional farms. We saw cattle and goats grazing, as well. Some of the homes (the ones not on stilts) were flooded by recent rains. It seemed the further north we traveled the more rural (if that is possible) the country became; the scattered communities along the Northern Highway had names like Ladyville, Sandy Hill and Crooked Tree. There was virtually no traffic on the roadway, as if Belizeans themselves had no interest in coming up here.

During the drive Eddy spoke about the various species of trees, animals and birds found in Belize. He mentioned that the national bird is the toucan, and the national animal is the tapir. Tropical rains dump 150-200 inches of water annually over the rainforests, creating the marshy conditions we witnesses throughout the trip. Along the way we stopped to photograph wood storks and spiny tail iguanas sunning themselves on a cement fence post. I discovered that the stilts the homes are built on are actually called pilings.

Eddy described the flag of Belize (a continued version of the old British Honduras flag): an emblem of a white and black man standing next to a mahogany tree – axes over their shoulders – holding up the colonial coat of arms (which represents the old logging industry). According to Eddy, most Belizeans do not respect this flag since independence was given to them through negotiations and not armed conflict. I guess the cathartic effect of violently overthrowing 'the yolk of colonialism' is more desirable to those who lived under British rule then a peaceful transition of power. Public education in Belize is compulsory up to eighth grade, after that the family must pay. The minimum wage (at the time) was 2.50 Belizean dollars an hour (our exchange rate was 2 for 1); after 48 hours of work overtime must be paid. People with college degrees can earn between 2,000 and 3,500 Belizean dollars a month. The local economy is driven by three main factors: agriculture, tourism and fishing. Unfortunately, when it comes to tourism, the country's infrastructure (as evident in Belize City) is not adequate to support the growing demand of this industry, and the government is struggling to modernize the interior. These were some of the topics Eddy touched upon during our drive.

By 9:45am we pulled into the small pier area built along the New River in the town of Carmelita, sections of the platform leading to the dock were submerged under water due to recent flooding. In fact, the river itself was currently 8-9 feet higher than normal. We climbed into a passenger boat and sat along the edges while a young man from the pier released us from our mooring. Eddy hit the gas, or the throttle, or whatever it is that makes a boat move fast, and we were on our way. I thought it would be cool to sit in the front of the boat – so I could take unhindered photographs of the waterway – but the wind against my face was so strong I had to fasten the chin strap of my boonie hat very tightly to prevent it from flying away. After fifteen minutes of this wind barrage, I began to regret sitting in the front.

The New River is the longest river that is entirely confined to Belize. It flows in a north-northeasterly direction from the Orange Walk District up to the Corozal District and empties into the Chetumal Bay which borders Mexico. This river also forms the New River Lagoon, the largest body of fresh water in the country, just to the east of Lamanai. At times the river narrowed and then would suddenly widen after a turn, meandering into smaller inlets and waterways. For most of the trip the scenery along the sides of the river was nothing more than thick jungle foliage and even thicker mangroves. Eddy told us this area was a protected habitat for many species of birds and animals. We stopped a few times to take pictures of exotic birds perched on tree limbs. The New River is also teeming with crocodiles, but we were not able to see any because the water level was so high they had moved inland. It hadn't occurred to me until we were well into the boat ride that much of the vegetation I was seeing along the banks of the river was actually the top of the tree lines, that's how high the water level had reached. We passed a shipyard and a Mennonite farming community on our right just before we entered the lagoon. When we reached the Lamanai archaeological site the pier was entirely under water, and we had to dock along a floating makeshift wooden platform. Prior to entering the site we used the restrooms in the welcome center. Luis did not accompany us on the archaeological tour. He stayed behind, near the boat, to protect our belongings and to set up the picnic lunch that Eddy's wife (or girlfriend, not sure) had cooked for us. We

followed Eddy up a small embankment to the first archaeological structure and began our tour.

Let me just give a brief history lesson on Lamanai:

The earliest Maya inhabitants of Belize arrived around 1200 BC, probably moving eastward from Guatemala or southward from the Chiapas areas of Mexico. These early settlers set up small communities and relied on agriculture, hunting, fishing, foraging and the domestication of certain animals to survive. Almost all of these Preclassic settlements were situated along or near rivers. Eventually, these early Maya villages developed certain skills and crafts and began trading with other Maya groups within Mesoamerica, acquiring new goods, technologies and ideas in the process. By the Middle Preclassic Period we begin to see the emergence of public monumental architecture in Belize, and the formation of social classes which led to a hierarchal political system. By the Late Preclassic Period (between 300 BC – 250 AD) the small Maya villages in Belize had been transformed into thriving towns and well-established city-states.

The first settlers of Lamanai arrived around 1000 BC and by the Late Preclassic Period had already begun to build the foundations of many of the structures we see there today. The combination of large temples and smaller structures and platforms at the site shows a high level of activity during this time, indicating strongly that Lamanai had grown into an important political and economic center in this area of Belize. Originally, Lamanai was established along the western bank of the New River Lagoon due to the abundance of resources and wildlife in the vicinity. But the development of the New River as an important riverine trade route linking the Maya communities in southern Mexico with those of Belize greatly increased the wealth and status of this city within the region. An interesting thing that separates Lamanai from other city-states is its unique architectural layout; instead of the typical Maya formation of plazas surrounded by small house platforms, the Lamanai Maya developed their community in a strip-like formation along the edge of the lagoon. Archaeologists are not exactly sure why since other similar-sized centers along rivers adhered to the traditional style of plaza group building. The prevailing theory is that the adjacent river probably influenced their construction plans.

By the end of the Late Classic Period many large and impressive city-states existed throughout Mesoamerica, each having built elaborate temples, structures, monuments and causeways. As they grew, so did competition for resources. Wars were constantly breaking out between the larger lowland cities of Petén (and elsewhere) that eventually led to the downward spiral of the great Maya civilization. As conflicts increased, the cities became overburdened and unsustainable and many Maya migrated eastward towards the more stable river cities in Belize. At one point during this time, archaeologists estimate more than a million Maya may have resided in the country. Lamanai managed to escape the turmoil of its larger neighbors to the north and west and continued to thrive well into the Post Classic Period when the Spanish arrived; it seems to have been completely abandoned around 1650, making it one of the oldest, continually inhabited Maya centers in history.

Compared to Copan, Tikal or Yaxha, Lamanai is a small archaeological site with most of its hundreds of structures still buried in the rainforest. Currently, only eight major complex areas have been excavated since the mid 1970's, but the place is extremely impressive nonetheless. *Lamanai* is the actual pre-Columbian name of the city, as inscribed on Maya glyphs from more than a thousand years ago; it means 'submerged crocodile' in Yucatec Maya, a nod to the large American reptiles that have inhabited these waterways for millennia. We began our tour at the Jaguar Temple, a stepped-pyramid structure built around 645 AD. On each side of the steep front staircase of the temple are large angular block carvings of a jaguar (hence the name). This was a huge structure, one of the tallest at Lamanai, but much of it was still covered by dirt and jungle. We proceeded across the open grassy plaza in front of the Jaguar Temple to the next part of the complex, coming upon a large black tarantula hiding in its hole. Eddy was somehow able to entice the arachnid to come out and strike a momentary pose atop his green clipboard while we took pictures of it. That was definitely an Indiana Jones moment!

Just to the north of the Jaguar Temple is the royal residential complex, a series of platforms and plazas which once housed the homes of Lamanai's elite. This particular area was still occupied when the Spaniards arrived in the 1600's, with houses made of thatch and stones and distributed like a typical village. We continued north along a natural trail through the forest and reached the city's ball court. Although relatively small as far as Maya ball courts go this one is unique in that it boasts the largest known ball court marker, a big stone piece sitting in the middle of the two playing walls. Underneath the marker, a lidded vessel was discovered containing miniature pots and other artifacts within a pool of liquid mercury, the first such find in the Maya lowlands. Just to the east of the ball court is Stele 9, the only one found in its original location. The monument marks a festivity held on March 7, 625 AD honoring the reign of a Lamanai ruler known as Lord Smoking Shell.

We walked further north through the forest and came upon the largest structure at Lamanai: the *High Temple*. Standing at over 100 feet, this badly damaged stepped-pyramid structure was first begun in 100 BC, and despite undergoing several reconstructions over the next 1000 years the temple has maintained its original height. It stands in Lamanai's central ceremonial core and was built on top of an older residential area dating back to 300 BC. The construction of such a large temple over what was previously a residential area signified the city's new power, wealth and prestige. In order to enjoy the view from its summit we needed to climb the central stairway of the temple. Although I've climbed taller and steeper pyramids in my day, this one was pretty worn and the steps a bit precarious. A thick rope was fastened from the top of the pyramid and ran down the center of the stone staircase. The small group of us (I think Ron, Casey, Jerry, Sheila and me) who made it to the top held onto the rope for support. The view was awesome! We could see the New River Lagoon and miles of rainforest canopy in every direction. The climb down was just as scary as the climb up. When we reached the bottom we saw an incredible sight; a young European woman, egged on by her tour group companions, did a handstand on the ledge of the second landing. *Wow*.

From here we walked five more minutes through the forest to reach the Mask Temple, the northernmost and final complex at the site. This was one of the most interesting temples I saw on the entire trip. Resting upon a series of wide stepped platforms, like an altar on top of an altar, the small leveled pyramid had two enormous face masks on each side of the main stairway, both were carved out of limestone instead of the typical sculpted plaster over stone used in most Maya designs of this nature. The faces on the stone masks were also unique; the features resembled Olmec iconography, with big lips and broad noses more commonly associated with the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Each mask was adorned with a headdress of a crocodile, validating the ancient name of the city. I had Ron take some very good photographs of me standing before the giant masks.

By 1:30pm we were finished with the tour of Lamanai and returned to the dock area where Luis and Pablo had set up a mini buffet inside one of the picnic huts. It was a delicious lunch of mixed rice and beans, chicken in tomato sauce, cole slaw, sweet papaya chunks, tortilla chips with salsa and bottles of water and juice. After lunch we had about thirty minutes to tour the small museum at the site and shop for souvenirs. I purchased a couple of T-shirts, magnets and a cool ceramic model of a chicken bus for a total of 37 Belizean dollars. By 2:30pm we were on the boat heading back to Carmelita. I made sure not to sit in the front! The return boat ride took only forty-five minutes. I think it was because we were going with the current of the river. When we arrived at Carmelita, we tipped Eddy well, thanking him for a job well done. Luis announced that our bus ride back to Belize City would be 'quiet time'. Most of us fell asleep.

We reached the Best Western Hotel by 4:30pm and had two hours before our farewell dinner. I took another shower and wrote in my journal. By 6:30pm, donning my second-to-last clean shirt, I proceeded to a small hotel conference room near the pool area where Luis conducted a final meeting, a sort of recap of the trip. We sat around a large square table snacking on tortilla chips with bean dip and toasting the trip with rum, wine or soda. Luis set up a projector and flashed a series of photographs he had taken throughout the tour. One hilarious moment ensued when he put up the picture of a howler monkey at Yaxha. The monkey was lying across two tree limbs high up in the canopy, and Luis had zoomed in so close you could see the animal's perfectly smooth testicles hanging below the tree limbs. Boy, did we laugh! Another funny photo was the one he clandestinely took of Ron, Jerry and John as they were lined up in front of the outdoor urinals at the pier in Carmelita. Luis would make a great private detective.

Since I had never been on an OAT tour before, I found this final 'summation' meeting quite interesting. Our guide went around the table asking us to recount what we most enjoyed about the trip, and then compared that with what we had said during our orientation meeting two weeks earlier, when he asked us about our expectations and what we wanted to experience on the tour. Turns out, most of us were pleasantly surprised. I had expressed a deep desire to see the archaeological ruins, but found the highlands of Guatemala and the interaction with the locals to be the *real* highlights of this trip. I think the same was true for everyone else; our expectations, for the most part, were greatly exceeded. This turned out to be one of the best-guided tours I've ever taken.

By 7:30pm we boarded our bus and drove to the Celebrity Restaurant, a popular eatery in Belize City for our farewell dinner. At my end of the table sat Casey, Connie, Ann, Jean, Pablo and our driver Sammy, who finally cracked a smile! The meal was great; cream of veggie soup, sliced beef in sautéed onions, mashed potatoes, fresh veggies and a slice of chocolate cake for dessert. We joked, shared stories and took photos with Luis. By 9:30pm we returned to the hotel. I think, deep down, these farewell dinners usually end on a sad note. I mean, you bond with a group of strangers for several weeks and then suddenly say goodbye…usually forever. How unusual when you think about it. I imagine it's even tougher for the tour guide, who has to go through this process on a regular basis. I had a wonderful time with this group and I will definitely miss them. Hopefully, I will see a few of them in the future. Back in my room I didn't even bother to repack. I sat on my bed and watched, of all things, a broadcast of Sunday Night Football between the Denver Broncos and the Kansas City Chiefs. I nodded out thirty minutes later.

Day Fourteen

I was awake by 4:15am. After consuming two cups of coffee in my room I showered, dressed and repacked my suitcase for the final time. That morning I had breakfast with Howard and several of the others. Luis was there with an old-fashion manual credit card swiper (the kind which impresses your card information onto a paper receipt) for those of us who had taken either of the two optional excursions during the trip. OAT billed our credit cards about a month later.

By 9:00am a group of us (Jean, Ann, Jerry, Sheila, Ron, Barb and I) were on our way to Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport located roughly fifteen minutes from our hotel. Because Belize City sits almost at sea level, and the threat of massive flooding is always a constant threat, the capital was moved to Belmopan in 1970. For some reason, this airport – which was undergoing major renovations despite being susceptible to major flooding – is still located within the city. I guess in situations of severe weather the air traffic is diverted to Belmopan. Luis accompanied us to the airport and actually facilitated our check-in. Prior to entering the security area we said our final goodbyes to him (our wonderful tour guide!) and then sat or browsed the souvenir shops in the departure lounge for the next two hours until our flight to Miami was ready for boarding. An hour before take-off John, Freddie, Howard, Barbara and Bev joined us in the lounge; they were scheduled for a later flight to New York City, I think.

We left on schedule at 12:10pm. The pleasant flight lasted just under two hours. At Miami International Airport I used the new passport entry machines for the first time; a device which scans your passport, takes your photograph and then determines whether or not you can proceed directly through immigration or must stop at one of the counters for further clearance. I imagine these machines were designed to speed up the process, but the devices were recently installed and judging from the long lines at the immigration

counters they were not working as required. When I tried to scan my passport it couldn't read the barcode even after several attempts, finally ejecting a printed piece of paper instructing me to see an immigration officer. Once I cleared immigration I followed Ron and Barb to the luggage carousel and retrieved my suitcase. I said goodbye to them and proceeded out of the terminal building where I flagged a local cab for the short ride to my apartment.

I had the rest of the week off from work, taking this time to square away my personal affairs and touch base with family and friends. I also sifted through the more than 2,000 photos of my trip. I sat at my computer whittling away at that number, deleting the bad or repetitive ones and organizing the better pictures into sets on my Flickr webpage. Once I captioned out my photos I was ready to write this journal, which is always the last part of the journey. No trip is complete unless I've jotted everything down. The travelogues I write serve as my memories, and this one took nearly three months to complete due to all the research and my lack of writing time (my 'creative' period is usually between five and eight in the morning, just before going to work). Looking back I was amazed at how much we crammed into two weeks of touring. We traveled through four countries and experienced both the past and present culture of a great people. The lush mountainous valleys, volcanoes, lakes and rainforests were beautiful. The cities and colonial towns were so interesting. The archaeological sites were expansive and impressive. But it was the people of Central America I will remember most. They were, for the most part, so warm and welcoming everywhere we went.

Before closing the chapter of any trip, the last thing I do is send a copy of my journal to my fellow travelers as I way of saying 'thanks' for their companionship. After all, what makes for a truly memorable journey are the people you take it with, and this group was awesome. So, to Ann, Jean, Howard, Barbara, John, Freddie, Casey, Connie, Ron, Barb, Jerry, Sheila, Bev and Luis, thank you all for a wonderful time. May your future travels always be so grand.

Richard C. Rodriguez
(My Route of the Maya tour occurred between November 5th and 18th, 2013)