



FLAAR Reports

FLAAR Field Trip

Peten district, Guatemala

December 24, 2006-January 5, 2007



Nicholas Hellmuth

The goals of this 2-week field trip in the tropical rain forest area of Guatemala were:

1. To see how the informational signage at the archaeological parks, museums could be improved using modern digital technology.
2. To ascertain what future anthropological projects FLAAR could contribute with our knowledge of advanced digital technology, both photography, scanning, and printing.
3. To see whether we might consider offering educational field trips to this area in the future.
4. To photograph as much ethno-botanical material as possible
5. To obtain better photographs for our popular web site on Maya culture, www.maya-archaeology.org

Since this field trip was during Christmas and New Year's time, it was not a large crew, as most people prefer time off and a vacation. But it's also a good time of the year precisely to escape the stress of too many parties. The crew consisted of

- Eduardo Sacayon, biologist
- Dr Nicholas Hellmuth

We also had a full-time security person with us who helped considerably with setting up the tripods and carrying the extremely heavy backpack with tons of camera equipment. Fortunately there were no security issues and the car was not once broken into, something I can't say for many cities in the US, and even once in a nice part of Brussels. However you definitely need to be street wise to safely travel through many parts of Latin America.

Ethno-botany

The general goal of the FLAAR program in Mayan ethnobotany is to find and photograph as many plants in the following categories:

- Edible plants
- Useful plants (for building materials, handicrafts, etc)
- Sacred plants (incense, special seeds for divining, etc)
- Plants and flowers pictured in Maya art

In the category Plants and flowers pictured in Maya art the easiest subject is the ceiba tree. This tree was sacred to the ancient Maya and is the national tree of Guatemala today.



CEIBA TREE



CEIBA TREE SPIKES



CEIBA TREE SPIKES

Achiote is a red dye from the seeds of the achiote bush. The pre-Columbian Maya used this red colorant to dye their cacao. Today most indigenous farmers either have a few achiote trees around their houses or fields, or have entire plantations (especially in the Verapaz area). I would estimate that achiote could also be used as a body paint or cosmetic, but I would have to check ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources to check on this.



ACHIOTE



CACAO



TINTO TREE

A completely different kind of red dye comes from the tinto tree. You have to soak the wood in water to obtain the dye. England logged tinto by the ton to ship back to dye cloth produced by their Industrial Revolution. Indeed to secure the tinto trees from the coastal swamps is why England took over the Belize area of Central America (took it away from Guatemala).

Papaya is a major food plant. Papaya grows readily though the plant is rather soft and easily damaged. My personal interest in papaya is because it is one of four plants that fruit directly from the trunk:

- Papaya
- Moro
- Jocote
- cacao



PAPAYA



MORO



CACAO

The Zinkin flower we photographed along the Arroyo Petexbatun is just a random example of our long-range concept of creating a photo archive for botanists and iconographers alike. Since FLAAR specializes in advanced digital photography, we have the equipment and trained personnel to accomplish a class of photographic reference archive of flowers that is distinct from the snapshot kind of photography employed by most university or museum field projects.



ZINKIN FLOWER

Iconography

Iconography is the study of meaning in art. FLAAR has been working in the field of Maya iconography for many years. Our landmark publication on Maya deities is still cited today. One of our long-range projects still today is to find all natural references for the images in Maya art (paintings, ceramics, carved stone, etc).

For example, a notable percentage of Maya incense burners are clearly modeled on the trunk of the spiny ceiba tree. The ceiba tree was the sacred tree of Guatemala. Its spines are quite noticeable during the first five to fifteen years of the tree's life. Some Ceiba trees still have spines much longer. Anyone who visits a museum of pre-Columbian art will likely see an 8th-16th century ceramic effigy of a cross-section of a ceiba tree trunk. So as part of our overall program of general education



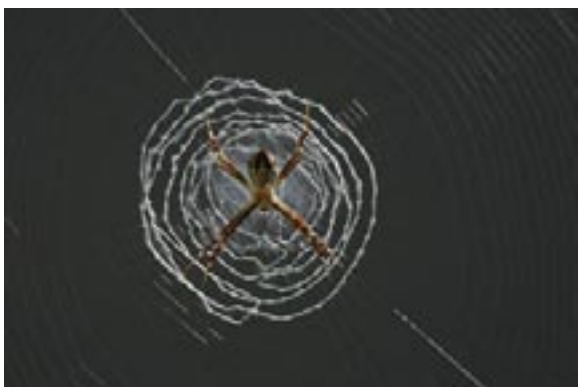
DR. NICHOLAS HELLMUTH PHOTOGRAPHING CEIBA TREES

FLAAR goes out into the field to find the actual ceiba trees so we can photograph them.

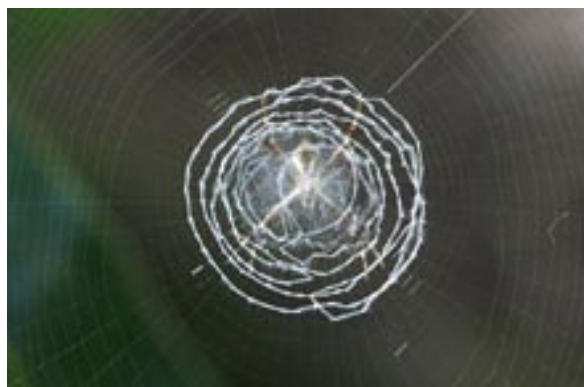
As with most natural features in Mesoamerica, there is more than one kind of tree with spikes, so it is crucial to find and photograph all of them. The catch here is that each species of tree may only grow in one particular region. So we will have to undertake additional field trips in the future to track down and photograph the other native trees with spikes, since, in theory, any of them could have been the model for the spikes on incense burners. The ceiba tree grows everywhere in Guatemala,

from the dry Salama Valley to the humid Peten, so this is the tree that we have the most photographs of so far.

Spiders in Maya Art



SPIDER



Large beetles and scorpions are the creatures of this size that are pictured in Maya art. The scorpion is the most common probably because of its astronomical and hence astrological significance. Although scorpions are quite common throughout the Peten, you have to dig down under fallen trees and logs to find them, so this will wait for a future field trip. But we did find some nice spider webs. The spider is rarely pictured in Maya art; one example that I can think of is at Chichen Itza, where a God N is backed by a spider web. It would be unlikely to have the opportunity to ascertain what species of spider is intended, but since I enjoy photographing spider webs anyway, I show two examples here.



WEB WITH TUNEL LIKE DESIGN

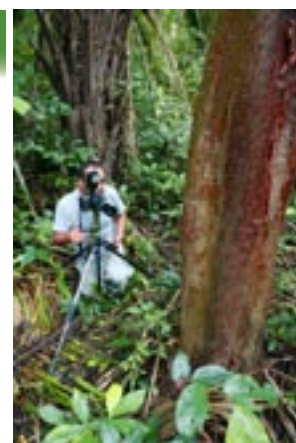
The symmetrical web was at Lake Yaxha. I spent about 25 minutes photographing it. The light was perfect. If more time had been available I would have used a 65mm macro lens that would have captured more detail. The shot here is with a 100mm lens on a Canon EOS 5D.

The lucky aspect of this web was that it was accessible from both the front and back, so I have views of both.

At Seibal I noticed this web with a tunnel-like design. Although the lighting was not perfect and I just took one shot, I found the structure of the web interesting.

Ethnobotany

Most archaeologists and many visitors to Guatemala are familiar with the incense used by the Maya. The substance that is most common (and hence best known) is copal (pom in Mayan languages). But, like everything else in Mesoamerica, there were several trees that provide incense. This is a polite way to say that it is not correct to list copal as the sole incense. The indio desnudo tree is far more common and provides a sap usable for incense. We probably saw about a thousand of this tree in the two weeks: it grows in humid climates, dry climates: you name it. The entire trip we probably only saw one copal tree.



INDIO DESNUDO

Tips on Photographic Equipment

Since the vehicle we rented was a bit small, we had to limit our photographic equipment to the following:

- 10 megapixel Nikon D200
- 12 megapixel Canon EOS 5D
- 22 megapixel Phase One on a Hasselblad ELX
- 48 megapixel BetterLight on a 4x5 Cambo Ultima

Bogen Imaging kindly provides tripods and tripod heads so that we can evaluate them, so we had a Manfrotto tripod and a Gitzo tripod (we also had several other tripods in case we needed to use the rather sizable large format digital camera system, but it takes about three hours to set up and take down the 4x5 digital system, so we did not use it on this particular expedition).



BOGEN TRIPOD 3898



BOGEN TRIPOD 3901



DELKIN LCD SHADE



MANFROTTO QTVR



CANON EOS 5D

Gray Balance

In order to obtain perfectly neutral color balance it is necessary to do a "gray balance." On a video camera or a point-and-shoot digital camera this is often called a "white balance." Lastolite and other companies make portable gray cards; the one we used here was from Lastolite (in England) provided by Bogen Imaging.



LASTOLITE GRAY BALANCE



Archaeological Sites

We visited

- Tikal
- Yaxha
- Seibal (spelled Ceibal locally)
- Aguateca
- Cancuen

Tikal



TIKAL TEMPLE 1



TIKAL TEMPLE 1



STELAE GROUP Q



CENTRAL ACROPOLIS

Yaxha



YAXHA LANDSCAPE

Seibal



SEIBAL



TAMARANDITO STELA

Aguateca



SAYAXCHE



AGUATECA RUINS

Cancun



RIO LA PASION



It rained several of the days so we do not have a complete photographic record (with just a few hours per site it was not realistic to do extensive photography in any event). Our intent was to visit the sites to see their current condition, and especially to judge what digital imaging technology could assist these parks to prepare more effective directional and educational signage for tourists. Cancuen and Aguateca had the best signage, though in most instances the signs interfered with enjoying the unspoiled view of the structures.



BILLBOARDS

Private Museums

In Uaxactun a pleasant family has been rescuing Maya ceramics abandoned by grave robbers. They have formed a small museum. If you are an archaeologist or iconographer this museum is worth the trip: several of the pieces in this museum have been published in books on Mayan iconography. Just realize that the vases, bowls, and plates here are pots that the grave robbers have abandoned as not being worthwhile to pack and take to dealers for resale.



In Coban, Alta Verapaz, an attractive museum has been formed during the 1980's-1990's. It has a major hieroglyphic panel and a diverse range of archaeologically and iconographically important vases, plates, and bowls.

After our main trip was over we visited Antigua and saw the booklet for the private museum of Maya, Tiquisate, and Olmec art which is now in the Hotel Casa Santo Domingo.



PRINCIPE MAYA MUSEUM IN COBAN

Hotels

Some of you who are reading this may visit Guatemala, so as a service we can provide a few comments on hotels.

El Remate

Remate is at the crossroads at the turnoff from the Flores-Melchor-Belize road to Tikal. Remate is at the eastern end of Lake Peten Itza. Traditionally tourists have stayed either at Tikal itself, or in Flores. But today there are at least a dozen hotels in El Remate. They vary from back-packer hostels to one expensive hotel; most are mid-range in price.

We stayed in Casa de Don David one night, in Hostal de Hermano Pedro another night. And finally in Las Gardenias. All were clean and pleasant. Don David has a restaurant with yummy food; there are also several other restaurants around. Hotel Las Gardenias has an Internet service. Just realize that Remate shuts down early, so this is not a place for nocturnal entertainment. But if you are traveling you probably want, or need, to get a good night's sleep.



HOTEL CASA DE DON DAVID



HOSTAL HERMANO PEDRO



HOTEL LAS GARDENIAS

Flores

“Flores” consists of

- the island of Flores
- the town on the mainland, Santa Elena (the airport is near here)
- a suburb, San Benito

San Benito has a nice hotel in the entrance towards Sayaxche but otherwise San Benito is best known for criminal gangs.

Santa Elena has the Jaguar Inn, same family as owns the Jaguar Inn at Tikal itself. You can be assured of a clean room and an honest family-owned facility. The Hotel Maya International and a few other hotels are also available; we have often stayed in the Maya International (Sagastume family), but it was sold out this holiday period.

The Pedro Castellanos family owns several hotels throughout Flores and Santa Elena. We stayed in the Hotel Santana, owned by Gustavo Castellanos.



HOTEL JAGUAR INN, SANTA ELENA



HOTEL JAGUAR INN, TIKAL



HOTEL SANTANA

Tikal

Three hotels have permits to operate within the National Park. The two we know the best are the

- Posada de la Selva (Jungle Lodge) owned by the Antonio Ortiz family,
- and Jaguar Inn, owned by the family of Mundo and Patty Solis.

Over the years we have stayed at both hotels many times. Both hotels have been expanded (more rooms) and dramatically improved (facilities more closely approach what an international tourist expects). Fortunately both hotels still maintain the rustic atmosphere that is most fitting for a remote national park in the tropical rain forest.



HOTEL POSADA DE LA SELVA



HOTEL JAGUAR INN, TIKAL

Yaxha

Only one hotel exists at or near Yaxha: El Sombrero. It is appropriately rustic. From the hotel you can obtain boat service to visit the Post Classic ruins of Topoxte Island.

FLAAR is proud to see the Yaxha ruins so popular because our mapping project here in the 1970's placed guard at the site to protect the ruins from grave robbers. We lobbied with the government to have the ruins made into a National Park. This park is thus a heritage of five years of our sweat, insect bites, and perseverance. We appreciate the donations from supporters that made our project at Yaxha possible.



HOTEL EL SOMBRERO

Lake Petexbatun area

Sayaxche is the place to catch a boat towards Aguateca or Dos Pilas. Although you can drive to Dos Pilas, this is not recommended; besides, a boat ride and the walk is more enjoyable (albeit longer since it's three to four hours each way on foot from Paso Caribe).

Three hotels are available in the Lake Petexbatun area. All offer boat "taxi" pickup service at Sayaxche if you make a reservation in advance. All these hotels have either satellite phones or cell phones, but e-mail is still spotty. We prefer the Posada Caribe.



AGUATECA



POSADA CARIBE

Coban, Alta Verapaz

Do not confuse Coban (in the middle of Guatemala) with the Maya ruins of Copan (in Honduras). Coban is a pleasant city, relatively peaceful compared with the crime rate in downtown Guatemala. Coban has a wide variety of hotels. This time we decided to stay in somewhere different, so we tried out a hotel near the orchid gardens.



COBAN

Note to tourists

Visa is the credit card most frequently accepted by hotels and restaurants in Guatemala. MasterCard is the least preferred by businesses.

Leaf-cutting ants

Leaf-cutting ants are mentioned in the sacred Maya book, the Popol Vuh, so we are also studying them. Look at the patterns they cut out of the tree leaves.

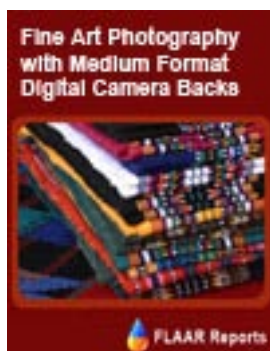


LEAF-CUTTING ANTS



The leaves on this vine have been completely eaten away by leaf-cutting ants, leaving only the central structure that used to hold the leaf up.

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