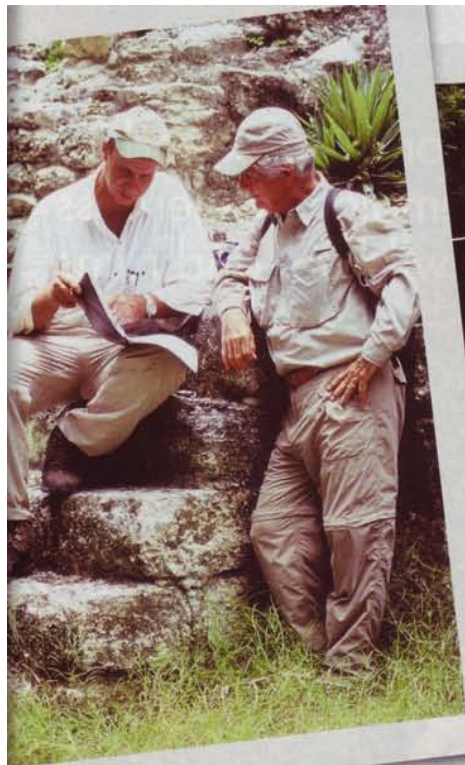


La Danta pyramid, which was built about 1000 BC, requires painstaking excavation and strategic reinforcement as archaeologists remove centuries of tree growth. The 230-foot-high structure once stood at the center of the flourishing ancient city of El Mirador and today claims the title of the Western Hemisphere's largest pyramid.

Ecoconservationists are working to save Guatemala's wilderness, wildlife, and ruins.

STORY BY MARTIE DUNCAN
PHOTOS BY RICARDO MATA

The Mission for MIRADOR— SAVING THE PAST TO SECURE THE FUTURE



not the three-day mule train.

As we prepared for our hike to La Danta, Dr. Richard Hansen, the chief archeologist and project manager for the Mirador Basin project, joined us. We talked a little about what to expect before we started out. Twenty-nine Mayan cities have been discovered in Mirador, and Hansen has mapped many

of these sites during the 27 years he has devoted to preserving the basin's ecosystem and archaeology. While the archaeology is Hansen's obsession, he knows it is the preservation of this last stretch of uninhabited virgin rain forest and the creatures that live there that will keep the largest and oldest Mayan cities ever found from disappearing completely. "The preservation effort will only happen with economic justification. The people of this region and of this country have to know that saving what we have found here is financially more productive than slashing, burning, looting, and unlawful logging. Science for the sake of science does no good for

PUTTING ASIDE MY NERVOUSNESS for the moment I let my inner Laura Croft take over, but I remained on the lookout for jaguars and the man-eating snakes I imagined slithering out of every tree as we waved good-bye to our pilot and walked into the jungle toward base camp at El Mirador, cradle of Mayan civilization, which was to be our home for the next four days. I settled into our accommodations at the base camp—a small tent with two army-green cots, with my tent-mate for the trip, *Private Air's* publisher, Deedee Morrison. We joined our hosts, Nini and Francois Berger, at their campsite and prepared to head out to explore La Danta, an hour-plus hike. I noticed large coolers, bottled water, the all-essential Diet Cokes, and boxes of gourmet goodies stacked on a table outside their tent and felt immediately encouraged that we'd at least have something more enticing to eat than the black beans-and-rice fare that we'd been expecting.

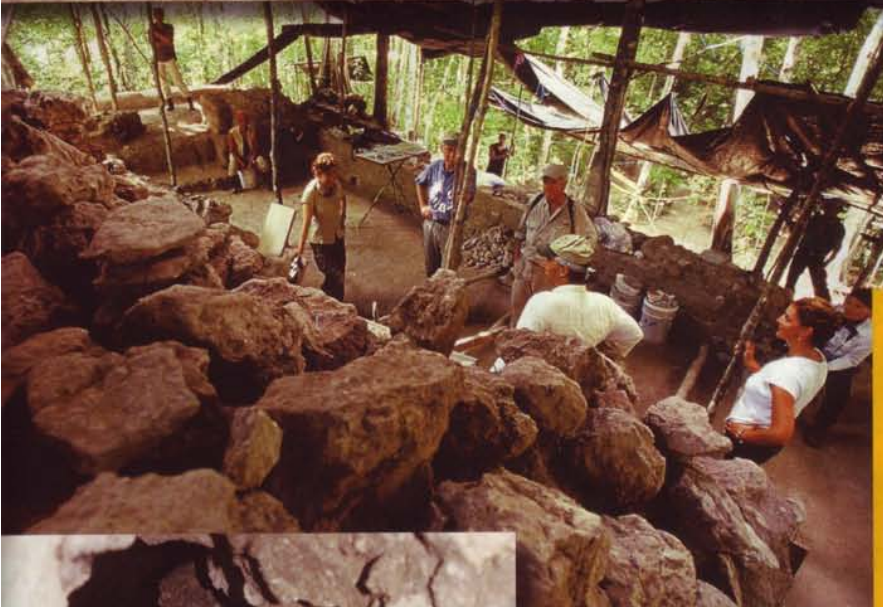
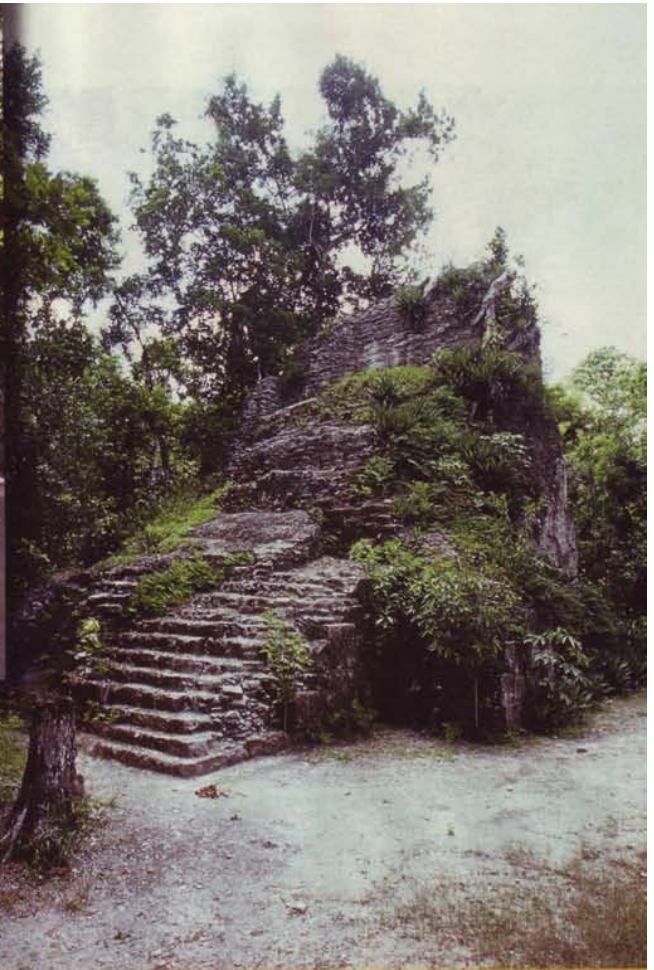
Nini and Francois are committed to preserving this last bit of virgin rain forest and are passionate about finding viable employment opportunities for the people of Petén. The Bergers' dedication motivated them to join with like-minded conservationists to found APANAC (Asociación de Amigos del Patrimonio Natural y Cultural de Guatemala), an organization committed to finding alternatives and solutions to save and protect Guatemala's natural and cultural heritage. We were here with them to experience the magic of the Mirador Basin—the wildlife, the wilderness, and the ruins still accessible only by helicopter or mule train from the tiny village of Carmelita. Personally I was thrilled that we had opted for the helicopter and

The progress and pace of the Mirador project is directly proportional to the amount of funding it receives. GHF, FARES, and APANAC all receive donations from the public to continue the work they are doing in Mirador.



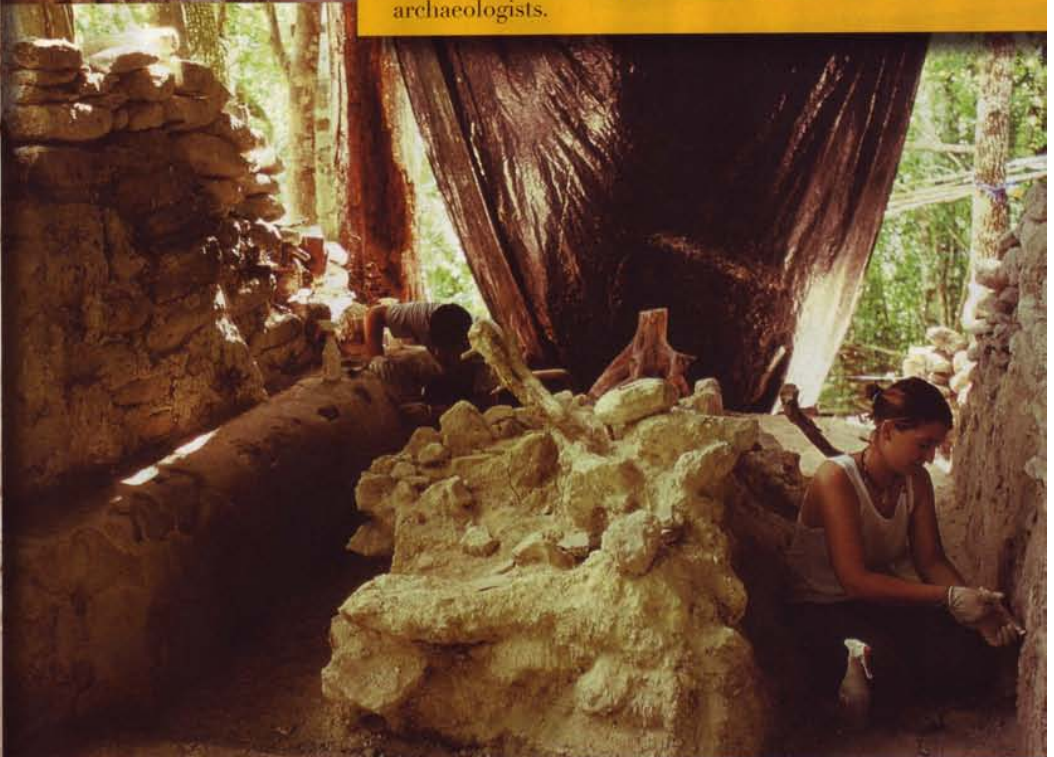
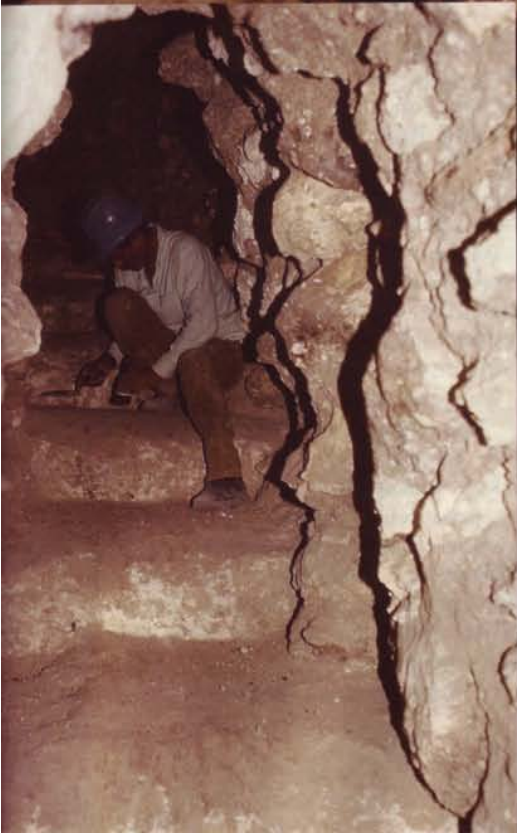
Winging our way over the dense Guatemalan jungle covering northern Petén, I can admit now that I was more than a little nervous. My nervousness existed on several levels: First time in a helicopter. First time in Guatemala. First time in the jungle. First time sleeping in a tent since age 12. And snakes—let's not forget the snakes. I am anticipating lots of big snakes in the Guatemalan jungle.

Fear aside I am feeling like a cross between Indiana Jones and Laura Croft—Tomb Raider. I imagined what Charles Lindbergh must have felt as he flew over this same stretch of rain forest in 1929 looking for signs of the ancient Maya civilization hidden beneath the canopy of trees. While our mode of transportation was a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter, not the Pan American twin-motored amphibian S-38 that Lindbergh flew on that famed trip, the landscape below was the same—completely unchanged by time. We began to see "mountains" as we flew along and were told they weren't mountains at all but some of the largest Pre-Classic Mayan structures ever built, erected about 1000 BC. It was hard to tell from the air exactly what we were seeing until we reached La Danta. Standing 230 feet tall, La Danta is said to be the largest pyramid in the western hemisphere. Looking down from the air it was impossible to believe that men built this structure without cranes, machinery, or even a wheel. More unbelievable to me at that moment was the fact that I was expected to climb to the top of La Danta that afternoon.



ON-SITE

(Opposite page, from top left) Dr. Richard Hansen and Franco Berger consult on recent archaeological findings; supplies are flown in weekly by helicopter—the alternative is a three-day mule ride; the entry sign to the Mirador Basin; (this page, clockwise from top left) Structure 34; La Muerta has been restored, although looters have destroyed valuable artifacts an keys to unlocking historical mysteries of the Mayan civilization an excavation in progress; the first facade with original paint was found in this tunnel; Mirador guests talk with the on-site archaeologists.





people. We are creating hope for people who have none," Hansen emphasizes.

Hansen and his organization, FARES (the Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies), have teamed with Global Heritage Fund (GHF), a US-based nonprofit international conservancy, to develop a wilderness preserve in the Mirador Basin to help ensure the future of the region. While Mirador is protected, it is under attack from drug traffickers, loggers, farmers, and looters illegally poaching and irrevocably altering the ecosystem and the ruins.

In theory, if protected, Mirador could become as important to Guatemala's tourism industry as Tikal. A Classic Mayan city built 1,000 years later than most sites in Mirador, Tikal now boasts \$200 million annually in tourism revenues. To date the inaccessibility of the Mirador sites prevents all but the most resilient travelers, ecotourists, and passionate conservationists from experiencing these ancient cities. The wonder of the place definitely overrides the conditions, even for a 500 thread-count kind of girl like me.

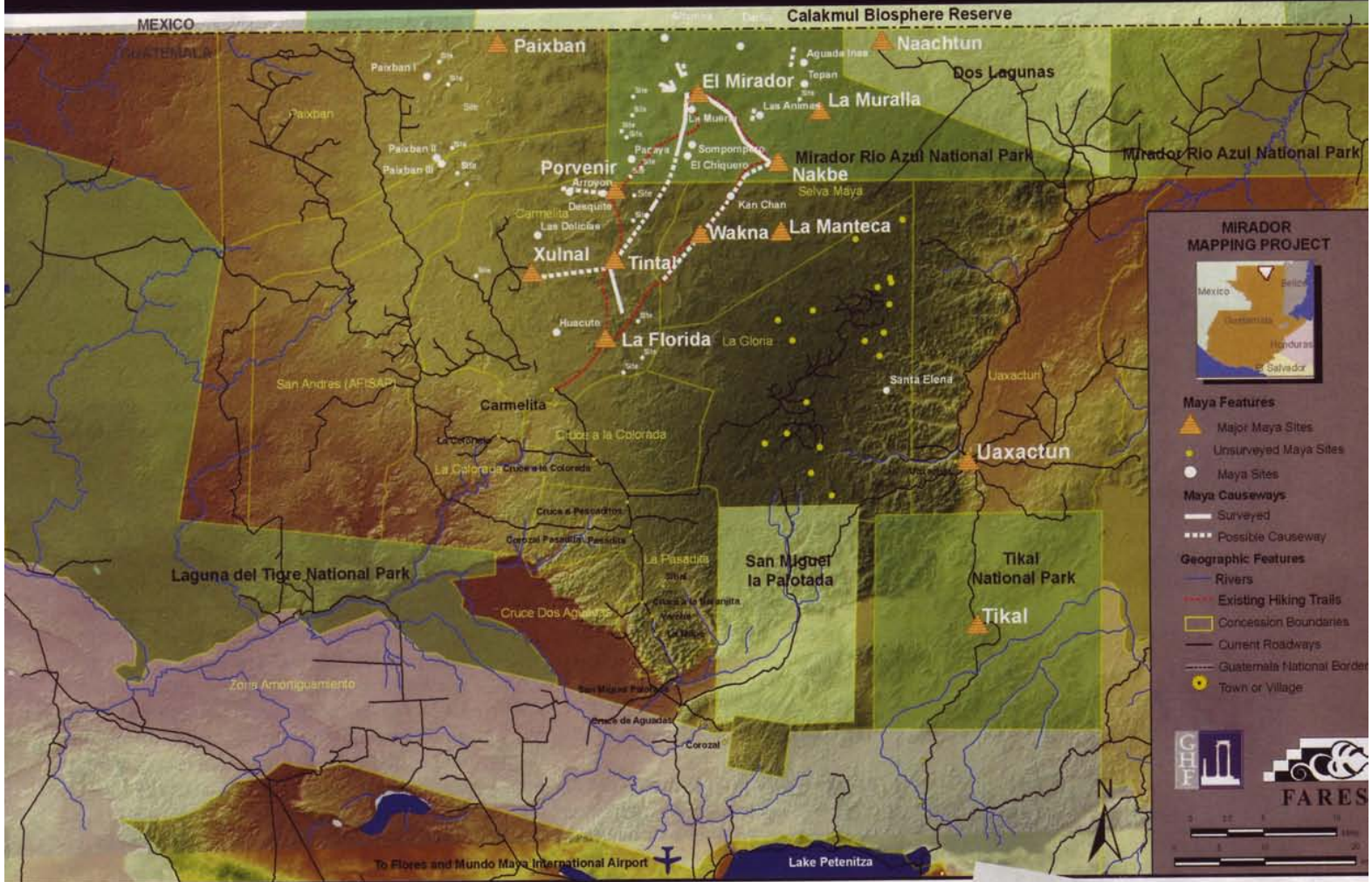
While we primarily came to see the lost Mayan cities of Mirador, the wildlife always seemed to put on a show just for us. Late one afternoon Nini and I saw a troop of spider monkeys swinging hand to tail through the treetops as they made their way alongside our campsite. We stopped counting at 200. The monkey train was an exciting example of the animal kingdom at home within the Mirador Basin.

Climbing to the Sunset at 230 Feet

More than nine generations of trees with intricate root systems have grown into the Mirador Basin ruins for centuries making our hike to La Danta difficult and tedious. Despite the vegetation and rampant looting, these remain world-class sites and striking examples of Pre-Classic Mayan civilization. When we climbed to the top of La Danta to watch the sunset, we saw howler monkeys and toucans in the treetops surrounding the structure and could see the Mayan structures in Nakké far on the horizon.

The going up proved to be much worse than coming down. We had to navigate rickety makeshift ladders that were leaning precariously against some fairly dubious scaffolding erected alongside La Danta's 230-foot-high back face to make our way to the very top. Going down from the summit, we descended the front face of the structure using the massive steps when possible. I felt a bit triumphant as I landed on the bottom

THE MAJOR ARCHAEOLOGY SITES AND ANCIENT MAYA CAUSEWAYS OF MIRADOR



While the archaeology is Hansen's obsession, he knows it is the preservation of this last stretch of uninhabited virgin rain forest and the creatures that live there that will keep the largest and oldest Mayan cities ever found from disappearing completely.

step, but that was before I realized that the romance of watching the sunset from the top of La Danta would mean a 60-minute trek back to base camp in the dark through the eerie jungle. The one item I had left out of my jungle survival kit was a flashlight—so I stayed close to Hansen and his flashlight while the jungle creaked, whistled, groaned, and howled as the night came to life.

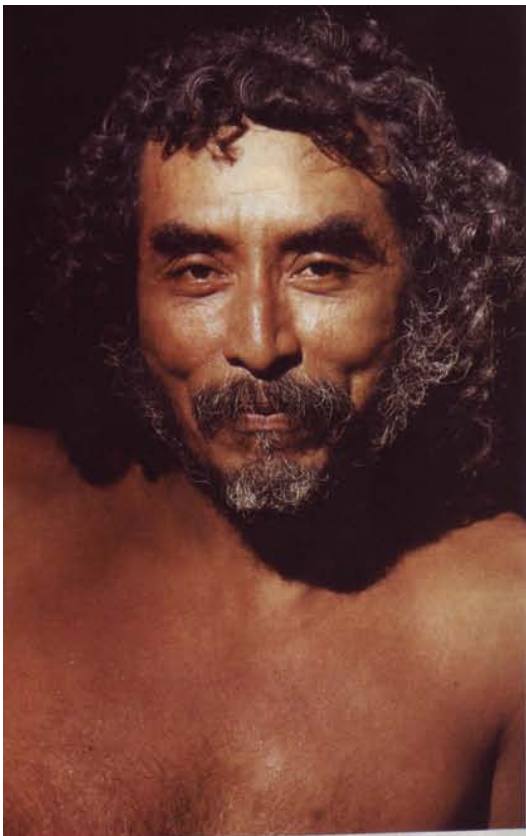
A glowing fire in our campsite welcomed us home after a long day of hiking. A huge pot of bathwater was simmering—another new experience. Standing outside our tent we filled 5-gallon buckets with the warm water for a quick but refreshing “shower” to

remove layers of sweat, bug spray, and sunscreen—not to mention any little creatures that may have piggybacked to camp with us. The incredible screeching of the howler monkeys woke us up throughout the first night—they sounded more like a Harley's loud roar on the city streets instead of bachelor howler monkeys' late-night calls for a mate. Some things translate to every species it seems.

Day two included a longer trek to La Muerta about 90 minutes from our base. It has been meticulously restored and is almost park-like. Hansen explained that looters beat them to the site by less than a year, and he



pointed out the looters' tunnel still visible on the side of the structure. We also explored other sites in El Tigre and the Jaguar Temple, better known as Structure 34, during our four days in Mirador, and we witnessed remarkable examples of the Pre-Classic and Classic finds and artifacts Hansen and his



TRAVEL DETAILS

In-Flight—Guatemala City's La Aurora International Airport is currently serviced from the United States by Taca, Northwest, Delta, US Airways, Continental, United, and American Airlines. The closest airport to Mirador is the country's second largest airport, Mundo Maya International Airport, also known as Flores International Airport (FRS/MGTK), which is a joint civil-military airport in Santa Elena, Flores. Its concrete runways are 9,842 x 148 feet wide. Continental services this airport from Houston if you want to fly directly to Flores. Since there are no airstrips in Mirador, you must charter a helicopter if you don't want to take the three-day mule train or walk in.

Currency—The local currency is quetzals, named for the national bird of Guatemala. The exchange rate has consistently averaged at 7.6339 quetzals per US dollar since 2005. You will find good values in handicrafts, textiles, local art, and knockoff fashions.

Visa Requirements—You will need a valid US passport to enter Guatemala, but no special visa is required for a stay of 90 days or less. Visitors are encouraged by the US State Department to keep a photocopy of their passport on their person at all times.

Hotels—We stayed at the Westin Camino Real, Guatemala, which was very nice and conveniently located in the city center. The Real Intercontinental, just down the street, is also a good choice. If you have time try to spend an afternoon in the colonial city of La Antigua, Guatemala, and stay the night at the marvelous five-star Casa Santo Domingo Hotel. The city's 400-year-old stone walls old hide the

luxurious amenities you'll find mixed among the museums and antiquities. Romantic gardens, fountain, plazas, arched ceilings, bar, restaurants, and a tranquil swimming pool await travelers in this charming old-world city, which received UNESCO nomination in 1979 and is considered a World Heritage site.

Westin Camino Real Guatemala:

starwoodhotels.com, 502.2333.3000

Hotel Real Intercontinental Guatemala:

intercontinental.com, 502.2379.4444

Casa Santo Domingo: casasantodomingo.com.

gt, 502.7820.1220

Hotel Maya International:

villasdeguatemala.com, 502.2334.1818

And finally:

The US Guatemalan Embassy; guatemala-embassy.org, info@guatemala-embassy.org, 202.745.4952 ext. 102



teams are excavating from the jungle ruins on a daily basis.

They photograph, catalog, and send the pieces to the National Museum, which is dedicated to treasures from Mirador. While we were there they were carefully uncovering a vivid red Pre-Classic mask, which had been hidden for centuries. It had been covered over by at least two other periods of construction, which kept the color vibrant and the carving virtually pristine.

Deedee planned to spend her last night camping at the peak of El Tigre, where we'd witnessed a marvelous rainbow that afternoon stretching happily across the skyline, but a torrential downpour kept her from sleeping under the stars. I had no intention of leaving the safety of our tent, so I was pleased that the rains came, even if they almost washed our tent down the side of the mountain.

Preserving the Past for the Future

To date the Mirador project has received more than \$4 million in funding from FARES and GHF. The funds have been used primarily to secure sites within the Mirador complex and provide the infrastructure necessary to get tourism dollars into the local economy. La Danta has been excavated and conserved and is being prepared to open to tourists, and community development is beginning in Carmelita. More than 220 locals are directly employed in Mirador, and more than 40 have been trained as guides. In addition GHF has teamed with the board of APANAC to invest more than \$200,000 toward a new visitor center and water system there. Sixty percent of the sites and natural area in Mirador have been mapped, and 3-D scans have been completed of most of the major monuments.

Oddly it is development that will actually save the rain forest and ruins of Mirador. GHF's Executive Director, Jeff Morgan, reports that with development of a viable national park with limited access there is a high potential for sustainable preservation, tourism, and economic development. FARES and GHF are working together with the Guatemalan government, President Oscar Berger, the US Department of Interior (DOI), the Google Foundation, and officers of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Guatemala to develop a plan to bring economic development to the area without further damaging the Mayan biosphere and secure a UNESCO World Heritage nomination for Mirador.

Morgan notes that while Hansen's organization, FARES, manages the archaeology conservation effort, there are no wildlife or nature conservation efforts in the area.

(continued on page 122)

(continued from page 104: THE MISSION FOR MIRADOR)

No major nature conservancy has invested money in saving Mirador despite the fact that more than 70 percent of Guatemalan forests in the Mayan biosphere have been lost to burning and logging in the past 10 years. Morgan affirms that "if we make Mirador successful economically, we will have a good chance to save the last remaining tropical forests in Guatemala in the heart of the Maya Biosphere—forever."

Currently Mirador is not on the World Heritage List of 830 sites that the Global Heritage Committee considers as having out-

Morgan goes on to explain that a new three-way agreement signed by the GHF, the US DOI, and the government of Guatemala on September 12, 2006, will bring professionals in law enforcement, forestry, parks services, and infrastructure to Mirador over the next 10 years to build tourism in the area from 2,600 visitors annually to more than 10,000 visitors per year within the next five years and increase revenues for the local economy.

Racing against Time

The infamous and the famous come to Mirador to learn about past civilizations and what

feature film on the demise of the great Mayan civilization titled *Apocalypto*, scheduled for release in December 2006. While projects like *Apocalypto* will perhaps ignite a new global interest in the earliest cities found in Mirador, with awareness comes change. Certainly more tourists will come to Mirador to see the remnants of this lost civilization, which will be positive for the local economy, but to experience these ancient cities in their current state *without tourists* is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that can only happen now.

The progress and pace of the Mirador project is directly proportional to the amount

Putting aside my nervousness for the moment I let my inner Laura Croft take over, but I remained on the lookout for jaguars and the man-eating snakes I imagined slithering out of every tree as we waved good-bye to our pilot and walked into the jungle toward base camp at El Mirador, cradle of Mayan civilization, which was to be our home for the next four days.

standing universal value, but Morgan points out that Mirador is now Guatemala's number one nomination to UNESCO. The UNESCO nomination would mean funding, training, technical cooperation, and support for Mirador from UNESCO's World Heritage Fund.

that tells us about the future. Hansen has worked with scholars, scientists, journalists, and even movie stars like Mel Gibson who seek to learn lessons about the future from the failures of the past. Hansen served as a consultant on Gibson's latest project, a new

of funding it receives. GHF, FARES, and APANAC all receive donations from the public to continue the work they are doing in Mirador. GHF claims that 90 percent of all of the donations go directly to their preservation and restoration projects around the

world. The trustees of GHF can even adopt a site. Through financial commitment you can become involved directly with the project you are most dedicated to preserving and actively participate in establishing conservation priorities, strategic planning and on-site conservation work, receive personal updates on GHF projects, and experience field trips with advisors, experts, and site directors.

Catching the Mirador Bug

While I didn't get bitten by any chiggers and only a few mosquitoes, I did get bitten by "the bug." The Mirador bug—as it is known by those who come to and fall in love with the magic, mystery, and myth of this place—is a powerful thing. It is reported that once bitten you will always want to return. With all my apprehensions about being there, from the moment we ascended La Danta and watched the magnificent sunset evaporate into the treetops far on the horizon, I knew that I had the bug. You should see it all for yourself while you still can.

While it hasn't changed much since Lindbergh's days, change is in the air. In the coming years there will either be more tourists or, if the funds don't come, more burning. It is up to those of us with a desire to know this place and keep its magic intact to make sure

that the Mayan civilization doesn't disappear once again—this time permanently.

The mystery and intrigue of the Mayan people, their kings, and what still lies hidden in Mirador is something those able should see before it does become a larger tourist attraction. The tombs of the Mayan kings who built these cities have yet to be discovered, and Hansen predicts that a major find may happen at any moment. Experience the allure of a true Indiana Jones adventure where you can discover and uncover the secrets of the ancient Maya before you have to buy a ticket or stand in a line.

All the Details of Getting There

The easiest way to reach El Mirador is to fly commercially to Guatemala City from the United States, but once you arrive private air travel is the way to go. We flew into Mundo Maya International Airport in Flores, which easily accommodated the Bergers' Beechcraft King Air. Once there we took a quick shuttle ride to the helipad beside Hotel Mayan International, where we enjoyed a refreshing frozen orange slush poolside overlooking Lake Petén Itzá before boarding our helicopter for the 50-minute ride into the jungle. You can also charter a helicopter for the flight directly to the base camp

in Mirador from Helicópteros de Guatemala at the Aeropuerto de Aurora in Guatemala City. The helicopter pilot, Carlos Enriquez, picked us up in a Bell Long Ranger 206 L-4 for the trip out of the jungle—I was never so happy to see anyone as I was Carlos and that big yellow bird! We suggest chartering through Helicópteros de Guatemala which can be reached by visiting helicopterosdeguatemala.com or calling 502.2334.7690. ☒

Helping the Cause

For more information E-mail or call the following contacts:

The Global Heritage Fund: Jeff Morgan, Executive Director: globalheritagefund.org, jmorgan@globalheritagefund.org, 650.325.7520

FARES (Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies): Dr. Richard Hansen: miradorbasin.com, info@miradorbasin.com, 800.654-3083
APANAC (Asociación de Amigos del Patrimonio Natural y Cultural de Guatemala): apanac.org.gt, adm@apanac.org.gt, 502.2366.4976

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization): unesco.org