

It's a Jungle Out There,  
Full of Buried Treasure

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August 23, 2005; Wall Street Journal Page D8

EL MIRADOR, Guatemala -- There is no such thing as a bad seat in the house for the wildlife show here in the northern Petén jungle. For that we can thank the late pre-classical Mayan empire (350 B.C.-A.D. 150) that built an impressive collection of monumental structures that are still standing.

Late one afternoon from my perch atop the pyramid known as the "Lion Temple," I found myself eye to eye with a pair of huge black and yellow toucans meticulously preening in the quiet of an oppressive, rainy-season heat. Only a faint breeze stirred the leaves. On the other side of the pyramid, I peered down on two spider monkeys swinging in the highest parts of the trees by their spindly tails and limbs and angrily shaking the branches to shoo me away.

This temple is in Tikal, an ancient city and Guatemala's largest Mayan tourist attraction. But there are also wonders to be seen in El Mirador, a larger, older city in the Mirador Basin.

No matter which of the 20-plus monumental temples you choose to scramble up, at the summit you tower above life and gaze across miles of lush green canopy and majestic Mayan history dating back thousands of years. During a visit here in the February dry season, I climbed the Tiger Temple -- 180 feet up -- to watch a spectacular blazing sunset simulcast with the rise of a luminous full moon. So breathtaking was the view that I decided to stay the night.

The temple-top was rocky, the wind howled, the moon was like a floodlight, and a heavy dew left me shivering under a wet poncho, the "blanket" I had borrowed from a local to get me through the night. Still, I was delighted. As dusk faded the retiring jungle bid goodnight with a cacophony of chirping, whirring, whistling and cawing along with the throaty grunts of the howler monkeys. Butterflies fluttered, hummingbirds hovered and locusts lighted on nearby rocks.

The long night gifted me with a perfect silence -- save the wind. I lay awake most of the night, puzzling over the mysteries of what Idaho State University archaeologist Richard Hansen, who is leading the recovery project here, says could well be the "first state-level society of Mesoamerica." At dawn the waking wildlife made itself heard again under a sky that seemed to stretch forever. I resolved to return on my summer vacation.

There are 26 large ancient Mayan cities in the Mirador Basin, a low-lying area of 849 square miles surrounded by a ridge of limestone in the northern Petén of Guatemala and southern Mexico. Despite not having the wheel and its related benefits for transport, the Mayans constructed an extensive system of elevated causeways -- one as long as 12 miles -- throughout their empire to assist in trading and development between towns and cities. This city of El Mirador appears to be the biggest and probably was most densely populated -- the New York of the Mayan empire. The city of Tikal is Guatemala's main Mayan tourist attraction, but this still largely unearched 15 square-mile metropolis of El Mirador, with its thousands of ruins -- from causeways, houses, funerary structures and a ball court to monumental towers -- is much larger and almost 800 years older.

Step one in recovering this historical gold mine is to learn what is here. That's why a Guatemalan survey team, working for the Mirador Basin Project, is "mapping" the area to establish the layout of the urban jungle where many buildings now appear only as vegetation-covered mounds. Sophisticated laser technology is impressive, but there is no avoiding the step-by-step tromping through the forest. For that, Mr. Hansen says he has hired every "chiclero" he can find. Two that I met have worked the Petén for more than 45 years with their machetes, first shimmying up sapote trees to slash the bark and drain the sap that Wrigley and Adams used to make chewing gum before synthetics, and now for Mr. Hansen guiding the surveyors. Most of the pyramids were named by the chicleros, including "The Dead Woman," after the chiclera who was bitten by a fer-de-lance -- the jungle's notoriously aggressive and deadly viper -- and died there.

The excavation of several large structures is also well under way. Structure 34, also known as the Jaguar Paw because of the impressively detailed masks on either side of the façade, is the most advanced excavation here. La Danta -- the tapir -- is the largest monument, reaching 236 feet in the air with a massive 2,034 foot by 1,083 foot base. A rope near the top helps explorers summit the last steep bit to take in an expansive view that includes the distant outline of the Mayan city of Nakbé and further away, Tikal.

Tourism here is still primitive -- though I confess to liking it that way. Pyramid hiking in the tropics has left me wilted. But the thought of a bath motivates me to hurry back to camp. There I take a pail of brownish swamp water -- that's tannin, they tell me -- to a stall constructed of tree branches stuck in the ground and black plastic on three sides. I peel off my sweaty jeans and damp, long-sleeve shirt and using a water bottle sawed in half to scoop and pour, I bathe. It is nirvana. I skip dinner and crash.

At breakfast in the dining tent rice, beans, tortillas and raw chopped onions with hot chilies are on the menu, as at every meal. So too is Cook Dominga's warm,

homemade bread -- baked in a stone oven with the fire on top -- that melts in your mouth. Coffee is served from an enormous caldron using your mug as the ladle. I'm a happy camper.

The basin's pristine biosphere, where one can glimpse everything from jaguars, foxes, monkeys and tapirs to tarantulas, armies of leaf-cutter ants, wild turkeys and, unfortunately in my view, many kinds of snakes, could be one of Guatemala's most valuable resources. With orchids blossoming throughout this ancient Mayan empire of exotic wildlife, the tourism potential is huge.

But to get here you either have to pack in with mules on a two-day trek or you have to find a helicopter, as I did. To solve that problem and still preserve the forest, Mr. Hansen proposes the construction of a small railroad. That would minimize human impact while allowing the locals to turn this untamed jungle from a remote, buried treasure into an accessible tourist attraction that can economically support the population. Tikal, he points out, generates millions of dollars in tourist revenue every year and this promises to be much bigger. "If you build it, they will come," he says. Now all he needs is the money to build it. Where are the philanthropic tree-huggers when you really need them?

***Ms. O'Grady edits the Journal's Americas column.***