

Dave Cox in Cobán, Guatemala, Mar. 14, 2010

Hello Everyone. Back on the road again. I had considered finally getting to SE Asia during this dry season, but had the opportunity to come visit an archaeological dig at one of the great classic period Maya sites. I have become acquainted with Dr Takeshi Inomata, a professor of Mesoamerican archaeology and Mayan expert at the University of Arizona. He is spending three months at the La Ceibal site deep in the rain forest along the Rio Pasión in the Petén (lowland) region of Guatemala. So here I am, heading that direction, and planning on close to a couple of months revisiting Guatemala.

I flew Continental from Tucson to Houston and from there direct to Guatemala City where I spent my first four days. The first two full days I traveled to the two archaeological museums in the capital, the larger the National Museum, and the smaller, but higher overall quality, a private museum on a university campus. My last trip to Guatemala was still in the photographic dark ages (film camera) and, because museums don't permit flash or tripods, I had basically no ability to photograph the hundreds of Mayan artifacts. The National Museum, with many of the world's most spectacular Mayan pieces, is particularly poorly lighted (I mean it is really really dark; in some rooms a flashlight would have helped avoiding rough spots in the floor). Fortunately, I now possess the best available low-light digital camera, and have developed a bit of a knack for museum photography. I have attached a small assortment of pics of some of the more interesting Mayan pieces, including the famous Throne 1 from Piedras Negras, a gorgeous jade funerary mask from Tikal, a human size funerary urn and some great pottery.

Guatemala City, in the central historic district, is one of the world's grungier capitals (almost rivaling Cairo). Most of the older colonial style hotels are in the center, and I stayed in the Hotel Colonial, with some charm in the small wrought iron-surrounded courtyard, and large but really run-down rooms. My room on the second floor apparently had not been occupied by people in some time, but hardly was lonely; at least two species of roaches enjoyed the bathroom, venturing occasionally into the bedroom, and the bed itself had a hungry family of bedbugs. Still, the place was friendly and, but for the unwelcome bed guests, I would stay again.

The central historic plaza itself is impressive, though not terribly lively, and the streets close by contain some interest; see the pic of the blind man playing his Saxophone. But just a few blocks south, and running for a kilometer to the business district, the city deteriorates, with all-night cantinas, street crime, and a number of street people literally living on mattresses and cardboard boxes together with their dogs on the sidewalks. They live in groups, and most appear mentally deficient. They drink, urinate and defecate on the sidewalks. This Zona 1 neighborhood is filled with cheap Chinese restaurants; these serve as the bars for the poorer class, selling beer by the liter, super cheap. The big brands here are Gallo, Brahva and Ice (not Bud). I spent a couple of hours in one of the better looking of these restaurant-bars, the La

Paz. Walking in the large rectangular front room was initially reminiscent of entering a fast food place; all the booths were white. But on the walls were five flat screen TVs tuned to futbol. The jukebox was so loud I put in my ear-plugs, always available for sleeping in noisy hotel rooms over busy roads. The walls were strangely covered with a variety of Chinese posters and a few cheap art pieces. The tables were mostly occupied, but no sign of food; all had groups huddled around multiple liter bottles of beer. A single liter of Ice went for 20 quetzales, or \$2.50, and the 2-4-1 bottles were 32 quetzales, or \$4.00. These are liters, not 12 oz bottles! I tried the Brahva – not bad, and cold. I then actually ordered food - which seemed a bit of a novelty in the La Paz - two dishes to get a variety. They were huge. The main dish, which I tried sight unseen, was called something like “molleja nogado”, sadly consisting of deep fried gristle from an unknown animal, cooked in a warm curry sauce with chunks of onion, celery, green beans and French fries (not on the side, but part of the mixture). I tried over a dozen chunks of the animal stuff, but couldn’t manage to swallow any. The mixture of veggies and fries were edible. The waitresses, 7 or 8 of them, were young, squat Guatemalans in tight black skirts and red pull-over shirts. Most spent all their time seated at a large front table folding paper napkins and stacking them to amazing heights. They would come to provide service after being waived or yelled at for a while. A wholly unique Guatemalan capital experience, and upon reflection, one I would repeat, but with a different main dish.

From Guatemala City I took a first class bus to Cobán (there are very few good buses in the country; most travel still is provided by “chicken bus”, brightly repainted, very old, North American school buses, with the Blue Bird bodies semi-intact and the terrible seats. They belch huge quantities of black smoke into the air). Cobán is in the central part of the country with the highest mountains and cloud forests, capital of the region known as the Verapaces. I had hoped to locate a guide to take me into the cloud forests in search of the quetzal, the national bird, and one of the world’s rare and truly unique and beautiful creatures: Green, with a large crest, a blazing red breast and belly, and tail feathers about 6 times the length of the bird. I have searched before in Chiapis, Mexico, but never seen one. I probably will keep that status as my inquiries for a guide have amounted to squat. Cobán also is the coffee capital of the country, with the world-class Cobán or Verapaz bean.

I am staying in a terrific hotel, the H Doña Victoria, an old converted private colonial mansion built off of tiled verandas around a jungle filled courtyard, with visiting hummingbirds in the afternoon. These last two days I just have wandered the main market streets taking some photos of the beautiful colors and people selling all manner of foods and flowers. Attached are several pics. Today I also tried photographing some of the orchids for which the area is famous. Tomorrow I take a morning shuttle to Sayaxché where the archaeological group is staying for the Ceibal dig. Later. Dave



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Vaso con Arboles de Cacao



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Dave Cox in Flores, on Lago Petén, Guatemala, March 23, 2010

Hello again. I have spent the last week in Sayaxché, on the Rio Pasión, visiting the archaeological site of El Ceibal and several others. Sayaxché is not much of a town, but has two hotels with a few rooms. The Guayacán, where I stayed, has a nice concrete terrace directly above what the town refers to as the “playa”, which is the 200 meter strip of dirt shore on a bend in the river. Here are parked several dozen long wooden boats, the smaller used to transport people, the larger to transport agriculture products; I watched them load hundreds of bags of beans for delivery down the Pasión to the Rio Usumacinta and into Mexico. The highway has no bridge over the river, and so the ferry operates day and night to shuttle cars and trucks across.

My hotel, no surprise, had a number of quirks; the first day I asked the elderly señora owner if there was some place close I could buy red wine. She had her six year old granddaughter, Vanessa, act as my guide through the little town to a small general store where I could purchase the first bottle of actual Guatemalan wine I have seen or tried. Very cheap El Presidente vino tinto has a decent fruity taste, but is way too sweet, and the color is not red but

a sickening looking orange. The hotel room had only one electric light working, a very low-wattage ceiling bulb which produced a greenish hue, and was positioned right above the blades of the fan which had to be kept running due to the heat. This produced an interesting dim green strobe effect. For the first few days I battled giant roaches at night each time I needed to get out of bed (the light switch was, of course, on the other side of the room from the bed, and with no city lights, the room was pitch black at night); as soon as I would turn on my flashlight and point it at the floor, the roaches which would come in under the huge crack under the door would go crazy. I made a game of kicking them with my stocking feet to slide them back out under the door. I got very good at making the single shot "goals". After a few days of actually cleaning the room, the roaches stopped coming in. No hot water of course, and a shower head that just had the water pour as if direct from the pipe. Really interesting when the owners bought a side of beef consisting of half of an unbutchered cow; I watched in amazement as they had the full cow haunch sitting on the kitchen table, hoof, skin and all, and they sat around and skinned and butchered it there. Still, sitting each evening on the third floor concrete terrace, through which a tree grew providing shade, and watching the action on the "playa" and the ceaseless ferry crossings, sipping orange sweet wine and smoking my pipe, was pleasurable.

Dr. Takeshi Inomata, the Mayan archaeologist from the UA, and the team of other archaeologists working with him, were staying a couple of kilometers out of town in a large building with dorm type facilities. On three different days I went out at 5:30 in the morning to breakfast with them and then travel with them for the day out to the ruins of El Ceibal, about a forty minute drive in four wheel drive vehicles. El Ceibal had a long history starting in the early to middle preclassic period (from about 1000 BC) through the end of the classic (around 850 AD). At times it was subjugated by either Tikal or Dos Pilas. Only two small structures have been reconstructed here, along with about a dozen terrific stelae. Most of the great ruins are just visible as giant tree covered mounds in the dense tropical forest. The site serves as a boundary between two troops of howler monkeys, and so did not lack for some terrific bouts of roaring. The bird life was good, but photography was very difficult, as the light is so dim under the canopy. In all, the group had 9 open excavations, each under a different archaeologist, all of whom were working under Dr Inomata. They employed about 30 laborers who did the muscle work of actually moving dirt and rock and building the protective shelters etc. Most of the work has already been ongoing for over three years, and so some of the excavations were really deep, down to the middle preclassic era in time. While I was there they unearthed the oldest complete pottery plate found at the site, from about 800 BC. In an excavation in the middle of the main plaza they unearthed several skeletons and skulls, where the feet had been cut off at the ankle. In another large excavation at the base of the major temple on the main plaza, under the main stairs, they opened up a large cache of giant red pottery plates, many dozens of them heaped around an area about 6 feet across (all shattered into pieces now, but most well aligned clearly showing the entire plate). They assumed, I think, it was an intentional offering cache. My theory was that a bunch of the laborers building the stairs got drunk on the predecessor of El Presidente wine, served in the large lipped plates, and then shattered the plates on the ground under the area they were working (celebratorial drinking followed by shattering the ceramic container is actually a tradition I have seen practiced in Oaxaca, so the idea isn't completely without merit). Back at the archaeological headquarters in town, the

floors are covered in boxes and sacks and trays of the countless artifacts excavated, mostly of course pottery shards.

While in Sayaxché I also arranged and traveled to the Mayan ruins of Aguateca and Dos Pilas. The two sites may have formed a power alliance around the Lago Petexbatún area. The first sits on a rocky hill above the southern tip of the lake, and is reached by a two and a half hour motorboat ride down the river and across the lake. I arranged the trip with a French couple and an Italian woman to share the high costs of the boat. We had motor problems on the way, and had to pull in to the lovely Posada El Caribe, a set of cabins under the forest on the river, where the owner gave the boatman a loan of another motor, and served us tea and toast while we were waiting. At the end of the boat ride, a twenty minute hike through a swamp and up the hill is required to get into the ruins of Aguateca, where we arranged to have one of the caretakers guide us through the site. It is built on both sides of a 240 foot very narrow chasm that opens up in the hill, and apparently served as a defensive barrier for the site; we had to use cut poles to make it down the treacherous incline into the chasm. The second site, Dos Pilas, was one of real power sites during the Mayan classic, and is believed to have been started by a break-away ruler from Tikal. The site is much harder to get to, and ultimately I made arrangements for a private four-wheel drive vehicle and driver for a day to get me there (lots of haggling over the terms and price). The site has a number of fascinating stelae, and several hieroglyphic staircases, but no reconstructed buildings.

From Sayaxché, I crossed the river by boat and caught a microbus on to Flores. We at least matched the record I had in Malawi in southern Africa for number of people in a van. In Malawi on the way to Blantyre we got up to 27 people, including only three children, into a minibus. Just out of Sayaxché we hit, for a short stretch, 29, but over 10 of them were small children, and I think the van was larger, so perhaps the Malawi record should stand.

Flores continues to be a picturesque town, completely filling a very small circular island (connected by a 750 meter causeway to the mainland) situated at the southern end of Lago de Petén. It is a beautiful setting, and the town continues to have most of the old buildings roofed with steep red roofs. It is filled with all manner of cheap to mid-range hotels and a huge variety of restaurants, and caters to international tourists. It is the main staging point for tours to many of the Mayan ruins, including the major ruins at Tikal, and is served by a small airport with daily flights to the capital city and to Cancún in Mexico. I will spend some time in this area; I have already made arrangements for another private four-wheel drive vehicle and driver for up to 14 hours tomorrow to get to the rarely visited but huge site of Nakum, as well as Yaxhá, both classic era sites, and the small site of Tepoxté which is supposed to be the latest Maya site known in the Guatemalan Petén, lasting until about 1450.

I have attached a number of photos, generally of some of the bird and wildlife in the tropical forests, and of the ruins and work at El Ceibal. Later. Dave



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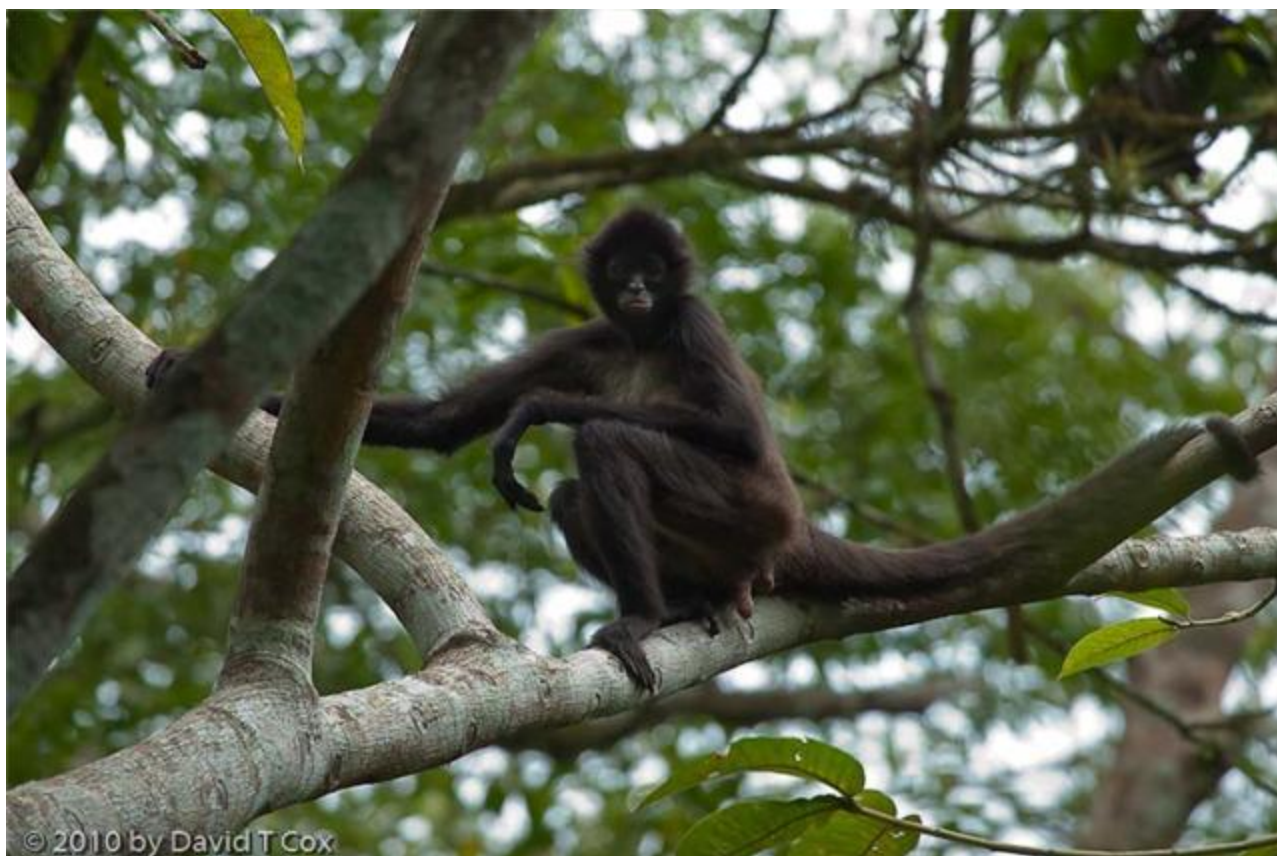




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Dave Cox in El Remate, Guatemala, Mar. 29, 2010

Hello again. Last Wednesday I hired a driver and four-wheel drive truck and spent a very long day visiting three Mayan sites. The first, Nakum, was the real reason for the need for the private transport. We drove first on a decent rocky road to Yaxhá, the second site I visited, and then from there 18 kilometers north through rain forest to Nakum; the road is impassable half the year during the rains. This time of year it is dry except after a heavy rain, but the ruts are gigantic, and trees constantly fall across the trail. Few people visit the site; the registry book listed fewer than 60 so far in March, and this is the busiest month. Nakum was a classic Maya site, and the high steep temples are very impressive. A number of edifices have been partially reconstructed and stabilized, and the overall experience is dramatic. I also got to see and photograph a spotted wood quail, extremely rare according to my local guide. We traveled from there back to Yaxhá, a huge classic era site, with towering twin temple facades facing off across large courtyards. There I was lucky to see and photograph a violaceous trogon and the exceptional white-whiskered puffbird. Finally, I traveled down to the Lago Yaxha, and arranged a boat to take me across to the most substantial post-classic Maya site excavated in the country; Tepoxté. It is a small site, only reachable by boat, which set me back \$30 US (the \$30 was presumably well spent as the other option was swimming across the crocodile infested lake). The site is very unusual for its late date with substantial temple complexes. It also had some resident howler monkeys hanging around the entrance. I was really exhausted by the end of the day.

After doing a day of bird photos at the lake edge around Flores, Saturday I moved 30 kilometers northeast around the lake to the village of El Remate, which has a number of small lovely hotels spread around the shore. I am staying in Casa de Don David, so I am sometimes referred to here as Don David II. Don David I is 73 and has lived here with his Guatemala wife for 23 years. Yesterday I spent 12 hours, from 6:30 am, at Tikal, the largest Mayan classic city, a world heritage site and by most accounts still one of the 7 modern wonders of the world. The five soaring 200 foot plus temples are the steepest and highest in Mesoamerica, and rise above the canopy of the rain forest. The view from the temple tops above the forest were shown in the original Star Wars movie as the planet on which the rebel base was located, and one can almost believe Tikal is an alien place. I spent 9 straight hours on foot in the jungle with my 20 plus pounds of photo gear, climbing all temples, and generally killing my legs. I took a couple hundred photos of the ruins, another couple hundred of the exotic bird and wild life, and the final third in the small museum which contains many of the greatest treasures from Tikal. I have included a sampling of some of the bird and animal life photographed, but will not name them all here as I assume the species are irrelevant to most.

I have been suffering a little from some strange bites to my calves. Something in the deep forest is crawling up the inside of my pant legs and biting, without my knowledge at the time of the crime; but oh! - do I notice by a couple of days later. This is the third time in the last 8 years I have experienced this type of bite, always after wandering off trails through the dense rainforests of Chiapis, Guatemala or Honduras. The bites just itch at first, but by the second day they start to exude fluid under the skin and form gold blisters which keep growing. By about day 3 or 4 they reach the size of large peanuts, as high as wide. When lanced they seep for hours and then seal and grow to twice the size. One on my left calf is of some concern now after about 9 days, and I worry about infection; I keep slathering it with antimicrobial ointment. I am going to have to start wearing some type of cuff to seal the bottom of my pant legs on future trips.

I have to move to a different small hotel tomorrow; many of the places around the lake are booked solid this week, being Semana Santa (Easter), and essentially a national holiday all week. I have made reservations to Thursday, and hope I don't get stranded then. I want to spend a little more time visiting some smaller ruins around here, and I still am putting out feelers to try and find a group going by helicopter to El Mirador, the largest and still-being-discovered pre-classic Maya ruins way north. The only way other than by helicopter to visit the ruins (by helicopter is extremely expensive, and only goes very sporadically if a large enough group books) is by 5 day hike on foot or by horse through the jungle; I just don't feel up to that now. El Mirador has gotten much press in the last 5 years or so, with about 40 archaeologists working there, and deemed now to be probably the largest, by area covered, pre-Columbian city in the Americas. Later. Dave





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Dave Cox in Rio Dulce, April 5, 2010

Hello all. From Don David's in El Remate I moved to a small boutique hotel, the Mansion del Pajaro Serpiente, on a steep hillside overlooking the lake; I had a superb view sitting in front of my private cottage, where I each afternoon would down a couple of beers, smoke my pipe and read sci-fi. The hotel is owned by an expatriate, Nancy, who has lived here in the Peten since 1954. The hotel property is large and full of birds and occasionally a lone adult male Howler Monkey who comes in for the many fruiting trees, and who goes crazy when I photograph him, howling up a storm and shaking the tree branches trying to drive me away. The property also sports a "flock" of Indian peafowl which run semi-tame. It is breeding season and the mature male sits around my screened windows and calls constantly, until a female happens by and then goes into a gorgeous display frenzy. The hillside has a number of basilisk lizards; they are the ones with large hoods behind their heads and that run incredibly fast, upright on hind legs, and literally can and do run on water. The days have been scorchers. I do not know the temperature, but the high heat, humidity and lack of breeze has made the past several days really uncomfortable.

Wednesday I walked a few kilometers south to the small ruins of Ixlu, where I spent a number of hours chasing into the forest after Keel-billed Toucans, among other birds, and getting a

number of new and unknown bug bites on my torso. So little changes. Thursday I hired a vehicle and guide/driver to visit the ancient city of Uaxactun, north of Tikal. Uaxactun was a major player in the late preclassic and early classic Maya world, until it competed too well with Tikal, which as a result conquered it just before 400 AD. It is the first of the Mayan cities discovered with a set of four temple complexes arranged with three temples aligned north-south and a fourth to the west of the three. It was found the alignment was set to have the sunrise, as viewed from the western temple, to be precisely over the south temple on the winter solstice, over the central temple on the equinoxes, and over the north temple on the summer solstice. Neat. My guide, Roxy, is the daughter of the owners of the hotel, Hotel Mansion del Pajaro Serpiente. Roxy runs the Tikal Inn at the ruins of Tikal, and is an archaeologist who spends part time in the field, currently at San Bartolo, the new ruins covered by National Geographic for their incredible pre-classic murals discovered just over a decade ago. She invited me up to the ruins with her when she goes later this month. I am awaiting the opportunity to correspond with the chief archaeologist as to whether I can get permission to photograph the murals, and may rearrange my travel if I get permission.

In the meantime, I have traveled from around Lago Peten south to the village of Rio Dulce which sits on the origin of the river Rio Dulce, at the mouth of Lago Izabal, the largest lake in Guatemala. From here one can take high-speed boats down the Rio Dulce to the Caribbean. I am sitting on a second floor open veranda of the Hotel Bruno, overlooking the inflow from the lake to the river, surrounded by jungle and birdlife while writing this. The docks are full of sail boats. I intend to use this as a short term base to take a day-trip tomorrow to the ruins of Quirigua, with its giant stelae, before moving on to Honduras and the ruins of Copan.

I have attached a few new photos of birds and wildlife, including the howler and the peacock, a Basilisk Lizard, a black rock iguana, a Slaty-tailed Trojan, the Keel-billed Toucan, a Collared Aracari, a Black and White Warbler and a Central-American Pygmy Owl, not all in that order; you should be able to figure which are which. Later. Dave













Dave Cox back in Tucson, AZ, April 26, 2010

Hello everyone. I am sending out this final note on my trip to Guatemala somewhat late; my mother passed away on April 9, and I cut my trip short and made my way back to the US and to Kansas City to be with family for the memorial. My mother was 94, had lived an incredibly full and somewhat exotic life; in very recent years she had gradually lost most physical ability, and in the last year lost the recognition of those around her, so her death may be viewed as a release.

Prior to receiving the news of my mother I did visit two more Mayan sites. From Rio Dulce I traveled to and spent a day visiting the ruins of the southern classic Mayan site Quirigua, with its unique “zoomorphs”, monolithic ovoid boulders (as tall as a person and perhaps 10 by 8 feet) intricately carved on all exposed surfaces and shaped overall generally like tortoises. The site also is famous for its wonderful stelae, the tallest by far in the Mayan world. Stelae E towers over the central plaza at over 26 feet, with another estimated 13 feet underground, and weighs in at around 65 tones. All the stelae are fully carved with figures and writing on all four sides. From Rio Dulce I traveled a very long day by various local transport to cross into Honduras and on to the small town of Copan Ruinas. It is located on the outskirts of the very large southernmost classic Mayan site, Copan. Copan has the most intricately carved stelae in Mesoamerica, with a wealth of historical data on the various rulers, and the famous “hieroglyphic stairway”, a 20 foot wide stone staircase, completely covered in hieroglyphic writing, ascending some 5 stories up the side of a steep pyramidal temple. It was with this staircase and these stelae that the classic Mayan glyphic writing was finally adequately deciphered just over 50 years ago. Also at the Copan site is a terrific museum with some of the finest stone-work carvings in the Maya world. The only downside is the astonishing entrance price for the site, excavations and museum; combined they cost almost \$40 US, by far the most expensive of all Mesoamerican sites.

Both Quirigua and Copan were surrounded by forest and had good populations of birds and wildlife. Copan in particular is in the tiny geographical zone where the endangered Scarlet Macaw still survives, and because they are fed and protected, a number of the birds live right around the entrance to the site.

I am back in Tucson now, and starting to consider where I might go next. Later. Dave





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