

BELIZE:2001

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We got up at 4:30 AM on July 13 and drove to the kids' in Burlington, where we loaded all the luggage into April's Rodeo and went to the airport. The flight to Miami was on a full 727 (no problems, though I hadn't realized American still operated 727s) and the flight to Belize a 757 with lots of empty seats. International flights (which I take rarely) are strikingly upscale, providing cooked food on china with steel flatware instead of plastic containers and utensils.

International Expeditions, the tour organizer, provided a guide in Miami to make sure we got from one flight to the other. That gave me a correct notion of how careful they are with their clients.

Our first guide in Belize, Martin, had come to there as a mahogany company executive in 1975. He took us through Belize City (the capital and largest city with 70-80K people in a country of 250-260K total) while we waited for the other six of our party (The were flying in through Dallas). The houses reminded me of older Brunswick County (NC) beach houses: colorful, run-down, and frequently on stilts because of hurricanes. Some of the oldest places in the city itself are built of bricks carried over in the 19th century as ballast for mahogany ships. There are also 'drowned cayes' in the bay where ships dumped ballast on which mangroves then took root, though they're underwater at high tide. (The lift is only 18" in Belize.)

The educational system works very well. The churches build the schools and choose the teachers, but the government pays those teachers. People whose faith doesn't have schools of its own (the big ones are Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Baptist) send their kids to some other church's school, but the kids aren't required to take the religious instruction. Literacy was 96% until the recent influx of refugees from Salvador and Guatemala (some 80K illiterate Spanish speakers) dropped it to 64%.

25% of the country's Gross Domestic Product comes from tourism, and they really do care about visitors. There are 'Have you hugged a tourist today?' posters and tourist police to make sure only licensed guides are operating (we ran into a checkpoint of tourist police later in the afternoon.)

Most cars are used sub-compacts from the US, generally from Texas and California. Used tires are imported from the US also. Gas is about twice the US price.

Then back to the airport, where there's a Harrier GR.3 on static display. The British sent a squadron of Harriers to Belize in 1976 when Guatemala was threatening to invade. They flew non-stop from Britain, refueling repeatedly. Castro allowed them to overfly Cuba: nobody but CIA likes Guatemala. (I will have more bad things to say about Guatemala in the course of this account, I suspect.)

We were switched to a different guide--Edd, a Creole who'd been an officer in the defense forces--and separate driver, Peter, also a Creole who'd been in the defense forces. Peter drove us from the airport in a Toyota Coaster, a 28-seat diesel bus with a five-speed manual transmission. It was a very rugged and satisfactory vehicle with two seats to the left and one to the right of a center aisle which could be filled by jump seats. It was comfortable, holding ten tourists, the guide and driver, and all our luggage without crowding. Peter took us places on it that I'd have wondered if a jeep could get through.

After his stint in the defense forces, Peter had worked for many years with

ornithological projects. He was a really exceptional birder and communicated his enthusiasm to me.

At the New River we boarded a boat while Peter took the bus on to Lamanai by road. The boatman, Ruben, was also a birder. As with every part of this trip, getting there was part of the experience--not just travel. IE packed us full of information.

A word on my equipment. For the trip I'd gotten the recommended packet of background books, which included one on the wildlife of Belize. In addition I'd gotten a specialist birdbook (*A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Adjacent Areas*, by Edwards) which proved very handy: full, but small enough to carry in a cargo pocket. Peter praised it, though he had a massive volume of his own in his backpack.

I'd also gotten a pair of military specification Steiner 8x30 binoculars. They have great depth of field, so by setting them for 30 feet they're effective from 20 feet to infinity. That permitted me to follow flying birds, but birds are so close in Belize that often I could only use my glasses by increasing the eye relief. A standard pair might have been more useful in the circumstances that obtained.

I'd planned to carry my Minox 35-millimeter camera, but I'd dropped it while practicing and didn't get it back from the shop in time. I used instead an old Nikon point-and-shoot with a 35-70 mm zoom. I took 200 ASA film, thinking that was the choice for outdoors in the tropic sun; 400 or faster would've been a much better idea in the rain forest. Jonathan's new Fuji digital proved excellent, and he had no difficulty downloading from his card to his laptop.

The boatride--a river through the rainforest in late afternoon--was a remarkable experience. I won't try to list all the wildlife, particularly birds, we saw, but it was a wonderful harbinger of things to come. Two Morelet's crocodiles (a freshwater croc unique to Belize, coming back from the verge of extinction) approached. Every stretch of river had a ringed kingfisher, a territorial bird patterned like the much smaller belted kingfisher of the US. Raptors were frequent and unconcerned by our presence. The snail-eating kite (AKA everglades kite) is still common here because the apple snail (its sole item of diet) remains abundant. A fork-tailed flycatcher, 5 inches of bird followed by 9 inches of tail, overflew us.

The sun was low as we approached Lamanai Outpost Lodge. Directly beneath it, rising from the solid forest, was the top of the High Pyramid at Lamanai--at 33 meters, the tallest pre-classical Mayan structure known. This day alone was the price of the trip, so far as I was concerned.

On the morning of July 19th we got a better view of the site. Lamanai Outpost Lodge has a small number (maybe 12?) of individual bungalows and a restaurant with excellent food. The roofs are thatched with boton palm fronds, as were those of all the dwellings we stayed in during the trip (including those of Victoria House in San Pedro, which was air conditioned). In the landscaped grounds are many birds and various lizards, particularly the crested basilisk which has a very long tail (twice the body length). It's also known as the Jesus Christ lizard because younger (lighter) individuals can run across the surface of water.

After breakfast we--the ten tourists under the tutelage of Edd and Peter--went on a nature walk to the ruins. I was particularly struck by the chachalacas, chicken-sized birds which were hopping around in trees like finches, and the fact that the flycatchers range

upward to 9" in overall length. Down from us along the river was a treeful of neotropical cormorants, and across the river a flock of woods storks clustered in a small pond where presumably something tasty had hatched or was swarming.

We passed a family of black howler monkeys, dozing in the trees. They took little notice of us. The infants were more active than the adults, but it was a hot day and leaves aren't a high-energy diet. None of the howlers we saw during the trip were calling, but we heard howlers in the morning and evening at Tikal.

Palm trees are more varied and interesting than I'd realized before the trip. Both the cohune palm and the boton palm begin as clusters of huge leaves sprouting from the ground, but they grow impressive trunks if the surrounding forest is thick enough to require them to do so to reach the light. The give-and-take palm is a relatively slender tree, but its trunk is covered by a hedge of downward pointing needles which induce fever in those they prick. The bark, however, is a specific against the tree's own poison (thus the name, give-and-take) and that of other vegetable irritants including the white poisonwood.

Most trees in the forest are covered by epiphytes growing on their bark and branches, but the allspice stays clean by shedding its bark twice a year. The bark itself is aromatic, but the spice is made from the berries.

In the trees at the river landing where we had lunch before entering the ruins were several raptors and some strikingly colorful birds including blackheaded trogons and the oriole-like Montezuma oropendula--brilliant and 20" long. I repeat: I didn't come to Belize as a birder, but I became one while I was there.

In the museum were flint and pottery objects found at the Lamanai site. The Spanish forced the local people to build a catholic church. Archeological investigation of the ruins (the locals burned the church during a 17th century revolt against the Spanish) turned up a multiform monster of pottery which the builders had buried when they built the church, apparently as a curse.

The pre-classic temples here at Lamanai were my first experience of Mayan ruins. The first we saw was the Mask Temple, so called because of a huge face sculpted in the side. Most of the Mayan sites are built of very soft laterite limestone and weather quickly when exposed. The face is being reconstructed (the archeological term appears to be 'consolidated') because it's deteriorated badly in the past few years. The Mayans themselves had the same problem and are now known to have kept carvings under thatched roofs at least during the rainy season.

We were able to climb this temple. It's not as impressive as others we saw later in the trip, but it was a wonderful experience.

The Mayans constantly rebuilt on the same sites, so while the mask is from ca. 500 AD, Classic Period, the foundations of the pyramid date well back into Pre-Classic times. The reconstruction of a site requires a decision as to what time horizon the reconstruction is to represent. (This is as serious a problem in Rome or London as it is in Mayan country, of course.)

Breadnut trees are common around former Mayan sites and were presumably a cultivated species. Their hickory-nut sized fruit matures in July, before maize, and can be ground with slaked lime into flour to make bread. This is the sort of datum which I find fascinating, although I don't expect it to ever enter my fiction directly. The fact that it made my mind kick over in a new direction--*that's* the value of it to me.

At the site were a number of striking birds, including a huge Pale-Billed Woodpecker. I thought of my parents and how much they'd have loved the birds of Belize. Maybe more of their interests rubbed off on me than I'd realized.

There was a ball court at Lamanai. The games, a feature throughout Mayan history, were played with a solid rubber ball slightly smaller than a soccer ball. Reliefs indicate that one of the two players was executed after the game; our guide, Edd, noted that there was argument as to whether it was the winner or the loser who was beheaded.

This puzzled me, because I knew Mayan script had been largely deciphered. There should've been an answer to the question. To get ahead of my account by a little, Foster (our specialist guide at Tikal) had a degree in archeology. I asked him and got the following explanation:

1) In the Pre-Classic Period the games were used to choose a courier to take a message to the gods. The players were all highly-trained members of the nobility. The winner had proved himself the most fit. He was beheaded as a matter of honor and sent with the message.

2) In the Classic Period the games (still a noble prerogative) were used as a means of ordeal to decide matters at issue (much like the Mediaeval European trial by battle). In addition, conquering kings arranged fixed matches with prisoners. In this period the loser would be executed.

3) In the Post-Classic Period, ball games were a sport. Kings had teams which played for entertainment.

This was interesting in itself and a useful reminder that no culture is static for millennia. It irritates me when people talk about 'what the Romans did' when Roman history covers thousands of years with sharp differences in all aspects of life within that general flow. I'd just made the same mistake about Mayan history.

It also reminded me that 'popular information' generally prefers mystification to later-learned facts. This may be more of this regarding the Mayans than some other peoples, because archeologists had invented a mythical gentle Mayan culture and decipherment of the Mayan texts was somewhat of an embarrassment to them. Throughout Mayan history, victims were publicly tortured to death as a regular part of any festival. A portion of the archeological establishment consciously suppressed this information until quite recently.

We weren't able to climb the two other major temples at Lamanai--the 33-meter High Temple and the Jaguar Temple, so called from the stylized jaguar face created in blocks (sort of crocheting in stone) on one side. The modern concrete staircase built up the back of the High Temple had collapsed during Hurricane Keith last year, doing considerable damage to the original structure.

I noted here and at other Mayan sites that the authorities frequently make steel and ferroconcrete additions--and that these regularly do serious damage by concentrating the stresses of storms and earthquakes that the original structure had survived for the preceding millennia. This is as true at European and Asian sites as it is here. You wouldn't think it took a rocket scientist to look at, say, the Parthenon or Sphinx 'repairs' and decide not to repeat the mistakes of past centuries of would-be conservators.

The back of the Jaguar Temple hasn't been excavated. It faces the landing site and museum. Neither I nor any other member of our group had been aware that it was a temple until we came back around from the other side and found ourselves where we'd

started.

Lamanai is a zoological study area as well as an archeological site and an ecotourist destination. In the afternoon we had a description of the zoological mission by the director of the project, then talks by two of the researchers--a woman whose specialty was bats (she brought in a yellow-throated bat for us to view and gently pet) and the man who was researching the diet of Morelet's crocodiles in the New River. The most striking bat datum that I picked up was that tent-making bats roost by day under large leaves whose support veins they clip so that the leaf folds over a clutch of bats. The crocodile man doubles as a herpetologist and brought in a small green iguana (the lecture room has dark cubicles in the walls where specimens can be kept quietly against need) and a garden snake. Save for the boa in the zoo, this was the only live snake I saw in Belize; my dreams of seeing a fer-de-lance in the wild were therefore dashed.

Following the lectures, we went on what was billed as a Mayan Medicine Trail, a nature walk focusing on the botanical uses of the forest. I learned to distinguish various standard palms. Palm trees are the most striking portion of the forest in much of the region that we visited. This surprised me, as I'd not really thought of palms as forest trees but rather as lone images on sandy beaches. There were those too--Jonathan got some lovely pictures of palms on the beach at San Pedro--but when one views Lamanai from the river, one sees an expanse of broad cohune palm fronds with only occasional other admixtures.

Another common aspect of the forest are leaf-cutter ants. These make 6" wide trails, occasionally merging into much wider boulevards, which are easily distinguished from the trails of larger animals by being completely clear of vegetable material. The ants drop formic acid and completely destroy the leaf and twig litter that is found everywhere else. Once you've learned to identify them, you can see ant trails snaking across all the archeological sites--I took a picture of one across the main plaza at Tikal from the top of the palace.

Along the trail was a fallen tree which (by permission) locals had started to turn into a dugout canoe; they'd abandoned the project because the trunk was rotten at one end. It was a good view of how the process was carried out: the exterior had been rough-shaped and the interior was excavated with fire, adze, and apparently saw cuts.

In the Lamanai property is a sugar mill which was operated in the period 1860-75. (I'm told it figured in the Harrison Ford movie *The Mosquito Coast*, which was filmed in Belize.) Massive iron gears on equally massive brick foundations stand in the midst of jungle.

Also on the property (though some distance from the mill) is a brick storage cistern, apparently for grain. It's 19 feet deep, with no sign of other construction nearby.

At night we went out on a spotlight boat tour of the New River and its lagoon. We viewed bird life, but the crocodile researcher was along hoping to capture crocodiles for his diet study. For the most part the birds remained resting as we passed, though several big boat-billed herons flew away when struck by the spotlight. Fishing bats worked the lagoon in considerable numbers, pretty much ignoring us. There were many 3" fish in the shallow water, probably the right size for the bats.

The northern potoo, a relative of the whippoorwill, is famous for its ability to look like a branch. At night, however, its huge eyes glow like beacons when the light catches them.

There were many crocodiles out in the night, but for the most part they sank out of sight when the boat got near. They're opportunistic feeders, eating among other things the large apple snails. This can cause a skewing of diet data because though the snail shell quickly dissolves in the gut, the trapdoor (operculum) that closes the shell over the snail survives for a very considerable period.

The researcher finally caught a 5-foot croc by wading under the branch where it lay and looping it with a cord on a pole. Landing the critter was a lengthy business, though the outcome was never really in doubt. When the croc was aboard, the researcher and the boatman duct taped shut his jaws and then eyes, quieting him immediately.

Somebody asked whether it was a male or female. "Let's see," said the researcher, pulling on a latex glove and sticking a finger up the croc's vent. He was male.

Because the crocodiles are territorial, the last thing the researcher did before we set off for the lodge was to take a GPS reading of the exact location. The following night (after stomach pumping) the croc would be returned to the same spot.

Thence to the bunglalow and to bed, utterly exhausted but full of amazing memories.

July 15 started in a relaxed fashion--IE is good about not overstressing clients, though believe me you don't get bored. We watched the lizards and hummingbirds in the gardens, and I got a picture of the chiclero kettle placed there as an accent. The sap of the chicle tree was gathered and boiled down much like natural rubber (or for that matter, maple syrup). Until 1975 chicle for chewing gum provided 25% of the Belize Gross Domestic Product. Then the Japanese found a way to process a synthetic out of petroleum, and the market for real chicle collapsed.

Chicle wood--zapodilla--is very dense and resistant to decay, by the way. The Mayans used it for lintels in their structures; at Tikal we saw beams that've survived well over a thousand years.

We then took the bus to the Belize Zoo, quite a long trip. The local people practice slash-and-burn agriculture. Land that has been abandoned after a few seasons grows back first in guinea grass and tall cecropia trees; there were many such stretches along the way. There were also orchards and coconut groves, most of the latter dying of the virus that is sweeping Belize. People are now planting resistant varieties, but what had been the standard Belize coconut tree is going the way of the elm and chestnut in North America.

The local subsistence farmers plant corn, squash and beans in the same hole as the Mayans did. The squash grows along the ground and the beans use the cornstalk for support. 90% of the grain in Belize, however, is grown by a small number of Mennonite immigrants (who left Germany for the US, then moved to Mexico, and in the 1950s settled in Belize) who by dint of hard work and western agricultural methods are hugely more productive than the locals.

Because the Mennonites (some of whom eschew internal combustion machinery; others use tractors and outboard motors for their fishing boats) keep to themselves, there's been relatively little ethnic tension, but their *per capita* income is much higher than that of any other group in the country. One can hope--I hope--that envy won't drive these productive people out of Belize as has happened to them so often in the past.

We stopped en route at an anomaly, a Belizian winery. The owner, a Creole about

60 years old, developed gardens and a winery on the 20 acres the government granted his father for being a veteran of World War II. So far as I could tell there was no difference between him and his neighbors, save that he was much harder working and imaginative. (There was a wall around the property to keep the garden furniture from going missing; before that he'd chained it down.)

The wines were local recipes for local fruits, among them orange, grapefruit, 'blackberry' (a tree; not what we know as blackberry in the US), cashew (from the fruit, not the nut), tamarind, and sorrell. Tourists had sent him books on winemaking after they got home--he'd been working without any help whatever before then. His bottles were liquor bottles from El Salvador, his corks from Canada (a visitor had found him a source), the plastic caps from Mexico, and his bottling machinery was British. He was selling the product for \$3.50 US/bottle or three for \$10. Heaven knows what it tastes like (I'm teetotal), but we brought some back for friends.

Thence to the zoo, a recovery operation stocked solely with injured animals and those released from poachers. The cages are very large and incorporate the vegetation that was on the site before it was fenced, so it can be quite difficult to find even good-sized animals. There was a lot of, 'Is that it up there?' and the like. The facilities have largely been built by the Royal Engineers. The British army keeps a jungle training site in Belize and pays for the use of it by carrying out infrastructure projects within the country. The zoo was a beneficiary of this policy.

The woman who founded and runs it (she'd come to Belize 20 years ago to shoot a documentary and stayed) came by with some chicken scraps while we were there, so we got to watch the jaguars gambolling. Even I got good pictures of the friendly tapir, and the tamandua (lesser anteater) was an absolute ham.

Tapirs follow regular trails through the jungle and are therefore easy to shoot, but they--like jaguars and most other native animals in Belize--are making a comeback during the past decade or more. Belizeans have taken readily to the notion of the natural world as a tourist resource and a subject of national pride

In the macaw cage was a clay-colored robin which had managed to squirm in through the mesh and was frantically trying to find a way out. The macaws watched it with mild interest.

It was an extremely hot day, and we were all wilting after the combination of the winery, a patio diner en route (it was called *Cheers*), and the zoo. The air-conditioned bus was a pleasure on the long trip to Pook's Hill, and I say that as one who normally dislikes and avoids air conditioning.

When we left the main road, the going became extremely bad. Here above all I was impressed by the Toyota and by Peter's skill. We were on a narrow rutted track, steep both up and down. The diesel and 5-speed manual transmission were more than adequate; Peter only rarely dropped into compound low. (My year driving a city bus allows me to appreciate excellence in this aspect of the trip.)

At one point Peter stopped and pointed out a pair of collared aracaris eating the fruit from a rubber tree. Aracaris are a form of toucan--smaller than the keel-billed, but big by almost any other standards--and brilliantly colored. They were just another of the striking species of birds we saw at every stage of the trip.

Pook's Hill is a nature reserve with a bush-hogged 'lawn' on the slope beneath the lodge, an open-sided building with a thatch roof. The lower story (ground level at the

back as the upper floor is at the front) is a common dining area, enclosed against the bugs. The individual bungalows have whitewashed walls of cast concrete and thatch roofs with a ceiling fan. The baths were large tiled rooms with a shower at one end and the toilet and washstand at the other; the water was drinkable (I did) though there was bottled water as elsewhere in Belize for those who didn't want to trust the taps.

The generator ran till bedtime, 10 pm or so, and then a battery bank kept the fans running till about three in the morning. It was in all respects a lovely location.

Here as later at the Victoria House we ran into a minor glitch: IE thought the Drake party was father, mother, brother and sister--and carefully arranged separate beds for Jonathan and April. (The two other parties with us were couples with a teenaged female dependent.) It was easily solved in both cases.

Vickie, who runs Pook's Hill with her husband, is English by birth and a fabric designer by former trade. She in a very nice way is a rabid naturalist as well as a thoroughly decent and interesting person. I noted that there were (seriously poisonous) give-and-take palms growing beside the bungalows and asked about them. She explained that two had been there but she'd transplanted the others because she'd noticed that the collared aracaris liked them. She then paused and said, "I guess they do send an odd message to guests, don't they?" But they didn't, not really.

Edd suggested a dip in the stream running through the property. The four Drakes took him up on it; the others, somewhat to my surprise did not (one family had a stomach bug; the daughter had been barfing on the extremely rough road and the father wasn't feeling great). It was a quarter mile away through rain forest, a neat walk in itself which involved crossing the stream on a rope bridge with a log floor.

And the stream was magnificent. It was broad but fairly shallow--chest deep or less throughout most of its width, but a trifle over six feet on the outside of the curve. Two-inch long fish nibbled our body hair as soon as we got in the water; they were harmless but utterly unafraid. A solid wall of jungle rose above the bank. A large antnest of mud sat on the crotch of a branch hanging over the water; and from it grew a rare orchid which was in bloom. The orchid's seeds have a gelatine coating which the ants like. They carry the seeds to their nests, where they may germinate--as this one had.

There were many high points to our trip. Swimming in this jungle stream the two nights we were at Pook's Hill was one of them.

After dinner we got out our flashlights and Edd led us on a walk around one of the circular jungle trails in the darkness. It was an interesting experience, though wildlife itself was sparse. There was a coatimundi (an elongated raccoon), a large frog, and most strikingly a bat flying down the trail at head height with something in its talons. It may have been a fishing bat like the many we saw at Lamanai; alternatively, the prey may have been a large cicada.

Thence back to the bungalows and to bed, the close of another day of amazing experiences.

On July 16 I got up early for birds. We were handicapped by the fact that Peter had cut himself shaving (his scalp) and wasn't able to join us till late. Edd is a very good field naturalist, but Peter's knowledge of birds borders on the supernatural.

Fortunately, the birds made it easy. There was a cecropia tree just down from the lodge. A pair of crimson-collared tanagers were eating seeds in it and carrying them back

to their nest in a nearby palm. They're striking birds, and indeed had pride of place as the back-cover illustration on my field guide.

Thence to Barton Creek Caves. The slightly sickly family remained behind, which is probably good because the road this morning was if anything worse than that which brought us to Pook's Hill (which we retravelled as well, of course). At one point we backed up to allow an old Toyota minivan to get around us in the other direction; the driver must have been a local guide, because he swept his minivan through ruts that I was sure would bog him. Further on, we forded a creek.

This is a good time to mention the weather, a factor in any trip to the region. The rainy season should've started at the beginning of June, but no significant rains had fallen by the middle of July; the scattered nighttime showers while we were there didn't mark a change. Central America is undergoing a drought, and BBC noted that within a month a million people in the region would be in need of food aid.

I greatly regret the drought (human environmental changes--global warming and the destruction of rain forest over much of the region, particularly Guatemala--may be at least partially responsible, though droughts are believed to have brought down the Mayan civilization as I'll mention later). So far as we were concerned as tourists, the lack of rain made the trip much more pleasant. (I know what monsoon rains are like.)

Barton Creek Caves is privately owned (like Pook's Hill and Lamanai), but it serves backpackers and budget tourists as well as coddled ecotourists like ourselves. There's a large thatched marquee under which more a hundred people could shelter (and scores did), with picnic tables and a bar. A number of family groups were swimming in the stream outside the entrance to the caves.

We rented canoes and entered the caves, three per canoe including a local guide who joined us. Whoever was in the back paddled, and the person in the middle was responsible for the light: an automobile headlight in a handgrip, attached to a truck battery by a length of flex with alligator clips. To turn the light on, you clipped both leads to the battery posts.

The ceiling rose in some places to 105'. There were striking stalactites and blooms of flow rock, though relatively few stalagmites. Several bridges crossed the cave, and occasionally the passage was low and narrow enough that the canoe scraped.

The Mayans regarded caves as sacred space. There are burials and grave goods in the caves, some of them (jugs set in niches) visible from the canoe. They've been studied by archeologists but not removed, which I think is a reasonable compromise. (Mind, I'm neither an Amerind or an archeologist.)

Bats roost on the cave roofs. Fruit bat excrement is acid, so over the years they've dissolved conical pits as much as a foot into the limestone. They huddle there in their little burrows and flutter away if the light stays on them too long (which I tried to avoid).

Algae grows hundreds of feet deep into the caves. That nearest the entrance is greenish; farther in the growth is white; and a pinkish algae remains on the walls even very deep into the caves.

The algae surprised me, but not nearly as much as the plants did. Fruit bats sometimes excrete intact seeds, which won't be a surprise to anybody who's gardened with cow manure. The seeds sprout in the blob of fertilizer, also no surprise. But they continue to grow to over 4" high with deep green leaves, photosynthesizing from the light brought into the caves by tourists like us.

I didn't get any worthwhile pictures of the interior, but Jonathan's digital camera and Jo using faster film did. The caves impressed me in many ways, and my neck ached a trifle for weeks after from the amount of time I spent looking up.

I was struck during the tour that the unsophisticated commercialism of the site harked back to an earlier age in the US, for example the Black Hills in 1940 when my folks honeymooned there. Nowadays the volume of tourists, governmental involvement to protect a natural resource, and sophisticated marketing have changed things back home. (This is an observation, not a complaint in either direction.)

From the caves we went to Green Hills Butterfly Farm where the mistress--co-owner with her husband, both of them Dutch by birth--had lunch laid out for us on tables under the usual thatched marquee. As elsewhere the food was prepared by local servants and (as more often than not) it was chicken with a variety of rice, beans and vegetables. The concession to... hmm, I started to say western tastes, but that would be pretty silly... First World tastes was a garden salad which is foreign everywhere in the region. She suggested we throw the scraps, including the chicken bones, over the fence to the chickens and guinea fowl, as that's what she would do afterwards if we didn't. (I did.)

A foot-long, brilliantly-colored lizard ran under the tables as we were eating. "What's that?" I said. The lady looked at me oddly and said, "That's my helper George;" meaning, I realized after a moment, the local man who'd just come over to ask her a question. Jonathan and I laughed in our usual fashion, while people looked at both of us oddly. (The lizard turned out to be a barred whiptail, a male in breeding colors.)

We then got a tour of one of the breeding greenhouses. The farm raises five kinds of butterflies; the caterpillar of one variety has extremely poisonous spines, so they're segregated in a separate greenhouse for safety. The plants within are chosen for their blooms. There are also dropper bottles with sugar water (rather like hummingbird feeders; and washed with bleach every week, just as we do at home with our hummingbird feeders) and leafed twigs of chosen types in vases for the butterflies to lay eggs on. The blue morphos refuse to lay eggs on anything but living plants, so there are also a number of tiny saplings in pots.

Leaves with eggs on them are transferred in the evening to plastic containers like those you'd get deli cole slaw in, segregated by species. The containers are opened daily and a fresh leaf dropped in (this also changes the air; the containers aren't vented). When (as usually happens) multiple eggs hatch on one leaf, the leaf is cut with scissors and part goes into a new separate container with its crop. The process continues day by day until there's one caterpillar in each container. (The woman doing this with blue morphos had the quick efficiency I've seen in other highly-skilled workers doing a repetitive task.)

When the caterpillars pupate they're transferred to a screened box, still segregated by species. Green Hills supplies a number of butterfly houses in Europe and the US, including that of the Durham Science Museum which Jo and I saw last year. (They can only be transported as pupas.) To be honest, I'm not certain what happens to the other butterflies as there must be more than're necessary for breeding purposes; perhaps they're simply released into the wild.

This is a very large-scale, labor-intensive project; I was thoroughly impressed. (I was thoroughly impressed by an awful lot of what I saw during this trip.)

Thence back to Pook's Hill in the evening for dinner and a chance to relax, which I very much needed. I managed to turn my notes for the day into journal entries; there

was so much going on every day that finding time for that necessary task was frequently difficult.

We got up early in the morning of July 17 for another look at the birds of Pook's Hill before we left. I'd seen keel-billed toucans silhouetted in flight the afternoon we arrived in Belize, but this morning we got good views of them in all their size and color. They're the national bird of Belize--and a good choice therefor among many striking alternatives.

We went by bus to our second significant Mayan site, Xunantunich. On the way we paused in San Ignacio, the second city of Belize. The houses again reminded me of older dwellings in Brunswick County, NC where we go to the beach every summer: smallish, generally shabby, often on stilts against flooding during hurricanes, and frequently brightly colored. There were many internet cafes, many travel bureaus, and many shops with tourist wares.

The road passed two cemeteries here and another at San Jose Succotz. The graves in the region are mostly above ground because of the high water table. The stones and slabs are generally painted in bright pastels. The look and feel of these cemeteries is quite different from those of the parts of the US where I've visited cemeteries.

At Succotz there's a hand-worked ferry (the operator cranks his raft along a cable) crossing a tributary of the Belize River to get to Xunantunich. There are three very large green iguanas (one was over 5' long) wandering around the ferry site; none of our group fed them, but I presume there's some reason they live in this location.

The raft wouldn't take the weight of the Coaster, so we loaded onto one of a pair of old blue Ford vans (the other passed us going the other way) that carry tourists to the site a mile upslope. The ride was hot (there was a little fan whirring in the back, but most of the windows didn't open), cramped, and extremely rough, but it sure beat walking.

Xunantunich was built to tax river traffic during the Classic period; it had only about 7-10K people (as opposed to Tikal, one of some thirty known Mayan sites which probably had some 175K residents at their peak). It's relatively small, so you can get a feel for the whole site from the restored pyramids unlike Lamanai and particularly Tikal.

During the late '70s while Belize was still British Honduras, the brutal military dictatorship in Guatemala threatened to take over the country by force. The British moved in troops and aircraft. Xunantunich became a British army observation post with concrete stairs to the top. Not surprisingly there's been earthquake damage since then.

One of the mounds visible from the main pyramid is cratered. An archeologist blew it open with dynamite and announced that there was nothing inside... which was certainly true after he got done with it. Any Iowa farmer with an Indian mound on his property could've told him that's not how you find burials and grave goods. (I'm not saying I condone the practice; just that my in-laws used dynamite for stumping, not grave robbing.)

We drove from Succotz to the Guatemalan border, where there was considerable bureaucracy and (especially since I'm slightly agoraphobic) discomfort. I read a book as I stood in line with a great crowd of other people, waiting for petty officials to stamp forms and take money. (Belize and Guatemala charge people who are leaving the country, \$20 and \$30 per head, respectively.) I found the whole business unpleasant and--it seemed to me--unnecessary.

Thence back on the bus and a long drive to Tikal. The road is now quite good, becoming paved a few miles from the border. Apparently the road had been awful but the complaints of tour operators forced the government to act--though I gather 'act' in this case means spend aid money on construction instead of using it to line the pockets of officials. The aid ran out a distance short of the border, but the gravel portion is drivable.

A line of poles--like telephone poles but without wires--parallels the road. Jo later learned the poles were set up to prevent people from landing light planes on the concrete highway. There's very little traffic, even less than in Belize.

Jonathan noticed that we were being followed by a blue Toyota pickup with two men in it. I asked Edd, who said with obvious embarrassment, "They're friends." It appears that IE provides armed guards for its groups while they're in Guatemala, but they want to keep the fact quiet so as not to spook clients. The trucks carrying cases of Pepsi and Coca-Cola also have armed guards: anyone in the country with cash has to be guarded, because thirteen families control all Guatemala's wealth. Grinding poverty turns most of the population into potential bandits.

Our hotel, the Tikal Inn, is one of the three within the park site. They're private property, remaining under a grandfather clause when the rest of the large tract became public. I assume the Tikal Inn was the best because IE did an excellent job in all the other arrangements, but the place wasn't prepossessing. None of our party were willing to swim in the pool; the restaurant was dirty (food that dropped on the floor would still be there at the next meal) and the staff sparse and untrained. (The waiters couldn't take an order for soft drinks and water in English, for example.) Our room and that of Jonathan and April beside us had cross draft and were reasonably comfortable. The other rooms had windows only on one side, and when the electricity went off at 10 PM, the ceiling fans stopped also.

After settling into our rooms we walked through forest to the archeological site a quarter mile away. There are many armed police throughout the site, up on the pyramids as well as lounging in guard posts at intersections on the ground. Coatimundis, spider monkeys, ocellated turkeys, and crested guans (a larger version of the chacalaca) are as common throughout the site as pigeons are in downtown Chapel Hill.

The site, which the Canadians cleared to its present extent in 1975, is huge. The population during its long *fluit* was about 175,000, far beyond what the region's present slash-and-burn agriculture could support. The Mayan kingdoms use raised-bed agriculture in the swamps around the city, forming 'paddies' with three-foot high walls and filling the interior with rich muck from farther out in the swamps. Raised bed agriculture can feed 1000 people/acre against 65/acre for slash-and-burn.

During the dry summer months the paddies were watered from the reservoirs on high ground in the city. The great causeways of the city were designed not only for pedestrian traffic but also to channel water (along the plastered gutters to either side) into the reservoirs for later distribution.

The region is subject to periodic droughts; recently one lasted for sixteen years, dropping the annual rainfall from 100 inches to 45 inches. A similar drought struck toward the end of the 6th century AD. The reservoirs didn't fill, so the crops on the raised beds would've shrivelled before becoming ripe. This in turn ended the Classic Mayan period. Tikal remained an important site, but the nature of warfare changed from war for

the sake of honor, to war in which the conquered city was annihilated to gain its territory to support the victor.

We entered the Great Plaza past a shrine house, where the king would talk to his ancestors. Temple 1, the tallest surviving pre-Columbian structure in the New World, was closed to tourists but we climbed Temple 2 across from it and also Temple 5 to the south. The acoustics are such that you can easily talk to someone on the opposite pyramid about 200 feet away. Originally Temple 1 was an astronomical observatory, but the ruler who built Temple 2 converted Temple 1 to a tomb for the body of his father, killed in war but later recovered.

Reuse, cannibalization, and overbuilding, are characteristics of all Mayan sites. There are now 16 small temples on the North Acropolis, but they're built on at least 150 earlier temples. The palace on the south side had rooms on five levels. There are steps up to the top, but there are also bleacher seats in the form of broad steps where the court would sit facing the populace gathered in the plaza. The higher a noble's rank, the higher his seat. The king on top would be comfortably ensconced on pillows of jaguar skins stuffed with feathers and kapok from the ceiba tree.

We went from the Main Plaza to the much older Temple of the Lost World, which we climbed with the intention of watching sunset from the top. I was in pretty rocky condition by this point, mostly as a result of descending Temple 2 sideways with my right leg leading the whole way. My left leg started to cramp. There'd been a lot of riding followed by a lot of physical exertion, and that stupid mistake had cost me much of my normal capacity for physical exertion.

The Temple of the Lost World was worth the effort. At 130 feet it's by no means the tallest structure at Tikal, but you can climb to the very top whereas much of the height of the higher temples is in combs which weren't ever meant to be climbed. The view of the jungle below us was marvelous: a bat falcon was making circular passes from a ceiba tree nearby; two birds of prey--they may have been hook-billed kites, but Foster and Edd were uncertain and Peter didn't come with us--were perched in plain sight a quarter mile away. Toucans were hopping among the treetops at the foot of the pyramid.

With us on top of the pyramid were three backpackers. They became excited when our guides pointed out the toucans, and we let them borrow our binoculars to watch those huge, brilliant birds. It struck me that though they were travelling to the same places as we were, they'd have seen nothing but jungle from here, if it hadn't been that we--with Edd and Foster--were present at the same time. I greatly respect what the backpackers were doing on their own, but I'm glad for myself that I waited to go until I had enough money to hire expertise that would enrich the trip beyond anything I personally brought to it.

Because the sky was cloudy, we came down from the pyramid before it was full dark (which would've made the descent really tricky, given the shape I at least was in). It'd been quite a day.

At dinner, Edd and two members of the hotel staff played the marimba. I was struck by how much reverb the instrument had.

I got up early on July 18 and went out birding with Pete as I usually did. Jo and Edd joined us. We got a good view of a blue-crowned motmot which has a two long tailfeathers that're bare shafts save for a tuft at the end. While I wasn't pleased with the

Hotel Tikal Inn generally, I've got to give some credit to any place which has these analogues to the birds of paradise living on the grounds.

There was also a bat falcon sitting on top of a high bare limb, picking apart something with a long tail (possibly a snake). It was a lengthy process. Throughout our stay in Central America I was pleased and surprised by the way birds of prey lived near humans without concern. The family of marsh hawks with which we've shared our property for the eight years we've been in the present house would never let me get as close as this falcon and many other raptors did.

We returned to Tikal with Foster, starting this time with Complex Q, one of a series built over the course of Mayan civilization to mark a 20-year cycle. Each complex has pyramids to east and west, with a nine-door palace to the south (symbolizing the Underworld) and a corbelled arch to the north (symbolizing Paradise) opening to an engraved stela and altar which recount the ruler's achievements.

The carved altars weren't functional. The altars in the plaza on which prisoners were tortured to death in odd numbers--three, five, or seven at a time generally--and their associated stelai weren't carved, though they probably had painted legends when they were new. The altar in the north archway is carved with a full description of the dedication ceremonies for the complex, including the names and means of torture by which the victims were sacrificed.

Later generations overbuilt previous monuments. What kept Q more or less intact was that it was built in 771 AD, just before the final collapse of the Mayan Kingdom. Complex R followed it, but R was heavily cannibalized centuries later by a successor group, the Mopan Maya.

Toucans and oropendulas--big, brilliant orioles--flew among the trees throughout the site. I truly was able to live my dream, to stand in ancient stone cities buried in the jungle.

We curved back to the five-story palace on one side of the main plaza (there was quite a lot of walking on this trip, even without climbing pyramids at intervals). The Mayans claimed (perhaps correctly) to be Olmecs who migrated from homes along the coast. Throughout Mayan history, seashells and mother of pearl were luxury items because they were reminders of the national past.

There was trade with the Toltecs of Teotihuacan (the region of Mexico City) but the route is difficult (the Spanish administered Yucatan from Peru, not Mexico City). In 300 AD the ruler of Tikal made a personal journey to Teotihuacan and returned with a wonder-weapon--the atlatl, the spearthrower--and two Toltec warriors skilled in atlatl tactics.

This revolutionized regional warfare, turning Tikal into a superpower before rival cities were able to adopt the new weapon. When the king died without blood heirs, he appointed as his successors the Toltec warriors who'd come south with him. From one of these (the other died of lingering injuries incurred in the climactic battle) the royal line of Tikal continued through the Classic period. Architectural themes from Teotihuacan appear at Tikal thereafter.

Foster says that in the lower levels of the palace (closed to tourists) pale orange plaster still covers the walls, picked out by a red understripe and paintings of prisoners in black. Construction was by small stone blocks, more or less the size of bricks, rather than the sort of multi-ton ashlar the Egyptians used.

The public portion of the palace has expanses of white plaster, in some cases with graffiti made by 11th century Mopan Mayans as well as by 20th century tourists (mostly Spanish speaking, I noticed). People are people.

We went from the palace to Temple 4; it's 215 feet high but the ladder to the top of the comb (which the guidebooks mention) is no longer there; we reached only the level of the chamber at least 30 feet lower. Only the top portion of the pyramid has been cleared, so access is by a pair of wooden ladderways up the side. This is a very practical addition which doesn't harm the original structure. It seemed to me that the ladder was less tiring than climbing the original stone steps of other pyramids.

From the top there's a striking view of the peaks of other pyramids rising above the treetops, but the jungle is so thick that one doesn't have an overview of the site or any real awareness of its extent.

On the way back to the hotel for lunch, we passed a huge Spanish (also called hardwood) cedar. I got pictures of the buttress roots spreading from the base. That's another of the trip highlights for me.

There was also a line of army ants passing alongside our trail. On the other side I noticed a number of bright orange (probably poisonous) millipedes which weren't being harmed by the ants but which seemed to be unable or unwilling to cross the ant trail. If I'd seen them a year ago, the giant millipede of *Mistress of the Catacombs* would've been orange... but if I live, there'll be other books.

Jo and I got up early on July 19 and did the usual nature walk with Edd and Peter, around the hotel grounds. This morning we didn't see coatimundis, but there was a herd--flock? covey?--of agoutis, which you can think of as large guinea pigs. (The paca, a truly giant guinea pig, we saw only in the zoo.) A flock of white-fronted parrots passed over so low that for a change I actually saw them as parrots rather than parrot-shaped silhouettes.

I asked Peter, by the way, how he could say with such assurance (for example), "Those are red-lored parrots," or, "Those are brown-hooded parrots," when the birds were high overhead against a bright sky and the identification marks are the color of the small patch of feathers between their eyes. "By their calls," he said; which was obvious after he said it, but still quite remarkable.

Edd pointed out 4" long caterpillars which lay on trunks and branches in groups of twenty or more, tight together like swatches of brown velvet with thin white stripes. These were the caterpillars of the Banana Owl moths, one of the species Green Hills Butterfly Farm raises. As adults they're huge and rather attractive, but the masses of caterpillars are pretty disgusting.

Near the Museum was a slough covered with water hyacinths. A limpkin--a wading bird with a curved beak--walked over the hyacinths, dipping down and finally coming up with a 4" apple snail. (Everything from hook-billed kites to Morole's crocodiles seems to eat them; I'd never thought of snails as a major item of diet, but I was wrong.) It held the snail in one foot, popped the hinge with its beak a couple times, and winkled out the meat to swallow.

Immature purple gallinules (visualize a colorful chicken) were walking on the hyacinths also. I don't know what they were eating, but an adult minced out on a drooping banana stem and ate one of the ripe bananas with deliberate pecks.

Thence back to the room to pack. Jo went walking and didn't come back till well

after they'd collected the bags, so I had the nervous task of hoping I'd finished packing all her stuff. I checked three times and had April go over the room also; we seem to have succeeded.

I was wearing the Old Iowa tee-shirt my webmaster had sent me. In the lobby a couple from Cedar Rapids saw the shirt and struck up a conversation. The wife was originally from Guatemala. "I tell my family," she said, "how hot it gets in Iowa in the summer and how cold it gets in the winter, and they look at me and say, 'Why do you live in such a terrible place?'" Given that I moved to North Carolina myself when I learned how much milder the winters were, that's a fair question; but there's a lot about Iowa that I miss, and the conversation reminded me of that.

We ate lunch, still in Guatemala, at a hamlet called El Renata overlooking the river. There were dugout canoes pulled up on the bank; women washed their clothes in the stream. A huge brindled mastiff slept in the roofed patio where we ate, and another dog lay in the screened bathhouse.

We proceeded to Flores, a good-sized city with the regional airport. Every other shop in the business area appeared to be a travel agency; there were also bars with brightly (and often imaginatively) painted exteriors, and souvenir shops where the staff was more aggressive than I was comfortable with. To be honest, the whole country of Guatemala gave me the creeps; that mastiff wasn't 'just a pet', nor were the guards following our bus 'just friends' as Edd put it.

Thence to the airport, where we said goodbye to Peter (who would drive the bus back to Belize City) and outprocessed. I had my usual trouble with forms, but we made it and boarded a Tropicair Cessna Grand Caravan (15 seats including the pilot, and a single turboprop engine). The flight to Belize airport was smooth. We inprocessed (having just come from a foreign country) and flew back in the same plane to San Pedro on Ambergris Caye.

A very battered Ford van carried the luggage and some of our group to the Victoria House where we were staying. The rest followed in a four-seat golf cart, the standard transportation in San Pedro for those who don't want to walk. The town is of about 3,000 people, strung out along the beach with basically just one long central street.

The Victoria House is very plush, with air conditioning even in our individual thatch-roofed cabanas (with the sea breeze, we didn't use the air conditioning except for the first night.) By this point I was pretty thoroughly wrecked, but a shower perked me up. Dinner was ample and excellent.

And to bed, where I slept like a rock.

We were up early on July 20th to go birding with Edd. We didn't see either the roseate spoonbills or the American crocodiles (which live in salt water, unlike the Morolets) which are supposed to be present on Ambergris Caye, but there was a flock of white ibis and many egrets. There were also Great Blue Herons, which I'm used to from NC but which are impressive birds nonetheless.

We then went snorkeling; the first time for the four Drakes, though the other two families were experienced. The initial practice session off the end of the dock went well enough. I managed to control my breathing, and because the flippers provided positive buoyancy I was just about able to float. (For those of you who don't know: when I blow my lungs out, I sink even in salt water. This is one reason I never got far in Boy Scouts,

as to pass the swimming test you had to float for ten minutes without paddling. Because of the laws of physics, I could no more do that than I could fly.)

There were schools of fingerlings near the dock, and I even saw an immature barracuda. So far, so good.

We then went out to the barrier reef (the second longest--Australia's is the longest--in the world.) I was struck on the way out (an impression reinforced by later experiences) that most of the shallow-water sea is utterly barren. There are stands of manatee grass and turtle grass, their leaves pale from the fine sand lying over them. There are no visible fish in the grass, and most of the seafloor is *just* sand or mud. The wreck of a fishing schooner was an oasis of fish and other life in the middle of this wasteland. Clearly artificial reefs *do* work, and having seen the natural condition--a submerged desert--I'm puzzled that there's not a lot more lobbying for them. This would be something positive for Greenpeace and similar outfits to do, as opposed to creating television opportunities for their activists.

The snorkeling itself was one of those interesting experiences, like a few I had in Southeast Asia a long time ago. I could get along all right so long as I was floating face down and paddling just a little (otherwise my legs would slowly sink). The problem was that I couldn't get anywhere in particular without expending a great deal of clumsy effort, and there was a slight current.

At one point I drifted into the boat channel and Edd had to drag me back. (A tourist had recently been killed there.) In my struggles I got water in my mask and had to empty it while thrashing uncomfortably. I managed to swallow a bit of sea water in the course of things, and I became so physically exhausted that I was afraid I was going to throw up after the effort of getting back aboard the boat.

That's the downside: my own physical incapacity and lack of skill. The vivid life on and around the coral heads was quite marvelous during the times I wasn't drifting away on the verge of drowning, however. Edd enticed a 5' green moray eel out of the coral, giving me a real-life glimpse of one of the critters I used in *The Jungle*. (Come to think, I believe there was a giant iguana in *The Jungle* also. As well as grasshoppers and murderous honeysuckle.)

The boat moved to another part of the reef, Shark and Ray Alley. The nurse sharks and sting rays are used to being handled. Edd and the captain horsed them around freely, feeding them bits of fish. Touristy stuff, but they were quite real nonetheless.

Jo had even worse problems than I did: she simply couldn't get used to the mask. Jonathan and April did better, but not well enough that they wanted to go out again in the afternoon with the rest of the group.

Jo and I went instead on a glass-bottomed boat with an eclectic group of tourists from other hotels. Most were Spanish speaking, but there was a young Italian couple and a pair of American women in their late 20s with the 6-year-old daughter of one.

The clear panels weren't large and a crack had been repaired with plywood. When there might be something to see below us, the owner splashed water on the panels to compensate for the scratches, but for the most part there was nothing to see so this wasn't a problem.

In the course of the three-hour ride we saw a sea turtle (underwater and off the side of the boat; there was no way to tell which species) and a very striking rainbow parrotfish. By tossing out chum the owner brought shoals of blue tang as well as gray and

yellowtail snapper around us.

The American women rode on the upper deck of the boat where the choppiness was amplified. They went into the water with others when the boat anchored. The mother immediately came back with her daughter and began wrenching while the daughter whimpered that she had to go to the bathroom really, really bad. Mother, between fits of nausea, tried to shut the child up or alternatively to get her friend over to take the child back into the saltwater rest room. It was, in its way, an entertaining episode.

We got back in late afternoon and relaxed. I even ate dinner, which wouldn't have been my bet while I was out with the snorkel.

On July 21 we went snorkeling again. One of our fellows had bought Jo a pair of goggles which worked for her (as the mask had not). Another explained to me that using my arms was counter-productive; I should simply kick. I found that really did work, though there were still problems.

The main one was that I had to keep moving, at least slowly, or my legs would sink. The other members of the party were good swimmers and--particularly the women--had positive buoyancy; they simply didn't understand that if they zoomed in front of me to look at something of particular interest, I was either going to bump them or my legs would sink. The water over coral heads was often very shallow, so I was in a constant state of agitation lest I inadvertently kick and damage some delicate structure.

Having said that, the amount and brilliant variety of life around the corals was fascinating and lovely. I'd brought the guide to reef life which IE suggested but (unlike the other guidebooks in the package) it was almost useless: there was simply too much there. (I did identify a dusky squirrelfish which looped out of his crevice and back; but compared to the fun I had identifying birds, fish were rather disappointing.)

There were several shoals of 6" reef squid. Their half-transparent bodies are flattened in a horizontal plane, and I saw no signs of two tentacles being longer than the rest. Edd and the captain assured me that they were squid, not cuttlefish, however.

Several of the party had disposable underwater cameras. They worked, but at least Jonathan's and April's pictures were of no particular merit in contrast to what they did with digital and film cameras on the surface. The images were blurred and washed out, even in the very clear water where we were.

My second attempt at snorkeling was much better than the first--I wasn't in fear of my life, nor on the verge of barfing--but it still falls into the category of educational rather than delightful. I might go snorkeling again if I were in a place that offered the opportunity, but I would never go somewhere in order to snorkel. It's one of those things I'm glad to have done--once.

The afternoon was free time. I simply relaxed, read, wrote up my notes into proper journal form, and chatted.

I've listened to BBC News on short wave for twenty years and had brought my current radio (a Sony ICF-7600 about the size of a trade paperback) along. While demonstrating it to Edd, I stumbled onto a favorite program (programme, I suppose I should say: *From Our Own Correspondent*) at an unexpected time. It was a small serendipitous pleasure, one of many on the trip. It made me think of Dad, a short wave enthusiast all his life, and how much he and Mom would've loved the trip themselves. I wish they were still around so I could tell them about it.

A low-key day and a good way to unwind before the grueling trip home.

On July 22 we were up early and did another little nature walk with Edd. San Pedro didn't have the natural interest of other places we'd been--it was a town, after all--though the young iguanas on the trees were of note. Because we'd walked the same route each morning, it was obvious that the lizards were very territorial--but even their postures seemed to be the same from day to day.

We chatted with Edd, who wanted to know about writing. (People tend to think being a writer is a more exotic business than I find it to be.) He's had two (English language) poetry collections published in Belize and promised to send a copy to me in return for *Mistress of the Catacombs*, which I'll mail him as soon as I have copies myself.

We flew from San Pedro to Belize City in another Grand Caravan, outprocessed (bureaucracy was the least pleasant part of the trip, though it wasn't horrible or I suppose even unreasonable), and boarded an Airbus for Miami.

US Customs wasn't a problem either, though the sheer scale of the operation was daunting. A DC-9 to Raleigh-Durham, where we picked up April's Rodeo. Jonathan drove us back to their house; we transferred our luggage to our car and Jo drove us home.

The house and animals were clean and happy.

It was an amazing and wonderful trip. It wasn't a vacation--it'll be years before I'm ready to do anything like this again--but for the rest of my life I'll be processing what I saw and learned.