



Welcome to Rott's Manor

Route of the Maya 2013 Trip Report

Our OAT Trip Leader, Vinicio Alba, helped tremendously with this trip report as he kept detailed notes which he emailed to each of his participants post trip (and we shamelessly plagerized).

Dec 22

Arriving in San Salvador, we began three days with Nahaut Tours (www.nahuatours.com). Our airport pickup was a little disjointed because our flight was delayed. Alex, our guide, was checking the marquee board for the flight status (which still showed delayed) and was located in a different part of the airport than our schedule meeting location. So, we waited and called the tour company's home office who then called our tour guide to straightened the whole thing out. Welcome to El Salvador!

Today we are having a city tour. We visited the main residential areas of the city, its most important avenues, the handicraft market and the Historic Center of San Salvador where the Metropolitan Cathedral, National Palace, and the Rosary Church are located. With the Christmas holiday so close the market was packed with shoppers. Everyone was so friendly. El Salvador was beginning to show us a side that the media seldom reports.

The historic sites were amazing. The Rosary Church is something that photos just don't do justice. And the opulence of the Metropolitan Cathedral is difficult to capture in pictures. Even though the National Theater was closed, our guide was able to talk his way into showing us the lobby (we even took a quick peek into the theater, but the lights were off).

Next we were off to view the sunset over the San Salvador volcano crater at Los Planes de Renderos (a place famous for its greenery, cool climate and amazing panoramic view of the country). This it seems is not just a place for the random tourist; the Salvadorians have set up a small carnival near the summit to celebrate the days end.

As the stars began to twinkle, we were off for our first taste of traditional El Salvador cuisine... a pupusa. Nearby is Alex's favorite Pupusaria. Pupusas are a traditional dish from El Salvador. Pupusas are corn tortillas with a filling - usually cheese (pupusas de queso), beans, and/or

Salvadoran-style chicharrón (finely ground pork). A pupusa revuelta has all three fillings. Pupusas are cooked on a griddle, and served with a pickled cabbage slaw called curtido and thin tomato sauce (salsa roja). Mary really liked the pickled cabbage slaw. Pete thought the slaw looked like something that would make an American reach for the pepto.

Soon the long day was over and we were taken to our hotel, Hotel Allicante. We said good-bye to Alex, as we would be having different guides for our other tours.

Dec 23

Today's tour is called the "Food Eco Challenge". The tour is designed to teach us the delicacies of El Salvadorian cuisine and the exuberant nature of El Salvador. On the Food Eco Challenge we are to have breakfast, lunch and dinner. While we eat delicious food and learn about the country, we visit the fruit & vegetable markets, the fishing pier, the volcanic sand beaches of La Libertad, and end the day with a typical dinner.

Our guide today is Mario, the owner of the company. We start the day eating the now familiar pupusa at La Pupusa Loka which has an awesome view of San Salvador. Today's pupusas are a bit tastier than last nights. But Mary liked the slaw from last night better. Mary's pupusa was stuffed with cheese and zucchini. Pete had cheese and beans in his.

Mario tells us now it is time to work off those pupusas with a little hike. So, up to the crater rim of San Salvador volcano we go. Along the way we see a lot of plants (even coffee), flowers, and birds. We crossed a pretty shaky looking bridge. Mario who is afraid of heights even challenged himself and crossed it. Coming back down from our wonderful hike, we crossed a suspension bridge, saw a torogoz (the beautiful national bird), and even a fox running through the forest. Amazing.

Next it was on to the fruit and vegetable market. Really there was a lot more than just fruit & veggies in there. It was where we had the most amazing soup for lunch. Sopa de mariscos is El Salvador's fish stew. The broth was so tasty that we used straws to drink it, really!

Mario wanted to show us where all of that fresh fish came from. From San Salvador, it is just a short drive to the pacific coast. He took us to a fisherman's wharf. El Salvador has a rich variety of seafood from its coast.

It was time for a pit stop and Mario knew just the place; a beautiful little hotel just up the beach in a surfer community. We enjoyed a refreshment at their bar and checked out a few of their rooms (wish we had more time in our schedule to stay here a few days).

Today we do have time to stroll on the lovely black sand beach of La Libertad. During our stroll we find a colorful crab and watched the surfers enjoying the waves.

Soon the day was ending, but we had one more stop. We entered El Carmen a neighborhood that closes one of its streets so that neighbors can set up food stands and everyone can come out for a good time. El Carmen was a charming neighborhood to have dinner and end our day.

With another fantastic day over, we were taken back to Hotel Allicante. We said good-bye to Mario, we would be having a different guide for tomorrow's tour.

Dec 24

Unlike yesterday, today we did take advantage of our hotel's included breakfast. They have a limited menu, but the popular choice was the "typical" option which came with 2-eggs, a piece of cheese, some refried beans, and fried plantains. It was pretty tasty.

Today's exciting exploration of El Salvador is a visit to the Volcano Complex and Coatepeque Lake. We are picked up by Mario Sr. who's English is better than our Spanish for sure, also along for the ride is a young guide/interpreter in training named Joe. The drive to the volcano complex is an hour or so long, Joe's conversational skills were tested and he passed the challenges very well.

Our first stop is at the Cerro Verde National Park. From here, we have the most impressive views of the Izalco Volcano (the youngest volcano in El Salvador), Santa Ana Volcano (the highest in El Salvador), and Coatepeque (Volcanic) Lake. Cerro Verde itself is an old volcano that is 2030 meters above sea level and is part of the cloud forests of the country. Here we enjoyed a mild climate and abundant flora species on a hike around the site.

After our hike we went down to Coatepeque Lake where we took a scenic boat tour of the lake. There is a small island in the center of the lake which used to be the top of the volcano; we are in a sunken cinder cone. The island now has the summer and retirement homes of the El Salvador's rich.

Next on the agenda was a late lunch at a lakeside restaurant. We ordered the house special; a platter of food. While enjoying our meal, we were entertained by a mariachi band. The place was not that busy... It seemed low season. The food was good, the setting awesome...more Americans need to visit here.

Mario Sr. took us back to Hotel Allicante. We said our good-byes. If we are ever back in El Salvador, I will be using Nahaut Tours (www.nahuatours.com) again, all the tours and guides were awesome.

Arriving back at the hotel, the OAT group was in the middle of a cheese & wine party. We joined the group and soon so did Vini our OAT trip leader. As darkness fell, Vini took us on a neighborhood walk to the plaza where we saw the Ceiba Tree (which was inspiration for the "Tree of Souls" in the movie Avatar) and the Chapel of all Saints. After the walk, back at the hotel we had tamales as part of the local meal for Christmas Eve. After dinner, we got to meet Vini's family. Then it was off to bed, because tomorrow was going to be another full day.

Dec 25

We departed our hotel today at 8:15 am for the El Salvador city tour included with our OAT tour. Our driver on our OAT tour is Saul. He is from El Salvador.

During our ride, Vini pointed out the changes in construction by the Salvadorans and the way the city looks; fancy and humble with its many shopping malls and then squatters just on the other side of the road. As we rode down the founding fathers boulevard Vini showed the national stadium and a monument that celebrates the far-away brothers who live in the United States who send money back to their relatives in El Salvador. We drove slowly by the largest U.S embassy in the American continent (no photos were permitted).

We visited the beautiful Basilica of Guadalupe to take some lovely photos and stretch our legs.

Next we visited the Museum of the Armed Forces History which has an awesome 30 meter long and 15 meter wide, scale topographic map of San Salvador. It provides a visual demonstration of just how many volcanoes there are in El Salvador. Besides a few aircraft and tanks, this museum also houses the Pope-mobile from his visit to El Salvador.

After the museum, we visited the handicraft market. From there we walked to the church of el Rosario with all the beautiful stained glass and then we visited the Metropolitan Cathedral.

After a full morning of exploration, we were off to lunch at Restaurant Rancho Alegre which overlooked beautiful Coatepeque Lake. For lunch we had grilled chicken, vegetables and rice. The food was OK... the view was stunning.

Before crossing the border, we stopped at a grocery store. People needed bottled water (or wine). Some got some cash from the ATM.

After we drove to Anguiatu Salvador/Guatemala border for passport check and a bathroom stop. At the border, we saw some trucks waiting to be called for jobs. Sometimes they wait there for days when their papers have something wrong and they are forced to fix them. The highlight here was the bathroom attendant. He was a charming man with a very photographic face; National Geographic cover worthy. Then we drove two hours in Guatemalan territory in order to get to the Honduras border.

We spent the next two nights at the Clarion Copan Hotel. Dinner was at the hotel this evening.

Dec 26

Breakfast at the Clarion Copan Hotel was a tasty buffet with omelets made to order.

After a hearty breakfast, we loaded up into our bus to head off to visit the famous Mayan site of Copan. Copan is the only UNESCO site in Honduras and the most famous Mayan site.

Arriving at Copan, our local guide Fito led us into the park, right away we spotted the beautiful Macaws that are flying around. Fito explains that for the Mayans, the Scarlet Macaw was the day time sun, powerful for what it symbolized. These Macaws are reintroduced and while not tame, they are not really wild either.

After Fito gathered us back up, he led us first to the acropolis of the site and showed us the most famous monuments, including the altar “Q” with the line of 16 kings carved on the square stone. We then walked around the acropolis and got to the plaza of the jaguars where there were two dancing jaguars carved on the stone.

At Copan our animal sightings didn't stop with the Macaws. We also had a few squirrels that posed for their photos, a Baltimore Oriole flashed its colors, and an Agouti made an appearance. An Agouti is a small, rabbit-like rodent.

After the Copan Ruins, we were taken to the town of Copan. We had some free time to explore the town before lunch. Our lunch was at Hotel Don Udo. Lunch started with a soup, then we had a stuffed ravioli pasta dish.

In the afternoon, ten of the OAT group took the optional horseback riding tour. On our way out of our hotel driveway, Mary spotted a very pretty blue bird resting a telephone wire. It was a Turquoise-browed Motmot. Saul had to back up the bus, but we all got great pictures of this “rare” bird.

Mary got a great horse (of course). Pete got one that he named Pokey (slower than slow). We had three local guides walking along with the group just in case anyone had any issues. Mary led the way, all the way up to the Mayan village. At the village, we had a demonstration of how the children make the corn husk dolls to sell to the tourist (us). Then all of the children put their dolls on a porch, so that we could do our shopping. Vini then bought dolls from just about any child who hadn't sold one. It was a profitable day in the village, and at just \$1 a doll a good day of souvenir hunting for us.

Vini then showed us around the village. He showed us how they bend the corn stalk over to dry the corn right on the stalk. And he showed us their weaving co-op building. There has been a lot of progress in this remote community, much of it thanks to OAT visitors. Before leaving the village, Pete & Vini played a little soccer with the boys of the village.

After our horseback riding, we had a little time back at the hotel to freshen up before dinner. For those that took part in the optional, dinner at Carnitas Nia Lola was included. The restaurant has lights like a Christmas tree. Tonight we had beef fajitas. Guatemala fajitas are quite different than what we call fajitas. The waitresses deliver everything, even the soda bottles on their heads. Dessert was pieces of fruit; melon, bananas, pineapple, and oranges.

Dec 27

The day began with another a tasty buffet. Today Mary tried the breakfast tamales along with the beans and plantains.

Our first stop this morning was at a palace complex called el Rastrojon, which in addition to being located right next to our hotel, is part of the Copan Ruins. This was a neat site to visit, because even though the archeologists were not there we could clearly see evidence of their ongoing restoration projects.

Then we went to Las Sepulturas. This area shows a unique set of palaces for the royal class and other buildings which had thrones, benches like the one with the carvings used by the scribe and the bed which still had colors but was broken into pieces. The buildings we saw were: the royal court with the palace and the painted bed, the house of the scribe.

And then we stopped to see Lito, the sculptor in Ostuman a little town outside of Copan town. During our visit, he demonstrated the way stone carvers keep the ancient sculpting traditions alive.

Our first stop after we crossed the Guatemala border was at a shopping mall to use the ATM or exchange currency at the bank. It was also a bathroom stop. It was a crazy place to take 16 American (mostly women) and have any expectation of keeping them together. Somehow the only thing Vini managed to lose was his camera. Even that was returned safely.

The second stop in Guatemala was at the Museum of Paleontology in the town of Estanzuela, Zacapa. The museum had the skeleton of a mammoth, a sloth, and a whale on display along with a little display of Mayan artifacts.

For Mary, hands down the best meal of the trip was our next lunch. Vini had to go retrieve his camera, and lunch was on our own any ways, so he had Saul take us to a plaza and Vini showed us where he suggested we have lunch. The restaurant was El Establo. We used an app on our iPhones to ask in Spanish what the house special was. Mary ended up ordering what she called "side of cow". After this, she ordered a lot of beef in Guatemala. The people who ordered the prawns were also happy. Those who ordered chicken (Pete) were not as impressed.

Back on the road again, we saw the Motagua River, one of the longest rivers in the country that drains into the Caribbean. This river is so important that even still today it is used by the local people in the towns and villages as a means of transportation, as it was for the Maya in ancient times. The ancient Maya used the river to take minerals such as cinnabar, hematite and the precious Jade from the nearby mountains. The Jade today in Guatemala is mined from the same places the Maya mined. These precious stones are a major business for the people of La Antigua who still carve and transform them into beautiful pieces that tourists can take home as a treasured memory of time spent in Guatemala. The road we used to get to the restaurant and Guatemala City was the road that in the mid-19th century the British could have built from the Caribbean side of Guatemala to our current capital. Things negotiations remained calm for over a century until Guatemala had its civil war, which ended up with several attempts from the Guatemala side to invade the neighboring country of Belize.

The drive to the hotel was only broken up with a brief stop along side of the highway, where Vini showed us a deposit of obsidian. No Maya site is without obsidian, named TAJ in Maya. It was an item that had common warfare and art uses as well as ritual use.

Tonight we are staying one night at the Best Western Sofella located in a business area of Guatemala City. We took a walk around the neighborhood looking for a place that looked interesting to us for dinner, but ultimately decided to grab a light bite to eat right in the hotels Italian restaurant.

Dec 28

Breakfast at the hotel was a nice buffet.

We started the day riding along the driveway of the Americas; where we saw places that belonged to different countries of the continent. We saw the sculpture of John Paul II. We stopped and stretched our legs at the plaza Berlin. At this plaza there are actual pieces of the Berlin Wall; so we touched a piece of history. Poor Saul and Vini had to change a flat tire on our bus. Back on the bus, we saw an area of factories in the country, and then went to La Cañada this is an area or neighborhood home of the country's wealthiest families.

Our second stop was Yurrita chapel. It is a gem in the capital because it is private and the owner built it to honor our lady of Anguishes. There was also an area called the civic center with city hall, social security building, and a fountain in a boulevard with two hands releasing a dove which is a giant version of the original one found inside the National Palace. The monument is to be present in the main parts of Guatemalan national territory because that represents 24 more hours of peace in Guatemala. At the original one a white rose is placed. This started on December 29th, 1996 and it marks the end of the 36 years of civil war in Guatemala - the longest one in the American Continent.

Just before starting our walking tour of the historic district of Guatemala City, we came upon a small herd of goats within the city limits. Vini explained that the herder is the local "milk man" making very fresh deliveries. A few daring tourists drank a cup of "from the goat to directly you" milk.

As we ventured into the heart of Guatemala City, Vini thought it wise that we have a bathroom stop first. Into a Wendy's our group went. Our group was eager for some good ol' American junk food.

First we toured the Metropolitan Cathedral dedicated in honor of Santiago de los Caballeros or Saint James of the Knights with a Black Christ and the History of the Virgin Mary that is a Unique. We walked past the former National Palace built by the last dictator of Guatemala. He made the national palace look green. Before we left the city we drove by the squatters; they are part of the remains of the war.

We had lunch at Cabana de don Robert at 8000 feet elevation. We had beef fajitas. Short bread cookies were served for dessert.

This Region of Sololá is one of the most Important, in terms of farming since this has a very large number of indigenous who farm the land and cultivate carrots, beets, cabbage, potatoes, etc. We took a nice stroll through the Solola market, some of the vendors were in their traditional dresses trading with each other the many products that they had for sale. Before leaving Solola, we visited its colorful cemetery with its amazing view of Lake Atitlán.

We spent the next two nights at Regis Hotel in the eclectic town of Panajachel.

A spaghetti dinner was served that night at the Regis Hotel's restaurant.

Dec 29

This day we did we a boat trip on Lake Atitlán. Our captain was Francisco and his son Orlando navigated. They took us to Santiago de Atitlan. On the boat ride over, we could see the Volcanoes San Pedro, Toliman, Atitlan, and Golden Hill.

Arriving at Santiago de Atitlan, Vini picked up a helper his name was Roberto Sanches aka Respeto. Our first stop was Maximon or Rilaj Mam (the great grandfather) that is in charge by Nicolas the Day keeper (Shaman), is one of the many and not so famous manifestations of spiritual expressions in the highlands of Guatemala. People have tried to destroy it but it is still surviving from the many changes going in in Guatemala as a nation. Maximon is in the house of a common but special family as they are still believers of their old traditions, beliefs and spirituality. They are Maya practitioners and are also part of a Brotherhood called Santa Cruz and protect the Grand Father, who helps the people in town in Santiago Atitlan.

After, we walked through the market to the plaza to the Catholic Church. Then we were given some free time in Santiago to do our own exploration.

Lunch was in a town called San Antonio Palopó at a women's cooperative. After the best included lunch of the tour (it was a feast of chicken, steak, beans, rice, guacamole, and salsa), we learned about the back strap loom that they used to make their textiles. Saul picked us up and drove us back to Panajachel.

Soon after we arrived back at the hotel, 12 of us, even our driver Saul, took the optional zip line tour to Atitlán Nature Reserve. There were spider monkeys and coatimundi along the trail to distract Mary's attention from the number of steps going up and up and up. We passed at least one waterfall and crossed several suspension bridges before making it to the top and starting our decent via zip cables.

After zip lining, several of us (Vini included), walked to the Sunset Cafe for drinks and appetizers before we all split up and had dinner on our own. Most went with Vini for Pupusa since they hadn't had any in El Salvdor. Us on the other hand, were all Pupusa'd out after our days in El Salvador. So, we went in search of some of Panajachel's specialties. We found Casablanca Restaurant serving black bass and that's what we had for dinner. Right at the end of our meal, all of the lights went out in town. We walked back to our hotel by moonlight and the lights of the cars. Our hotel had a generator and was the only thing lit up in the whole town....we had internet :-)

Dec 30

Today we returned to the Pan-American Highway with our final destination being the colonial city of La Antigua.

All week the group has been collecting the little bottles of soaps, shampoos, & lotions provided by the hotels. When we arrived in this area Vini had pointed out the women & children that sit along side of the Pan-American Highway waiting for mission busses to stop and hand out candy or food. Today we

are stopping and Vini is handing out our toiletries. Even the children had smiles on their faces when they got soap.

Our first real stop today is at Iximche. Iximche was the capital of the Kaqchikel. And it was declared by the Spanish as the first capital of the Kingdom of Guatemala in 1524. Today, it is still an important site to the Mayan. And on this day, we were able to witness a ceremony by a Shaman.

Our next stop was in el Tejar (tile town) to visit a family where they keep a tradition of making of tile, bricks, roof tiles, etc. Luis had been putting tiles in the kiln and had many more of them outside of his house for sale. This is the way they make a living and all the family is involved in helping each other.

We had lunch on our own at Katok deli. Their specialty was smoked meats. Mary once again ordered the house special, which was a massive platter of food. Pete ordered a sandwich.

Latter, we visited Valhalla macadamia plantation with owner larry (Lorenzo) being a gracious host. He demonstrated husking and sorting the macadamia nuts. Then he treated us to a macadamia nut pancake with blueberry compote washed down with coffee that even Mary drank.

Arriving in la Antigua, which is a UNESCO site just before dusk we strolled a few blocks to our hotel. On the highlands of Guatemala the mode of transportation for most indigenous people, are the remodeled school buses that come from the United States and are driven to Guatemala which are nicknamed chicken buses. We've seen quite a lot of them and it appears they were all headed to Antigua.

After checking into La Casona de Antigua, we had a lovely meal at Donde Monica (a short bus ride away). The meal started with a delicious squash soup. Mary had a pork entree with rice and steamed vegetables. Pete had chicken with rice and a side salad.

Dec 31

This day is called A DAY IN THE LIFE. After a hearty buffet breakfast with omelets made to order, we were driven to the market. Vini began by giving us a quick introductory stroll showing us the various items available inside the maze that is known as El Mercado. Then Vini split the group in half and gave us some money so that we could buy some juice, oatmeal, cookies, instant coffee, cinnamon sticks, and sugar for the school that we will visit later this morning. He then sent us back into the market without him...it was fun and challenging.

Then we got on a chicken bus to get to Santa Catarina Barahona. Your visit to the lovely country of Guatemala is not complete without a ride on a chicken bus. The locals that work in the market bring their fresh products to be sold on market days, Sundays and Tuesday are the big market days, and the women are the ones that sell while the men cultivate the products in the field. We even got to ride like locals...you have to see the pictures!

The children of the primary school were waiting for us when we got off the bus. They led us to the school where they performed a couple of songs and a dance. The teacher explained to us the role of

the weavings in the community. Teacher and principal, Sandra Natareno, teaches the group of kids that after being in kindergarten and pre-school will start primary school next year. She has been teaching at that school for several years. The school year starts on the second week of January and ends on the second week of October.

After our school visit, our large group was subdivided again and each smaller group went with a child to their home for lunch. The family that hosted us had prepared a bountiful tasty meal.

After leaving the town of Santa Catarina Barahona, we went back to la Antigua where we did a visit in to the jade Factory. Mary bought a necklace.

Later that afternoon, we visited the extensive museums of Santo Domingo. And then we came back that evening for a fancy dinner. We sat next to Saul and he showed us his family pictures on his phone. It is fun conversing with Saul. He knows a little English and we know a little Spanish. Then We were entertained by a mariachi band while feasted on our entrees.

Jan 1

This Morning we did a walking tour la Antigua Guatemala, we went to the Merci Church and to the main square and San Francis de Asis.

Lunch was on our own. Most of us went with Vini to a local restaurant that he knew. The food was tasty and pretty cheap.

After lunch, we still had a little free time to explore Antigua. So, we checked out the chocolate museum and bought a few items from their gift store. Yummy Guatemalan dark chocolate!

In the afternoon, we took the optional tour. The first place that we visited was San Juan el Obispo where Lucy taught us about chocolate. Our second stop was at the house of an artist who works mostly with clay and in miniature. Mary bought a Mayan necklace from him. Our third stop was at San Felipe de Jesus, where we visited the house of Don Cruz. He demonstrated his art in clay, mostly birds. And the last stop was Jocotenango at the House of Don Thomas. His works are making wooden fruit and the bowls that the fruit is displayed in.

For dinner we went to Posada Don Rodrigo where we enjoyed the folkloric dance and the sounds of the marimba.

Jan 2

Today is a sad day of good-byes. We will be leaving the beautiful hotel La Casona de Antigua, we will be leaving the city of Antigua, but most dishearteningly we will be saying good-bye to Saul, our driver thus far...this is as far as he goes. He has been such a delight to have on this trip...the rest of the trip will be different that's for sure.

So after a great breakfast, we checked out of our hotel and got on the bus for our last day exploring

Antigua. This morning we went to the el Tenedor del Cerro this is a Restaurant and a gallery place where we got a great view of la Antigua Guatemala and the volcanoes.

We had a little free time around the central plaza in Antigua before lunch. Pete found a guitar shop and resisted bringing home a new one. Mary negotiated the price she wanted to pay for a chicken bus t-shirt. And it really was another beautiful day.

Soon it was time for lunch, Saul drove us to Hotel Los Pasos where we had the house specialty a fish dish. Ours was a bit under cooked and we sent it back. Before loading back onto the bus, everyone took pictures with Saul and said their good-byes.

After our lunch stop, Saul drove us to the airport.

We have a flight from Antigua to Flores. Arriving at the airport in Flores, Samuel, our new driver, was waiting for us to drive us to our hotel in Flores.

The weather was less than welcoming here...it was raining. Apparently it does that a lot in this area of Guatemala. So, most of us chose to eat at the hotel rather than sloop around on unfamiliar streets at night in the rain looking for a good restaurant. The meal, as is the hotel, unremarkable thus far.

Jan 2

A disappointingly light breakfast with few options. This hotel may be the only one on the tour that has had a set menu and not a buffet breakfast. And that is not good because today is a full day of activities.

Tikal is a highlight for the Route of the Maya. We started at 7.30 am to get to Tikal and enjoy the morning seeing spider monkeys, coatimundi, Bird life, and others.

On the way, we stopped at a store that had soft drinks and the usual touristy stuff. It was also the studio of a local wood carver. And contained a replica tomb of a Mayan King with all of his Jade jewelry.

Arriving at Tikal, Vini arranged for the bus to drive us all the way to the back of the main plaza so that we could save some of our energy (vehicles in the park are normally forbidden). From there we walked. Here we could appreciate the real jungle and the fact that this is a Natural and Cultural World Heritage Site of UNESCO.

We saw it all:

1. Complex "Q"
2. Complex "R"
3. Main Plaza
4. Temple I,
5. Temple II,
6. The north acropolis,

7. The central acropolis
8. Temple III,
9. Windows Palace
10. Temple IV
11. Mundo Perdido
12. Plaza of the Seven Temples
13. Temple V

We had a late lunch at the site (a roasted chicken). We all were quite hungry, because of the light breakfast and lateness of lunch. It was worth it to see this wonderful sight, but OAT needs to find a hotel with better breakfast options in this area.

Dinner was at the hotel.

Jan 3

On this day we left Guatemala for Belize. After another light and unremarkable breakfast we left the Flores hotel.

Along our drive, we were met by two charming tourist police who rode along with us in this "remote" part of Guatemala. They were particularly fun to have along when we had to switch modes of transportation.

We stopped at the parking lot of our lunch restaurant. But this was where we got adventurous, because we used a local mode of transportation, the Pickups. Yaxhá, the next Mayan site on our schedule, is in a rainforest and the 12 KM road to it is dirt...well, it was dirt before the weeks of rain that they have been having. We loaded up (in the drizzling rain; which Vini called "chippy chippy") into the back of the four wheel drive pickup trucks that are usually used to transport cows and such... You have to see the photos.

At Yaxhá the groups we covered were:

1. The astronomical group
2. Plaza of the columns
3. East acropolis with the highest temple at the site called temple 216
4. North acropolis
5. The plaza of the birds
6. Ball court

After our walk through this site, covered with mud from our ride in the back of the pickups, we went for lunch at Yaxha restaurant. The restaurant in this village started when Survivor (TV series) crews were looking for a place to sell them food that could be close to them.

At the border the porters took care of our bags and Vini checked our passports to leave Guatemala.

Manuel Mendez was our local expert who accompanied us to the city of Belize. Along the way we

stopped at a tourist store for some homemade ice cream.

Our last two nights on the tour were at the Best Western Belize.

Jan 4

On this day we visited Lamanai our last Mayan site. Eddy was our local expert and our boat captain. We cruised down New River to get to Lamanai. On our river safari, we saw a lot of different birds, and even bats.

We stopped to see the village of Shipyard occupied by the Mennonites.

Finally we got to Lamanai and we visited:

1. Main Plaza
2. Jaguar Temple
3. Main Palace
4. Ball Court
5. High Temple
6. Temple of the Mask.

After touring Lamanai, we enjoyed on site a delicious typical lunch. Then we cruised back up the New River.

Back in Belize City, Vini had a farewell gathering before dinner. He presented each of us a handcrafted wood plate made by his father highlighting this tour.

We had our farewell dinner at Celebrities Restaurant.

Jan 5

Today was transfer back home and the day to say bye bye to Vini and all of the other OAT tour adventures.