



Belizean plunge

by Daniel Wood
photography by Ron Watts

The canyon ahead echoes with raging whitewater. Jaguar tracks line the riverbank. And for 10 kayakers who have signed on for a rare glimpse of this Central American jungle, it's hell and high-water time


JUST UPRIVER FROM HERE IS A PLACE called Go-To-Hell, a destination that I won't – God willing – be visiting soon. The route out of this Belizean jungle is, fortunately, *down*river. But deep in the trackless rainforest, the map informs me that down that way – amid dangerous rapids – lies Sale Si Puede (“Leave If You Can”), an abandoned camp used by Mayan *chicle* collectors whose sense of humour led them to warn future visitors of the hazards there. Partway through a rugged week-long expedition, there is no third option . . . not unless I want to retrace my steps and backpack alone two days and 25 kilometres through hellishly humid and uninhabited 1,000-metre-high mountains. Been there; done that, thanks. I'm destined, it appears, to kayak past Sale Si Puede and face the three days of serious Swasey River



cataracts that lie beyond.

B.C.'s Dwane Roberge, 38, one of the two guides on the expedition, directs our flotilla of 10 kayakers into a back eddy for some last-minute instructions. It is, he informs us, only the fourth time this 22-km section of Class 2 to 3+ rapids has been run.

There are a lot of drops, lots of whitewater. And a couple of good-sized waterfalls ahead. He then describes an earlier journey when the group's kayakers awakened after a night's torrential downpour to a vista of flood-engorged Class 5 – almost unnavigable – rapids beyond their tents. To the worried questioning of one woman about what to do, the local Mayan guide studied the river and replied simply: “Pray to Jesus!”



On a four-day descent of the Swasey River, dozens of Class 3+ rapids like this confront the kayakers. Only the two largest cataracts are portaged.

Roberge laughs, retelling the story. The others grin with adrenalin-fuelled bravado. But I'm less sanguine. *What*, I thought, *have I gotten myself into?* It's the voice of my Inner Wimp. If this were a *Survivor* reality-TV series, I know I'd be voted off the trip, or would have been left days ago as grub for the jungle's army ants.

For more than 1,100 years, Belize has been the little Latin American country that almost no one wanted. The jungle has long reclaimed its ancient Mayan temples, and insects and malarial swamps have deterred colonial ambitions. I had left the village of Maya Mopan three days earlier beneath a 15-kilogram backpack and –

under the scrutiny of fitter companions – soon found out why it's the place Hollywood chose to shoot *The Mosquito Coast* and *The Heart of Darkness*.

The jungle can eat you alive. I'd been cautioned to avoid stepping on any of the 54 species of local snakes, especially the notorious fer-de-lance, whose fast-acting venom means *hasta la vista, baby*. But I'd also been assured not to worry about the region's jaguars or tarantulas or scorpions; they're usually nocturnal. However, I was not prepared for the tropical humidity. Massive breeze-blocking trees – their branches draped with lianas and bromeliads – rose 40 metres. Spider webs, vines and huge ferns hung across the narrow trail. Clouds of biting no-see-ums danced before my eyes like hallucinations. And a carpet of rotting leaves and battalions of army ants lay underfoot. On occasion, logs provided slippery traverses of mountain creeks . . . or broke under the weight of someone ahead. Hours passed. The motionless air was pungent with decay; the light crepuscular. I hemorrhaged sweat.

As a reprieve from these surface hazards, we detoured one day to follow a subterranean creek deep into Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave, famous for its Mayan archaeological artifacts and remains of ancient human sacrifices. For an hour, my companions and I waded or swam upriver – into the mountain, our route lit only by our headlamps. It was eerie, almost sensual amid the smooth limestone, as if I was returning to the womb. In a vast and dry side chamber located high above the riverbed, the reason the place is called The Cave of the Stone Sepulchre became apparent. Our headlamps revealed scores of huge, multi-coloured stalactites, many reaching the cave's floor – some purple, some silvery, some rust-brown, some lavender. It was easy to see why the Mayans selected this location as a place for shamanistic rituals. It was, for them, the doorway to the Underworld, a place where humans would be offered to appease the gods of the Earth. First discovered just 18 years ago, the floor of the 100-metre-wide and 20-metre-high cavern is covered with thousands of intact pots and the skeletons of 13 human sacrifices, dating to 800 AD.

Archaeologists have found residues in the pots that show celebrants here used psychedelic drugs; scorch marks on the walls and firepits reveal that some resided inside the torch-lit cave during these

events. It seems from the artifacts and hieroglyphs that the Mayans were trying to appease Chac, their rain god, in order to halt the century-long drought that plagued their civilization 1,200 years ago – and ultimately brought about its collapse.

I looked around, stunned by the Daliesque display of dripstone, the shadow dance produced by my companions' headlamps as we moved between the stalactite-columns, the wealth of pottery left here and the bodies of the sacrificial victims – their eye sockets turned upward as I looked down upon their skulls. It was an Indiana Jones moment.

At the end of the second day of hiking into the Cockscomb Mountains, we finally reach the headwaters of the Swasey River, the launching point for the impending whitewater run. A dozen advance porters, carrying the expedition's two-person inflatable kayaks, food and camping gear, have deposited their burdens and already left. I'm pooped. My skin is a Braille of bites; my clothing a catalogue of mud and flattened bugs. Soaked with sweat and copious doses of insect repellent, I lie on the ground, half hoping a fer-de-lance puts me out of my misery. And this despite the fact I'd earlier accepted – with minimal loss of pride – that one of the porters carry both his load *and mine* rather than have me collapse into heat-induced gibberish. "Where's the cold beer?" I shout, well aware that it lies several days' downriver. I figure if I'm destined to be the group's doofus, I might as well play it to the hilt.

Later that night, with tents set, bats flying, clothes drying on the bushes and insect bites salved with cortisone, we sit around the campfire while Roberge reads Kipling's *How the Elephant Got His Trunk* – the tale of a child with a dangerously "satiabile" curiosity. It is almost enough to make me like the jungle. We discuss the vision-inducing "lickability" of the noisy bufus toads by our campsite, the traditional uses of the forest's medicinal plants and the wild animals – like tapirs and lizards – that lurk beyond the firelight. The Mayan word for jaguar means, we're told, "He who kills with one leap." This information means each subsequent late-night trip to the pit toilet is made in wide-eyed haste.

The next day is spent exploring the jungle that crowds our sandbar campsite and fills the view across the shallow, boulder-

filled river. The group's Mayan naturalist and guide, Greg Sho, 46, takes the opportunity to lead our contingent to an ancient pyramid he recently found still buried beneath the nearby forest. We proceed – with Sho cutting trail with his machete – amid a feral density of underbrush, aerial vines and towering buttress-rooted *ceiba* trees. Metre-long iguanas flee our approach. It's only at the peak of a 20-metre-high, tree-covered hillock that we realize, from the rectangular stones underfoot, that the mound is, in fact, a man-made structure. Sho draws a circle in the air. Around us for hundreds of square kilometres, he says, there's only uninhabited jungle.

But 1,300 years ago, there was a Mayan town here . . . with this temple and two others on the ridges over there to the east. Thousands of people, roads, farms and now . . . absolutely nothing. It is the same everywhere in Belize. A civilization vanished. There is not, however, much time to reflect on history's vicissitudes. There are swarms of mosquitoes and doctor flies with one-centimetre-long stingers and the predatory no-see-ums to deal with.

Around the campfire that evening, Roberge entertains us with two readings about bugs. The first is a celebration of the world's 2,700 species of mosquitoes whose malarial proclivities have, argues the account's writer, subdued colonialists' aspirations in the tropics and thereby helped protect its rainforests from conquests. The second story, so grotesque it's comic, details how the local botfly lays its eggs under the skin of its human host.



These become, in a few weeks, *maggots*. The best preventative, it seems, against having one's skin erupt later with baby flies, is to duct-tape a slab of fresh meat over the bite, which induces the larvae to move to tastier quarters. At this, we all groan in mock-horror and compare bites. There are no distinctive botfly welts among us. But no one has less

than 150 bites; myself and a couple of others are, we estimate, at more than 300. Roberge says, "Our blood is the price of visiting the rainforest." To this, no one cheers.

Early the next morning, with mist rising from the jungle canopy and kingfishers scolding our appearance, the 10 of us, two-to-a-boat, helmeted and adrenalin-pumped, think of Roberge's "Pray to Jesus!" story and point our heavily loaded, six-metre-long crafts downriver. The current grabs us. The sound of rapids reverberates in the canyon ahead. I begin composing a long overdue mental letter that begins: "Dear Jesus . . ."

Because I'm the bonehead journalist and because naturalist Sho has experience running the Swasey's whitewater, I – sitting as his partner in the lead kayak's bow – get to see everything *first*. I know we're approaching trouble when Sho stands momentarily in the kayak's stern trying to assess which chute of racing water to choose, which rocks to avoid and what series of quick manoeuvres are required to avoid capsizing. He shouts directions. The ripples in the water become drops. The kayak plunges downward. The bow submarines. Haystacks of foam crash

life is but a dream

Stretching along Belize's 250-kilometre Caribbean coast is the planet's second-largest barrier reef (Australia's Great Barrier Reef is No. 1). For centuries it was the hideout of British pirates, who raided passing Spanish galleons laden with gold headed for the Old World. Today, its 200 sunny islands (many with thatch-roofed resorts) and turquoise waters are a mecca for divers and snorkellers. One-kilometre-long Half Moon Caye is one of the five islands of easternmost Lighthouse Reef Atoll, and a superb location from which to discover this tropical world. During our six-day base-camp kayaking trip with Island Expeditions, time dissolved into daily excursions to the coral reefs around the atoll and late afternoons spent in hammock-bound, palm-shaded brainlessness.

One day, our group of 12 adventurers snorkelled around a wrecked freighter; another, we paddled two-person kayaks to a nearby island for a picnic; still another we motored 12 km north to the famous Blue Hole, Belize's best-known natural attraction. Around the perimeter of this sinkhole are schools of indigo-coloured fish, manta rays, a few non-dangerous sharks and huge magenta sea fans. At night on Half Moon Caye, the waves sluice over the reef offshore and the nearby lighthouse flashes its warning into the inky sky. There is only the slow rocking of the hammock in the lambent wind and a thousand stars caught in the palm fronds. □ –D.W.

(opposite page) Studying the shoreline for evidence of 300-kg tapirs and elusive jaguars; (inset) male iguanas turn bright orange during their mating period; hundreds of varieties of birds – like the red-footed booby (right) – and 250 species of orchids are just part of what is the most accessible tropical wilderness in the western hemisphere; (below) At the mouth of the labyrinthine Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave, a contingent of adventurers prepare for an hour's swim and wade – in total darkness.

against my chest. Amid churning white-water, we slalom around Volkswagen-sized boulders. A big one appears ahead with the suddenness of a nightmare. *Whaaaaoo!* Sho is shouting, "Left! Go left!" I dig. He sweeps. The bow pivots 90 degrees. The boulder rushes past my elbow. "Right!" I obey. Too late. The kayak hits a half-submerged rock, spins sideward, tips, breaks lose and we slide awkwardly into a deep green pool of calm, laughing out loud at the thrill of it all.

In the stretches of flatwater I lean back, let the adrenalin subside and watch the jungle unfold. From the overhanging branches of tall riverside trees, lianas of trailing philodendron and strangler fig drop 25 metres into the water. The torpedo shapes of half-metre-long mountain mullet flash beneath the hull. Sandbars reveal the imprint of 300-kilogram tapirs and the smaller paw prints of jaguars. Squadrons of scarlet macaws issue distinctive *awk-awk-awks* overhead. Then, the channel constricts between limestone cliffs and the sound of whitewater refocuses my attention. Sho stands, signals to those behind and says to me, "Big falls." We head for a promontory to reconnoitre the gorge ahead.

"Want to try it?" Roberge asks as we stand, studying a set of twin 3.5-metre falls with serious hydraulics, a hideous boulder garden and 50 metres of whitewater beyond.

I look at him: *Is he serious?* I tuck my fingers in my armpits, flap my elbows and utter clucking sounds.

"You're a journalist. You're supposed to try things out, aren't you?"

But I've assumed the role of Official Chicken. I'm beyond goading. I cluck louder. He laughs and confesses only one person has ever attempted it.

As the expedition works its way toward Belize's Caribbean lowlands, the river alternates between mostly "runnable" sets of rapids and placid pools where tropical ennui

reigns. Before the serious whitewater sections, we usually stop and discuss the obstacles and requisite manoeuvres. The inflatable yellow kayaks take tremendous punishment but are virtually unsinkable. They carom off cliffs and slide over most submerged rocks, though they also get marooned on mid-river boulders, leaving their occupants paddling fruitlessly like passengers on a giant airborne banana. Sometimes a kayak is caught in a whirlpool and the boat descends the rapids backward. Sometimes one capsizes. These occasions draw laughter and good-natured teasing from those who have successfully run the whitewater. At Swasey Stopper, the biggest navigable waterfall, Roberge dares me to try it single-handedly. I again cluck in my best Chicken Little manner, and Sho

shoots the two-metre drop alone.

On the last night, we camp in a canyon with a full moon rising over the ridge across the river. The forest sinks into blackness and the whitewater turns silver. There is only a blazing fire and the camaraderie of friends as insulation against the jungle. Says Roberge, reflecting on the journey: "No signs of other humans for a week. No towns. No farms. Just wilderness. You know jaguars are out there – even if you don't see them, they're there. It reminds you there are still places where you can get seriously away from things, where you can still feel like you're an explorer."

I wander down past the beached kayaks and curl into a water-sculpted concavity in a riverside boulder. The moon climbs. The air cools. The jungle's animals squawk and croak and issue demented howls. Slowly, as the moisture from the forest canopy evaporates into the mountain air, the stars become fuzzy, ephemeral – frosted with translucence. They remind me of the stars in Van Gogh's famous painting, *Starry Night*. The others in the group retire. The campfire dies. But the rapids continue a sibilant account of gravity's relentless pull. I lie, staring up, with all the world at my back, at the edge of nowhere, quietly laughing at the strangeness of it all. ▣

Daniel Wood is the author of 15 books, both fiction and non-fiction. His book Western Journeys: Discovering the Secrets of the Land (co-authored with Beverley Sinclair) was a 1998 B.C. Book Prize non-fiction finalist.

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For more information on flight options and travelling in Belize, contact your local CAA Saskatchewan travel agent.



the devil and the deep blue

Island Expeditions, a Vancouver-based company with 20 years' experience leading adventure/educational tours in Belize, offers a range of options for discovering this tiny country tucked between Guatemala and Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. The seven-day strenuous Sale Si Puede expedition (see main article) can be arranged privately, while two of its most popular small-group itineraries are: the nine-day **Ultimate Adventure**, comprising kayaking, snorkelling, diving and board-sailing; exploring underground rivers and Mayan burial chambers; and paddling the Moho River (cost: \$2,269); the 10-day **Coral Jaguar Expedition**, including paddling through the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and exploring coral reefs at sea (cost: \$2,199). **Contact:** Island Expeditions (1-800-667-1630; www.islandexpeditions.com). □