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Honduras: House of the spirits



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COPAN RUINAS, Honduras — Things haven't changed much in Copan Ruinas. Old men play checkers in the plaza and barefoot kids kick soccer balls in the dusty square. But the village, now the gateway to the restored Mayan city of Copan, thrives on its ancient neighbor, the National Monument whose massive pyramids and plazas rank among Central America's preeminent cultural sites.

Like most vanished and deliciously ghoulish civilizations, the Mayan world fascinated our two grandsons, Will and Dillon. What better, then, but to show them the real thing?

Copan Ruinas baked in the heat on the afternoon that our tour bus from Tegucigalpa, the capital, pulled into town. Like most of the 80,000 tourists who visit Copan annually, we planned two days touring the site, and another exploring the town, sampling Honduran food and shopping for crafts — including a gift box (for our dog-sitter) of the first-rate Honduran cigars produced by Cuban families who've fled Castro's Cuba.

It was late when we arrived, with just enough time to check into the Hotel Marina Copan, cool off in the swimming pool and grab a meal. But we were up early the next morning, ready to meet our guide at the park entrance.

As we walked through town, store owners stood in their doorways, yawning. Grade-schoolers in blue and white uniforms paraded down the sidewalk. Across the street, a security guard in cowboy boots and a Panama hat lounged against a store-front bank, a sawed-off shotgun slung over his shoulder. Dillon's eyes went wide and the guard gave him a broad smile.

As promised, our guide, Inmar Diaz, young and clean-cut, was standing by the gate feeding fruit to two adult macaws, big birds with brilliant blue, green and red feathers. Handing some fruit to the kids, he showed them how to feed the parrots without getting nipped.

"These birds were sacred to the Mayans," he said, as we shook hands. "You'll see them today, represented in ancient iconography."

Diaz was a traveler's ideal companion, an enthusiast who knows his subject. A chance encounter with a visiting American led to a home stay with an American family and a scholarship at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. After graduation, speaking perfect English, he came home to a job in tourism.

"Copan isn't the largest Mayan city," he told the kids, "but it's known for the finest sculpture and carving. Archaeologists from the United States and Honduras discover new things almost every month."

In 800 A.D., Copan was the center of an empire, its temples the skyscrapers of their day, its broad plazas and elaborate carvings designed to exalt the rulers and impress the humble.

"It's a spooky place," said Pete Anderson, an American we met in the hotel restaurant. "Spooky but fantastic," he added. "According to our guide, strange rites and human sacrifices were a common practice. But the temples are an engineering marvel. Each of those tens of thousands of stone blocks is perfectly shaped to fit together."

It took a full day and plenty of energy just to walk around Copan's two-square-mile site, built between 426 and 800 A.D. Your best bet is to follow a map, for sale at most tourist shops — and in most guidebooks.

Though the site was never really a secret and 19th century scholars had viewed the ruins, the complete and scholarly excavation didn't start until 1975, eventually revealing the city's full extent. In 1980, Copan became a UNESCO World Heritage sites, and in 1982, Honduras placed both Copan and the Copan River Valley in a newly-founded National Monument.

It was spooky walking through the city beneath towering jungle canopies, the giant root flares of ceiba trees spreading out over the soft loam. When your imagination is working overtime, it's easy to hear the murmurs of long-dead spirits.

On the Great Plaza, carved stone stelae stood in a row, each depicting one of the city's 20 rulers. Best known — and most photographed — is that of "18 Rabbit," (Uaxaclajuun Ubak K'awil), the 13th ruler. Ozymandias-like, he wears a towering headdress twitching with tiny figures, a scepter with the jaws of a two-headed snake and a belt of dangling shells covering his squat thighs. The hieroglyphic inscription records his name and the dates he ruled, now all just a memory.

Back in the day, crowds gathered on this plaza, women in red and yellow huipils sold fruit and vegetables and children played tag. At the temple now numbered "16," priests in macaw feathers supervised masons who cut and laid long rows of blocks over a smaller temple.

"They dug a tunnel under Temple 16 and there it was," said Diaz. "Then they dug some more and found an older one under that, with a burial chamber."

For years, scholars struggled to decipher the Mayan hieroglyphs, and to explain why the Mayans abandoned Copan around 900 A.D. But recent studies of skeletons suggest that the city grew too large for the available food supply. By 760 A.D., when the last king, Yax Pac (Sunrise, or First Dawn), was building Temple 16, an estimated 24,000 people lived in and around the city, straining local resources. A decade of drought and floods completed the catastrophe.

When scholars finally did decipher the hieroglyphs, once thought to describe religious rituals, they found that the cartoon-like carvings are a history of the city's rulers, describing their names, dates and deeds. The best hieroglyphs are found at the Hieroglyphic Stairway on Temple 26.

While Diaz waited below, the kids scampered to the top of Temple 16 and we followed. From 100 feet

up you can see distant hilltops, the original river bed and most of the layout, with a restored ball court, the Great Plaza with its stelae and ongoing excavation sites.

For an uneasy moment, the sight of the finest architecture of its day invited a comparison to a future century when archaeologists unearth our abandoned cities and analyze our bones for toxic chemicals. Like us, looking back, they'll wonder why we let it happen.

The macaws were waiting when we left the park, waddling duck-like on the path, searching for crumbs. When the gatekeeper, a stolid man with a perpetual frown, pushed a wood pole against their feet, they climbed aboard to pose for photographs. Then they flapped back down to peck in the dirt, untroubled by the march of history.

IF YOU GO:

Allow a day to explore the principal ruins and climb the temples. Regular maintenance keeps the park clean, the grass mowed and walking paths in good order. A snack shack near the entrance sells bottled water, ice cream and chip. Museum entrance is \$5; park entrance is \$10, or the equivalent amount in Honduran currency.

For hotel choices in Copan Ruinas, google current internet listings. The Hotel Marina Copan earns kudos for friendly service in a Spanish-colonial setting near the plaza, with attractive furnishings, good beds, telephones, private baths and an excellent restaurant. At the end of a hot day, the kids couldn't wait to jump into the swimming pool. Double rooms start at \$104, but low-season discounts apply. 877-893-9131; www.hotelmarinacopan.com.

Also popular is Hotel Don Udo's, an intimate hideaway owned by a Dutch family, with seven rooms with bath and a restaurant. Double rooms start at \$40. 011-504-661-4533; www.donudos.com.

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