

**Jack and Priscilla Benson's Trip Report: "Rumble In The Jungle"**  
**Reefs and Rivers of the Mayan World**  
**March 21-31, 2004**

After spending the previous night in Miami, we flew to Belize City and boarded the MV Sea Lion about 2:00PM. We were pleased to see Mark Graves, who was captain on our Baja trip on '02, William Lopez-Forment, a naturalist on the same trip, and Roy, one of our waiters in the Galapagos. After getting settled and an informational meeting, we boarded Zodiacs for a snorkel at Goffs Cay. The water was warm, but rough, and Scilla had some problems with her snorkel tube, but it was a good first effort. That night, we pounded through some rough seas, leading to some very tired people in the morning. Attendance at breakfast was sparse.

The next day we went ashore on Half Moon Cay, an island outside the barrier reef. After a hike, we climbed a 20 foot high observation tower which was raised in the midst of a colony of Blue-footed Boobies and Frigate Birds. We were at eye level with hundreds of birds nesting in the tops of small trees. It was fascinating to see them come and go, feeding their young. In the afternoon we moved to another part of the reef. We passed up on the snorkeling, but the ship was rolling a lot at anchor, making for a queasy stomach. That night we sailed back inside the reef, and the rolling stopped about 9:00.

On Wednesday, we anchored off Seine Bright in Belize. After going ashore on a riverbank, we bussed for an hour to the Cockscomb Reserve. We then split up into small groups with a local guide and Lindblad naturalist. The guide led us on a three-mile walk through dense rain forest. We saw and heard many birds, but not the jaguars and peccaries who frequent the area, due to their nocturnal habits. Leaf cutter ants were very active. It was fun to watch his or her processions with each ant carrying a piece of leaf much bigger than itself. We soaked ourselves with Deet and managed to avoid being bitten. Those of us without bug spray got bitten quite badly. The birders, who positioned themselves near Park Headquarters, saw over 60 different birds! After a picnic lunch and the obligatory shopping stop, we arrived back on the ship by 2:00. In the late afternoon, there was a trip ashore to attend dancing by the native Garafuna people, refugees from St. Vincent who settled in the area over one hundred years ago. We passed it up and enjoyed a pleasant afternoon on the ship.

Thursday we anchored off the mouth of the Monkey River and took a guided Zodiac ride up the river, seeing bats, iguanas a crocodile, and many birds. We saw a few howler monkeys at a distance. It was a pleasant morning on this jungle river. In the afternoon, we anchored off the Barrier Reef near Seal Cay and snorkeled. We saw quite a bit, but the rough seas had stirred up sand, making visibility less than optimal. The water was warm and the sun bright, so it was a very pleasant experience.

After another rough night, we anchored off Punta Sal in Honduras. Our anchorage was protected; but twelve-foot breakers at the river mouth kept us from the river cruise scheduled, so we took Zodiacs along the shore and into a large lagoon. Here we saw interesting plants, birds and lots of jellyfish. Our naturalists did a great job of pointing

things out during this unplanned excursion. In the afternoon, we took a walk in the Jeanette Kawas National Park. Here we saw Spider Monkeys and the usual plethora of birds. That night we celebrated the wedding anniversary of our new friends, Stuart and Susan Handler. The Captain's farewell dinner included lobster and steak, continuing the excellent meals we had during the cruise.

Saturday morning we left the ship and bussed to the town of Copan Ruinas, a five-hour trip which included a stop at a coffee finca (plantation). The nearby Mayan city of Copan flourished between 200-850 AD. It was abandoned, covered by the jungle and rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century. After years of restoration efforts, the main buildings have been excavated and partially rebuilt, but there are hundreds of buildings remaining to be uncovered. After lunch and checking into our hotel, we visited a portion of the ruins to see the remains of a Mayan dwelling area. Later we had a lecture by one of the principal archaeologists at the site.

The next morning we went to the main site where there were large temple structures and the main plaza of the city, covered with stelae commemorating past leaders of the city. We walked around and climbed up on some of the temples while our guide explained their significance. The enormity of the site is hard to describe and very impressive, considering the distance from the stone quarries and the tools of the time. We had a picnic lunch at the site, and then toured a museum where original stelae and other artifacts were on display. After a visit to the town museum, we had the rest of the afternoon to stroll around the town's nice colonial era square. We bought some pottery and took in the sights. That evening we had dinner around the hotel pool. The menu featured local preparations of beef, chicken and fish and was quite good.

Monday morning at 9 we took a short bus ride to a dirt airstrip and boarded a turbo prop for the flight to Flores, Guatemala, the nearest town to the Tikal ruins. The flight was uneventful; and, after we landed a 30-min bus ride got us to our hotel, the Camino Real. This was a resort built on a hillside overlooking a large lake. Our rooms were large and comfortable. After lunch, we bussed to Tikal, about 40 min away for an introduction to a small part of the ruins. Tikal is many times larger in area than Copan and is situated in the midst of an even larger national preserve. The buildings are widely separated and often shielded by the jungle. The structures are massive, and built of limestone quarried near the site. Much of the limestone has deteriorated due to heat, rain and earthquakes. We arrived back at hotel about 6PM and went to bed early, prepared to spend the next day in the main part of the site.

**The next morning we left the hotel at 8 and were on our way down the Tikal access road, when masked bandits stopped the bus by dropping a log in the road and putting a gun to the head of the bus driver. We were forced to leave the road and drive down a narrow jungle track until we were out of sight of the highway. At that point some of us were concerned about a possible kidnapping. When the bus stopped three or four masked men with machetes boarded the bus and started grabbing at watches and rings, asking for cash, meanwhile yelling and waving their**

**machetes in the air. In retrospect they were very nervous and disorganized, but at the time they were pretty scary.**

**They got over \$100 cash from us, plus a digital camera and binoculars. When they grabbed at Scilla's engagement ring, one of the robbers started waving his machete over her hand as if to amputate her finger. This provided sufficient incentive, and she was able to get the ring off. In less than five minutes it was all over. The robbers vanished into the jungle. The bus driver was able to back the bus out of the jungle on to the road, and we headed back to the hotel. Needless to say, we were all shaken and upset. The police came, and we provided them with list of our losses. They provided an affidavit for insurance purposes. After a call from one of our group, the US Embassy got the attention of the national police, who provided a police escort for those wishing to go back to Tikal.**

We did go back and spent a fascinating afternoon walking among the giant edifices of Tikal. Most of the temples were astronomically aligned and as many as 15 stories high. The mounds, which covered them, had been removed and the structures partially rebuilt. Much work remains to be done, but the national government can provide few resources for this work. Seeing the site was the high point of our trip, despite our involuntary contribution to the local economy.

The next morning nineteen relieved Americans left the Tikal area and went to the airport with a police escort. We flew to Guatemala City, where we checked our luggage at the airport and went to a hotel for lunch. Our plane for Miami left at 2:00PM and arrived at 5:30. We were all happy to be back on US soil and had no complaints about the usual immigration and customs formalities.