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Waldbaum Recipient Essay
Program for Belize Archaeological Project

Belize

I heard multiple times, while I was in Belize, that the first thing that hits you when you get off the plane is the heat. I guess this is true; stepping out onto the metal ramp that leads down to the sticky black tarmac feels like walking into wet sauna. However, in the few awkward moments it takes to actually get off the plane, standing patiently and quietly thanking the flight crew, it is the smell of Belize that is most distinct. It is alien in every way to a person from the Pacific Northwest. It manages to be sweet, briny, wet, herbal, and overwhelming all at the same time. This is the tropics; a warm gentle rain stains the already streaked runways; heat from cloud-obscured sun brings out the sweat in a matter of minutes, and a distinct but enigmatic smell permeates the air.

After an uneventful trip through immigrations, customs, and a brief stop at baggage claim, I find myself standing outside a slow moving terminal. Before long the waiting area is crammed with missionaries, high school tour groups, and a bunch of people from North Carolina who I guess constitute a family vacation, judging by the matching red T-shirts. As more flights arrive, these groups come and go, disappearing onto brightly colored school buses and rickety looking vans. Then the terminal is crowded again, but this time with fellow archaeologists. I run into the two professors who have graciously allowed me to assist on the project, and I receive a warm but short welcome as 60 other students need attention.

After waking up at 3:00 a.m. to make a 6:00 flight, socializing is a bit of a burden so I hop on the first van headed to camp with our bags and six other staff. The van sloshes through

miles of straight highway broken up only by deep puddles. The scenery stays the same verdant flat expanse with little homes and small green farms that pop up every so often from the encroaching jungle. Before I can get accustomed to this new landscape, the gentle bumping and hum of the van lures me to sleep.

When we arrive, camp fulfills my expectations in size and construction, although its distance out the middle of the jungle is impressive. A long, white, muddy road leads deep into the jungle past a sleepy inspection station where we are waved through every day onto another few miles over potholed sandstone and mud that twists and turns into the emerald depths. Camp is a large cleared area in the center of this viridian tangle.

Site

The site I have been assigned to sits on the side of a cleared hill. For miles there are sparse patches of trees and rolling green pastures. A bajo stretches out to the east of our hill, reflecting its trapped water on rainy days and looking a damp brown during dry spells. The hill is a refuge where I will learn to set up units, screen, profile... essentially the basic methods of archaeology. The sun will beat down on our makeshift champas on cloudless days, and the rain will drip from every surface on rainy days. Lightning will strike just overhead, and cows will wander through the site once we pack up and leave for the day.

This site, a late to terminal classic Maya site, is strange for many reasons. It sits just outside of the direct influence of the larger La Milpa Polity, and its construction is a contradiction to the norms of Maya site-layout, which is usually oriented with specific cardinal directions in mind.

I learn that working in the field presents an interesting paradox. You spend weeks, months, and maybe years uncovering tiny fractions of past peoples' lives. With these small

fragments you hope to say something conclusive about the site itself, the civilization, or at the very least what time period the area was occupied. I am lucky as the building we are digging requires a variety of techniques and approaches to successfully manage and interpret.

Archaeology is difficult; it requires a strong body and a patient mind. One must crouch, stoop, crane, and crawl for the better part of the day, all while making small calculated incisions into a seemingly endless pile of dirt and stone. One minute a group could be working as hard as they can to bring buckets of dirt to be screened, only to be brought to a halt at the discovery of a plaster floor or a small ceramic assemblage. It's rewarding but agonizing, physically demanding but sometimes almost motionless, stimulating but mind-numbing.

Always on site we are working hard but keeping our eyes peeled and ears perked for any signs of a bright yellow crop-dusting plane. It belongs to a local who spends his days swerving and dipping over the fields, pastures, and forests like some fantastical, giant, never-flapping canary. Our site director loves the plane and we learn to love it too. Its appearance, usually predicated by a dull roar, is enough to make everyone on site smile. Seeing something bright yellow against a pale blue sky over patches of rolling green walled in by the jungle is surreal. There is something eerily beautiful about seeing it at a distance, when it is too far off to be heard, gliding over fields, occasionally gushing out a trail of pesticides. Sometimes work will come to a brief halt, and everyone will watch the spectacle of the plane far off in the distance in quiet reverence.

I learn a lot about archaeology and how one has to be able to shift gears and focus at a moment's notice. For example holding a plum-bob perfectly still requires utter concentration and muscular stillness, but moments after a unit is set up using plum-bobs, tape measures, line levels, and a sighting compass, one must immediately focus on clipping the roots and grass that cover

the top of the unit. On our little ridge holding a bob is difficult enough, but as I find later as I rotate through the sites, it is far more difficult with jungle sweat pouring down your neck and a zealous fleet of mosquitoes and flies trying to eat you. Moving dirt and screening, though they fall hand in hand, cannot be more different. Both involve extracting materials, first the dirt from its unit and its matrix, and then artifacts from the dirt, but moving dirt can require brute force or a slight touch while sifting requires speed, a keen eye, and efficiency.

Working on site also reminds me why being multilingual is not only a boon but a gift. My colleagues who are native Spanish speakers are not only able to ask our workmen to help out with certain tasks during the day, but they are able to ask them about their lives over lunch. Our workers, Lupe and Jorge, who know English far better than most of us know Spanish, seem much more comfortable opening up in Spanish. There are workers on every site I work during the season, and their help and experience on each project is immense. Our director looks to Lupe and Jorge often for advice on where to begin a unit and how far to excavate before closing units. I would have liked to have gotten to know Jorge and Lupe. We share laughs when someone bonks their head on a champa stick or runs screaming from a giant tarantula, but I never learned how they felt about the current election taking place in Orange Walk District¹, or what their spouses did for a living, what school their children went to, or what they did when they were not archaeologists. It is a shame that lack of Spanish inhibits me from having long interactions with these men, but I am happy for their company as they are always in good spirits.

The end of the day on site is a rush of throwing tarps over exposed units, closing out units, finding tools, sweeping, and occasionally sifting a few straggling buckets. The reward after a long day and a frantic last push is a half-hour ride in an old pickup truck. As five or six people

¹ Orange Walk is the district of Belize in which the program is located and where our workers live.

crowd into the cab, the remaining people try to find a dry and comfortable place in the back of the truck. The truck bed is the great equalizer as wind rushes across sweaty clothes and sun soaked skin; squabbles on site and the hard work of the day are forgotten. Sometimes we talk, but a lot of the time spent in the back of the truck is just quiet with the occasional collective exclamation as we hit a nasty pot-hole or swerve to avoid a large puddle.

Jungle

The jungle is a miraculous place. Its constant assault on the senses is, however, sometimes overwhelming. The vivid greens of the dense canopy give way to the soft blue of the sky, which, at a moment, can change to grey, bursting with a violent and sometimes brief deluge to turn back to balmy in as little as a few minutes.

Heat is everywhere. It is not a dry heat; it is damp and oppressive. It sticks to you; excesses of it drip and steam from every part of your body in a sweaty mess. A clean cotton shirt can become soaked in no time if you exert yourself. The skin leaks endlessly, even getting out of a cool shower.² When you lie down at night the sheets become damp, or maybe they stayed damp from the night before; you can never quite be sure.

Lying down for the night when the lights are out makes a person realize how much they rely on vision. Once everyone has quieted down for the night, the sounds are deafening. Frog croaks, howler monkey screeches, and bug life twits and buzzes create a cacophony that I found impossible to sleep through without earplugs. But once the eyes adjust to the darkness and one looks up into the sky, it's hard to miss the bright splash of stars sitting silently overhead.

Although I was packed in a tent that sat feet outside the largest camp dormitory, I never felt so

² There was no hot water in camp, which made all showers seem relatively cool.

small than in the few moments before sleep took over as I stared into that jeweled sky amidst the bestial dissonance in otherwise complete blackness.

Life is everywhere in the jungle, hiding in small nooks, and thriving off the most unthinkable resources. Dried, swampy, sludge filled ruts in the washed-out road explode with bright yellow as butterflies scatter away from oncoming trucks. Grey foxes, not much larger than house cats, skitter across camp carrying mangoes in their mouths that are larger than their skulls. Gold and emerald doctorflies, like vengeful automatons, seek out the smallest patches of exposed flesh, at the knee and knuckle or the crease of the elbow, in an attempt to land a painful bite. Mosquitoes, unlike anything one can see in the United States, an iridescent blue and white, hover in omnipresent clouds at the edges of camp, occasionally finding someone brave enough to sit down for an extended period of time. Coatimundi, a cousin of the raccoon, meander carefree on the sides of the road outside camp, their long, red bushy tails standing straight up like the wire of a bumper car, while they mill about, noses to the ground. A herd of peccaries, largest leading the charge closely followed by their miniature kin, erupt out of the jungle, quick enough to startle, only to disappear back into the dense green.

Trips

Every weekend we take trips to prominent ruins of Maya civilization. Our first week we take a half day to explore the expansive city of La Milpa, a major center for our project and the surrounding region. Being amidst the ruins of towering temples and deep, now dry chultunes is not only stunning but also humbling in the extreme. Not only did the Maya achieve architectural greatness, but they also managed to bend the jungle to their will. It is hard to imagine the same landscape deforested as sunlight is barely visible through the thick canopy, and the forgotten city has completely succumbed to nature. Only with the help of archaeologists have parts of the city

been unearthed, vines trimmed off major centers of religion and economics, debris of a thousand jungle years stripped away to reveal steeply sloped stonework beneath.

Where La Milpa is humbling, Lamanai is breathtaking. We ride a rickety turquoise bus with a springing jaguar on the side that sounds like a crashing plane out of camp almost two hours to the small rural community of Spanish Church. On the outskirts of town, down a washed-out, unassuming road lies Lamanai. After a brief walk to a small site museum, we walk alongside a river for a brief jaunt and arrive outside a fully uncovered temple. Unlike La Milpa, the ground here is level; the structures are uncovered and in some cases have undergone some reconstruction work. The tour is brief, information packed, and sweaty but ends at the Jaguar Temple. The temple itself sits at the back of a wide, green, grassy area bordered by the same green jungle. The trip to the top is steep but also allows one to feel the procession that might have ascended these same steps for some ritual purpose more than a thousand years ago. It is one thing to study these structures and their specifications and significance but it is another to walk, matching the footfalls of those who used the temple for its intended purpose, to the top and then gaze down at the small people dotting the smooth green grass below.

Gift shops are the same in Lamanai as anywhere else. Local trinkets, ranging from small and inexpensive, to larger bulkier pieces, fill four small huts. People have spent their whole time here, buying T-shirts that will become polite conversation starters back in the US. After so much time in the jungle, the wide array of bright and shiny, carved, crafted, sewn, and painted paraphernalia is overwhelming. I peruse the shops for a moment before we are ushered back onto the bus.

Although we take the same road to Lamanai that we took the first day from Belize City, it is unfamiliar to me as I slept through this part of our trip. Just how close we are to the border is

apparent when we rumble past the Mexico border crossing about twenty yards to the right of the bus. A murky stream meandering through a lush field, its banks shrouded in thick trees, is all that stands between us and Mexico. A boy, much younger than I slowly walks around a back porch of the border crossing station wearing combat boots, a vest, and carrying an M-16. An older man sits in a plastic lawn chair on that same porch. Out front a clothesline holds bright colored clothes. We roll past at thirty miles an hour, so the sight is a quick one but sticks in my memory, not because of the harsh image of a young man carrying such a lethal weapon, but because it seems paradoxically nonchalant and deadly serious at the same time. I wave as we pass, but the guards take little notice of a bus full of tourists, even if it is painted turquoise with a springing jaguar.

On the ride home we have to jump out of the bus as we ascend the one large hill on the way to camp. Much to people's chagrin we slowly disembark, march 100 yards up the hill as the bus sputters up behind us, and slowly load back onto the bus. We make it back to camp with no other mechanical troubles.

Closing

One of the strangest things about being an archaeologist is the backfill day. A summer is spent meticulously uncovering every piece of our structure, and in a half day's work the whole thing is covered back up as if nothing ever happened. No champas provide shade, no pit to climb in and out of, no more cows. Besides the fact that the mound we recover is all freshly moved dirt, it is as if we haven't been there at all.

Somehow backfilling is very satisfying, but it is also backbreaking. Before we have worked an hour I am as wet as if I had jumped into the rained out bajo below us. Rain comes in the middle of backfill, cooling us off but also redampening every article of clothing and every

day pack on site. It's hectic, it's hot, it's hard, and it's all over before 12:30.³ Although we have covered an entire summer's efforts in a short day, it is one of the best days on site. Pictures are taken, dancing is done, and final words are said, before we bounce our way home in the back of our trusty old truck.

Vacation

After backfill day and a day of finishing up in the lab, which requires sorting through over 200 fragments of pottery we found in a one-by-one unit on the last day of digging, we head back to Belize City. People ask me over and over if I am excited to be home where I can check the Internet and talk on the phone,⁴ or at least get a cheeseburger. I do not miss these things. Being without Internet has actually been invigorating. Without the distractions of keeping up with the world, I have spent a good deal more time reading and many hours simply playing games with friends I have met at camp. The idea of heading back to a place where I can settle any argument with a quick Google search, using the smart phone that is always in my pocket, is not only overwhelming but somewhat horrifying. The food has been excellent and as far as I know a person can live on rice, beans, papaya, eggs, onions, and hot sauce, so my nutritional needs are more than satisfied. What troubles me about food is the idea of buying food at a grocery, a horror that is realized the first trip I make to the store back in the states - too many choices makes for an inefficient shopping trip. No, I have in fact been very happy in Belize, despite not knowing where my loved ones are or what they're up to. Ignorance is bliss or something like that.

³ We usually pack up for the day about 3:30.

⁴ There is no Internet and no cell service deep in the jungles of Belize. All contact with the outside world was made during several forty minute shopping runs to the local gas station/hardware/convenience store a good thirty-minute drive from camp.

Thank You

I would like to thank the AIA for contributing to my first archaeological dig. Without their help I would not have been able to participate in an archaeological excavation. The generous contribution of the AIA through the Waldbaum Scholarship went toward the price of the field school, which included weekend trips, transportation, lectures, and room and board, as well as the cost of the plane ticket to Belize. I would also like to thank Dr. Caitlin Barrett and Dr. Kurt Jordan for their letters of support and Dr. Lauren Sullivan and Dr. Fred Valdez for allowing me to be a part of Programme for Belize Archaeological Project.

I learned a great deal on this project, about Maya culture, the discipline of archaeology, and myself. Being a part of PfBAP was an enriching experience and I am very grateful for everyone who made it possible. I am a better scholar and a better person for having participated on this dig.

Thank You.



The crew of Tzak Naab on our last day of digging. I am in the pink shirt.



This is the bus we used to get to and from camp for weekend trips.



Tzak Naab through the windshield of our truck. Cows are plentiful at Tzak Naab.



A typical view from the ridge above our site. Storm clouds barrel across the bajo and cows cluster to the side of the pasture.



The team covers the backfill dirt before we are hit by an oncoming storm.



A potential chultun at the site of La Milpa.



The ball court at the site of Lamanai.



The Jaguar Temple at the site of Lamanai.