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Saturday, March 4, 2000. Set my alarm but forgot to turn it on, so I was awakened at 5:15 AM by the limo driver pounding on the door. Met Betty Baxter at our gate and we flew Delta to Miami to connect with our American flight to Belize City. American Airlines was about 12 seats short (One of the connecting flights arrived late and they had reassigned the seats). There were a lot of angry passengers and American started offering compensation for anyone who would give up their seat. It started at \$300, soon was \$500, all with no takers. We had boarded the plane when they raised the ante to \$1000 plus free hotel and food and guaranteed space on tomorrow's flight. My seatmates couldn't resist and left to be replaced by a young couple that was on their way to Belize to scuba on its famous reef and do some fly-fishing. It's about a two-hour flight down over the Keys, Cuba and Cozumel to Belize. American served a very passable lunch with complimentary wine.

When we arrived Ramon Silva, our Natural Habitat Adventures guide, met us. He was raised in southern Belize and lives in San Ignacio. Also being met was a woman named Linda Norris who lives in Mountain View, CA. Her ancestry is English and Austrian. She wants to take lots of pictures for a slide show and her first picture was of the somewhat scruffy row of car rental agencies.

Some shipwrecked British sailors first settled Belize in 1638. The settlement was engaged in logging. Spain considered the area their domain and after many disputes, in 1763, at the Treaty of Paris, England finally got the right to the area. However skirmishes continued and in 1821, when Spain granted independence to Mexico and Guatemala, both countries claimed the area. It wasn't until 1859, when Britain made a treaty with Guatemala, that the area known as British Honduras became a separate country. Belize City, the historic capitol, is a town of 70,000 and is in the Central time zone. The buildings are undistinguished stucco and wood (most of which seemed to be in need of paint) and most are stilt houses since flooding is a problem in low lying Belize City with the Belize river running through the middle of it. At least the temperature is not too hot.

We checked into the pleasant Fort George Radisson Hotel where our room has a water front view. Betty has broken one of the temples on her reading glasses so our afternoon project was to try and find a replacement. We walked up town (6 or 8 blocks) crossing the swing bridge over the river, which swings twice a day to allow boats to pass, and found that on Saturday, finding a pair of reading glasses is impossible. We did find a rack in Brodie's Hardware Store, where they apparently had carried them, but the rack was empty. And we don't have time to order some. There is a lovely Supreme Court building with New Orleans style wrought iron work and next door the colonial Prime Minister's office. Belize got its independence in 1981 and is now a member of the British Commonwealth. Signs abound with ER on them, including an old mail drop postbox. The people are all so helpful and friendly, so we are somewhat surprised when a tourist policeman overtakes us to ask if we are all right. Ignorance is such bliss. Later we found out it is not considered safe to walk down to town unescorted.

We walked back to the hotel and found the room clerk had had some very limited success with scotch tape in repairing Betty's glasses. It had gotten hot unless you were where the breeze was blowing so we were glad to be back at the hotel and had a nap before dinner.

The group enjoyed an open-air buffet next to the swimming pool. The barbecued grouper left a bit to be desired but the rest was very good. There are eight of us and the group seems so nice. We decided to share a couple of bottles of wine and were astounded that a bottle of California Chardonnay cost \$40 (or \$80 Belize)! Flower Hund from Kansas City, Kansas, is a librarian traveling with her daughter Liz and Liz' significant other, Harvey Bilik from Oakland, CA. Liz is in agricultural financing. Harvey is a clinical psychologist and since they had lived in Denver I asked if he knew my clinical psychologist son-in-law, Denis McCarthy, and he does know who he is. Ann and Lewis Throop are from Palo Alto. He's an analytical Chemist.

Sunday, March 5. We left the hotel at 8:00 and Ramon drove us through downtown Belize City pointing out the various colonial buildings. Then we went to the grocery to stock up on water and other essentials and rode in our comfortable van up the Northern Highway. The countryside is sparsely populated and the people, if they farm at all in the flat sandy swampy environment, grow a few coconut palms. The mahogany trees have long since been logged off.

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We got to the New River where we boarded our boat (an old army launch complete with camouflage paint) for the 45-mile trip up To Lamanai. We saw storks and gallinules, the snail eating flicker, kingfishers, egrets and so forth. The limpkin is a sort of stork. A curious bird is the Northern Jacana or Jesus Christ bird that walks on water. The male takes over the raising of the chicks after they hatch and we saw several young birds being taught to fish by their fathers. The largest flying bird in the Americas is the Jabiru stork with a wingspread of 6-7 feet and we spied a tree with a huge nest on it. The river is bordered with water lilies, the white flowers sticking up above the green and (when the wind turns them over) red leaves. The white stilt birds among the water lilies are almost invisible. The tall trees are lavishly decorated with bromeliads, some orchids and even an occasional huge termite mound. There is little sign of habitation except for occasional small fishing boats.

The only point where we saw people living was at a Mennonite farm where they were raising cows and crops. We are near a large settlement of Mennonites. Nearby the family was fishing, the men in their suspended pants and the two young girls beguiling in their dresses and straw hats. Ramon has a low opinion of the Mennonites since he feels their heavy farming is not good for the eco system, the Mayan slash and burn technique being easier on the land. He is also irritated that the government gives them land even though they do not vote.

The river twists and curves through the swamp sometimes becoming quite narrow until we finally ended up at the Lamanai Lagoon, the largest fresh water body of water in Central America, and the Lamanai Outpost Lodge our home for the next two nights. The lodge sits in an immaculate tropical garden and our lovely thatched roofed room even has hammocks outside if we want to relax, ... but Ramon has planned a lot for us to do.

After lunch and a couple of hours of R&R we set off on a hike to an old sugar mill. Along the way Ramon points out birds and identifies the trees and educates us on their traditional use. The Bay Cedar is called the Travelers Tree since a concoction made from its fruit will instantly constipate you! We investigated the ruins of a 15th Century Mayan church. Then we left the chalky limestone road and followed another path back to the ruins of a 19th century sugar mill, with a date of 1866 on one lintel. Built of brick, some plant growth has started along the roof edge. Ramon suggested someone should clear all this out, but when we walked behind the old building and saw the giant fig tree embracing the ruin like the ones in Cambodia, I felt it much better to leave it alone in its ruined beauty. Leaving the old mill we spotted a slaty tailed female trogon, and Ramon tells us you don't usually see them so low in the tree.

Further down the road we reached the lagoon and the main entry to the Lamanai ruins. A huge mound marks the entrance. Tomorrow we will explore it in depth. And then we spotted a male slaty tailed trogon so Ramon's joy was complete!

Back at the lodge we had some wine before getting cleaned up for dinner. Between the sun block lotion and the bug repellent we really needed those showers!

Monday, March 6. We are awakened by a symphony of chachalacha bird screeches and howler monkey calls, (which sound like a cross between a lion and an asthmatic). Breakfast isn't until 7:30 so Betty and I had time to walk down to the lagoon and admire Mila, the resident howler monkey.

We left at 8:00 for the Lamanai ruins. Most people come only for the day, so we are there long before the crowd arrives. We started at the small museum near the visitor center. Our guide, Nasario, the Mayan curator, is very knowledgeable and proud of his heritage. He worked with David Prendergast, the Canadian archaeologist, who dug here from 1982 to 1994. It is thought Lamanai has been a religious center for 2500 years, the longest of any Mayan City. The museum has artifacts from the earliest period to date (a pepsi cola bottle being the most recent). The term Lamanai should really be Lamanaing, or City of the Submerged Crocodile. Nasario points out many of the displays and explains what uses they had. Unfortunately most of the pottery is broken for the best pieces are in boxes in Canada where no one has ever bothered to put them on display.

Outside the museum we saw yet another sooty tailed trogon. Ramon got so excited! And then we saw a squirrel cuckoo and he was stationary instead of jumping round! This is also very rare. Ramon is a consummate birder, stopping every time he hears a rustle in the jungle, and his enthusiasm is contagious, causing us to spend a lot of time staring up into the trees through

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binoculars! Nasario is also into birds and trees so we are having quite an education. We found a troop of howler monkeys and watched for a long time as they moved through the trees. The babies are adorable.

At last we came to the Temple of the Mask, so called because of the stone mask found in the excavation. The earliest part of the temple dates to 200 BC but the mask was found in a higher level making it date from about 400 AD. It is preserved in a shelter adjoining the temple. This was a burial temple for an important king and long after his death, and long after the mask had been covered up by subsequent building, the site was considered sacred. I climbed almost to the top. The next temple was simply called the Tall Temple and I did not make what looked like a hard climb to the top. The temple faced a plaza and around in the jungle you could see many other smaller mounds which had not been excavated. These are also temples and no two of them stand symmetrically across from another. There are over 800 mounds in Lamanai. I wanted to get out my trowel and start to work!

Nearby was a large circular stone. During the excavation they found various things hidden under it including some mercury in a jar. Its purpose can only be speculated about, but I suspect they thought it was magic. And also nearby was Stele #9, a funerary stone, beautifully preserved since it had toppled forward, keeping its inscriptions buried all these years. Nasario can read the inscriptions on it and translates that this was the tombstone of a king who lived about 1000 AD. Nasario's interest in the stele also has caused him to make a copy of the carving of Quetzalcoatl for posterity, which he painted in its original colors. This is fortunate for while the stele has a roof over it, it is obviously not going to last very long since people take rubbings or just touch the bas-reliefs and they are wearing down. Several groups have said they would send money to place a plastic protective covering over it but the money never appears. Nasario says that if they sent the money to the Antiquities Department, the money would have been stolen.

And at last we came to the Jaguar temple (named for the carvings found on it). This temple wasn't built until the 13th century and was still being used when the Spanish came. Of all the ruins we have seen, this one was in the best condition. The Spanish built a church on top of the mound but after they left the church was torn down and in the walls they found a curious clay effigy of an animal with a crocodile at one end and a shark at the other. In its mouth is a human head. There were also idols hidden in the walls. While the priests thought they were converting the natives, in actuality the Mayans knew their gods were there all along.

Nearby were the excavated remains of a palatial building, which had originally been embellished, with sculptured heads of stucco, some of which are in the museum. It was a very full morning and I am delighted to be told we have the afternoon off!

After some work on the computer, I even went for a swim in the lagoon. The water was wonderful, but the ever-prevalent wind made it cold when I came out. At 6:00 PM we went next door to the Lamanai Preserve Research Station to hear Laura tell us about the work in the preserve. She is a young archaeologist who has been in Belize four years. It was an interesting talk on everything from pre-classic ceramics to the cataloging of howler monkey calls. Many aspiring archaeologists come here to do their graduate work and Elder Hostels also come to work and study, their fees providing the graduate students with funding. While the talk was going on, a very friendly cat went around from lap to lap, a bat periodically checked out each corner of the room and a dog with a deformed leg carefully looked us over, all causing distractions.

After dinner we boarded our launch and went out on a night safari with Carlos and his big searchlight. For a while we found little except for a couple of raccoons, but then we began picking up the eyes of crocodiles. Carlos would gun the boat toward them and most of them dove and swam rapidly away, while we watched their silhouettes disappear. He informed us later we had seen 25 crocodiles but I really only saw two, one a young crocodile who had caught a big bird and the other a grandfather crocodile who lay submerged in about 2 feet of water near the boat. I had no desire for another swim in the lagoon! We took the boat up a narrow channel where the trees and bushes from each side almost met in the middle and here we found roosting birds, kingfishers, blue herons, egrets and so forth. I hope the SPCA doesn't get after us for waking them up! It was fun but I got quite cold. We seem to go from one extreme to the other. It is cool when the breeze blows but when it stops you know you are in the tropics!

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Tuesday, March 7. The plan was for the van to take the luggage back to Belize City while we flew in a charter plane. Most of the group opted to drive back with the luggage so they would see more but Linda, Betty and I waited for the plane. I didn't think the hour from Belize City to New River was interesting enough to do twice. We had a leisurely morning and then rode our 14-passenger Cessna to Belize City. You get a different perspective from the air as you can see the swampy areas and rivers. Some of this area was used to grow marijuana and the area was sprayed with DDT to eliminate it, eliminating the ecology at the same time. The flight takes 12 minutes and when we got back to Belize International Airport, Ramon was waiting with the rest of the group. We drove for about an hour along the Western Highway before we found lunch. Since there seemed to be no suitable restaurants along the way, it was a relief to find the Cheers Restaurant, which made a pretty good hamburger.

Nearby was the Belize Zoo and it was delightful. They only have animals indigenous to Belize and all displayed in their natural setting, unlike our zoos where an artificial natural setting has to be created. We saw spider monkeys, pumas, tapirs, crocodiles, even two jaguars, one spotted, one black, screech owls and the toucan, yellow headed parrots and red macaws. Throughout the zoo are messages to educate people that they should not hunt or otherwise harm these animals that are so important to the ecology of Belize. It also makes a good point that non-indigenous animals should be left in their own countries!

After the zoo the scenery became more rolling and lush as we came to the Mayan Mountains. Ramon tells us that many of the hills we are looking at are really Mayan mounds. It was another hour and a half to San Ignacio and beyond we came to our new home, Chaa Creek Lodge. The rooms are in buildings similar to Lamanai Outpost Lodge, but the atmosphere is not as nice. Among other things we were one room short so Harvey volunteers to sleep at another nearby lodge. Our room came complete with a fan that we could not turn on and a bat, which we asked to have removed! There are no screens on the windows! I skipped the night walk after dinner and did some laundry, totally flooding the bathroom. Lamanai Outpost Lodge was so perfect I can only hope things improve!

Wednesday, March 8. Got up in time to go on the 6:30 bird walk with Jason, the somewhat phlegmatic guide who apparently made last night's walk a real disaster when they only saw a couple of spiders. Just Betty and I showed up for the morning walk, which started late. Jason did point out a few birds and set up his scope for a closer view of a woodpecker in his nest. Most exciting was to see a beautiful toucan and a parrot. By 7:30 we excused ourselves to go for breakfast.

Behind the cottages is a steep cardiac producing hill and we huffed and puffed our way to the top for a most interesting tour of the Blue Morph butterfly-breeding program. They only raise the blue morph here, which isn't endangered, but there is demand for it in butterfly displays in Texas and Florida. The blue morph is a beautiful butterfly. The females have a double row of white dots on the inside of their wings while the males only have one row next to the brilliant blue color. For 14 days they mate, and then the female lays perhaps a hundred eggs a day on the leaves provided. We were shown each step of the 120-day process as the tiny egg hatches into an almost microscopic larva, then gets bigger and bigger until he turns green. Then he attaches himself to something and makes himself turn into a pupa by emitting a gel. The pupa, which breathes, lasts two weeks until the butterfly hatches and the whole cycle starts again. Near the butterfly center is a small natural history museum.

Following this we walked down to the Macal River, which runs behind the lodge. An agouti crossed our path, running away with a succulent stolen orange in his mouth. When we got to the river we were assigned canoes and I lucked into the front seat in Miguel, the guide's canoe. Since I hadn't set foot in a canoe in perhaps 30 years, it was nice to have someone in the stern who didn't expect me to paddle all the time! There are only six of us since Linda is sick and Betty doesn't do canoes!

Miguel pointed out the various birds and we saw several iguanas, some resting on the bank, others high up in the trees. The bush came right down to the bank and often overhung it so it was a lovely river. Periodically there were small rapids, but Miguel expertly guided us through the channels. We came upon two horses bathing in the river and saw a couple of ladies doing their laundry. Sometimes we passed another canoe going upstream.

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After 2 1/2 hours we reached San Ignacio where Ramon awaited us and took us to the Hapi Iguana for lunch. We window shopped awhile and stuck our nose into a small wooden sculpture exhibit.

Then it was on to see Xunantunich (the Stone Maiden) pronounced Chu-nan-tun-ick. We had to cross the river on a funny old, cable operated ferry and went in over a gravel road, which fortunately was not very long, to get to the ruin, one of the tallest Mayan ruins in Belize. Unlike Lamanai, this site has been extensively uncovered and you can really see what it must have been like. We viewed the ball court where the Mayans played a game, which has not been determined, but can be guessed from drawings at Chichen Itza in Yucatan. And then Ramon insisted we climb the Castillo. I don't do hills! It was a real struggle to get up to the third terrace, but we saw remnants of house floors, and got a close-up of the famous stucco astronomical bas-reliefs. The originals are behind fiberglass replicas to preserve them. How exciting it must have been for the archaeologist who first uncovered them! Xunantunich was a middle class community absorbed in agriculture. It was a 3-class society, the priests or astronomers living in the Castillo, the middle class around the main plaza and the peasants below the terraces. Although its construction started pre-classical (identified by rounded corners of buildings) it flourished from 400-800 AD and then was abandoned, probably because the people became traders with other tribes and left. It was wonderful to get back to Chaa Creek and have a shower!

Thursday, March 9. We drove off to see the mountains. As far as San Ignacio the road was paved but from then on we traveled a dusty gravel road. We stopped to visit a Guatemalan family who were making a subsistence living on a small plot of land. They had a number of different fruit trees, custard apple, papaya, sour sop and so forth and were growing cabbages and chickens. The lady of the house tried to sell us a basket, but it was far too big to fit into the van. Ramon did buy some fruit and vegetables from them. They have lived there for over 30 years and have seven children. They would like to leave but have no money. In all my travels to the third world I have seen many impoverished people but this family really got to me. I wish we had bought the basket.

We stopped in San Antonio, where there was a free medical clinic going on, staffed by American doctors, and everyone in town was lined up to get shots. There were two small general store/grocery stores near by but not much else to look at. And then we drove up and up until we reached the Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve following the old logging road. It was quite abrupt when the broad leaf trees were replaced with pines due to the altitude and soil.

Our goal was the Rio Frio Cave, one of many in the area. The huge gaping mouth of the cave led into a huge room with stalactites hanging on the high sides. The river rushes through its quarter-mile length. Some of the soft limestone looks like stair steps, carved during the flooding in rain season. In the center of the cave is a sandy beach, deposited by the river, and it is here where the Mayans most probably used the cave for ceremonial purposes.

Then we were led on a mile-long nature hike in the preserve. We walked awhile noting the various trees, many of which had identifying signs. And we did see a red-capped manekin. But then the trail started up and we climbed and climbed. I could no longer admire the trees since my eyes were firmly on the ground to make sure I did not fall on something. I had to stop frequently to breathe and I am sure the group thought I was having a heart attack, and Ramon kept encouraging me that it was only a little further. The trail was quite difficult in places and after an eternity we reached the top, where there was a small cave that had been inhabited by the Mayas. They must have had to crawl in through the small opening, which we did not try! It was a lot of effort for one bird and one cave!

We had our picnic lunch overlooking the Rio On Pools, which are quite scenic, and after lunch we had an opportunity to swim. Only Lew and I tried it. It was slippery going in over the rocks, but delightful once you were in.

Then it was on to the Hidden Valley Falls, also known as the 1000-foot falls (although the drop is 1500 feet), which is the highest in Central America. The view is spectacular with the mountains stretching off in the distance beyond. Then we were back in the van for the dusty hour and a half back to Chaa Creek. Betty was in the back and I am sure that is why she got sick, so I put her to bed with Imodium and went up to dinner alone.

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We have decided to move people around in the van since the same people always seem to get the better seats and Liz and Harvey have never sat up near the front at all. Friday,

March 10. Drove back toward Belize City and turned south on the Hummingbird Highway, which runs diagonally south/west across the country. We took a diversion to Baking Pot where 3500-year-old mounds were discovered when the road was improved (apparently from no gravel to dusty gravel). The area is now a government agricultural station and there was a large herd of Brahman cattle grazing among the mounds.

There are many colorful names for the villages of Belize: Orange Walk, Crooked Tree, Double Head Cabbage, More Tomorrow, Teakettle, Washing Tree and so forth. Moving on, we passed a papaya grove and came to another cable operated ferry. These ferries belong to the government and it is free to ride them. There are only three left in the country.

Then we had a real treat, a Mennonite dairy where the raspberry ice cream was delicious! This is one of the largest settlements of Mennonites in the country.

Back on the main road we came to Belmapan, the capitol of Belize. After the disastrous hurricane, Hattie, which devastated Belize City in 1961, a new Capitol, was planned near the geographical center of the country and the government officially moved. However the government officials didn't care to move and continue to commute from Belize City. There wasn't much to see in town except for the large Friday/Saturday market in full swing.

We stopped at the Blue Hole National Park where a spring feeds a sandy-bottomed deep blue pool, which we are told is 100 feet deep. It drains into another cave and becomes the Blue River. We don't have towels so can only wade in and watch the fish. Above the pool is a high cliff of limestone pock-marked with what looks like many small caves. Ramon points out the village of Middlesex where he grew up, nearby Camelote.

At last we came to Dangriga and the Pelican Bay Inn for lunch. Dangriga has the feel of a Caribbean town, with an African heritage. Ramon tells us that a tribe of Mayans has also moved in from Southern Guatemala but they have a different dialect from the Mayans of Western Belize. There are so many different races in Belize: Mayans, Chinese, Amish, Mennonites, Hindus, and Honduras and San Salvador refugees. Ramon keeps telling us how broad minded his country is and yet it is obvious he wishes the country were turned back to the Mayans!

South of Dangriga, the southern highway is under construction and it is an hour and a half of dust and bumps to The Inn at Robert's Grove where we are all of a sudden back in civilization. There's a pool and tennis court and we have lovely room where we will hear the surf all night and a private pelican keeps watch outside. There is even a hot tub on the roof! We could get used to this! The restaurant is considered the best in the area if not the best in the country, but the service runs on Caribbean time, which is when they get around to it. No one, however, tells us about the air conditioner or gives us the gizmo to turn it on, so Betty and I sweltered all night, finally opening the front door to get a small cross draft. The next day they showed us how it worked!

Saturday, March 11. Doused in sun block we rode a speedboat out to Laughing Bird Cay. This is a narrow island covered with coconut palms and in each palm at least one pelican was roosting! We are led to the east side and the snorkel area is pointed out but it is difficult to get off the beach of loose coral and small rocks. The reef has a lot of brain coral and wonderful and colorful fans, but no big schools of fish. We then tried the other side of the island where the coral wasn't as interesting but the fish were in quantity.

We walked down to near the northern end of the island where two ospreys had built a large nest on a downed tree, but they had no chicks. There were also sand pipers and cormorants, two terns and a frigate bird overhead, but they were badly outnumbered by the pelicans!

They served us lunch and then we went in again, but I was getting pretty water logged and ended up taking a nap under a palm tree. It was fun to snorkel but I was so disappointed that we did not get to see the Barrier Reef. We had been promised a private boat so we could go where we wished, but instead were joined by other guests in the hotel until there were 17 of us. Some had never snorkeled before.

Back at the hotel, after showers and shampoos, Betty and I enjoyed a marguerita in the bar and began to feel like human beings again. Dinner was a buffet around the swimming pool (it seems

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like it is a Saturday night tradition in Belize). The buffet was quite good, particularly the corn, but the chicken left a bit to be desired. They just don't know how to make a good barbecue sauce!

Sunday, March 12. The program had been to take us to the Jaguar Preserve, but most of the group felt two hours of dusty driving back and forth wasn't worth it, and that we could stop and see it when we drive north. A few wanted to repeat the snorkel trip (Harvey wanted to scuba and Flower wanted to take her water colors and paint). So the Jaguar Preserve was canceled and Ramon took a day off.

We didn't want another long day in the sun, and there was no assurance another snorkel trip would be any different from yesterday, so Lew and Ann, Betty and I signed up for a trip to the Monkey River. It was a speedy 45-minute launch trip down past Palencia to Monkey River Town where we picked up our guide, Brian. He was very knowledgeable but his English was hard to understand and he often talked without facing us. Despite it the entire trip was a success. Traveling through the mangroves up the river we spotted an osprey and a two-foot crocodile, which did not dive on our approach but lay there hyperventilating for us all to see. At one point we put ashore at a plantain plantation and after crossing it, Brian macheteed a path into the jungle where we could see a small troop of howler monkeys. We went on to land further upstream for a walk in the tropical rainforest. Tall figs and huge cohune palms shaded the trail. Brian pointed out the bullhorn acacia tree, which has a symbiotic relationship with the predemex ants that live in its thorns. The ants in return cut down any strangling vines that attack the tree. The tree provides a substance useful to treat snakebites. The cahune palms have a large acorn-like fruit, which produces oil for lamps and cooking. He pointed out the medical value of some of the other trees and identified some of the birds. We can hear nearby the loud howler monkeys and at last come to a large troop high above us in a fig tree. Being directly under them is an adventure, as just like the chimpanzees we saw in Uganda, you never know when one is going to turn the forest into a 'rain' forest. The howler monkey population was decimated 30 years or so ago when an epidemic of yellow fever hit, but now they think the population might almost be bigger than before.

We then went back to Monkey River Town to the Sunset Inn and Restaurant, which looked much better inside (lace curtains and clean vinyl floor) than it did outside and had a lunch of chicken and rice and beans (the native staple meal).

Then Brian took us on a walking tour of the town, which 170 people call home. It feels like we are on an island, since there are no cars and the 'roads' are footpaths to connect the houses. Mangroves surround the town with a small beach toward the Caribbean (it was once much bigger but was eroded by the pollutants upstream in the river). The only connection to the outside world is the water and a road on the opposite bank of the river. The weathered buildings include a stilted hurricane shelter, which also acts as an assembly hall for the town, an abandoned medical clinic, the Anglican school for the 35 children living in the town, even a police station, an old granary, another inn, and a small grocery store. The village started as a logging town and when that ended switched to raising bananas. This came to an end when blight hit the bananas so they turned to fishing. But the fishing hasn't been very good lately, so now they are trying to develop tourism!

Heading back to our hotel we paused to look for manatees, but without success, and then Betty and I relaxed on our breezy deck watching the pelicans and frigate birds overhead.

Monday, March 13. A dusty bumpy ride back up the southern highway brought us to the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve. The area was designated a reserve in 1984 to protect the jaguar population and other resident wildlife. In 1990 the reserve was expanded until it now contains 100,000 acres. Driving in we came to a large tree housing the Montezuma Oropendola and smaller chestnut-headed or Waglers Oropendola birds. They nest like weaverbirds and there was a lot of activity as the birds flew in and out of their long basket like nests. The reserve is a beautiful second growth rain forest. There are many trails and we followed the Gibnut trail along a picturesque stream. Ramon kept identifying birdcalls and with limited success found the producers of some of them. More exciting was when Harvey spotted a white-tailed deer near the trail. Ramon found holes that were iguana holes but we saw no iguanas. It was a pleasant walk although it got very hot and humid toward the end. Alas no jaguars but it are rare to find them.

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We stopped at the welcome center and bought some of the native crafts and then it was back in the van for another bumpy dusty ride north to Gales Point. Here we had a picnic lunch and found a reasonably clean restroom before boarding our launch for the trip back to Belize City.

Stopping in the middle of the first lagoon, we tied up to a stake and waited for the manatees. And we waited and waited. At last Napoleon, our guide, said, "Here comes one now". And about 25 feet away we saw the pig-like snout of a manatee as he came up for air. His large black body stretched out behind. It was all over in just a minute and then we settled back to wait for another ... and waited and waited. At last, Harvey, our tour leader pro tem, took a vote and we found we all really wanted to get on to Belize City more than to wait for another manatee!

Napoleon gunned the boat and we headed into a canal through the thick mangrove swamp. These mangrove canals form a protective waterway down the coast of Belize. In the next lagoon we found Birds Cay, with a large colony of both snowy and great egrets decoratively nesting in the trees. We also spotted one boat-billed heron. Then it was back into the mangroves again where egrets and kingfishers swooped alongside and led us along. We saw many birds and stopped to see one baby crocodile. At last we turned into the Belize River and sped through the town of Belize City, under the swing bridge, and past the fishing fleet before emerging into the Caribbean. There doesn't seem to be a slow no wake rule in Belize! Soon we were tying up at the Fort George dock and found Ramon in the Radisson lobby waiting to check us in.

Had a wonderful hot soaking bath. Then Ramon had us to a rum punch party before going to our farewell dinner in a charming restaurant in the garden of a hotel across the street, which had originally been a private house.

Tuesday, March 14. Flew back to Miami and had to schlep our bags all the way across the airport since Delta closes their check-in at customs at 6:00. Caught an earlier plane to Atlanta than scheduled, which was good for Betty but I still had to wait till 11:30 for my plane to Cincinnati where I am to play bridge with Martha at the Duplicate Bridge Nationals.