

2004 BELIZE AND TICAL

Friday, January 30, 2004. As I was packing, I realized I had no vouchers. Broad Horizons was closed for the day, so I called Lost Worlds who had arranged our itinerary. "No problem", they said, "It is just like an e-ticket". I was dubious but could do nothing about it.

Saturday, January 31, 2004. It was a day for Stevens. My limo driver was Stephen; (John would have said he pronounced it wrong. It should be Step -hen.

I took American Airlines from Atlanta to Dallas, connecting there to the Belize flight. I don't normally travel American but I was impressed. They have taken over the original international facilities at Hartsfield and that means you don't have to ride the train. You just walk out on the T-Concourse. In addition, the plane has more legroom than Delta.

Dallas is a huge airport but I was put on a cart for the long ride between terminals. Managed to have a chicken quesadilla lunch at a Tex-Mex place in the airport before I boarded the flight to Belize City. My seatmates were from Minnesota and go every year to dive on the reef. They told me it was 25 below zero in Minnesota. It makes Atlanta's weather seem insignificant!

In Belize a wheelchair got me speedily through customs and immigration. The driver who met me was named Steven!

Mary and Tom had arrived before me, having come from Miami, and were waiting for me at the Radisson Fort George Hotel. We were given rooms on the first floor that shared a patio. I was disappointed for I had thought I had paid for the rooms with the view of the water that Betty and I had four years ago.

"Voucher please" they said. "I have no voucher. I'm traveling on an e-ticket". The hotel didn't seem to have heard of this and said I would have to pay. I was very upset and called Lost Worlds. It was the weekend so all I got was an answering machine, but I told them my problem.

We went across the road to the Smokey Mermaid garden restaurant of the Great House. Mary and Tom only wanted appetizers for their plane had been very late and they had a late lunch after they arrived. The food was good although the service was slow. Three beguiling cats entertained us begging for food. The service was particularly slow in getting the check.

Later that night I had a call from the desk telling me there would be no problem with the bill. It was early to bed as we are being picked up at 7:00 AM tomorrow.

Saturday, February 1, 2004. We were up early and were in the dining room when it opened at 6:30 AM. When we checked out I was told I had to pay for everything, BZ\$916 (almost \$450). I was very upset. In addition to that, Mary had had allergy problems from the dust in their room and both of us had had temperamental toilets to deal with. The hotel offered to reduce the bill so I did not have to pay for the long distance phone call or the Sesniak's lunch. This was not an auspicious beginning to our trip.

We were transferred to the airport and, after explaining about the e-ticket, found we weren't on Maya's manifest, although Maya Air had a plane leaving at the right time. We were on Tropic Air to Flores in Guatemala. It cost \$33 apiece in departure taxes to leave Belize.

In retrospect it would have been better if we had transferred on our arrival. This had been suggested but I declined feeling it was too much flying for one day. What a wrong decision. We could have avoided the Radisson and saved some money! Tropic flies small propeller planes and is Belize's airline.

At Flores, Mary and Tom looked suspicious so their luggage was searched. By the time we cleared customs, there was no one to meet us. They must have believed we had not come. Several taxis wanted our business and one enterprising man got on the phone and, after fifteen minutes or so, got through to Via Maya Tours and arranged for us a transfer to the Westin Camino Real Hotel, a half-hour away.

At the hotel, after explaining about our lack of vouchers, we were given thatch roof rooms with a sweeping view of Lake Peten. All our troubles had worn me out so after lunch, I took a nap. Mary and Tom explored the hotel property and rode kayaks on the lake.

When we booked the trip, Tom had worried he would miss the Super Bowl. For some reason this football game was the first Sunday in February this year instead of the last Sunday in January! Even though we knew the hotel had cable TV, it wasn't until we arrived that we found one of the channels was CBS. Thus we had a Super Bowl party in Mary and Tom's room with room service dinner including wine and beer. We put the table between the beds and Tom sat in a chair facing

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the TV set while Mary and I sat on the two beds. It was a good game with the New England Patriots beating the Carolina Panthers with a field goal in the last few minutes.

Monday, February 2. Got to talk to Susan's answering machine. I hope she can straighten this out for it is so embarrassing to be asked for vouchers all the time.

At 7:30 AM Reuben, with Via Maya, picked us up and drove us a half hour to Tikal, the largest and grandest of the Mayan ruins. Twenty-five years ago I took a tour with Swann and we went to all the main Mayan sights in Mexico and Guatemala. Tikal was still in an early state of being excavated. Now much more has been uncovered. Also the Mayan hieroglyphics are being deciphered so we know much more of the Mayan history.

We started with an area of small temples that were built to commemorate several decades of Tikal history. Then we advanced on the old Mayan road to the main plaza where Temple 1 and 2 face each other. On one side of the square was the citadel that collapsed during the excavation, revealing older temples underneath. I clambered up to the second terrace to see the masked figures that decorated an earlier building. These temples were not built to be climbed, and the steps are high. I did my climbing the last time I was here, so I watched as Mary and Tom explored the other heights.

Temple 4 is the tallest of the temples. Still not uncovered, it can be climbed by a series of ladders. Mary took pictures so I could see the magnificent view from the top.

We walked through the "Lost World" area and went on to Temple 5. This temple had rounded walls and at the top there was an opening into a chamber.

I felt that we had walked miles and miles. The bottoms of my feet were bruised. Throughout the walk, we saw much birdlife. The wild turkeys are brightly colored. A coatimundi (a relative of the raccoon) was wandering around unafraid of the tourists. It was a delightful day.

The tour ended at a thatched enclosure where we had the included lunch. I always wonder at these things why it is always chicken legs. What happens to the breasts? Lunch wasn't all that great but I was too tired to care.

Back at the hotel, I collapsed into a hot tub and changed out of my smelly clothes. Mary and Tom overwhelmed me with birthday presents and cards from my family. Then they treated me to dinner on the open terrace of the restaurant. The hotel provided a serenade and a slice of cake with a candle on it.

Tuesday, February 3. We were transferred back to the airport and flew back to Belize. We were met and driven in an old beat-up van with four-forty air-conditioning (all four windows down at forty miles an hour) to the New River, a half-hour away, where we boarded a launch.

The river twists and curves through a deserted jungle while the guide, Arturo, pointed out many birds and even a crocodile. The only signs of human life were the occasional fisherman and a Mennonite settlement. The Mennonite's grow a lot of the vegetables in the country. After an hour or so we were at the lagoon and caught our first sight of Lamanai.

Soon we were at the Lamanai Outpost Lodge's dock. The lodge is as delightful as it was four years ago. Even the resident howler monkey, Mikluk, is still here. He has acquired two wives and two children.

"May I please have your voucher?" "We're traveling on an e-ticket." The Lodge has an Internet connection so I was able to get an e-mail off to Susan. Lunch was a chicken enchilada and a delicious sesame cake.

I washed my hair and rested before a six-thirty dinner, followed by a spotlight tour of the lagoon. Reuben woke up many birds with his light and even found a big crocodile on the bottom.

Wednesday, February 4, 2004. Reuben took us on a private guided tour of the Lamanai ruins. We went by launch to the Lamanai dock and started in the small museum. A new museum is planned. There were pottery shards and some interesting flint items.

We walked through the forest to the masked temple, so-called for the large mask uncovered on the face on an earlier temple. Then it was on to the High Temple that faces the main plaza. There only the temple and the ball court have been uncovered. The ball court is small but it contains a huge rock altar that is full of mercury for some unknown purpose.

These ruins are enchanting to me for they are still largely uncovered and the mounds with the

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growth covering them, even trees, are wonderfully mysterious. I would love to get my trowel out and start digging!

Then it was on to the Stele Temple, called for the interesting stele found there. When Betty and I were here four years ago, this intricate stele was still on exhibit under a thatched protective roof. We worried about the security and our fears were justified. Only a few months ago someone carved his name on the stone. Now the original has been taken away to wait for the new museum and a replica takes its place (without graffiti), Tom and Mary climbed the temple while I watched.

Our walk continued to the residential area and here I found much more has been uncovered in the last four years. We walked through a residence and then admired the nearby Jaguar Temple with a stone jaguar face looking out at us.

We had finished just in time as the big tours from the cruise ships had just arrived. After a quick check of the souvenir stand we took the launch back to the Lodge.

A nature walk was scheduled for the afternoon but I opted instead to have a massage. Anna was very good and gave me a deep pressure Swedish massage. She is from Houston, Texas and loves Lamanai enough to want to stay here for the near future.

My computer memory is acting up and Mary doesn't know how to cure it. She is also having trouble with her camera. We are both frustrated with electronic glitches.

Thursday, February 5, 2004. Spent the morning repacking. I finally got a phone call from the Radisson apologizing for their mistake and telling me they had credited for the charges.

We were then in five airports in less than 2 hours. A Tropic Air six-passenger plane was waiting at the Lamanai airport. Mike, the pilot, flew us fifteen minutes to Belize City. Tom rode copilot. Only Mike took us to the International airport instead of the Municipal airport! Tropic wanted to charge \$150 to get us to the other airport, but we held our ground and they finally only charged \$1.50 each departure tax. We were loaded into another small twelve-seat plane. Tom had to ride co-pilot again. In five minutes we were at the Municipal airport. We were hustled to yet another plane, Tom again co-pilot. We thought we were finally headed for Ambergris Caye. Not at all. We had to top at small Coulter Caye to let off a passenger. From the air we had a beautiful view of the barrier reef arching around the islands, wearing a white beard of surf. When we finally got to San Pedro, I asked Tom if he was ready to try for a pilot's license!

The hotel had sent a van to meet us and it took us to a dock where we boarded Journeys End's launch. It was very windy so the ride was bouncy. At one point the driver stopped and put the boat in reverse so we could see a school of dolphin. We were showered with salt water.

Journeys End is on the north end of the island. You can see the reef a quarter of a mile away. The water was pouring over it like Niagara Falls. It is obviously too rough to snorkel. All you would see would be sand.

We were taken to boxy looking cabins. Inside they were nicely furnished and air-conditioned. The four-poster bed even had mosquito netting if we wanted to leave the window or door open. The bathroom had a shower to die for. There were steps leading down to it so you could sit and bathe or whatever.

The Sesniaks headed for the pool. I found a shady deck chair on the beach. It was lovely lying in the wind and reading. Tom joined me while Mary had a nap.

We decided to go into San Pedro and explore the nightlife. When the 6:00 PM water taxi arrived, there was a large crowd waiting. It was another bouncy speedboat ride and cost \$5 per person.

We got off at Fido's Restaurant and decided to wander a bit before deciding where to eat. There isn't much to see. It reminds me of Harbor Island in the Bahamas, with its dirt roads. Tom selected the Stained Glass Pub for dinner. I had lobster but it was nothing special. I told the Sesniaks they could stay and look for the nightlife. However, they decided to catch the water taxi with me.

I had a time getting the air conditioner to work. Finally I got help on how to use the remote control.

Friday, February 6. Our last day. The wind is still honking and I am not going to be able to swim on the reef. We asked several people what else there was to do. Two people suggested, "Get drunk".

We decided to rent one of the gas powered golf carts which double for cars and explore the

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island. Our first discovery was that the road was almost non-existent. Where it did appear it was badly rutted or washed out. Tom is a wonderful driver. He has obviously spent a lot of time in a golf cart.

After about a half-hour of bumping along we decided to stop at the Capricorn Restaurant for lunch. I had heard it was one of the best on the island. They had a parking area for carts and the tables all wore tablecloths and had lanterns. Because of the wind, they seated us indoors so we wouldn't get sand in our food. This also meant we had no breeze, so it was a very warm lunch. I had a delicious Caribbean salad with hearts of palm, tomatoes and olives.

We continued on toward San Pedro and the road improved a bit and there was more traffic. Forty years ago, a hurricane cut the island in half. A ferry now bridges the gap. We rested at the nearby Hammock House and watched how the ferry was hand-pulled across by a rope. We decided the experience was worth BZ\$5.00 to cross. San Pedro seems to be like New York City. You pay to enter it no matter how you get there.

In San Pedro the road are better. We drove all the way to the airport before stopping for some ice cream. Traffic was heavy. There were not only many carts, but minivans that act as taxis.

Then it was back to the ferry where they managed to squeeze four carts on one load. The signs that read, "Only sixteen minutes to Journeys End", amused us.

Ten minutes later we still had more than ten minutes to go! The last sign said "Almost there, don't give up". Tom thought he new a short cut through another resort complex but the management thought otherwise and escorted us back to the road. We got back to Journey's End with four minutes to spare of our four-hour rental.

The wind had let up somewhat and I put on my snorkel and went into the water off the dock. It was SSS: sandy, salty and shallow. So I gave up. One more thing I will have to do in my next life. A shower felt delicious.

Saturday, February 7. The hotel seemed to have a computer glitch. It took over a half-hour to bring up the bill. Time was getting short so I did not have time to dispute them turning it into Belize dollars at a rate of 2 for 1. Since one dollar is 1.8 Belize, we were ripped off. At least the bill was fairly small since we did not have to pay for the rooms themselves.

The resort launch took us back to San Pedro where a van awaited to take us to the airport. Tropic wanted a voucher. So what else is new? We waited patiently until they found the reservation in the computer.

At the International terminal in Belize City we checked in and then went to the Airport restaurant for a meal. Tom had his last Belican beer.

Mary and Tom's flight to Miami left two hours before mine but I had a good book to read as I waited. The flight to Dallas was only half full. The crew was very attentive and beveraged us twice.

In Dallas a wheelchair got me easily through immigration and then I was loaded, chair and all, onto a buggy and driven to the other terminal.

The flight home was pleasant but I did not get home until midnight. I got off the plane, crossed the aisle and went down an escalator to get my bag. The limo driver was able to park at the curb and come in to assist me.