

MAYA PILGRIMAGE: Xibalba, MaXimon, and our GalaXy
CHAPTER 1: BELIZE (House of Water & Sky)

“I told you we shouldn’t have gone to see that evil saint Maximon,” said my wife Elsa. “We’ve had nothing but trouble ever since that time.”

My wife was talking of our visit to the house of the Cofradia Santa Cruz (Brotherhood of the Holy Cross) in Santiago Atitlan, where a wooden manikin named Maximon scared the living hell out of her. She thought she was standing face to face with the devil, and it made her want to run away from the effigy (idol) as fast as she could.

I, on the other hand, was intrigued by the cultural phenomenon that I was witnessing. I wanted to know who this ancestral god was – and why he played a central role in the Mayan world-view. I had read that Maximon (pronounced “Ma-She-mon”) was a trickster, and I associated that image-concept with the coyote of Native American legends.

My daughter, Susie, carried in her body the effects of Maximon’s mischievous nature. There was an ominous wind and rainstorm that descended on Lake Atitlan the day we arrived at Panajachel – the hub of the lake, and Maximon’s territory. That’s where something sinister invaded her body.

However, I’m getting ahead of myself in the telling of this story. Looking back – in the retrospective mirror of the mind – I would have to say that the tricks of Maximon began in the planning stages of our trip. Susie was teaching at a school in Tehuacan in Mexico, and her contract there would expire in May. My wife and I wanted to visit our daughter, so we planned to land in Mexico City, see the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon in Teotihuacan, and then fly together to San Cristobal de las Casas (Tuxtla airport), and then go to see Palenque. I had always wanted to see the Temple of the Cross, the Temple of the Inscriptions, and other sacred places in that foremost Maya center. That was my dream ever since my first trip to Mexico back in 1987 with a group of teachers.

I had just made reservations for airplane tickets to Mexico City, and tickets from Mexico City to Tuxtla in Chiapas, when news was broadcast world-wide that the swine flu had attacked Mexico. Mexico City was under siege, and several days afterwards, schools were closed nation-wide in Mexico until the sixth of May. We were supposed to arrive in Mexico City on the tenth and fly out on the thirteenth. The governments of both Mexico and the United States were advising travelers to restrict their travel until further notice.

Elsa wanted to cancel the entire trip. Susie said there was a widespread feeling amongst the Mexican population that the health alert about the swine flu was a conspiracy within the pharmaceutical industry to introduce a new drug on the market. There were even rumors that President Obama's visit to Mexico the previous month was a prelude to the announcement of a swine flu pandemic. Elsa wanted to play it safe. She definitely did not want to travel to Mexico. That meant no trip to Palenque for me.

That's when another plan came into view. It's funny how the mind interacts with the environment and with obstacles that it confronts. No sooner had we canceled the trip to Mexico when Elsa and Susie came up with a creative solution to salvage our plan to travel to Mayaland. Even Paul Steven, our son, liked the plan. We would travel to Belize, enjoy a week in the sun, then take a bus to Tikal in Guatemala. We would have a family vacation – just like in the good old days when we traveled together to Chichen Itza, Tulum, Coba, and other places in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Susie arrived in Belize City first. She traveled there by an overnight bus. By the time Elsa and I flew in from California and arrived at our riverside hotel, Susie had already acquainted herself with the surroundings, and with the local population. When we walked across the bridge to the main section of town, where the boat launches to the islands were located, we kept our eyes open for our daughter. We even asked a few people if they had seen a young lady in her mid-twenties.

“Was she wearing a tight skirt, and has blond hair?” asked a young black Belizean man who worked at the boat office.

“She might be,” answered Elsa. “Her name is Susie, and she's about the same size and height as me.”

“Did she have red streaks in her hair?” asked the man in an English accent that was peculiar to the islanders of the Caribbean Sea.

“She might have,” answered Elsa, who was trying to remember her recent telephone conversation with Susie. She thought Susie had mentioned something about a new hair style.

“There she is!” I exclaimed as I noticed a familiar smiling face approach us. She was wearing a tight green skirt, and she had red streaks in her hair, just as the Belizean man had described.

“That’s her,” affirmed the young man, whose eyes didn’t miss a fair-skinned white woman. “So that’s your lovely daughter.”

“Hi Mom, hi Dad,” said Susie as she approached and gave each of us a long-awaited hug.



Later that afternoon, our son Paul Steven flew in from Oregon and arrived at the hotel. We had a happy reunion, sitting on the patio overlooking the Belize River, which flowed southeast into the Caribbean Sea. It was a great Mother’s Day for Elsa. Both of her children were with her. We celebrated at a local restaurant, where a jaguar peered out of a jungle mural at us.



Afterwards, we walked along the seaside to a casino. We contributed to the local economy by throwing coins into the slot machines. My eyes continually were drawn to a beautiful ocean mural, where the life-like ocean creatures beckoned the seafarer to explore the ocean depths. That’s what we planned to do when we made our scheduled trip to Caye Caulker on the morrow.



Early the next day we were happy to leave the unattractive surroundings of Belize City for the sunny isles of the Caribbean Sea. We sat in the speedy water taxi and watched as the riverside buildings faded from view and the open sea welcomed us. The city receded into the background. We were now entering the wide expanse of the water planet.



Less than an hour later the water taxi docked at the small pier of Caye (pronounced “key”) Caulker. It was a short walk on the soft white beach sand to the Tropical Paradise Hotel that awaited us. It wasn’t long before we were in our bare feet walking along the sandy shore to the famous beach at “the Split” – an island phenomenon named after a hurricane split the island into two separate parts.



As we approached the restaurant-bar that was ideally constructed alongside the water - which flowed in a strong current through the Split - I heard a catchy tune playing on the loud speakers.



"OM NUMAH SHIVAYA," chanted the singers. The words were from a Hindu chant evoking the god of destruction – Shiva.

I wanted to hear the words a little better, so I walked through the entrance into the open-air restaurant area and listened to a male vocalist sing a verse:

**"I shall walk across the land that has been chosen
and I shall climb the mountain so high,
I shall go across the sea and across the ocean
and sing with the bird in the sky,
It's only Jah up above man who leads the way
under whose shadow I abide,
Me saying you're running and you're running away
but from yourself you know you can't hide."
[Time For Change, by Apache Indian, 2005]**

It was only after the enthralling song trailed off into the distant heights of the spirit that I happened to turn around and see the ominous handwriting on the wall. Painted on the wall in large black ciphers was the prophetic date of 2012. That was

the year the Mayan calendar was purported to predict the end of the world. And yet beside the number-year were the familiar peace sign and the word HARMONY – ideals of the approaching Aquarian Age.



The words and melody echoed in my mind over and over – OM NUMAH SHIVAYA – and I recalled seeing the trident of Shiva, which symbolized the cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction. The rhythm and movement of the entire universe followed the heart-beat of that principle. Every beginning had its end, and every end foreshadowed a new beginning. That was the law of cause and effect.

“OM NUMAH SHIVAYA,” I chanted as I walked through the threshold of the door back to the beach area where the family was already spread out on beach towels, enjoying the sunshine and the local beer. I noticed a Mayan temple depicted on the label of the Belikin beer.



When we finally got overheated from the sun, we went into the water to cool off. Once we got in, we didn’t want to get out. The most interesting part was jumping into the channel between the separated pieces of the island and floating in the current. It felt like a water slide. I did it over and over again with the kids. It felt invigorating to play with the children again – even though they were adults now.

The split area was also a place to socialize and meet people. There was a wooden table with benches placed in the shallow area beside the restaurant-bar. That's where we sat and chatted with a friendly young man, whom I'll call Tex because he was from Texas. He showed a keen interest in my daughter, and he displayed all his southern gentleman charm. You couldn't help but take a liking to him. He was traveling with his uncle, and they told us about their deep-sea scuba-diving experiences in the famous Blue Hole.

"It's like you're descending into a black hole, diving deeper and deeper into the depths of the earth," said Tex, gesticulating with his hands. "There's coral reefs around that hole that are simply spectacular."

"Were there any snorkelers at the reefs?" I asked.

"We didn't see any, but I'm sure you can snorkel there," answered Tex.

"We are planning to do some snorkeling either here or at Ambergris Caye," I said.

"Your best deal is to go from Caye Caulker," said Tex's uncle. "You see more, and it costs less. Either way, you will be heading on a boat out a mile to the reef, and then they take you midway between the two islands."

"Thanks for the advice," I said. The Great Barrier Reef was the major attraction off the coast of Belize, and we weren't going to miss it.

As I was talking to Tex's uncle, Tex turned sideways to talk to Susie. It was at that moment that I noticed a remarkable tattoo on his left upper arm. It was a tattoo of a bird with its wings spread out on the horizontal beam of a cross. I had always viewed the horizontal beam as the feminine principle – and the vertical as the masculine principle – of creation. Here the bird was hovering like the Holy Spirit upon the face of the waters, just like in the biblical creation story. Tex was happy to see that I was impressed with his tattoo, and he even allowed me to take a picture of it. Thanks, Tex!



On our way back to our beachfront hotel, we were accosted by several competing snorkeling companies. My son always wanted to go on a sailboat, so we chose the local-run small-scale company run by two Belizeans, both named Steve. Steve, the salesman with dreadlocks, told us to be at their booth in front of their boat early the following morning before nine o'clock. We would need to be fitted for snorkeling masks and fins.

Back at the hotel we had a little fun posing as islanders in Rastafarian outfits. It was a colorful scene titled “Rasta in Paradise,” with holes for our heads to poke through. Afterwards, the kids wanted to rent kayaks and explore the mangroves along the shore. I agreed to go with them. We rowed our individual kayaks up through the channel of the Split and explored the inlets along the sparsely inhabited other half of Caye Caulker. By the time we returned two hours later, we were sunburned on our shoulders and legs. With the overcast clouds, we did not think we needed to put on any sun-block lotion. Boy, were we wrong. When we returned to our Tropical Paradise (hotel) for dinner that evening, we already felt like we had too much fun in the sun. Our bodies were on fire from the sunburn.



The next day we made sure to put on some sun-block lotion, even though the damage had already been done to our bodies. We wore t-shirts when we were on the boat – and while we were snorkeling – to prevent any further sunburn. Susie was disappointed that her evenly-developed tan on her body would now be marred by watery blisters popping up all over the sunburned places. My skin usually didn't sunburn easily, but I soon discovered that the Caribbean sun, with the combination of salt water, could wreak havoc on any non-acclimatized skin. Within days, I would be unconsciously popping the watery blisters on my body right along with Susie. We would be shedding our skin not like a snake does – all at once – but bit by bit.

Nevertheless, having a minor sunburn did not prevent us from enjoying our sailing and snorkeling experience. There was plenty of beautiful multi-patterned coral to see. Turtles and sting-rays swam below us on the ocean floor. I thought of “the Crocodile Man” on television, who had been killed by a spiny needle from a sting-ray, as I floated above a sting-ray. I wasn't going to get too close to it. Steve, our guide, took us to a small cavern and showed us an electric eel, which he lured out of hiding by diving down to the hole and moving a large seashell, causing the sand to pick up. The electric eel came out of hiding to see what was happening and who was invading its territory. The most impressive sight for me, however, was watching the boatman Steve throw bait into the water to bring the big fish to him. That's when I watched in amazement as he grabbed a nurse shark with his bare hands for us to see up close.



Sailing on the open sea gave my son, Paul Steven, the thrill of a life-time that he had desired. Even though the sail went up only after Steve the boatman had used the motor to get us at least a mile away from land, it still felt good seeing the wind fill the sail with enough force to move the sailboat along the mildly choppy waters to our snorkeling destination. After an hour of snorkeling, the two-man crew treated us to lunch and drinks. The only thing we didn't get to see was the manatee or “sea cow.” It had not arrived yet to its breeding grounds.



When we returned from our adventurous sailing and snorkeling trip to the Great Barrier Reef, we walked along the shore and watched the frigate birds up in the sky. Some of them had accompanied us out to sea. Now they circled the boats along the shore, looking for scraps of food thrown into the water. After we met up with Elsa, who didn't want to go on the boat ride because she didn't know how to swim, we went strolling down the central street that ran through the middle of the narrow island. There were plenty of shops to poke our heads in. One shop had an impressive wooden statue of a big kahuna and a bunch of worry baskets to choose from. I couldn't resist taking a picture with that awe-inspiring kahuna. His frightening features were a foreshadowing of what was to come when we finally met up with the image of Maximon.



The next morning I woke up early to watch the sunrise. There was something mystical about watching the sun rise out of the primordial waters. It was like watching the first day of creation, when light appeared on the landscape of time.

The Maya sacred book Popol Vuh came to mind, and I meditated on the vast wisdom in its words:

*"This is the recital of how everything was in latency,
calm and silent;
all was motionless, all was peace,
and void was the immensity of the Heavens. . . .
The face of the earth did not manifest itself yet;
only the tranquil Sea was,
and all the Space of the Heavens. . . .
All was immobility and silence in the Darkness,
in the night;
only the Creator, the Former, the Dominator,
the Plumed Serpent, they who engender, they who give being,
were on the waters as an ever-increasing Light.
They are enveloped in a Halo of green-fringed blue:
that is why their name is
'The serpent with plumes of the Paradise Bird.'
Of the greatest Sages is their Being;
this is why the Heavens exist,
and the Heart of the Heavens;
such is the name of the Deity;
it is thus that he is invoked."*

[The Book of the Azure Veil, by James M.Pryse]

After a light breakfast, we were ready to head for the boat launch and our next destination: Ambergris Caye. Island-hopping was the great attraction for tourists in Belize, and we were going with that flow. I took one last look at the Split as the water taxi headed north.



We landed at the major town of San Pedro, and a taxi took us through a busy section of the town to our beachfront hotel on the outskirts of town. Much to our dismay, we didn't have a nice place to swim in – there was too much seaweed in the water. However, the mile-long walk along the sandy beach to the center of town was good exercise for us.

There was a lot to see in San Pedro. Shops and restaurants catered to every desire and every taste. With such a large selection of places to eat, we nearly had to check out every restaurant and look at every menu before we settled on a choice that all four of us could agree on. Susie and I were vegetarians; Paul Steven and Elsa wanted a serving of meat with their meal. Sometimes I would want to eat at a restaurant just because a fantastic mural was painted on the wall. One mural in particular caught my eye. It was a picturesque mural of a Mayan temple set in a jungle, with a colorful macaw flapping its wings, as if preparing to land on a tree growing out of the stone of the temple. My son wanted to eat at a Bob Marley restaurant, with the legendary singer's portraits splattered all over the walls and banners hanging from the ceiling. I couldn't say no to his request. After all, I had played the accordion at his wedding a year-and-a-half ago. And the song he and Alison requested was Bob Marley's "One Love, One Heart." Presently, Alison was teaching a special-ed class while our son was vacationing with us.



We found out the next day that the most economical way of touring the long island was by renting a bike. Going up north would take us to a biological preserve, which was about twenty miles away; going south would take us along beaches. The choice was easy to make. We went south. It was a new experience for all of us to ride on sandy sidewalks and roads, for the beach sand was spread out throughout the island. Elsa in particular had a hard time maneuvering her bike. She almost ran into a wall. We rode as far as we could along the beach, then we crossed over a toll bridge and continued southwards along the beach where we could find a path to ride on. Otherwise, we rode on a narrow road through small neighborhoods. At one point I spotted an iguana.



The road became hard to navigate after a while. It looked as if we were in the boondocks. Dense jungle was on both sides of the unkempt pot-holed road. Later, I found out that if we had ventured a few more miles on the rugged road, we would have ended up at the southern tip of Ambergris Caye, where the Marco Gonzalez Maya site was located. It was not aware that there were Maya sites on the island. I also found out that at one time, Ambergris Caye was connected to the mainland Yucatan Peninsula. Then a canal was built to separate the caye from the mainland.



On our way back into San Pedro we rode by the San Pedro statue, which I had initially seen the previous day when the taxi whisked by it. I took a closer look at it this time. I thought that the statue looked more like a rugged wilderness-type man – something like John the Baptist – rather than a long-robed Galilean that I was accustomed to seeing in pictures representing St. Peter. Later, when we were browsing through shops and looking at jewelry stands, I ventured into the Catholic church beside the plaza and saw an interesting painting of the time when Simon Peter tried to walk on water and Jesus had to save him. That was an interesting picture to have in a place where water surrounded you on all sides.



On the third day, I woke up early one last time to witness another gorgeous sunrise. This would be our last sunrise in Belize. We were heading back to Belize City, where we would catch a bus for Tikal. We boarded the early water taxi out of Caye Ambergris. In Belize City, we bought the tickets for Tikal and left our baggage at the ticket counter. We had over an hour to wait for the bus, so we decided to visit our favorite riverside restaurant for a late breakfast. When we finished and walked towards the exit, I looked up one last time at a picture of the watchful eyes of the “Divino Maestro” (Divine Master) over the threshold.



[NEXT: CHAPTER 2 - TIKAL \(House of the Jaguar\)](#)