CHAPTER 4: COPAN (House of the Bats)

There comes a time in every journey that a person needs to descend into unknown regions. On a pilgrimage, a person needs to plumb the dark depths of the soul and go places where even angels fear to tread. Such was the case for us when we crossed the border from Guatemala into Honduras. The dog at the border appeared to be a Cerberus-type watchdog, guarding the gate that led to the underworld. The inscription above the gate to Hades came to mind: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” We had to pay to leave Guatemala, and we had to pay to enter Honduras. They’ve got you coming and going. A map on the building wall let you know that you were near Copan (ancient kingdom of Xukpi, “corner-bundle”). We were at the outer limits of the far southern and eastern end of Maya territory. Copan Ruinas was the nearby town, the gateway to the ruins of Copan, and as I was to soon find out – the gateway to Xibalba.

The dog was the first sign that we were entering unfamiliar territory. The second sign was even more sinister. I continued following Elsa and Susie past the welcome sign to Honduras, and then I saw a reminder of the health concern that had almost canceled our trip to the Maya world. We had to go through a health check-point. It was a reminder that the swine flu epidemic was a world-wide concern. I remembered that the lords of Xibalba brought all kinds of disease to
plague mankind, and cause death. We passed the medical inspection and were allowed to proceed.

After we checked into the Yaragua Hotel, a block away from Parque Central, we went to explore the small town that had been built for the archaeologists who had descended on the ancient archaeological ruins of Copan. That was when I saw a third sign that was like an unfavorable omen, a premonition of impending doom. At first, the singing coming from a colonial white church across from the park sounded inviting, and I was drawn to it. It sounded sorrowful, like a plaintive dirge. When I entered the church, I did not notice the coffin at the front near the altar under the crucified savior on a cross. The people had just finished singing, and they started to exit the church. My attention was drawn to a painting of the trinity on the left wall. It was a three-in-one trinity that I had never seen before; God the father in a white robe was in the middle, God the Son in a blue robe was on the left hand, and God the Holy Spirit in a red robe was on the right hand. They were One Person – Jesus. The only differences were the colors of the robes and the symbols placed picturesquely in the center of his being: a sacrificial lamb, a heavenly heart, and a descending dove.
It was when the parishioners had assembled outside the white colonial church that I realized it was a community saying goodbye to a deceased person. I watched as the coffin was carried out of the church – across the street – to be placed in the back of a pick-up truck, the kind that carried standing passengers and had a crossbar to hold onto.

Death was a universal phenomenon – it was for everyone. However, the Maya saw death as a gateway to life, and life as a gateway to death. It was a cyclic event like the sun-god descending into the underworld (at night) and rising to a new day (at daybreak). Even the story of the crucified savior had a “harrowing of hell” (Hades or Sheol) episode, when he descended into the darkness of the underworld and brought the righteous souls into the light of day with his resurrection from the dead.

Afterwards, we enjoyed pupusas in the park. A lady vendor opened her basket and showed us the warm pupusas, which had beans and melted cheese inside a corn tortilla. Elsa liked her pupusa encurtido-style: with hot pickled veggies like cabbage, carrots, onions, beets, and a side serving of hot salsa. The day would not be complete for the ladies without a cool refreshing cerveza. That’s what they had after a long walk to the Copan River and back. They enjoyed the beer of Honduras: Salva Vida (Life Saver).
Next morning, we headed out for an adventurous excursion of the ruins I had read a lot about. We had already walked around the area the previous day, just to get a preview and to find out how far from the hotel it was. It was only one kilometer away, a pleasant ten-minute walk along a raised footpath that runs parallel to the highway. There were a few stelae and altars placed along the footpath to whet the appetite for an extensive tour of the ruins. One of the signs describing the archaeological discovery said that there was a “rich 6th century tomb found in this locale.” It even said that “archaeologists have uncovered an extensive building complex and dozens of burial sites here, not far from the Acropolis.”

Finally, the large sign along Honduras highway CA-11 welcomed us to Parque Arqueologico Copan Ruinas. We were anxious to enter the site. The exchange rate was 18 Lamperas for $1 US. A two hour tour with a registered site guide was $25 (450 Lamperas), and a combined ticket to enter the ruins and the tunnels was $30. We paid at the Centro de Visitantes (visitor’s center), where we met our guide Marvin.

The visitor’s center had a welcoming statue of a young corn god. “That’s the Maize God,” said Marvin, who noticed me looking intently at the stone sculpture. “He is called Hun-Nal (Ear of Maize) or Wak-Kan-Ahaw (Raised-up Sky Lord). You can see the maize growing out of the top of his head. There is a story that the Lords of Death killed the Maize God and buried him in the ballcourt, but the hero twins brought him back to life.”

“I was looking at the upraised and downturned palms that are similar to the mudras of fearlessness and protection that the Buddha used,” I remarked. The hand gestures seemed to be mirror images of what I had seen in India.
“It is also a blessing for the corn to grow,” added Marvin. “The maize god is meditating on the death and life of the corn seed that dies when it is planted in the ground and lives when the green sprout rises above ground.”

Marvin showed us the model of the archaeological site, pointing out the main features of the ceremonial civic center: (1) plaza principal, (2) campo de pelota, (3) escalinata jeroglifica, (4) plaza occidental, (5) plaza de las jaguars, (6) zona residencial, (7) tunel rosalila, (8) tunel los jaguars.

The entrance to the site was graced with several squabbling scarlet macaws greeting our arrival. “That’s the sacred bird of the Maya people,” said Marvin. “It represents the rising and setting sun, and the blue sky. Yellow, red, and blue are sacred colors.”

“They’re also the primary colors,” I added.

We walked past a sign that gave some information about the forest as a sanctuary. I noticed that the site was now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Further on, we stopped at another sign to read about the principle group: the
royal precinct.

“This is the epicenter of Copan, a vast architectural complex that was the focus of ceremony and gatherings. It includes the most extensive hieroglyphic writings and elaborate sculpture in the Maya world. The inscriptions on the ancient stone stelae, altars, and buildings carved from volcanic tuff, describe royal genealogy and history, dates, and rituals of sixteen rulers over a period of almost 400 years (A.D. 400-800). The ancient Maya of Copan, as elsewhere, used architectural relationships to mirror their cosmos, often building repeatedly on the same spot, using similar patterns and rituals. What you see today has been excavated and restored over many decades, an ongoing process to fit together a puzzle made of stone.”

Someone had painted a picture of the model of the archaeological site, which gave a bird’s-eye view of the city-state known as Copan, including the river that flowed beside it. Later, that river was diverted by the archaeologists to save the structures from erosion.

A beautiful blue morpho butterfly flew by us as we walked towards the ruins. “In ancient times, the Mayas believed that the warriors who died in battle
turned into butterflies,” said Marvin. “That was the way of thinking of the ancient people.”

“They’ve done their fighting, and now they get their wings of freedom,” added Elsa intuitively.

“Have you seen any other Maya sites?” asked Marvin.

“Yes, Tikal, Chichen Itza, Tulum, Coba,” answered Elsa.

“You know what? This is the best,” stated Marvin.

“They all say that,” said Susie.

“It’s the Athens of Central America,” stated Marvin.

Our first stop was at a ceiba tree. “This is the tree that connects heaven and earth, and Xibalba, the underworld,” said Marvin. “Xi (she) means skull, and dark, too. “Place of the Skull. Place of the Dead. Place of Darkness.”

“Golgotha, place of the skull,” I whispered to myself.

“It was not the same concept like hell,” continued Marvin. “According to our concept, Xibalba, the place of the dead, actually means life. What a contradiction.”

“Well, the place of the skull is your brain, and that’s where all your life is,” I suggested.

“That’s right,” said Marvin. He walked a little further to show us a skull rock.
A little further, Marvin pointed out a ficus tree.

“That’s the tree that the Buddha sat under and received his enlightenment,” I said excitedly, recalling my recent visit to India and Bodh Gaya, where Buddha was enlightened. I asked Susie to take a picture of me, sitting in meditation under the tree. Then we rounded a corner and arrived at the west court of the Acropolis. Susie stood in the center of the plaza and gazed in a circular manner at the panoramic view.

“This is the Acropolis, which means the high city,” stated Marvin, as we looked at the structures that surrounded the west court. “The elite used to live here, and the farmers, like me, used to live in the mountains,” explained Marvin. “They used to build huts for themselves. Pizza huts,” he kidded. We laughed at his humorous remarks.
“We will see the great plaza, later,” said Marvin. “That’s when I’m going to show you the most wonderful thing ever built in the Maya sites: The hieroglyphic stairway. It’s truly amazing, because it’s like its own encyclopedia, like a book built out of stone.”

“Did they decipher what is written in the stone?” asked Elsa.

“Eighty-five percent of it has already been decoded, according to the scientists,” answered Marvin.

“So who does the decoding?” asked Elsa. “Who knows what the stones say?”

“We have a lot of different people from different countries, like the French,” said Marvin.

“But how would they know?” questioned Elsa.

“They make up the whole thing,” joked Marvin. Laughter. “I’m just kidding.”

“No, really, how do they know?” asked Elsa seriously. “I would think the Maya would know.”

“In the sixteenth century, when the Spaniards came into the Yucatan Peninsula, they found Maya writers who still used glyphs like the kind you find along the structures,” explained Marvin. “And some Spanish people, like Diego de Landa, he was asking the Maya about the meaning of those glyphs, and he was translating them into the Spanish language.”

“So they did get it from the Maya people,” affirmed Elsa.

“Absolutely,” replied Marvin. “We have some book made by Diego de Landa that we call like the Rosetta Stone, our Rosetta Stone, which is used to translate Maya glyphs and writing. Today we have Linda Schele, Michael Coe, people like that, from different parts of the world.”

“How did the Maya disappear from this area?” asked Elsa.

“A lot of socio-economic and political problems, over-population, deforestation, malnutrition, and warfare contributed to their disappearance,” answered Marvin. “Also, weather changes.”
“When did this happen?” asked Elsa.

“From about 822 to 1200 AD,” stated Marvin. “You have about a four hundred collapsing time period, a kind of exodus of these people from Guatemala up to the Yucatan Peninsula. Up to Chichen Itza, Coba, Tulum, and others.”

“So this was one of the first ones built?” asked Elsa.

“No, not one of the first, but one of the classic Maya cities,” responded Marvin. “Tikal, Palenque, Kalak’mul, and Copan used to be the four most important cities of the classic Maya period. Four of them.”

“So why is this place better preserved than some of the others?” asked Susie.

“Because they used volcanic material, which is stronger,” answered Marvin. “The other material, like limestone, is porous.”

We walked to the middle of the west court. To our left was a temple of nine doors, known as Temple 11 (according to our guide book), and the structure to our right was known as Temple 16.

“This is what we were talking about, the ceremonial site,” said Marvin, as he continued walking toward a stone figure on the ground. “The snake-looking head is Kukulcan. He is the feathered serpent. In Mexico, he’s called Quetzalcoatl. The quetzal bird is the national bird of Guatemala.”

“We saw a quetzal bird when we were up in a cloud forest in Costa Rica,” I said. It was a quest I was on at the time – to see the legendary bird of all Quetzalcoatl and Kukulcan stories. That was when Susie was studying Spanish in Costa Rica, and we took advantage of that situation to visit her and travel with her. Just like we were doing now.
“Above you is the Wind God,” said Marvin, pointing to a stone sculpture that had a protective covering above it. It was centrally placed below the nine doors that were part of Temple 11.

“What are the symbols that are on the Wind God?” I asked.

“On his back is a tail,” said Marvin. “He’s a monkey, too. And the thing he’s holding onto is like a maraca, a rattle. He was playing music and dancing.”

“For the wind?” asked Susie.

“Yes,” answered Marvin. “And the thing you see in the middle of his maraca, here, is the wind. And there’s another figure like this one at the end of the stair, for symmetry. They always had pairs to keep the balance of the structure, like mirror images. And in the middle, between the two winds, is the rain. By the way, the inscriptions, they’re telling who built this, when they built this, why they built this.”

“And what is this large structure all about?” I asked, pointing to Temple 11.

“The astronomical temple,” answered Marvin. “A place to study the stars. And the little doors you see there are the passageways they used to get in touch with the heavens. There were supposed to be thirteen of them, one of each of the thirteen levels in the heavens. Nine levels in the underworld.”

“Now, those nine levels of Xibalba, did they name them and what each one means?” I inquired.

“Absolutely,” stated Marvin. “Like the place of knives, the place of the killer bats, the place of jaguars, the place of cold, darkness, and fire.”

“But what do those places represent?” I continued my inquiry.
“They’re like penalties,” said Marvin. “Every level had to have a different test, and we had to pass it.”

“The anthropomorphic figure that looks like a shell or a snail means earth; heaven, earth, water; heaven, life, death,” said Marvin, pointing to a design to the right of the wind god structure. “The face was eroded from the rain; that was the rain god. The rain washed away the rain god. Ears were ornate with shells. Usually, the rain god had a curved nose, and he was called Chac, like Shaquille O’Neal.”

We walked up to an altar in front of Temple 11. Marvin continued: “The image that you see on the altar, with crossed-legs, this is part of the rain god’s mask, because people like this priest were reincarnated into the gods that they worshipped. And he’s pointing to his loincloth, to his penis, because he’s cutting himself.”

“Oh, the bloodletting,” I said knowingly. “We read about that.” Elsa showed her bloodletting place on her left arm.

“The other hand shows the offering, with the skull in it,” said Marvin. “With this kind of symbol of the head or skull, it means Xibalba, the underworld.”
“Xibalba,” we repeated with Marvin. It was becoming a very familiar word.

“It was not easy to perform those rituals, cutting oneself,” continued Marvin. “However, I don’t think they felt any pain because they used magic mushrooms first, or mescaline. And they had a plant, I think you call it an Angel Trumpet, flowers that open up like a bell, and are used for shamanic purposes. So they had different drugs for their ceremonies.”

I couldn’t imagine myself going through such self-sacrifice. I took a picture in front of the altar, with a protective stance, demonstrating that to me it was a symbolic gesture of continence, something like the esoteric circumcision.

Next, Marvin showed us a painting of the Rosalila Temple. Then he pointed to the tree above the temple and its corresponding tree on top of Temple 16. And then he pointed to the opening at the bottom of Temple 16, which corresponded to the entrance to the Rosalila Temple in the picture. Temple 16 was the tallest structure in Copan. It was a thirty meter pyramid that was constructed on top of the Rosalila Temple in such a way that the temple below was preserved.

“You would not see it this way, because the Maya people covered it up with a stucco layer,” explained Marvin.

“Why did they cover it?” asked Elsa.

“To protect it,” said Marvin. “If you uncover it, you will get a lot of erosion, and you will lose it all. You have an exact copy of this Rosalila Temple in the museum, if you want to see how big it is, with the paint colors, and everything.”

“It’s an exact replica,” added Susie, remembering what she had read in the guide book.

“So this is Temple 16, Rose-Lila, pink-violet,” said Marvin.
“And how about the ceiba tree above the temple,” I interjected. “Did the Mayas plant it to represent the tree of life above the temple?”

“Actually, according to the scientist’s analysis, there wasn’t any trees about thirty kilometers around here at all,” informed Marvin.

“Just like in Tikal,” I added.

“Then this other one here is Margarita,” continued Marvin. “They built temples on top of each other. So you have Rosalila, Margarita, Pina Colada, Tequila.” We laughed. “Just kidding,” added Marvin, just to make sure we knew he wanted to add some humor to the tour. “These temples were used like king’s tombs.”

Actually, the legend on the picture showed what the numbered items really were: (1) Structure (or Temple) 16, (2) Rosalila, (3) Margarita, (4) Tomb Margarita, (5) Tomb Hunal, (6) Hunal (“first”), (7) Yehnal, (8) Sun God, (9) Quetzal-Macaw.

The stelae labeled Estela P in front of Temple 16 was a revelation to me. I had seen that image in a book. I tried to remember where I had seen it.

“This is a copy of the eleventh king,” began Marvin.

“It’s not the original?” asked Elsa in disbelief.

“We have to protect the original from erosion,” explained Marvin. “From the elements. The original is in the museum. You will not notice the difference if you see the original and the copy side by side. It is the same size, and it is cut like the original one. It is the same color like the original one.”

“This is the king’s face with the headdress, and the arms in front of his chest,” demonstrated Marvin. “This means power. It’s kind of interesting that
buildings like the one you see behind the stela have been used as burial sites for the king; buildings like this have been aligned with the stars and planets; buildings like this have been used as gates to send the soul up to the supernatural world. Kings had the position of the arms similar to what the Egyptians had, with the power scepter. Maya kings had a two-headed serpent that they held to say, I am a king, I am a god. Why do you think the Mayas and the Egyptians had similarities like this?”

“Some people say it’s from Atlantis,” I offered. “Some went to Egypt, some went to the Americas.”

“But there is not any proof,” said Marvin. “That a city like that existed.”

“Plato,” I offered. “He got it from Sidon, a priest of Egypt. And Edgar Cayce with his trance readings about Atlantis.”

“But is that proof?” asked Elsa.

“Yes,” I responded.

“You know, someone from Germany, a woman scientist, she found some cocoa and tobacco remains among the Egyptian mummy remains,” said Marvin. “And cocoa and tobacco is something you find only in America. That is amazing.”

“So you’re connecting the Maya with Egypt?” I inquired.

“That’s the big question,” answered Marvin.

“By the way, what are those three heads on the stela?” I asked, changing the subject. There was something about those three heads that looked familiar.

“Those heads are telling about king’s titles,” answered Marvin. “Because to be a king you had to be a priest, an astronomer, a mathematician, people like that. So those are the aspects of a king.”

“So what is the name of this king?” asked Elsa.

“Smoke Serpent,” answered Marvin. “Butz’ Chan is his Maya name.”

“Was he a priest?” I asked.
“Actually, he was a sun-god,” answered Marvin. “That is his reincarnation. On top of his head. In his heart section is a jaguar. Pop Ah, he was a lord of heaven; Pop means lord, and Ah means heaven. That is the title of the king. He was 64 years old, and he reigned for 49 years. That is amazing because he was a child when he took over, a child-king.”

It suddenly dawned on me where I had seen Stela P. It was in a book by the same author, James M. Pryse, who had started a commentary on the Popol Vuh called “The Book of the Azure Veil.” He compared the faces (heads) on the monolith Stela P to the divisions of the Holy Land of Palestine (Judah, Samaria, Galilee), naming them esoteric representations of man’s three bodies: physical body (of generation), psychic body (centered in the heart), and spiritual body (centered in the head). A fourth face or head (above) represented the “plumed serpent” (unmanifest divine realm), which in biblical terms was expressed as “beyond the river Jordan.”

Marvin approached his favorite structure, Altar Q, the altar of the rulers. This was where he used his pointing stick to its full potential. There was a lot to show.

“Altar Q is the most important one in Copan,” said Marvin. “Here you can see the first ruler and here you can see the last ruler of the main Copan dynasty. The first scene you see here is two rulers facing each other. The first of the kings is handing over the power of rulership to his successor. The dynasty starts with this one and moves all around to the last king. The first king is named Yax-K’uk-Mo – I call him Jacques Cousteau – or Great Sun First Quetzal Macaw. The last ruler, the 16th, was Yax Pac or Rising Sun.”
I walked around the altar – counting from the first ruler – moving clockwise and verifying that there were sixteen figures on the altar of rulers.

“15th was Smoke Shell, 14th was Smoke Monkey, 13th was Eighteen Rabbit,” enumerated Marvin.

“How did eighteen rabbit get his name?” asked Elsa. “Too many kids?”

“No, we don’t know,” responded Marvin. “Some people say he was born at the time of the sacred moon, which to the Maya had a rabbit face on it.”

“What years was he king?” asked Elsa.

“From 695 to 738 AD,” answered Marvin. “Forty-three years he was king.”

“12th was Smoke Jaguar,” continued Marvin. “11th was Smoke Serpent, 10th was Moon Jaguar, who built the Rosalila Temple.”

We continued further. “It was a real concrete jungle here. Super-imposition of temple upon temple, structure upon structure,” concluded Marvin. We were now leaving the West Court and moving on towards the Royal Residence area in the southern section, known as the Cemetery Group.

The Royal Residence area displayed a sign:
“The Cemetery” is the local name for this area, named for the offerings and skeletal remains found here. It is now believed to have been the residential area of Copan’s royal elite families and their attendants. There were over 25 buildings here, built around rectangular patios. The majority of people were buried next to where they lived, as was common practice, which may account for the fact that true cemeteries have not been found in the Copan area.”

It appeared from what we saw that the homes were clustered around a courtyard.
Numerous structures were uncovered here, dating from the late classical period, primarily from the reigns of the 15th dynastic ruler, Smoke Shell, and the 16th and final ruler, Yax Pac (Rising Sun). We walked up to the tomb of Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat (AD 810). He was the ruler who had commissioned Altar Q, the altar of rulers, to be sculpted. Rising Sun was actually the setting sun of the dynasty that lasted almost 400 years. Yax Pac was also called “The Sky is Newly Revealed.” His newly-excavated tomb was not open to tourists.

“Most of the time, the king used propaganda,” said Marvin. “Trust in me because I am the chosen one, they would say. My grandfather or great ancestor Yax Kuk Mo recognized me, so you should too. Blah, blah, blah, like the politicians today.” Marvin was referring to the transfer of power that he had pointed out on Altar Q, when Yax Pac was shown receiving the scepter of power from the founder of the dynasty, Yax Kuk Mo.

As we were leaving the royal residence area, Marvin added his special brand of humor with an anecdotal saying. “The king and his many wives lived here,” said Marvin. “It was a very bad idea. If you have many wives, you have many mother-in-laws. That was one of the reasons why they collapsed. Lots of stress. Just kidding.” Marvin was truly a trickster, a clown, in a Maya guide disguise.
“Why did they collapse?” I asked, wanting to hear Marvin’s version of Maya history.

“They made the same kind of mistakes and had the same problems that we are talking about today,” responded Marvin. “Global warming, drought, disease, deforestation, weather changes, El Nino, natural disasters, all those. Kaput.”

We were now approaching an area known as Structure 18, according to the numbering system that the archeologists used at Copan. It was located at the southern end of the East Court. The small square building with a protective covering had four carved panels erected on top of the structure. One of the panels depicted a sculptured warrior figure identified as Yax Pac, the 16th ruler. The militaristic nature of the panels brought up a discussion of the war-like nature of the Maya tribes.

“Have you seen the movie Apocalypto?” asked Marvin.

“Yes,” we answered.

“Mel Gibson was helped by our archaeologists,” remarked Marvin. “The movie showed the Mayas of the 16th century, just before the Spaniards came. The end of the movie, if you remember, showed the arrival of the Spaniards in their big ship.”

“Are you saying the Maya weren’t war-like before?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” responded. “When we get to the Great Plaza, I’ll tell you about how the 13th ruler was decapitated by a neighboring tribe.”

The whistles, chirping, and chattering of birds resounded through the tree tops as we walked towards Structure 19, which looked like an extension of the previous structure. From here there was an expansive view of the Copan Valley.
In the distance we could see the curvature of Copan River, the same one we had seen the previous day during our exploratory walk. Looking on the east side of Structure 19 and along the entire fenced-off wall running north and south, we could see where the former course of Rio Copan had flowed centuries ago beside the Acropolis and had eroded some of the structures. No wonder the archaeologists felt the urgent need to divert the course of the river.

Susie stopped to take a look at the prominent feature on top of Structure 19.

“That’s the jaguar throne,” stated Marvin, who noticed Susie’s curiosity. “Very aggressive, strong animals.”

“What’s the symbol of the jaguar?” asked Elsa. “The power, the fastness?”

“People used to dress up with the jaguar skulls, especially the warriors,” explained Marvin. “They wanted to be like the strong animal, the jaguar. And the jaguar has been related with the sun-god. The color yellow means the rising sun, and the black spots represent the sunset. Jaguars used to be like the sun-god protector. Especially during his trip to the underworld. The Egyptians believed in cats as the underworld protector. They mummified them and buried them with the pharaohs.”

We descended into the East Court, also known as Jaguar Plaza. The western stairway of the East Court had a relief panel of the great jaguar deity, also known as the sun-god deity Kinichi Ahau. Beneath the giant head, which was a personification of the night sun as it traveled through the underworld (Xibalba), were two dancing waterlily jaguars that flanked the lower stairway’s base. The anthropomorphic jaguar figures seemed to me to be the rising and setting sun, while the central great jaguar deity was the sun at its zenith or nadir.
At the northern end of the East Court was a stairway to the king’s throne. “Up there is where the king would sit up on his throne,” said Marvin, pointing to the top of the eight-step platform that rose above the lower sixteen steps. “The entrance up there used to be like a huge serpent. The Almighty was up there. Every time this animal, the serpent, opens his mouth, it was like a gate, the doorway to get in touch with their gods. And the king was like a god. After they used the drugs, they could say anything they want.”

Susie and Elsa scampered up the twenty-four steps to the top of Temple 22 and stood in front of the doorway that had two Pawahtun titans holding up the sky band.

“You can see the original doorway sculpture in the museum,” said Marvin, who caught up with us after a while. “The entire sculpture represents the Cosmic Monster, who really is not a monster, but a representation of the Cosmic Mountain or Cosmos. Astronomers say it is the body of the Milky Way that arches in an east-west direction across the sky. Others say that the east-west design represents the path of the sun. The front end has the head of a crocodile, and the back end has its tail. The Bacabs or Pawahtun gods lift up the sky dragon, which overarches the earth like the Egyptian sky-goddess Nut. At the bottom of the doorway you can see a row of skulls, which represents the underworld, Xibalba.”
To the left, or west, of the sacred mountain that represented the Mayan cosmos in ceremonial architecture – built by ruler 13, who was known as 18 Rabbit – stood The Popol Nah or Council House. The carved mat design, a criss-cross pattern, above the three doors signified that this was where the council met. In the same vicinity was the anthropomorphic rain-god, Chac.

The sacred mountain (Temple 22) was where I sensed all the Maya gods assembled in council to perform their sacred function of creation, preservation, and destruction. I wore my Maya gods shirt that day to conjure their presence and to bring to mind the sacred ambience of the Maya cosmos: Itzamna (primary god), Chac (rain), Yum Kaax (corn), Yum Cimil (death), Ix Chel (medicine), Ah Chicum Ek (stars), Buluc Chabtan (sacrifice), Bolon Itzacab (wind), Ek Chaun (merchant), Ixtab (suicide), Pahuatun (universe), and Kaui (thunder bold).

I took two panoramic pictures of the view from the cosmic mountain, one looking east towards the Copan Valley and the mountains in the background, and the other looking northwest towards Temple 22, the doorway into an otherworldly contact with the Maya gods. The view eastward at one time, according to archaeologists, had a structure that was destroyed by the Copan River. That structure had a façade of at least six large sculptures of grisly underworld bats, the kind that were described in the Popol Vuh. This was the
House of Bats, the place where one of the Hero Twins was decapitated. The bat was also the symbolic emblem glyph of Copan. Marvin told us that we could see one of those bats in the museum.

We were getting closer and closer to our goal: the Great Plaza and the Hieroglyphic Stairway. Along the way, we stopped to look at the top backside of Temple 11, where a towering sacred Ceiba tree graced the summit.

We had been to the sacred mountain, and now we were at the sacred Tree of Life that connected the earth to the sky above and the underworld below. The Maya looked at the Ceiba tree as the central axis of the universe. The tree was an image that explained many things in life: the Milky Way and our connection to the galaxy, the Tree of Life and the spiral growth in all four directions, the DNA
code from which organisms emerge, and the spinal cord with its nervous system that makes humans walking trees.

Just as we were ready to descend to the Great Plaza, I noticed a man on his knees with hands raised to the sky. He was praying in a loud voice. He was facing in the direction of a large stone head. After he finished his prayers and left with two younger family members, I went over to look at the stone head. A sign said: Cabeza del Anciano (Old Man’s Head).

“That is a Pawahtun head,” explained Marvin, who noticed I was interested in the stone head. “That’s the same deity that you saw at Temple 22 holding up the sky band. Except here the deity has a human head. We call this guy the Old Man of Copan. The head is all that remains from two giant Pawahtuns that stood at the entrance to Temple 11.”

“What was the man praying about?” I asked, curious to know if it was an ancestral prayer to the Maya gods.

“That was what we call syncretismo,” explained Marvin, who had heard such prayers before during ceremonial reenactments. “It’s a mixture of cultures, a mixture between ancient Maya and Christianity.”
A few feet past the Old Man of Copan – one of the four Bacabs or Pawahtuns who were the upholders of the universe – we came to the edge of the hill overlooking the Great Plaza. Down below was the grand scene of one of the great Maya sights, a vast sea-like expanse where the plan of creation in the world above was duplicated in architectural form in the world below.

“That is the Great Plaza,” said Marvin proudly. The Asian features that he carried in his genes proved to him that he had descended from the Mongolian tribes who had crossed the ice bridge from Asia to America thousands of years ago. He was proud of that heritage and all that his ancestors had created here in the southeastern corner of the Maya world. “And the beautiful structure you see with the ugly cover is the hieroglyphic stairway.”

He led us down a trail to the plaza below. Temple 11 was to our right (south), and the west face of the hieroglyphic stairway (Temple 26) lay straight ahead to the east. We were eager to get closer to the majestic structure.

Marvin paused at the bottom of the trail to tell us about the panoramic view that we beheld.

“To your right is the north face of Temple 11,” said Marvin, pointing with his stick. “Up above was the Acropolis, the city on a hill, which we just saw. The
ruling class would descend the same steps of the trail that we came down for their ceremonial celebrations. Temple 11 was built by the last ruler, Yax Pac (Rising Sun), to commemorate the reign of his father, ruler 15 Smoke Shell. Archaeologists believe the tomb of Smoke Shell is somewhere underneath Temple 11, but they haven’t found it yet. We’ll be looking at Smoke Shell in a minute, at the stela honoring him. He was the ruler who completed the hieroglyphic stairway.”

We walked to the stela (marked Stela N) at the base of the temple-pyramid. Smoke Shell (K’ak Yipyaj Chan K’awiil) had two sides of himself carved on the stela: the north side – facing the plaza – had a headdress resembling a bat’s face, and the south side – facing the temple – had the head emerging from the jaws of a jaguar or a serpent. I posed for a picture with the side that had the head emerging from what (to me) seemed like the divine self emerging from the animal self.

“That face shows the king emerging from the underworld, after his visit to Xibalba,” said Marvin after I had my picture taken. “The king emerges from the jaws of a hybrid reptile-mammal. And the zoomorphic animal that you see placed like an altar in front of him on the side facing north is what I call a G.O.K. figure. God only knows - what it is.”
“What is the ruler holding in his hands?” I asked, taking a careful look at the image facing south again. The monolith carved out of volcanic andesite was well-preserved, and the details told a symbolical story of immense importance.

“That’s the ceremonial bar representing his rulership,” answered Marvin.

“It looks like a serpent coming out of each end,” I remarked after closer observation.

“That’s the two-headed serpent, showing that the ruler is divine, a reincarnation of the god that he serves,” said Marvin. “Remember, the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh become the sun and the moon after they defeated the Lords of Death in Xibalba.”

“Was the feathered-serpent their main deity, the over-arching deity?” I asked.

“Yes, he was,” answered Marvin. “That was the Almighty god of all gods. Like I said before, he was called Quetzalcoatl, Kukulcan, Gucamatz, and other names. Two-headed feather serpent.”

“Some say it represents the kundalini, the serpent spinal energy in man,” I said.

“Could be,” said Marvin, remembering something. “Fire is the Strength of the Sky God. That is Smoke Shell’s other name.”

To me, the two-headed feather serpent was the energy that flowed from the lower depths of man’s being, the earth or base chakra, to the heights of man’s
being, the celestial or crown chakra. Holding the ceremonial bar of the two-headed serpent would mean that the person was the ruler of his inner heaven and earth. He had conquered his animal self and had risen to his divine self.

We stopped to read a sign about the hieroglyphic stairway. The left side of the sign showed a diagram of the Patterns in Time: “Buried here are structures dating back to the first ruler K’ínich Yax K’uk Mo and his son and royal successor. . . . This restored structure is the latest version of three older substructures on the same location.” The right side showed a picturesque rose-colored temple and hieroglyphic stairway of what the original probably looked like. It said: “This is the longest pre-Columbian hieroglyphic inscription in America and one of the most remarkable monuments built by the Maya during the Classic Period. . . . In over two thousand hieroglyphs on 63 steps, the text recounts much dynastic history, beginning with references to the dynasty’s founder, K’ínich Yax K’uk’ Mo.”

“Have you seen something like this before?” asked Marvin when he thought we had enough time to read the sign.
“Nope,” I answered.

“Last time I was here,” answered Susie. We laughed.

“Is this all original?” asked Elsa.

“The only two fakes you can see are the tarp (covering) and me,” joked Marvin, the Jester. “The real me is back home, drinking a cold beer right now.”

“He’s learning how to be in two places at once,” I remarked to Susie facetiously.

“What year did they discover the stairway?” asked Elsa.

“1576, the whole thing,” answered Marvin.

“How about excavation, when did they do that?” asked Elsa.

"1891 was when they started the first excavation on it,” answered Marvin. “But it was already restored, the way you see it now, in the 1930s. Most of the inscriptions faded away because of erosion.”

“When did they put the tarp on?” asked Susie.


Marvin pointed to the monolith in front of the stairway and said, “That is the 15th ruler, Smoke Shell, the same one we saw on the statue in front of Temple 11. He is the one who completed the stairway in 755 AD. Ruler 13, called 18 Rabbit, started the lower part of the stairway in 710 AD. Now, the rest of the figures that you see going all the way up are Smoke Shell’s ancestors, his forefathers. 14th ruler is Smoke Monkey, 13th is 18 Rabbit, 12th is Smoke Jaguar, 11th is Smoke Serpent, 10th is Moon Jaguar, and so on.”
“There’s one missing,” I remarked, noticing a missing spot where the second one should be.

“That one is in Harvard University,” explained Marvin. “About 1891 - when you were asking about the first excavation - we were trading with them. They gave us money to continue our studies, and we gave them over 300 sculpted pieces for their museum at Harvard University.”

“So the missing one is 18 Rabbit?” I asked.

“Should be,” replied Marvin. “I say should be because the majority of the pieces are not in their original position. They had been mixed up.”

“How come?” asked Elsa.

“Because they didn’t know anything about the inscriptions, when it was restored by them,” answered Marvin. “When they were restoring the stairway, the upper parts of the stairway had already collapsed in a landslide, either due to an earthquake or due to erosion. So only the bottom part is in its original position, about fifteen steps.

“I see only six spaces for the rulers,” I inquired. “What happened to the rest of them?”

“There was supposed to be fourteen,” said Marvin. “Because Smoke Shell was the fifteenth, standing here as a statue. The rest are just gone. The stairway itself was taller than you can see right now. And the temple on top, like you see in the picture on the sign, was ornate with the rest of the kings of the kingdom or dynasty.”
“By the way, you said you would tell us what happened to 18 Rabbit when we got here,” I reminded Marvin.

“Oh, yes,” replied Marvin. “Thanks for reminding me. Do you see the top of the steps? That’s where 18 Rabbit was decapitated by a neighboring city-state, the Quirigua, who were competing for power in this region. That happened in 738 AD. Copan was almost taken over completely, but they managed to reassert their power, and Smoke Shell restored the glory days of Copan by completing the stairway to heaven. At one time there were thirteen terraces on the sides of the stairway to represent the thirteen levels of heaven.”

Marvin was ready to move on to the ballcourt and the Great Plaza. Before moving on, he pointed out the zoomorphic altar in front of Smoke Shell. “Altar 41 shows a plumed serpent with a human head emerging from its jaws,” he remarked. “A double-headed serpent, like you saw in the ceremonial bar that Smoke Shell was holding.”

“Kundalini, the serpent in the human spine, ascending to the crown of the head,” I said softly to Susie. She nodded knowingly. I was beginning to see a lot of feathered-serpent imagery everywhere I looked, even on the balustrade at the sides of the stairway. As I started to walk away from the hieroglyphic stairway, I wondered if it had a similar function as the feathered-serpent stairway at Chichen Itza – to display the awesome serpent power in the universe and in man.
There was much that I still wanted to know about all the meaningful monuments and the glyphs that told the story of the Maya world. I wished I could read the inscription on the back of Smoke Shell's statue.

While I was lost in thought about all the things I was seeing, Elsa and Susie had moved on with Marvin towards the ballcourt. I caught up with them just as Marvin was explaining the significance of the ballcourt.

“The ballcourt is the place where the most famous Maya game was played,” said Marvin. “The game of life, Maya style.”

Marvin continued talking, explaining the I-shaped design of the playing field, running north and south, the sloping walls with the ring-like vertical hoop, and the temples on top of the eastern and western structures. He pointed to the corbelled (false) arch, which was like an inverted 9-level Xibalba design. There was a macaw head near it.

My mind went soaring to the days when I taught the Popol Vuh story to the sixth-graders in my school. It was an ancient civilizations class, and I discovered
the creation story from a World Mythology book, an anthology of the great myths and epics of all civilizations. The creation story was only a prelude, a springboard to locating the entire epic and having the students draw an illustrated version as a cooperative effort in making the story come to life. The creation of humans out of yellow and white corn was especially interesting to them:

"So it came to pass that the four First Fathers were created. The Creators fashioned their bodies from cornmeal dough. They made corn drinks from ground yellow and white corn and fed them to their new creatures to give them muscles and flesh, and with these strength. And the Creators were satisfied. "We have thought about it and planned it," they said, "and what we have created is perfect!"

These four First Fathers looked and talked like human beings. They were attractive, intelligent, and wise. They could see far into the distance. Mountains and valleys, forests and meadows, oceans and lakes, the earth beneath their feet, and the sky above their heads all revealed their natures to them.

When the four First Fathers saw all there was to see in the world, they appreciated what they saw, and they thanked their creators. "We thank you for having created and formed us," they said. "We thank you for giving us the ability to see, hear, speak, think, and walk. We can see what is large and what is small, what is near and what is far. We know everything, and we thank you!"

The Creators were no longer pleased. "Have we created creatures who are better than we intended? Are they too perfect?" they asked each other. "Have we made them so knowledgeable and wise that they will be gods like ourselves? Should we limit their sight so that they will see less and know less? Let it be done!" [World Mythology, An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics, Donna Rosenberg]

Since then, human beings have been trying to regain the original wisdom that was taken away from them. That’s where the story of the Maize God and the creation of the fourth race (our present humanity) came into play. The ballcourt was the place where creation was reenacted. The death of one creation cycle gave way to another. The playing field was where the seeds of generation were sown so that the new crop of corn could grow. The sun-god would rise from the east out of the underworld (Xibalba), over the top of the playing field, giving life to the substance of created matter, and then descend into the west, back to the land of darkness and death. The Maize Gods continued this cycle of life, death and rebirth, until one day the Lords of Death in Xibalba disrupted that cycle, killing the Maize Gods (an older set of twins) and burying them in the place of sacrifice under the ballcourt. However, a daughter of the underworld, known as the Moon-goddess, saw the skull of the Maize God hanging on a tree and was
impregnated by its saliva. She gave birth to the next set of Maize God twins, who continued the next cycle of creation. They also played the game of life, following the path of the sun into the underworld, defeating the Lords of Death, and rising again in the east as the new Sun and its satellite Moon. What was impressive about the story was the elaborate story-telling skills that the Maya displayed, weaving a tale of a challenging ball game between the twins (sun and moon) and the Lords of Death, and creating monumental structures where that ball game could be reenacted between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. The Maize Gods were central to their stories, just like maize was central to their agricultural and culinary life. It was the substance of life, the tree of life that sprouted in their fields and in their ballcourts. It symbolized the story of human beings, made of the same substance, who also went through the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

From the Great Ballcourt, we walked to the Great Plaza. In the middle of the plaza – that represented the primordial sea – was a four-terraced pyramid that branched out like a tree to the four cardinal directions, a crossroads that stretched vertically like the Milky Way (from north to south) and horizontally like the ecliptic path of the sun (from east to west). It was the symbolic Wakah-Kan, the World Tree, which centered the Cosmos and connected it to the celestial world, earth, and underworld (Xibalba). It was the place where the present creation, the fourth, was raised up to the sky. In front of the temple-pyramid of four stairways – each having eighteen steps – was a faceless stela (Stela 3) built by Smoke Jaguar (ruler 12), whose name evoked the image of the jaguar, who was the paddler in front of the cosmic canoe that sailed through the Milky Way.
The Great Plaza was also known as Plaza de las Estrellas, with seven tree-stones (stelas) erected to glorify the 13th ruler of Copan: 18 Rabbit (Waxaklahun Ubah Kawil). Another meaning of his name was: “18 images of Kawil, or God K, who was the deity of the ruling dynasty or lineage.”

“Are you saying all these statues are of 18 Rabbit?” asked Elsa.

“Yes, everywhere you look, it is 18 Rabbit, or 18 Bunny-Man, as I call him,” said Marvin, the Jester.

“That guy was like Ramses II in Egypt,” I remarked, recalling the statues of Ramses I had seen in Egypt. “He also is everywhere.”

“Yes, and like Egypt, the Maya had a polytheism system,” added Marvin. “The same king in different aspects, different gods.”

“That’s also like Vishnu’s incarnations,” I supplemented. “The fish, the turtle, the boar, the man-lion, the dwarf man, and then the true evolution of the human being as King Rama, Lord Krishna, and the enlightened Buddha.”

“Of course,” agreed Marvin, who was knowledgeable in comparative religions.

“These are all 18 Rabbit?” asked Susie incredulously, surveying the Great Plaza.

“Yes,” repeated Marvin. “This Stela A shows him holding a ceremonial serpent bar, like the kind you saw at Stela N. Here also you see in his headdress a woven mat design symbolizing ruling power, and in his apron you see serpent branches of the world tree.”

I noticed a solar image at the solar plexus region of his body, and an anthropomorphic deity or animal-spirit companion at his crown region. I also
noticed a cruciform chamber below the statue, which I later learned was a place for offerings to the deity.

“Here at Stela 4,” said Marvin, continuing his tour of the Great Plaza, “You see 18 Bunny-Man in the guise of Bolon-Kawil (nine kawil), who was one of the patron gods of Copan. The king is saying the god of my ancestors lives in me, and I embody the ancestors power to bring new life to the people. The altar of a flattened sphere bound at the bottom by a twisted cord is the rubber ball of the ball game. The ball is used by the Hero Twins to defeat the Lords of Death.”

“Stela B has the king wearing a royal crown of Chak, a shell design,” stated Marvin. “Here he is saying he is Chak, the god of lightning, and also rain. Chak is the god who struck the Cosmic Turtle, and where the lightning hit the turtle, a crack developed, and out popped the Maize God. The crack is also the side walls of the ballcourt, where the Maize God is reborn after the Hero Twins bring their father, the Maize God, back to life after their victory in Xibalba. Also, if you’ll notice, there are macaw heads emerging from the corners of the mountain above his head. That is Macaw Mountain.”

We started to move towards the next stela in line. We were moving in a clockwise direction, going north, then east. Susie lingered for a few moments to gather in all the images displayed on the statue. It was like a baroque monument of elaborate ornamentation, somewhat bizarre, and very extravagant and complex. But extremely captivating and beautiful.

“Look at the turtle!” I exclaimed as we approached the next monument. “Wow!”
“It’s two-headed,” stated Marvin. I looked at the other side of the turtle to verify the guide’s statement.

“Why the turtle?” asked Susie, who had caught up with us. She was very interested in turtles, and she even persuaded us to take a trip to the coast of Guatemala to see the turtles that came ashore there.

“Remember the underworld we talked about?” answered Marvin. “The underworld was a place full of water. After someone died, like a king, they were put in a boat, and they were taken to the underworld. And they used the turtle to carry the king, that is, the canoe would sit on top of the turtle as it went through the water. The turtle was said to have also carried the earth on its back. But, of course, there’s more to the story than that.”

Marvin walked to the head of the turtle that was facing north. “One head of the turtle is facing north, and the other is facing south,” explained Marvin. “Now, when the king was taken to the underworld, he was actually being taken to a place in the Milky Way called Xibalba, or Xibalba be. That was the center of the galaxy, and the place where the original stones of creation were raised. It is in the constellation of Orion, where creation takes place. The north and south is the direction the Milky Way stretches across the sky at the time of creation. We’ll talk more about this when we get to the actual stones of creation.”
Marvin walked to the western end of the stone turtle shell. “Come here, and take a look at this,” motioned Marvin.

We walked to the place where he was standing. We saw the red colors on 18 Rabbit. He looked like he had a beard. A jaguar head was at his waist. The king was holding the ceremonial serpent bar with old men emerging from the mouths of the snakes. The headdress had some kind of zoomorphic deity with three heads on top.

“Do you see the Maize God rising out of the cleft of the turtle’s back?” asked Marvin. I had been too preoccupied with looking at the imagery on the king’s monolith to notice what Marvin actually wanted us to see. Sure enough, when we moved several steps back from the turtle, we could see the perspective of the resurrected Maize God emerging from the cleft in the turtle’s back. Even the false beard as a symbol of maize made sense now.

“When the king faces west, like you see, he is an old man,” stated Marvin, redirecting our attention back to the king. “On the other side, the king faces east, and he looks like a young man. The king is saying here that he is the rising sun, and he is the setting sun. He was a narcissist.”

After we viewed both faces one more time, we were ready to move to the next monument at the eastern end of the plaza.

I thought to myself about the apotheosis of 18 Rabbit. He was like the divine king or pharaoh who embodied divinity and represented all the aspects of the godhead. He was also the emanation of all the forces of nature. He was the sun, the moon, the planets, the stars, and the Milky Way. He was rain, lightning, and the elements of earth. He was the Maize God and all the vegetation that grew as sustenance for human beings. He was named correctly: “Eighteen are the images of the God.”
“The altar you see here in front of Stela F represents the mountain monster,” explained Marvin. “He usually is placed on temples to make them sacred, living mountains. Here he probably was placed to show that this is a portal into the other world. The king is facing the west, the setting sun, and vision serpents surround him. He wears the disguise of a jaguar-eared Venus god, the evening star. On his backside is a feathered backrack that goes from the crown of his headdress to his legs.”

Marvin was anxious to show us the Cosmic Hearth stones, so he didn’t tarry long at Stela F.

“These three snake altars were not built by 18 Rabbit,” said Marvin as we faced the triangular formation of the symbolic stones set up to represent the Cosmic Hearth in the sky. “They were added by Yax Pac (Rising Sun) to honor 18 Rabbit and to recapture his glory before he was decapitated. The double-headed serpent allowed Rising Sun to communicate with his dead ancestor through a trance ritual. On the day that the third altar was set up, the sky overhead showed the same design of the three hearth stones in Orion that were set down here below. The formation of three stones in the sky are known as the
stars Alnitak, Saiph, and Rigel. In Maya language, they are the Jaguar Throne Stone, Snake Throne Stone, and Shark or Water Throne Stone. Jaguar paddler set up the first stone.”

“So those three stones are the three stars of Orion’s belt?” I asked, trying to understand the connection between celestial astronomy and Maya cosmology.

“Not exactly,” said Marvin. “One of the hearth stars, Alnitak, is in the belt. The stars in the belt are actually the back of the turtle. And between the hearth stone stars is the Orion Nebula, which the Maya said was the smoke from the hearth.”

I thought of the biblical allusion to the sweet influence (or cluster) of the Pleiades and the bands (or belt) of Orion. There was a verse that said, “Seek him that makes the Pleiades (seven stars or sisters) and Orion.” (Amos 5:8) Was there a link to Maya knowledge of the cosmic fire at the center of the Orion Nebula and the nursery of stars that exists there? The Maya creation story was very intriguing, indeed, as was their knowledge of the celestial skies. Once again the image of the cosmic canoe came to mind as I visualized the paddler gods journeying across the celestial sky to the constellation Orion, where creation took place. The mythic king made his mythic journey to a mythic realm at certain junctures of time and space, and the entire pageantry was played out in dramatic presentations, in ball games in Xibalba, and in the life of 18 Rabbit as he
descends to the underworld (Xibalba) in the cosmic canoe to usher in a new era of cyclic time and space.

“And the creation – when the paddler gods set up the three stones of the hearth – took place on August 13, 3114 BC,” concluded Marvin. That set in motion a whole new set of questions in my mind.

“Does that have to do with the 2012 end date of the Maya calendar?” I asked.

“Yes, it does,” responded Marvin. “The present Maya calendar ends on December 21, 2012. A great cycle of time that takes 5,125 years.”


“Nothing much,” answered Marvin nonchalantly. “It’s just a lot of hoopla about nothing. It’s only the end of a period of time, and then a new cycle begins. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Marvin pointed out one more detail about the double-headed serpent imagery before we moved on to the seventh, and last, monument. The west-facing part showed a skeletal figure, where a kawil or spirit companion emerges; the east-facing part showed a fleshy serpent, where a pawahhtun or sky-raising deity emerges. The side in skeletal form signified death, and the living form on the other side signified rebirth. I thought, of course, of the opposite ends of the kundalini or serpent-energy that rose in the human spinal cord from the bottom of the skeleton and ascended to the skull. I also realized that the three stones of creation could possibly refer to the three stones that were set up in the skull: the pineal gland, the pituitary gland, and the medulla oblongata.

“Here we are at the last stela created by 18 Rabbit,” announced Marvin when we came to Stela H. “Here is 18 Bunny-Man playing the role of the Maize God and reenacting the dance of creation that led to our present fourth creation. He wears a Maize God headdress with the leaves and ear of the maize plant arching over his head. The altar is the throne stone. On his back is a backrack in which he is carrying one of the three animals who would become the throne stones of the Cosmic Hearth. The theme of resurrection and fertility is displayed on the sides. And that is the end of his story as he transforms himself from a king to a Maize God.”
This was where Elsa parted ways with us. She did not want to go inside the tunnels. Susie and I wanted to see what was inside. I took one last look at the panoramic view of the Great Plaza and the magnificent monuments erected to recreate the story of creation and the story of the deification of a man-god.

We followed Marvin back to the East Court, where we first entered the Rosalila tunnel. Susie and I felt like we were going into the depths of the earth, into the underworld of Xibalba, as we descended into the dark tunnel. On the wall at the bottom of the steps was a sign explaining what lay ahead: “This building was dedicated by Copan’s tenth ruler, Moon Jaguar in the year AD 571. The temple as a whole represents a deified mountain, a place of creation, a source of life-giving water, and the birthplace of the sacred maize plant. The sun-god, a key player in the creation story, rises majestically over the doorway.”

“The person who found Rosalila was an Irishman named John Gallagher (aka Juan Galindo) in 1834,” said Marvin as Susie and I followed him through the narrow tunnel. “He stole everything.”

We wandered for a short way (about 25 meters) alongside the Rosalila (rose-lilac) temple, feeling the cool walls and the presence of ancestral history buried under Temple 16. There was a small enclosure where we were able to see what looked like a wall of the buried temple that had been preserved during the centuries. Unfortunately, the barrier of Plexiglas windows prevented us from
getting a good view or from venturing for a closer look. Marvin reminded us that we would get to see a fantastic replica in the museum.

The other tunnel, Tunnel of the Jaguars, had a longer walk (about 95 meters). We entered the tunnel at the Court of the Jaguars. The jaguar pointed the way to the underworld beneath Structure 17.

Marvin’s voice echoed in the underground walkway like in an echo chamber. An eerie feeling of the presence of ancestral spirits pervaded the space through which we walked. At one point we could see ancient steps that disappeared into the wall of a partially-uncovered section. At another point we could see a partial restoration of a hieroglyphic step. Marvin explained that many levels were piled up on each other. Sometimes, a new structure would be built on top of a previous structure, most likely at the end of a 52-year cycle. Sometimes the structure would be torn down and buried beneath a new structure. Temples were like living things; they died, they are buried, and an offering was brought to it. Sometimes there was a special event at the end of a 20-year cycle; or when a new king ascended the throne, there would be a new pyramid built on top.
At one section of the long tunnel, there was a roped-off area where the tunnel seemed to go under another temple. Later I found out that the area was under Temple 20, the House of the Bats. That’s where the Hero Twins suffered their first defeat in Xibalba. Further down the dark tunnel there was an interesting Macaw Mask made out of stucco. A sign explained the use of the Macaw Mask:

These large masks were molded in stucco with a Macaw design, an animal associated with the God of Brilliance. These stucco masks have a decorative function in the Ante base and were originally painted in resplendent colors, among these red and green. Their placement on the west side occupies both sides of the staircase; two are on the east side and a larger one is found in the center of the northern and southern sides.

I couldn’t help but think of the story of Seven Macaw in the Popol Vuh; he was the egoistic being who had to be defeated by the Hero Twins before the fourth creation could come into existence. The old order had to give way to the new order.
When we came out of the Jaguar tunnel, we were facing a high wall that was the remnants of Structure 21, the part that had not been eroded by Rio Copan.

I was ready to walk through the reptilian jaws of the terrible monster – the entrance to Xibalba. There was no turning back now. Every journey demands that the hero face the tests of the Lords of Death in the underworld in order to refine the character and the soul. The path through the proverbial jaws of death became dark. A sign on the wall described the significance of this final step into the unknown:

“According to ancient Maya thought, tunnels, or more accurately nature caves, provided access to Xibalba, or the mythological underworld. The entrance to such a cave can take the symbolic form of the open mouth of a serpent or crocodile monster as reproduced at the head of this tunnel. The underworld is the realm of the dead and the abode of ancestors, as well as the home of fearsome beasts, demons and death gods. We learn from the Popol Vuh legend that the primal ancestral Maya “Hero Twins” were subjected to a series of trials by the Lords of the Underworld before ascending to the celestial cosmos.”
There was light at the end of the tunnel, however. Not only was there light, but the vision was absolutely sublime. The full-scale replica of the inner temple named Rosalila came into view through the opening at the end of the tunnel like a resplendent revelation of what I would imagine the thirteen levels of the Maya heaven to be. The sculpted façade, with a well-preserved crimson and jade-colored mask of the Sun God over the entrance to the sacred place, welcomed the visitor. I found out that it was the face of the king who founded Copan’s dynasty, Great Sun First Quetzal Macaw. An awesome Cosmic Monster adorned each side of the doorway, making the temple a living mountain. A double-headed serpent made an arch in the celestial sky above the Sun God, whose outstretched wings were ready to take the beholder of the vision on a celestial journey.

The Museum of Mayan Sculpture was in reality the finest in the Maya World simply because of the full-scale reproduction of the Rosalila Temple. Everything else pales in comparison. As I walked through the museum and looked at the original sculptures and monuments, I read the signs and marveled at the exquisite craftsmanship of the Maya artists. I marveled at the rich culture and history. I wanted to learn more. That’s when I decided that I would preserve the memory of my own pilgrimage by writing about it when I got home.

The first monolith that I encountered was the familiar Stela P from the West Court. Then there was the Buddha sculpture that was found during tunnel excavations beneath Temple 16.

[Note: For the sake of brevity, I will provide more information with each picture that you click on. There will be a separate page for each picture, and I will provide the descriptive notations that I copied from the signs at the museum.]
Altar Q from the West Court provided an original of the ruling dynasty. Marvin was right – it was hard to tell the original from the reproduction that was placed at the site. Next was a structure that commemorated the founding ruler of Copan.

Stela 2 from the ballcourt was a monolith that Marvin had overlooked. It was an important feature in the section of the museum titled Underworld Symbolism.
The floor marker nicknamed “Motmot” was the cornerstone for the ancient city of Copan.

The next image was the bat, the emblem glyph of Copan. This was the image that dominated the East Court at Temple 20. It was the image that defeated the Hero Twins in Xibalba. The section from the Popol Vuh about the House of the Bat is reserved for the conclusion of this chapter. You can read it now by going to the end of the chapter. Another image, which reminded me of the bat image, was the replica of the macaw, which represents the egoist Seven Macaw, who falsely claimed to be the sun and moon during the era of the wooden people.
(1) Stela A (original) from the Great Plaza. (2) Head with masked-headdress.

(1) Stone censers, Platform of Structure 17. (2) Water Bird and Streams
(1) Macaw Head Markers, Ballcourt. (2) Maya head with Mask-Headress.

(1) Altar G-1 (original), Great Plaza. (2) Ballcourt Façade Reconstruction, Structure 10.

(1) Old Man, Pauahtun head, Temple 11. (2) Hieroglyphic panel (south), East Doorway of Temple 11.
(1) Temple of the Meditation (Temple 22); Entrance, temple 22, with Pawahtun titans on left and right, holding up the sky band.

(2) Witz Masks, Corner of Temple 22.

(1) Scribe’s Palace, Structure 9N-82. (2) Scribe 1, from structure wall; (3) Scribe 2, behind glass.
(1) Hieroglyphic Bench, Structure 9M-158. (2) POPOL NAH (House of the Council)


(1) Skyband bench, Structure 8N-66 Central. (2) Structure 8N-66 South.
(1) Selection of Motifs, Structure 8N-66 Central. (2) Masks, Temple 26

(1) Façade Motifs (Warrior, Seated Figure, etc.) Temple 26.

It was time to say good-bye to the Rosalila Temple within the glorious Structure Museum of Copan. Just a few more pictures in front of the jewel of the Maya World, and we were on our way out of the archaeological site that gave us a whole new perspective on the great Maya civilization.

A girl met us outside the museum. She was selling little maize dolls. The Maize God was a symbol that was around in many forms. I bought one to take home with me.
After leaving the archaeological site, I reasoned that I had escaped the clutches of Xibalba – or so I thought. Little did I anticipate what would happen in the darkness of night after the sun had descended into the underworld. That night I had a dream-vision (lucid dream) that shook me to the core of my being: We (Elsa and I) were flying back to SFO (San Francisco). I saw that we were landing somewhere unfamiliar – through a crowded roadway. When we landed, I inquired where we were. No one knew. I felt the need to leave the plane and find out. I wandered amongst the people of the town. No one could tell me where we were. All of a sudden, I got a funny feeling that we probably crashed and died, and I had gone to “another place.” I tried to look at newspapers, but there was no indication of my whereabouts. I looked at the sky and saw strange looking shapes and forms. I instantly knew that I was on another planet. The thought occurred to me that maybe we were abducted. And then I woke up! I realized immediately that Xibalba was a state of mind – in a place called the House of the Skull! Nevertheless, it felt strange, like a bi-location, a sense of being alive and dead at the same time.

The following morning, I stopped in the colonial church in Copan Ruinas to take one last look at the image of the trinity that I had seen before. After seeing the Maize God in many forms, I now saw the Christian God as a deity that also took many colors and forms.

The trip to Copan proved to be more than I expected. And the experience of going into the underworld (Xibalba) of the Maya Cosmos proved to be heavenly and intensely revealing.

Crossing the border back to Guatemala was easier this time. We knew what to expect. All it took was a few lempiras and a few quetzals. I kept a one lempira bill as a souvenir because it had the Copan ruins on it, with a picture of the hieroglyphic stairway (to heaven) and the ballcourt (of Xibalba).
The stone guard dogs did not look as threatening as they did when we first saw them. In fact, they looked very friendly, just like the Maya people.

Hunahpu and Xbalanque in the House of Bats

Next they were put inside Bat House, which had only bats inside. It was a house of death bats. These were great beasts with snouts like blades that they used as murderous weapons. When they arrived there, they were to be finished off. They had to crawl inside their blowguns to sleep so that they would not be eaten there in this house. Nevertheless, it was because of a single death bat that they gave themselves up in defeat. It came swooping down. But this was merely a way to manifest themselves when it occurred. Thus they pleaded for wisdom all that night as the bats made a din with their flapping wings.

“Keeleetz! Keeleetz!” they said all night long.

At length things quieted a little, and the bats became motionless. Thus one of the boys crawled to the end of his blowgun. Xbalanque said, “Hunahpu, do you see the dawn yet?”

“I will go and see for certain if it has happened,” he replied. Hunahpu truly wanted to look out of the mouth of his blowgun to see the dawn. But when he did so, his head was cut off by the death bat, leaving the greater part of his body behind.

“What? Hasn’t it dawned yet?” asked Xbalanque. But Hunahpu did not move.
“What is going on? Hunahpu wouldn’t have left. What then has he done?”
But nothing moved; only the rustling of wings was heard. Thus, Xbalanque was ashamed: “Alas, we have given in already,” he said.
At the word of One Death and Seven Death, the head was placed atop the ballcourt. Thus all the Xibalbans rejoiced because of the head of Hunahpu.

[Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Quiche Maya People, translation and commentary by Allen J. Christenson]


BONUS:
Map: Plan of the ancient site of Copan

http://www.famsi.org/reports/03075/CKguidebook_english.pdf