

### CHAPTER 3: PETEN (House of Spears)



RAZOR HOUSE  
ch'am or ch'ayim na

We arrived on the island of Flores in the afternoon. The small island in Lago de Peten Itza (Lake Peten Itza) was connected to the mainland by a short, man-made causeway. The causeway connected Flores with the town of Santa Elena. The shuttle van dropped us off at the bus stop at the northern end of the causeway, and we walked through the cobbled streets with our luggage trailing behind us.

We used our Rough Guide to Guatemala handbook to locate a suitable accommodation for several nights. There were several hotels to choose from, and we walked through the curved street of pastel-colored buildings in search of an appealing place to stay at. Calle Union (Union Street) curved along the western side of the lake, joining at the northern end with Calle Fraternidad (Brotherhood). That's where Elsa and Susie saw a pretty building with a clean ambiance – La Casa del Lacandon (House of the Lacandon). They went up to inspect the rooms prior to making their decision to stay at the place that afforded them an ideal view of the lake from a spacious balcony. I waited in the lobby with the suitcases. I spent my time looking at the large painting hanging on the wall, depicting what appeared to be an old woman with long black hair sitting in a hammock that was strung between two trees. The title under the painting read “El Lacandon.” I wondered who the Lacandon people were.



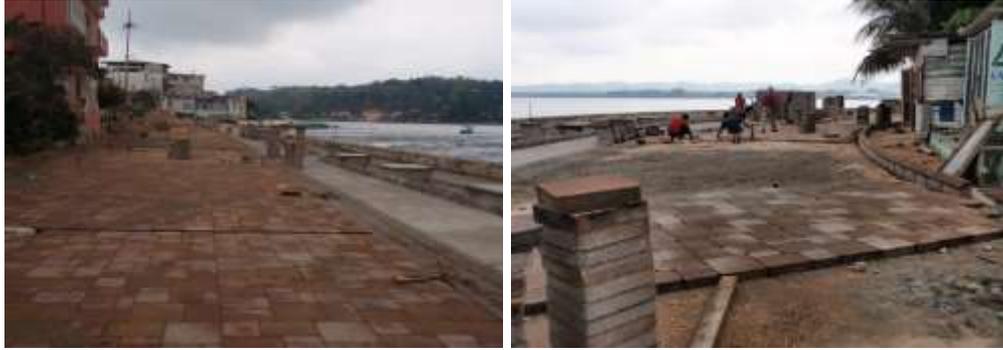
**The view of Lake Peten was spectacular. We could see a row of colorful buildings across from us in a town named San Miguel, which was part of a peninsula that could only be reached by traveling on a dirt road from the main highway that went to Tikal. I brought out my binoculars and surveyed the buildings on the shore and the green hills behind them.**



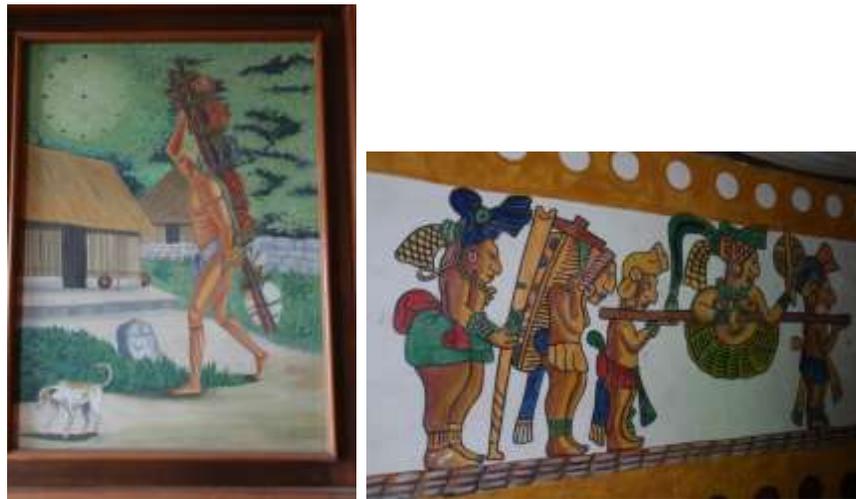
**Before we left for a walk around the island, I wanted to find out from the lady at the registration desk about a good place to eat. She told me the name of several good places to eat. I couldn't help but notice the artistic creation above the desk near the wall. It looked like a sculptured mosaic of a stela, a snake, and a horned skull of an animal. The snake looked so real, with its mouth wide open, displaying its threatening fangs.**



**We walked around the town, starting with the new promenade that was being created along the west, north, and east side of the small, compact town. We watched the workers use a cutting saw to fit the red brick slabs in place. The promenade and roadway provided a scenic walk and drive along the island's main attraction – Lake Peten Itza.**



**My son was hungry, so we poked our heads into the restaurants that the lady told me about. We checked the menus to see what was agreeable to our stomachs. Once again, I was more interested in the art work than the food. One painting caught my attention: a tall barely-clad Maya man was carrying a seven-layered assortment of pots on a long two-stick backpack; a Maya clock with the dot and bar numerals for the 12 hours of the day was pictured in the top left corner. At another restaurant there was a mural painting of a royal figure, which looked like a corn-god, being carried by two servants; the unique Maya colors and facial features were astounding.**



**The family settled on a restaurant that suited their taste and my intellectual curiosity. Lo and behold, as we walked through the door, I was immediately mesmerized by a wooden sculpture of a jaguar-man. The half-jaguar, half-man stood on a wooden pedestal; his face was looking downwards, and his jaguar-looking feet and legs were arched in a dancing stance. His hands and forearms were covered with what looked like jaguar-paw gloves. On top of the man's head was an awesome teeth-baring jaw and head of an upward-facing jaguar. The jaguar and the man were one, united in a majestic anthropomorphic manifestation.**



**After dinner we continued our stroll up and down the streets of Flores. It seemed as if we were walking through the history of Guatemala. One street, named 15 de Septiembre, commemorated Guatemala's independence from Spain in 1821. Another street, named 10 de Noviembre, commemorated the election of President Guzman in 1950. A street named Calle Centro America commemorated the brief historical federation that Guatemala belonged to: the United Provinces of Central America, which broke up in civil war in 1838-1840.**

**It was on the street named Centro America that I glimpsed a painting - through the open door of a restaurant - of the cosmic canoe that I had seen at Tikal. The proprietor of the restaurant saw me taking a picture of the canoe mural, and he smiled approvingly.**

**"You like the painting?" he asked.**

**"I saw the same canoe with the seven passengers at Tikal," I said.**

**"Some Mayas believe the canoe represents the Milky Way, the Xibalba be, or road to the underworld," said the starry-eyed proprietor. "And the animal deities are the constellations. Those Mayas are the star-gazers. They explain all Maya symbols and glyphs through the language of the celestial sky."**

**"What do you think it represents?" I asked.**

**"The center of Maya life was the maize-god," said the owner of a restaurant whose staple food was the corn tortilla. "The entire journey of the maize god is tied to the death and rebirth of the sun. The Jaguar Paddler represents the darkness, where the seed dies in order to be reborn. The kankin dog accompanies the sun on its journey through the dark underworld, and the**

**macaw parrot represents the air element that is needed for the creation of maize, the substance of life. You notice the maize-god sits in the center of the canoe. The spider monkey represents the previous creation before the maize people. The iguana lizard represents the element of fire from the underworld that gives heat to the new creation. The Stingray Paddler completes the ascent of the solar canoe back to the light of day. Also, being a fish, the stingray represents the water element, without which the maize could not come to life.”**



**That explanation gave me a new perspective on the profound importance of maize and the solar deity embedded in the corn seed. The substance of life – on earth as it is in the heavens. And ultimately, the nourishment that gives life to the people on earth.**

**That night, before the early morning dawn, I had a dream of a fish, which resembled a stingray. It was caught on a line. When I brought it in, I took out the backbone, its skeletal structure. I associated it with the Stingray Paddler in the Maya mythic story. Now I felt as if the animal spirits of the jaguar (lunar night) and the stingray (solar day) were accompanying me on my journey through the Maya world.**

**Early in the morning, a shuttle bus picked up my son for his journey back to Belize to catch a flight back to Oregon, and back to his wife.**

**Now it was just the three of us: my daughter Susie, my wife Elsa, and I. From here on out, I would depend on the two women in my life to plan and direct the rest of the trip throughout Guatemala. We had two weeks, and I hoped to make the most of it. Susie knew I wanted to see the Maya archaeological site in Copan, Honduras, and Elsa wanted to enjoy some time on the beach. We drew up a tentative plan of places all three of us would enjoy visiting: the ruins in Copan, the colonial city of Antigua, the coastal town of Monterrico, the famous Lake Atitlan, the market day in Chichicastenango, and the museums in Guatemala City.**

We were initially planning to spend two nights in Flores, but after some deliberation, we decided there wasn't much to do on the island town. We talked about revisions to our plan over a cup of coffee at a local restaurant. I studied the map of the lowlands of Peten on the wall. The map said Peten in northern Guatemala was the "Corazon del Mundo Maya" (Heart of the Maya World). There were a lot of archaeological sites to explore, but we had other places to see. This was my introductory trip to Guatemala, and I trusted Susie to show me the highlights of the land she had visited six years ago.

Our next decision was to walk to the nearby town of Santa Elena at the southern end of the causeway and find the bus station. It was less than one kilometer to walk on a stone-paved street.



There was an interesting billboard in Santa Elena that intrigued me. It advertised a spiritual center, and it had an attractive sub-title: "Secretos de la Selva" (Secrets of the Forest). On the left side of the wide billboard was displayed a flow of rainbow-colored lights entering a pair of outstretched receptive hands, and on the right side was a Christ-like image with outstretched giving hands. It seemed to be a perfect blend of a new age image of the auric energy in the hands and a Christian image of the healing hands of Christ.



When we arrived at the bus station, I watched as Susie and Elsa interacted with the locals and the ticket counter agent to get all the information they needed

to make their next move. An overnight bus to Guatemala City would be the perfect solution. We wouldn't need to waste a night at the hotel in Flores, and we would be ready to see the ruins in Copan the following day. It was nice having guides that both knew Spanish. I made good use of my time by studying a chart of the Maya number system on the station wall. The base 20 (or vigesimal) number system used dots (for ones), lines (for fives), and shells (for zero). The base 20 system utilized the digits on both hands and the toes on both feet.



As we walked leisurely across the causeway back to the island, I noticed an archway with an inscription welcoming the tourist to Isla de Flores (Island of Flowers): “Bienvenidos a Isla de Flores, Plaza Turistica Concordia.” It was a perfect place to take a picture with my lovely daughter Susie.



Right after we went through the archway, Susie noticed a bowl of mango pieces in plastic baggies on a park bench. What happened afterwards is a story in itself, and I asked Susie to write an account of the incident in her own words. Here is what she wrote:

## MANGO BOY

By Susie

What do you do in Guatemala when you're a 10-year-old boy and don't know how to read? Sell mangos, of course! This is who we had the pleasure of encountering on our leisurely stroll in the sleepy island town of Flores.

Crossing the bridge on foot to Flores, my Mom, Dad and I passed by a quaint lakeside park. It seemed like the perfect spot for a post-shopping rest. And what better way to enhance our break than with a refreshing fruit snack. Mangos are readily available on every street corner and near every park bench. They come cut up in bite-sized pieces, packed away in plastic bags for easy eatability. Green and tart, or sweet and vibrant orange, these Latin American mangos are like no other. They are served either simple (natural), or more typically with lemon and spicy sauce. They accompany any laid-back sunny day exquisitely. The pleasure of the mango indulgence this day, however, was not the slippery texture of mango juice dripping down our chins, but rather the surly maturity of our mango vendor.

We approached the collection of bagged mangos in small plastic baggies, carefully scrutinizing the perfect one. We vacantly surveyed the surroundings for our illusive mango vendor. Expecting a scratchy-faced woman in a traditional dress or a bunched-over man with a cane, we suddenly heard a crunch of leaves in a tree above our heads. Suddenly, a plump 10-year-old boy appeared. He had a despondent look on his face, as if we had interrupted him from a much more important job.

“Cuantos quieren?” (How many do you guys want?), he demanded hurriedly.

“Umm...tres mangos?” I replied, anxious to finish this uncomfortable transaction and relish my sweet mango.

“Pero solo quieremos unos muy dulces!” (We only want really sweet ones) interjected my mother, always on the quest for the perfectly sweet mango, shunning the typical Latin American slightly under-ripe, salsa-fied variation. My dad also preferred them sweet to satisfy his insatiable sweet tooth, inherited from his German mother.

“Y yo lo quiero con mucha salsa!” I, on the other hand, love both mango styles and opt for a bit of spiciness with mine. On this trip, it's a simple diversion tactic, so my parents won't take any from me.

We paid the boy the 24 quetzales (about 3 dollars) and looked for a nice bench along the promenade. But the boy wasn't done with us yet. He wanted to enlist us in his much more important job of the day. Within a half-wink of our sun-tired eyes, the chubby kid had agilely swung himself up into the same tree.

“Dame un palito!” (Give me a branch), he yelled from above in his gruff, commanding voice. He seemed much too forward and forceful for a boy his age. I suppose that's a much needed quality for one starting to work at such a young age. Under his dictatorial presence, I couldn't help but say, “Por supuesto!” (Of course).

I scoured the premises for a stick, not even thinking to ask what the stick was for, but I turned up empty-handed. I looked up at the boy and said, “No lo puedo encontrar”.

With a frustrated scowl, the boy leaped from the tree and swooped down to quickly find a branch. I felt totally demeaned by this menial task and concluded that I had lost all of my natural abilities. The boy brusquely handed me the stick and resumed his position in the tree in a manner of seconds. I realized that although he may be selling mangos on a school day, this boy was in many ways more learned than me.

“Bueno...ya dame el palito,” (Okay...now give me the stick) he demanded.

I passed the stick up to him and finally got the courage to ask what he was doing up there.

“Hay un nido aca, y quiero los huevitos,” (There's a nest here and I want the eggs) the boy stated. Sure enough, we gazed up into the tree and noticed a small nest.

Accustomed to the ways of the city, I questioned why he wanted the eggs, “Y que vas a hacer con los huevos?”

“Comerlos por supuesto. Son muuuuuyyyy ricos!” (Eat them, of course! They are very delicious!) He then proceeded to try to get the nest down with a stick.

Now as a vegetarian and yogi, I was suddenly skeptical of this endeavor and felt guilty as his accomplice-in-crime.

I told my dad what the boy was up to, and he was not pleased. I translated this sentiment to the boy. “No estamos de acuerdo con esto. No nos gusta hacer dano a los animales. Tampoco comemos carne.” (We don’t agree with taking these eggs. We don’t like to harm animals, nor do we eat meat.)

The little boy scoffed, obviously thinking this absurd. “Pero solo son huevos.” (But they are only eggs.)

My ethical stance lost in this situation, as I was completely under this boy’s spell, totally and irrevocably willing to help him in this criminal act. He continued to poke the nest with the stick that I had unwittingly supplied him with. Not only was this boy street-smart, but he was conniving as well. Having no luck so far, he asked me to further aid him in this offense. “Arranca este palo para que pueda subir mas.” (Pull back the branch so that I can climb higher). I, of course, complied, hoping deep down that his attempt will fail.

As he worked on this most important job of the day, I became increasingly curious as to this boy’s situation. I started to grill him on his life. “No hay escuela hoy?” (There’s no school today?)

“Si, pero no me gusta la escuela. Prefiero vender mangos.” (Yes, but I don’t like school. I prefer to sell mangos.)

“Sabes leer?” (Do you know how to read?)

“No me importa.” (That doesn’t matter to me), he said in a matter-of-fact voice, as if the questions I was asking were completely nonsensical.

“Pero que vas a hacer con tu vida?” (But what are you going to do with your life?)

“Vender mangos por supuesto. Es un buen trabajo,” (Sell mangos, of course. It’s a great job) he replied, obviously having the world figured out at the ripe age of 10. I had to admit, I was a bit envious. At the age of 28, I was still confused and struggling to find a steady job. And I’ve always fantasized about hanging out on the beach, selling coconuts. This boy was on to something. Maybe a simple life of days selling mangos and climbing trees for eggs was better.

Ruminating on the Guatemalan education system and an idyllic life, I noticed the boy appear on the ground again beside me. “Que paso?” (What happened?) I inquired, looking into his empty hands.

**“No los pude alcanzar,” (I couldn’t reach them) he frowned.**

**“Ah...que lastima,” (Ah..what a shame) I conveyed, trying to hide my growing smirk, knowing that the vegetarians and educated wanderers had won this round today.**



**The Mangos were sweet and juicy. Susie’s bag of mangos was spicy and juicy. We found out that eating mangos was our favorite snack. We felt it was safe to eat because it had to be peeled. Susie was courageous when it came to eating street food, but I chose to be careful and follow what the health authorities advised when traveling in a foreign country. Back in town, the ladies felt it was a good time to relax in the afternoon sun with a bottle of beer. And what better beer to try than the local brew: Gallo Cerveza (Rooster beer). The label said it all: “Tradicion y orgullo de Guatemala, famosa desde 1896” (tradition and pride of Guatemala, famous since 1896).**



**Since I wasn’t a beer drinker, I spent my time admiring a stone carving with a Maya motif at the lakeside restaurant. I was especially impressed by a**

tapestry with rows of Maya deities and images, the highlight being a central pyramid with a green quetzal bird on top.



There was still lots of time to kill, and we had agreed earlier that it would be nice to take a boat ride on Lake Peten Itza. There was a boat launch near the hotel, and we found out we could have a sunset cruise – if we desired. I was willing to go anytime, but Elsa really wanted to see the sun set over the lake. The sign at the boat launch said, “Paseos en Lancha” (Pleasure boat trips). Little did we know what was in store for us when we got into that pleasure boat, which had a small canopy for shelter in case of rain. I looked at the western end of the lake and saw dark clouds advancing towards us. I didn’t like the looks of it. Surely, this wasn’t going to be a sunset-watching trip. Miguel, the boatman, convinced us that everything would be OK. He even enticed us with a bonus tour of a Maya archaeological site, where we would go up a path to the top of a mirador (viewpoint). Supposedly, the top was an unexcavated platform of a pyramid. The colorful buildings of the island receded from view as Miguel revved up the engine and cruised over the surface of the water.



The further we got from shore, the better was the view of the island. The imposing church on top of the hill displayed twin domes. It was a Catholic church that was built on top of a former pyramid, a structural development that took place throughout Mesoamerica as the Spanish-Catholic religion usurped

authority over the local religion by building churches on top of the temple-pyramids. Miguel motored the boat to the shore where a path led to the Tayasal archaeological site.

“Tayasal was the capital of the Itza people in Peten,” said Miguel as we walked up the stony path to the viewpoint. “The capital was also known as Tah Itza, the place of the Itza. Legend has it that the Lacandons were the slaves of the Maya Itza, and they built eight temples in this region.”

“Were they the same Maya Itza that were at Chichen Itza?” I asked.

“The Maya Itza left this area around 900 AD,” answered Miguel. “Some people say it was the end of an age, and the Maya left because of prophecies and something to do with the calendar. They went to Chichen Itza. Then when the Spaniards came, they returned to the jungles here to hide from the Spaniards. But it was the same Itza people, because Itza means “magical waters,” the waters of Lake Peten Itza.”



When we reached the top of the hill, there were some wooden steps that we ascended in order to stand on the platform that was built around the branches of a tall tree. It was like a tree house, except that it was only a platform without a covering. A dark cloud hovered over the lake, and the wind blew fiercely. I felt a few drops of rain on the top of my head. The view of the island was fantastic, but the weather conditions prohibited us from staying long enough to really enjoy the city island. We could feel the situation worsening as the rain started to descend with a forceful gale. There was no shelter up on the platform. We would have to hurry to a shelter that we passed on our way up.



**And that’s when it happened. We were hurrying down the slippery granite steps when suddenly Elsa slipped and cut her lower left arm on the jagged edge of the rock. She was wearing sandals that didn’t have any traction. Fortunately, Susie always carried a bottle of water with her, so I washed the three-inch gash that was bleeding profusely, and then I tied the wound up with a clean handkerchief. We stood under the shelter and waited for the rain to subside.**

**“That was quite a bloodletting ritual that you just went through,” I said to Elsa. The entire experience of watching the blood flow made me think of the Maya ceremonial self-sacrifice that involved piercing body parts with the pointed spinal barb of a stingray. It wasn’t funny for Elsa. She was hurting from the bruise that was developing.**



**The thunder and rain soon subsided, and we slowly descended the wet slippery steps. Elsa held the wooden banister and my hand as she carefully measured each step on the way back to the boat.**

**When I asked Miguel (through Susie as my interpreter) what he thought about the prophetic Maya date of 2012, Miguel simply answered, “Only God knows what will happen.” Miguel was one of the newly-converted Christians that were the result of the Evangelical influence in Guatemala. He belonged to a local church named Camino de Hermosa (Beautiful Way).**

**Miguel took us to the other side of the peninsula, where we could see the villages of San Andreas and San Jose across the lake. He told us about the millions of dollars that were donated to uncover the eight temples that were part of the Maya civilization at ancient Tayasal, and he revealed that the government kept the money, so the projects were delayed indefinitely. He also told us about the three sacred skulls that were kept in a Catholic church in San Jose; the skulls were paraded through the streets during a pagan ceremony on the Day of the Dead (Dia de las Muertos).**

**Just then the sun broke through the clouds, and Elsa got to see her sunset after all. It was a glorious sight, the golden light shimmering on the surface of the water and in the distant sky. Susie was getting cold, so she put on the red-colored Tikal shirt that she had bought me. The picture of the shirt and the rosy-colored sky in the background was like looking at a glowing aura around Susie's physical appearance.**



**Miguel turned the boat around and headed back to Flores. We took one last look at the high hill of Tayasal that we had walked up. The pyramid site there was as high as Temple 4 at Tikal, according to Miguel. We also took one last look at the red setting sun as it descended into the underworld, making its journey through the dark world of Xibalba.**



**We made one last stop before we were ready to depart from Flores, the City of Flowers. It was at the Iglesia Nuestra Senora de Las Remedios (Church of Our Lady of Remedies) on top of the island of Flores. It was the church with twin domes that we had seen from the boat. Inside the church was the famous Black Christ of Esquipulas, the god-man nailed to the cross. A worker inside the church told me the Crucified Savior was made of black mango wood. To the Maya people, the four-sided cross represented the crossroads and the four directions of their universe (north is white, south is yellow, west is black, east is red). From another perspective, the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross represented the legendary longitudinal (spear of Longinus) and the horizontal latitude, the magnetic poles in the human body. The invisible spear thrust at an angle through the middle would be the ecliptic. The human body was the house of spears.**



**Later I would see the image of the Black Christ again. It would be on a poster advertising Our Lord of Esquipulas (the Black Christ), enshrined and venerated in the Basilica of Esquipulas on the border of Honduras. People would come to this spiritual center for healing, for comfort, and for an auspicious journey in life. The Lord of Esquipulas resembled somewhat the Roman god of healing, Aesculapius.**



**On our overnight journey by bus to Guatemala City, I reflected on our adventure in Flores and Lake Peten Itza. I reminisced about the canoe mural, the boat ride, the bloodletting, and the Black Christ. The image of the cross, the crossroads, and the House of Spears kept appearing in my mind's eye over and over again.**

**The story of the twins in the Popol Vuh, and the trials (or initiations) they faced in their journey through the underworld of Xibalba, came to mind. The House of Spears was the second trial they faced, a place where it was ordained by the dark lords of Xibalba that the hero twins be cut through with knives (or blades). But they survived that test by telling the blades they would have the flesh of animals, instead. Then the twins had to complete their task in the House of Spears by filling four bowls of flowers for the lords of Xibalba. In my meditative mind, I saw ant-like thoughts traveling through the garden of my spine, filling the bowl of the base chakra at the lower end of the spine with red petals, the bowl of the solar plexus chakra with yellow petals, the bowl of the brow (or third eye) chakra with white petals, and the bowl of the crown chakra with large (or whole) petals.**

**By dawn, the bus rolled into Guatemala City, where we would catch a shuttle bus to take us on our next adventure.**