



Shaman Don Crisanto performs purification ceremony in Pac Chen Mayan Community.

WHERE THE SKY IS BORN

A waft of fragrant, spicy smoke assails my nostrils and I breathe in gently. Standing with my head bowed, I can hear birds call to each other in the jungle. The air is moist and the sun's rays warm my skin. Don Crisanto (Maya), a 61-year-old shaman, begins to pray. He is directing the smoke from a small dish of burning copal, or *pom*, over my head with a small bunch of leafy twigs. Burning the incense made of hardened sap, he has explained, is for protection and is part of the purification rite.

BY MAUREEN LITTLEJOHN • PHOTOS BY DANNIELLE HAYES

NATIVE PLACES



Ancient Mayan Mujil Temple to fertility goddess Ixchel in Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

I'm in Pac Chen, a Maya settlement of around 125 people an hour's drive from the coastal city of Tulum in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. I came as part of a group day excursion, organized by AllTourNative Tours, an eco-tourism adventure company that works with the Maya people in the region.

Crisanto has prepared us to go for a dip in the adjacent *cenote*, a freshwater pool or sinkhole, in a limestone cave. Before we take the plunge, he answers our questions about his altar, a table of green branches that holds cactus fruit, flowers, corn, beans and peppers. "The offerings are to show thanks for the first harvest," he says, pointing to the area below the table. "That symbolizes the underworld. We believe the *cenotes* are the entrance to the underworld. In some *cenotes* sacred ceremo-

nies are done," he says. "You have been purified to show your respect to the gods and to the *Aluxes*, or spirits that live here."

We walk up a small slope, strip down to our bathing suits and line up at an opening in the rocks. Looking below, I see crystal-clear turquoise water and two Maya guides from the community floating in life vests. I slip into a rope harness and am lowered into the cool water. The guides swim over with an inner tube and as I float in the serene stillness of the cave, two curious catfish swim by.

This is called the Jaguar *cenote*. Looking up, I can see why. There are two openings in the rock above that look faintly like a cat's eyes. I've read there are five species of felines in the Yucatan, puma, jaguar, ocelot, margay and jaguarundi – the ancient ruins of Chichen Itza in the Yucatan

even have a Temple of the Jaguars – but they are rare and seldom seen. I reckon this glimpse of a stone cat-head is the closest I'm going to get to the real thing. Soon another rope is dangled from the opening in the rocks and I am gently hauled up to the sunshine.

The ancient city of Coba is next on the itinerary. "The city was established 100 years before Christ. It had a population of 55,000 with temples, plazas and ball courts. It was one of the biggest cities in the Yucatan region and today only five percent of it has been uncovered," says Daniel Cen (Maya), a government guide at the site. The ball game, he says, was a tough competition between two players to get an eight-pound rubber ball through a hoop. "At Chichen Itza, the winner was beheaded and offered as a sacrifice to the gods. It was

a great honor to be sacrificed. The ball court is smaller here, there were no spectators, and the winner was not killed but had to offer the gods blood through a self-mutilation such as piercing the tongue with thorns,” says Cen.

I’m booked into a restful beachside cabana in Tulum, and before dropping off to sleep I reflect that it’s good to live in a time when a ball game is just a ball game.

In the morning, Alberto Cencaamal (Maya) comes by to show me more of the area. He’s a guide with Community Tours Sian Ka’an, a six-year-old Maya company based in the village of Muyil. He picks up a few other tour participants at the entrance to the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, just a few miles south of Tulum. As we bounce along in the van, he tells us the 1.3-million-acre reserve is a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site and provides habitat for 350 species of birds. “Sian Ka’an means ‘Where the sky is born’ in Maya,” he says. “It’s a big, big paradise.”

Slowing the vehicle, he points to a square stone structure half hidden in the undergrowth by the side of the road. “That was a Maya checkpoint or toll booth. They used to bring honey, jade, animal skins, salt, wood, gum and incense along this trade route 2,000 years ago.”

Community Tours, Cencaamal tells us, employs around 20 Maya people and offers birding, nature, cultural and fishing tours. It is the only Maya-run tour operator working in the Reserve. Environmental protection is a priority. Tours use one van (as opposed to their competition’s multiple jeeps), fishing is catch-and-release and only non-toxic sunblock and insect repellent are allowed. “We have to protect this area by promoting responsible tourism so we can have jobs and a legacy for our children,” he says. Growth has been slow but steady and the company hopes to open a museum, butterfly pavilion, restaurant and cabana accommodations in Muyil when the economy recovers.

Raw, sandy coastline appears on one side of the van. Soon we are in Punta Allen, a fishing village on Ascension Bay. We pull into a marina where boats are lined up to take us out to the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef – second only in size to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. Gazing at the white caps, Cencaamal decides, “It’s too dangerous to go to the reef today, the coral is very sharp.” Instead, we take a dip in a shallow, sandy, protected part of the bay and then go for a boat ride.

Nearing an island no bigger than a tennis court, Cencaamal cuts the motor. We drift



Mayans Alberto Cencaamal and Miguel Quezada of Community Tours.



30-year-old Ceilia Mukul (Mayan) makes empanadas for visitors to Pac-chen Mayan Community.



LEFT: Fresh fruit snack prepared by Community Tours in Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve. RIGHT: Typical Mayan meal served to visitors to Pac Chen Mayan Community.



A ha iguana taking in the sun atop Mayan ruins in Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.



Endangered salt-water acutus crocodile hiding in mangroves in Ascension Bay Biosphere Reserve.



Nesting roseate spoonbill on San Juan Island in Ascension Bay.



Ficus tree in Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, Quintana Roo, Yucatan, Mexico.



ABOVE: Thousand-year-old toll house along ancient Mayan trade route connecting canals and lagoons. RIGHT: Juano Palm used for roofing palapas, typical Mayan houses.



closer. Suddenly I see that the dense mangroves are alive with waterfowl. “Roseate spoonbills” he says, pointing to a pair of shrimp-colored birds with long thin legs and round, flat bills poking about in the water. “Their main diet is shrimp; that’s why they are that color.”

Slowly circling the island, Cencaamal passes us his binoculars. We are able to see fine, feathery details of grey egrets, boat-billed herons, snowy egrets, brown pelicans, cormorants and a bright yellow mangrove warbler.

Stomachs growling, we head back for lunch in Punta Allen – freshly caught grouper pan-fried with garlic, creamy yellow potatoes, cabbage salad, rice and flan for dessert.

On my last day in Tulum, I take Community Tours’ Muyil Forest and Float day trip. Cencaamal picks me up again and after a 20-minute drive we are at the Muyil Ruins. The first building we encounter has a very low entrance. We bend to enter.

“This was an oratory,” he says. “Priests did telepathic communication with the gods here. The people would ask them if it was a good time to farm and the priests would do ceremonies to the squash or bean spirits. Our shamans do ceremonies like this even today.”

We wander around the site, mesmerized by crumbling temples, lush jungle and squawking parrots overhead. Cencaamal puts his hand on the trunk of a large tree. “That’s an elephant ear tree. It was used to make dug-out canoes,” he says, then points to a plant that looks like burdock, “It’s called Xkanbahau, an antidote for snake bites.”

Laguna Muyil delivers the second half of our adventure. We hop into a boat and Cencaamal finds a small opening in the mangroves. “This canal was created by the Maya 1,000 years ago as part of their trade route,” he says as we glide along. Pulling up to a wooden dock, he points to a low stone building that looks like a temple. “Another Maya checkpoint,” he says, then nods towards a stack of life vests in the boat. “It’s time to put on a life vest and float.” The water is waist high and a tad chilly, but the sun pours down and soon everyone is blissfully bobbing along with the current. Bromeliad plants the size of beach balls hang over the water. Warblers and king birds flit above our heads. Forty minutes later we’re at the next dock and climb into the waiting boat.

A delectable spread is laid on outdoor picnic tables by the water’s edge when we arrive back at Laguna Muyil. Plates overflow with watermelon, pineapple, mangos, cheese empanadas, corn tamales with chicken, spicy salsa and soft tacos. We dig in and the food is fresh and delicious.

Before going back to Tulum, I take a last look at the lagoon. The waters ripple and the grasses and mangroves stretch for miles. I squint my eyes. Is that an ancient Mayan canoe laden with precious jade and honey? The speck gets closer and I can see it’s a Community Tours motor-powered boat, filled with another precious cargo, smiling tourists. Sian Ka’an is a paradise indeed. ✨

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MAYA FACTS

The Maya population at its peak was more than 20 million and is around seven million today. “Maya” is a collective term that refers to Native peoples in the region with similar culture and language. They inhabit the same areas their ancestors did 3,000 years ago: the Mexican states of Yucatan, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas and Tabasco, Belize and parts of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Getting there: The nearest airport is Cancun. Rent a car or take a shuttle to Tulum, an hour’s drive south along the coast. This 100-mile stretch is called the Riviera Maya and is filled with luxury resorts.

Accommodations: In Tulum, everything from big hotels to charming beachside cabanas.

Community Tours: www.siankaantours.org, Conde Nast Green List, one of the world’s three top ecotourism destinations, 2005.

AllTourNative Tours: www.alltournative.com, named Socially Responsible Company in 2007 by the Mexican Philanthropic Center.