

April 5th 2011

Exploring Inland Central America

An early start today as we are to meet our tour guide, Jorge Martinez, owner /operator of "Tourin El Salvador". <http://www.tourinelsalvador.com/new2/index.php> .

Our goal is to visit the unique and relatively recently discovered archaeological ruins of the ancient civilisations of Mesoamerica (Middle America) and more specifically those of the pre-colonial Mayan Era. Over the next 6 days and 5 nights we will visit 3 countries in order to achieve our goal they are; **El Salvador** ; Joya de Ceren -The Pompeii of America & San Andres where we will explore the Mayan Ceremonial Centre and its ruins and view the artefacts on show there.

Honduras ; Copan – The government and ceremonial centre of the Mayan Civilisation.

Guatemala; Antigua – Where we will experience the Mayan culture.

As we travel we will be visiting some of the other attractions each of these 3 countries offer such as the coffee plantations, cascading waterfalls, wildlife parks featuring exotic parrots and the awesome landscape and scenery provided as we traverse the 2 counties that are known to have the most volcanoes in the world. We will also have the opportunity to sample the local fare and get close enough to the locals to provide us with an understanding of their lifestyles and beliefs. There is also the added benefit of being able to stop along the stretch of coast occupied by Guatemala and El Salvador and hopefully experience some of less visited surf breaks on offer.

So let the adventures begin!



7.00am ; The van is waiting and spotlessly clean, inside it smells good, roof rack for the boards, air-conditioning is working great, the seats comfortable and Jorge speaks very good English, we are off to a good start!

As we leave the haven of Bahia Del Sol and "Red Sky" Jorge begins his commentary with some historical information about the country that is both his home and his passion, El Salvador.

We learn that El-Salvador whose name translates to "The Saviour" and was under Spanish rule from 1525-1821 occupying just 20742 square kilometres is the smallest of all the countries in Central America.



(Statue depicting “The Saviour” name sake of El-Salvador)

From 1821-1841 El-Salvador was under the control of the Central American Confederation before gaining independence from Spain in 1841 has a population of 6.2 million people and thanks to the toll of over a decade of civil war between 1980-1992 has a ratio of 3 woman to every man.

The civil war ended after an agreement between the governments was reached where by the guerrillas in exchange for their weapons and signatures on the agreement were offered either small parcels of land 2-4 hectares or cash in the amount equivalent to \$1200.00 USD or education to college stage . The 80,000 strong army of the government was also dramatically reduced in numbers and similar incentives including lifetime employment offers in the newly created private security sector were offered to those who were freed from service in order to prevent future civil unrest.

Despite these arrangements there still exists no middle class only that of the very rich and the poor. The countries land area which until recently was owned entirely by just 14 families whose wealth originated in Spain. This came about as a result of land ownership laws dating back to the 1900`s which basically stated that you could own as much land as you could fence off with barbed wire. The fact that back then one family had control over the supply of barbed wire meant that unless you were a member of this family it was impossible for you to own any land. Even after the introduction of new law at the end of the civil war stating that no one person can own more than 235 hectares today just 33 families own the vast majority of the countries land meaning that the wealth generated from the land remains in the control of a few who as a result have financial control over many.

Jorge explains that El-Salvador and El-Salvadorians are now beginning to see the benefits of centuries of struggling for true democracy and independence despite the disparity between the rich and poor. Free hospitals and schools are helping to pave the way for future generations to close the gap between the haves and the have nots.

Currently the minimum wage is just \$7.00 PER DAY (\$207 per month) with the average income being \$10.00 PER DAY (\$310 per month) meaning that although the cost of living is low by comparison to our standards most El-Salvadorians who work and live in El-Salvador live a very simple lifestyle.

The majority of the countries income is derived from El-Salvadorians who reside and work in the USA and send money back to their families who live in El-Salvador. Unfortunately El-Salvador imports 80% of its products meaning that much of this money doesn't remain in El-Salvador however the government is working hard to improve this situation and their efforts combined with future generations of educated El-Salvadorians should see this situation change.

Coffee exportation is the other primary source of income for the country. Tourism is a major focus of the government as a future generator of income.

The national food is known as Pupusa which translates to "Fat stuffed Tortilla". Our first stop on the tour having skirted the prosperous capital city of San Salvador also known as "The Hammock City" as it often feel tremors from earthquakes and sways a little as a result was for breakfast at a Pupuseria where we sampled the fare. At just .75 cents for a chicken or vegetable Pupusa these made for a very filling and tasty meal.



Next stop, **Joya De Ceren /Americas Pompeii .**

In 1976 the area where this now very important archaeological site that provides a unique window into the Maya past now exists was being excavated in preparation for the construction of grain silos when a particularly hard material was discovered below the surface of one of the areas.

The development of the site ceased, the Silo's that had been completed relocated and 2 years later archaeologists confirmed that what had been discovered was in fact a pre-Hispanic dwelling.



(the site in 1976 when it was discovered)

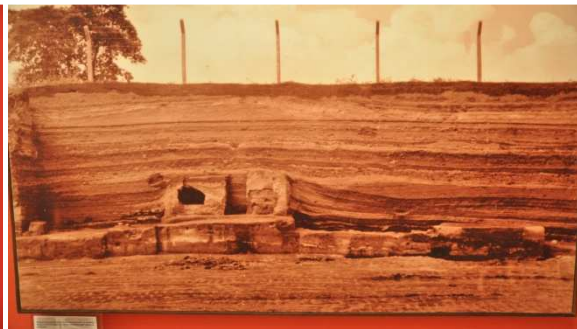


(the foundations of the relocated silo's)

It is believed that the first of the pre colonial period (spanning 800BC - 1500AD) Mesoamerica ancient civilizations known as the Olmeca`s and later the Mayas inhabited this village.



(Mesoamerica Civilisation locations)



(The Joya De Ceren site as it was unearthed)

Archeologists and historians determined that around the 7th century AD a local volcanic eruption near the village resulted in the village being buried under the volcanic ash resulting in the area becoming compared with and becoming known as The Americas Pompeii.

The 2000 residents were able to flee as the ash & steam rained down upon them but without sufficient time to take with them any of their belongings. It is believed they fled to nearby San Andres but died soon after of disease related to the inhalation of the toxins being emitted from the erupting volcano. Within just a few days the village had completely disappeared. The village, its buildings and the belongings of the Mayan inhabitants remained buried for the next 1400 years

Since 1976 a total of 18 structures have been identified at Joya de Ceren along with house gardens, maize fields, possessions of the people such as tools and ceramics as well as the remains of animals including the petrified skeleton of a duck proven to have been captive at the time of the eruption.

These discoveries have been able to provide valuable information and insight into the lives of these ancient people. Many of these original artefacts are on display at the very modern and well presented visitors centre located on the site.



(Bowls , pots and vases found on site)



(Petrified Duck Skeleton)

The structures discovered were built on a ground surface of white volcanic ash which had been deposited by previous volcanic activity believed to have occurred between 400 -500AD which caused a mass migration of the western areas of El-Salvador at the time. There are at least three possibly 6 households and other special use structures that have been identified. Each of the households consisted of a cluster of several structures: Sleeping quarters, a storeroom, and a kitchen. They were constructed of wood with wattle and mud.

Below- (top image) artist impression of the structure
Below - (lower image) actual ruins of the structure.



Jorge tells us that the Maya civilisation is believed to have flourished during the period between 250-900AD. He goes on to explain that much of what is understood about these ancient civilisations is the result of piecing together the ruins and the artefacts as no record other than these things exists. Jorge continues to explain that at the beginning of the colonial period King Phillip the 2nd ordered all record of the Maya people be burned as it was feared that their religious beliefs, their theory of the 2012 end of cycle events and the consequences associated with them may be the demise of the Catholic Religion

The cause of the demise of this diminutive (the average height of an adult Maya was just 165cm) but highly intelligent people is not know for certain but popular beliefs include the following:

- Starvation due to deforestation
- Mercury poisoning as a result of ingestion of the red pigments used for decorative purposes
- Them being conquered by the Aztecs
- That they were taken to a different dimension (Alien Abduction)

Having now received an informative and enlightening introduction to the Joya de Ceren location and learning a little about the lifestyle and beliefs of the Maya inhabitants we begin to gain an understanding of how resourceful, intelligent, superstitious and creative they were we are now ready to visit the actual site of the village and the ruins that have been so carefully unearthed and exposed.

As we walk along the path leading to the observation area Jorge spots a Torogoz the national and very beautiful bird of El-Salvador with its distinctive pendulum tail feathers.



As we get our first glimpse of the ruins it becomes clear from the sight of a large expanse of roofing covering the area where the ruins have been exposed that conservation of the site is a high priority and an ongoing challenge. Once the structures have been exposed they go through a deterioration process as do any other buildings and no reliable method of preservation is known.



The patience and passion work of those who have painstakingly unearthed these structures is immediately evident as is the commitment of EL-Salvador to the continued preservation on the site.



What also becomes evident is that tourism in El-Salvador is a resource yet to be capitalised on. We along with another Canadian couple are the only visitors in the whole area and as such are afforded premium vantage points from which to view and ponder the significance of this site without any sound other than that of the flora and fauna surrounding the area.





The structures are still being studied and carefully monitored and where possible preserved but despite these measures and the fact that in 1993 UNESCO named Joya de Ceren as a world heritage site it is likely that just like the Mayas who built them and lived their lives in and around them over 1000 years ago they too will disappear from the earth.



Jorge tells us that we are now ready to further our education of the ancient civilisations and San Andres , a Mayan Ceremonial site where the people of Joya de Ceren fled when the volcano erupted is located just a short drive away is the place to do it !



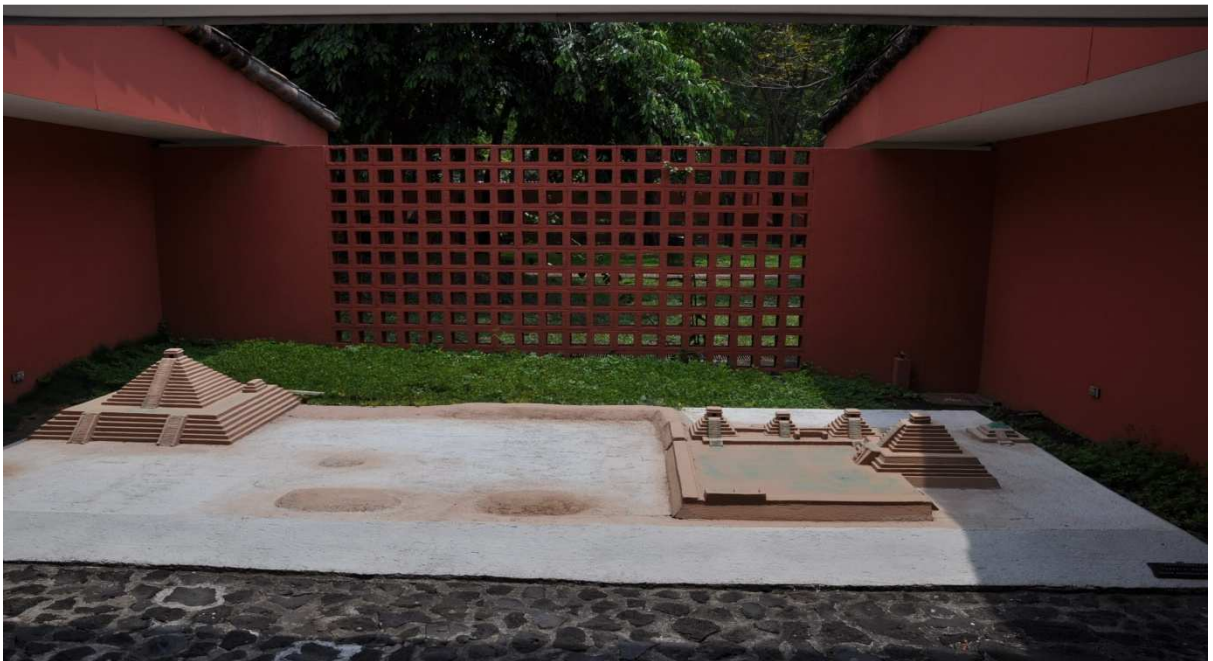
As promised we arrived in San Andres quickly as it is just 5klms away from Joya de Ceren and we begin to realise to our delight that Jorge unlike many of the Central American people we have met has the same measure of time and distance as we do!

Part two of our Central America ancient civilisation lesson begins just as did lesson one with a tour of the San Andres visitor centre and once again we find Jorge to be a knowledgeable, informative and patient teacher. We find the visitor centre to be immaculately presented and well laid out with the relics professionally displayed in easy to view glass cases and again we are pleased to see that all the written information in provide in both Espanola and English.

We begin with Jorge explaining with the help of a model the layout of the site and he informs us that the site was discovered in 1910 and that is was at that time a sugar cane farm. Excavation of the site began in 1940



The mound shown in this picture is how the site appeared when it was discovered - disguised by centuries of volcanic activity covering the entire site in ash and earth.



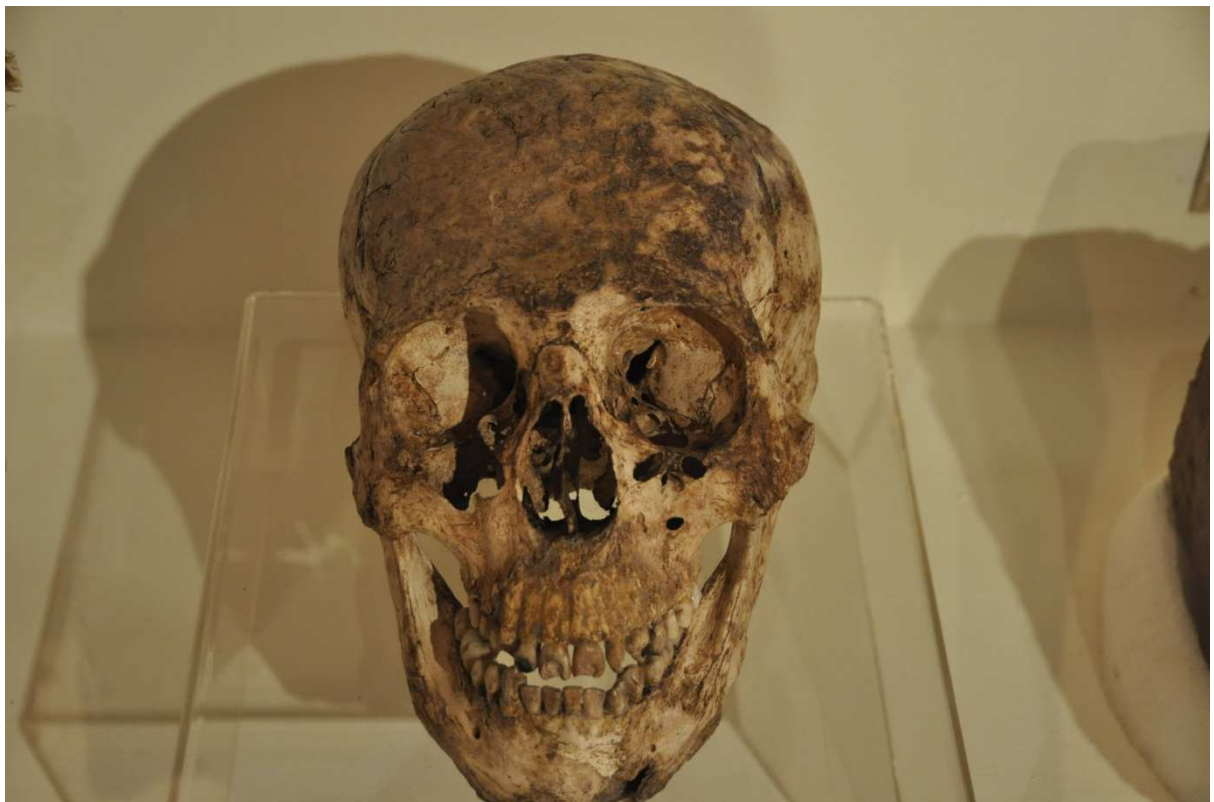
The model shows the North Plaza where the political activities took place, The South Plaza where religious and commercial activities were held and the Centre Area or "Ball Field" where the traditional game was played.

As Jorge continues to educate us we are interested to discover that just as our current civilisations have variations of ball games from place to place, such as Rugby, Soccer, Football, Basketball and so on the Ancient Civilisations too had variations of ball games in the different villages.

Just as in some of the ball games we play are contact sports so too were the games of the ancients however it is believed that the rules of contact were much less inhibitive and the stakes of the game much higher. For instance some who have studied the culture believe that it was considered such a privilege to be the captain of a winning team that the captain was willingly beheaded at the end of the game as a sacrifice to the gods!

Hmmmm guess the old saying “winners are grinners” didn’t originate from the Mayas.

We move on to the displays inside the visitor centre one of which contains the skull believed to be that of a Maya villager. In fact it is determined that this is a member of the elite class within the society. The elite in order to be certain to be able to be easily identified as being elite “re-shaped” the forehead area by placing a stone on the forehead, tying it in place to secure it where it would remain during the early years of development. Also the teeth were often filed into different shapes as well for the same reason.



As we move about the displays we see more of the relics that have been recovered including pots, bowls and grindstones all of which have been recovered from the site and restored or recreated.



We move on from the visitor centre to the actual ruins located about a 5 minute walk away where once again we are amazed to find that we are the only visitors. We are able to wander the ruins, relax and dream what it might have been like to have been born a Maya and have been here when all the colour and action associated with a ceremony. Mayas performed human sacrifices where they would take the still beating heart from a victim and present it to the gods in the hope that the gods would be pleased and provide gifts such as better crops and protection from evil. Hallucinogenic drugs were given to the people who whilst under the influence of the drugs they would see the evil spirits, they would then look to the King who was believed to be able to speak to the many gods and gain protection for the people from the harm these spirits wanted to cause them. It is believed this is how the King controlled the people.



The ruins of the North Plaza in the background with the ball park off to the lower left of centre



Jorge, Leanne and Matthew contemplating life in an ancient civilisation



Jorge, Matthew and I --- Imagine

As we make our way slowly back to the van Matthew our son says that he was imagining being part of the ball playing team ,, he said he wasn't the captain !

Our education furthered it is now time to leave El Salvador and continue to the 2nd most important of El-Salvador's cities Santa Ana a coffee growing area where we will break for lunch before crossing the Guatemala border twice on route to the Maya city of Copan in Honduras where we will continue our journey of discovery and understanding of the Maya culture and civilisation.

Jorge tells us he knows where the good places to eat are and because he frequents them the food and service are always first class and affordable. Our lunch venue proves to be no exception and comes complete with a gift for Leanne from the restaurant- a nice touch.



With lunch finished we begin the 3 hour drive to Copan where we will stay for 2 nights.

As we cross the border into and then again out of Guatemala Jorge in his professional and friendly manner handles all the official requirements including having our passports stamped without us even having to get out of the van and without any delay.

At the border of Guatemala and Honduras we take the opportunity to have a photo taken under the welcome sign. On returning to the van we are approached by a local who reaches into his pocket and pulls out a large wad of cash and offers to change our currency for us. Again Jorge steps in and negotiates on our behalf what we learn later to be a very good rate of exchange.



We arrive in Copan in the late afternoon and Jorge delivers us to our hotel. To say we were pleasantly surprised by the standard of accommodation is an understatement. Jorge checks us in, helps carry our luggage and surfboards pass the pool (the surfboards attracts a few strange looks given that we are no-where near the coast) through the hotel and informs us he wants to check that the room is satisfactory before we settle in. This guy knows how to treat his customers!





We unpack , shower and change and meet Jorge in the hotel lobby as he has offered to take us to restaurant he thinks we will enjoy and he was right.



As we enter the restaurant we are distracted by all the memorabilia adorning every possible area of the walls, roof and even the floor and are surprised by the wood fired open grill and the attending chef located in the open area of the lower level.



We are seated upstairs and having ordered a drink we are choosing our meals when Jorge tells us that the house specialty is Kebabs and he recommends them if we like Kebabs. Matthew and I are sold. It is about now that our drinks arrive. They are being carried from the bar downstairs on the head of the waitress and are unsupported, they just balance there!



Soon enough along come our meals and we get yet another surprise, the Kebab's are huge!



Our day is best summed up by the photo on the wall behind us:--



It reads La Vida es Corta! Disfrulata! – Translation; Life is good! Enjoy Life

We wander back to the hotel well fed , relaxed and happy – day one has been great and we retire tired but excited with the prospect of exploring Copan and the nearby ruins tomorrow !