

Journey to YAXCHILAN

Jon recounts a memorable journey along the Usumacinta River, bordering Guatemala and Mexico, to photograph the remote, jungle covered Mayan city of Yaxchilan. Words and photos Jon Davison.

fact anywhere on the peninsula at dusk with exposed skin! It is sheer murder!

We headed into the jungle to shoot the crumbling but still inspiring ruins of Coba. Don't be surprised to see hundreds of huge Tarantulas slowly wandering across the road on the way to Coba! Whole squadrons of them in fact. We then across the border into Yucatan and the major Mayan sites of Chichen Itza with its fabulous 'El Castillo' temple, followed by the beautiful ruins at Uxmal. I was very privileged to have seen these spectacular sites at last, yet they were not what I was looking for. They were all in the process of major restorations, but Palenque and the jungle clad ruins of Yaxchilan were still only being unearthed.

In the southern Mexican State of Chiapas, stretching along a jungle-covered ridge in the foothills of the Tumbala Mountains, lie the majestic ruins of Palenque. The site is one of the most enigmatic and mysterious ruined cities anywhere in the world today

Palenque immersing ourselves into the culture. It is quite something to sit in these ruins realizing what an arduous task it must have been for the early explorers to discover these places with only Mules and machetes.

A few miles from the ruins of Palenque is a little town bearing the same name. (The Spaniards built it in the XVIth century looking for gold, not knowing that these spectacular ruins were only 9 kilometers away). In the window of the local 'Oficina de Turismo' we saw a hand written sign with sun-bleached pink photographs proclaiming 'Journey down mighty Usumacinta by canoe and see ancient ruins of Yaxchilan. We guarantee you not forget! We knew that Yaxchilan (YA shee larn) was one of the more inaccessible Mayan ruins and therefore not on the normal tourist 'circuit' of archaeological sites. It was just what we were looking for.

"Four hours to the ruins, are you sure?" we



I remember being always fascinated by stories of Mayan ruins in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Later in my thirties. 'Incidents of Travel in Yucatan Vols 1 & 2' were written in the mid 1800's by American architect/explorer John Lloyd Stephens, and illustrated by Englishman Frederick Catherwood, and were the first to bring the wonders of the Maya to the world. The books are essential reading for anyone wanting to immerse themselves into the Mayan archaeological sites of Mesoamerica'. So it was a dream come true when I was commissioned to shoot

this area over the course of a month, for a new travel guide.

I started in the mega-resort of Cancun, in the state of Quintana Roo, and then slowly drove across the top to the lovely Spanish Colonial city of Merida the capital of Yucatan. This way I could retrace to a degree the footsteps of JL Stephens. We headed down the coast to the stunning ruins of Tulum, by the sea. Here we were assaulted by the aggressive yucatecan Mosquito. My advice here is do not under any circumstances wait at the bus stop at Tulum, or in

and is without doubt one of the gems on any journey to Mexico. There are hundreds of other Mayan ruins scattered throughout the Central American jungles and lowlands, many still undiscovered.

I read Erick Von Daniken's 'Chariots of the Gods'. The cover had the depiction of what the author considered to be an astronaut, carved in stone on a 1500 year old lid of a tomb, and was part of his inspiration for his controversial book. At Palenque this tomb lies beneath the 'Temple of the Inscriptions'.

We ended up spending a good few days at

asked the cheerful officer. "Buenos dias amigo ... Si, las ruinas, quatro horas" he replied. By using the traveler's golden rule number one, always double any times you are given, we figured this would be at least a days journey.

Opposite: 'Temple of the Inscriptions' at Palenque in the Mexican state of Chiapas. **Above:** A 25 minute time exposure with torchlight, of Chichen Itza's 'El Castillo' in the state of Yucatan.



Typical of the overgrown structures at Yaxchilan.

"Paved road?"

"Si, no problem...easy camino all the way" the smiling officer answered.

Bringing out his photo album, the smiling tourist officer proudly tried to tempt us with his unique images. We saw faded images of the ruins, then pictures of the mighty Usumacinta river, the canoes themselves, the river without the canoes, the jungle without the river, a dead Crocodile, the inside of his home, his wife, his children, a close up of a dead Mosquito, finally a blurred shot of his foot in motion (he was changing film whilst running from a Jaguar, or so he told us!).

In the end he had us hooked and we paid the Pesos, agreeing to meet our guide Servando at the Chan Kah Resort 5am next morning. The advertised 'bus' was a beaten up VW Kombi van and along for the ride were an American and French couple who had also seen the sign in the window ... and the photo album. We all agreed that it was the shot of the blurred foot that did it!

The 'no problem... easy road all the way' lasted for only 30 minutes before giving way to a very rugged dirt track, where massive logging trucks hurtled aggressively in both directions. The corrugations in the road had our Kombi struggling and us flying about inside. We figured there was about six or so hours to go on this road! At one point a bus hissing steam and packed with locals – all who's eyes followed us at the same time - overtook us at light speed.

Up ahead, the steam trailing bus that overtook us had now broken down near Ocosingo (the scene of bitter fighting in 1994 between local Zapatista forces and the Mexican Army. The driver and passengers seemed to have given up and were content simply to have a siesta, knowing that 'something' would turn up. We were the divine 'something' it seemed. All the bus needed was radiator water, so we gave it a drink and well that was it. Just like watching a cartoon, the bus seemed to shake itself out of its stupor, waking the passengers up on cue, almost as if the bus and passengers were one. Alive once again, the bus accelerated at speed into the interior, leaving a vast plume of dust in its wake. I remember looking at the empty water container in my hand and the diminishing plume of dust, thinking that I must remember this. Somehow it all seemed very surreal.

We were traveling through an area that was covered in grass and large bushes. Only a couple of years ago it had been thick tropical jungle. Due to the logging, the effect on the flora and fauna has been catastrophic due to the logging.

After three hours of vibrating on this obstacle course, we stopped for breakfast with a Mayan family living on the edge of the foothills. The dwelling was typical of homes in the Central American jungles and lowlands, a thatched palapa structure with an earthen floor, open windows and no door. The smell of petrol, leather and sweat gave way to the pleasant aroma of freshly cooked Tortillas and ground coffee. The only

sound was the squawk of a resident Parrot. Feeling refreshed, we continued and spent another four hours on this nightmarish road, before eventually arriving at the Usumacinta River and the small settlement of Frontera Corozal. The four hour trip had become seven. It appears the logging trucks had not yet reached the river, as we were now in pretty thick jungle but it may only be a matter of time...

At the small settlement, we were directed to three handmade canoes with outboard motors, surrounded by rifle carrying, sleepy eyed locals who were watching us with interest. "The mighty Usumacinta - not very big" I said to Servando. He said "Amigo.. this is the swampland, the mangroves... you know the rivers edge" Servando had a remarkable command of English when it suited him. We set off, with Servando up front and a Mexican armed with a rifle. I thought to myself when I get time, I must ask him about the rifle...

As we sped through the mangroves, trees raced past and at us, a quick duck followed by nervous laughter as branches loomed up and over us. The swamp area lasted for about 15 minutes before the picture changed abruptly. The foliage parted and we were on the Usumacinta River. It was hundreds of feet across, slow moving and muddy brown, bordered on both sides by thick impenetrable jungle. Mexico on the right and Guatemala on the left.

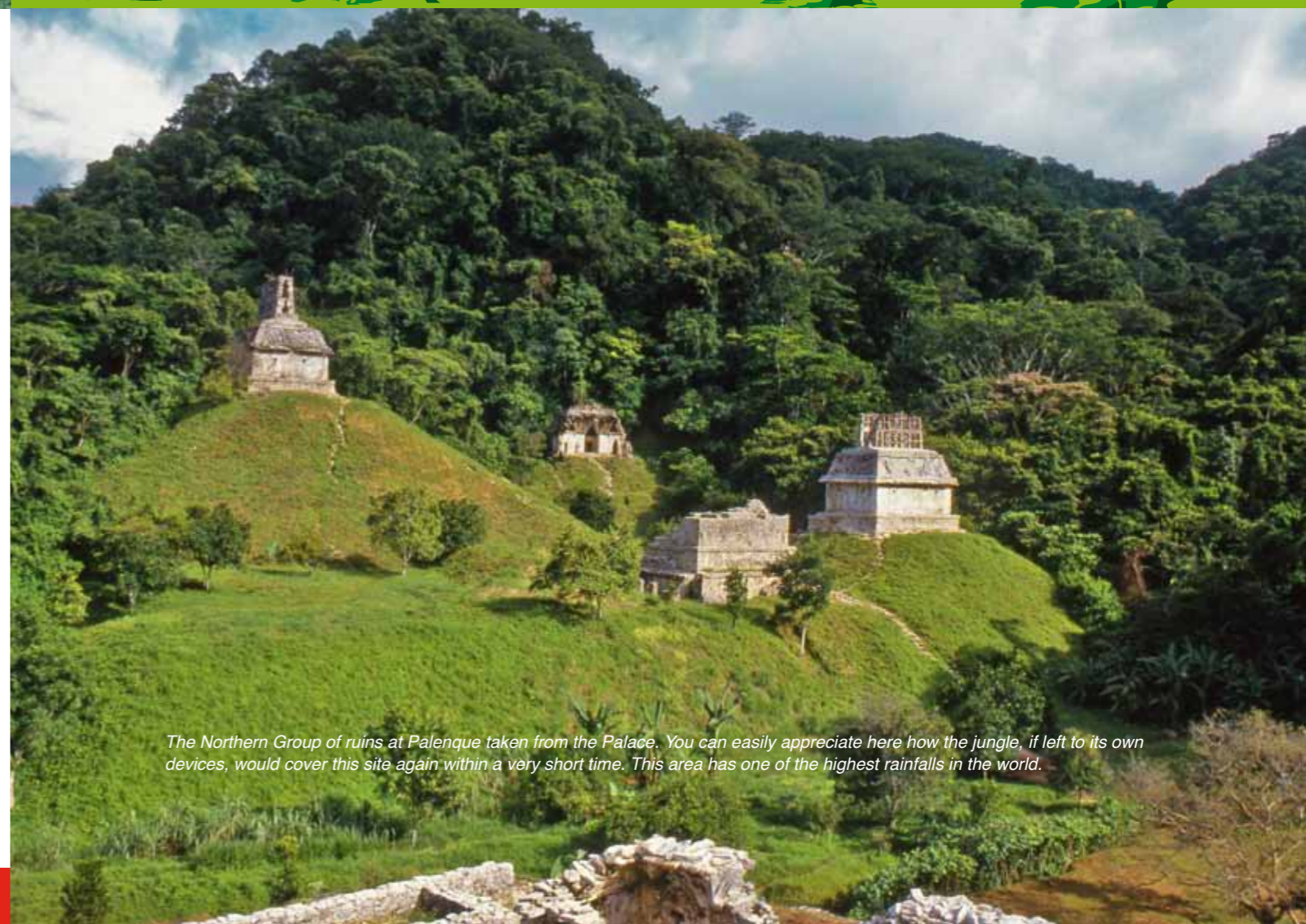
Finally, with curiosity getting the better of me I ventured "Why the guns?", thinking banditos maybe?

"Crocodiles" then pointed down "beneath us".

Servando, trailing his hand in the river ever so nonchalantly said "Crocodiles" then pointed down "beneath us". The helmsman cradling his rifle, added "Si ... and big cats with spots". 'Strewth!' I said 'Cats, underwater?' They frowned, my nervous sense of humour did not go down well. We all looked at each other and gripped the canoe for comfort and started taking a keener interest in our surroundings.

Brightly coloured parrots and excited monkeys darted about the jungle canopy, and every now and then something made a huge splash on the river surface, though we never could see it in time, apart from a dark glossy fin. The further we went we all realized how alien this environment was and how quickly civilization vanishes, with nothing familiar anywhere. We were alone, on a vast river in Central America. After about an hour we reached Yaxchilan. On the muddy bank stood one thatched palapa hut to inform us that there was indeed life here.

The Lacandona Jungle was a cacophony of sound. Tiny warlike flying hyperdermics accompanied by high pitched whines screamed past our ears determined to spear us. Big branches snapped as 'something' moved through the undergrowth, insects



The Northern Group of ruins at Palenque taken from the Palace. You can easily appreciate here how the jungle, if left to its own devices, would cover this site again within a very short time. This area has one of the highest rainfalls in the world.

At least it would have done in its heyday, now the jungle covers the site and you cannot see the river, even from the tops of the temples.

whistled everywhere. Howler monkeys gave an eerie cry as they swung above us in the canopy, Toucans screeched to each other. The Spanish guide (no English unfortunately) talked about the wonders of the Maya whilst Nikons and Canons captured frames. This all enveloped us as a total blanket of sound.

Among the hundreds of ruined sites in Central America, Yaxchilan is unique due to its fantastic jungle setting above a loop in the river, giving a strategic view in both directions. At least it would have done in its heyday, now the jungle covers the site and you cannot see the river, even from the tops of the temples. The site, originally called 'Menche'-tinamit' by early explorers, was lost to living memory for over 1000 years before it was first explored in 1882. Alfred P. Maudslay an Archaeologist and Désiré Charnay an explorer, share the honour of showing to the world the first photographs, descriptions and drawings of this long lost city-state.

Yaxchilan came to power before 250 AD and ended around 900 AD. Their architecture, city planning, art and mathematics rivaled the Greek, Egyptian and other great civilizations in the known world. The sheer number of Mayan ruins is greater than existed in all of ancient Egypt.

Around 200 BC, they pioneered 'Zero' and 'positional value' as mathematical concepts, these are still recognized today as brilliant achievements of the human mind.

The massive temples were once covered with stucco and painted in incredibly vibrant colours. It was hard to imagine what it must have looked like 1500 years ago, the verdant green foliage had enveloped the buildings completely. Large trees were growing up through the buildings from the inside. All the hills and mounds at the complex were in fact buried temples and other structures that were yet uncharted. The temples were raised on a succession of man-made, stepped terraces with some peaks over 250 feet in height. In keeping with most four sided Mayan temples, the sides were huge sloping stairways, with each step being only about 15 centimeters in width, quite a bit smaller than your typical Nike footwear of today.

This city state, governed by the powerful ruler 'Bird Jaguar' covered an area of approximately 30 square miles. Only a small portion of this amazing city has been excavated from the jungle. After seeing the other Mayan ruin sites in the Yucatan Peninsula such as Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Coba and Palenque, it was good to see Yaxchilan almost as the first explorers had found it.

After a few moments of trying to envisage what this





'The Palace' at Palenque. Photo by Jon Davison



but a roving Jaguar had apparently decided to go 'shopping' a few yards from the hut in the wee small hours and cleaned out the lot.

site must have looked like in its day, you just have to give up and rest for a while. It was just too hot to think. Few sunbeams penetrate the thick steamy jungle, and no air at ground level stirs the foliage. Sweat pours in rivulets from scalp to feet and clothes cling clammy to you. But what an atmosphere, I have seen many ruined cities but nothing comes close to the sense of mystery and wonder that these Mayan cities do. Haunting, evocative, spooky, moving are all understatement. There are structures like 'El Laberinto (the Labyrinth) with its amazing dark vaulted passageways and never ending chambers, full of Vampire bats (Vampira) and 'other things'.

Unlike other vanished civilizations like the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, etc, where their origins and demise is pretty well documented, mystery surrounds the Maya. No one knows for certain where they came from. Their cities were totally abandoned within a fairly short time and no trace can be found of where they may have gone, if in fact they went anywhere. Their legacy in stone is still being deciphered.

After taking in the incredible vision around us, it was time to go back to the landing hut for a meal that was being prepared. The table was adorned with fresh Tortillas, water melon, rice, beef and onions, eggs, avocados, agua mineral and the ever present bowls of optional chili sauce. There was meant to be Chicken on the menu that afternoon, but a roving Jaguar had apparently decided to go 'shopping' a few yards from the hut in the wee small hours. Only feathers were visible in the remains of the coop. With a wave to our guide and a nice tip, we parted the ruined city. Yaxchilan, without a doubt has an almost tangible aura. As we motored on in silence I think we all felt it.

The return journey by canoe was uneventful, until that is, Servando began putting on his waterproof poncho. "Why?" we asked. He simply pointed to the sky saying "Normal this time of day". For some reason we had not seen the inky blackness slowly covering the sky. "Why did you not tell us before Servando?" his simple and quite logical reply was "You did not ask" What can you say to that? (rule number two 'Think ahead and ask questions, lots of them')

With his Poncho on, he folded his arms, looked up, and it started. The most incredible, blinding, torrential downpour we had ever seen. Not only could you not see the river banks on either side, you could barely see the other end of the canoe, just a wall of white everywhere. The downpour lasted most of the journey back. When it stopped Servando packed up his poncho, folded his arms, smiled and went to sleep. We all looked at each other and I swear we



could have easily tossed him over the side to the Crocodiles.

Night had fallen by the time we got back to dry land at Frontera Corozal. On the journey back the images along the road were spectacular; fireflies illuminated the sky like shooting stars and the moon gave the silhouetted hills an eerie look. Now and then warm orange lights from the small huts could be seen in the forest, contrasting with the deep blue grey of the night. Lightning, diffused by clouds, illuminated the landscape for a fraction of a second. A spectacular end to a very memorable journey to Yaxchilan. I will not bore you with details of the return journey, suffice to say it was more of the same, but at night. Seven hours over the same road, soaking wet, hungry and tired. Four hours huh? Yet I believe this is what traveling is all about, embracing the unexpected and unknown. The journey is the thing and there is always something to learn from the experience. Since we did this journey you no longer have to suffer the 'no problem' unsealed logging highway. There is a paved road 'Carretera Fronteriza' that goes all the way from Palenque to the lagoon de Montebello and runs parallel to the border between Mexico and Guatemala. This not only takes you to Frontera Corozal and the canoe, but to other Mayan sites like Bonampak with its fantastic walled murals.

To me, seeing Yaxchilan really did fulfill my ambition to see ruined cities in their natural overgrown



state. Somehow, when fully restored I think they lose something of their aura. The books by JL Stephens are still today immersive experiences into another time and place.

Jon Davison ■

Above: The broken down bus near Ocosingo.
Top and opposite left: Temple structures at Yaxchilan with our guide explaining the details of a stela (in Spanish).