

# On the trails of the Mayas

## Project El Pilar

*MesoAmerican Research Center*  
*University of California Santa Barbara*



**Table of Contents**

I. A Glimpse of Green Wisdom.....3

II. Dreams in the Maya world.....5

## I. A Glimpse of Green Wisdom

*By Carissa Wein*

“So, you are Narciso?” I said to the baseball-capped Maya man standing on the other side of the living room, “I’ve heard a lot about you!”

“All good I hope,” he replied, a smile on his face.

“Yes of course, many good things! I’m supposed to ask you to show me the garden.”

“Yes, I will show you when ever you are ready,” he gestured to the book lying open in my lap, “I’m in no hurry!”

Since arriving at the BRASS Base, the place I would call home for my 11 week volunteer session with the BRASS/El Pilar project, I had been given two assignments: read up on basic Maya archaeological history, and start learning about the dynamics of a traditional, local forest garden by getting a tour of the lush backyard with the garden's keeper, Narciso. So, after a well-needed night's sleep, my travel day behind me, I began reading my stack of books, perched comfortably on the sofa in the simple living room, when, after a few chapters, I looked up to see Narciso walk in the room with a bag of freshly picked food. I had never met a forest gardener before, but after our short conversation, I was already impressed with the charm and sincerity contained in the small man's smile and the obvious wisdom in his eyes.

“Just let me get my shoes!” I smiled back and darted to my room.

Stepping out the back door, my eyes were greeted by a wonderful kaleidoscope of shapes and shades of the diverse plant-scape contained in the small, fenced yard. My guide told me that this beautiful garden was once grass and rocks, like most of the surrounding yards in the neighborhood, but with work, patience, and a lifetime of gathered experience, he was able to transform the barren patch to this living encyclopedia of useful trees, flowers, shrubs, herbs, grasses, palms and more! There are some plants which have medicinal value, many that are edible, some ornamental, and a few with materialistic uses, like making baskets, roofs or hats! Shortly after we began, we were joined by Sebeto and his camera, who accompanied us as we began our tour of the grand mixture of flora layered in the yard. Turning to the left, I watched as Narciso plucked a pod-like shape from a tangle of grass. Showing me how to squeeze the grass pocket in order to extract a clear, cool gel, he explained that this gel is good for the eyes and skin (especially red, itchy eyes and sunburns), and is best harvested in the morning before the plant uses the valuable resource up itself. He also pointed out a young Gumbolimbo or 'tourist tree' growing beside the wall and mentioned that it was particularly useful for skin infections and mosquito and snake bites.



*A cacao tree*

As we continued through the garden, Narciso showed us more useful plants, many of which I got to taste and/or smell. I was especially fascinated with learning new things about the plants that I already knew of, such as Basil, Oregano, Allspice, Chives and Cilantro. Narciso said, with a grin, that women tend to generally know more about these kinds of plants because of their experience in using herbs and spices in cooking. We also got to see the Cacao tree growing in the middle of the yard, which held a good number of fruit filled with Maya

gold, cacao seeds, just waiting to be harvested, dried, and ground into chocolate. Our green-thumbed teacher showed us the inside of one of the ripe pods and invited us each to try a flesh-covered seed. The pulp was quite sweet and delicious. I could see why it was once a candy treat for the Maya children in ancient times!

While introducing me to more growing medicines, Narciso also told us stories infused with both wit and wisdom. He explained the importance of keeping healthy and fit physically and “going with the flow” spiritually. He also told us that he always tries the plants before he advises anyone else to use them, and that he finds out a lot through simple experimentation! While telling us about the value of organic gardening, Narciso led our gaze toward a sad-looking avocado tree. He explained that the pests that were slowly killing the tree could be fended off with regular application of white lime and that chemical pesticides were not needed. He said he plans to begin applying this eco-friendly, harmless version of DDT again soon.

Past the compost pile and around the corner of the house, we found a vine with a spongy, loofah-like pod that Narciso told us would have been used as a washing tool for anything from the body to the dishes, back in the day before synthetics took over the world. Handing me a leaf that he plucked from a different nearby stalk, Narciso informed us that this plant, particularly accompanied by salt and hot water, holds the cure for a runny nose. I broke off a small piece of the leaf, at his direction, and put it in my mouth. Though he warned me, I was still surprised at how bitter the little leaf was! Our guide then told me, while laughing at my facial expression, that I didn't have to swallow it. So, spitting the little pulpy shred of horror out, I laughed too and followed him through the gate. I think I might rather have just a tissue next time!



*A natural washing tool...*

Then Narciso told us that he had a dream a few years ago in which he learned that it is important for people to eat lime often, and the whole lime, including the skin! He said that the only time that this is not good is when a woman is menstruating, but otherwise one should eat lime at least once a week! Many dreams of his come true, or have real meaning, he explained, so he is careful to pay attention and share his knowledge with those who need it.

Eventually coming to a cactus growing next to the fence, Narciso asked us if we had ever eaten cactus before. He then picked a few of the young growths and handed them to me—for a salad, he said. Then he picked a large leaf from another nearby tree and added it to the pile in my hand. He also picked up a piece of the root which we washed off before taking little pieces in our mouths to chew. He informed us that this root can be used for pain relief and to achieve a numbing sensation, especially useful for tooth aches. As I chewed on the tough root, my tongue began to tingle and feel a little numb...a strange sensation indeed!

We then continued our little tour, stopping to see and learn about a few more beautiful and useful plants until we reached the front door of the house. He then handed each of us a thick, light green leaf with a scalloped edge. He explained that this particular “Life Everlasting” leaf could grow into a tree! All one needs to do is put it in water and roots will start to sprout and then it can be planted in the ground. He jokingly proposed to start a race, to see whose leaf became a tree the fastest! So, as Sebeto and I went inside to find a womb for our potential trees, setting them in a glass of water in the kitchen, Narciso gathered some more ingredients for our lunch, including lime and chives (which are good for asthma, I learned). As we sat down to eat, I felt so grateful for the experience I had. I truly enjoyed learning about the diverse, multi-useful garden and soaking up some knowledge from its charismatic keeper, who, by the way, continued to tell us all stories and jokes from across the table as we munched on our medicinal forest garden salad...yum!



## II. Dreams in the Maya world

*By Sebeto (Sébastien Merlet)*

What time is it? 3:00am, maybe 4:00am. Lying in my hammock, I obviously lost track of the time. All around me, I can hear the sounds of the jungle. My room is only some meters away, but tonight I decided to experience the fresh air of Tikal. Some mosquitoes are turning around, I hear their buzzy sound when they approach my ears, there is no doubt that tonight they have a very good meal with me.

Once more I close my eyes, trying to fall asleep. But my excitement is too important, the sounds of the jungle too present, my mind keeps traveling, again and again. I was about to go to bed when Carissa, Marc and Anabel did so around 10:00pm, but then decided to stay a little bit more outside, I remember it very well.

“ Oh, I really wish I could be sitting at the top of one of Tikal's mighty temples, watching this beautiful full moon, so big, so orange... In the middle of the Jaguar Inn, this empty wood square seems to wait for me. Sitting on my knees, I take some time to meditate, quietly watching my breathing.



*Bloody moon at Tikal*

“ My mind keeps jumping on the sounds all around me: *was that a bird, a monkey, a gecko?* I open it to the jungle around me, what a silly thing to try to concentrate on my breathing when the forest around me is so full of life! I feel the breathing of the jungle, all the life surrounding me, living in such a beautiful and powerful harmony. A while later, a group of happy singing girls come nearby, time for them to go to bed apparently. I stand up, go to my bedroom where Marc is already sleeping, but then decide to continue my communion with Tikal and to stay on the hammock outside for the night, even if I don't have any mosquito net. As usual, the weather is perfect, I love Guatemala, and this hammock is so comfortable...

Back to the present, a thought chasing another one. The night is so full of noises, this is so amazing. There is of course the buzzy background of the insects, and a lot of more powerful and strange sounds covering it every now and then. I can recognize the song of the parrots, I wonder if they are still eating at this time, or are they simply shouting their fears in the night, afraid that a snake would come and catch them?

A new noise, that I don't immediately recognize. Another insect? I know that I've already heard this before! Ohhh no, only one of the girls, snoring and snoring again. Well, I guess that it's part of the jungle... And another sound, coming from far away apparently. Some kind of deep breathing, that's so beautiful. I don't know what it is, but my mind already makes all kind of hypothesis. Yes, I know the one that I want to believe, it can only be that... The mighty jaguar, *Balam*, patrolling its territory. It lives there, in the National Park of Tikal. It is hun-



*Sunset in the jungle*



*Sounds of the jungle...*

gry, looking for a prey. Its breath is warm, deep, powerful. All other animals stop moving and stay still when he approaches them, it is the God of this forest, the subject of so many legends. And tonight I can hear it, and my heart freezes, and my body shakes, and my mind feels all the magic of *Balam*. I love this forest, I love all its animals, I love this beautiful bloody moon looking after my night outside... And mosquitoes definitely love me.

“ I remember how it took us a long time to come to Tikal. Leaving on Thursday morning, crossing the Belize-Guatemala border, reaching Flores... With Carissa and Marc we decide to take a tuk-tuk to go to have lunch in *Rest. Los Peches*, a wonderful little restaurant. Ahh, a red Tuk-Tuk, my favorite! This restaurant is simple but beautiful, full of colors, not one of those numerous boring fancy restaurants where you meet only tourists. Portraits of the *Che* are hanging on the ceiling, while people are drinking their *Cuba Libre*. With Carissa, we try to decipher the meaning of the sentences on the walls: “*En la calle eres mi amigo o amiga, en mi negocio eres mi cliente. No se da fiado, dar fiado crea enemigos. Mejor, seamos amigos*”. Well, it's not too difficult to understand, even if we don't speak Spanish!



*A simple but wonderful restaurant*

“ Time flies like an arrow, it's already time to attend a lecture made by Anabel about the Maya environment, in Spanish, and with a crazy trumpet player nearby, everything seems so surreal! The sun slowly goes down, its fire light drowning in the water of the beautiful lake surrounding Flores. A little walk on the colorful streets, before having dinner. Ahhh, it's so wonderful not to be able to speak the language of this country, so much laughing when Carissa tries to figure out what are the things without meat! The armadillo meat is neither good nor bad, it's a little bit like chicken, and tastes like... well, impossible to describe, but it had to be tried! The way back to the hostel is done walking,



*I love Tuk-Tuks...*

leaving behind us the city on its island, surrounded by fishing bats, full of sparkling lights illuminating the lake.

“ The night is long, the fans are broken, the bedroom far too warm, and the morning sun comes as a relief, bringing with it a lovely breakfast: *panqueques con miel, naranja, té...* I'm so excited, today we visit Tikal...

Arf, another mosquito just bit me, this night outside in Tikal will let my skin covered with red dots! I still can't believe that I'm at Tikal, the famous, great Tikal. All those Mayas, in the middle of the forest, those people who built those incredible pyramids, living, dying for them, for those proofs of their passage on the earth that tourists are now climbing, wondering about the beauty of the surroundings. Ahhh, I remember how we entered the park yesterday, in the morning.

“ A big difference between a landscape of grass and cows and a green leafy jungle. Before going inside the reserve of Tikal, we stop at a little house where some women are sorting ramon nuts. Their expert eyes identify the ones which are not good enough to produce ramon flour, and which will be given to the chickens. This small cooperative lead by a



*Women sorting ramon nuts*



woman who discovered the benefits of the Mayan nuts grew over the years, drying, grinding and selling this marvel of the forest. Hmmm, I can't wait to do some crêpes with it, yammmi!

“ *No more than 45 km/h* tells a road sign on the road. Here we are, on the domain of Tikal, on the domain of the Mayas, on the domain of *Balam...* Forest all around us, so quiet, but so full of sounds and life as well. It's amazing, I feel so happy to be there! Some strange bird nests are on one of the trees, some kind of purses hanging on the branches, with only a little aperture. Black birds with yellow tails are flying around, singing.



*Strange nests...*



“ After arriving at the Tikal Jaguar Inn, we rapidly get rid of our bags, have a quick lunch, and Carissa, Marc and me go to the forest... Here we are Tikal! The trail leads us under the canopy, crossing the way of a lot of things, each one more wonderful than the other. Ohh, here is a mighty Ceiba tree, projecting its branches toward the sky. Those only have few leaves, but seem to be hairy with all the grass and orchids growing on them.

“ The stairs bring us even more deeply in the jungle, I feel like Indiana Jones with my leather hat, discovering a long lost world. The three of us are completely silent, aware of all the life surrounding us, pointing at some Toucan or funny insect crossing our way to the pyramids... No, WE are crossing their ways, this forest is theirs, we are so small compared to their green house.

“ The first temple appears, popping out of the jungle. I keep my breath, in front of me stands the so-called Temple one, the Temple of the Jaguar. We enter the central place, the ball court standing on our right. The great plaza is surrounded by constructions, and we decide to climb the North Acropolis. A lovely rain is accompanying our ascension, delicious with this warm weather. From the top of the Acropolis, I can't help but admiring what I'm seeing. Among other things I studied urbanism and land management, and I really appreciate the way the buildings are organized. Seen from this very place, the plaza seems to have no exit, the grass gives it the look of a green swimming pool. I try to imagine it filled with Mayas practicing some kind of ritual, I feel all the energy of this place, all its beauty, those temples in the middle of the jungle. I sit here, under the rain, taking the time to empty my mind and just feel the present time, to fully live this wonderful moment.



*From the North Acropolis*



*Temple I, Temple of the jaguar*

“ The sun slowly appears between the clouds of the dark blue sky, and a miracle seems to operate in front of me. The Grey buildings begin to shine, trees project shadows on the grass of the Central Plaza. Anabel just arrived at the bottom of the North Acropolis, it's time to join her to go to the Central Acropolis.

“ It's really interesting to see how the architecture of these rooms is done. With Carissa, we also see a group of howler monkeys, jumping from one tree to another. They come quite close to us, only few meters away, and we keep laughing at them, espe-

cially when one of them misses a branch and falls... What kind of monkey is that??

“ We slowly move toward another part of Tikal, crossing Temple III and some beautiful sculptures. In front of us appears the wonderful Temple IV, and we stay a while at its bottom, watching spider monkeys. They jump gracefully, run in the trees, eat some fruits. They are so beautiful! A brown koati comes nearby, we don't do any noise, and this funny animal gives us the honor to see it climbing a tree just in front of us!



*A spider monkey*

“ Wooden stairs lead us to the top of Temple IV. The sun behind us, we sit there, taking the time to meditate a little bit and appreciate the incredible view that we have on the Maya world. The canopy seems so far below us, its sounds coming up to us. The forest is all around us, bathed by the sun rays, the only signs of civilization being the Maya temples emerging from the green ocean. I try to imagine all the animals crawling there, I can't see them, I could barely imagine that this landscape is hosting so much life without the continuous song coming from the forest, wonderful mix of sounds of monkeys, parrots, toucans, insects. *Balam* may be there too, somewhere under the green cover, wandering around, waiting for humans to leave Tikal for the night to climb like we did and watch its seemingly unlimited green territory.



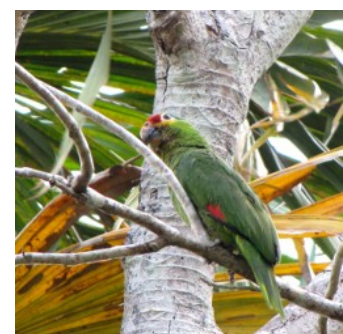
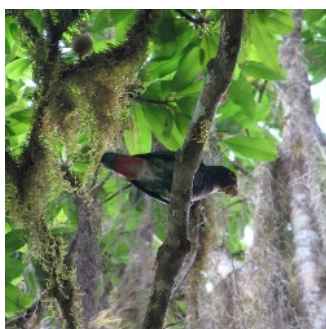
*View from Temple IV*

“ Back under the canopy, we let the piercing sound of some invisible insects guide us to the so called *Mundo Perdido*. With the night coming, the jungle is even more alive. We walk around the plaza, experiencing every temple, every sound, every smell. The sun slowly disappears beneath the central pyramid, its last rays illuminating the top. There's so much magic in this place, so much peace...



*Mundo Perdido*

“ Hey, who is throwing things to me? Only a little blue parrot trying to eat some fruits. The remains fall all around us, and he is joined by other green parrots, all shouting. I wonder what is their conversation about, they are so talkative! A beautiful toucan is watching them, oblivious to all those noises, while spider monkeys are running on the trees, jumping into the air to land several meters away. I suspect them to be able to fly, they barely touch the branches, I have a lot of troubles to get a movie of them, they are so fast, this is so incredibly wonderful! *Mundo Perdido* and its temples, its animals, an incredible experience.







*Carissa is on the ladder... so small!*

“ The night slowly falls on the jungle, it's time to go to Temple V, Carissa told me that it's an amazing place. We cross the path of some leaf cutter ants, little red spots hidden under green moving patches of vegetation. They seem to have some business with bigger ants with yellow abdomen which keep wandering around them : an investigation is currently being carried out to figure out what was the relationship between them.

“ Carissa was true, I'm really impressed by Temple V. I see her climbing the ladder to get to the top, she seems so small from the bottom! It's my turn, I slowly follow her, it's very steep and not that easy with my flip-flaps. The view is absolutely amazing from there, even if I prefer the one from Temple IV. I'm a bit scared by the height, nothing to protect you from falling, and the wind blows again and again. I sit next to Carissa and empty my mind from my fears to fully appreciate what I can see and feel. From here, the sun is still visible when

under the canopy it's already almost night time. The last rays fall on Temple I, coloring it with a beautiful Orange color. I feel so alive, I feel so happy, this place carries so much, no word can describe it. But it's time to come back to the Jaguar Inn, the park closes at 6:00pm, and it's already 6:30pm when we finally leave it.

Oh, so many great memories which come through my mind, this day was so wonderful! What time is it now? Maybe 5:00am, the moon slowly disappears on the top of the trees, but the light doesn't fade away. It seems that the mosquitoes finally got bored of their big meal, or is it that I was too lost in my memories to feel them? Tikal is definitely one of the best place I've experienced, I really would like to come back with my uncle to show him all those wonders... Ahh, but I'll soon be back to El Pilar, the archaeological reserve of the project. The experience is so different with the archaeology under the canopy. Not better, neither worse, simply different. Archaeology under the canopy brings a new way of looking at temples, with all the power of imagination... I remember now the second time I went to El Pilar and could really discover it...



*Sunset on the Temple of the Jaguar...*



*Narciso, a modern Maya*

“ It's on a rainy day, I sit on the back of the truck with Narciso, a wonderful forest gardener and I don't know yet how wonderful this discovery of El Pilar will be. What a pleasure to talk to Narciso, he has such an interesting vision of life in harmony with the nature. His knowledge of plants and their proprieties is amazing, and like the other forest gardeners he works everyday at protecting a whole part of the heritage of the Ancient Mayas. His philosophy of life is very beautiful, respecting all kind of life, insects, plants. According to him, every single being has its place and utility in a garden: there are no bad weeds for example, those are only weeds that we still don't know well enough to understand their role in the nature. His words of wisdom are incredible, and when asked what he thinks about weed-killers or Roundup, his answer

leaves no ambiguity: *why do you want me to use poison in my garden?*



*Natural lipstick*

“After a while, we arrive at the entrance of the park, and we meet one of the care-takers. He shows us some interesting things, for example those red seeds used to make lipsticks, we can even have a proof with Anabel trying it! It's so amazing to see again and again all the wonderful things that one can do when knowing which plants can be used. A lovely turtle is wandering on the side of the trail when we enter the park, slowly but surely finding its way among the leaves which cover the soil.

“ With my palmtop computer equipped with a GPS device, I keep track of the trails we use, it seems so strange to use such a modern equipment in the middle of the jungle. But of course I'm also learning how to use the machete, my first try at BRASS base to cut coconuts wasn't really a success... Narciso still have to train me for this, he is so incredible! Seeing some fruits ready to be picked, he uses a long wood-stick to detach them from the tree, and catch them on the fly with a precision acquired after years of experience of the life in the jungle.



*Lost in my thoughts...*

“ We continue our discovery of El Pilar, picking ramon nuts when we find some, and soon we arrive at a lovely plaza, plaza Gumbolimbo. Under the canopy, I climb on the top of the Mayan vestiges, every step bringing more feelings in my heart. This place is incredible, absolutely indescribable, so full of peace, of energy, of power. From the top of this hill which was once a beautiful temple, I feel completely overwhelmed by the power of the Ancient Time. The others continue their walk, and I stay there, alone, on the top of this green temple, unable to move, unable to think, turning around, experiencing the rebirth of this place.

“ This vision is so strong, the world around me becomes a pure mix of colors, of energy, I can feel the animals, the plants, the spirits of the past, the present and the future. Never ever



*View of plaza Gumbolimbo*

have I ever been that caught in the embrace of Gaïa. I stay, standing there, and there she is, Stéphanie. I can't tell if she is on my side or in my heart, or all around me as all my senses are pure feelings, but I know that she is with me. Some tears appear in my eyes, I can't say if those are tears of joy, sadness or pure wonder, but my spirit knows that the best thing to do right now is to surrender to my vision, let my tears make everything disappear in a surreal world. I cry, and my sister cries with me. Together we cry, we cry for a lost civilization, we cry for the beauty of the forest, we cry for the

energy which flows from everywhere, we cry for what we can or cannot see, for what we imagine, we cry for the Past, we cry for the Present, we cry for the Future.

“ Slowly, the reality comes back, the world around me becomes clearer, and I feel my visiting sister fading away back to her eternal rest with a last smile. She was always dreaming of the pyramids of the Ancient Egypt, I'm so glad that she could share this incredible moment with me, here on the top of a Maya temple in Central America.

“ My tears are drying on my cheeks, and I walk fast to join my team which is exploring a Maya cave below a temple. My mind is still completely blurred by the vision I just experienced, and I know that it will accompany me until the end of the day, every step that I do seems to belong to a dream.



“ We discover a lot of other wonders of El Pilar, walking with modern Mayas in this environment is so amazing. Birds, monkeys, beautiful flowers, all those parts of the nature seem to fit so well with the remains of Maya architecture. After seeing the aguada which was used by the Mayas to collect water, we arrive at the main plaza with its great temples and its beautiful trees. Once more, the energy of the place flows into my mind, tears burst again, and I can't help embracing Anabel Ford and thanking her to be the protector of this incredible forest. El Pilar vibrates in my heart as a church of Gaïa, a place where one can explore his very soul and experience all the energy and importance of nature. A mighty civilization stood there once, creating temples, acropolis, incredible buildings, a civilization which understood the importance of biodiversity.



*With Andreas, a modern Maya*

“ Tikal and its incredible buildings remind us of the glory of this civilization which was able to last for thousands of years and learned how to use its environment in a sustainable way. A

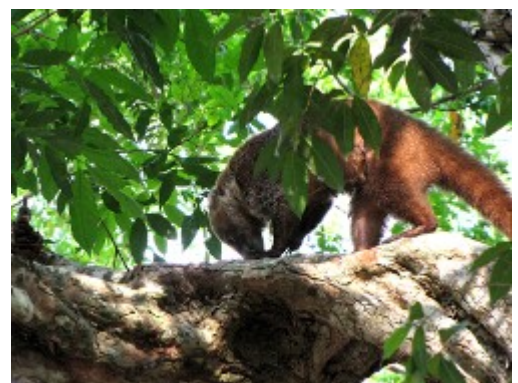
civilization which could feed its people and create wonders without knowing iron, wheels, mechanical agriculture. At a time when human beings are depleting the resources of their planet, a time when companies such as Monsanto are changing seeds for food into lucrative business, worshipping profits and productivity, creating Genetically Modified crops which are the only ones able to survive the deadly poison that these firms dream to spread all over the world to make money, the knowledge of the Ancient Mayas which still partly lives in the Modern Mayas should more than ever be taken into account. The changes induced by globalization are new, misunderstood and extremely fast. Evidence



*Temple V at Tikal, barely emerging from the amazing canopy*

appear everywhere all around the world, showing that this way of living can only be temporary before major problems arise.

“ After a long time of glory, the Mayan civilization collapsed. El Pilar shows the destiny of the temples which once stood proudly, and are now covered by the canopy. Gaïa will always have the last word, but how much destruction will we bring into this world before understanding that we can live peacefully with our environment? Mayas obviously understood the world surrounding them better than we do, may we study more deeply how they could live through centuries without our destructive machines, GMOs and poisons. To honor the Past, for the sake of the Present time, for the Future of our planet and our children.



*This koati just climbed a tree...*

### *Epilogue:*

Ahh, I understand now why I couldn't sleep more than few hours during this wonderful night at Tikal. Some hours of reflexion under the moon in the jungle are more precious than days wandering in the modern world.