

★ STARGAZING



As an indulgence before plunging into four-to-five years of graduate school, I recently spent two-and-a-half months bumming around Central America (and by "recently," I mean two weeks ago to the day I was swimming with manatees off the coast of Belize (well, the manatees may disagree that I was swimming "with" them, but I say that if you're less than five feet proximate to a manatee, then you're swimming together)). I pulled a classic North American blunder, and over-planned my itinerary prior to departure. As any seasoned traveler will attest (and I would only now, if presumptively and on an amateur level, count myself among their ranks), the best part of any excursion is the digression. That is, you show up somewhere and decide you want to stay longer, or leave earlier, or -- better yet -- one of the fellowship recommends an especially choice (and as of yet unknown) possible side-quest. One of my favourite and most rewarding tangents came from such a recommendation: a five-day jungle trek in northern Guatemala (so north that our destination lay just seven miles south of the Mexico border) to a recently uncovered (1989 I think) and barely "rehabilitated" Mayan ruin called El Mirador (or "The Lookout"). One takes two days to traverse sixty kilometers of flat but mangled terrain, has one day on site to explore the ruin, followed by two days of backtracking. Though El Mirador is becoming an increasingly popular destination for the relatively adventurous, the site is so large, and the number of attendees so small, that it's easy to feel as though you have the whole space to yourself. As such (and unlike Tikal, a magnificent ruin but teeming with tourists), El Mirador -- comparable to Tikal in scale -- is a somewhat solitary experience. There is archaeology afoot, but it is funding-dependent; thus, when the money runs dry, the archaeologists pull up anchor. One is left to wander, to wonder at the Mayans astonishing architectural accomplishments, the grandeur of this once dominant civilization, and at how quickly the jungle will erase you once you're gone.

The size of the tour groups vary -- are dependent on who books when -- and mine was a trio: myself, a laid-back Danish dude, and the son of a supermodel I'll call Australian Superman. Danish dude and I hit it off, but I didn't mesh especially well with Australian Superman. He sported that casual, captain-of-the-football-team type arrogance and sense of entitlement that stems from being the son of a supermodel as well as the actual captain of a football team (and we're talking AFL (Australian Football League) here). He was bossy, and self-righteous, and turned every conversation, no matter how irrelevant, to the topic of sex. We chatted about cameras some (he was a dedicated shutterbug), but otherwise I tended to avoid him when possible. However, on night four, our last night in the jungle, the three of us scaled the Temple of the Monkey to stargaze. This was the third in a row of moonless night skies, and our clear

celestial dome shone a ruddy shade of purple. This, we mused, would have been a not uncommon sight for the Mayan people, no less so atop one temple or another. To our modern minds, we marvel at the swath of our own solar system -- the Milky Way, in a slow, silent spiral around the gargantuan black hole at its core. Or how about the sheer unfathomable scope of the universe beyond this little blue dot? How can one help but feel insignificant in the face of all of that...that immense space? For me there's an ouroboros effect (i.e. the two snakes eating each other's tails); that is, are we so insignificant that our insignificance, in and of itself, must have some sort of meaning?

These scientific and existential quandaries are not unique to our time -- however much we have opened the aperture on our understanding of the cosmos and our place within it through astronomy, astrophysics, and quantum mechanics -- but I was struck by the idea that this was no uncommon sight for generations of Mayans. Consider, then, the extent to which their society and culture were defined and contextualized by this celestial backdrop. Not only did the Mayans had a detailed calendrical system, with staggered, overlapping, and interconnected astrological components that aligned in complex but precise ways, but much of their mythology (and we might say "naturally") stemmed from stargazing: what narratives and images did the illustrative constellations inspire? I was reminded of the extent to which we -- as individual storytellers, and the collaborative composers of myth -- are defined by our environment. These inflections are not only physical (how is a body shaped and altered by the jungle or a desert?), but psychological and philosophical: our contemplation or understanding of self as deeply rooted in the uniqueness of place. Imagine what it must have been like to have a lush and shimmering sky as a foremost frame of reference, as a recurring event, as that thing you sit and stare at many a moonless night as the surrounding jungle hums and chatters.

We emerged the following afternoon, and returned to the more familiar world of dull night skies throbbing with the bleed of municipal glow. I would not argue that this is better or worse, just different. Ours is a world of electric light and always available illumination; this absolutely has its own perks (such as less cover for proximate jaguars). Humans, however, have been plodding around for a hundred-thousand years or so, and our earliest electric grids less are than a century old (though the Egyptians figured out how to build (admittedly weak) batteries out of copper urns). Thus, for the bulk of our existence, if there was any light at night at all, it came from the moon or stars or both. (There was also fire, of course, but let's not drag Prometheus into this.) No wonder that the heavens are so centric to our understanding of time, of history, of gods, of myth, of self and other. Or, rather, that we so often situate ourselves at the center of the heavens.

Jason Rothery - Playwright, *the space between us*