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Seeing bats, camping in jungles of Guatemala

By Rob D'Amico

I had worn my hat all day to shield the sun on our six-hour hike through the jungle in Guatemala's remote Petén region. So with the onset of a cool breeze through our campsite at dusk, I shed my long-sleeved shirt and sweat-drenched hat for a short walk to see the destination's key attraction: millions of bats taking flight from their cave for a nightly feeding. I know — as an Austinite, it's a "been there, done that" moment.

But I was rewarded with a view unlike that of Austin's urban bridge colony. As the insects began their deafening calls and darkness smothered the jungle, Venus rose just above a high line of limestone cliffs to accompany a sliver of moon and provide an eerie backdrop to the frenzied flight of bats. I was also punished for my stupidity in not wearing my hat, since the bats relieve themselves on exit from the cave. I was left covered with hundreds of tiny guano drops and no shower in sight for the next two days.

Maya guides led us to the site, which is adjacent to Maya ruins known as El Zotz — a local Mayan word for "bat." Not only does the name sound cool, but it's a heck of a lot easier to shoot from the tongue than the Spanish word — murcielago. The ruins are largely buried, and because of the remote location, largely unvisited. The itinerary for our tour gave us a good half day to explore the ruins and climb the temples.

Tunnels left by looters at El Zotz let you peek into the interior of the temples and often provide a face-to-face (or in my case, wings in my face) encounter with bats inside. Although the Maya guides, who do not speak English, don't have a lot of information to share about the site, they do know the jungle. The lead guide, Carlos, could easily spot "los monos" (howler monkeys) camouflaged in the treetops, was adept at luring tarantulas from their holes and pointed out a spot where a jaguar had scratched through the dirt and plants of the forest floor.

He also knew the medicinal properties of a large variety of plants, including a collection of leaves he later brewed as tea to soothe our bones and settle our stomachs.

After camping near the ruins one night, and exploring them the next morning, we left for a half-day hike to another campground and a small set of ruins called Little Tikal.

The next day's six-hour hike back to Tikal National Park was the hardest, since the horses that had carried our water and backpacks the first two days returned home in the opposite direction and left us to carry our own loads. However, we had the unique opportunity to see

hundreds of bewildered tourists at the popular national park watch us emerge from the jungle, sweaty and exhausted and covered in guano.

The El Zotz tours, running about \$160, can be arranged at almost any of the dozen or so travel agents in Flores, Guatemala, the Petén city that is the starting point for tours. The tour operators provide transportation to Cruce dos Aguadas, where guides with horses and all provisions take visitors into the jungle.

D'Amico plans on visiting the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, and the Yucatán this spring for research on a book he is writing about duende, aluxob and other mythical 'little folk.'

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