

TRAVELERS' TALES,  
FROM NEAR + FAR

EDITED BY  
DENNY LEE



# EXPERIENCES



►  
*Sunrise over Elijio  
Panti National  
Park, in Belize;  
a cabana at Gaia  
Riverlodge.*







FROM LEFT: ROBERT RAUSCH/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX; ADRIEN WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF GAIA RIVERLODGE AND BELIZE TOURISM

# Kindred Spirits

*A national park in Belize has deep roots in Mayan healing traditions.*

By Gina DeCaprio Vercesi

**S**MOKE CURLED around my body as Maria Garcia, a Yucatec Maya healer, walked around me in circles, swinging a pail of incense. I closed my eyes and inhaled the spicy fragrance—copal resin mixed with cinnamon and rosemary—while Garcia brushed my limbs with a bundle of *piper amalago* leaves. The plant, part of the family that includes common black pepper, is sacred to the Maya for its healing properties. “We use it like a brush to remove all of the negativity,” Garcia said. “You give all that’s not good to the plant and the plant gives you its energy.”

I was standing in Garcia’s jungle-like garden in San Antonio, a small Mayan village in the western district of Cayo, in Belize. Bordering Guatemala, Cayo was in ancient times a center of Mayan civilization. Now it’s home to Noj Ka’ax H’Men Elijio Panti National Park (EPNP), one of four parks in the country comanaged by the Mayan community.

Established in 2001 thanks to the efforts of the Itzamna Society, a group formed by Indigenous Maya to protect their ancestral lands, the park is a cultural sanctuary for members of the community living in and around San Antonio. Its name, which means “canopied rainforest of healers,” also honors Garcia’s late uncle, Elijio Panti, who was a distinguished spiritual leader and healer.

With Garcia as its chairperson, the Itzamna Society helped run the park until 2009, when the group lost its agreement with the government, leaving the treasured landscape vulnerable to loggers and poachers. “The park went into abandonment,” Garcia said. More than a decade of negotiations ensued, and in 2022 the Itzamna Society regained its stake in the park. Since then the rainforest, which shelters hundreds of





medicinal plants as well as tapirs, jaguarundis, peccaries, anteaters, and countless tropical bird species, has slowly begun to recover.

Wrapping a pair of leaves around my wrist, Garcia pressed her thumb into my pulse point and murmured a blessing. When she finished, she handed me the foliage. “This is your

bundle,” she said. “You have to release it when the sun is setting. Go down to the riverside and do like this.” She mimed throwing the bundle over her shoulder. “But don’t look back. Do it with your heart and the night will take care of it.”

EARLIER THAT MORNING, Kenny Garcia, Maria’s nephew and one of EPNP’s four rangers, had picked me up at Gaia Riverlodge for the short ride to San Antonio. (I had arrived the previous afternoon after flying in to Belize City, two hours to the east.) Tucked into the lush highlands of the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, the lodge partners with the Itzamna Society to offer guests cave tours and waterfall hikes in the park. My cabana, with its soaring palm-thatched roof, clung to a hillside covered in tropical vegetation. Through a wall of screened windows, I could see the Five Sisters waterfall, which



▲ The restaurant terrace at Gaia Riverlodge.



▲ Healer Maria Garcia conducts a Mayan sunset ceremony.

Maria Garcia later told me had been named for her and her siblings. Each morning, I woke to the musical trills of rusty sparrows and hepatic tanagers. In the evenings, I sampled cocktails infused with mint and pineapple purée while peach-colored sunsets cast a glow across the deck.

After my healing ceremony, Kenny took me to the park. We bumped along a dirt road through fertile farmland on the outskirts of San Antonio, the landscape a testament to the village’s agricultural heritage. “When we first came back, hunters would pass right by us with their guns and their meat,” Kenny said when I asked him about the park’s condition following the Itzamna Society’s long absence. Last winter, he and his colleagues encountered three poachers during a routine patrol. The trio fled into the forest before they could be detained, but they abandoned shotguns and a sack containing deer meat and a gibbon, a prized game animal, all of which the rangers confiscated. “That made a huge impact in the community,” Kenny said. “Since then, we haven’t seen any trace of hunters.”

Caves were sacred to the ancient Maya, who saw them as portals to Xibalba, the underworld. Belize is home to hundreds of caverns where Mayan priests once held rituals to petition the gods for rain or a successful harvest. Some of the most famous are in Cayo, most notably Actun Tunichil Muknal, which attracts upward of 100 visitors a day. But today, deep in EPNP, the park’s remarkable Offering Cave, known to the Maya as Ka’am Be’en Actun, would be ours alone to explore.





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*Tamales at the San Antonio Women's Cooperative; El Castillo pyramid; Privassion Creek, which flows past Gaïa Riverlodge.*

Near the park boundary we stopped to pick up Antonio Mai, a San Antonio native who has served as a curator of the Offering Cave for more than two decades. It took us about 45 minutes to reach the trailhead. Rangers navigate the rugged rainforest roads on motorbikes, but in Kenny's truck, the going was slow. A short hike led to a series of terraces that Mai said the ancient Maya used for public gatherings.

Archaeologists believe the Offering Cave became a pilgrimage site during a devastating drought around the year 900 that contributed to the collapse of Mayan civilization. Cave rituals, including human sacrifice, increased during that time—desperate offerings made to Chac, the rain god. Only priests could enter the caves; everyone else congregated outside. “It was like modern times,” Kenny said. “If you were wealthy, you could afford a better view. If not, you were way in the back.”

When we reached the cave's entrance, I gasped at its enormity. Donning a helmet with a powerful headlamp, I followed Mai into the darkness. Cave moths clung to the walls, their tiny eyes glittering in my lamp's beam. The papery flutter of bats' wings echoed through the gloom. We ducked beneath a curtain of stalactites and entered a small alcove. In one corner, fires from ancient rituals had left the limestone ceiling blackened by soot. Pottery fragments, including the top half of a massive ceramic vessel, lay scattered across the dirt floor. These ancient artifacts—offerings the Maya made more than a millennium ago—were the kind one would expect to find in a museum.

MAYAN CULTURE, PAST and present, runs deep in Cayo, and I saw signs of it everywhere I went. One morning I paddled

the Macal River, a meandering waterway the Maya navigated by canoe. I wandered the ruins at Xunantunich, an important archaeological site set on a ridge above the Mopan River, and climbed El Castillo, its 130-foot pyramid. On my last day I visited the San Antonio Women's Cooperative, where I made a pinch pot out of rich, red clay using a traditional Mayan hand-building technique. Later, I learned how to grind nixtamalized corn on a stone metate said to be centuries old and form the dough into tortillas, which members of the cooperative cooked over a wood fire. Brushed with coconut oil and sprinkled with salt, the tender tortillas tasted both sweet and savory.

Back at Gaïa, I took my bundle of *piper amalago* down to Privassion Creek, where I swam in the large pool at the base of Five Sisters Falls, letting the water tumble over my shoulders. When the sun began to drop toward the mountains, I rock-hopped along the riverbed to a quiet spot where a small cascade spilled into a basin. I clutched the bouquet and said a word of gratitude. I had come to visit a park and was leaving with a newfound appreciation for the way small groups of people can make a difference in the world. Closing my eyes, I tossed the bundle behind me. I could tell by the rush of the creek that, just as Maria had promised, the night would take care of it. 🌍

*Daylong tours of the caves and waterfalls of Noj Ka'ax H'Men Elijio Panti National Park can be booked via **Gaïa Riverlodge** (doubles from \$295).*