

TO BELIZE AND BACK.....February 2012

Everybody told us that this is a mild British Columbian winter – so be it – but we wanted to once again feel the heat and humidity of the tropics. So Belize it was, in Central America.

We drove from Clearwater to Kamloops where we left the truck in the airport parking and “entrained” for a night in Calgary. The flight over the Rocky Mountains in the late afternoon was spectacular – mighty peaks, lots of snow and a clear sky; almost 400 km across wilderness. An auspicious start to the trip! A restful night in a motel and next day dealing with US customs/border security officialdom in the heart of Alberta, Canada! Anyway, then on to Houston, Texas. Again, mostly clear skies and until southern Colorado a snow-bedecked vista then on to dry semi-desert.

The last leg to Belize was uneventful and the third world atmosphere of Belize airport a pleasure. And oh that pressure cooker heat..... after a little delay with the pre-booked car hire... the car is in Belize city but the chubby lad took us in his bakkie to pick it up. Back to African driving standards – speed limits there are none, potholes aplenty and lots to be liked! So our trusty little Suzuki was about to carry us on our first neotropical journey.



Shopping – a small “Vietnamese” supermarket (in name alone) for some basic supplies, bread, peanut



butter, beer and Belizean rum (of course only to support the local economy). In the dark we headed to our first three night stop, the tropical Eco Centre that is attached to the Belize Zoo. In fact this was to be our pattern, a few nights in a location and checking the surrounds. All was ready and we moved into a house on stilts, mosquito mesh and no glass, shutters to be closed for storms.

Our first camera subject, a



Caribbean coast toad, was captured before we settled in. The zoo itself is excellent with only species occurring in Belize – jaguar, ocelot, margay, tayra, gibnut, agouti, howler and spider monkeys, tapir and white-tailed deer. An excellent introduction to the local wildlife. There were some good trails that allowed one to pick up the feel of the place.

We met up with jaguar researchers Becci & Bart who had worked for 5 years in the jungles of the Cockscomb Basin where we were headed, and they gave us some insight into the area, where to look, and the problems facing conservation in this country. We had lunch at a joint, owned by a German woman, called Cheers and this became our “homing point” – good food and a hangout for British troops that do “jungle manoeuvres” here – ex-colony and all that.

Belize, when ruled by the Maya peoples some 800 AD backwards, had approximately 1 million people, today courtesy of such diseases as measles and smallpox has a third of this number. Throughout the lowlands centuries of cultivation has seen great modification of the natural environment but in the tropics regrowth is rapid.

From here we moved to a location on the Sittee River, a place managed by an American couple (everything here seems to be managed for absentee landlords/ladies). Here we put out rodent traps and were “amply” rewarded by the evil stings of fire ants attracted to the bait. We have been bitten and stung by many beasts in different parts of the world but these were definitely supremo! We then began to wonder if anything was trapped what would they go through.....no more trapping!



We made forays from Sittee River into Hopkins, a tourist “slum” that for some reason attracts overseas visitors! But we did see some nice royal terns and frigatebirds – as well as having an excellent meal of crayfish and shrimps, suitably washed down with good Chilean wine! A foray to an AmerIndian village called Red Bank where scarlet macaws were said to gather but our timing was out but we did see a small sounder of white-lipped peccaries. A surprise as hunting pressure is high in the area.



Then it was off to the real jungle – the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Reserve. Here we hired a basic but adequate cabin – it was that or a dormitory but as it turned out we were pretty much on our own of nights,



with small numbers of visitors coming up to “tube the river” for an hour or two and then heading back to the coast. The jungle was bliss – lots of

mud, some rain but tracks galore and a splendour of birdlife. We walked all of the trails, encountering jaguar tracks at almost every turn, as well as tracks of Baird’s tapir, ocelot, agouti, gibnut, peccary and opossums. We had collared peccaries in camp, grey fox and the birdlife! Mighty crested guans grumbling to each other and frustratingly many species calling but not showing themselves. The buzz of hummingbirds was constant, *Montazuma oropendula*

with their great pendulous nests, tinamou the tropical forest equivalent of the francolins and spurfowls of Africa. But it was a humble ant that held our respect – the leaf-cutter ants. Cutting circular, or near circular, leaf sections from numerous forest plants and then in great columns carrying them back to their clay citadels. If only humankind could be so disciplined and hardworking!

After the wonders of the Cockscomb we headed deeper south and closer to the Guatemalan border. Three nights at Sun Creek Lodge which we had to ourselves and an AmerIndian maid. The German



owner was otherwise engaged with his furniture factory in the jungle but we met him as we were leaving! Again, a wonderful jungle establishment. The maid's children were "employed" to bring us beasts for the cameras – tarantula and terrapin, toads and scorpion; neighbours had Brazilian jungle rabbit and agouti; unfortunately the chap who had had 3 gibnuts (pacas) had recently sold them; no doubt to the restaurant down the road! The AmerIndians are compulsive wild pet keepers that range from parrots to deer, peccaries to monkeys and although

not good for the beasts it is good for the cameras.

The nearest "big town" to Sun Creek was Punta Gorda on the coast – not much to write home about but Grace's did a mean shrimp dish washed down with beer.....

The place is run down, roads potholed, buildings decaying and an uninspiring coastline. So into the interior to visit ancient Maya settlements – not on the tourist route. The first was undeveloped, required 4x4 and we shared it with feral pigs but a special atmosphere. Labaantun and Nim Li Punnit have been in part restored and are incredibly impressive and have a special atmosphere, the first we shared with a Canadian couple, the second we had to ourselves.



For our last two nights we booked into Banana Bank, a working horse, cattle and cropping ranch where we rounded off our trip. The owners are a couple originally from Montana somewhat eccentric but then so are we.... Food and environment good and especially for M the highlight of horse riding. We headed off for 3 hours in the morning along muddy jungle trails and sightings of howler monkeys – their impressive calls heard throughout the trip – tapir tracks. I chickened out of the afternoon but M valiantly went ahead. The result lots of pepper tick bites.





Then it was back to the snow of BC. We will be back in Central America.