



Mundo Maya

The Route of Kings



Route of the Present and the Past

It is a world of kings and deities; of city-states and kingdoms. It is a world of power and politics; of conquest and destruction. It is a world of blood-letting and sacrifice; of feathers and jade. It is a world of religion and ritual; of the underworld and the heavens.

It is a world that thrived and rivaled the civilizations of the Egyptians and Chinese, in science, in social organization and in art. It is a world that fell and a world that still exists. It is the world of the Maya.



The Maya Empire can find its beginnings almost 3000 years ago, its height of power and influence peaking in 700 A.D encompassing an area of today's Yucatan peninsula, Chiapas and Tabasco provinces in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and the western portion of Honduras and El Salvador. As the empire collapsed to mysterious causes, one might think they would have all but disappeared.

Yet, with over 7 million Maya living throughout these regions today, it is clear their legacy lives on.



Route of Color and Culture

The “Maya Route” is more than a series of ruins to be visited in the back of a minibus or stretches of white sand beaches in which to wile away the days. In fact, the route itself can only be defined by the person taking it and encompasses a region that not only offers archeological delights and sun-kissed shore, but also natural preserves with incredible biodiversity, colonial cities, and a culture rich in tradition...

We traveled the Maya World, in part by kayak, on foot and on horse, for over 4 months to connect not only the temples and natural environment, but also to discover what surrounds them: the people and their way of life. From healers to spelunkers, hammock makers to priests, we met and interviewed a wide range of people and tried to understand the broader view of the Maya World as it is today from personal perspectives.

Discover the burnt orange facades of churches and monasteries. Feel the intricately woven patterns of their textiles. Smell the scent of incense as it wafts over you. Hear the haunting lilt of flutes, and taste the richness of a handmade tortilla, fresh off the griddle...



Route of Adventure

The Maya Route not only concerns itself with history and culture, it is also a route of adventure.

Open the door to thousands of acres of virgin jungle, forests, wetlands and wildlife habitat. Hike cloud forests in search of the elusive quetzal, its plumes once treasured by Kings. Kayak mangrove lined waterways, the silence of the dawn interrupted by a scarlet macaw or the howl of a monkey. Snorkel the crystal clear waters of the Caribbean or dive for the treasures beneath...



Our Proposal

With more than 15 million American visitors yearly to this region, that has been increasing in the past 3 years, the secret is out. This region and its history not only augment the story of the Americas, but today is a region that offers the visitor a multitude of experiences. From history buffs to adventure seekers, all can enjoy and learn about the world of the Maya...

The purpose of this project is not only to highlight the diversity that exists within the Maya World but also to educate the readers of the ongoing struggle of the Maya to maintain their way of life and to better their lives, and at the same time, to preserve the natural beauty in which they live.



Our Outline

We propose a full color illustrated book with text that will highlight the different regions of the Maya World through the people we have met, the history of this great empire, and the stories and realities we have uncovered in the context of our journey. We suggest 5 chapters:

1. From Highlands to Jungle
2. Churches, Haciendas and Temples
3. Waterways of the Coast and Land
4. Cuchumatanes, the High Plateau
5. Land of Smoke and Volcanoes



Chapter 1: Highlands to Jungle

The highlands of Chiapas may very well be better known for its political affiliation with the Zapatistas, yet with tensions now diminished, what is hidden inside reveals an area full of surprises.

We travel from the depths of the Sumidero Canyon where hundreds of the Chiapa people hurled themselves into its abyss to escape the onslaught of the conquistadores, to the cobbled streets and markets of colonial San Cristobal de las Casas. Alejandro, an anthropologist of Tzotzil blood, takes us inside the pine-strewn floors of Templo de San Juan and the colorful cemetery of San Juan de Chamula, to explain the cosmology of his ancestors, and of beliefs today...



The Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, is second only to the Amazon region in terms of biodiversity. The 1.8 million hectares it encompasses hosts 50 percent of Mexico's species of tropical trees, 3,500 types of plants, 340 species of birds, 163 species of mammals; reveals the secrets of Bonampak with its astonishing frescoes, Yaxchilan, a major trading center of the Maya overlooking the mighty Usumacinta River, Palenque, perhaps one the most love of all Mayan archeological sites...and the Lacandon people. Meeting Ricardo near the village of Lacanja Chansayab, he talks to us about his struggle to preserve his people's culture and heritage in the face of modernity.



Chapter 2: Temples, Churches and Haciendas



Taken from the earth, the temples were constructed. Taken from the temples, the churches and cities were constructed. Both still stand representing their respective rulers and were built to maintain control. As a result, the Maya, forced to embrace the religion of the conquistadores, added their own twists of faith drawing from ancient rituals of worship, a fusion of beliefs that still exists today.

Participating in the processions during Semana Santa in the small villages around Ticul, we are overwhelmed by the power of the church today. A local priest shares his thoughts on the difference between the church in the days of the conqueror and the church of today.



The War of the Castes beginning in 1847 led to Mayan control over much of the Yucatan peninsula. The colonial cities of Campeche and Merida held steadfast, with reinforcements from Mexico City dealing the final blow to their struggle for freedom.

Haciendas were born from the families of the oppressors to further reap the benefits of sisal, their fibers used for rope and fabric making, and although it led to great prosperity for this region, the ones who toiled the most received little.

We watch intently the sun-wrinkled face of Jorge as he tells us how he would go by horseback to Hacienda Petac to cut the leaves of the sisal plant, the days of the revolution, and the aftermath...



Chapter 3: The Waterways of Ocean and Land



The Chontal Maya were great seafarers, paddling their long wooden boats around the Yucatan peninsula to trade in cacao, quetzal feathers, flint, obsidian, thorny oyster shells and salt. Because of the difficulty of navigating the jungle and mountain landscape, the canoe was the most important means of transportation, and trade.

From the mangroves of Celestun and the salt fields near Rio Lagartos where thousands of flamingoes mate and feed, to the 2nd longest barrier reef in the world off the coast of Quintana Roo and Belize, we paddle in the footsteps of the ancient Maya...





Inland routes were by rivers and swamps, leading north to the Usumacinta River and the Gulf of Mexico or flowing east into the turquoise blue waters of the Caribbean.

Following these paths into the interior of Belize, we find ourselves surrounded by jungle once more, the mighty “World-Tree” or Ceiba shooting above the canopy to unite the heavens, the earth and the underworld. A detour takes us to meet a Mayan family on whose property lays a cave, an entrance to the 9 levels below, Xibalba, where we discover an ancient place of ceremony, their offerings in tact.



Chapter 4: The Cuchumatanes and the High Plateau

Traditionally a Mam Maya region until the 15th century, they were pushed out by the neighboring K'iche, and many fled across the border into Mexico. Today, the village of Todos Santos and its environs are pure Mam, distinguished by the dress of the men. Geronimo, guard of La Torre, the highest non-volcanic point in Central America, walks with us in these lofty hills calling out to relatives and friends with whistles that sound like birds, and tells us the story of his community from the days of the civil war...



Continuing our trek by horse along the cordillera, we meet two former workers of UNHCR (United Nation High Commission for Refugees) who helped supervise the return of Maya refugees from Mexico after the end of the civil war, and discuss contemporary issues of the Maya today.

Putting our backpacks on once again, we head across the steep valley toward the Ixil Triangle, probably one of the worst afflicted regions of the civil war. Following a network of signed walking routes and *posadas comunitarias* set up by a Spanish NGO, Solidaridad Internacional, we have a chance to meet and converse with the people of this harsh area. The revenues of this program are to distributed equitably among the villages to aid in the construction of schools and infrastructure.



Chapter 5: The Land of Smoke and Volcanoes

Surviving earthquakes and exploding volcanoes, Antigua stands a precious remnant of the Spanish conquest of Guatemala. But beyond the faded baroque exteriors of churches and monasteries, the outlying regions are rich in contemporary Mayan culture.

Lake Atitlan sits surrounded by volcanoes, a mystical place, where placid blue waters lap at the feet of traditional villages. Traveling across the lake to Santiago Atitlan, we come face to face with Maximon, a short wooden man covered in colorful scarves, an incarnation of the Mayan gods. A local shaman explains to us the purpose of his calling as a communicator between man and spirits...



But Maximon is not always needed to give thanks, to ask for healing or for success. In Chichicastengo, famous for its weekend market where hundreds of people come from various villages to trade, the adherence to pre-Christian beliefs and ceremonies is strong.

Pascual Abaj sits on a hilltop south of the town, a shrine to the Mayan earth god, Huyup Tak'ah. It is revered with gifts of incense, food, cigarettes, flowers and alcohol left in gratitude and hope. Incense and candles burning in front of the church, a young man, son of a shaman, tells us about the structure of the *Cofradia*, a traditional religious brotherhood, and their importance in the community.

The “Maya Route”, as depicted in guide books and tours, is something that can be explored by all yet, the journey can surely be enriched by trying to understand and experience the inter-relation between all the elements of this region: the history, the environment, the culture and the issues that exist for the Maya today...



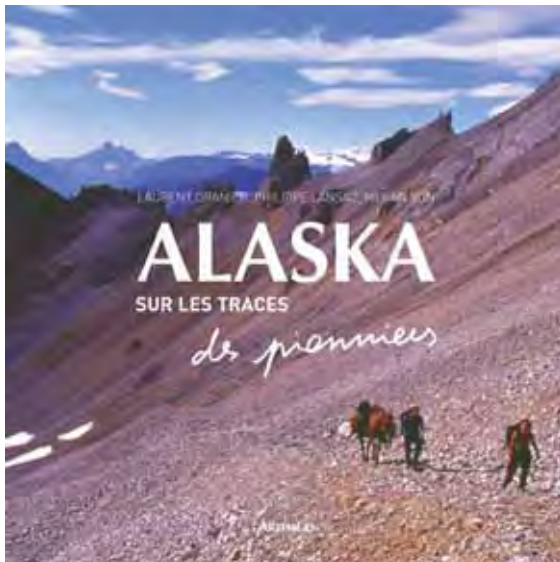
The Team

Laurent Granier

A French national, Laurent discovered his knack for a camera while embarking on a world tour. 5 years later, he is still on the road clicking away. Co-author of over 6 books, he writes for press in his native France, as well as other European, Asian and Mexican magazines. He has also been part of numerous radio chronicles on Radio France. He will be one of the co-authors of “America, the legend of the west” set to be published in 2006.

Megan Son

Having spent most of her life abroad, Megan, an American national, was afflicted with the bug to travel from a young age. The fever still with her, she now writes for various magazines in the UK, France, Spain, Canada, the US, Mexico and in Asia. She is one of the co-authors of “Alaska, in the footsteps of the pioneers”, and the 2006 release, “America, the legend of the west”. Her desire to integrate social and environmental issues into her work stems from a BSc in Social Work and a MSc in Social Development from the University of London, SOAS.



Books :

Canada, sur les traces de Jacques Cartier (Arthaud 2005)

Alaska, sur les traces des pionniers (Arthaud 2004)

Le Grand Nord, sur les pas de Jack London (Garde Temps–2004)

L'inde des Parfums (Garde Temps – 2004)

Aux Sources du Massages (Garde Temps – 2004)

Paris-Tokyo (Coéditions Radio France – Garde Temps - 2004)

Paris-Séoul, on the roads of Eurasia (GNC média - 2003)

Press:

They collaborate on articles published in Europe, the Americas, and Asia.





www.studionomade.com

Laurent GRANIER
l.granier@studionomade.com

Megan SON
m.son@studionomade.com