

Dik van der Meulen is a historian and the author of a biography of Multatuli that won him the AKO Literature Prize in 2003. **Marta Durán de Huerta** is a sociologist and journalist who has published several books about the Zapatistas, including *Yo Marcos*, translated into many languages.

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Dik van der Meulen and Marta Durán de Huerta

Mayans Ancient and Modern

A Travel Story

The Mayan people and their two thousand years of civilization still speak to the imagination. Their society collapsed several times over the centuries but always re-established itself. In the footsteps of nineteenth-century explorers, Dik van der Meulen and Marta Durán de Huerta travelled on mules and open trucks to the furthest corners of south-eastern Mexico, searching for the last vestiges of a culture that has survived almost unchanged.

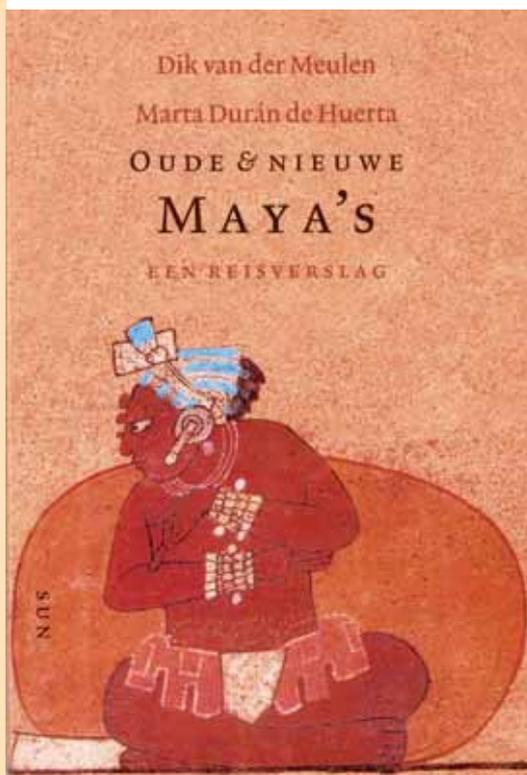
Their plan to write *Mayans Ancient and Modern* dates back to shortly after 1 January 1994, the day the Mayans with a heartfelt *Ya Basta* – 'we've had enough' – rose in revolt against large-scale land ownership and the country's corrupt administration. Rebel leader Marcos, who quickly became an icon of the anti-globalist movement, marched out of the jungle with his army and occupied several towns in the state of Chiapas.

A few days after the revolution began, sociologist and journalist Marta Durán de Huerta, along with several friends and colleagues, arrived in the area to support the Mayan resistance movement. Historian Dik van der Meulen followed events from a distance but with more interest than most: he had visited Chiapas several times and had been fascinated by the Mayans for years.

This report of their exhausting journey through the jungle region controlled by the Zapatistas ten years after the revolution is gripping. Durán de Huerta's contacts enabled them to penetrate into the heart of rebel territory and return with unique impressions. They celebrated the tenth anniversary of the revolution surrounded by Zapatistas in the legendary rebel village of La Realidad. For all their sympathy for the rebels, however, the authors have a sharp eye for the misjudgements and absurdities that are part of the story of the freedom struggle.

Mayans Ancient and Modern is not just an exciting contemporary story. The authors give voice, quite literally, to the past. They resurrect an old Mayan king, ruler of the city of Palenque in its heyday, by seeking an audience and having him tell his story. It is a brilliant literary-historical device.

In Chiapas the authors also get to know the Lacandones, Mayans known for their primeval customs and seen by many as the last real Mayan tribe. Here too, the authors show, reality is more complicated than enchanted tourists who idolize the 'noble savage' would like to think. True, these Mayans often look just as they do in old photographs, and they know the jungle like the backs of their hands, but jeans and satellite television are steadily making inroads.



Sample Translation

Mayas Ancient and Modern. A Travelogue

(Oude & nieuwe Maya's. Een reisverslag)

by Dik van der Meulen &

Marta Durán de Huerta

(Amsterdam: Uitgeverij SUN, 2005)

Translated by Brian Doyle

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The King

There are two Palenques. One is an overgrown village once known as Santo Domingo de Palenque (population circa 25,000), on the lowland plain to the north east of the ruins: a hastily assembled collection of hotels, eateries, internet cafés and travel agencies, with more taxis than inhabitants. The other is the city of yesteryear, built against the northern slopes of a vast upland plain: the ancient Lakam Ha. No one visits the modern Palenque for its urban splendour, or for its peace and quiet. The *Lonely Planet* described it in 2001 as ‘A sweaty, humdrum place with little attraction except as a base for visiting the ruins’ and they were close to the mark. The *zócalo*, the central square with its surrounds, is the only place that might be considered reasonably pleasant, thanks to the shade provided by the trees. The single old building in the city, the church, is also on the square. A 7.5-kilometre tarmac road connects Palenque with the ruins. White delivery vans full of tourists travel back and forth. At least as many visitors arrive in large coaches, organised by international travel companies. In short, a pleasant hive of activity, especially in the holiday season, which is more or less all year round.

It wasn’t always like this. *Terry’s Mexico*, a predecessor to the *Lonely Planet* guide dating from 1911 (second edition), also recommends the ancient temples and palaces, but the tourist is warned: ‘Travellers to the ruins must take a camping outfit, including their own provender, and in the absence of Inns or *mesones*, they must camp in the neighbourhood. Indians make the best guides and they are procurable at the village of *Montecristo*, the point of departure from the river.’ The river in question was the Usumacinta and these days Montecristo is called Emiliano Zapata (like a couple of hundred other towns and villages in Mexico). An alternative route is not given, the suggested route already being difficult enough in 1911. The traveller is advised to take the steamboat upriver as far as Montecristo: a thirty-hour voyage. According to Terry, ‘The ruins are 30

M. in a north-easterly direction (about 2 days' travel) from *Montecristo* and 6 M. N. of the Indian village of *Palenque*'. But that was not all. 'The journey is usually impracticable except in the dry season, which begins in Feb. and ends in May. While the heat in the forest is almost suffocating, it is preferable to the discomfort produced by the torrential rains – when the rivers overflow their banks, the trails are submerged, mosquitoes and ticks make life a burden, and the Indians refuse to enter the forest.'

Yet there was still every reason to undertake the journey. Terry concludes his praise of the ruins ('the finest on the American continent') with some lines of a poem by Southey:

Upspringing there for sunless centuries,
Behold a royal city, vast and lone,
Lost to each race, to all the world unknown
Like famed Pompeii 'neath her lava bed,
Till chance unveiled the 'City of the Dead'.
Palenque! Seat of kings! As o'er the plain,
Climbs the rude mound the shadowy scene to trace,
He views in mute surprise thy desert grace.
At every step some palace meets his eye,
Some figure frowns, some temple courts the sky:
It seems as if that hour the verdurous earth,
By genii struck, had given these fabrics birth,
Save that old Time has flung his darkening pall
On each tree-shaded tower and pictured wall.

'Tourists!' Irritation and disdain struggle for precedence on his face and in his voice. It's a little after closing time; the light of the sun, which is already low in the western sky, skims over the scanty remains of the north-western wing of Palenque's palace. The man who built this part of the complex – building A-D for the initiated – is staring out from the ruins across the lowland plain. He turns and motions us to follow him to one of the oldest parts of the palace, which is the best

preserved: House E. ‘Tourists,’ he repeats, ‘they’re worse than termites. You should see what they’ve done to the house my father built.’ It’s already dark inside, but our host turns out to have a powerful torch (‘Why not?’) with which he illuminates the plaster walls. There’s not much to see. ‘All this used to be covered in paintings. Do you know the temple in Bonampak? Here too every square inch used to be decorated: completely different, and better, more beautiful. There was still a fair amount left when the young Stephens arrived with that sketch artist. But in recent years they’ve been arriving in their thousands, and that’s when the problems started. Now they’ve closed it off to those graffiti scribblers, to the folks who insist on touching everything, but it was too late.’ He beams the torch on an oval relief built into one of the walls. ‘My father’s inauguration, carved in solid stone. Thirty years ago it was as good as new, but everyone kept on touching it. Everyone. Stone, I know, but nothing can survive all those fingers. Look, almost nothing is left of the picture.’ He looks around regretfully. ‘It’s not what it was in my day. Colourful woven textiles hung everywhere, there were ornately carved wooden benches and chests, cushions all over the place, sumptuous enough to drown in. It’s all gone, long, long ago. But those tourists can’t help *that* either.’

We are listening to K’inich K’an Joy Chitam II, the king who ruled for nine years over the city in its heyday, from 702 to 711. The second son of the most notorious Maya sovereign of all time, K’inich Janaab’ Pakal I, is dressed simply despite his royal status, as he was on the day he was unexpectedly taken prisoner by troops from Toniná: his upper body naked save a (precious) jade necklace, and without headdress. Above his eyes he wears a finely carved wooden figure: the god that guarantees his royal descent. His forehead recedes steeply, the result of the artificial deformation of his skull at an early age.

‘The place is a miserable shambles.’ He’s right. The clay or compacted mud floor is covered with grit and dust. ‘But there’s something I can do about that.’ He disappears into a hole in the floor on the far right of the building and reappears a moment later with three large cushions. He sits on one of them cross-legged and we settle on the others. He lights a cigar and begins his story.

‘I don’t have much to say about what happened in Lakam Ha before my time. Our city was founded... 993 years before the beginning of your Common Era – a detail no one believes anymore, but I insist on it. My being a descendent of the Hero Twins, just as my father and even my brother, is also beyond dispute as far as I’m concerned.’ He gives the impression from the outset of being someone aggrieved, but we’re not inclined to argue the point.

He tells us little about the first centuries of Palenque or Lakam Ha (he uses the city’s old and new name interchangeably) and seems generally reluctant to respond to our observations. In spite of the passing of the centuries, he has maintained the character of a person predestined to rule, unaccustomed to contradiction and even to simple questions. He is talkative, nevertheless, and we are more than satisfied that he is prepared to speak with us. He turns out to be an excellent host and conjures up a couple of bottles. ‘What would you like? I have *poch* and beer... Montejo,’ he adds with an uneasy snigger. *Poch* is the powerful homemade rotgut many of the Mayas drink round here, frequently to forget their woes but just as often a source of the same. That is why the Zapatistas banned alcohol. As far as the beer is concerned, K’an Joy Chitam’s embarrassment is quite understandable, since Montejo is not only a well-known brand of Mexican beer, it is also the name of the Spanish family that subjugated the sixteenth century Yucatan Mayas. It’s hard to say no to the beer. A day among the temples is thirsty business. As he opens the beer (he himself drinks *poch*) he tells us about the Palenque/Lakam Ha of his childhood years and of the days prior to his reminiscences.

‘Palenque had yet to experience its second period of expansion; the third – which took place after my downfall – was to make it unexpectedly top-heavy, at a time when its limbs were already in the process of dying. Most of the temples surrounding the palace were made of mud, clay and wood. That was also a result of the devastating wars against the mighty Calakmul, from which my city was still slowly recovering. People of superior religious descent lived in the neighbourhood of the palace. It was all very respectable.

‘The river behind the palace was also there in those days, channelled and partly underground, flowing over little waterfalls and into natural ponds. Reasonably prosperous, if you ask me, at least within sight of the palace. Sturdy, spacious huts built on terraces against the steep hills. We had gardens planted with a variety of fruit trees, which we even used in our hieroglyphics for the name of the city. An intentional ambiguity, since its true – or rather, its *principal* name was actually Great Water.

‘Anyway, the people who lived in and around the centre of the city were fairly well off. The women were decently clothed in *huipiles*, you’ve seen those before, a sort of blouse from the neck to the ankles. It was a different story in the lower parts of the city. The adults were often just as naked as the children, who would play in the mud between the garbage and the faeces. The filth even covered the steps of the (minor) temples, which were completely absorbed into the urban landscape and where the sweet scent of putrid offerings filled the air. There were floods if it rained heavily and people sometimes died. But they always returned to the same place. Further down, on the plain, where the population was less concentrated, were the fields that supplied the city with food.

‘I was born in the centre of this city, in the ninth *baktun* according to our calendar, 10 *katun*, 11 *tun*, 17 *uinal*, 0 *kin*, 11 *ahau*, and 8 *mak*, November 2, 644 according to your calendar. The palace was not as tall as it is today. Of the principal buildings, only the house in which we are now sitting was already in place. I was actually responsible for commissioning some of the temples those tourists now gawp at wide-mouthed. And we worked a lot with wood, traces of which are now few and far between.

‘Pakal, my father, put up buildings like a man possessed – and he reigned almost seventy years... I mean, at the age of twelve he succeeded my grandmother, who is referred to nowadays as Sak K’uk. That was in... 615.’ He frequently hesitates when calculating the year, probably to convert the Mayan calendar into the calendar now in common use. ‘But she still had 25 years to go and she wasn’t the type to spend the rest of her days weaving or cooking (something she had never learned anyway). Moreover, the entire first half of Pakal’s reign were difficult years. After effects of the unsuccessful wars against

Calakmul, plundering... A great deal of building work also took place in those days, but mostly to repair what had been destroyed. And there was drought, and there were crop failures. Difficult times. At least that is what they told me, since I wasn't around to see for myself. When I was born, things actually took a turn for the better, and I can't help making the connection.' He laughs, exposing his jade-inlaid teeth, yet he doesn't seem to intend his last statement to be ironic. 'A little more than a year after my birth, Pakal completed his first temples. He was the one who started to add upper levels to the palace, keeping the lower floors according to the tradition. No, that strange tower is not his; that stems from much later, from one of my successors.

'And my father commissioned a great deal more: the northern group, all sorts of temples and houses, in that direction...' – he makes a sweeping gesture towards the door, behind which darkness has fallen – '...buried under piles of sludge and leaves. Towards the end, he wanted a temple the like of which had never been built before. Not the tallest possible, as those idiots from Calakmul would have built; not as steep as the temples in Tikal, but more refined and above all more beautiful. He couldn't have chosen a better moment. There had never been so much talent in one place as during his final days in Palenque, craftsmen of every kind – architects, plasterers, carpenters and painters. There was a great deal of unrest in what is now called Chiapas (and its surroundings) and Pakal took advantage of it. Half of Tikal had been evacuated after an attack from Calakmul. The king of Tikal, Nuun Ujol Chaak, fled to Palenque, with the best builders in the city following in his tracks. Tikal was finally to regain the upper hand, and then it was downhill for Calakmul, thank god.

'But where were we? Quite so, Pakal's mighty pyramid. A masterpiece! And he, my father, almost witnessed its completion. We could build quickly if we had to. The temple was as good as finished when he died and his tomb was already complete; the pyramid was built around it. His interment was glorious... At least that's what I've been told. I wasn't there in person.' K'an Joy Chitam falls silent, reminiscing perhaps about his father. 'But it was my brother Kan B'alam who tried to take all the credit after he succeeded Pakal. He used the inscriptions in the temple to his own advantage. I won't deny that we are all a little like that, but –

well, let's put it this way, my brother and I never really saw eye to eye.' He pauses once again and passes over to the days of his youth without saying why. His words are carefully chosen, with a touch of solemnity, and he speaks almost without hesitation, as if he had learned the text by heart.

'At a time of border conflicts and failed harvests, a starving population assembling in front of the sanctuary, and pumas and jaguars venturing as far as the suburbs of the city, I received my name on February 10 of your 657. I hadn't been looking forward to it, because for the first time in my life I had to pierce my genital organ, with my own hands. Terrible, I know, but apparently the only way to contact the dead.

'In spite of the alcohol and mushrooms, I still almost fainted from the pain. And I saw nothing, no ghostly manifestations and absolutely no ancestors. My father wasn't happy at all. He spread the word that I had had a conversation with K'an Joy Chitam, a legendary king from preceding centuries. From then on that was my name, in other words, I had actually become K'an Joy Chitam. The animal that goes with both my name and my person is the peccary, a rare wild boar not seen very often these days in our forests. In reality, all this was determined shortly after I was born, making the blood offering a bogus and highly unpleasant affair.

'It was all in keeping with the way Pakal governed: conscious of tradition and custom, but flexible where appropriate. This was also how he understood the business of war. My father never disputed the necessity of wars, but he always made sure he didn't go looking for an opponent stronger than him. He had learned his lesson the hard way. He had grown up with defeat in war, which ultimately determined the first decades of his reign. While we Mayas, as you know, tend to be relatively autonomous in the administrative sense of the term – one city more than another – two major powers had emerged over the years, powers that divided our world in two: Tikal and Calakmul, two enormous cities in the so-called Petén, in present day Guatemala and Mexico. The majority of the other Mayan centres had already expressed their support for one of the two major powers long before, acquiring good trade conditions and a degree of military protection in the process. Palenque found itself in the Tikal camp. It would be

wrong to imagine an alliance of equals, however. On the contrary. One century Tikal was the strongest and Calakmul and its allies suffered heavily; the century that followed saw Calakmul achieve domination, to the deep distress of Tikal's supporters.

‘That’s what it was like when my father was born, and it remained that way into the first period of his reign, but then the military-political horizon cleared up. Not particularly because Tikal was on the ascendance (quite the contrary), but because Calakmul appeared to have lost interest in us. After all, we had already been defeated on two occasions, and in terms of military power, we no longer had much to say.

‘Why don’t you write a book about my father? I recently saw a novel about my fellow monarch Ramses II. At a pinch you might call Ramses the Pakal of Egypt...’ K’an Joy Chitam takes a swig of his *poch*, which gives us the opportunity to say that we’re not in the business of writing novels or other such things. ‘No? So much the better! In our day there was no such thing as a novel. We told stories, absolutely, but what we wrote down was *the truth* – even when based on imagination or lies. My brother realised this more than any other, which is why he had so much committed to stone and plaster. But my father was responsible for more building and that was ultimately what it was all about.

‘The so-called Temple of the Inscriptions, under which he was buried, is the best evidence of his pragmatic approach. It’s not the largest of the Mayan pyramids – although anyone climbing those steep stairs in the sweltering heat might think otherwise – but it remains the most famous on account of its beauty. In that sense he was successful and history confirms it. It’s a question of proportion, found in the architecture of all the major cultures.

‘I watched from the palace as the old temples were replaced by new ones. New wings were added to the palace itself, with grand, spacious rooms. The exterior walls were covered with a layer of plaster and painted dark red while others were decorated with life-size human figures in stucco. Stone benches and tables appeared everywhere, with hieroglyphics and symbols. I was unable to see much more, since as a son of Pakal it would have been inappropriate for me to mix with the people, and the people for their part did not come to the palace or the major

temples. It was better that way. Imagine the people had seen Kan B'alam's ulcers at close quarters, or my stillborn brothers and sisters. We kings were... no, we *are* gods, don't forget that. But the fact remains that they did actually see us in real life from time to time: at major sacrificial ceremonies and, of course, when we set out to war.

'It goes without saying that wars were part of life in those days, but in hindsight we may not have waged enough of them. Society needed wars to survive, certainly our society. The best policy was to maintain a significant number of vassal states, not only in order to hold our own in a hostile environment, but also for the sake of our own prosperity. Is it any different in other parts of the world? We also needed prisoners of war for the sacrifices. Pakal was aware of this, but he also knew that during the long years of recovery, war was risky and bad for the harvest, since the farmers were usually enlisted to fight. The lack of human blood was offset by fruit and animal sacrifices, especially dogs. The gods appeared to be satisfied, since the rains were abundant. After a heavy defeat in 628 against Piedras Negras on the Usumacinta, Pakal decided to limit himself to campaigns against smaller cities. His greatest success took place on a different terrain. As I already mentioned, he had offered refuge to the exiled king of Tikal in 659, which did us no harm decades later when Tikal recovered its position as the mightiest of all Mayan cities. No, it wasn't just an act of kindness. I was only about fifteen years old, but I lived through a full two years of palace life with Nuun Ujol Chaak. Compared with him, my brother Kan B'alam was a model of talkativeness. Although he spent the best part of his time with us lamenting over his lost city, my father was particularly well-disposed to the presence of such an eminent visitor. He even had it inscribed in a text, on the stairs leading to the palace's small interior courtyard, among other places. The text is still there, just round the corner. Apart from that? Let's say I wasn't unhappy when the man left.

'I was being groomed for an important administrative function and religious career. Even the monarchy was a possibility, since my brother's health was poor and he was nine years older. That is probably why he despised me so much and the older we became the more he considered me a threat.

‘Life in the palace? Busy! There was always so much to do: sacrifices and other religious solemnities, government business etc., and of course, leisure. We had dwarfs at the court who would tell jokes and stories. There was also a lot of music. I can barely remember what it sounded like, but it was nothing like the music you hear in Mexico nowadays, that’s for sure. Huge *caracoles* – the shells of sea snails – were used as trumpets. There were also flutes and drums – but I’ve forgotten the rhythms and the melodies.

‘I went through a large number of teachers, until I understood the script and I could get by in the languages that mattered. We kings and priests from Palenque to Copán spoke the same language – and that made all the difference – but it was of primary importance that I learned Nahuatl, the *lingua franca* of the north. We had excellent and extremely valuable contacts with the distant city of Teotihuacán, which was then past its prime but considerably influential nevertheless. The presence of the king of Tikal made it particularly important from our point of view, but the least said about Teotihuacán and Tikal the better.’ This has to be a reference to recent publications on the vast territory that had been dominated in one form or another – by trade, but also perhaps by force of arms – by the colossal city in Central Mexico. Signs and symbols originating from Teotihuacán have been found in Tikal and also in Palenque. The presence of the water god Tlaloc is probably the most striking since he can be easily recognised – even to the amateur – from the two large circles under his eyes, a pair of owl-like spectacles, although the Maya were never acquainted with glasses.

‘When I was eighteen I went to Copán. Those were the years of the long reign of K’ak Nab K’awil, who is referred to on occasion as Smoke Imix. The journey had a variety of objectives. First of all, it was considered high time I got to see something of the outside world now that my education was behind me. I knew all there was to know about the furthest corners of the divine world. Xibalba, the world of the dead, held no secrets for me, but I couldn’t tell a cornstalk from a beanpole. On the way to Copán, a journey of several months with twisting roads, mountains and swamps, I was to familiarise myself with the *milpas* or cornfields and the *selva* – the primordial forest –, at least that was the intention. Secondly, my marriages had come to nothing because no fewer than three candidates chosen

for the purpose had died. One of Smoke Imix's nieces was apparently available, perhaps even a daughter. Reports from Copál left much to be desired, you understand, on account of the distance. But the true purpose of my journey was the diplomatic advantage it could provide. A marriage would also have topped the list for the same reason.

‘As expected, it was a difficult enterprise. Though we naturally made the journey in the dry season, this need not imply it remained dry. In addition to myself, there were two low-ranking priests and four bearers or rowers who could serve as bodyguards – and we travelled more or less incognito, which wasn't difficult considering that no one outside Palenque knew what I looked like. We had a fair amount of material with us (such as cacao, shells and salt) for exchange and barter, but we differed little in that respect from the many merchants and diplomatic delegations that criss-crossed the land in those days. We travelled the brown waters of the Usumacinta upstream to Piedras Negras and Yaxchilán, but the current was so powerful we were repeatedly compelled to put ashore. After a brief visit to Yaxchilán, which rose up like an invincible fortress on a sharp bend in the river, we left the main waterway and headed towards Bonampak and Lacanjá.’

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10

Lodo

So here we are, exactly one month later, standing in the half-light of dawn on the edge of the woods, while three wiry Mayas strap our baggage to the mules. In addition to the rucksacks, the animals have to carry three small plastic barrels containing our food. They calmly put up with it all and only get nervous when we, the foreigners, get too close them. There is no lack of provisions in Indio Pedro, but their *milpas* are not built to accommodate a hungry delegation from the ‘civilised world’. There are eight of us: Marta, Ernesto, Lucas, the German anthropologist Waldemar Saalwächter, the three brothers from Indio Pedro and myself. Lucas, dressed in a traditional grey-white *huipil*, is a well-built young Lacandón from the Obregón clan. He is wearing flip-flops just like Angélita, but has a pair of shoes with him too. He has a machete in his hand, indispensable for forest expeditions. Waldemar, who lives and works in Mexico City, looks a bit like Jesus with his long hair and beard. We’ve come to know him as a reliable and friendly character. Lucky for us, since we shall have to share a less than spacious three-person tent with him in Indio Pedro.

The three Tzeltales are wearing rubber boots. They advise us to wear the same, since the path today might well be ‘a little muddy’. But it’s too late to buy boots. Ernesto has a spare pair, which appears only to fit me. So now I’m ready, boots and all, to enter the primeval forest.

What else does the average adventurer take with him into the jungle? Besides obvious things like torches, a toothbrush (which even Stephens had with him) and a rucksack in which to carry it all: a sleeping bag, a hammock, rope to secure the hammock, mosquito repellent, antiseptic cream for cuts and grazes, plasters to prevent blistering (‘Compeed’), ordinary plasters and bandages, phosphate-free non-lathering soap, a compass, paper tissues, a tent, extra shoes, a hat (not to protect against the sun, but against all the insects that might drop from the twigs

and branches above), plastic bags, water purification pills, medication for an unfortunate bout of diarrhoea, a fast-drying towel made from a sort of chamois leather, plastic bottles of purified water, which can be filled when empty from the multitude of streams that flow through the Selva Lacandona. This is only a selection, of course, and doesn't include the material Ernesto, our travel guide, has with him, such as several doses of snakebite serum, a GPS (global positioning system – making our compass redundant), a mobile phone that also functions in remote regions, a gas or petrol burner, pots and pans, etcetera.

A fairly innocent list, with the possible exception of the snakebite serum, and one no experienced camper would surprise. Compare that with the pages of requisites published by Frans Blom at the end of his nomad years. His list includes boots (not only because of the jungle mud but also against snakebites), lengths of canvas, a shovel, a pickaxe, and a thermometer for scientific measurements. He also had things with him no one would think of nowadays: half a kilo of paraffin, half a pound of beeswax (to make the canvas watertight), a jack (to raise collapsed steles), pulleys (to move the said antiquities) and brushes (to clean them). But it's not so much *what* he took with him as the *quantities* we find so remarkable. On a reasonably important expedition, for example, Frans Blom took along six machetes, at least three pairs of trousers and numerous sweaters, pyjamas (several), four litres of petrol, not to mention two frying pans, five ordinary pots, six tin plates, six sets of knives, forks and spoons, ten kilos of flour, six kilos of sugar, and a kilo of salt. You could be forgiven for wondering if this was some kind of culinary campaign rather than a serious archaeological expedition.

Two rifles were intended to ensure the meat supply (he advised against carrying pistols because the Indians distrusted such weapons and their owners). The price paid by the jungle for one of Blom's visits: 31 pheasants, 42 peacocks, 5 deer, 6 peccaries (the wild boar that were still present in those days in massive numbers), and an unknown quantity of 'other animals'. There were probably jaguars among the latter, since Blom frequently recounted that he hunted them. And, to return to his baggage, he mentions nothing of the generous supply of

strong drink and cigarettes he was accustomed to bringing with him. All this had to be carried by five or six mules.

We are not carrying rifles, nor do we have the necessary material to conduct scientific research should we come across a temple complex. And for good reason: both hunting and amateur archaeology are strictly forbidden (not that laws of this kind achieve much, but we'll abide by them anyway). The most striking difference between our expedition and those of people like Stephens and Blom, however, is the way we plan to make our way through the jungle. We are going on foot and only using the mules to carry our baggage. At least, that's the intention.

The first couple of kilometres cover familiar ground. We're heading due west along the path we took with Angélita a month earlier to the ruins of Lacanjá. We don't speak much. The path seems less muddy than before and the streams have dried up, allowing us to make good headway and instilling a sense of optimism. We pay no attention to the signposts for hikers, and when we turn off to the left half an hour later, we're left in little doubt that we're entering the jungle. Many have travelled this path since Blom's day, but with the exception of the woodcutters and the occasional adventurer, most of them have been locals and, if our guides are correct, not only the Tzeltales from Indo Pedro and the Lacandones.

'Folks from Nueva Palestina,' says Miguel, one of the brothers, disapprovingly. We're standing in a small open space, where persons unknown have built a campfire and left garbage lying all over the place. Nueva Palestina, formerly Doctor Velazco Suárez, is one of the two villages in which the inhabitants of the Selva Lacandona were collected together in the 1970s. Still close to the forest, the place now has a population of (roughly) thirteen thousand, an enormous number for these parts, and the pressure on what's left of the environment is immense. For Miguel and the other *arrieros*, mule drivers from Indio Pedro, the village is the source of all evil. 'There used to be jaguars, pumas and peccaries here. But then the men from Nueva Palestina started to hunt them and now there's nothing left. They're destroying and polluting the forest.'

The Selva Lacandona is a notoriously wet part of the world, and even in the dry season it still lives up to its reputation. Before we've made much progress we encounter our first obstacle: a stream, shallow but wide, and with tributaries. A party of lizards races upright along the bank like toy dinosaurs. It's unclear whether the tree trunks and logs found their way into the water by accident or were placed there deliberately by our guides, but it takes determination and skill to make use of them nonetheless. The Mayas cross them without missing a step. Now we know why those boots would have come in handy: they seem ideal for the stream's shallow tributaries.

Lucas, a Lacandón in flip-flops, is equally unchallenged, and Ernesto has clearly done this before. If there's any delay, it's due to the big city dwellers balancing on tree trunks, tongues between their teeth, hopelessly searching for a sense of balance. With a hefty German expletive, Waldemar slips, and his right leg plunges into the water. Marta and I reach the other bank dry-shod, where the Mayas, much to their amusement, have been watching us perform. The trail is still in reasonable condition, but this is only the first of three rivers we'll have to face. The mules find alternative routes across the water. They don't seem to care how deep it is.

We cover the next few kilometres relatively quickly. The trees are still a fair distance apart, but it's dusky all the same, something we only realise when we try to take photos. My camera, a normally unfussy old Minox, insists that I use a flashbulb. The undergrowth is still reasonably thin, except where a mahogany or *zapote* has fallen. We suddenly stumble on just such a place, our eyes blinking in the dazzling light in front of a wall of bushes. Someone has usually cut a path around it already, but a couple of times our guides get the chance to prove just how indispensable their machetes are.

Along the trail we can make out a variety of steep hills of differing sizes, covered with scrub.

'Perhaps they're ruins,' Ernesto says, 'perhaps not. The forest is full of rock piles like this. But in this case so close to the ruins of Lacanjá... Look over there.' He points to the foot of one of the hills, where the stones appear to be piled up with particular regularity. Stairs, no question. For quite some time we've

been walking through the remains of what must once have been a city of considerable proportions, perhaps even a suburb of the complex we visited with Angélita.

The trail is twofold to start with, as if some giant vehicle had driven through the forest. Our impression isn't far from the truth. 'They tried to build a road here with an enormous tractor,' Miguel says. 'Long ago. But they didn't get far.' After five kilometres or so, the tractor tracks disappear. We stop for a moment and drink some water. A wide strip is visible to the left of the trail, where the scrub is shallow and there are no mature trees in evidence.

'This used to be a landing strip,' Miguel informs us. If the undergrowth is anything to go by it wasn't too long ago; perhaps in the 1970s when the Lacandones capitalised on their newly acquired property. 'We should keep moving. The trail is about to get a little worse.'

What an understatement! Although the forest isn't noticeably wetter at this point, the trail changes from one minute to the next into a mud-covered furrow. Narrow in some places, in others at least three metres wide, it splits repeatedly into a number of swampy tracks, but remains just as difficult to travel. It's tempting to walk along the edge of the trail, but such tactics are not without risk since the undergrowth is more obtrusive at the edge and often contains enormous thorns. '*Espinas*' – thorns – Lucas warns us on a regular basis, and rightly so, since it seems that the spiny stalks have concentrated themselves in the very places we're tempted to reach out for balance. One frequently occurring sort is particularly treacherous: an innocent looking palm with thorns like daggers. I made that mistake only once, years ago near Palenque. I slipped and grabbed hold of the nearest stalk. It took me six months to get all the needles out of my hand.

Our expedition soon turns into an altercation. Mud is a recurring theme in the accounts of earlier explorers. Based on Stephens' description, it seems it was even worse in his case (*and* he lost his barometer), but at least he and Catherwood were sitting on the back of their mules. Our feet disappear deeper into the sludge with every step. If we have to keep this up for the next twenty kilometres... Marta appears to have similar thoughts.

‘Lucas! How long do we have to keep this up?’ The Lacandón, who has put on his shoes in the meantime, gestures that he also has no idea, but behind us Miguel offers an answer: ‘The trail used to be much better, but more and more people from Nueva Palestina have been using it in recent years and their mules have destroyed it.’ He doesn’t seem to be having much trouble with the mud, however, and the *mulas* – the apparent source of the problem – seem equally unperturbed. Miguel’s brothers and Lucas appear to be making easy progress and I decide to see what I can learn from their talent. And believe it or not, once I’ve picked up their movements, walking through the mud turns out to be much less of a challenge. An abbreviated guide for those attracted to such activities:

Keep up the pace – Logical, bearing in mind that the longer one stands in one place the deeper one is likely to sink into the mud. Movement is a precondition. Before the mire gets hold of your lower leg, the foot should have already moved on. Of course, there are little islands right and left in the guzzling bog, which the well-trained Mayan eye can see directly, but they’re even visible to the amateur, although it takes a bit of practice to land *on* them from time to time and not *beside* them. In reality, it’s a mixture of jogging, jumping and stomping ahead. The fact that the mosquitoes keep their distance is a added advantage (the best-known remedy against mosquitoes is to cover oneself in mud, a matter of course in present circumstances).

Never stand on tree roots – No matter how attractive and stable they might appear, they’re usually very slippery.

Don’t follow the mules – They are very intelligent, as we shall later observe, but their hoofs don’t share the same concerns as our shoes and boots. The Mayas, by contrast, almost always choose the best trajectory, even if they (Lucas, for example) haven’t used the trail for a long time. I thought I would be smart at one point by opting for an apparently well-maintained parallel trail, but I ended up in a thorny wilderness where even a machete wouldn’t have brought much in the way of solace. An additional warning: mules can be temperamental and have been known to give a backward stomp now and again.

Shoes or boots? – My experience is that it makes little difference. Somewhere along the line one is likely to step into a deeper puddle and get one's feet wet in spite of the boots. And the sludge splodges its way into every type of shoe on such a long trek. Boots have the advantage of keeping one dry longer, but shoes generally have much better soles.

Stop now and again – to empty the sludge from your boots or shoes: a couple of fingers worth for shoes, handfuls for boots. It makes quite a difference in terms of weight.

It's better not to walk ahead – did once and nothing untoward happened, but the return journey was to prove that I had been lucky. Why? All sorts of animals cross the trekker's path, and in contrast to our well-organised forests and fields, such confrontations can have unpleasant consequences here in the jungle. We'll return to some examples later, namely ants and snakes. The spider's webs that hang across the trail at face level are an extra disadvantage when it comes to taking the lead.

Definitely do not run ahead: In the last analysis there is only one way to reach one's destination; the number of tracks and side-paths, however, is much greater. *Quien sabe* who made them – perhaps one of the few remaining wild boar or tapirs, perhaps those troublemakers from Nueva Palestina, but losing one's way is still a possibility. On top of that, everyone in the jungle depends on everyone else, whether it's for a snake bite or a twisted ankle.

But be sure to walk ahead of the mules: It goes without saying that the trail is worse behind the animals than it is in front of them.

Once I'm into my stride, I actually begin to enjoy it. I splash, splatter and slog my way forward, leaping from right to left over the deepest pools of mud. With more than a couple of decades behind me, and having been considered useless at more or less everything over the years, it's a pleasant sensation to realise that one is good at something, even if only the not so highly thought of ability to run through mud.

After slaloming through the mud with Lucas for about a kilometre, we realise that it has gone pretty silent behind us. We wait. Before long, Ernesto appears

covered in sweat followed by two *arrieros* with their mules. When there's no sign of the others after ten minutes or so, I make my way back uneasily through the mud. A couple of bends in the trail and I heave a sigh of relief: Waldemar Saalwächter, suffering but alive, leaning on Marta for support. One of the brothers follows up the rear with his mule, smiling patiently. Waldemar is up to his knees in sludge, long clammy strands of hair hanging over his face, and the look in his eyes – which already had an air of melancholy about them – conveys profound despair. '*Ich bin am Ende meiner Kräfte,*' I hear him say to Marta.

'The trail gets better up ahead,' I lie, offering him a hand. It takes him all the energy he can muster to free himself from the mud.

'*Odio el lodo,*' Marta confides more than once, 'I *hate* mud.' I had never heard the word '*lodo*' before. It's not onomatopoeic in the strict sense of the term, but like 'mud' and 'sludge' it's not far from it, especially when the Mexicans say it, with a muted, short yet slightly drawn out 'o' – *lóddóh*. It sounds just like a foot or a hoof being pulled out of the mud.

We make our way deeper and deeper into the forest. The three Tzeltales from Indio Pedro are friendly, patient and helpful, especially Pedro, the youngest. It's clear nevertheless that they're worried about something. We halt briefly beside a clear stream in an open space that might once have been a small settlement, judging by the presence of a rusty old tortilla press. Ernesto talks for a moment with our guides.

'We're moving too slowly,' he tells us finally. 'At this speed we won't make Indio Pedro before dark.'

'How far have we come?' Marta asks.

'Exactly half way.' And how long do we have to put up with this mud? 'It's not going to get much better in the short term,' Ernesto finally admits after some hesitation. On hearing the news, poor Waldemar shakes his head and confers with Marta under his breath.

'Let's stay here,' she concludes. 'We have a tent and there's food and water. We can camp here until you get back.' Her plan meets with considerable resistance from the three brothers, however, and also from Lucas and Ernesto.

‘Out of the question! It’s too dangerous here.’ After a long speech about the unsavoury types that hang around this part of the *selva* – as expected from Nueva Palestina – Miguel offers a suggestion. There are three mules; he, his brothers and Lucas can take over some of the baggage, freeing two of the *mulas* to carry Waldemar and Marta. The latter object vehemently, but Miguel explains that they have no choice. Staying put is far too hazardous, verging on the suicidal. So, while my fellow travellers continue to declare that they can’t accept such an offer, two of the mules are stripped of their burden.

In the meantime, the forest hums and sings.

I watch a little jealously as Marta and Waldemar cross the stream and disappear into the woods, straddling their mules. Now they’re travelling like Stephens and Catherwood, Maudsley, Blom and all the others: sitting on their mules instead of running ahead of them.

Mules and hinnies are both referred to by the same word in Mexico, *mula*. Spanish, on the other hand, employs two different words – *mula* for hinny and *mulo* for mule – because there is a difference between them. A hinny (*Equus hinny*) is the offspring of a stallion and a she-ass, a mule (*Equus mulus*) of a jackass and a mare. It would appear that a mule is more like a horse than a hinny. Male mules and hinnies are both infertile. The Dutch encyclopaedia *Winkler Prins* (sixth edition 1952, chief editor G.B.J. Hiltermann) describes the *mule* as follows: ‘This animal combines the characteristics of both [horse and donkey], namely the gentle, cautious tread, the tenacity of the donkey and the power and courage of the horse.’ Since both hybrids tend to be referred to in Dutch and English with the term ‘mule,’ we shall avoid making distinctions in print that we would otherwise find impossible to make in reality.

‘It was the first time I had ever ridden a mule,’ Marta was to say later, ‘and I’ll never use the word as an insult again. Those animals are enormously intelligent. They instinctively pick out the best track and if they have to cross a river, they pause for a moment as if considering the best place and strategy to do so. Every step is premeditated. And to top everything: they know the way to Indio Pedro.’

Not everyone would agree, however, and once again Graham Greene offers a prime example of a dissenting voice on the topic of mules. ‘I had not ridden a horse for ten years; I had never ridden a mule before,’ Greene writes in *The Lawless Roads*.

Its trot, I imagine, is something like a camel's: its whole back heaves and strains. There is no rhythm you can catch by rising in the stirrups; you must just surrender yourself to the merciless uneven bump. The strain on the spine to the novice is appalling: the neck stiffens with it, the head aches as if it had been struck by sun. And all the time the nerves are worn by the stubbornness of the brute; the trot degenerates into a walk, the walk into an amble, unless you beat the mule continually. “*Mula. Mula. Mula. Echa, mula,*” the dreary lament goes on.

Greene’s words naturally do an injustice to the creatures (Hiltermann and his associates came closer to the truth, perhaps without ever seeing one in real life). The disadvantages associated with riding a mule, however, are also evident to Marta and Waldemar. No matter how adept the animal is at finding the best trail, it pays little if any attention to what is going on above its head, where a not unimportant portion of the rider is still located. The latter is obliged to be on the lookout for all sorts of overhanging branches, with or without sizeable thorns. A momentary loss of concentration can lead to a nasty injury. Waldemar came off pretty lightly in that respect, when a branch got hold of him and tossed him from his saddle: back pain, a stiff leg and, of course, a mud bath. It could have been worse.

Lucas, Ernesto and I charge ahead of the column. I have little difficulty keeping up with the Lacandón since he is lugging Waldemar’s hefty holdall, while Ernesto and I only have a couple of small rucksacks with a little water and photographic equipment. At a certain moment, while I’m walking ahead (never again!), a brown coloured animal crosses our path. ‘Deer,’ Lucas suggests as I describe what I’ve seen, but it seemed more like a fox or a biggish weasel to me. There are remarkably few mammals to be seen actually, if you discount the

occasional group of monkeys high in the trees above. Every now and then, we stop for a moment until we hear the mules approaching. ‘*Mula, mula, arre! Ho, mula shhh!*’ – Graham Greene’s ‘lament’ resounds through the forest in a multitude of variations.

It becomes evident that we are not alone in the jungle when we approach a wide stream, and I spy a mule secured to a tree and a couple of men in the river not far ahead. I wait for Lucas, who is being followed by one of the *arrieros*, Antonio, if I’m not mistaken. They signal to me to keep moving and keep quiet. ‘Nueva Palestina,’ Antonio whispers. It’s not clear whether the strangers are aware of us but they leave us alone in any case.

Half an hour later we pause at the same stream, taking the opportunity to rinse the mud from our boots. It turns out that there’s as much mud inside as there is outside our boots, and after cleaning, each one is easily a kilo or two lighter. It won’t take long before they’re back to their usual weight, of that I’m sure. Ernesto hands out crackers with pâté from a tube. It must be the first time anyone has ever eaten pâté in the rainforest – although Frans Blom is known to have brought an array of exotic foodstuffs with him.

When we set off again I have the impression that walking requires more effort. That’s often the case: to reach the finish you have to keep moving. I can’t find the rhythm I had before. Ernesto is struggling too and has fallen behind. Even Lucas has to heave himself forward, but then again, he is hauling Waldemar’s baggage. On top of that, I’m told later that he fractured both legs a couple of years ago and that he seldom ventures into the forest anymore.

‘Jesus, I’m tired,’ I say as we rest briefly to wait for the others.

‘Me too,’ says Lucas, emptying my water flask.

‘Do we have far to go?’ I ask Pedrito, who arrives with his mule. He and Lucas are both carrying heavy rucksacks, but he looks completely relaxed, as if he were taking a stroll.

‘Not far. An hour perhaps. And the mud stops here.’ Not far! But he’s right where the mud’s concerned; evidently the mules from Nueva Palestina rarely came this far. The advantages of being without mud, however, remain open to question. It’s only now that I realise that the soles of my boots are thin, so thin

that every twig and stone seems intent on boring its way into the soles of my feet. In addition, I'm plagued with an ever increasing pain in my shins, precisely where the rim of my boots rubs against the skin. But the forest finally thins out. A banana tree here and there suggests we are approaching the inhabited world, which is confirmed by the *zopilotes*, vultures, in the distance. The others are no longer in sight but it doesn't bother me. I'm confident that all the trails at this point will lead to the village. And, accident or not, we meet up again on the banks of a charming river at the edge of the forest: Lucas, Ernesto, the three brothers from Indio Pedro, the mules with Marta and Waldemar, and me. Children washing in the water stare at us with enormous curiosity. They're unafraid, and I have a feeling they've been expecting us.

A well-trodden tree trunk bridges the water to a sprawling meadow with tall grass and the occasional mule slowly climbing an equally well-trodden hill on the other side. There are five or six huts on the crest. The sun sets over Indio Pedro, the place where Frans Blom kissed the hand of Trudy Duby. In single file, we follow along a narrow path leading to the village. I'm not sure if it's the unexpected beauty of the place or simply the fatigue, but I can barely control my emotions at the sight of our goal.

It's already dusk when we enter the village. We are welcomed by an elderly man with short grey hair and a moustache, who introduces himself as Pedro. He wears worn-out jeans and a threadbare T-shirt.

We set up our tents in the darkness with the help of our torches. You would imagine that a remote place like this, thirty kilometres deep into the forest, has no electricity. But there's a light bulb burning up ahead. The light is coming from a large circular hut with an elevated roof of braided palm leaves. Inside there is a long table, and to the right of the door two women are preparing food at a fire. The bulb is dangling in the middle of the space, but most of the light comes from the candles on the table, around which our guides are sitting with a few family members and a rather obscure individual, who is not from the village and evidently not Mayan.

We learn more about Don Pedro and his family during the meal, although he himself is a man of few words. A Tzeltal from the neighbourhood of Ocosingo,

Don Pedro trekked through the rain forest decades before, finally discovering the *montero* and *chiclero* settlement San Pedro (the coincidence is unintentional). He returned to the ‘civilised world’ to collect his wife, and together they were responsible for the settlement’s revival. They had twelve children (ten sons and two daughters), eight of whom still live in Indio Pedro. Of the eight, Miguel is the oldest and Pedrito (‘little Pedro’) the youngest. Although his father is the real boss, Miguel acts like a chief, negotiating with Ernesto about the money we have to pay for room and board in the days ahead and for their work as guides.

I don’t understand most of what they’re saying. My Spanish, which is poor at the best of times, requires a degree of concentration I can’t muster for the moment and, to cap it all, part of the conversation is in Tzeltal. Although the exchange of jokes leaves me at a loss, I laugh along cheerfully anyway. It turns out to be a pleasant evening. Even Waldemar’s humour is at its best. He seems to have put the hardships of the day behind him.

After the meal, Ernesto takes one of the maps out of the tube he uses to carry them and spreads it out on the table. Pedro provides light with a torch.

‘This,’ Ernesto says, pointing to a small white open space in a sea of green, ‘this is Indio Pedro.’ The Tzeltales look on, fascinated, as if the Mexican had actually transformed their village into a tiny smudge with a magic wave of his hand. With the possible exception of Miguel, who pretends he’s seen it all before, it is clear that this is the first time the Tzeltales have ever encountered a map. Ernesto spends a few minutes trying to explain the principles of map reading. ‘Today we arrived from this direction.’ He moves his hand over the territory to the north of Indio Pedro. ‘But do you know more or less where the ruins are?’ After Ernesto explains the meaning of ‘north’ and ‘south’ a couple of times, Miguel gestures confidently to a strip of land, kilometres wide, to the south of Indio Pedro.

I say goodnight, grab my torch and head to the water to bathe. The two-hundred metre walk demands more of me than the thirty kilometres we travelled in daylight, but the river makes it all worthwhile. The water is cool, clear and in some places a couple of metres deep. Tiny fish nudge my toes out of curiosity. Frans Blom wrote of the thousands of mosquitoes by the river that forced him to

duck continually under the water, but they're not much in evidence for the moment. Things will be different in about a month's time, when it gets warmer and the rains begin; we've chosen the right season. I inspect the damage to my shins by lamplight. Nasty wounds, worse than I had expected. Mud or no mud, from now on I'm doing without the boots. I wash my clothes as best I can on a flat stone, generating thick clouds of brown water in the glow of the lantern. They'll never be completely clean, but they'll be clean enough for the rest of the expedition.

Quite early the next day, the heat of the sun makes the tent unbearable. It had been warm the entire night, much warmer than a month ago in Lacanjá, I realise. I had slept *on* my sleeping bag rather than *in* it. Waldemar, Marta and I scurry into the outside air. Ernesto and Lucas' tent is better placed, under a tree with bright red flowers. A bunch of children are standing around our tent, commenting in their inimitable language, full of guttural sounds and strange consonantal combinations. Probably Pedro's grandchildren. A couple of his sons and daughters must have succeeded in finding a husband or wife in one of the villages outside the forest.

The village looks much as the majority of Mayan settlements in Chiapas must have looked a century ago: a stretch of grass and palm-thatched wooden houses. Chickens and pigs rummage around between the huts, but most of our attention is drawn to two domesticated forest dwellers: a red macaw or *ara macao*, brazen and mean, like the caged specimens in the 'civilised world,' and a red curassow or *crax rubra*. Whoever devised the latter's Latin name must have only seen the female of this great crested, pheasant-like bird. With the exception of its yellow bill, the male is jet black. While the macaw nips at visitors who get too close, the curassow checks the edibility of Waldemar's rucksack.

The hut in which we enjoyed our meal the evening before also serves as the village meeting place. It is a tall, substantial, circular construction, about fifteen metres in diameter. Its thatched roof is a major accomplishment in itself and we offer Pedro our compliments. He laughs proudly and points at the structure's

equally elaborate walls. What appear to be machine-cut floorboards are actually the result of patient manual labour.

One of the main features of Indio Pedro is its toilet. Not much more than a plank of wood with a hole in the middle at the edge of the village, but with a panoramic view of the rainforest, and at night the best possible observatory. Unhurried nocturnal relief under the Milky Way, the road to Xibalbá. Some might lament the absence of a washbasin or running water, but there isn't a millionaire in the world who can boast such an impressive view from his WC.

While Marta and Waldemar head to the river with their dirty laundry, I join our three guides and two of their brothers. They're tinkering with a gadget that turns out, on closer inspection, to be a solar panel attached to a battery, which explains the electric light from the night before. Miguel tells us they bought the thing a year ago with the proceeds from the *cache* or dyewood sales. This is not the only piece of modern equipment in the village: Pedro has a pair of binoculars. One of the lenses has an ugly crack but they're still better than mine.

A little later, Miguel asks me if I would like to see his house. He tells me he lives in the surrounding hills, a short distance from the village. I follow him to the river, where Waldemar and Marta are washing themselves and their clothes. A steep path slopes upwards on the other side between banana trees and maize plants. Miguel's house – more a spacious wooden shack – looks out over Indio Pedro and the *selva*. In addition to his wife and children, he also supports two macaws.

'Look,' he says, pointing to a white rock, a good distance away in the forest. 'El Mirador.' A lookout post? I pay no attention, not realising that it would soon pose a problem. With his house in the country and two macaws, I figure Miguel must be the businessman in the family.

We gather shortly after midday in the large round hut for a late breakfast, which also passes for lunch. Ernesto, who provided the food, is rested and bristling with ideas.

'I've just heard that there's an excellent lookout post not far from here. Two hours on foot. What would you say to a visit? We could watch the sunrise

tomorrow morning.’ The brothers nod in agreement, although their mother seems less enthusiastic. Waldemar looks worried. The bath may have done him the world of good, but he’s not completely rested. Marta also pulls a face. Didn’t we come for the ruins? But they let themselves be talked into it, not only by Ernesto, but also, I’m reluctant to admit, by myself.

We head south out of the village, with the two brothers – Pedrito and Antonio – as our guides. The Tzeltales, together with Lucas and Ernesto, carry the baggage, since the trail is unsuitable for mules, or so we’ve been told (an offer to carry our own share is politely but firmly rejected). We walk the first couple of hundred metres in the blazing sun, along the edge of an *acahual*, once a cultivated field in which the jungle is gradually re-establishing itself. The forest itself is cool by comparison, but the constant uphill climbs and downhill plunges soon have our clothes soaked with sweat. To our right, still close to Indio Pedro, we hear a waterfall.

The trail gets narrower and narrower and finally disappears. We are now completely dependent on the knowledge and instincts of the Indians. Short, bushy palm trees are the primary ground cover, much like ferns in the northern forests. They’re spaced quite a distance from one another. The absence of great mahoganies, ceibas and cedros allows more light to reach the forest bed, and here the vegetation immediately gets thicker. This often requires us to cut a path through the bushes, giving us a chance to catch our breath. We break off a branch or a twig now and again to mark the route where the undergrowth is thin.

Waldemar is suffering. The anthropologist felt at home in Indio Pedro, where he had conversations with just about everyone, but he’s not really cut out for the rainforest.

‘*Was ist denn das?*’ I hear him mutter. Tiny insects, which turn out on closer inspection not to be insects after all, are crawling all over his arm.

‘Ticks, Waldemar. Don’t let them bite you. It’s safer to stuff your trousers into your socks and roll down your sleeves.’ Horrified, Waldemar plucks the creatures from his arm. He’s not the only one with ticks. Ernesto, Marta and I have them all over our clothes and headgear. But the Tzeltales, who appear unconcerned, don’t give us time to do anything about them. Fortunately, the forest also has a great

many beautiful things to offer: a red macaw in a tree hollow, all sorts of red curassows, monkeys and deer, a magnificent rainbow-coloured beetle, enormous blue butterflies. Lucas shows us the tracks and droppings of a tapir.

After six hours, four more than originally planned, we finally reach the steep, limestone rock: El Mirador. Dusk is already settling in, which means it will be dark in fifteen minutes.

‘We’ll set up camp at the top,’ Ernesto says. Antonio has already started to clamber his way up, but Waldemar is clearly not impressed.

‘Not me! I’m staying down here. I’m afraid of heights!’ The Tzeltal counters that the climb is a piece of cake, but our fellow traveller is not convinced. ‘No! There’s no way you’re getting me on that rock!’ He’s so upset that Marta and I have to reassure him we won’t leave him alone. We finally decide that Ernesto and the Mayas will spend the night on top of the rock and we’ll camp at the foot. While searching for an appropriate place to set up our tent in the middle of the forest, I miss my step and grab hold of a branch, a careless manoeuvre, with a searing pain in my hand and forearm as its immediate reward. My first thought is a poisonous thorn bush, perhaps a snake – *Bothriechis schelgelii* or the Eyelash Viper for example, a camouflage specialist and a typical tree dweller –, and I figure my time has come. It’s too dark to see exactly what’s going on. Alarmed by my shriek of panic, Marta races over and shines her torch on my hand. Ants! Huge ants, all over my arm. My first encounter with the infamous *ronda*. The pain disappears after five minutes and the bites don’t leave a trace. Now we know where *not* to set up our tent.

We eat together in front of our tent, fifty metres or so from the rock. Ernesto digs a petrol stove and a two pans from the bottom of one of the rucksacks. Heavy-duty material, but effective for those willing to put up with the extra weight. While Lucas and Antonio start a fire, Ernesto prepares spaghetti in bolognaise sauce. He even has cheese with him, one-and-a-half kilos of Edam. After the meal, he lights a cigarette.

‘*Después un taco...*’

‘Yes, Ernesto, we know what comes next.’

‘...*un tabaco*,’ he concludes, unruffled. Lucas is the only other smoker. The Tzeltales decline. In contrast to Stephens and Catherwood’s day, few people smoke in Mexico, and even less in the Maya region. Strange, when you think that smoking was invented in these parts. It probably has more to do with the price of tobacco than with health concerns. Actually, the life expectancy of the average farmer is so low that smoking doesn’t get the chance to make much of a difference.

It’s still early. The evening star glistens through the treetops and the chirp, crackle and crunch of tiny nocturnal creatures is all around us. We are sitting round the campfire, and before long we are exchanging stories about the disappearance of wild pigs and the scarcity of tapirs, pumas and jaguars. If we are to believe the two brothers from Indio Pedro, the place was once overrun with jaguars. With the people from Nueva Palestina penetrating deeper and deeper into the forest, they have become something of a rarity, although you can still hear them now and then. He places his hands in front of his mouth and makes a strange animal noise. It’s clear from Lucas, Ernesto and Pedrito’s laughter that his jaguar imitation is a complete failure. Each of the others takes his turn, but for the time being the only result is that all the other animals avoid us, with the exception of the ants and the mosquitoes.

Although biologists disagree, the Indians are convinced that jaguars and pumas are man-eaters. Antonio tells us about a *chiclero* who climbed into a tree on the run from a puma. The man fell from the tree, breaking his leg in the process, and the animal devoured him. They never managed to capture the creature and it could still be lurking in the forest. According to Antonio, once a puma had eaten human flesh it would never settle for less. They’ve been saying that about the Asian tiger for years.

Marta then tells us a story about an atheist in *selva*. As he strolls along, enjoying the flowers, the fragrances and the birdsong, he gradually realises he’s being watched from behind. He turns, only to find himself face to face with a jaguar. The atheist runs as fast as he can, and just when he figures he’s shaken off his pursuer the jaguar pounces.

‘Great God!’ the unfortunate atheist yells, lying prostrate with the huge cat on his back, ready to finish him off. And lo and behold: at that very moment time stands still. The jaguar freezes on the atheist’s back, the heavens open, and a voice booms from on high:

‘You dare to invoke my name? You who always denied my existence, who dismissed my work as the outcome of the laws of nature... you who always insisted that I was nothing more than figment of the imagination, intended to comfort the foolish... you who always claimed that my existence had been superseded by human reason... Now you want *me* to save *your* life?’

‘It would be unreasonable to ask such a thing of you,’ the atheist concurred, ‘but what about converting the jaguar to Christianity?’ God agreed. The heavens closed and time resumed its course. The jaguar bowed its head, kneeled and said: ‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful,’ and devoured the atheist.