

I'll Show You Mayan

Belize Jungle Expedition

by Larry Rice



“Larry, go back and come down again!” commands Jim Van Dijk. “I need another shot.” Jim, a 32-year-old professional videographer, is poised nipple-deep in the jungle stream, a \$50,000 Beta SP camera perched precariously on his shoulder. “And remember,” he cautions. “Don’t look at the camera! Just forget I’m here.”

Pack straps gouge my shoulders, my knees ache, I itch, and all I can think about is food. Still, I do what I am told. After all, it’s not that often you get to ham it up for a TV show.

Doing my best impersonation of Indiana Jones, I climb back up into the giant tree ferns and slog down into the emerald-green pool. “Great! Fantastic!” Van Dijk jabbars while slowly panning the big camera. Fifteen seconds of raw footage later, he lifts his eye from the viewfinder, sweat pouring in rivulets down his brow. “Thanks, man. I owe you a Belikin when we get out of this hell-hole.”

“Yeah, right!” I snicker, plodding on. Jim “owes” us all Belizean beers for photographic favors, but it will be a while before we collect. Deep in the Maya Mountains of south-central Belize, there’s no beer, no nothing, except what we carry in on our backs. This is another world, a green, dripping, dark tapestry where rivers disappear underground, howler monkeys roar from the treetops, thousand-year-old Mayan temples await discovery, ticks, chiggers and flesh-boring flies buzz and bite. Sure, an ice-cold beer would be nice. But what I crave most is a can of barbecue-flavored Pringles, and I don’t even like Pringles. The jungle does strange things to a man.

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For Allan: A Day's Work

Fifteen men—from four countries, of all ages, from different backgrounds—gather in an eight-sided house on a knoll in Belize. In the soft light of the setting sun, we gaze out on the western flank of the Mountain Pine Ridge, its rolling ridges cloaked in an extravaganza of tropical vegetation. It is scenery to savor—another time. It is the eve of our expedition, and we are tired from a hectic day of preparation—and a bit anxious.

The jungle does strange things to a man.

“For some of you,” declares Jim Bevis, “this will be the hardest three weeks of your life.” Bevis, 42, friendly and easy-going, will co-lead the expedition. He looks like a middle-aged Fidel Castro, right down to the Cuban cigars he smokes.

“The southern Maya Mountains are largely unexplored, and for good reason,” explains the stocky, former Texan. “The limestone topography is extremely rugged; overland travel requires humping heavy packs over rough terrain with no established trails; daytime temperatures often reach 100 degrees, with humidity to match. As far as we can tell, not even *chicle* hunters venture here.”

This will be Bevis’ second traverse of these mountains. When answering questions about his first journey, he says that he lost over a pound of body weight a day, blew out two pairs of boots, suffered amoebic dysentery, and rubbed his back raw due to an ill-fitting pack. “If I tell you anything more, I might spoil the fun,” he chuckles.

Suddenly serious, Bevis nods toward a large, dark-haired, Bunyanesque figure sitting in the shadows. “That man got us through the Maya Mountains last time. And

it's only because of him that I'm going back."

Under the pale yellow glow of kerosene lanterns, our eyes focus on the dark figure. There, standing 6' 6" and weighing in at a solid 235 pounds, is Jim Allan, our team leader and expedition organizer. Jim Allan may not be a household name in the United States, but in Canada he is something of a legend.

He lost over a pound of body weight a day

A wildlife biologist by training, Allan is the founder and Expedition Director of Ecosummer Expeditions, one of the oldest (established in 1974) adventure travel outfitters in North America. Long before "adventure travel" became vogue, Allan was leading backpack, mountaineering, dogsled, sea kayak, and canoe trips to remote sites all over the globe. He has spent months in the jungles and mountainous regions of Latin America and Asia, roamed nearly every nook and cranny of Canada's western coastline and much of the high Arctic, canoed Africa's Zambezi River; and kayaked in frigid waters off Greenland and Antarctica. Name a place, the more exotic the better, and odds are Allan has already been there.

Garbed in a black tank-top and baggy green river pants, Allan eases out of his chair and points to a map of Belize on the wall. "This is where we'll head into the bush," he says, his finger landing just east of the massive Mayan ruins of Caracol, a desolate spot on the Maya Mountains' north slope. "It's only about 35 kilometers as the toucan flies between here and the ocean side of the mountains where we'll come out. But don't let that fool you. On the ground it'll be closer to 100."

As Allan briefs us, we listen quietly, anxiously. There are only a handful of questions. Allan sums up on a cautionary note, "The first few days will be hard. We'll be wet. You may be toting 100 pound packs. The footing will be treacherous, the bugs ferocious. We're in for a bitersweet experience. Let's hope more sweet than bitter."

Sacks, Cries, and Videotape

It's three days into the trek. Rumor has it that we've only covered eight kilometers, although we'd swear it's been more. Except with Bevis or Orlando de la Oh, 43, a local *chiclero* and our lead scout, Allan rarely discusses our progress.

As predicted, the going is laborious and slow. Allan and Orlando are somewhere ahead, hacking away with machetes at the seemingly unassailable vegetation. Next

in line are Carlos Yacab, and his cousin, José. They come from a small town near the Guatemala border and have been hired to carry the video equipment for the three-man film crew. The plan is to produce an hour-long pilot for an adventure travel television series.

We come to a spot where the stream flows over limestone ledges to form a succession of pellucid pools. Electric-blue morpho butterflies, the size of dinner plates, flutter above the water like characters from Disney's *Fantasia*. "Beautiful, aren't they?" I say to Carlos. Sweating under his heavy pack, he merely shrugs.

To keep from falling behind (Allan has made some caustic remarks about stragglers), I throw caution to the wind and walk straight into the pool. Halfway across, the water is at my chest. I take another step and even with an 80-pound pack, I float off my feet.

Before I can slosh up the opposite bank, someone yelps. Spinning around, I see Carlos face down. Held afloat by his waterproof backpack and clutching the Beta camera case for dear life, he sputters and kicks feverishly toward shore. At that moment, the video crew arrives. Seeing their precious camera in peril, Dick Hamilton, the beefy assistant producer, lunges in and grabs the case. Only when the camera is safe does he yank out poor Carlos.

The film crew assesses the damage while Carlos flounders about, coughing up water and gasping. "I think everything's okay," sighs Hamilton with relief, sponging up some water that has leaked into the "airtight" case. "But that was damn close." He hands the hefty Beta to Van Dijk, chosen for this assignment as much for his strength as his skill with a camera. Van Dijk will add the Beta to his load.

We're carrying more than video equipment. Besides the gear we need for exploring and filming a documentary, we're lugging along 30 pounds of collecting paraphernalia for Jan Meerman. A Dutch tropical biologist, 39, Meerman is conducting a biodiversity survey. This is his first backpack trip. Energetic and astonishingly skinny, with long froglike arms and legs, he sweeps his butterfly net back and forth like a tennis racket as he hops across boulders and logs, looking for plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds, and anything else that flies, crawls or swims.

"The rich vegetative cover of the Maya Mountains is ideal habitat for rainforest wildlife, from jaguars and toucans to anacondas," says Meerman. "The chance of discovering new species is not unreasonable, since virtually no one has done any collecting where we're going." Meerman's equipment, from alcohol to plant presses, has been divided up among the team—30 pounds of bottles and other stuff that might have been food.

Shelter Set-up

We climb higher and higher into the dense forest of the Maya Mountains, past cascades, up gurgling streams, and over steep hills draped with oppressive vegetation. Luxuriant at river's edge, the forest is a tangle of trees, shrubs and epiphytes bound by spider webs and twisting vines as thick as your arm. The sun, moon, stars and sky become a distant memory as we forge deeper into the river cleft and overhanging canopy.

Now and then, Allan pauses to pinpoint our location, matching coordinates on his GPS (Global Positioning System) with his British-issue topographic map. "It's only a backup," he says in defense of his hi-tech instrument. "It doesn't take the place of a compass and good



navigation skills."

Downpours soak us to the bone. When it isn't raining, the temperature and humidity soar. Sweat-stained and caked with grime most of the time, we each carry two changes of clothes, one filthy and mildewed, the other a bit cleaner and slightly drier set for evening wear.

Every evening, we chop and slash our campsite out of the virgin forest. Guiltily, I participate in the havoc wrought by a dozen machetes, but we have no choice if we want to sleep lying down. Meerman, an avid environmentalist, tells us not to worry. "Plants grow quickly," he says. "In a few years you'll never know we were here."

With the underbrush cleared, we stretch two large nylon tarps between trees for roofs. We roll out two other tarps to cover the ground. Five to six people sleep shoulder-to-shoulder in each shelter. These arrangements don't suit Orlando, José, Carlos, and Albert "Jonesy" Jones, a muscular, 56-year-old Carib and former jaguar hunter who has accompanied Allan on previous Belize

jungle trips. They prefer all-natural materials and build their abode by weaving palm fronds together with vines to construct a cozy, rainproof lean-to.

If Only Hunger Were a Dream...

Ten days on the move have taken us over the Maya Mountains Divide nearly 1,000 meters above sea level and the highest point of our journey. But we are behind schedule. Allan picks up the pace.

The going is as torturous as the day we started. We trudge on, sweating our way up one ridge, then down into the valley, across stony stream beds, then up the next ridge. Up and down, up and down...and so on, endlessly. Monotony and fatigue bring on a leaden numbness, until we no longer notice the bites, blisters, bruises, cuts and scrapes, the fungus, the sweat trickling down our faces, and our godawful heavy packs. We trudge on in a dream.

If only our hunger were a dream. It's said that an army moves on its stomach. Well, this army isn't getting enough to eat. Our rations—dehydrated beans, rice, pasta, oatmeal, cheese, salami, jam, bread, and assorted high-energy bars—are nutritious enough, even tasty and keep well on the trail. The trouble is, there just isn't enough to go around.

Allan has appointed himself sole cook and dole-out of food, a joyless and thankless task. We crowd around him to receive our meager portions, our eyes shrewdly gauging the share doled out to the others. Allan mockingly compares us to a pack of slavering sled dogs. Too true. As the fat burns off our bodies, food has become an obsession. We consume every crumb, lick clean our bowls and fingers, and scrape the pots. Allan is above such weaknesses. He is last to eat and, when preparing dinner, abstains from sneaking a bite.

Morale sinks as our belts tighten. Allan deals with this one evening. "As an expedition like this goes on it gets easier on two counts," he lectures us. "Your pack gets lighter and your body gets stronger. The trick is to keep your mind from getting weaker."

I'm reminded of Teddy Roosevelt's 1914 expedition to Brazil's River of Doubt. This was a journey so grueling that it shortened the 26th President's life. Describing it, Roosevelt complained of clothes that were





never dry, rotten shoes, bruises on legs and feet that turned to sores, and insect bites turning into festering wounds. "After two weeks in the jungle, things begin to break down on a lot of different levels," Roosevelt wrote.

Morning Ritual

I awake to rain dripping and frogs trilling like a fax machine. I long for my bed at home and lie motionless as a diffuse green light spreads through the forest, signaling dawn.

Camp comes alive. Grizzled faces emerge from under dew-soaked tarps; naked bodies tumble out of leafy lean-tos. Fifteen men—young and old, boisterous and quiet, get ready for another long day in one of the world's most punishing jungles, their lives focused on the very basics: shelter, fire, water and food. Especially food.

Meals are simple. Breakfast is a half-cup of oatmeal and a swig of coffee or powdered fruit drink to wash it down. "Not enough here to fill the belly of a cockroach," someone grouches.

We've set up a first-aid clinic under Bevis' tarp. Besides the usual bites, cuts, and bruises, some strange new growths are showing up on wrinkled, water-logged feet. "Jungle rot," Doc Bevis pronounces, staring closely at a blotched, oozy fungus. It starts on the toes and spreads outward like a prairie fire. He rummages through his medical kit of bandages, pills, ointments, and salves. "Why, hell, none of this will do any good," he says, shucking the pile aside. "The only remedy is to keep your feet dry. Let me know if you succeed."

The Breaking Point

Our pace slows to a crawl as we worm our way through deep, dark canyons laced with waterfalls. We brush by orchids and tropical flowering plants, but only Meerman stops briefly, logging his observations into a micro-cassette recorder. The rest of us move on, heads down and shoulders sagging.

Next to me, Guy Robinson, the video team's director and writer, suddenly stumbles and falls hard. Grimacing with pain, the tall, former actor angrily throws off his pack. He drops his head in his hands. "I've had

enough! I'm a city person, not a jungle explorer," he groans. He sits there for a while, then accepts a helping hand and struggles to his feet. "Sorry. I'm having a bad day, that's all," he apologizes, rubbing dirt off his face. "My God, what I wouldn't give for a pint and a pub right now!"

The heat and humidity is taking its toll on the entire video crew. It's wreaking havoc on their equipment as well. The lens on the Beta has cracked. It's totally useless. All that's left is a miniature backup camera, and it's uncertain how long it will last since it runs on solar batteries, and recharging these is proving difficult in this twilight world.

Imagine hauling out a body

To add to the film crew's woes, Allan has become far less attentive to their requirements. "He knew from the outset how vital he was to our project," Robinson laments to me. "It seems now he resents having us along at all. He can't even spare us five minutes for an interview." A hard-driven professional, Robinson's distress mounts with one snag after another. "The video is the only reason I'm here," he grumbles. "I can't go back to Vancouver



without something to show."

We make camp late, on a ridge far above rushing waters. A rich forest surrounds us, tall, straight oaks with huge buttress roots festooned with creeping vines, sprouting palms and ferns as large as Volkswagens. It is Jurassic Park without the special effects.

Again this evening, we have a "Jan Moment" with Meerman, a gifted speaker, lecturing on the natural wonders of the day. At its end Allan makes an announcement. He and Orlando have scouted the route ahead. "It doesn't look promising," he says ominously. "Our descent down Snake Creek tomorrow will be the most treacherous of the trip so far. It's a steep-walled gorge. In places, we'll have to use ropes. *Don't take any chances!* You know how difficult it is getting through this country. Imagine the difficulty of hauling out a body."

A boiling mass of army ants swarms through camp

The briefing over, as we prepare for bed, a boiling mass of army ants swarms through camp. Ants everywhere, crawling over our legs, arms and faces, biting us. Then, just as quickly as they came, they're gone, off to rampage somewhere else in the forest.

The next day, the stress takes its toll. Haggard and physically spent, some just drop, collapsing on boulders, logs, the ground.

After reaching the next campsite, Jonesy, José, and Carlos, are sent back to give the worn-out stragglers a hand. Night is falling as they shuffle in. Allan is there, but shows no sympathy. Loud enough for all to hear,

he snidely remarks, "So, Jonesy, beginning to fall apart, are they? Well, at least you and the fellows were there to help them."

A Significant Find

We barely have the energy to set up the tarps and wash up. It's disheartening to learn it has taken us seven grueling hours to cover just three kilometers.

Suddenly, there's a flurry of excitement. Arran, Bevis' 16-year-old son, while scrounging for firewood, uncovers a stone wall under a blanket of leaves. About one meter high and seven meters long, the wall is made of sculpted limestone blocks. And there's more. A nearby mound is littered with blocks. It looks as if we might be camped near a Mayan temple.

Meerman is excited. "This is a significant find," he announces, pacing back and forth, scribbling notes in his journal. "The Maya traveled through these mountains from places like Caracol. This temple may date back to that period. When we get back, we'll report it so it can be properly documented and mapped."

Over dinner, Allan remarks that camping here was no mere coincidence. "I have a 'sixth sense' about this kind of stuff," he says casually. "Something told me to push on until we got here." Bevis, for one, believes him. "Big Jim thinks like a Maya," he says admiringly. I glance over at Van Dijk, who rolls his eyes.

In the morning, the film crew shoots what they can of the ruin. We leave the ancient site in peace and resume our descent along Snake Creek's bedrock of water-polished slate.

The End of our Lifeblood

A few hours later, Allan calls a halt. The break is welcome. We slide off our packs and drop to the ground.

Orlando borrows my map and studies it for several minutes with José and Carlos. Conversing in rapid-fire Spanish, they use the spine of a *warrie cohune* palm as a ruler. "We have five, maybe six days left if there are no ups and downs," says the wiry scout. "Of course, there are *many* ups and downs."

Late that afternoon, Snake Creek ends. The shallow stream—our lifeblood through the forest—is swallowed up by a sinkhole at the base of a limestone cliff. Fascinating from a hydrological standpoint, for us it means a major detour. Thickly wooded precipitous bluffs loom overhead—impossible to scale with our heavy loads. We camp back at the first sinkhole. At least there is water. It is our thirteenth night in the bush.

Though built like a middle-weight boxer and with the stamina of a man half his age, Jonesy is showing signs of strain. For two days now, he's had a fever. "Did you get much sleep last night?" I ask. "No, mon," he says wearily, "Not much. The flies were bad. They bite me bad. Can't eat either. Oh, yes, mon, I lose many pounds." Earlier that day I looked on in disgust and amazement as Bevis lanced boils on Jonesy's back, then squeezed and pried out several long and wormlike larval bot flies.

The dinner of pesto and sourdough bread is designed to lift morale. Our portions are the largest yet. "Have to give the starving troops a little more food. Hear there's been a little grumbling going on," says Allan caustically while ladling out rations. All is well until someone casually mentions that we're low on sugar. This makes Big Jim angry. "So, maybe you should move on down to the next restaurant," he snaps. "See if you can find some sugar there!"

The Jan Moment is just what we need to calm things down. "Today was strenuous, but successful," says the gaunt biologist. "I caught two

species of butterfly. They're new to me, and possibly new to science. I also identified two species of passion-flower and an orchid. These constitute new records for Belize." Staring reflectively at the fire, he pauses and grins. "Yes, it was a good day, but when this trip is over, I think I'll hang up my backpack for good."

Cut to the Bladen

After two days of hard hiking, Snake Creek reappears, then a half-hour later flows into an immense cave at the bottom of a rocky ridge and vanishes once more. "Many cave systems underlie the Maya Mountains," Meerman says, shining his feeble headlamp into the gaping black hole. "The Chiquibul complex, of which this is a part, extends into Guatemala and is probably the largest cave system in the Americas."

Jonesy, an expert tracker, is more interested in what's happening just outside the cave. In the wet clay, he spots the tracks of peccary (a wild pig), spoor of tapir, and the pug-toed imprints of the endangered jaguar. This big spotted cat is an opportunistic predator and will eat almost anything it can catch. "Does that include humans?" Van Dijk asks, camera rolling. "Oh, yes, mon," Jonesy laughs, the whites of his eyes gleaming against his jet-black face.

A quick probe of the cave is undertaken and the report is discouraging. "The Snake is dry," says Allan, his arms and bare shoulders crisscrossed by crimson scratches. "Our best bet is to abandon this drainage completely and cut over to the Bladen River."

"What will the terrain be like?" someone asks.

"The map is vague about that," says Allan, smiling. "I guess that means we'll be doing some more exploring, eh?"

Allan fills his water bottle from

a cave seep and summons Orlando, Jonesy and Arran to join him. "It's still early. We'll try and find a route over to the Upper Bladen," he tells Bevis. "No use moving everyone until we know for sure if there's water there."

With nowhere to go and little to do, we mere mortals who remain behind settle down for a long wait. To pass the time, Gerry Williams, a periodontist and world-class mountaineer from Florida, dutifully cleans his teeth with the plastic toothpick from his Swiss Army knife. John Field, an electrical engineer from Chicago, sits on a rotten log and amuses himself by plucking seed ticks off his pale white skin. "Seventy-one so far. I'll let you know when I hit a hundred," he announces. Hearing this, Van Dijk looks at me and mouths the words, "I THINK I'M GOING INSANE!" Bevis breaks out a stack of two-month-old Belize City newspapers that Meerman brought for his plant specimens. One article after another describes in gory detail some murder or act of mayhem. "Makes you damn glad to be out here in the wilderness," Bevis notes, passing the papers around. I can't tell if he's serious.

Allan and crew shuffle in at dusk, parched and exhausted. Unfortunately, the Upper Bladen is bone-dry. "That means we'll have to hike with full water supplies," says Allan, looking more weary than I've seen him. "We'll fill up at some waterholes along the way."

Our brushy campsite crawls with seed ticks. Fumbling with flashlights, duct tape, and tweezers, we extract the tiny creatures from our bodies. I discover scores of ticks embedded in my arms and legs, thighs, belly, butt, and genitalia. "Hey, what are friends for?" mutters Van Dijk, pulling another six-legged bloodsucker from my scalp. "Just don't ask me to pick

them off below the belt."

We reach the Bladen around noon the next day to find not so much as a puddle in its rock-and-gravel bed. Then it's up yet another bluff, looking for water as well as a way out.

Near dusk, we discover a waterhole. "This is camp, boys," Allan says, shedding his mammoth pack. "No telling where the next water is." The scummy puddle swirls with wiggling things. But who cares about such trifles? We covered nine kilometers today, our best distance to date.

The Mite-y and the Meek

At dawn, we are awakened rudely by a troop of howler monkeys belting out their strange gasps and hoots high in the treetops.

"You look like hell," I chide Williams, normally the most well-groomed among us. "Sleep well?"

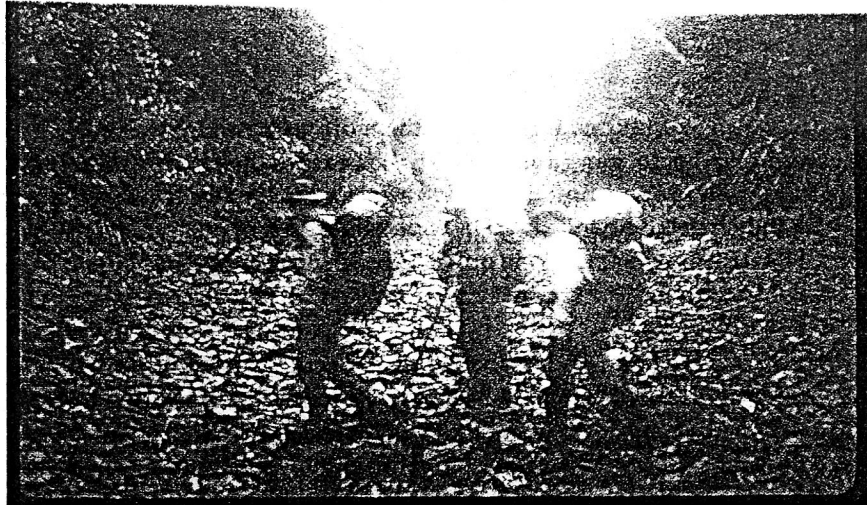
"Not at all," he growls. "Just like every night."

I know how he feels. Chiggers. Williams and I are plagued more than the others. These microscopic mites are eating us alive. Nighttime is the worst, when the creatures are most active. With warped pride, Williams and I compare bites. I have 390 raised, red welts, 35 more than he does. "You win," he concedes.

The next day, our search for water pays off. We cross the Bladen River again, but this time there's running water. Like desert travelers stumbling upon an oasis, we shed packs, strip off moldy clothes, and wallow in the stream. Flat on my belly, I lower my head and drink deeply. Water has never tasted so good.

At Last

At precisely six p.m. on February 3, we reach Belize's Southern Highway at the small Mayan village of Golden Stream. The last eight ki-



lometers we slogged through goo so deep we sank up to our hams at every step. Now, some of us are skeptical. Can this muddy track actually be one of Belize's main roads? Apparently so. Our pickup team shows up in a 4x4, and we all pig-out on fresh bread, pastries, and grilled steak—all of us, that is, except Allan. Although he's lost more weight than any of us, he waits, as is his custom, until everyone else has eaten.

We spend the night on the dirt floor of a thatched hut exposed to malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Supposedly to ward off vampire bats, a single kerosene lantern glows faintly on a beam overhead. Like the rest of us, Van Dijk is too keyed up to doze. He would rather talk as we await the sunrise. He, like many of us, is amazed that we have reached our destination and have done it without serious mishap. But our success is no surprise to Big Jim. In a rare relaxed mood, Allan chuckles from his sleeping bag. "Why, of course we made it," he says, confident to the very end. "Would I ever steer you wrong?"



To join one of Jim Allan's hard-core ventures, call Ecosummer Expeditions at 800/465-8884. Ecosummer also organizes less arduous adventures on the reef and in the rainforest of Belize, as well as other locations.

