

Not being the rugged outdoor type, I had a certain degree of apprehension about traveling to Central America to drive Land Rovers through the jungles and savannahs of Belize. From the communications, I wasn't sure where we would be staying and I got the impression we may be camping in rustic huts. I envisioned snakes, spiders and who knows what other dangers. I read warnings about not drinking the water, the recommendation

to get anti-malaria pills and maybe even a shot for Hepatitis A.

Then there was the email assuring me that, although Guatemalan bandits had been operating in the area we would be go through, they had taken precautions to protect the group of journalists.

Was this really a trip I wanted to take?

It was only three nights...so I figured, how bad could it be?

I packed lightweight clothes, sunscreen, DEET insect repellent and my camera and

headed for the airport.

I arrived in the afternoon at Belize City where I met up with 15 other journalists, a few from automotive publications and most from lifestyle media. When everyone arrived, we boarded smaller planes for a short flight to a remote dirt landing near the central Guatemalan border. As we flew a few thousand feet above the thick carpet of trees, we saw occasional settlements, a few roads and a terrain that transitioned from flat to rather hilly.

We later discovered that several of the "hills" we had passed over were actually Mayan ruins that had been swallowed up by the jungle.

Night one, the accommodations were at the Five Sisters Lodge, just a short drive from our dirt landing strip. The mountain lodge was perched on the edge of a valley overlooking the Five Sisters Falls. My thatched roof cabana looked primitive but had hardwood floors, screened windows with shutters, a small indoor bathroom

and a screened porch with hammock. It had two beds with mosquito nets and a fan mounted in the rafters. Our group dinner was at the base of the falls, 291 steps down from the lodge or a ride of several minutes in a rudimentary two-person cable car.

After a few drinks and a "Belize barbecue" of fish, pork and chicken, I retired to my room to see what might land on my mosquito net. The symphony of jungle sounds quickly put me to sleep,

and I had a restful night. The next morning I discovered a dead two-inch-long beetle in my shower. The prize for the most exciting night, however, went to the guy from Los Angeles who had a small snake fall from the ceiling of his cabana with a stranglehold on a gecko.

In the morning, the reasons for coming to Belize were parked in front of the Five Sisters Lodge—a group of Land Rovers, including several each of the Range Rover, Sport and LR3.

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Central American Adventure—Land Rover Style

by Bill Schaffer



Five Sisters Falls, Belize



Five-mile shortcut

Based on the first 18 hours in the lush jungled country, it looked like the trip would be a drive in a beautiful park.

The morning drive was on a narrow dirt road to the Mayan ruins at Caracol. This was one of more than 200 Mayan cities throughout Central America, some dating back to 1500 BC, and it is the largest Mayan archaeological site in Belize. In 650 AD, the urban area of Caracol had a radius of approximately 6 miles and a population of more than 140,000 people. As a contrast, the entire country of Belize currently has only 280,000 inhabitants. These Mayans had an immense agricultural field system, elaborate city planning and they were highly respected for their war prowess.

After spending several hours touring Caracol and the pyramids, and enjoying a lunch with the people working at the ruins, we moved on.

Five miles out of Caracol, we left the

civilized dirt roads and dropped off into the jungle. It was a shortcut to our resort for night two: a five-mile logging trail through the dense, tall jungle.

As we progressed, the trail got muddier and muddier and muddier. This was no ordinary mud; it was thick clay that filled tire treads making them nearly useless. Each vehicle had two journalists—who alternated driving—and a professional Land Rover driving instructor, who coached us through each challenge. Through this section we would go a few hundred yards and one of the vehicles would get buried in the mud. The Land Rover team, now wearing tall boots and waterproof gear, would pile out of the vehicles and walk ahead, or behind, to push, pull, dig or winch the incapacitated vehicle out of the mud. We'd go a little further, and then repeat the process. The

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Mayan ruins at Caracol

five miles took four hours, before we pulled out of the jungle onto an improved dirt road.

I was driving the new Land Rover Sport, which is lauded for its excellent performance and on-road handling. I didn't expect it to be such an impressive off-road vehicle, too. Thanks to the excellent traction of the Sport, adjustable suspension, and the good coaching, I didn't get stuck once.

An hour later, we pulled up to the gates of the Lodge at Chaa Creek Adventure

Centre, Rainforest Reserve and Spa. The 340-acre retreat is made up of 26 timber-decked cottages with traditional thatched roofs. The simple elegant huts were filled with handcrafted furnishings and fine antiques from Mexico and Guatemala. This was very different from the "roughing it" I had envisioned. As I returned to my cottage after a wonderful dinner, the rain started to fall.

Thatched roofs don't make a sound when rain falls on them, but I could hear the rain falling all night. By morning, the

clouds broke, with sunshine occasionally striking the wet ground.

My driving partner, Robert from New York, and I climbed into a Range Rover for the second day of driving. As we left Chaa Creek, it soon became obvious that a large amount of rain had fallen during the last 12 hours. Water was flowing over the roads in the low areas, and in some places, we pushed water more than half way up the radiator. I was amazed we didn't flood the Land Rovers. Later we were told the overnight rainfall totaled 7 inches.

Our morning drive was scheduled to take us on a trail winding through the savannah to the Peccary Park Adventure Center where we were to tour limestone caves that had been used by the Mayans. As we caravanned around the trees, through lakes of standing water, the vehicles toward the rear of the pack started to break through the top crust, dropping into saturated sand beneath, which was now acting like quicksand. The vehicles were being stuck, one after another. We would get one out, and the

next one would fall in deeper. Finally, after a couple of hours of repeatedly getting stuck and unstuck, we decided to turn around. This meant we had to go the long, long way to our final destination, the Chan Chich Lodge.

The detour roads had been in good condition a few days earlier and posed no problem...at first. However, the 7 inches of rain was running out of the mountains and getting deeper and deeper. Robert and I were now driving the lead vehicle, and still about 30 miles from our desti-

nation, when the creek water started running over the bridges, sometimes by more than a foot.

Because bandits from Guatemala had been operating in the areas we were in, Land Rover arranged for a military escort that included a military Land Rover Discovery with three armed soldiers in it and two more armed soldiers riding in the chase vehicle. The diesel-powered Discovery sat higher than the models we were driving, so they were able to test the water depths before we started through.

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The Lodge at Chaa Creek

Because we were driving the lead journalist vehicle we followed the military vehicle into the unknown depths.

The last major body of water we had to cross was more than one half mile wide. The water was flowing fast across the road, traveling through the trees and brush. As we started through the water, it got deeper and deeper. The technique used for going through deep water involves going fast enough to create a wave in front of the vehicle (see photo, opening spread). If you can stay a foot or two behind that wave the water is less deep. If it gets too deep, the water could flood the electrical system or worse enter the air intake for the engine, which will immediately stall the engine and perhaps ruin it.

Robert was driving this section and we were all sweating the crossing. He got behind the wave, but the water kept rising to the point where it crested over

the hood. Finally we started out the other side, safely. Amazingly, the eight Land Rovers following us also made it though safely.

We arrive at the Chan Chich Lodge about three hours behind schedule. The lodge is located on a 130,000-acre private nature reserve in the heart of "La Selva May"—the most extensive moist tropical forest in Central America. The resort is actually situated in the plaza of an unexcavated ancient Mayan city. The 12 cabanas and single villa are surrounded by temple mounds still overgrown by the jungle.

The Chan Chich Lodge at Gallon Jug Estate in the Orange Walk District of Belize has the kind of facilities you would expect at a five-star resort. As one of the journalists said, "It's the only thatched hut I've ever stayed in that had a bidet."

After drinks and a wonderful dinner, I climbed into bed hoping to hear the screams of the local monkeys, but they

were quiet that night. There are more sightings of jaguars at this resort than in any other area of Belize. At 6 am, a few of us got up for a nature walk in the surrounding ruins, hoping to get to see a Jaguar, monkey, colorful parrot or some of the other wildlife. All I got to see was a wild turkey with a bright blue head.

Later that morning we flew from an airfield near the resort back to Belize City to catch flights back to the US.

Belize is a remarkable country filled with natural beauty and friendly people who all spoke English. I can't wait to go back. The Land Rovers were equally impressive. I was amazed at how well they took us through all the mud and water in such luxury. The next time I see one of the movies with the Land Rovers going through the jungle, I'll understand what it's all about.

If you'd like to make a similar trip, visit <http://travelbelize.org> ■

