

The Maya UNDERWORLD

Live an Indiana Jones fantasy when exploring a Belizean cave

BY HALEY SHAPLEY

When my shuttle driver begins shouting, I look up and see that we're in the wrong lane, hurtling toward an oncoming car whose driver also feels no need to adjust his speed, despite the impending collision that appears to be happening in three, two ... when I open my eyes, I see the car in our path has taken to the shoulder and we've pushed our way back into the right lane. The girl behind me lets out a gasp. The morning is still young, the trip barely underway, and we've already had an adrenaline rush—this one not advertised in any brochure.

We're in the Cayo District of Belize, headed for Actun Tunichil Muknal, better known as the ATM cave. An important Maya underworld location that experts date back to somewhere between 250 and 909 AD, the cave is host to both natural wonders and historical human artifacts, with dozens of ancient pottery shards and several skeletons—including a particularly famous one who's even earned herself a nickname.

We hiccup along a dirt road with potholes big enough to house a family of coatis, a cute raccoon-like animal that roams the roadsides here. After the hour-long car ride from San Ignacio to a trailhead, we set off on a 45-minute hike with guide Rennen, a short, round man with graying hair. Although no one in our five-person group is sure what to expect, we look the part of adventurers, our red helmets tightly fastened. A newlywed from Chicago crafts a pack carrier out of a stick that he slings over his shoulder, which seems quite explorer-like indeed.

Our hike takes us through three river crossings before we arrive at the mouth of the cave. I'm nearly giddy with wonder and a tinge of fright. I look past a handful of large moss-covered rocks to the hourglass-shaped opening, covered by a few stray vines, and see a small pool of deep blue water. Beyond that it's dark—a complete mystery.



How did the ancient Maya do it, without the headlamp I'm wearing, without knowing what they would find? They probably felt they had no choice. For the Maya, the caves were sacred, a place where they could commune with the gods. Drought plagued the land during the late Classic period, which is likely when the Maya left these offerings in a plea for rain. Rennen is clear that no one knows for sure what happened here, but this going theory explains the bones scattered within. Whether being sacrificed was an honor for the privileged or a punishment for the weak remains a question.

What isn't a question is that there's no room for weakness on this expedition. After a quick swim into the mouth of the cave, I pull myself up onto a rock ledge and we begin hiking along the inside left edge. Water levels vary dramatically (sometimes we're wading, sometimes it's easier to just swim) and there are a few tight squeezes through various nooks and crannies. One spot seems custom-designed to fit just a neck, and I place mine carefully between two rocks in order to get through.

In an assembly-line fashion, we call out to the person behind us to watch for a sharp edge here or to step up there. It's really the only talking we do, as we're all focused on carefully sloshing through the chilly water, the air quiet and warm around us. Bats, spiders, and all manner of other creatures I'd rather not meet lurk in the darkness, but I'm too distracted by the beauty of the stalagmites and stalactites to worry.

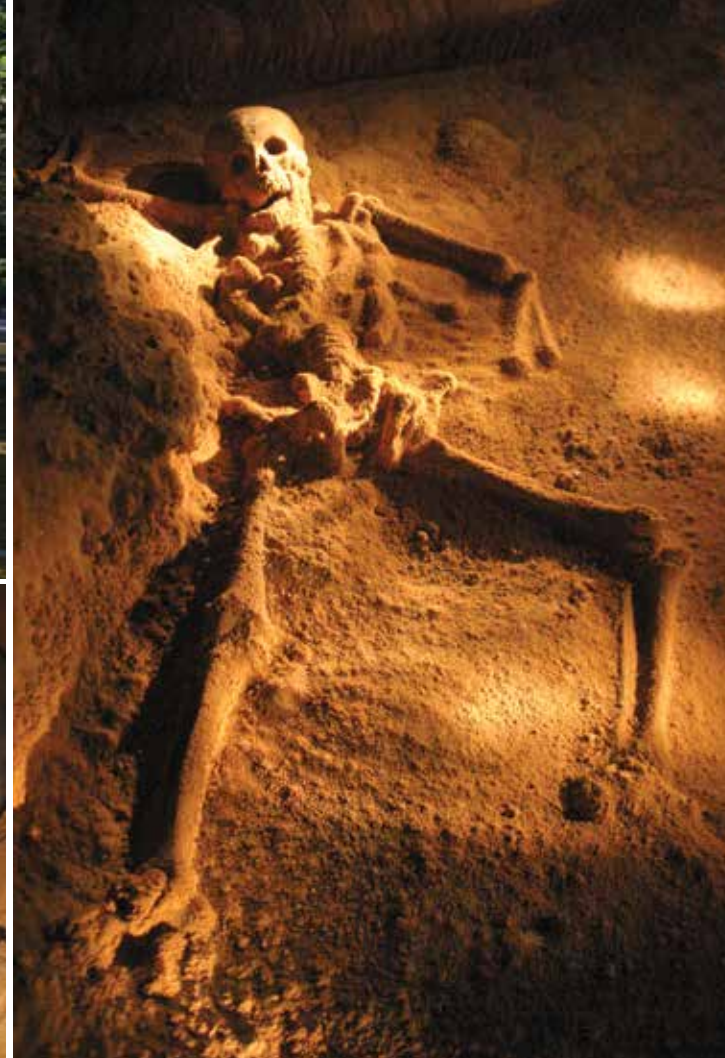
(Clockwise from top left) An eerie entrance to Actun Tunichil Muknal (aka the ATM cave) hints of spooky relics to be discovered inside.



COURTESY BELIZE TOURISM BOARD



(Clockwise) Explorers make several river crossings on the trek to the ATM cave. The Crystal Maiden and ancient Maya pottery shards are highlights of the tour. The author pauses near a grouping of mineral formations deep in the cave.



We stop at a large, slippery boulder; climbing it is necessary to get into the Cathedral, a large chamber where ceramic vessels and skeletons are scattered about.

With some help from Rennen, we scramble to the top, take off our shoes (you must walk in socks through this portion to protect the cave floor), and begin to explore. Everything is left just as it was in the 1980s when a geologist discovered the site, with pots of various sizes everywhere we turn, and the skeletal remains of both children and adults.

We continue on to the most famous find of all: the Crystal Maiden, an entirely intact skeleton of a young woman. I climb a ladder to a small ledge to see her. She lays sparkling from cranium to metatarsal (having calcified in the 1,000

or so years since her death) with her left leg bent, right arm up above her head. I wonder how she met this fate.

Back at my hotel later that night, a bartender catches sight of my blue eyes, a rarity here. “Belizean men melt like butter in a tortilla for girls like you,” he tells me. I laugh. Forget men. I melt like butter in a tortilla for days like this, filled to the brim with adventure, history, excitement, nature, and, yes, even the adrenaline that comes from starting the day with the brief notion that it might be your last. 🌟

Former Texan Haley Shapley is a freelance writer now based in Seattle.

Your AAA travel agent can provide trip-planning assistance. Visit your local branch, call (888) 651-0172, or go to AAA.com/explore.

If You Go

A certified guide must escort you to the ATM cave. Several companies, such as Pacz Tours (pacztours.net), lead these trips. Price varies, but it’s about \$100 U.S. Most ATM excursions leave from the San Ignacio area. The trip takes the better part of a day; the time in the cave is about three hours. Sturdy closed-toe shoes are required; parts of this hike are slippery. You will be getting wet, so bring a towel. Shorts and a shirt worn over a bathing suit is a good wardrobe choice, along with dry clothes to wear after your tour. More information about Belize is available from the Belize Tourism Board at travelbelize.org.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY BELIZE TOURISM BOARD (2); HALEY SHAPLEY (3)