**Sample Chapter 1 | Amsterdam 1997**

The twelve hour flight provided me solitude to mark though my Lonely Planet guide book to become familiar with the local food, history, and customs. Surrounded by people speaking in languages I couldn’t comprehend, signs referencing metric measurements, and literature printed in Dutch, it felt like the first day in a new kitchen. I pulled myself together and knew I had to learn more than just new cooking technique. Amsterdam would be my home. Immersed in classical European (technique). The guidebook may have been written in English but couldn’t possibly have provided the level of comfort to me facing all I was surrounded with.

This was my first time to arrive on an international flight alone—nobody to help me. I was well prepared, or so I thought. Nervously, I followed the herd of fellow travelling sheep under the bright lemon illuminated signs that displayed arrows and cartoonish depiction of a customs officer. I was instructed by my “unknown” contact to say I was there as a tourist and not to mention anything about working. She informed me the “official” work visa would be issued several weeks after my arrival, which reminded me of my runs between South Beach and Boca Raton. I often wondered if this was a ploy for an international human trafficking ring for the adult entertainment world, what? Me a porn star!

I passively stood behind the red tape of the tall Pink Floyd-esque immigration counter with my declaration paperwork and passport gripped tightly in my sweaty left palm. Nervous beads of sweat off ran off my forehead. “Next! What brings you to Amsterdam”? I was relieved. I looked up at the officer’s forehead to avoid eye contact and said, “art museums”; thanks Lonely Planet. The officer pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose and I heard a series of loud bangs; it was the official entry stamp hitting my passport. *“Welkom* to the Netherlands Mr. Gilbert, he says through a half-cocked smile, I hope you enjoy tulip season like the *Meneer* Rembrandt painted it for us.”

I hauled my luggage further north through the sea of people awaiting the arriving International passengers. There stood my “contact.” She was a tall, slender, middle aged brunette woman wearing a crimson sweater, and slate grey slacks that matched the color of the depressing Amsterdam sky. Meena provided the obligatory and awkward European cheek peck and escorted me to her mid 90’s “smart car” that appeared no larger than a toddlers pedal car. The moment my seatbelt clicked, she wasted no time informing me the international student apartments were not ready, so she had organized a hostel outside of town for several days. What? I guess I was off the map. Unsure of where we were heading, the thoughts of human trafficking were becoming more than a mere figment of my imagination. As I watch the narrow lane lines become tunnel-vision coordinates, she lights a cigarette and I hurtle to an unknown doom.

After nearly an hour’s drive from Schiphol Airport, we pulled up to a one story, dilapidated brick building, concealed by the soaring twisted *Talia* trees, which clearly had no resemblance to the surrounding cubist Dutch architecture. My impression was reminiscent of a textbook picture Eastern European structure from the former USSR. The roof was as flat as a *panokoken,* the walls originally constructed with aligned white brick that had shifted into a vertical texture of Ireland’s Giant’s Causeway. To complete the “Taj Mahal” there were insignificant, slender, rectangular windows placed high above eye level, even for an above average Dutchman.

My suitcase wheels were continuously getting stuck along the cracked stone pathway covered in dry leaves and twigs. The Addams Family –like path went around to the side of the square building and led to the oddly placed traditional Dutch doorway. We walked onto the raised stone door steps and turned the squeaky handle. The humid weather had expanded the aged wood so I leaned my left shoulder into the door and gave a confident break-and-enter push. A tall and narrow Dutchmen hallway was in plain view with a small antique school desk immediately to the right, which was apparently the reception area. The interior was about as romantic as the exterior. Chipped plaster walls, flickering dim lights, and worn area rugs welcomed me. However, I did notice there was an in-house bar in the next room. How strange, yet convenient that I no longer had to adhere to the ridiculous U.S. drinking laws, so guess I could put away my hard-won fake ID.

The bartender somehow managed to pry himself away from the live televised *voetbal* game to stagger over and check me in to the Bates Motel. He was friendly enough to invite me to the bar for a Heineken once I got settled in. I am not sure how much settling in there was going to be, but the offer was taken as a gracious gesture. Walking down the narrow hallway to the last room on the right, I inserted the skeleton key slowly just like my grandfather taught me during my visits to his summer cottage in Sharon, Massachusetts. A few squeaks and skilled movements later, I opened the heavy wooden door to see two sets of bunk beds and a hair laced pedestal sink. The beds must have been there since the discovery of metal fabrication, and the free standing sink was no Kohler. The floors inside the room reminded me of my elementary school cafeteria with a chalky back drop of faux travertine. My eyes instantly honed in on pieces of luggage packed underneath both sets of narrow twin beds. I was about to share a room with total strangers. What type of person would be staying at the “Taj Mahal”?

I briskly walked back to the reception to inquire about a private accommodation and was informed, “We do not offer those types of rooms.” I felt I somehow offended Holland’s Trey Anastasio look alike. He rapidly notified me the communal men’s shower was across the hall from my room. Great. Meena said a quick good bye and said that she would “return in a few days”. There I stood with no one to talk to but this overachieving thirty something waiting for the next tour. I was craving a long hot shower but settled for a few splashes of cold water from the trickling rusted faucet and a Clark Kent change. I had to find out where I was, so first stop was the hostel bar.

I pulled up an old wood bar stool and asked for a pint, and received more than I anticipated. “Trey” poured a slightly above room temperature glass of Heineken proceeded to inform me that in Holland the beer is unpasteurized. That made a lot of sense since there was two inches of head at the top of the glass. I continued to be educated on the differences between European and American beer regulations. “Trey” told me if a European beer does not have at least two fingers’ width of head at the top then they consider it a bad pour. The complete opposite that I understood from the countless keg parties I had attended my senior year of high school.

I was never a fan of the overpriced green bottled beer in the states (and am still not), so how was this going to win me over? The first taste of the well tempered beer with live yeast made a complete difference; I couldn’t believe this was Heineken. Trey made a joke with me about the water coming from the canals, a joke the Dutch must pass along to every foreigner; much like Thai’s when they inform you their cuisine is not spicy! I enjoyed the beer education and thanked “Trey” and then he informed me I was a 1 hour & 30 minute bus ride outside of Amsterdam on the edge of the country side. Considering the circumstance, he suggested I wander off into the town center and there I would find plenty of shops and cafes. His directions were mere vagaries much like that of Willy in Charleston, just without the demeaning tone.

I put on my typical American college student navy blue hoodie and walked outside in hopes of finding comfort beyond drinking beer in the dreary “Taj Mahal”. The air had a slight chill, similar to my mother’s defrosted meals through my youth. I instantly noticed the droves of brightly colored bicycles being ridden by locals. Some people were in suits and slacks, ladies in skirts and jeans, just peddling down the street as if this was normal. I knew that Holland was the bicycle Mecca of Europe, but had no idea it was still their daily mode of transport in modern times. I continued along the paved stone pathway that led to small arched wooden canal bridges that were painted as white as Holland’s prized asparagus. The picturesque gardens of blooming tulips, lush spring grasses, and orange-caramel colored butterflies set me at ease. Every time my eyes blinked it felt as if I was adjusting the aperture on my camera to better focus on these images.

I sensed I was nearing the town center when I saw clusters of Dutch residences packed tightly together like bushels of oysters. The homes were designed identical with three levels of windows, and as wide as a comfortable trailer home. These quintessential Dutch homes appeared as if they came out from the plastic bag of monopoly pieces, all precisely molded the same. The exteriors of the Star Trek cramped space all had white trim that wrapped the windows and lined the roofs which looked like the sugar straws from my former college culinary experiments. There was an undersized front patio with what appeared to be a standard issue flower pot and planting box. The flowers were in bloom, herbs growing, and I even saw the start of small cherry tomatoes in one planter box. I came to find out just how seriously the Dutch take their botany, even if they only have a few square meters to work with.

The street was divided into four lanes: two for cars, and two for bicycles. They led me into the center of town. Before I knew it, I was like back walking on Charleston cobble stone streets, but unlike hearing hoofs hit the stones there were the sounds of bouncing bicycle tires and ringing bells. The sunlight had made a cameo through the grim Holland sky enough to be able to enjoy more unpasteurized beers in a sizeable outdoor café. It was the perfect time for me to regroup my thoughts from the past twenty four hours and observe another culture life pass by.

I began to feel a bit light headed from the jet lag; well that’s what I told myself anyway. There was no time to waste. I felt I had to make the most of the day before the sun set so I could just pass out when I returned to the Bates Motel and forget about the creepy filth. I wanted a dose of “espresso”, so where better to head than a Dutch coffee shop. I never remembered such an extensive menu back home and rather confused by the metric measurements. The coffee was slow roasted and had the look of concentrated tar. Rather unsure, the hipster behind the counter “certified” that I would enjoy it. Uncomfortable with the entire situation, I sat down and enjoyed my coffee through the purple haze of smoke in the presence of total strangers which seemed to be the Dutch custom. It didn’t take but a few sips and the espresso kicked right in. Somewhere between the smoke filled coffee shop and the *biers,* I had an uncontrollable urge to eat. My stomach followed the aroma of freshly baked bread right into the town bakery.

I saw the bright yellow pinstripe awning directly ahead as an older woman walked towards me with a paper bag filled with a freshly baked boule of Dutch *tiger bread*. I had never seen bread the size of a small basketball. And in her other arm rested a large baguette. Just as we passed one another, I made a left turn into the bakery and was greeted with a smile from the baker, who appeared to also be the owner by the left over flour on his hands. Craving some fresh bread I say in my best efforts, “baguette *achetiblieft*” and the next thing I know I am holding a Ron Jeremy size baguette. The artisanal touches were apparent on the hand rolled crusty baguette. The local bakery, much like my grandfather’s butcher shop, was becoming a sign of the past with modern grocers.

I had already torn off small pieces of the warm baguette before I found the *Kass* shop a few doors down. The round, paraffin wax lined cheese was packed floor to ceiling, and perfectly aligned on thick wooden shelving across from the display case. It felt like being in a tire shop with all the wheels in direct vertical alignment to the ones below. I picked up triple cream brie and 200 grams of the local Edam cheese. As I made my way back towards my temporary accommodations, I elected to take a pit stop in the park for a picnic.

Fully equipped with the cheese and baguette, I tried my best to adjust to “European time” and regroup before I was lost in a Starry Night. I felt like I was in heaven; I sat on my ass like a transient hobo and had one of the most memorable meals of my life-- feeling so ever European. The brie was made with 75% butterfat which made it slowly melt off the roof of my mouth and down my throat. The Edam cheese was quite the opposite with a hard pale yellow interior and black wax exterior. This particular cheese was aged longer than the typical red waxed label commonly seen in upscale dairy sections in the North America. Edam cheese needs a knife or cutting utensil in order to sliver pieces onto the baguette, however my hands became that vehicle. Bite after bite, I sat in the neighborhood park alone watching Dutch life pass by me. I knew Amsterdam and I were going to get along just fine, like Rembrandt starting a new project; I had just begun to etch the surface.

Several days passed, and I had become familiar with my foreign surroundings when I see the familiar “Smart Car” just outside the compound as I am on my way back from my new morning routine. Apparently, the time had come to move accommodation. This only meant onwards to the city of Amsterdam. It was a relief to leave the pseudo-suburban town without delay; however I had grown accustomed to this way of life. Each morning I sipped Turkish tea with shady Turks at their antique store, walked through the picturesque park, and continually found new foods to try. Upon my arrival, Meena greets me with the same awkward European cheek kisses while holding a cigarette in her right hand-- only hoping she doesn’t ash on my newly scored cashmere sweater.

We find ourselves back in the car driving to Amsterdam *Centraal*, and I am clearly under the assumption we were headed directly to the new accommodation, but like Dutch history, there always seem to be a creative surprise. Informed in the car that there is a two week orientation for all the international students that would cover a crash course in Dutch, food preparation, dinners, canal tours, and learning metric (something I had already began to grasp), I felt uncertainty again. At least knew I would be able to connect with people who spoke fluent English. The car steadily made its way through the congested pedestrian traffic and bicycle laden streets of Amsterdam. Meena cut through the major thoroughfares where clusters of tall and narrow 17th century homes lined the consciously designed canal system.

We swiftly maneuvered in front of a non-descript building like Meena was on an audition for the Dukes of Hazard remake. In the foyer was the assembly of eleven international hospitality students—my compatriots for the next five months--sipping drip coffee and timidly picking at apple pastries while attempting to socialize. I bypassed the European breakfast offering; I was being drawn directly to some natural *cajeta* from the Yucatan’s sun. Her name was Carolina and she was a hospitality student from Quintana Roo, Mexico. Being Mr. Smooth, I soon learned that she was a devoted cultural traveler and the Indiana Jones of food explorers. Much to my surprise and pleasure, we spent a lot of time together during the first few weeks, as I was often the one who was helping her along in the kitchen, and in return she kept me on a “caffeine free” diet. She liked to follow the rules; however I managed to convince her to skip the “canal tours” with the other students and go food hopping with me. We ate our way through Amsterdam’s back streets and completed many of our journeys at the Leidseplein. Our first time the Starry Night was upon us, I was more than comfortable sipping local beer and eating Dutch *Proffertjes* while watched the street performers extract our last Guilders.

My last clear memory of dining in Amsterdam was that night sitting at the Leidseplein, relaxed and well rested. That all came to a stop much like my daily desire for drinking coffee in smoke clogged rooms. The orientation at the Barbizon Palace was different since it was the first one ever done entirely English. I wasn’t sure what was more grueling: the time spent in the office or renewing my driver’s license at home. I even went so far as to ask if we could skip the formalities since I was ready to cook After several hours of monotony, a young lady walked me into the uniform room where I was fitted and issued several of the ugliest and most inefficient chef jackets I have worn to this day. The jacket breasts were reversible and had removable black plastic buttons. The light blue checkered pants had to be shortened. I guess to the Dutch, anyone less than two meters is a dwarf. The aprons much the same. The chef was strict on his uniform policy and the aprons could only be worn on the waist, forcing us to work spotless. I kissed the social life I was becoming accustomed to with Carolina, and committed myself to Chef Katz and his Michelin Star kitchen team.

French was the only language spoken around the center island built stoves; I was no exception to this order and I only spoke a mere handful of junior high words and phrases in French. Chef Katz only believed in one thing: perfection. The average work day was 16 hours. We began at 10 AM, with the typical European coffee breaks and late afternoon lunch. The *brigade* of twenty seven *commis* performed as a military platoon following direct orders and never questioning our commander in chief. The narrow and cramped spaces of the Amsterdam streets were no different than the space to do our *mise en place*. Elbow room was at a premium. Chef Katz was chasing his second *Michelin Star* and drove his team with an iron fist to accomplish his gastronomic quest. Needless to say, I was nervous. In the glaring light of the fact that I was given the first orientation in English by the hotel, and issued a uniform that fit like a present from Grandma, I walked into the seeming chaos of the kitchen with two levels.

The same split level transfers that occurred in Centraal Station also took place across *Prins Hendrikkade* inside Restaurant Vermeer’s kitchen, except with no stairs. The kitchens were divided into two floors separated by a service elevator that operated on what I learned to be known as “island time”. Located on the first floor of the hotel was the main kitchen, this is where the chef conducted his gastronomic symphony each night for his diners. The basement level was kept at a bone chilling temperature because it housed the *garde manger* preparation, a blast chiller, and specially designed area for Chef Laurence’s pastry shop. Delicate food items like the foie gras terrine had to be prepared under close watch and in the downstairs kitchen then transported to the northern platform for service. Each terrine took four hours to assemble (in addition to ingredient cook time) because of the precise layering of paper thin slices of braised beef tongue that were strategically placed between the flawless pieces of fattened goose liver and bound with paint brush thin coatings of house made oxtail jelly.

It was made clear that before I was even allowed to look at the terrine I needed to learn how to peel asparagus. My first day I was given six bunches of delicate Dutch white asparagus by the Sous Chef, Dennis. He tells me “These *whit* *asperges*es only have a seven week growing season and were hand harvested this morning from a small farmer in Limburg, Holland. They will be served this evening”. I had never seen white asparagus before let alone peeled one. I did not want to lose face (something I learned more about while living in China) or create any doubts of my skills on my first day so went along with everything as if I knew how to handle the white gold. I held one of the thick spears at a 45 degree angle by the tip and slowly moved the peeler towards the base. After each proficient stroke I turned the asparagus gently on its axis point 1/8th of an inch. This lasted less than one spear before Dennis verbally exploded in French, then Dutch, and then English! First he made a point to remind me he had to speak English because I was an American and knew nothing else, secondly I did not ask for help, and most importantly I was peeling them INCORRECTLY! He was right on all accords, after he was done making my pulse flat line with his tri-lingual verbal vomit he demonstrated to me how to properly peel a Dutch white asparagus ON the cutting board. I stood there in dead silence as if rigor mortis had set in and just gave him a nod of the head. Thankfully Dennis resuscitated me with a hard but jaunty pat on the back just to let me know it wasn’t personal. The time drug out for the rest of the first day as heard my inner voice on repeat “it is time to focus on your career, not fucking around”, this was like a bad flashback from previous conversations with my father.

My first job as “Le American” apprentice was to put away and organize the deliveries as they came in. This was not going to be difficult because I had already done this for Juanito; well that was not exactly the case. Nearly all the items were brought in by individual farmers or small businesses the chef had personal relationships with, therefore creating a start and stop work day. There was no set routine for their arrivals with the exception of the cheese lady from Gouda. She was always the first to arrive typically with one of her young son’s when I was taking the first sip of my morning coffee. I am not sure Hendrika ever changed her clothes because she always had on the same traditional black shirt and ankle length pleated skirt, neatly braided hair, and a modern day version of willow-wood clogs. I would always try and make small talk with her, but her English was choppy and my Dutch was no better. Hendrika was all business and just like the translation of her name was no doubt the ruler at home. Once I accepted her aged butterscotch-colored *kass* her shoulder blades would drop and accept a cup of tea for her ride home.

The arrivals of the farmers in Holland were as unpredictable as the hurricanes of Southern Florida. Just when I began to *tournee* the carrots for the rabbit dish and pick through the sea beans for the turbot the call would come from the security desk. I knew that meant more farmers, just a matter of which ones. I always dreaded the egg delivery that came twice a week. There were two brothers that alternated driving to the city (in no particular order) to deliver both the fragile chicken and duck eggs. It was always a confusing moment when they first arrived because I couldn’t tell them apart, my luck they were identical twins. These two seven foot burly blonde brutes were in their mid thirties and came dressed in faded blue overalls, stained white tee shirt underneath, and black steel tip work boots. It took me some time to recognize one infinitesimal detail between them which was their ears. Andries had detached ear lobes as Gerben did not. There were some days I could not get a fast enough view from a foot and a half below, so had to develop a second method. It took me a few weeks but discovered that Gerben was the brother with the fierce bone crushing handshake. How he ever handled the raw eggs still remains a mystery.

It was customary to spend a few minutes with each vendor unlike culture in the U.S. which I had experienced in Juanito’s kitchen. My favorite vendor of all was the artisan who delivered his salt lake smoked eels in small quantities still dangling by their pierced heads from the coat hanger wire racks. Joeri was a jovial man with a belly like Santa and the matching belt and buckle to go with it. He was always chuckling to himself and rubbing the micro green size stubble under his chin. I always knew when he had arrived from the smell of burnt beech and apple wood from down the narrow declining corridor. Joeri was a fifth generation eel farmer who had been perfecting his family’s craft for the past sixty years of his life. I was incredibly fascinated by the process and smooth smoky taste because it reminded me of the white fish I would eat on Sunday mornings with my father. I knew Joeri could sense my enthusiasm to learn more about the traditional process of smoked seafood which was sadly becoming victim to mass production companies, he invited me to visit his operation. I thanked him and said, “If I ever get a day off…” I never was able to identify if it was the Chef who set it up, or Joeri, but was sent for two entire days to work side by side with the smoked seafood master. What an experience as I prepared the order for my very own restaurant that was sent back with me for Chef Katz. Somehow between the deliveries and juggling act as the apprentice I completed my work, which was a true lesson of time management.

To start I was assigned to assist in the preparation of the vegetables, starches, and garnishes for the *chef entretemier.* This sounded like a gimpy prep job at first by U.S. standards, but suddenly realized how detailed every item needed to be. Harkening in my days to as a graphic design student I already had an appreciation for the individual elements for an individual composition. Peeling vegetables were my lines; my lessons in perspective came in to play every time I turned a potato. Each day all the *mise en place* was prepared from scratch, no exceptions. Painfully but proudly I remember slow roasting pearl onions, carefully removing the skins, then discarding all the inner circular layers. Of course it didn’t stop there, as each onion was filled with piped creamy polenta filling in the remaining outer ring and garnished with fish scale sized dehydrated prosciutto chips. In a flawless, circular composition I applied the chef’s favorite oxtail jelly just as a portrait artist dots the pupil in the subject’s eye or as a pediatrician uses an infants’ eyedropper. This level of exacting detail was demanded for every item on every plate across a 16 hour shift. I was never certain if I was positioned on the vegetable station because of “escapade asparagus”, or it was where the chef found I would be most challenged.

Instinctively there were cultural variations and stereotypical views I had to surmount, not easy when you are the private of the kitchen. I commenced each day by arriving an hour early, being meek to learn, and always showcasing several new French words or phrases. My pronunciation of words was nowhere near correct as I came to learn that from a deep stare and cracking smile. One late afternoon I had half a dozen small sauce pots reducing stocks at the perfect simmer. Down below by my knees an oven turned extremely low *confiting* whole bulbs of garlic, the other oven dial turned in the complete opposite direction to finish roasting the sweet-saffron color fingerling potatoes. The dehydrator was filled with thin trays of blanched and pureed pea mixture for the lamb dish; meanwhile I removed the lemon-thyme flowers from each sprig with surgical tweezers for my chef! My arms moved like an octopus attacking a conch bed. Dennis saw how far I had come and for the first time since “The Day” asked “*Veux-tu de l'aid ?* This time I knew he offered the help because he was proud of what he saw, not out of incompetency. Replying in French with “*merci beaucoup Chef”* (phonetically correct: mair sea-bow-coow) instead I pronounced *beaucoup* as ‘bow cyu’. My memorable misstep in so many words told my boss he had a nice “back side”! Dennis was first caught off guard, but then quietly corrected me, understanding what I meant and preserving my dignity, thank goodness!

The *brigade* began to take notice of my dedication to the food and slowly lost their negative stigma of American cooks. American gastronomy at that time was stepping away from the European techniques and structure, however in Europe kitchens were still dominated by tradition. Not even the witty French philosopher Voltaire could predict the auto-extinction of the European chefs in America. Sadly for the Europeans they have had to adapt to some of the progressive culinary change because the American chefs have chosen to break all their structured rules on plating and cooking technique. The other cooks in the kitchen would make jokes about American “cuisine”, public way of life, and what we considered “culture”. I was as sharp and polished as the chef’s knives with my rebuttals at age twenty, especially when it came to the food. I reminded them constantly that the tasteless Dutch food reigned supreme in Europe for worst cuisine, even topping the UK! Like *slagroom* on an *appeltaart* I always brought up their vile vending fast food chain [FEBO](http://www.febodelekkerste.nl/eng/) (the Dutch McDonald’s) which makes Mickey-D’s seem like spa cuisine. America is a very young country so developing its own culture and defined “cuisine” (a French word, how cliché) will be an evolution, much like the mindset of my European friends. This was all done in good fun, but it was a rough road as “Le American” apprentice.

Standing my ground helped me earn respect and allotted me the ability to be given new tasks. We all awaited the new monthly roster; it was treated as the chef’s grade card. After three months I was moved from the *entretemier* to the *poissionier station* as 2nd commis. My new position provided the unique opportunity to be near the stove on a regular basis, something only reserved for high ranking chef de parties. Each day at Restaurant Vermeer was like being part of the O.J. Simpson trial with new discoveries and countless hours of work. Like a sequestered juror, my eyes gradually opened each morning to thin slivers of beaming natural light through my broken-linked vertical blinds inside my hotel-pan shaped studio apartment. One morning in particular I woke up in a meditative state looking over at the Edam cheese colored rays and realized I was in some Buddhist - *nirvana*. My mind had been liberated from tension, anger, and all things Kurt Cobain. This was no “cup of Jo” high it was organic happiness that transcended through my confidence and achievements to cook at Michelin Star levels.

The hard work was paying off in comparison to my other culinary school friends. I would call them from the hallway pay phone to check in and they would report back with how they only worked the mandated thirty two hours per week, meanwhile I was clocking hours in highway speeds. This was shocking but knew we were no longer from the same cut when it came to futures; they surfed in their free time as I read. The other international interns always had the time to plan organized events from dinners to museum trips that I was seldom able to attended. I never held any animosity because they mostly worked in the front of house or in a hospitality role, not in the demanding atmosphere of a five star hotel kitchen. The hard work and time-consuming salaried hours paid off in even more unexpected ways.

I had felt more confidence than ever before, until I heard the chef yelling for me in through the noisy sounds of the evening’s preparation. My first day of work was the last time I was directly addressed in English, something wasn’t right. My mind was racing around faster than a Dutch speed skater chasing world record. I accidently removed the skin from a few filet of John Dory earlier in the day but nobody knew since I buried them quickly in the trash so that couldn’t have been it? He stood in the doorway to his office and looked at me with fury, then slowly relaxed his face muscles and broke into a smile. The Chef presented me with a signed bottle of wine from the entire kitchen team and a jacket with my name on it. “We are all impressed with your achievements and the respect you earned here as an apprentice, an American one at that. (Of course he had to throw that in there) We wanted to pay you back.” What the hell was this crazy Dutchman talking about? Then I was told, “Tonight will be your last service then you will have three weeks to travel, cook, and eat Europe.” Once I had turned around I saw the entire brigade had left the stoves to applaud me, some even gave me the “euro-hug”, creeper than the male football pat.

The chef had sent me off with an unspoken message, intentional or not I realized that night food goes far beyond the kitchen. I arrived back at the student crash pad and downloaded the information to Carolina right away, and before I knew it we were plotting an escape. With my travel companion secured and a destination selected one last variable had to be addressed. Growing up everything had always been about dollars and cents, and this was no exception. Furthermore, the ideas that had been percolating like the many cups of coffee consumed in Amsterdam’s finest was a desire to learn more about the business side of the restaurant world. After having received so many orders of locally sourced products which was so very different from what I had experienced in America. I had realized that success as a great chef meant great ingredients, high level of skill, and knowing how to manage your bottom line. High quality products come at a high cost, like the white asparagus, and every ruined piece means lower profits for the restaurant. Who better to understand this than my father, so I ventured to pick up the telephone and tell him about my desire to complete a degree in accounting back at Johnson and Wales.

“…..Who is this?” My father feigned recognition after I informed him of the next path I had charted. Perhaps it was all a set up (I’ll never tell) but he seemed very willingly to part with a few *shekels* to finance my next self indulgent adventure. My success was rewarded by Chef Katz and the brigade as well as my father who had viewed my culinary aspirations with skepticism from the beginning.

Naturally I wanted to go to the beach to SCUBA dive and decompress, Carolina hoped for educational tours of busy European cities. Like a good bottle of Ouzo we had no time to “ferment” over the situation and Greece became the perfect pairing. Forty eight hours later we were saying *“Doei Doei” to* Holland and”YahSU” to Greece’s historical island of Crete. Once we arrived on a small prop plane via Athens we noticed an immediate change in air quality. My first breaths were filled with bouquets of late summer flora and wild oregano, far different than the intoxicating haze of Amsterdam. It wasn’t long before we found ourselves slicing dried salami and tearing off pieces of crusty *psomi* bread (from the village bakery) to dip in the local olive oil. Not to be overshadowed by the clinking of our glasses filled with chilled Rosé from Heraklion as we watched the single massed sail boats drift by our Mediterranean beach villa.

Thanks to Chef Katz, I was now working on “travel time” instead of his regimented work schedule that I had followed for months. Exploring the island on tour busses or rented taxis fit our agenda like Maverick giving away “classified information”—that is to say, not at all. We took off from the villa and before we knew it found ourselves flying down scantily graded dual carriage roads on the north side of Crete in a Suzuki Samurai, doors off and top down! The birds’ eye aerial views of the calming sea below were more impressive than the postcards we sent home. We continued our drive through the winding mountain roads of *Levka Ori* (commonly known as the White Mountain Range) as we pushed onward to the next village. The son of Zeus, *Apollo* must have been looking out for me as he hammered down the sun’s rays casting my body into deep bronze. I licked my lips for some type of relief from the heat and the only thing I could taste was the granulated texture of dry salt from the evaporating water below. The island’s meandering, narrow roads and grassy, earthen aromas made Crete a vast farmers market with new wonders at each stop.

The local villages were far different than the tourist area we happened to pass through for a few additional rolls of 35mm film. Each small village seemed to be stuck in a perpetual Sunday morning with no bar culture, few twenty-something’s, and an atmosphere so quiet, “ you could hear a pin drop”. Local business owners welcomed us into their family run shops that were constructed of uneven excavated mountain stone bound by mortar made of sand and clay. These hand constructed buildings acted as temporary umbrellas from the hot island sun with their cool limestone flooring and small windows. We took a recommendation from the caretaker of our villa and found ourselves eating small plates of authentic Greek food only a grandmother could prepare. When we arrived in the tiny traditional village on the other side of the mountain range there was an older gentleman seemingly awaiting our arrival. He casually leaned against the rubble wall wearing the Greek scarf-style black headband, scuffed olive green trousers, thin polyester white button down shirt, deteriorating black jacket, and a half smoked cigarette hanging from his upper lip. However the most eye-catching feature was his thick clam shell-colored, steel wool mustache that would have made even the late Groucho Marx envious.

We pulled off the dirt-packed dusty road onto the course gravel, and with no common language were welcomed by the old man. He embraced us with a firm handshake, smile, and direct eye contact and escorted us into what appeared to be his family’s restaurant. We had no idea what was going on but it seemed innocent enough. Before we knew it, a woman we had to assume was his wife came out from the kitchen speaking in boisterous and welcoming Greek and blindsided me with one of those European cheek kisses and smiles. As gestured us to our seats, I leaned over to Carolina and questioned if we were even in the right restaurant. Regardless, there was no way we could leave. They spoke to us with ear to ear smiles, but even through our best efforts in Spanglish, we couldn’t understand a word until we were joined by Kostas. I first saw the soaring, lean, and dark complected Kostas through the reflection of Carolina’s meditative vertical eye movement as he approached me from behind and introduced himself in broken English as the son of his parents. Fortunately for us, he spoke enough English to convey they had received a phone call (probably over the tin can-wire transmitter) we were coming; they just didn’t know when we would arrive. So, we were in the right place!

The next thing we know our glasses were filled with a fermented red juice blend of *Kotsifaili* and *Mandilaria* grapes and *Mezzas* (traditional small plates of Cretan dishes) began to arrive. We were served: roasted peppers in local olive oil glistened against a white backdrop; poached artichokes enticed us with their intoxicating aroma; baked raw milk feta in an earthenware vessel tempted with its creamy texture. Kostas told us it was their neighbor’s goat’s milk inside the cheese, and peppers from their own garden. Oh no, it didn’t stop there! Out came more complex dishes of marinated grilled goat (Think it was the same goat from the cheese?), pickled octopus, rabbit *stifado*, fried sardines with lemon wedges, and *Chaniotiko Bourek* (an authentic Creten dish of oven baked slices of potatoes with zucchini, *myzithra cheese* and fresh torn mint leaves). Neither of us had even thought about the time as we just continued to enjoy the afternoon eating frenzy with our new friends. This reminded me of my own family’s hospitality to visitors, just without the variety of fresh dishes and use of salt and pepper.

Once I actually saw the glass wine jug empty and noticed my slouching posture did I realize it was time we needed to move along. Our hosts insisted we stay for dessert—to which we obliged--recognizing it would have been considered rude to leave. Five small stemmed shot glasses were placed on the table, along with fresh sliced watermelon and flaky phyllo dough pastries with a honey nut something-or-other tucked inside. I had my concerns about what was about to be poured, however I kept my American mouth shut and just remembered I was on vacation in Greece. The father, whom also happened to be named Kostas, appeared with a plastic bottle of what looked like fruit punch. The off-red liquid was a unique variety of *tsikoudia* called *mournoraki* that is distilled from mulberries, not the grape and vine “leftovers” from the wine harvest season. We were fortunate enough to be at the right place at the right time for some of the “home brew” as our gracious host had just returned from seeing his cousins in Sfakia, in the south.

The Suzuki felt a little lighter and the steering a bit more dicey than I remembered as we headed down the jagged road to experience the former leper colony of Kalydon. We took Kostas’s advice and wandered down to the local dock following a few scribbled lines he had scratched on the back of a single-ply paper towel. There we met Yannis, a local skipper we found hanging around the dock. After a brief and spirited brief negotiation on price with flailing arms and a conclusive handshake, we were cruising at a slow speed through the reflective cyan waters on his *caïque*. With my stomach packed full from the delicious food and my head filled with plenty of mulberry *digestif,* I was a uncertain if leisurely hour boat ride was the best idea. Our captain slowed his pine wood skiff down so there was no wake just to tell us that the “boat”—a massive Titanic-sized yacht anchored five hundred feet to our right-- belonged to James Cameron. Here we are, about as far off the beaten path as I had ever been, and I hear the Greek Robin Leach narrating *Lifestyles of The Rich and Famous!* Once we arrived, we scrambled up a narrow path passed a yawning cave mouth and through the spectacular ruins on the Isle of Spinalonga. Later, we learned how the lepers were brought through the underground entrance we had passed on arrival in much the same way the slaves were funneled into Charleston from the harbor.

Unlike when I arrived in Amsterdam as a student and tourist, we had no guide books to navigate our way through Crete. It was from talking to the locals and exploring with pirate drawn maps that we discovered the deeper culture that is often masked by the tourist laden areas, commonly filled with sun burned and intoxicated Brits on holiday. Despite my experience of the freedoms in Amsterdam, I was still pleasantly surprised by the level of liberal “freedom” at the Greek beaches. Some days in the morning I went SCUBA diving and Carolina would get her archeological fix. In the timeless afternoons, reminiscent of my childhood summer days, we would wade through the warm Mediterranean waters and as the sun set search out local food. I learned first-hand from Carolina how to eat and explore my way through Crete like a professor of archeology on the last crusade. Her passions and willingness to explore revealed to me the shift I had made from tourist to traveler!

From navigating the bicycle filled streets of Amsterdam to navigating the credit transfer and degree requirements of a college system still in the infancy of the internet, I had filed the paper work and signed my name on the dotted line and declared my major in accounting. Back in Charleston at Johnson and Wales, my days were spent writing general ledgers (a far cry from stuffing pearl onions in Chef Katz’s kitchen) reuniting with friends, and swapping stories from our apprenticeships.

**Sample Chapter 2 | Mission Maya**

Like all great endeavors conceived over alcohol, Mission Maya was born. Where AOL dial up couldn’t cut it, the Charleston Public Library and back issues of National Geographic filled in. Mr. Dewey's decimal system and “space age microfilm” provided a constant diet of new trip ideas that seemed a bit cloudy after a spring break trip to Cancun. My comfort with Mexican culture and this constant diet of travel information kept ideas and destination ideas forming and reforming in my head.

Before Mission Maya could ever be a reality; I had to secure a job. My fellow classmates were scoring positions as sous chefs at various mid-range hotels. But somehow that was not good enough for me as I rightly or wrongly believed they were simply chasing the money, not really following their passion. I steadfastly resolved to only apply with luxury hotel companies and through rigorous phone interviews, personality tests, and meet-and-greets, I was eventually extended an offer.

My stoicism paid off, I suppose, as I had secured a position as a Cook II—just two steps on the kitchen ladder above apprentice. Initially disappointed with the position, I came to realize I had to get my foot in the door of a great kitchen in order to achieve the growth I felt certain was within my reach. The time came to prove myself once again as I anticipated graduating and getting back into the kitchen—much more about that later. The next few months were all about Mission Maya.

The late spring of ’99 was spent wrapping up my bachelors degree, working on the sly as a bartender, and spending countless hours mapping Mission Maya. During many sessions of “power hour” with chilled Palmettos (the local brew), my best friends and I came up with idea after idea. Bussey, a 6’4, blonde haired mammoth built like a line backer, Eagle Scout, computer genius, and self proclaimed serial entrepreneur was charged with sourcing the right map, destination research, and conceiving insane ideas to find a way to get into Cuba. Sanchez, a native North Carolinian with a manicured beard and unassuming manner was always “chill” when it came to the trip. He focused his input on a desire to venture into the jungles of Belize and his obsession with drinking “real” Coca-a-Cola in bottles. Of course, I was determined to take the back roads, eat local, and expand my comfort zone. I had images of meeting living descendants of the Maya, SCUBA diving in Belize, and gluttonously eating everything unfamiliar. Eventually, all of our enthusiasms seemed to mesh and I began to share with Bussey his enthusiasm for smoking a hand rolled Cohiba inside the famous *Hotel Nacional* in Havana and for jungle trekking with Sanchez. Epic adventure fantasy syndrome, I guess. We also attempted to drag Vincent along, but he was preoccupied with perfecting his Nature Boy image over 22 oz. Ice House’s and fuchsia colored slaw dogs from Bert’s Market--that is a story for another time!

As he was tasked, Bussey located a map from a back issue of National Geographic, which was perfect for the trip, yet illegal to replicate and enlarge due to copyright laws. The smooth talker had built a relationship with the employee that worked the graveyard shift at Kinko’s. The Student Wire, Bussey’s monthly newspaper, was always printed “on the fly” due to my boy’s chronic habit of procrastination so he was no stranger to the night crew. As it turns out, he was not only able to get the map enlarged, but had it printed in hi-res color on card stock. His ability to “get things done” was a reminder to me of why he was a key component of this trip. If the going got weird, Bussey would concoct a way to set things back on track . . . or so I had hoped.

Backpacks ready, plane tickets secured, it was time for Mission Maya, but we were only missing one key ingredient—Bussey. That summer (at the last minute) he had to abort and return to Columbus, Georgia for Uncle Larry’s chain-gang. It was quite a blow for us to have to leave the big guy behind—after all, he was our “fixer” whom we had relied on to solve the unsolvable--- but with his well wishes, Sanchez and I made our final plans to rendezvous south of the border.

I arrived in Cancun with the other herds of tourists passing through the push-button, traffic light customs system for bag checks. Fortunately, on this trip I was able to bypass the cattle call of tour package resort busses and meet the eagerly awaiting Carolina. With a plotted course and plenty to cover, the first stop was to my favorite restaurant in *Mercado de Veintiocho*, *El Cejas.*  We were joined by other friends for a welcome lunch and a few *agau frescas*, passing on the tempting afternoon *chelas* because I had to visit with Mexico’s top chef, Tita, also known as Carolina’s grandmother. Of course, after having travelled with Carolina in Europe, we had developed enough of a relationship for her conservative family to begin to become curious about the American guy. Carolina, who joined on some of the Mayan adventures, was not only great companionship for me, but also a key cultural ambassador when our wandering ways got us into a pickle.

In 3 ½ months, the plan was to cover as much of the Yucatan peninsula by public transport as possible. Often, the option of the air conditioned bus was bypassed as we were poor graduates intent on stretching a limited budget as far as possible. The first adventure inland from the coastal Rivera Maya to the dense jungle and unchartered territory of Chiapas was a bus ride through snaking, elevated mountain roads. I can only liken it to being on a tame version of Space Mountain at Disneyland but without the seatbelts. Pushing together the tabs to release the half-size, drop down window of the converted rickety school bus, all I could see was a thick misty haze over the cliff edges. My eyes spun around trying to find some type of comfort from this dizzying height but all I saw was torn cushion foam, exposed coiled springs, and twine woven *chanclas* on every pair of my fellow travelers feet*.* There was no sense of comfort knowing that if this rig took a life-threatening bump or hit a random pothole there was not going to be enough foam left to soften the impact of the bus hurtling over the cliff side. I put on a brave face and pushed the crazed thoughts to the back of my mind and eventually the bumps became less frequent and the curves became sloping straight-away. It seemed to have taken an eternity, with all of my anxious hand-wringing and mopping of nervous sweat, but we finally arrived in the Maya village of Palenque.

The ruins of Palenque (the village’s namesake) date back over two thousand years, and like the majority of Mayan archeological sites, were consumed by the relentless growth of the jungle which kept the ancient city hidden until the late 1950’s. This *zona arqueologica* is set in the foothills of the Tumbala Mountains on a ledge overlooking the swampy plains that stretch northward to the Gulf coast. We explored the stone carvings, Paskal’s tomb, and the strange pagoda-styled structure in the Northern grouping of the ruins. I had read a little bit about the theories surrounding the Maya’s civilization --from their far advanced agriculture practices to the many possible reasons for their extinction—and was intrigued by the massive stones and the skill required to place them on this sight. Historians and archeologists seem to obsess on the question of how the civilization developed, thrived, and then mysteriously disappeared. Some of this is much easier to understand after seeing these ruins firsthand. The out of place pagoda tower—an image so strongly linked to Asia--helped me answer my own questions about the speculated land bridge that once connected our present day eastern and western continents.

The Maya have a far different appearance than the Spanish influenced Mexican nationals, with their rounded face, low height, seemingly panoramic vision and elliptical eyes. The pieces of the Mayan puzzle began to join together further and I began to recognize a faint physical resemblance between the Chinese and Maya. Perhaps I simply wanted to see the resemblance, but like the JFK assassination everyone has their own theory.

We traded our seats on the rickety school bus for a wooden canoe powered by an engine I had last seen on my father’s lawnmower in 1984. Chiapas was, and still remains, one of Mexico’s harshest political landscapes. Through the tension filled border, slowly working our way upstream on the Usumacinta River, we were constantly reminded of exactly where we were. The two hour boat ride from our local guide was everything short of romantic. When we looked to our right there were camouflaged Guatemalan soldiers blending into the trees like chameleons. To the left were poverty stricken river villages and Mexican military outposts. It quickly became clear I somehow put us into a pickle with my genius idea to go this far off the beaten path. We were really “up the creek without a paddle” so to speak, and it was just a matter of praying there was not going to be any sudden outbursts from the natives or commandos. This is just what we needed, to be caught in the crossfire of two reactionary countries over prime water front real estate with southerly-flowing, sewage-strewn views.

The river had climbed its’ banks from the recent rains and was awash with floating logs, trash, and a wealth of rotting vegetation in murky water. This swirling hell-broth looked like a toilet bowl after too many jalapenos. With these conditions I questioned when we were going to see a three-eyed fish or a few mutated reptiles appear from the stained waters. And even worse, if we capsized which side of the river would we end up on? Despite my anxieties, it seemed our guide Carlos was used to having guns pointed right at him and the river threatening to flip the boat. He was calm, cool and collected (or at least acted the part very well) and meanwhile I was on border line self-defecation mode! Carlos skillfully guided the nose of the boat upstream carefully maneuvering around the abundant amount of obstacles. Thankfully Carolina spoke the magic lingo and kept the guide on track without too many “village” stops. He was clearly hoping for us to purchase local wares so he could get his kickback or as he would tell you “commission.” Even is this tense environment, the economy of the river communities had to go on.

The natural shadows from the overhanging trees began to intensify as the threatening rain clouds formed over the dense vegetation of the Chiapas jungle. It was apparent it was only a matter of time before we had no shelter from the volatile tropical rainfall. I was assured we did not have much farther to travel to reach Yaxchilan. These ruins were located along the apex of the horseshoe shaped meander on the flowing river, making it nearly impossible to reach. My mind was in a panic as I could feel the rapidly rising humidity and low pressure system forming.

Carlos had no sign of fear in his eyes, which didn’t do anything to allay my nerves, but then just as I was about to say something and crack my thinly veiled image of enthusiastic adventurer, the boat took a sharp turn. I thought we were heading back in fear of being caught in the rain but before I knew it he used the river current to hoist his canoe along the muddy riverbank. I smacked my hand to my forehead and let out a huge sigh of relief. We had finally arrived in the ancient Mayan “city” of **Yaxchilán** where a hand written “garage sale” sign nailed into a tree read “**Yaxchilán** un ½ kilometro” with an arrow pointing to a tiny machete carved path. The trail went from soupy clay ground by the river to small fragments of limestone rock giving my worn flip flops some type of traction. The small rocks became larger in size and led us to the ***Pequeña Acrópolis***, a group of ruins on a small hilltop, just in time. We took shelter under one of the advanced Mayan feats of engineering (a doorway) as the torrential down pour began. My camera was safe from the rain as I shot two rolls of high speed film capturing the needle point rain drops striking the hieroglyphic-etched stairway on the Central Acropolis.

The cooling jungle rain storm seemed to last less time than watching a “Minute to Win It” as we stood gazing at the nearly untouched and glistening stone ruins. The humidity dropped faster than my pants on a co-ed spring break trip to Nassau and bright rays of sun appeared between the quickly dissipating clouds casting their angled beams on the monolithic carved *stelaes* creating a photographers dream. We spent hours exploring the site being more amazed after each step we took: this was the pot of gold for a person traveling off the beaten track. There was no doubt I felt like a Japanese tourist opening a new pack of Fuji film. I was not departing without shooting every narrative stone relief carving on the massive lintels that spanned the temple doorways. The National Geographic map seemed now more like a treasure map as we found ourselves giddily encapsulated in the Chiapas jungle grinning from ear to ear. My nervousness on the river was long forgotten and the gun-toting soldiers shrunk from menacing figures to art museum security guards.

Picking our way along the path back to the river, we met Carlos standing barefoot on the bow of his wooden planked canoe eating and using his poke-a-dot stained shirt as a *servilleta*. He immediately began a rapid fire, good natured exchange with Carolina from which I could only make out about every tenth word. He reached down with his free arm and hoisted us into the swaying boat. Once we were aboard, he extended the offer for us to enjoy some of his food. I had no idea what he was eating so Carolina explained it was traditional Chiapan cuisine. Carlos grabbed the bottom of his shirt and wiped his three scruffy chin hairs of dripping green salsa and hands us fresh tortillas that he picked up from a local village nearby. He passes along a bent aluminum spoon and small double lined plastic bags of rustic red tomato sauce.

I was suddenly transported back to mom’s skillet version of American Chop Suey, just without the mini-macaroni and canned Prego. Through their cryptic facial expressions and brief English explanations I was told these uneven pancake shaped disks had come right off the *comal.* I carefully watched Carlos and Carolina spoon the charred tomato mixture out from their fish store bags onto hand slapped blue corn tortillas. I followed suit and paid little attention to the mess that had dripped between my crusted muddy toes. This was some of the best Mexican food I had ever eaten. Never once was I bothered by thinking about the sanitation of the preparation or where the ingredients came from because I was so focused on loading up another tortilla.

Each bite only got better as the tomato sauce had a slightly smoked-char flavor with rustic textures of onion and tomato with the soapy flavor of fresh cilantro. There was another texture that I could not pinpoint and tried to eat slowly to figure it out before asking. I tried to wrap my palate around a slight crunch on the outside with an airy center; it was just like a Cheeto, but better! Finally after three tortillas I had to ask, “What is this?” Some rapid eye exchanges between the two Spanish speakers and some obvious hesitation, “Oh, I don’t know the name in English.” After a brief game of hand charades and Spanglish, I was able to piece together the description. The name *mariposa* (butterfly) kept coming up with hand gestures of wings, then it switched to horizontal pinky fingers slowly moving up and down and the word *bebé* (baby) was repeated over and over. Before I could use any type of cultural couth I immediately blurt out “caterpillar!” –“You knew I was eating worms!” Oh well, tasty little buggers.

This traditional Chiapan dish is called *chirmol* and has served as a source of protein in this region for centuries. The caterpillars, or when talking to a gringo “*Orugas,”* are first simmered in salt water then pan fried in oil (or in my case lard) over a wood fire using the *comal*. This large flat circular cooking pan is typically made of thin steel or clay and is used much like a wok in Asian cookery. I should have consulted the writings of the late Spanish Monk Fray Bernardino de Sahagin who was the first to document the dish in his book *Las Cosas de la Hueva España*. My facial expression was surely You Tube worthy for a few million hits in today’s world!

After making our way out of the Chiapan jungle, with the thrill of our wild river adventure still firing our nerve endings, we made our way back to Cancun. Carolina’s part of the journey was at an end, and I was collecting Sanchez as my travel partner for the next leg of the race. Gathering him from the airport and finding him his beloved Coca Mexicana, we spent a few short days finalizing our bus trip to Belize and relaying the details of the harrowing river trip to Yaxchilan. We set our sights on a remote jungle location that had been just the briefest mention in a book back in Charleston. What had stuck in our epic adventure fantasy mindset was the fact that this site held a relatively untouched Mayan sacrificial cave located on private property. No artifacts had been touched or sold to museums for outrageous sums and visitors were welcome to drop by. It all seemed so *casual*—as well as off the beaten path—that we couldn’t resist checking it out. So far on the trip each turn of the road or bend in the river had surprised me and challenged me. As per usual, Sanchez was down for anything, and onto the bus we climbed for another bone-jarring ride.

Arriving at the border of Belize several hours later, with Sanchez still nursing his magic elixir, we were ushered through a squat, cinder block building and got the stamp of approval to continue on our way. Our destination was San Ignacio, which really amounted to nothing more than a few buildings at a wide spot in the road. From there we had the sometimes frustrating challenge of securing a “taxi” to the remote jungle camp. Language barriers fall rather quickly when strangers are met with a smile (or in some cases a swig of rum) and we found a ride into the middle of nowhere from a likable guy who drove an ancient station wagon with a patchwork body and a few good tires. Despite the fact that we had no clear idea where we were headed or even if our driver had a reliable sense of direction, we eased into the spirit of adventure with a naïve optimism and belief that something great would always be around the next blind corner.

Our circuitous route took us high into the mountains on dirt roads to an unmarked area on a hillside where a tiered camping area with hammocks suddenly appeared. With a look of uncertainty, Sanchez and I tacitly agreed that this must be the spot we were looking for, although not another soul or sign was around to confirm it. We made ourselves comfortable in a few hammocks hung under the rustic *palapa* and dug into our meager provisions: peanut butter, jelly, bread and a bottle of One Barrel rum.

We sat and talked like two unemployed day laborers waiting for someone to come along and give us direction or at least tell us we were trespassing. The only thing we could hear aside from our rum fueled voices was the sound of soothing water as it pushed around large river rocks as it headed off the edge of the cliff. Before we knew it there was another sound, one less familiar. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the end of a tail through one of the open square spaces along the cement wall to my left. I quickly turn my head to the right to face Sanchez and interrupt him, “Did you see that?” He says, “You must be imagining things…" just as my head rests back comfortably, I think to myself, "This is some great Belizean rum!" Sanchez and I began to talk less as my eyes slowly began to close. Only to be startled once again by his glass coke bottle hitting the concrete surface below our hanging hammocks.

Then I see the tail again, flying through another glassless “window.” This time I knew I was not hallucinating. Meanwhile, Sanchez is resting quietly with his Walkman on and headphones stuck snuggly in his ears, probably listening to a bad mixed tape of the Meat Puppets. I laid as still as a corpse until I saw two beady black eyes and a small face peek around the corner at me as if we were playing a game of hide-and-go-seek. Through slightly blurred vision I identify this furry little creature from the random ink jet brochure we picked up on the Belize Zoo. This was no animal sanctuary as this wild mammal had snatched up the leftovers from Sanchez’s PB&J and was showing off to me as she consumed the wadded up white bread. It all started to make sense as I began to focus, this spider monkey had knocked over the bottle as she grabbed the food, ah yes, feeling ever so genius.

We watched each for ten minutes while she continued to rub it in my face that she was enjoying Sanchez’s sandwich. I went to reach for my camera for a few “Kodak moments” and as soon as my back was cradled in again she hid her face. Sanchez was lost in the tunes and I had to wake him up to prove I was not completely drowned in the oasis of caramelized sugar cane. I threw the empty film canister at his head and he woke up, looking over at me with my index finger vertical over my mouth, letting him know to remain quiet. I whispered, “Keep your eye over there, a spider monkey ate the remnants of your sandwich and is flipping you the bird. . .” The baseball sized head appeared again and this time began to make some weird noises. I hoped she wasn’t calling for back up, because keeping an eye on one was enough. Good thing we still had rum left.

Sanchez proceeded to through some bread from his bag along the floor of the palapa and before we knew it there she came scrambling through with a wide stance much like she had a bad case of chaffing. Sanchez, for whatever reason—perhaps just entertainment, felt obligated to feed this little cute creature and sat at the end of the concrete with bread in hand making an offering. While it took a few tries, eventually she was in a perfect position for photos. After a few grab-and-go’s she came back saddled on top of her friend---the resident dog. We couldn’t believe it! Laughing hard enough to bring tears to our eyes, we watched them slowly parade around the camp ground, blown away by what we were witnessing. I was unsteadily snapping photos like crazy-otherwise not a soul would believe this and it would become just like another one of my cousin Charlie’s fishing stories.

The short hand on the clock seemed to go by much quicker as we were entertained by what we had just witnessed, and before we knew it another unexpected, mind –boggling surprise. We hear American voices coming our way through the distance in the jungle. Around the tall stack of cooking logs blocking our sight line we see nearly twenty people approaching the camp; I was immediately relieved we could confirm our location and get some direct information in our native tongue. After an enthusiastic welcome and a few quick introductions we had confirmed we were in the right location. As conversation went on, the next thing we know we are partnering up with a team of archeologists and student interns to map and excavate a Mayan sacrificial cave (not the cave we had read about, but details at this point didn’t seem to matter). We were thrilled at the invitation and discussed all of this over a traditional Mayan feast (and yes, more rum) that was prepared by Rosa, the wife of the land owner. The meal was served in a school cafeteria fashion with a flimsy tray, plastic plate, and silverware that had enough iron inside it would throw off a keychain compass. I of course began to inquire about the Mayan food, clearly after my caterpillar experience in Chiapas I had to know just a little more before diving into Belizean jungle cuisine.

The food prepared was all handcrafted. The Maya living in the south have centered their lives on agriculture; their very existence is bound with their crop clearings called *Milpas*. The tortillas along with numerous other dishes were plentiful in corn, ranging from steaming tamales to drinking *pinol.* Rosa made this drink from grinding toasted *maize* kernels in her large *mocahete* then adding a mixture of indigenous herbs and ground seeds creating a thick paste. The next step was adding the cocoa, cinnamon, sugar, and bottled water to thin down the paste to complete this traditional Mayan beverage. We enjoyed the flavors of the drink but somehow I couldn’t wrap my hands around the gritty texture in my mouth. It reminded me of packing down sand as a kid with my bare hands on our family trips to Southern Florida, somehow always getting it in my mouth.

We continued to be engaged in conversation with Cam, the leading crusader of this mission, as we all helped ourselves to the fresh picked exotic jungle fruits that were put out for dessert. The cave that we had been invited to was not on any map, nor on any radar of cultural travelers. This was a confidential project funded by the Belizean government. It felt like Cam was Ian Fleming writing the next novel for 007 by the way he was talking. He was rather lucky there was no such thing as Facebook and You Tube to capture the moment, or at least the ones to come. We wrapped up dinner and slipped into the tee-pee style tent they loaned us, just set up by the cliffs edge. I remember we shot a two minute video on Sanchez’s then modern day mini tape palm-cam. The back ground noise was full of wild animals, insects, and the smashing waterfall just 80 feet below our tent. My words to the camera were, “Where the fuck am I?” and “Sanchez you better not sleepwalk that way!” (Pointing into the direction of the fall off) “PS-I want another meal before I die”. Needless to say, it wasn’t long before my eyes shut as the distilled liquid sugar had worked its way through my blood stream.

I heard someone outside of the tent speaking in a language I couldn’t understand. I peek out to see Rosa with her husband collecting fresh plantains and star fruit from the trees. I walked out of the tent and asked, “Rosa, *puedo ver que preparer el desayuno*?” or better put, “Can I watch you prepare breakfast?” She smiled and seemed to be flattered as I reached out to help with the fruit. Rosa did everything by hand, from the grinding to rolling she was a pro. I watched her put together a breakfast that was so simplistic but took hours to perfectly prepare.

It started with a wood fire that she lit inside the stone pit that was clearly built and designed just for Rosa. While she waited for the wood to become glowing embers she went into her three walled hut (her *cocina)* and began to grind the masa for the tortilla dough. It was methodical to watch the process of a middle aged Mayan woman who has probably made fresh tortillas every day since the age of eight, or as soon as she could lift the pestle. Once the dough was to her liking she covered it with a towel and went to collect the chicken eggs from their “resident” wild chickens (and annoying roaming roosters), sliced tomatoes, onions, chilies, and limes for fresh salsa. The dough sat patiently just waiting for Rosa’s little hands to work the masa mixture into small four inch disks, each looking exactly the same as the first. Rosa obviously knew the fire was just at the right temperature as she poked around a few split logs and then on went the large flat frying pan. Rosa charred the chopped vegetables, and put them to the side, then she surprised me with some wild game meat she had minced up before my eyes had opened, that went on next with a sprinkle of salt. It all came together so quickly and she spoke Spanish as if I understood every word. I suppose a little smiling and “Si” kept her believing I understood her every word.

She smashed the ingredients for the salsa, working quickly, had boiled water for instant coffee and her own mix of “bush tea”. All the food was placed on the long elevated “table” which was nothing more than a few pieces of evenly sanded pieces of a tree trunk with a few nails to secure the structure. The only thing Rosa did not have covered with plastic breathable covers (which in theory kept the bugs out) were the tortillas. I motioned to help her cook the tortillas and she shook her head with a resolute and unmistakable, “NO.” I watched this amazing Mayan chef squat in front of the burning hot fire and cook them nearly to order for the awaiting explorers. Perhaps building her trust was akin to my time in Chef Katz’s kitchen, but what a world away!

We filled up nicely on Rosa’s tasty Mayan breakfast and headed deep into the jungle, following the inconspicuous marks that Cam and his team had laid out. There was some bizarre pattern he had concocted between the trees, ground, and four foot jungle growth we were trekking though. During the hour long “nature walk” I saw bizarre looking insects (curious if Zimmern would eat them), long billed toucans, and (never to be forgotten) the recent and sizable paw marks from a jaguar they made sure to point out. When we had finally arrived at the cave, excited as I was to get inside, I notice there was only one problem. The mouth of the cave had a very small opening, and the base of the cave was forty feet below ground level! Yes, that’s right. They somehow forgot to mention we had to repel into the cave by way of slip knotted thick rope. It took everything in me to go through with this Mickey Mouse jungle contraption; they were so kind to give me a helmet, “just in case”.

Knot by knot I worked my way down the swaying line, trying not to think about my rope burning hands and always kept my head pointed up. I kept my direct sightline on the kid responsible for “making sure” the rope stayed snug around the large tree just outside the opening. Safe and sound down below, the rope was retracted back up for Sanchez and down he went, meeting me at the bottom in less than a minute--slightly embarrassing compared to my inch by inch movements. Cam got us all equipped with adjustable headband lamps and what appeared to be chemical warfare masks before entering the different rooms of the tiered cave.

In the main room of the cave was a tiered platform constructed from limestone that got smaller as it went up. There was a roped off area from Cam’s team on the top tier that was clearly a point of excavation. The tiers were covered in hard packed natural dirt, or so I thought. Cam explained the necessity for the masks was to protect against the *histoplasmosis:*  the toxic spore that grows on bat guano (Great!). Then he shined a bright light on the dripping stalactite ceiling and thousands upon thousands of tiny bats’ eyes greeted me. It was obvious we no longer stood on packed dirt and my day was going to be filled with an abundance of toxic shit, how delightful. Well, it was about the same as listening to my little sister blare New Kids on the Block from the next room over and I had somehow survived that.

Sanchez and I were divided up into separate groups and off we went into the depths of the once Mayan sacrificial cave. My group went to the left of the rope; Sanchez’s headed to the right where there was a speculated waterway that led to a nearby stream. My group lost any sign of daylight once we squeezed through narrow passageways created by the massive boulders. That led us into another chamber where I was warned not to touch anything wet. This non- claustrophobic room had the sound of slow trickling water. I was told to shine my headlamp along the forward facing wall. The graduate student leading our group pointed out “The Piano” which they had named this particular section of active long-lined limestone. Every drop that hit had a slight echo and over thousands of years the mineral deposits began to connect the stalagmites and stalactites together, some only inches apart. This was an incredible act of nature, as I had only seen a *cenote* outside of Tulum and the dried up touristy cave formations on an “educational family trip” to New Mexico back in the fourth grade.

There weren’t any swaying canoes own here, but instead guano slicked boulders that required us to assist each other by locked forearms as we made our treacherous way ahead. We made it to the area that was still unmapped so the team leader divided us into two sub groups. There we crawled into the smallest nooks and crannies measuring point to point with marked string that was looped around small rocks in a diagonal pattern with an opposing color in the other direction to determine the angles and widths. This was fun for about an hour until I realized my clothes were covered in guano and I was identified as the shortest person which meant I had to go into the smallest spots. Three hours of being in various fetal positions, seeing spiders pass by me that were bigger than my foot, and this deep fear of inhaling some toxic waste, it was not my idea of a good time! Once we connected and recorded enough measurements and dots on their graph paper it was time to make our way out of the black hole and back to the main cavern.

The teams gathered and sat like a congregation at the base of the tiered limestone rock in the late afternoon. I hardly recognized Sanchez as he crept up from the low lying entry way to the left of the group. Sanchez walk had slowed to a snail’s pace with a ripped pant leg, missing sleeves, and a chin strap of guano. I saw in his eyes he was ready for more rum and probably other medicinal devices to sooth his “aching” muscles. He just looked at me and said, “Gilbert, after this, I need a vacation.”

That night we unfolded the National Geographic map and plotted our next move. It was a tough decision but we opted out on the long southern journey to Honduras to visit the oldest recorded Mayan super power, Copán. For nearly six weeks I had walked up narrow stairways (not suited for a size 10 ½ foot), sweated in jungle humidity, and constantly pondered the questions and theories that surround the Mayan civilization. I agreed with Sanchez it was time for a break and besides our rum bottle was getting low. We traded in the mysterious sacrificial caves of the Belize jungle for the world famous sinkhole not far from Ambergris Caye to the east.

This was not on course as far as “Mission Maya” was concerned, but a few days of SCUBA diving the famous Blue Hole, rumored gambling, and consuming copious amounts of rum sounded like an excellent idea. Sanchez and I worked it out with Cam for an early morning ride to the village as he needed to pick up a few things for Senora Rosa. We said our good-byes that evening and found ourselves back on the non air conditioned bus at sunrise for yet another time-consuming adventure. According to our scaled calculations we were looking at a four hour ride to Belize City which served as the transit point between the islands. Good thing Sanchez grabbed another bottle of rum and a few bottled cokes at the first stop, because like many things in Belize they just take a lot longer than you plan.

The bus pulled into the weathered concrete building that apparently weathered monsoon rains and a dedicated schedule of neglect. The interior concrete walls were painted a light yellow I suppose to create a soothing or tropical feel, both were a stretch. Inside were local Belizeans parked in seats that surely were hand me downs from the local airport terminal and stiff board benches to supplement the seating. You would think that each person was fleeing the crime stricken city by the sheer amounts of plastic wrapped boxes they had placed by their flip-flopped feet. The Mayan language was left behind in the west and in exchange we heard voices of Spanish, and fragments of English spoken throughout the local Creole dialect. I looked for anyone resembling a Caucasian traveler to get details on what to do and where to stay while in transit to the islands, but clearly we were castaways in this coastal city. The sun was falling quickly behind us and we had to make some quick decisions.

I approached the large Creole woman who sat behind the two inch thick plexiglass window with a small open speaking hole and asked in my best Spanish her recommendation for accommodations closest to the speed boat terminal. She handed me a photo copy of a map that had nothing to do with my question beyond a faintly drawn black square box indicating the bus terminal and another depicting the boat dock. Better than nothing, I figured. Thanking her for her assistance we headed into a cab and played Russian roulette with yet another taxi driver. Marco jumped on the gas and whisked us from the bus station through the hovels and streets of Belize to the only hotel that was positioned next to the terminal. Upon inquiring, the rooms were over two-hundred dollars (US) a night. Classic set-up of the foreign traveler heading to the islands for a vacation; the cab driver gets his commission and the hotel operator fleeces the tourist. Clearly that did not fit our budget, so we opted out for a Chinese run guest house a short distance away.

This leg was already becoming an adventure between the Aussies in the adjacent room who were openly smoking “salt crystals” to the sketchy dreadlocked locals that all “wanted to show us around.” Fortunately, at dusk we ran into a police officer (typically not a fortunate moment) and he told us not to trust anyone in this neighborhood and stay in our accommodation once the sun went down. Good thing I called home from a local payphone not far from our evening residence as daylight was becoming a precious commodity. Sanchez and I were offered dinner by the owners son and without hesitation I spoke for both of us, “No, thank you.” My immediate response was derived from my previous passing of the kitchen on the way to our room: sanitation grade, F. Thanks, but I’ll skip on the room temperature fish and spiral fly tape hanging over the filthy wok. We scooped up convenience store snacks and of course another bottle of One Barrel and enough mixers “just in case” we got cabin fever.

The night was filled with observing the sketchy local people from the shanty town interact, cracked out prostitutes get picked up, and the oldest son and girlfriend leave our guest house with a silver loaded .44 Magnum stuffed in the back side of his pants. I caught a glimpse of the gun when the overhanging street lights reflected off its polished metal as the Chinese Sumo slipped away into the night. Sanchez wasn’t fazed by any of this, although I was working diligently to calm my nerves with more rum. That night we paid homage to Jenning’s Cox (the founding father of Daiquiris) and created our own “whatcha-got” daiquiris of sorts, mixing what we had left to create new cocktails as the costal breeze kept us cool sitting on the front pork. We knew it was time to go to bed when I knocked over the rum bottles and there was the hollow sound of rolling glass. We left our trail once again and quietly stepped along the creaking wooden porch and up the splintered stairwell to bed.

Early the next morning I rolled off the dimpled mattress and made my way into the calcium encrusted shower which of course had no hot, running water. We opted to pass on the included breakfast (no surprise there) and headed for the ferry dock. The sun was just rising as Sanchez and I, both teetering from the night before, soaked up the rays and tried to cook the booze from our systems. The boats left Belize City to the main town of San Pedro in Ambergris Caye every three hours. This gave the locals just enough time to gear up for the next batch of arriving tourists. The whipping wind aboard the twin engine Yamaha speed boat helped us to shake of our sweats and prepare for all the island had in store. When we arrived in San Pedro there was nothing but golf carts and sand packed walkways that divided the two rows of buildings that housed dive shops, restaurants, and of course bars. Sanchez and I both thought we had found paradise with the mild climate, swaying palm trees, and white sandy beaches. However before we could continue living *The Rum Diaries,* we had to first secure our accommodations. Unlike Cancun, the island did not house any large mega resorts or frozen daiquiri bars with intoxicated co-eds handing over their bras for a free T-shirt. Instead, this island was quite the opposite. The real party here is under the water.

We walked north on Barrier Reef Drive soaking up the small two street town. With an eye to the future, we angled in to a convenience store to stock up on provisions. Call it dumb luck or good karma, but whatever it was good fortune smiled upon us in the form of Robbie Rodriguez. He stood in line behind us inside the minuscule mini mart and saw we had two Guatemalan *Gallos* ready for check out. The twenty-something interrupts us talking and says, “Hey guys! You need to try our local beer-Belikin, guarantee it’s better than that shit”. The next thing we know the three of us are clinking bottle necks and enjoying the frosty suds in the untouched sunny paradise of the Belizean Cayes. Robbie had just returned from his routine two tank dive with new Open Water divers, and no doubt he was decompressing. The three of us instantly connected, most likely because I spoke his language when it came to adventure diving and Sanchez with other things recreational. He proceeded to tell us that his father owns and operates the three story budget hotel that is a coconut’s toss away. Ironically, Robbie mentioned that a room had just opened up and it was ours if we were interested. Running down the road to double check with his old man, he came back with great news- not only is the room open but his dad was even going to extend a discount if we promised to dive and fish with them. How could we say no? What a perfect fit as we knew both activities were on the “to-do” list.

The second floor room had the traditional foot-thick concrete walls, two beds, bathroom, shaky ceiling fan, and daily maid service. However, a garish pair of fish paintings hanging above each double bed and flamingo pink poly-cotton curtains surely helped Sanchez felt right at home. There amenities of the hotel were great (compared to how we had been staying), but what really cared about was the mahogany skiff dive boat tied-up twenty feet away and the trusty convenient store across the sandy road; perfect for Sanchez to keep us stocked up on “necessities.” Robbie knew the island inside and out and once we checked in he had already grabbed another round of Belikins and was waiting to give us the nickel tour. We opted out of the offered golf cart ride for a solid walk through what we saw as paradise, but for Robbie it was all he knew.

The sea breeze passed through the beach front buildings and circulated through San Pedro without any mountain obstacles. Robbie shared with us the history of the island that somehow was never mentioned in any of our readings. There was indeed a rich Mayan history that encompassed the island, with two small remaining sites and Mayan blood lines in some of the locals. He showed us the southern narrow channel that separated Chetumal, Mexico and Ambergris Caye that was dug by the Maya to provide trade routes from bay to bay. The island was surrounded by the clear and shallow azure waters of the Caribbean Sea and was naturally protected from the temperamental waves by the second largest barrier reef in the world. Robbie shared with us his personal blood line that dated back to the Caste War. His great grandfather was a Yucatecan refugee and settled in Ambergris Caye and continued his trade as a fisherman. This explained his natural love and appreciation for the water and seeing his family’s business thrive as surely one day he would take over.

We stopped by his auntie’s house for a quick hello since we seemed to be in her neck of the woods. I learned when distances are scaled by walking and golf carts there became defined neighborhoods. With lots of warm smiles and open arms we were immediately handed chilled *tamarindo* *frescas.* When the first sip hit my tongue I detected the three strong flavor profiles. First,my cheeks squinted from the tart and sour bite, and then my face muscles gradually relaxed from the natural sugar cane that had been boiled inside before chilling. Robbie’s *Tia* was adamant we cool down and stay to chat for a while, and we both realized diving was out of the question for the day so why not?

It wasn’t often to see two traveling American’s on the island at that time, so plenty of great conversation and a mix of languages were being spoken as we relaxed in the jobillo wood chairs. Like many cultures you cannot have guests without providing food, and just as we started to discuss the rumored “bingo board” gambling, a spread of Belizean dishes appeared. Tia had come out with *escabeche de piscado*, *garnaches,* and a dessert of stewed cinnamon infused *craboo*. The sweet finish from the hospitable snacks hit the spot. It was a nice breather from the foamy suds that had accumulated in my already ravaged stomach. This was by far the best thing I had put in my mouth since leaving Cancun! Once I got over the particularly odorous smell, I savored each bite of the walnut colored cooked fruit in natural syrup. This indigenous thin skinned fruit falls from the small shrub from which it grows when ripe. This is a favorite amongst the locals from the raw state to the cooked versions. Craboo is found in both savory and sweet applications such as tamales, soups, and rice dishes. When prepared for a dessert option the fruit is commonly smashed and mixed with evaporated milk or, like we enjoyed, stewed with the inner bark from the prized West Indie *canella* tree.

Sanchez and I were both slumping in our handmade wooden seats after the amazing meal. There was no reason for words when our eyes closed steadily and our voices began to lower, it was clear we were in need of a nap before exploring the night scene. Robbie was right there with us as we thanked Tia and returned back to Hotel Rodriguez. Robbie had proved to be more than just a new friend, he was a walking encyclopedia Britannica on Belize, luckily for us the unrated version. We said our farewells to Robbie and promised we would meet him at the dive boat even before the tropical fish woke.

That evening we wondered along Front Street in search of something--we just didn’t know what. Sanchez was eager to meet back up with Robbie to continue their early afternoon discussion outside of the mini mart, but unfortunately for him that would have to wait until tomorrow. I swore off any liquid filled madness that night in hopes of a full body detox. Okay, let me be more realistic, I knew the dry compressed air mixed with alcohol would provide the fish with supplemental food via my regulator.

I woke up to the sounds of the piercing noise of the alarm clock and the wobbling ceiling fan. My immediate reaction was to slam the snooze button, but empty Belikin bottles barricaded my reach. When I came to a moment of clarity (if you will), I realized I had been fast asleep for over twelve hours while Sanchez must have ventured out on a solo night mission. Interested to hear what island insight Sanchez had to share from his staggering night, I attempted to wake him up. His lackluster eyes opened just enough to see my glowing face and rolled over to catch the faint breeze coming from the east. I attempted once again to pry Sanchez from his sunflower colored sheets but he gave me the half cocked shoo of the hand and knew I would get the story later. The downstairs restaurant at Hotel Rodriguez offered a few basic breakfast items but I was there for the smoothie Robbie couldn’t stop raving about. I enjoyed the fresh pulverized papaya which was the perfect antic dote for a pre-dive boost of energy. I saw Robbie before anyone else had shown up and I had to break the news about Sanchez being a little “under the weather”. He laughed and said, “It’s not uncommon the first day *on island*- we see it all the time”. We waited for the three other divers to show up, but it seemed Sanchez must have made some new friends while wandering the arteries of San Pedro, and we were left to fly solo.

Robbie and I loaded up the skiff and headed East over the shallow seafloor to the barrier platform, passed over the declining limestone wall, and went all the way to the coral atolls. The drive was no picnic but most enjoyable when I had the chance to continue the conversations that were merely started the day before. We approached the reef from the east with caution as the captain raised the engine’s prop so it sat just under the waterline. With the late morning sun over our shoulders, the skipper was able to make out the sandy seabed and define the dark-colored coral patches. It seemed we had arrived just a tad late by the amount of cattle herding dive boats (from different Cayes) that had already set anchor along the perimeter of the Blue Hole. We were in for a three dive treat as we discussed the pitch black cavernous profile that began at 130 feet with expected stalactites and stalagmites. I had my hesitations but a decision that was left to me. The dark, rock-lined descending tube (which requires powerful underwater flashlights and two *deco* stops) was not a comfortable place to be with sun bathing tourists that were out for a holiday recreational dive. The last thing I wanted to be involved with was rescuing some yuppie soccer mom who shines her light onto the lateral projecting eyes of a hammer head shark. It was a tough decision but I choose to return to this natural formed pupil another time, perhaps for my thirtieth birthday…

It’s only fitting to sarcastically thank the cheap rum drinks and lazzie-faire attitudes of the other divers that inhibited me from exploring one of the most famous dive sites in the world. Robbie agreed with me and understood my frustrations, so with his swift thinking and experience he pulled together a nearby dive profile that made for an enjoyable afternoon. “El Capy-tan” maneuvered the boat through the shallow coral spiked waters and headed south west to Long Caye. Our first stop was the West Point Wall dive, which provided enough depth for seasoned divers like us. We sat on the side ledge of the boat with our regulators in, lights clipped to our inflated BCD’s (Buoyancy Compensation Device), and hands over our faces as we held our mask and hoses in place ready for the backward roll entry. With the go ahead from the skipper, I gave the downward pointed-half moon hand signal I was okay, and Robbie and I began our decent down the wall as I saw abundances of barrel, vase, and rope sponges. Once we passed the “kiddies” or rookie divers he pointed out the large pieces of Caribbean Black Coral that Bernard K. Passman would have swooned over.

On our ascent we followed one of the gullies to the shallow water seeing spiny lobsters and dancing garden eels. With a few slices of fresh oranges to boost our sugar levels we plunged back in to the next site. There were no marked flags or GPS devices at the time so navigation was based soley on the skipper’s compass and knowledge of the sea’s tides. The next site was a relatively shallow reef dive to avoid the *bends* or decompression sickness, yet filled with a few cavernous elements. Robbie took his experiences from diving the Blue Hole enough times to paste together two sites that provided the experience of the sinkhole without the darkness and yuppie tourists. We kept an eye on the clock and decided that after the spectacular dives and a few boat photos to prove it we passed on the third dive to meet up with Sanchez for a late afternoon lunch.

As the wake of the boat subsided we made out what appeared to be the woken beauty, but were not willing to make any confirmation due to the fact there was a large plastic bottle in his right hand. As the boat approached the soft hour glass sands, the scruffy bearded wanderer wearing knock off Ray Ban aviators came closer. Indeed it was Sanchez! Wearing a “new” unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, that looked like it came from some local’s yard sale. The first thing that went through my head was there must be a story behind this, since both of us agreed to leave plenty of room for souveneirs, even if those were empty rum bottles! There was no way he was out buying new threads. Before I could even get a hello in, I had to yell out, “It’s 4 O’clock and your drinking water?” Response, “Just wait until you boys hear about last night”! We helped Robbie and Capy unload the boat and the three of us wasted no time getting frosty Belikins from the mini mart.

Sanchez had little to say, which sharpened my curiosity even more about his night crawling shenanigans. After a few rounds Robbie was called away to tend to the family business, so much for lunch-- as I had plenty of new island information to share with Sanchez. That early morning boat ride proved to be better than any overpriced travel book as far as I was concerned. Sanchez and I took Robbie’s recommendation and ate some of the barbecue chicken that was being cooked up on his friend’s handmade charcoal smoker around the block. The walk became a battle of questions, as I wanted to hear all about the previous evening’s adventures (and the new shirt) and Sanchez about the diving. We knew we were in the right place when we spotted a huge Belizean man wearing a royal blue apron that had the Kraft logo in the center. This mobile outfit was parked right in front of his house with a cardboard sign taped to few wooden paint sticks with the base buried in the sand with rock supports. The sign said Chicken $8 BZD, nothing more.

We were just slightly out of place as the crowd surrounding was of all local Belizeans speaking the Creole dialect mixed with bits of Spanish. The Kraft-y chef greeted us with a big smile and didn’t even bother to ask what we wanted, as two plates were loaded up. Hot off the slow smoky charcoal came two leg and thigh pieces still connected at the knee joint and a hill of homemade potato salad with a plastic fork flung in that stood like the *Christ the Redeemer* on top of the Corcovado Mountain in Brazil.

We told Kraft-y that Robbie had sent us his way and before we could even get a bite in he went on a five minute tangent how he has known that boy since he was five. The chicken had genie trails of steam coming from the top as I wiggled my flimsy fork through for a bite. The leg muscle was tender and so juicy it made me realize that cooking on dry heat was not an excuse for serving jaw massaging chicken. I asked Kraft-y how he did it and without thought said, “it’s all about temperature control, love, and patience.” Then after he realized we were not the typical tourists (even though Sanchez had on his awful Hawaiian shirt) his personal igloo opened. Next to his back up food prep was the logo we had learned to recognize all too well, “The Golden Barrel.” Out came Kraft-y’s personal stash of rum and through conversation we told him we were young chefs exploring the Maya civilization and cuisines throughout the Yucatan. By this time we had learned all about the Belizean style of barbecue and how he had been perfecting his craft for over twenty years. Kraft-y’s portable outfit still operates on Tuesdays and Fridays and nothing has changed, not even his apron.

Sanchez and I were all geared up for the night, and Kraft-y confirmed a few things that were rumored to happen on the island, most “behind closed doors.” Our timing was perfect because upon our arrival back at Hotel Rodriguez for a quick shower we ran into Robbie (but more importantly Sanchez could take off the hideous shirt). We raved about the Kraft-y’s barbecue chicken and shared the story about the rum and he said, “Welcome to Belize. . .” Just our luck, Robbie had no divers for the following morning so he was ready, willing, and able to go out with us, but I reminded him it was Wednesday night and we had some “business” to attend to based on our earlier conversations. He nodded his head knowingly, threw on a Dive Rodriguez T-shirt, and assured us we were about to take part in some seriously bizarre “crap.”

The sky was a dimming as the sun sank like a diver descending into a sink hole just as we arrived at the beach in front of Pier Lounge Bar. We saw a small crowd of locals and a few hippie travelers Sanchez seemed to recognize from the night before. This was by far the strangest event I had ever attended, as it involved a coconut, a chicken, and a “bingo board” of sorts. Since Robbie had the next morning off, we felt it was only right to keep him double fisted with Belikins the entire evening, and we certainly weren’t left out! It was time to be involved in this decade plus island tradition where we partook by buying numbers on the “bingo board” from the bartender. Then once all hundred squares were purchased a hostess appeared with a rattan basket holding a few healthy chickens. One lucky person selected the lively bird and a cracked coconut is placed out for the pregame warm up. The chicken seems to moronically peck at it for a few minutes before the hostess removed the soft meat drupe and it was show time! This rumored gambling was actually happening right in front of our eyes and even stranger we were betting participants. We hooted and hollered along with the crowd just waiting for the chicken to stop and do her business on our number. Unfortunately, we did not come out winners, but on the up-side the winner had to clean up the dropped, fizzy mess and pose for a picture. The Pier Lounge began this event back in the eighties and it has now become a tourist attraction. Sadly it has lost its once local charm (I know, chicken-shit bingo is charming) and now is in every nauseating guidebook printed.

The next morning we woke up to the mid day sun and wandered down to the street to the beachfront restaurant, Cannibal’s Café. Sanchez and I devoured some fried grouper sandwiches and played ring toss for well over an hour never once removing our shades and exposing our blood shot eyes. We knew another few days on this island and there was a good chance I would never make it to Buckhead. As for Sanchez, I think it would have been just fine. We mustered up enough energy to do a late afternoon snorkeling trip to swim with the nurse sharks inside the barrier wall. The nurse sharks were tame, much like the stingrays in Grand Cayman; however, they were still wild animals swimming in their own backyard. That evening we had a few Belikins with Robbie and packed up as we decided to move on and experience Caye Caulker based on recommendations from Sanchez’s granola buddies at the Pier Lounge. The next morning we joined Robbie for a fruit shake before he got on the dive boat but promised to return. The two of us staggered down the sand packed road to meet the speed boat ready to experience the island of eight hundred and their motto: Go-Slow& No shoes” philosophy. Exactly what we needed!

This was not a regular stop for most tourists so the pleasant accommodations were mostly budget rooms with simple push button locks and no crime. Our new two story beachfront digs were not going to be featured on any Belizean post cards anytime in the near future. I will say the pleasant lime green exterior with plantain colored trim provided a refreshing feel as if we were walking into a vintage Sprite can. We couldn’t get the “Obey you’re thirst” thought from our heads so we used the only bit of advice we had and started walking north along the coral sands. We found the bar that seemed to be a favorite of Sanchez’s backpacking friends from Ambergris Caye and slipped right into the two unoccupied bar stools.

This four walled nondescript shack was made of old drift wood with a few metal screws to keep everything in place. There were the broken remains of a concrete pier with locals casting a line or two on their “yo-yo” style spools. The location was incredible as it sat on the water’s edge and the only background noise was coming from a small number of local children playing on the shore line. It was nice to be greeted by the former Houston, Texas resident now owner, who tended bar accompanied by his rather young island wife. They were very friendly and hospitable always making sure our drinks were on the “up and up.”

Their place did not have your typical bar banter; in fact, it was more of a gathering of old salts, expats, and back packers sharing tales. The owner (a former corporate type) shared his story, one that I have heard over and over again throughout my global travels. Company man got sick of the rat race, always traveling, marriage on the fringe, gets divorced, leaves America, opens beach business on tropical waters in a foreign country- oh, and remarries a woman half his age--and lives happily ever after. He was the first person to say, “I go to work every day in shorts and, on occasion, flip flops. Why would I ever leave this life?” Smitty gave me a very valuable piece of information at a young age and I have never forgotten his wise words of self liberation.

I noticed the empty molasses colored Belikin bottles Sanchez and I polished off as if we were in some never ending game of *flip cup.* The blood red plastic crate filled, and I figured it was time to inquire about food before we attempted another stroll back to the room, this time with no shoes. Smitty’s wife, Monica chimed in between our inappropriate jokes and said, “Do you guys want the house specialty? It’s fried iguana.” Then pointed to the sign by the storeroom door that said *Lizard tastes like Chicken.* I think that was an old joke that surely still continues today. Smitty said, “By the time you finish this next one there will be another American guy that will show up named Robert or better known on the island as “Chef Robert”. Without the slightest hesitation, Sanchez and I continue our jokes with the other shoeless patrons.

I saw this guy appear from the left side of the wooden structure looking exactly like Vincent Chase playing the Columbian drug lord Pablo Escobar, just without the entourage. There was an exchange of waves from behind the bar, as I immediately identified this thick black mustached man as the famous Chef Robert. He came equipped with a charcoal Webber that opened up on a tri pod contraption and a portable two wheel ice box that he hand-pulled behind him. “The Chef” plopped his gear on the beach and walked over to see his friends, needless to say he had an opened Belikin waiting before he even hit the bar. Robert slugged down the first one, grabbed two more from Monica, and set up his mobile shop. The Webber--legs extended--was filled with charcoal and doused with lighter fluid, or who knows it could have been gasoline! Meanwhile the chef removed his shirt uncovering his natural gorilla suit and finished up his third beer. He returned to the bar with the empties and the suds dribbling down his chest hair along his breast bone, only to order another round of two.

Smitty said, “That’s your man, he has the best burger on the island.” I questioned if it was the only burger on the four mile sandbar. We both approached Robert and, like all expats, were ready for conversation, but he first asked us one question. “Burger with or without cheese?” This fifty-something had nearly the same story as Smitty, but with a little twist. He told us, “I just work when I feels like it, and life should be as simple as a burger, with or without!” The conversation was all getting a little odd for me as I excused myself to wander back to my barstool. I guess he and Sanchez had plenty to talk about, or do together, as they wandered off like roaches into the lush green mangroves. I thought Sanchez had a short term memory issue when it took him well over an hour to return to Smitty’s Lazy Lizard as Chef Robert’s grill stayed well heated in the Caye Caulker sun.

Through some magical help from Carolina, we discovered a loop hole to get to Cuba. Smart, probably not, but we went anyway. After all, we had become enthusiastic about the idea back in Charleston when Bussey cooked it up, so why not take the chance? Hell, we had done pretty well so far embracing the dangerous, ridiculous and the unknown. Plus, we could rub it in his face when and if we got back home safely. We said our goodbyes to our new friends in Belize and got ready to head to a country few Americans had had the chance to visit in more than 50 years. A quick plane ride, and with a shady “paper visa” stapled inside our passports, we were stamped through customs and we were in! The welcome party skipped us somehow during bag searches as all my toiletries were confiscated. A bit nervous (go figure), I didn’t say a word and let the customs officers take what they wanted, considering I had been reminded that I had no legal rights as a US citizen in their country.

What Sanchez thought was a missed welcome party was just the opposite. We arrived at our hotel to be greeted by the young and sociable door man. He was eager to practice his English and asked if we were ready to celebrate *Carnival*? We had no idea what our new friend Miguel was so excited to talk about, but evidently it was something big. He worked hard to inform us that the parade started in an hour, two blocks north from the hotel along the *Malecon* and that we should not miss it.Willing to find a party, Sanchez and I took quick showers, grabbed the video camera, and headed out to explore.

The ripened streets of Havana were filled with vintage Cadillac taxis, local vendors selling cheese empanadas, fried plantains, bootleg cigarettes, and Cuban flags. The familiar smell of sea water and warm spray kicked up along the 8 kilometer concrete wall. With the temperature in the mid 80’s and not a cloud in the sky above, I struggled to take it all in. Suddenly, my head spun to abrupt attention, the music started and the crowd went wild! Carnival had officially begun! There was an obviously patriotic feeling for the Cuban people but it was a liberating time as well. They were relieved from their jobs the entire week. Thousands of delighted people drank and danced all night alongside the parade route; we felt obliged to join. It didn’t take long to figure out why the gringos have such a fascination (or more like obsession) for Cuban women. What perfect timing, “Four *Cristals,* please!”

The five days we spent in Cuba opened my eyes (while the late nights and rum did their best to permanently shutter them) up to an entirely new way of life: *Communism.* Castro managed to suppress an entire population while providing a 97% literacy rate to his citizens. They also gladly accepted US dollars, which ranked high amongst their two national currencies, the *Chavito and Peso.* The most puzzling of all was the law forbidding Cuban nationals in public eateries or tourist spots unless escorted by a foreigner. That launched the movement of *Paladares*, single room restaurants inside ones home, adhering to tight government restrictions. Sad as it was to experience, it reminded me of the often forgotten freedoms we have on US soil.

Our last night in Havana was spent seeing the world famous Tropicana show, filled with cultural heritage dances and flashing lights. We sipped on Havana Club all night and ate roast chicken with bland vegetables. Sanchez swiped the rest of the bottle as we headed back to the urban sprawl in our pimped out 1950’s Cadillac taxi. Some way or another, over way too many mojitos, another great idea is born. We decide to stay up all night and journey to a Cuban night club. We danced and continued to soak ourselves in rum while pulling macerated mint out from between our teeth until 4am. Staggering back to the hotel we were confronted by flashing lights of a different kind. The *Policia* stepped out and began speaking Spanish. Perhaps too intoxicated to know better, I decided to play stupid as if I didn’t understand a word, while Sanchez had suddenly become frozen with the fear of death in his eyes. It turns out they wanted to see our passports; somehow Sanchez became unfrozen and pulled his out, while eyeing the girls smiling at him from across the street. Terrific. He is the macho gringo outlaw and I am the one playing stupid whose passport is in the hotel room, locked in the safe. I, somehow (it was late, after all. . . ), found myself in the backseat of the car next to an armed military *policia* racing me through the streets of Havana. Down a narrow street a gate opened and they drove into a compound in a residential area: sweating worse than being stuck in a jungle cave, I thought this would not be a story I would ever be able to tell. Somehow I kept my composure and did not show any fear. It was a satellite police station, and when I walked in there were two officers sipping rum and smoking Cohiba cigars in the lobby area of a converted old government mansion. One spoke just enough English to make an offering, I gladly accepted.

Our plane left in five hours, and I had just spent two hours sipping more Havana Club, which I clearly did not need, with the Cuban military police. Thinking, “where the hell in the world am I?” This would be immediate grounds for a cops dismissal in the US, which, in a way, explained the wild NASCAR style car ride. Just as the commanding officer came out and joined the lobby party, in walked Sanchez with my passport! The officer was coming to inform me I was free to go, but only after another stiff glass of rum. Sanchez looked at me. . . “What the fuck is going on here?” I didn’t know how to explain, but invited him to join us for “power hour” with my new amigos (clearly they didn’t understand my English slang). Miguel, the hotel doorman, saved the day and got Sanchez a taxi directly to the police station so he could be a hero. Meanwhile, I was stretching the party out with the police.

I smelled like a distillery and cigar smoke (which I can’t stand), and was so thankful to Miguel for saving me I handed him 50 dollars, three times his monthly salary. He then said, “Senior David, I have a surprise for you,” yet I only wanted one thing, a cold shower. He points to the hotel lobby, and who’s there but the girls Sanchez was eye fucking during this whole fiasco. Giving him a manly hug and looking back over at Sanchez I said, “Have fun buddy. . .” and left him to his own devices. We managed to make the plane with no sleep, Sanchez with a smile, and I with prayerfully closed eyes thanking Miguel for allowing me the chance to eat another meal.