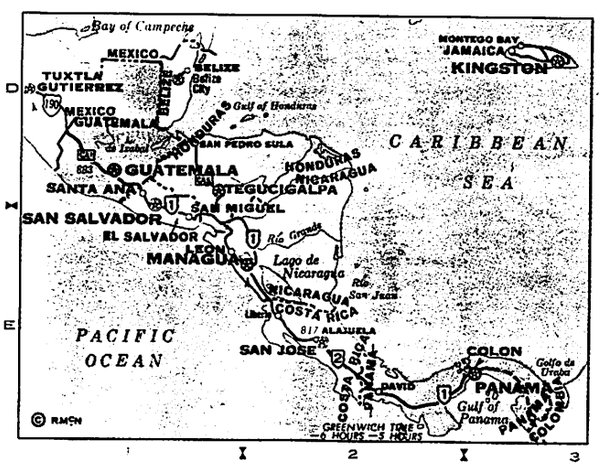
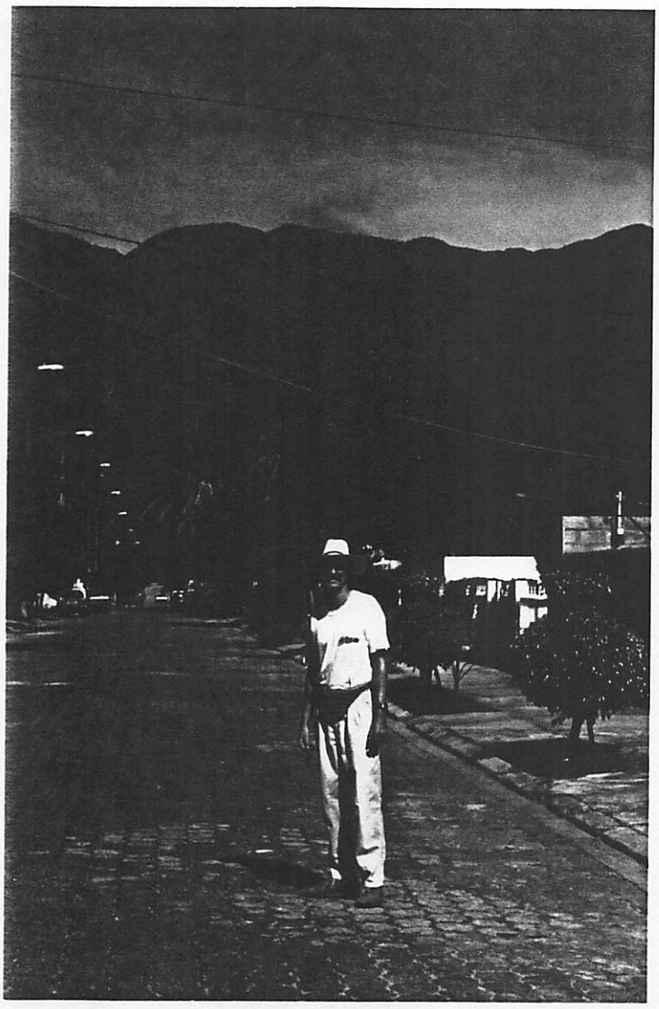
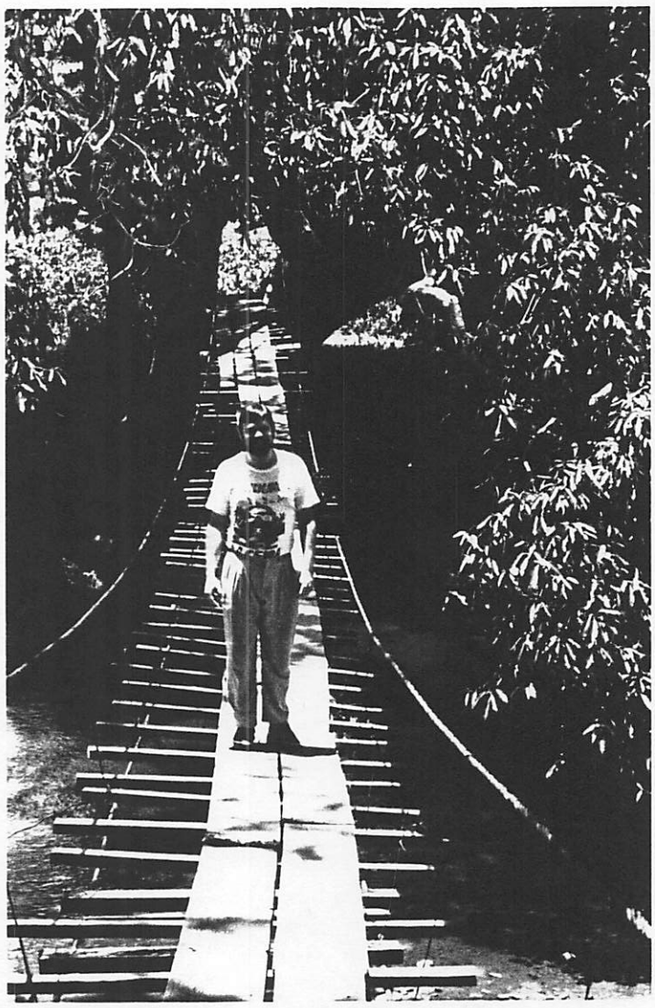
HONDURAS

Jack Gelting

The 727 jet set out over Miami Beach and the blue and green Caribbean waters around the Keys. Lovely and remote islands in the sea cluster around Cuba. These smaller islands have a pleasingly random pattern of development. Cuba's communes, though, are all similar to one another. They lie in the middle of the fields which radiate outward. The jet descends over miles of bananna plantation and lands in San Pedro Sula in the north of Honduras.





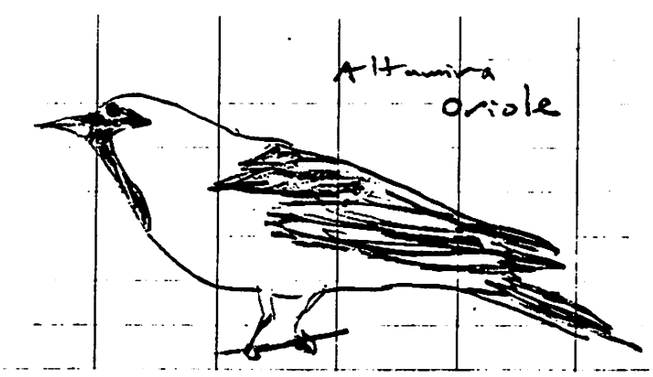


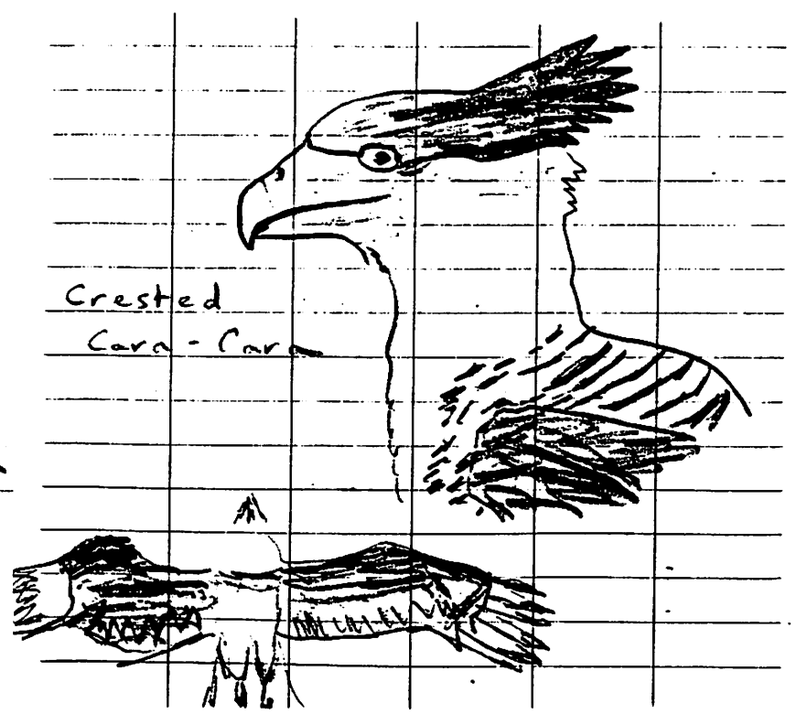
Mi hermano, Ricardo, greets me heartily after I am walked through customs. The officials no longer take an interest, as bribery has been strictly policed of late. We bounce out along the highways of San Pedro Sula, past a churning anaerobic stream by the airport and the *eterna* construction. The prevailing smells of burning garbage and raw sewage are nearly ubiquitous and since there is no sewage treatment and little waste management, as inevitable as the sun rising every morning.

Honduras is also a beautiful country and I marvel at its contrasts. Red clay tiled roofs on white adobe buildings on narrow cobblestone streets dispel the disgust of waste. The country's contrasts are embodied in the beautiful Mestizo girls in satin dresses, spitting.

Ric and Sue live in a funky Spanish-style two story house on a upper middle class street. The house has lots of louvered windows and looks out over the surrounding rooftops along the mountain foothills. A semi-spiral staircase is the centerpiece of the house. Clouds flit by along the flanks of the Mountain of the Burnt Monkey.

On the first day, we ride up to the *Mirador Bella Vista* by the giant Coca-Cola sign on the mountainside above San Pedro Sula. It's windy and a pleasant 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Along the way, Ricardo points out some of the birds of Honduras: a Crested Caracara and the Altamira oriole. Later, we see more ornithological color in the Montezuma Oropendolas, Boat-billed Flycatchers, Pale-billed Woodpeckers, parrots and Mot-mots.





Back at *la casa*, Ric's wife Susan prepares a wonderful traditional meal of tortillas, beans, vegetables and rice. On my first night in Honduras, Ric and I watch Game 4 of the 1993 Kings - Canadians Stanley Cup finals at an open-air restaurant owned by an obscene Canadian acquaintance. ESPN reaches 80 countries now.

"I never thought I'd see a hockey game in Honduras" said Ric.

I replied, "It took me to get you there and on my first night, and in June, no less." The modern world is a global village.

In search of the ancients, we set off for Copán the next day.

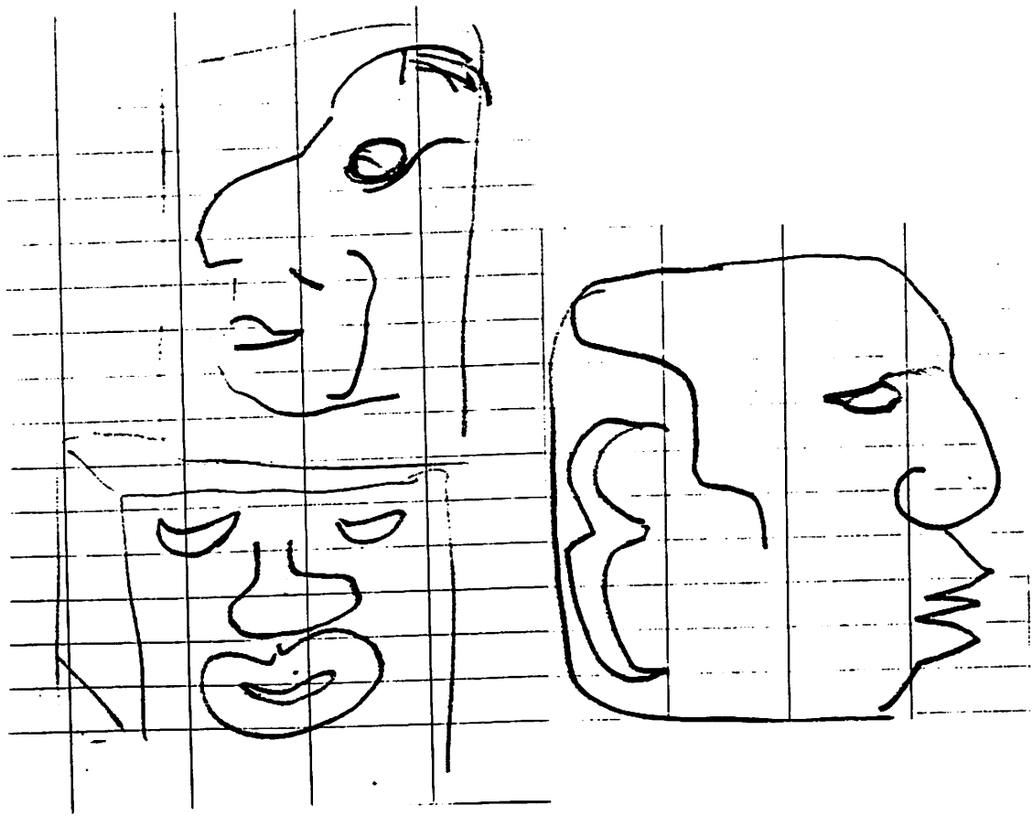
Along the way, we visited the timeless village of San Jeronimo. The village is at the top of a winding steep gravel road traversed by far more horses and mules than automobiles. The road lets out onto a plaza at the top. Cobblestone and dirt roads ring the plaza. The sacred tree of all Mesoamericans, the Ceiba, towers in the open plaza, shading horses, chickens and children.

An old barefoot woman proudly opens the adobe church for us. The church is adorned with frilly decorations and a San Jeronimo doll-statute. Back outside, Ric explains to an old *campesino* that we are brothers. Since we do not look much alike, he remarks that I look like father, Ric looks like mother. I am "*gordo*", he says. Fat in the U.S. is strong, well-fed in Latin America.

Comparisons with the States are inevitable. Here, a white man is akin to a rock star. In San Jeronimo, we plunk down on the steps of the municipal building to eat our lunch. A wire fence encloses the porch in front of us. The locals crowd outside the fence like feeding time at the zoo to watch us eat our sandwiches.

In Honduras, family and property are rich traditions. Expectations for wealth are framed by these traditions and the Hondurans spare themselves much stress by living within this framework. We drive ourselves to a poverty of time and spirit by our high material expectations.

Back on the road to Copán, we wend our way by *campesinos* with machetes, soldiers with automatic weapons, chickens and litter. Honduras is like a hybrid of the Old South and the Wild West.



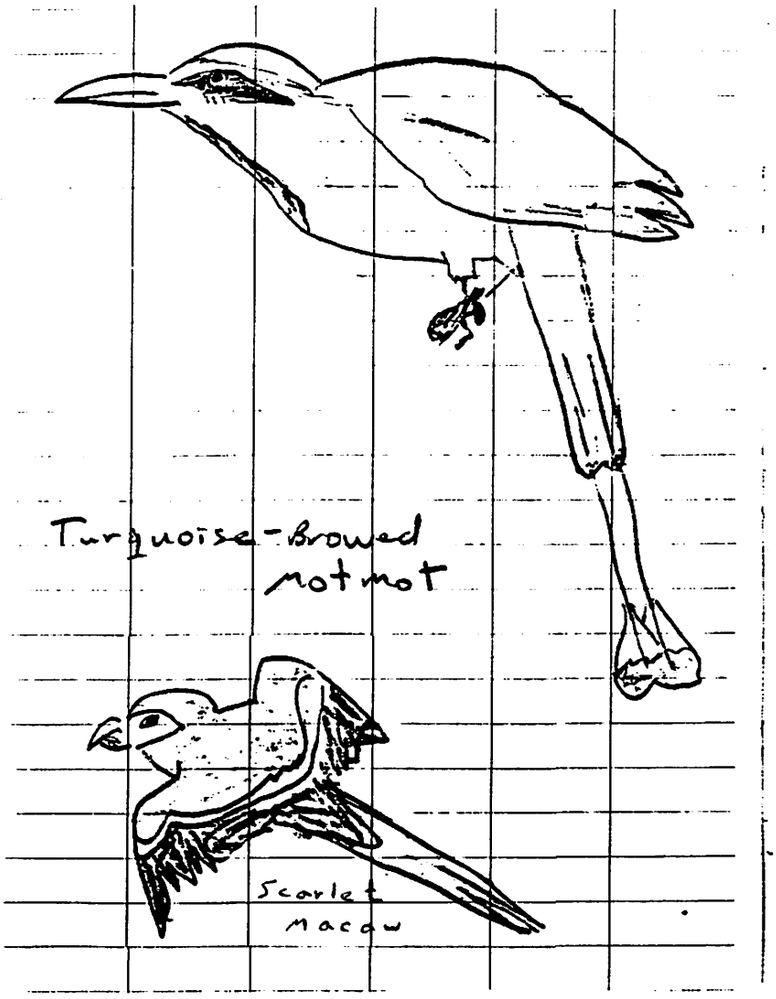
Ric and I reach *Copán Ruinas* in the afternoon and soak up the timeless Mayan influence. A smiling young entrepreneur sells me a stone carving for a song, while children gamble nearby with semi-worthless coins like they were loaded dice. We see the *museo* on the edge of the plaza with its Mayan burial display and priceless artifacts. The plaza is pleasant here in the late afternoon as the *campesinos* trudge home. The white twin-steepled church beckons to all the weary, but few heed the call. Inside the church, near the altar, is an oil painting depicting the Trinity as three Jesuses. Below the trinity are figures in flames, including a bishop, a pope and a king.

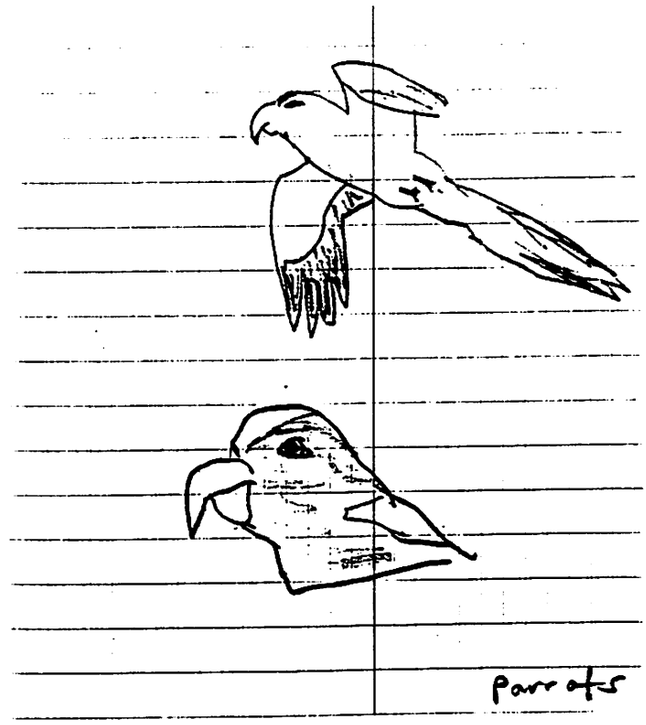
Young Copánec men play "*futbolito*" on the grounds of an old Spanish fort at the top of the ridge. They battle as if this were the top of the world. We walk in all directions on the cobblestones of this enchanted town. The church bell rings on and on until darkness. We walk on to the Llama del Bosque restaurant for simple and delicious *arroz con pollo* and Nacional *cerveza*.

The next morning I rise with the ancient sun and walk the cobblestone streets to the plaza where I sit and pray. On the way back to the hotel, I buy the morning's first coffee at a roadside stand for a few *centavos*. Chickens and dogs run about the street in the rush of workers trudging off to the fields. A young girl dutifully prepares my coffee. There are no child labor laws here. Honduras is a macho, male-dominated society. In rural Copán, this culture is undiluted by modern change. One can sense the loss of joyful naiveté in girls as young as eight years as they realize the life of drudgery they face.

The ruins at Copán are a testimony to the Mayan society and represent their greatest artistic legacy. The high-relief stone carvings are the most extensive left to us by the Mayan empire, which stretched from eastern Mexico to northern Honduras. Tourists come from all over the world to see, but not in overwhelming numbers. The log book at Hotel Patty includes the name of Scott Ryan (31/5/90) along with entries of Japanese, Australians, Dutch, Finnish, Swiss, French, British and mostly USA and Honduran visitors.

Stelae, or sculptures, extend out for miles from the ruined city. Each cardinal direction is marked by stelae on the perimeter of the valley.

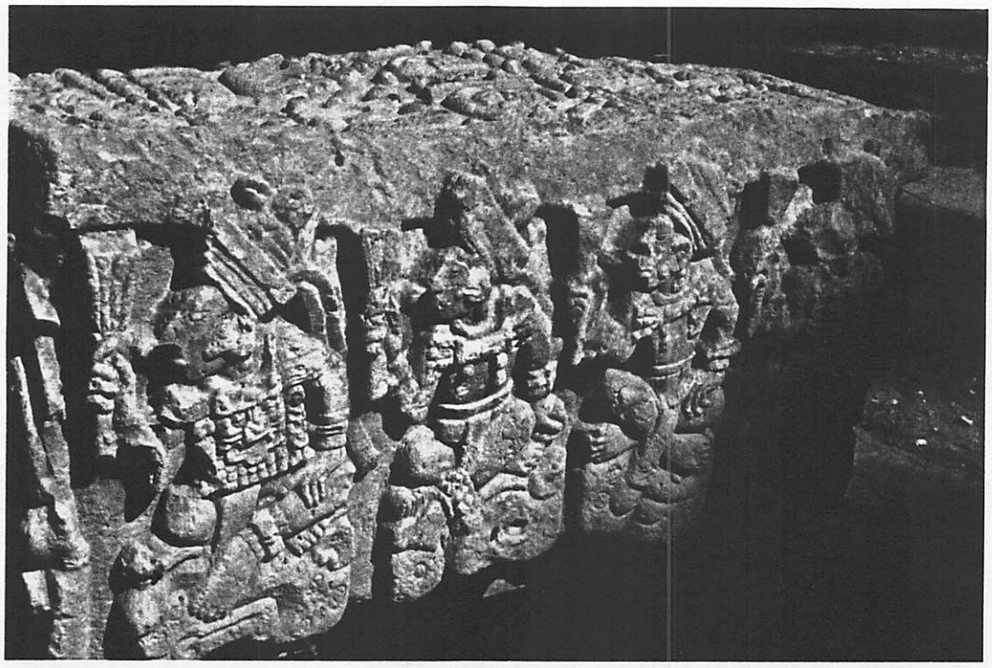




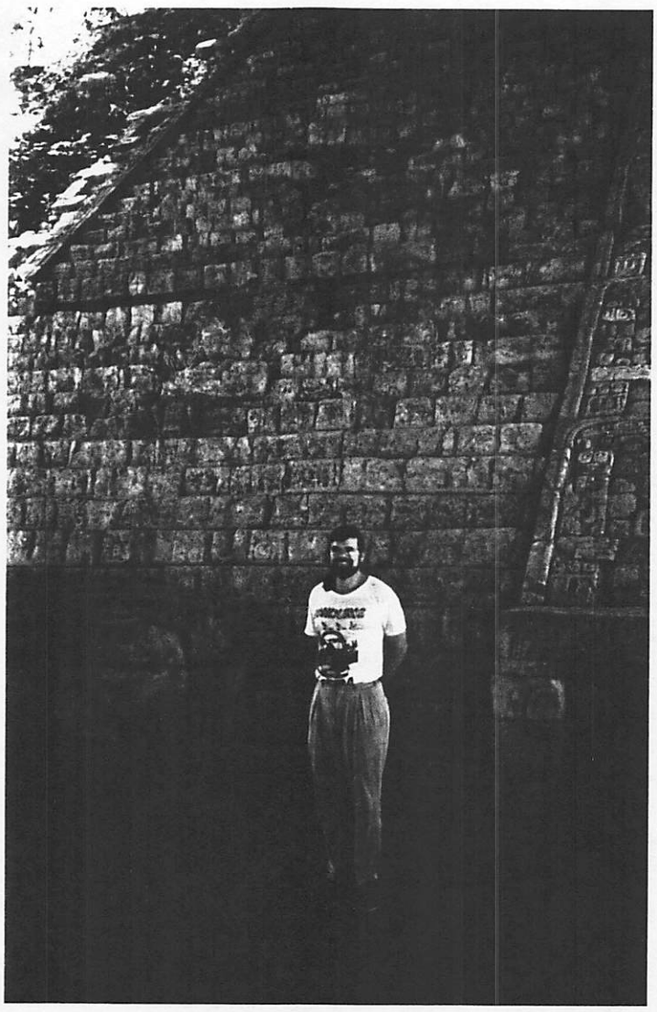
Two scarlet macaws greet us on the edge of the national park area. The Mayans' many gods are testimony to their veneration of nature.

Six main areas have been identified in the city: the *Plaza Principal, Campo de Pelota* (ballcourt), *Escalinata Jeroglifica* (heiroglyphic stairway), *Plaza Occidental, Plaza de los Jaguares y Zona Residencial.* The heiroglyphic stairway was completed in 776 A.D. by the king Smoke Shell. It codifies and celebrates the history of the Mayans in Copán. The royal lineage includes the great kings 18 Rabbit and his father Smoke Jaguar.

Mayan civilization reached its artistic peak under 18 Rabbit. Before his assassination by neighboring rivals, 18 Rabbit commissioned many of the nobility stelae depicting the great kings. The oriental cast of the Mayan visage is evident in the sculptures. This supports the theory that the Mayans descended from Asians that crossed the Bering Strait.



A carved altar depicts the succession of sixteen Mayan kings, with four on each side of the altar. Sculpting was accomplished with only stone tools, as the Mayan empire pre-dates metal working. I stand amazed before the altars and the heiroglyphic stairway.



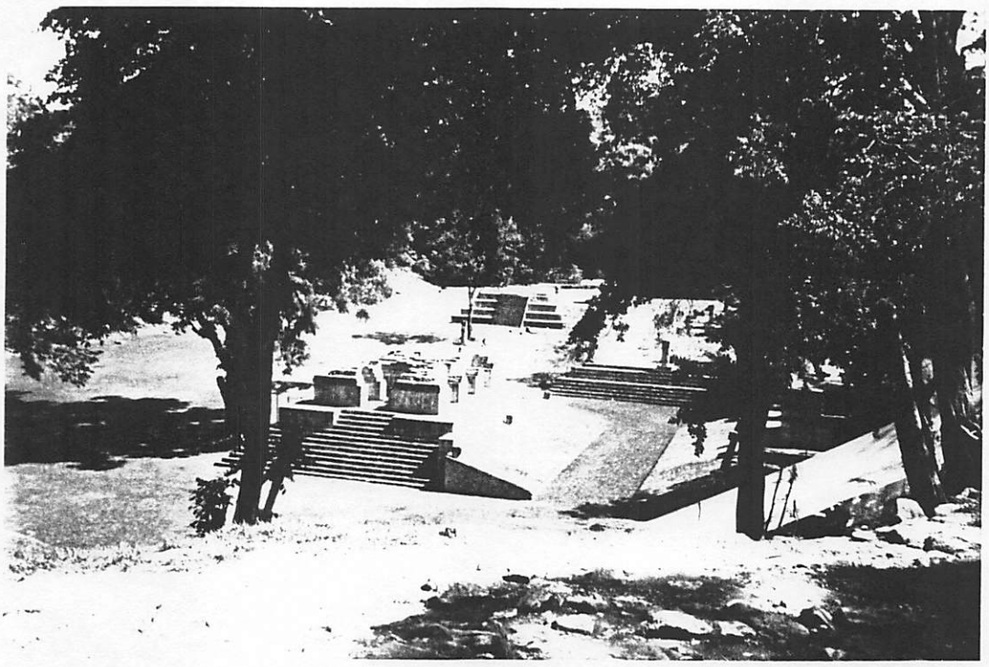
An exquisite carving of Smoke Jaguar shows his youthful face greeting the morning sun in the east, from where life springs. On the opposite side of the stela, Smoke Jaguar's aged face looks at death in the west. The original red paint can still be seen on the sculpture.

Other stone sculptures at Copán demonstrate amazing engineering and artistic accomplishment. A clever drainage system floods a lower plaza in the *Plaza Occidental*, just up to the level of sculptures depicting aquatic life. A network of tunnels extends throughout the four layers constructed in the city. Archaeologists are still piecing together some of the sculptured pieces, some of which interlock. Others are labeled G.O.K. (God

only knows). The ruins were looted of some of the best pieces between the time of their "discovery" in 1576 and the 1840s when serious scientific investigation began. The 1576 discovery was muted in impact because of jungle growth and lack of interest from the discovering Spaniards who were only looking for gold.

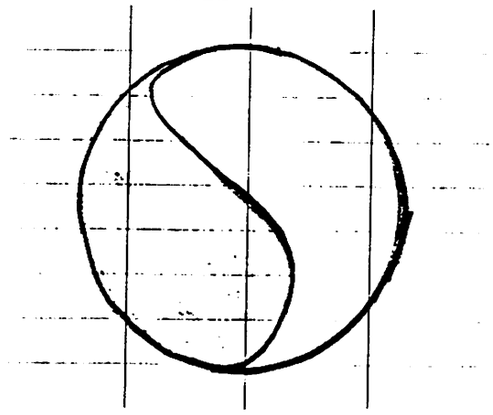
The *Plaza de los Jaguares* was the Mayan congress. Step seating was provided to dignitaries during contemplation of the stars and the visible planets. The sculpted Venution god looms over the plaza. The Mayans' knowledge of astronomy was truly mind-blowing. The accuracy of their calendar far exceeds ours or any other.

Only the king and the highest priest could enter the Temple of Meditation. The entrance was sculpted as the mouth of a giant serpent. Visions were granted to the king by the gods when he was in the mouth of the serpent. The king conferred with the priests, artists and noble families in the *Plaza de los Jaguares*.



The ballcourt was more than a place for sport. It held special religious significance. The head of the best player was sacrificed before thousands gathered to watch. This was considered a great honor. The players believed they were deified

in the act of being sacrificed. Sacrificial altars were cut with grooves to channel away the blood. In the *Plaza Principal*, a round sacrificial altar stands for the placement of the heart of a jaguar. In plan view, the channels for blood form a perfect symbol of yin and yang.



Students of Mayan civilization now believe that as the Mayans advanced, the religion of sacrifice began to be considered an aberration.

Certainly the Mayans had little fear of death or the dead. They buried their dead under their houses in a show of respect for anscestors. The spirits of the dead were thought to be able to hear the lively play of children and the passion of adults above them. The *Zona Residencial* has come to be called *Las Sepulturas* (cemetaries). *Las Sepulturas* are littered with pot shards dating to before Christ.

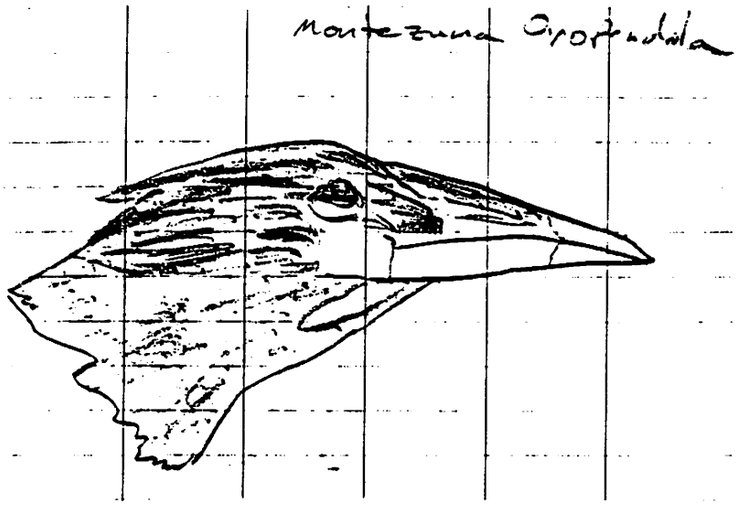
Rituals became more sacred to the Mayans with repetition. As kings built and rebuilt temples on the same spot over centuries, the sanctums within became more sacred. The sheer labor necessary to construct these temples and pyramids in the Stone Age would have required the inspiration of very sacred rituals indeed. The hinterland for the stone construction materials must have been enormous. Rock types such as pillow basalts, sandstone, limestone and granite blocks are in evidence.

Eventually, Copán was abandoned after many centuries of fluorishing in the Valley of the River Copán. The peoples' desire to live in the city outstripped the carrying capacity of the valley and environmental degradation set in. The slide began with the assassination of the king 18 Rabbit. Social standing and proximity to the city became more important than food production. Construction was completed on much of the best farmland.

But the art of these exuberant people lives. The quality and congruity of line compares favorably with all masterworks of sculpture.

Copán Ruinas draws together all the beauty of art, emotion, spirituality, science and culture in one setting. I climbed up to the highest point in the ruins at the Acropolis. A guide waved his finger ("No") at me, as if I, like the Mayans, had tried to go too high.

On the way out, an eight-year-old girl, cute as a button, descended from Mayans, sold me a stone carving. "Ten *lempiras*...eight for you, my boyfriend."

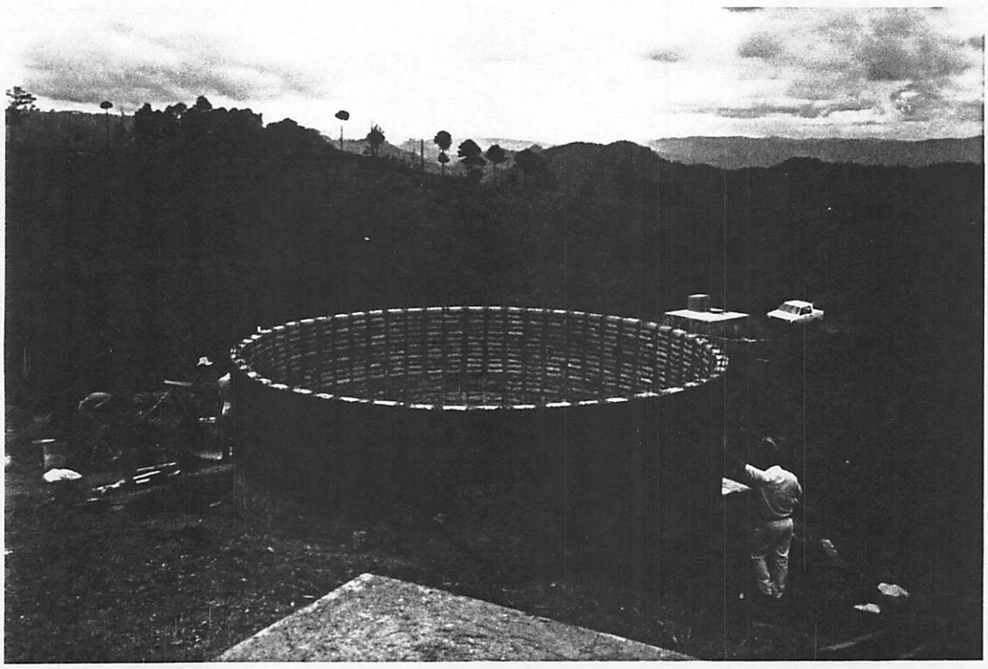


Santa Rosa de Copán is a cool mountain town about 110 kilometers from *Copán Ruinas*. The Spanish style rowhouses and a plaza with colonial church and a gaudy theater all make this the typical Hondo town. Actually, it's beautiful and tacky, dirty, but serene, crowded but full of the space of the sky above.

The Hotel Elvir dishes up a fine cafeteria menu including *Pincho Mixto* - the shish kebob - and *Cerveza Nacional*. Other distinctive beers are *Salva Vida,* favorite of the Peace Corps volunteers and the *Gallo* Guatemalan brand.

Jeronimo is a skilled Honduran civil engineer. He designs and builds rural water systems. This work is performed by SANAA, the national water company. Ric used to work for SANAA and the Peace Corps and is presently investigating and writing about these stream-fed tank and pipe systems. After finding and drinking *cafe negro* at a private residence near the SANAA office, we lurched off to San Augustine in four wheel drive. San Augustine is in the "deep campo."

I watch as Ric and Jeronimo direct the *maestro* and workmen in constructing a water tank high above the town on an arkosic sandstone outcrop. The men take turns in the construction work. They work together to benefit the community. SANAA provides funding for design and materials. The villagers have a "sweat equity" in the construction. They work the bananna and coffee fields also. The women carry huge bundles balanced on their heads. The men swerve around on bicycles loaded and piled impossibly high with banannas. Livestock are raised and run freely through town. The cacophony of roosters is practically constant, yet Peace stays perched on the red-tiled roofs.



That night, back in Santa Rosa, we meet Diego, Jeronimo's adopted son. My limitations with the Spanish language diminish considerably in conversation with the two-year-old Diego. Their house is cool, with thick adobe walls and a roof of baked clay tiles on roughly hewn poles set in the 'dobe walls. They have a crude but clean kitchen with a woodstove and a large dirt-floored patio.

In the morning, we drive down from the mountains of the Copán region back to San Pedro Sula. We pass through the town of La Entrada, the seediest place in this second poorest country in the western hemisphere. A dreadful *Laboratorio Dental* looks pretty dangerous. Even here in La Entrada, though, the women look fresh, clean and well-dressed. They really take a lot of time and pride in their appearance.

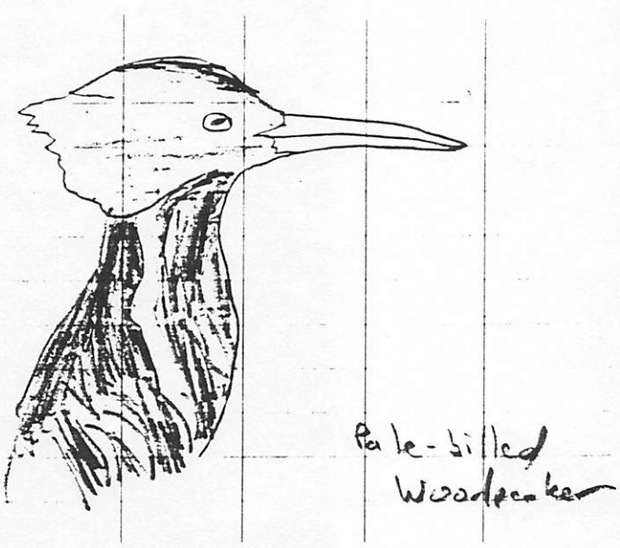
A "press gang" makes a roadway stop. This Army recruiting technique involves yanking young men from cars and pressing them into service. The families are not even notified. Often this takes place in routine non-emergency scenarios. The military is simply flexing its considerable muscle. The U.S. has effectively backed repression here by pouring money into the military to strengthen its iron fist grip. This was done simply because of the empty threat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

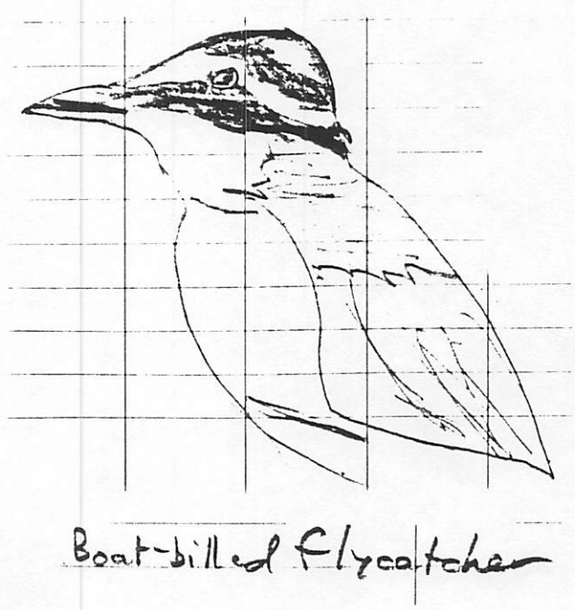
Back in San Pedro Sula, I reflect on how this country alternates between paradisical and hellish on a regular moody basis. It's hard to sleep here, people are noisy, windows always open, dogs bark and mangoes fall from the trees, Whack! on the hot tin roof.

So we left for Tela. In Tela, one sees that paradise side again. The sunset was reddening the tops of the cocoanut palms on the beach when we got there. The wide powdery white sand beaches,

surf and little Garifuna children selling *agua de cocoa* all make this the ideal beach town.

The rooms here are modern, cabled and cool. But in Tela, Time folds his wings and paces on a drowsy path.





Ric and I rode *el tren* back to San Pedro. The route involved changes in La Junta and Barracoa, two swirling, dusty trackside junctions. The milling crowds chatter and naked children raise a chaotic clatter.

The train is slow and very cheap. Third class is a box car. Second class has benches and first class has padded benches. All three train jumps on first class all together cost us eight *lempiras*, ten *centavos* or about 60 cents each.

The people of Honduras have low expectations for the material quality of life. But they revel in "used American clothes." Shirts and hats of the Sox and LA Raiders are just as popular here as in the States.

It seems there are so many people with so little to do. They love to be still in the shade, sipping soda from a straw in a plastic bag. These people are happy! The sprawling slums of Choloma are full of joyful children.

Along the way, we pass through an African Palms plantation. *Campesinos* extract palm oil for market. Miles of bananna plantation border the tracks. Suddenly the open train car is choked with the smoke of burning bananna fields. A soldier with a big gun, and a girl cuddled all over him and his gun, laughs at the fear I show at the smoke and his gun.

We pass numerous railside cemetaries with wooden crosses. We deboard in San Pedro Sula and walk home. A horse wanders and meanders in the busy highway by the *mercado*. The disregard for animals these people demonstrate is truly unsettling.

The next day, San Pedro is deluged with heavy rain. The streets

flood and the rainy season begins. Other than some shopping at *Mercado Guamilito,* it is just a day for reflection.

Our culture in the States is different from Honduras. But Honduras of today differs just as much from its own history. The people seem to be searching for a culture, perched headlong on the edge of boredom. They're looking for something that's already found them. They ignore the rich culture of their anscestors, the Mayans.

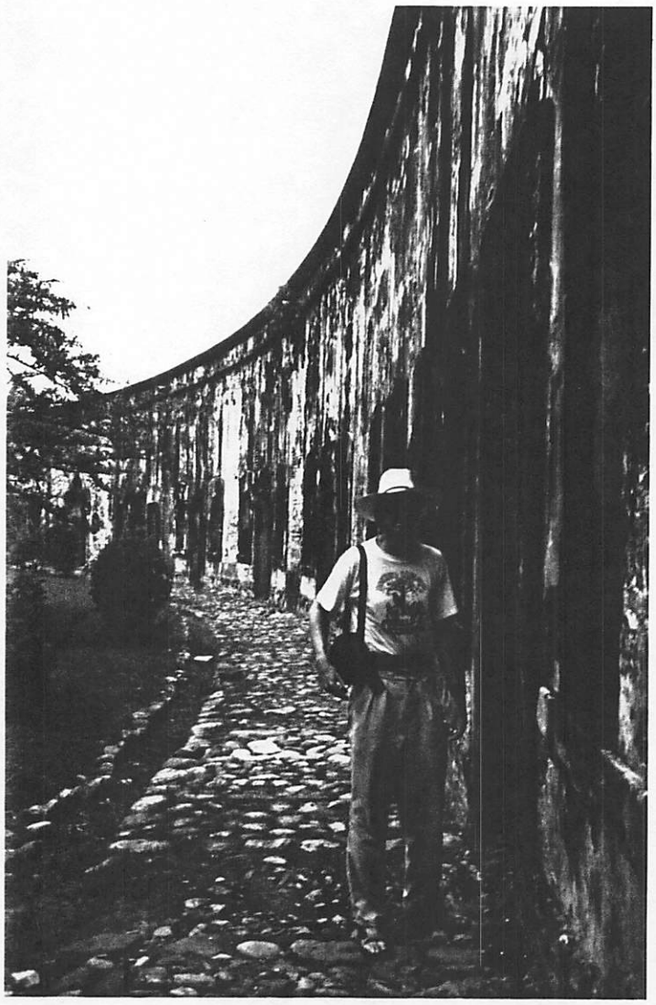
I reflect on this a couple of weeks later, back in the States on the Fourth of July. I decide to celebrate an ancient Mayan ritual and convince Hopi to do so, also. We let a little blood from our fingers using obsidian blades. The blood is let onto paper and incense. We burn the offering in front of the stone carving from Copán. I carefully wrap the ashes and obsidian in a paper bundle and bury it in a place of personal significance. We watch the full moon course through the sky, high above the pine trees.

Blood is the holy substance of human beings. Letting it is not uncivilized, or "weird", if one takes the language of reality to be religion and ritual (like the Mayans) and not economics (like the West). There are as many "realities" as there are societies. These realities are simply paradigms of perception. Our own version guides our actions. We call this culture.

During my last few days in Honduras, I continue to marvel at the country's schizophrenic flavor. The natural beauty of coastal Omoa and the Pulhapanzak waterfall in the headlands above Sula Valley are undeniable. Getting there is the challenge. The road form San Pedro Sula, the country's major industrial city, to the largest port in Central America, at Puerto Cortés, near Omoa, is awful. The road is really a glorified dirt road, constantly undergoing the "eterna" construction. Corruption amongst contractors and government officials is crippling Honduras.

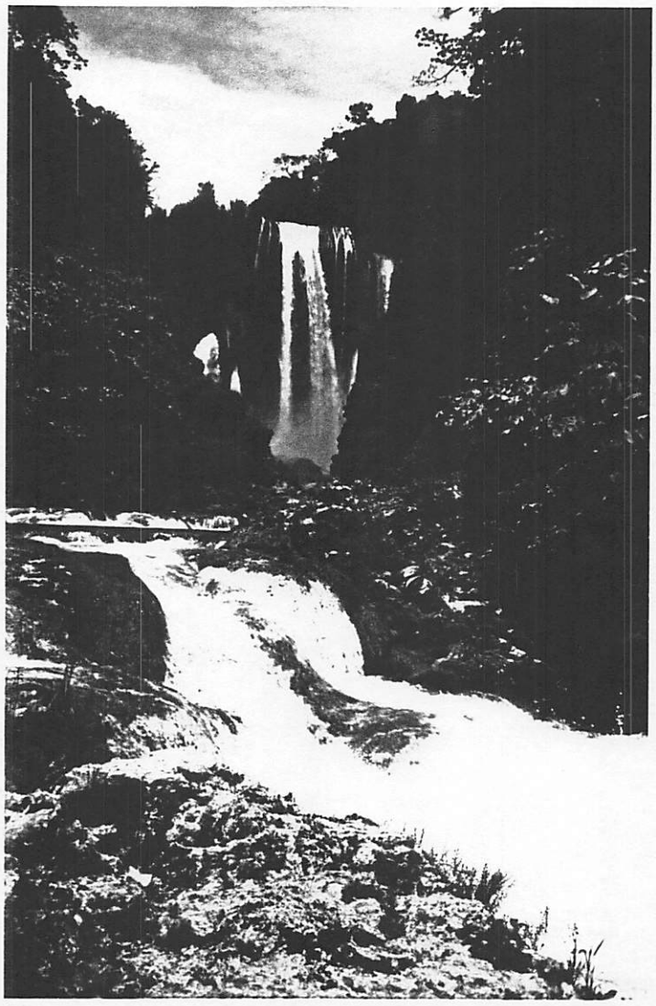
The lack of environmental controls is really obvious in the "cancer alleys" of Puerto Cortés. But Omoa is beautiful. The seafood (I had great red snapper) in Omoa is superb. The mountains come right down to the sea here. Free-wheeling port towns, with sailors, rum and whores, Omoa and Puerto Cortés provide quick escapes to the sea for salty vagabonds.

A fortess was built at Omoa by Spaniards in the 1770s. The thick walls and numerous turrets give the fort a look of invincibility.



The road to Pulhapanzak winds through the little town of Rio Lindo, amidst steep volcanic hills. There are more rocks and stone walls here than anywhere outside New England.

While meditating at the waterfall, I hold an image to recall in steamy hot big city traffic: watching the waterfall in a mist while sitting by a pool filled with colorful tropical fish. Places like this and *Lago Yojoa* are as serene as a sleeping baby.



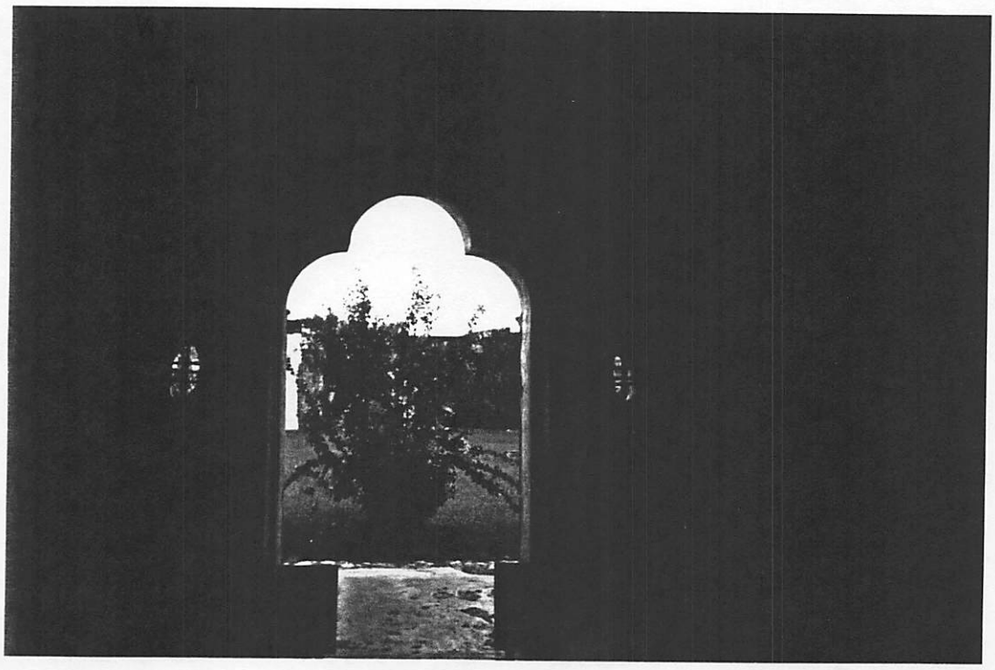
The *futbol* game between *Petro Tela* and *Montagua* at San Pedro Sula stadium was not so serene. Latin *futbol* fans are boisterous to say the least. Even a torrential pre-game rainstorm with thunder and lightning doesn't dampen spirits. The fate of the game was in doubt, though the rain finally stopped.

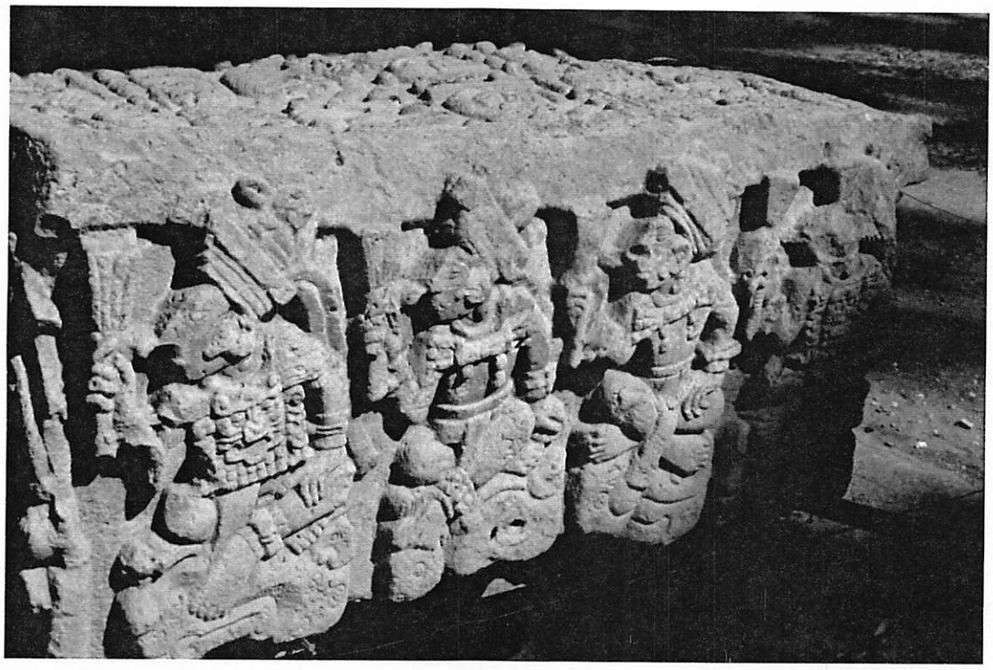
We watch from under the balcony as streams of rainwater cascade down the stadium steps. The stadium lights shine through the rain, making it appear as snow. Rivulets of water form everywhere, even on the chain link fence that surrounds the field to protect the players and referees from the rowdy fans. *Montagua* prevailed 2-1. The local papers, *La Prensa* and *Tiempo*, both provide extensive coverage the next day, as the game was played as part of the National Tournament.

"Welcome to *El Progreso*, 'City of Progress', where the one traffic light doesn't work," Ric said.

On the last day of my stay in Honduras, we drive to El Progreso. We visit the SANAA office where Ric has set up a water quality lab with Jeronimo. Rolando shows us the local Chiquita bananna-packing plant and plantations. We go to Rolando's home for *cafe*, and meet his four daughters, age 1 - 17 and his wife. We watch a bullfight from Spain. The spectacle strikes me as cruel. The Spaniards' psychological hold on Central Americans does endure.

Honduras today is a place to marvel at man and nature. The country is one of the world's great tourism bargains.





A carved altar depicts the succession of sixteen Mayan kings, with four on each side of the altar. Sculpting was accomplished with only stone tools, as the Mayan empire pre-dates metal working. I stand amazed before the altars and the heiroglyphic stairway.