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“GOING DEEP” - (The original version)

by Carl Hoffman

“There is no place as beautiful and ugly and dramatic and as full of life and death as Guatemala. It’s art,” says John Heaton, as we inhale the thick sweet acrid smell of copal and cigars and black smoke carrying dreams and prayers aloft from round fires stirred by shamans wearing red bandanas. Heaton was born on the Right Bank in Paris, attended boarding school in England, France and Switzerland, has slept on half the beaches in Mexico, hunted for sapphires in Madagascar and Asmat art in Irian Jaya, but it’s this that has glued him to Guatemala for 23 years.

We are at a temple to a deity named San Simon in the town of San Andres Iztapa, far off the standard tourist path. The round fires burning on bare concrete are fueled with candles and incense and honey and Quetzalteca cane liquor and rose petals, even the occasional chicken. A man fires round after round of mortars into the blue sky, and the explosions rock the hot pink walls. Women rub themselves with fistfuls of inch-thick cigars, then huff and puff and hyperventilate, snapping their fingers like maniacal human metronomes. Inside, hundreds of candles burn. A never-ending line of devotees make the sign of the cross or genuflect and file up a set of stairs to the dais of San Simon - a Mestizo mannequin in a black suit and cowboy hat, cigar chomped in his teeth inside a glass case. He’s the jefe, the overseer – pure, unadulterated power, the saint of truckers and prostitutes and narcos and the dispossessed – and they walk away from him backwards. You do not turn your back on San Simon. Shirtless men stand, arms

outstretched in supplication, as shamans cleanse them with green bundles of herbs and Quetzalteca blown in a misty aeration from their mouths. There is chanting and accordion music and singing, and children playing. It's wild and raw and mystifying; the human soul as open wound: Needy. Imperfect. Powerless and unafraid to admit it. Heaton revels in the passion and ritual. "Things like this that you don't understand," he says, "are just conceptual art. It's like one big living canvas. You don't have to understand every subtle meaning."

Heaton is the perfect foil for the place, and we're plunging in deep. The country is rugged and complex, rich in Mayan culture and natural beauty, but changing fast. I want to see HIS Guatemala, I tell him, the place that's seduced him when other places couldn't. It's not just that Heaton has been here for so long and knows its nooks and crannies – he owns two small hotels and organizes custom made adventures, so that's a given. It's that he's an aesthete, a lover of good taste and beauty – a guy who should be in Paris or St. Barts – but who instead is in love with a smoky, poor and turbulent little third world country. There's nothing pompous about him. Once he was traveling in a dark tunnel and switched his lights off, just because. And ran into a boulder that destroyed his car. "I wanted a life with stories," he says. He'll sleep on a beach, take the back roads, revel in mud and damp and adventure; he's spent his whole life in search of and celebrating the "sacred magical moment of curiosity." Not the art of travel, but travel as art itself.

Of course, I'd left the itinerary totally up to Heaton. "Hire a four-wheel drive SUV," was his only requirement, and here we were, an hour out of the colonial city of

Antigua, and already into another world. The sun was bright, the sky blue, it was Sunday and there was a fiesta on; San Andres was packed. “You come to a village and there’s a fair – it’s a good omen,” Heaton said, as we left San Simon and swerved past campesinos wearing cowboy hats and machetes on prancing horses. Guatemalan towns can be downright ugly and San Andres was no different. The largest source of income in the country is remittances from relatives working in the United States, and the \$4 billion annually funds an architectural travesty – the once ubiquitous traditional adobe homes and cobblestone streets are being wiped out by a flood of poured concrete. So Heaton directed us straight through the sprawling cement, out the backside and onto a rutted dirt road, which we’d slog and bump and jolt over for the next six hours – and parts of the next six days.

He was unrepentant. “The journey is what’s important here,” he said, as we thumped along ridges shrouded in mist and thick green, dotted with blooming poinsettia, passing villages of a few houses and horseman and chickens, working our way ever higher into coffee country. “When you go to these places it’s like going back 100 years,” he says, swerving around a pothole, “and HOW you get there, HOW you arrive, is how you’ll see them, and how they’re connected to everywhere else.” That’s especially true here in the highlands, which is like a thick green, crumpled rug. Only since the peace accords were signed in 1996, ending 30 years of civil war, have paved highways pierced highland villages that were always close to world as the crow flies, but deeply isolated.

We pause at fincas, share travel tales, and, as night falls, pull into Los Tarrales, a plantation owned by an American named Andy Burge, whose grandfather bought the

farm in 1941. Burge was born on its 3,100 acres, where he grows coffee and ornamental flowers. His is an old story, part of the two Guatemalas: one Mayan, peasant, the other a place of big fincas founded by outsiders, many of whom were Germans or Americans. Los Tarrales is small and Burge supplements its income by taking guests in the old manor house. It's late when we arrive, pitch black night, so it's not until morning when we settle in around the big dining room table over fresh, strong coffee, refried beans and fruit. The walls are hung with old black and white photos of his grandfather and father, in pith helmets, khaki jodhpurs and knee-high laced leather boots, Burge a little tow-headed boy at their feet.

Burge, a small, compact former gymnast wearing a knife on his belt, suggests we take a hike. The morning is sunny and Los Tarrales is buzzing, a riotous jungle in the lee of towering 9,000-foot high volcanic cones. On closer inspection under Burge's guidance I see the jungle as one big garden, worked by 64 campesinos who live on the property, four of whom were born on it. There are big old cedars, eight foot high coffee plants beneath rows of tall Mac Arthur palms, banana trees, orange and red impatiens growing willy-nilly on the ground, all planted by generations of Burges. Toucans flit between the trees; we spot the long tails of a blue crowned Mot Mot, Mexican Squirrel Cuckoos, tiny honeycreepers, blue-throated sapphire humming birds and bright red white-winged tanagers. "Look," says Burge suddenly. We're on a ridge overlooking his Eden and the volcano, known as Fuego, throws up great puffs of smoke. "It's been rumbling big time," he says.

“It gives such a life to the land,” says Heaton. “I’ve seen Fuego blast massive plumes and columns of smoke for 24 hours straight. At night in the main plaza in Antigua you could see the ornamental molding of the Palacio with the spewing volcano behind. That topography is God’s gift to this country.”

After lunch we rendezvous with a friend of Heaton’s named Vinnie Stanzione, and a strange thing happens. At a town called Chicacao, we hang a right off the highway onto an ancient cobblestone road running between miles of latex trees, their sap slowly oozing into little black pots and it’s like passing through some strange portal beyond the fields we know. The light is dim; the road twisting, and filled with donkeys and horseman and trudging men carrying cut wood on trump lines across their forehead. “This is the old Camino Real,” Stanzione says. “Maya have used it forever.”

Stanzione is a Philadelphia-born Italian; he’s 46 years old, gray, with a deep tan, a boyish face and an easy, loose-limbed way, but there’s nothing normal about him. In college he found himself in Costa Rica, amidst refugees from the civil wars raging across Central America, wars that were, in places like Guatemala, between the Indians and the Europeans. Fueled by their stories, Stanzione ended up in Atitlan, the center of the Tzutujil Maya and there he stayed, becoming one of the few outsiders to speak Tzutujil, and immersing himself deep in their rituals and consciousness. And for the next two days, under Stanzione’s inspired guidance, we shift between worlds, traveling a road that’s part here and now and part ancient past, part Mayan universe, and the whole experience takes on a dream-like quality, abetted by the way Stanzione speaks of the past in the present tense.

The cobblestones give way to dirt and it's dusk when we roll over the steep mountains into Santiago Atitlan, the center of the Tzutujil Maya on the shores of Atitlan. Santiago is an unpainted concrete maze, startlingly barren against the blue of the lake and the perfect volcanic cones surrounding it. Yet there's something compelling about the city, too: a dynamic, frenetic cement Anasazi-esque city of square buildings piled on top of each other and narrow streets crowded with women in huipils and, rarely in Guatemala today, even a smattering of men in traditional hand woven pants and jackets.

The Tzutujil Maya were the last to surrender to their Mexican conquistadors and Spanish Franciscan friars, and Santiago has been a turbulent place on and off ever since. Civil war raged here in the 1980s and its Catholic church was sanctuary, where Stanzione and Heaton head in the dying light. It's massive, white, built in 1547 by the Friars out of stones from Mayan temples on the hillsides across the lake. "The Franciscans translate the scriptures into Quiche," Stanzione says, as we sit on its curving stone steps, carved by Maya a thousand years ago, "and connect the Catholic saints to the Mayan gods, but then the Franciscans leave in 1821 and this is the backwater of backwaters. Here in the highlands, the Maya don't move much and they reinterpret Christianity with their own metaphors and analogies, and retain their culture and magic."

This sense of the past as present grows the next day, when we hire a boat, which drops us off at a steep and lonely hillside. We clamber up, up, until we're sitting on the grass 150 feet above the blue water, local wooden fishing pirogues far below. "The Tzutujil hold out here but then they surrender; they don't want to be destroyed. They are warriors and nobles up here, but the people on the lakeshore are cornflower people,

agricultural people...” Stanzione’s narrative starts and stops, and winds, depending on where we are and what we’re doing. We hike further up, scrambling through dense underbrush and step into a tangled garden. Stanzione picks little yellow fruits – Jocote – which we pop into our mouths, sweet and bitter at the same time. “Jesus’ testicles,” he says, leading us higher and deeper into a grove of coffee and 12-foot high corn and orange trees and avocados that tops out on a flat, sweet smelling, grassy plateau. It’s a beautiful place. Quiet. Far away. Crumbling old walls and 15-foot high mounds rise from the grass, and we climb them. The lake and Santiago are far below, the world is stretched out before us. “These mounds are temples,” Stanzione says. He lifts a stone from the grass. “This is carved stone. It’s ancient. This is the very stone that the Franciscans use to build the church in Santiago. They build it on an East-West axis, the same as the Mayans. That volcano,” he says, pointing to the west, “is the elbow, the bend on the road to the sun. At the March Equinox the sun sets on the top of the volcano. This is the center of the world, the belly button of their kingdom.” These mounds were mapped in the 1930s, but never excavated; the Maya forbid it. “There is Mixtec gold under here,” Stanzione says. And pointing to a flat space, “There is the ball court.”

The great temple is gone now, nothing but an overgrown ruin. Yet it feels alive under Stanzione’s skein of interwoven time, part of a continuum of history and myth and magic that’s still present as we walk through Santiago’s back streets at dusk. The streets narrow until they are the width of sidewalks, tight dusty passageways crowded with black-haired women in brilliant embroidery and laughing children and chickens and feral dogs between crooked wooden and concrete houses, emanating voices and music.

Stanzione is known here; he laughs and chides and greets in Tzutujil. A man in a baseball cap and mustache leans on the half-door of a house. “Look,” Stanzione says. “He’s trying to look modern. But hear what he’s listening too!” And only then do I catch it – the music on his radio is the simplest drums and flute. Old. Traditional.

It’s dark when we arrive at a warren of concrete shacks topped with corrugated metal and lit with a single low watt bulb. Smoky. Dim. Full of women and children. This is the cofradia of Santa Cruz, home of Maximon, the most important deity of Santiago – the Mayan version of San Simon. He is a wooden plank, assembled into a small man, and taken apart after Holy Week in May. Tonight is an important night – Maximon has just been reassembled, re-knotted, re put back together and thanks to Stanzione we are invited in to the cofradia.

We enter a cinderblock room the size of a one car garage, and it carries the weight of ages. Wooden benches line two of the walls, behind a wooden table. A ladder rises from the table to a hole in the ceiling. The ceiling is hung with green and yellow and red streamers, and dozens of fruits and vegetables. A life-size glass coffin strung with white Christmas lights holds Jesus Christ, swaddled in heavy wool blankets. He looks so real it’s unsettling. In front of the table stands Maximon, four feet tall, wearing masks, two cowboy hats over an acrylic Jaguar print scarf that flows over his shoulders. He wears a garish black and orange striped tie and is draped in silk scarves, dozens of them. Leather boots studded with silver peak out from beneath the scarves. A row of candles burns on the cement ground before him. Two chairs are on either side, topped with fresh

flowers in coffee cans. An ancient incense burner on a chain gushes smoke; the shaman hands it to us and we bathe our arms and bodies and even cameras in its thick sweetness.

The shaman pours glasses of Quetzalteca. One by one, every man in the room takes the glass, says Maltiox Tata, first to the “alcalde,” – he’s an old man wearing a red bandana and it’s his house that’s hosting the Cofradia now – and then to every one else, and swallows it down. Three and a half big gulps; my throat burns and my stomach lurches. One, two, three rounds, full glasses each round. I’m plastered, there’s no other word for it, and the night dissolves into a phantasm of smoke and light and words and alcohol and nicotine, and we are swept away. The shaman kneels before Maximon, feeds him Quetzalteca, places a lit cigarette in his mouth, makes us smoke, talks and talks and talks. I hear our names; the shaman is talking about us to Maximon. “There is no I anymore,” says Stanzione, “nothing but we.” He points to a leather case wrapped in cotton rope hanging from the ceiling. “That is filled with parchment, ancient parchment from the 1600s.” We laugh. We joke. We tumble against each other on the benches as more Quetzalteca and cigarettes make the rounds. Stanzione translates when he can: “I put you together,” implores the shaman, on his knees before Maximon. “I cleaned you. I’m here. I’m just your slave. I’m on my knees. I’m talking with my hands, my mouth; can you see me doing this right now?”

It is intense and mystical but never solemn; we are completely inebriated, after all. The room is crowded; my vision blurred. The shaman hands me another glass and a lit cigarette and Stanzione says, this is it; it’s my turn – I can kneel before Maximon and ask him for a favor. “Something you really want,” he says. I’m not religious but I’m in

the flow, in the moment; somehow it all makes sense. I kneel on the concrete, the heat of the candles on my face. Maximon is decked out in his finery, but tough looking, with that burning cigarette clenched between his stony lips and eyes that bore into me. In my altered state in this hot, dim room, a womb of sorts, I feel the power of faith, even if it's not my own and sprinkle drops of Quetzalteca before him, for him, and mumble my request.

John Heaton is smiling, glowing, his eyes shining bright: this is it – the magical moment of curiosity, the traveler's quest – to be subsumed by and within the absolutely foreign and mysterious. We are off the bus, off the map, out of this very world - 500 years, half a millennium, from the days when those mounds across the lake were sacred stones under the sun, yet it's all one long strand. I understand almost none of it, but I head Heaton's words – it is art, the magic of human creativity – and that's all I need.

As the ceremony winds down I ask Stanzione if I might pester the shaman with a question. “You can ask him anything,” he says, so I ask about the relationship between Jesus Christ and Maximon, and who is more important. “Maximon is a policeman,” the shaman says, “a lawyer; he is just a child of Jesus. The man in the coffin is the judge; he is the one who is listening.” And then, talking to Maximon, they gently carry him up the ladder and put him to bed, and we tumble out into the darkness of an ugly city that feels beautiful.

In the morning, surprisingly clear-headed and buoyed by our night in the cofradia, we bid farewell to Stanzione and take to the roads again, bound for a place called Chajul that is, says Heaton, “the end of the road.” He means it literally. Isolated in the northern

highlands for centuries, a new paved two-lane road has only just connected it to the outside world and it is, as yet, one of the last places in Guatemala that has not been subjected to the onslaught of concrete and cinderblock. But it is a long journey, and as we climb and plunge along the tales spill out: of the lynx he once adopted in Mexico. Of his great, great, great grandfather's Clipper ships making the tea run to China and his father's three Olympic medals in skeleton and bobsledding. Of his very first journey, beyond the chalk pits at his English boarding school. "The chalk pits were the fence, beyond which we weren't allowed to go," he says. "But I had to see what was on the other side and a friend and I snuck off. It was just woods, but for us it was like being on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. Only three kids had ever done it before. We came back to a wall of tweed and were given a 'sixer:' six lashes on our bare bottoms with a cane. It stung like hell but it was worth every lash. In the communal showers the stripes on our bottoms were stripes of glory."

We pause at a fiesta in Xecul where two bands are battling it out in front of the church and the Ferris wheels are turned by hand, and late in the afternoon arrive in Chajul. The pavement ends just before town and we bump the last way over dirt roads slippery with mud and deep puddles. Chajul is perched on a series of ridge tops, a cocoon of winding dirt streets and beautiful adobe houses, smoke pouring through their tile roofs. A woman sits in the doorway of nearly every house, weaving. Donkeys and horses loaded with cut wood amble through the streets, and women are draped in the mountain cool in red and black checked blankets. There are few cars and life here is outside, in the beaten earth yards, on the streets. "Look," says Heaton, pulling me into

an old house. “Is your mother here?” he asks a young girl. She isn’t, but Heaton leads me in anyway: 300-year old frescoes of men and black suits and women in ball gowns adorn the walls.

Outside another, Heaton greets a middle-aged man and women, they talk in rapid-fire Spanish and invite us inside. The house is adobe, a single room with a packed earth floor and an open fire smoldering in the corner. The women climb a ladder into the rafters and returns with Pre-Columbian bowls and figures and large shards of Mayan funerary urns decorated with the faces of jaguars. “We find them in the fields,” she says, shrugging her shoulders, as if 1,000-year-old artifacts were as common as old Coke bottles in the world. Truthfully, it is all a bit dizzying; Houston is a two-hour flight away and Guatemala, people say, has more private planes per capita than anywhere on earth. But here, tucked away under our very noses, is deep, old, village life. It is raw and inscrutable. “We are lucky,” Heaton says, as we tuck into refried beans and scrambled eggs and hot tortillas cooked on a wood stove in a tiny, empty restaurant, “to be a generation that has seen traditional life but has benefited from technology, too. But in a few generations that traditional life will be gone completely.”

Indeed, smoky, muddy Chajul and the drunk passion of Maximon are still dancing in my head when we settle into Heaton’s inn in the old colonial city of Antigua. The 500-year-old former capital is a different Guatemala, a museum quality place of cobblestone streets and perfectly preserved single-story colonial buildings ringed by volcanic cones. Cafes, sophisticated restaurants – we dine on sushi one evening – a square filled with street musicians and a fountain. Walking along the street, I hear music and duck through

the open door of a Posada. The courtyard is lovely, filled with calla lilies, and seven men playing a wooden xylophone-like instrument. The sound is rich and fast and resonant and two couples - sophisticated, urban Guatemalans from Guatemala City – start dancing arm in arm while their friends clap and shout “Ole!”

But over the red tile roof I can see a volcano, and all this seems veneer. Thanks to Heaton and Stanzione I’d gone deep; out there, I knew, were all those twisting back roads and men and women getting whipped with bundles of herbs before San Simon and drinking to his Mayan counterpart, Maximon, and weaving in dusky dirt floored houses in Chajul. Heaton had been right: because we’d driven those back roads it all felt connected, a journey deep into the soul of a complicated, rich corner of the world. He’d taken us beyond the chalk pits and his tale rang in my ears. “Travel is about always taking a risk,” he’d said. “It’s about curiosity leading you to places you don’t know, just to have that knowledge of what lies beyond. I saw beyond the chalk pits and I paid the price. But it was worth the risk; you have that knowledge for the rest of your life.”