

Travel

Busing around the **BACK COUNTRY**



FACES FROM THE PAST: Archeologists at the ruins of the Mayan city of Copán stacked all the skull stones in one pile.

■ Honduras' cheerful residents and hills of velvet green and soft beige show a vivid country as one travels into the jungles in search of ancient ruins.

By BRIDGET MCQUATE

La casa blanca!" "La oficina de dentista!" The passengers were calling out where they wanted the bus to stop. The official route had deteriorated into a free-for-all delivery service.

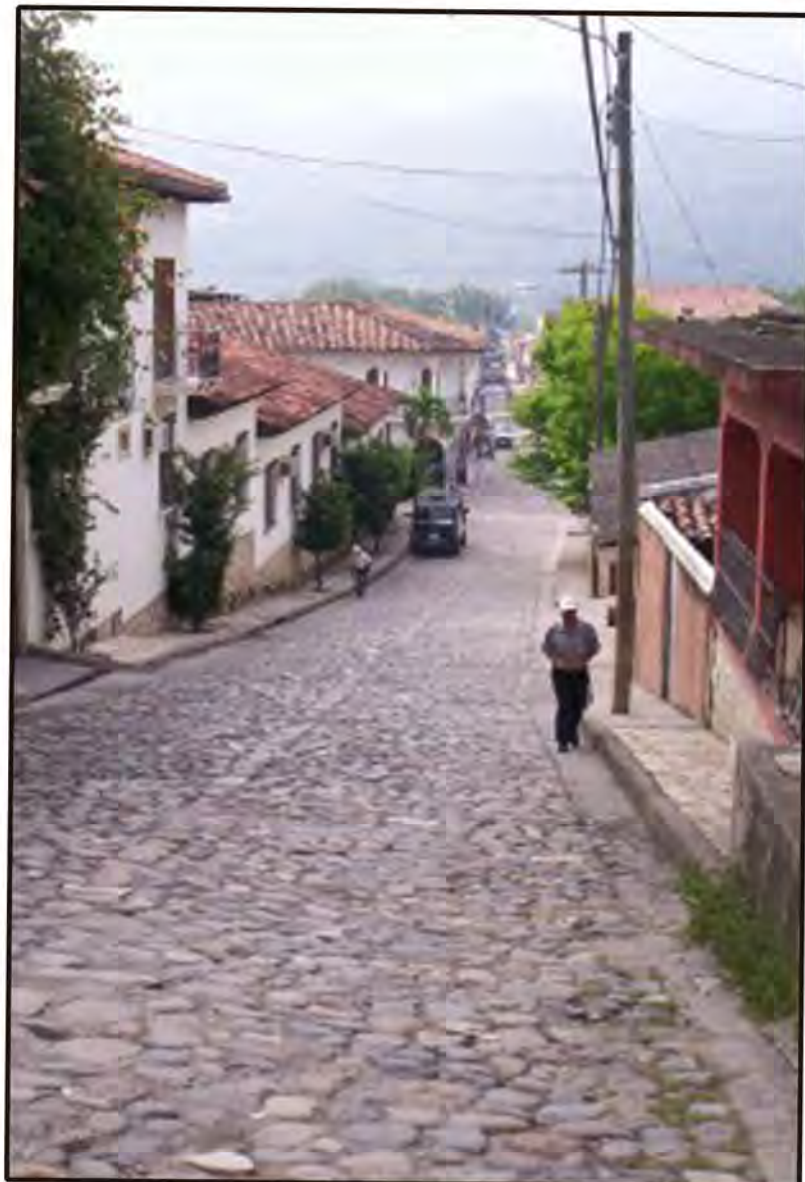
One man hopped off to make a quick purchase and get back on. Another man jumped out to hand off a pistol to his wife waiting in their front yard. At that point, the other passengers and I (the only foreign tourist) were in the jungled mountains of northwestern Honduras, heading toward the Maya ruins of Copan near the Guatemalan border.

There in the heart of *campesino* country, every man wears a straw cowboy hat and carries a machete — to chop through his back yard or to cut rope holding crops onto his horse. One man I met while stuck in the rain used his machete to whack off huge palm leaves to make a poor man's umbrella.

The mountains rose higher and peaked more sharply the farther west we went. The patchwork hills of velvet green and soft beige pointed up to the blue sky where cotton-ball clouds stood still, as if painted on by numbers. Sprays of deep fuchsia and yellow flower bushes added exotic highlights. The houses dotting the hills were painted in the brightest imaginable blues, pinks and greens. What a shame Van Gogh never painted Honduras.

And now for the dark side of that world. The bus came to a stop in

Please see **HONDURAS**, 9E



Photos by BRIDGET MCQUATE
THE HILLS ARE ALIVE: The hilly, cobblestone streets of Copán Ruinas.



Photos by BRIDGET McQUATE

COLONIAL CLASSIC: A colonial church in Honduras' capital city, Tegucigalpa.

Honduras from 1E

front of two soldiers with machine guns at an impromptu roadblock. Dressed in camouflage and combat boots, one boarded the bus, commanding us to get off and have our personal documents ready. He lined us up, the other women and I in front, the men in back — and went down the lines checking IDs. The other soldier crawled around inside and on top of the bus.

They were probably looking for El Salvadoran refugees. Many had fled to Honduras to escape the civil war in their country. The war is officially over, but some refugees in Honduras may be suspected of insurgent activities. The encounter gave me a taste of the way people in some Central American countries have lived — in fear and intimidation.

But the incident turned out to be harmless. And I found Honduras in general to be safe for travelers.

In the 1990s, with resolutions to the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua (for now), Honduras is moving out of its defensive mode. There's a push for tourism to boost its anemic economy. But many travelers still haven't heard the call.

At every official bus stop, swarms of men, women and children ran from the street to the bus windows hawking juice, cookies, corn on the cob, caramel popcorn and things that looked like hockey pucks wrapped in corn husks. The chaos of the selling stampede crescendoed as each vendor yelled the name of his or her product. As the bus started rolling again, it left behind a wake of floating Lempira bills (17 cents U.S.), tossed out at the last minute.

Almost every bus in Honduras is a school bus that apparently no school wanted anymore. The only public "luxury" buses operate between Honduras' two major cities, the capital Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. But none has a bathroom onboard. My adventure of seeing Honduras by bus turned out to be an exercise in bladder control.

We reached the village of Copan Ruinas as the sun was setting in pinks and blues

over the mountain edges.

When my first choice of hotels was booked, an indigenous teenager helped show me to another hotel. He walked me there, waited for me to check in and offered to show me where to eat, change money and buy souvenirs. Before I knew what was happening, this 13-year-old had become my self-appointed guide.

"How much do you charge for being my guide?" I asked him in Spanish.

"Whatever you want to give me." His name was Mario. I would see him again.

The next morning, I headed to the ruins. Walking along a dirt path next to the road, I came face-to-face (actually face-to-waist) with a gigantic, elaborately dressed stone warrior standing on the edge of a farm. Another popped up farther along.

I saw more tourists at the ruins than anywhere else in Honduras, but only a handful altogether. I overheard them telling stories of Copan, such as how American John Lloyd Stephens and Britisher Frederick Catherwood "officially" discovered the ruins in 1839, after hearing rumors of a great city in the jungle.

A native guide led them through that jungle until they found a wall. Behind it, 14-foot-tall stone warriors and vegetation-covered temples awaited. At that time, there was no name for the people whose city had been resting there for more than 1,000 years.

The size of the ruins you can see at Copan is smaller than the majestic pyramids of Tikal in Guatemala. But Copan's majesty lies in its expression of the Maya's artistry and imagination.

The ornamental beauty of its buildings, the extensive written symbols with cartoonlike animal figures, the evidence of ceremonial rituals and astronomical calculations, all create a sense of awe that such an ancient people could be so advanced.

Copan evokes a host of mysteries, too. Why is one statue wearing what looks like sunglasses? How many people were present at a blood-letting ceremony where a ruler extracted blood from his penis and his "concubine" dragged a spike-edged rope across her tongue? Did they really decapitate the losing captain at their ball games?

Why did the people of Copan leave their city to decay and ruin? And the biggest mystery of all: Why does a statue of Copan's official mascot, the bat, look like a Saturday morning cartoon character?

That evening, I hiked up to an abandoned jail overlooking Copan Ruinas' adobe houses, cobblestone streets and the jungle valley of the ancient Mayas. Several village children came out to greet me, saying they lived in the jail and would pose for a photograph for 1 Lempira. Many children in Honduras are unabashedly curious about tourists — and fairly unabashed about asking for money. But most of them offer some sort of tourist service in return. As poor a country as it is, I saw few beggars or homeless people.

Hondurans in general were extremely friendly and honest. One little boy had charged me 2 Lempiras for some caramel popcorn. Another vendor child came over and told me that it really cost only 1 Lempira and that the scoundrel had charged me extra for being a tourist. The little "thief" sulked away.

On my way out of Copan, the bus passed Mario leading three horses carrying gringos.

I was on my way to Tela on the Honduran Caribbean, in search of the Garifuna people who live in coastal villages. Garifunas are a mixture of African, Carib and Arawak that the British brought from the island of St. Vincent to Honduras in the 18th century. They're known for their seafood, coconut bread, music and dancing.

At Tela, I hiked down the beach under miles and miles of coconut groves toward the Garifuna village of San Juan. I took a swim in the warm, blue Caribbean before continuing on to San Juan's beach, where the fishermen park their colorful wooden canoes. Friendly residents led me to Restaurant Gilma — just a porch and a couple of tables. I drank a few Salva Vida beers, mostly because it was all they had. The young girls there were keen on playing with my hair, so I came out of Restaurant Gilma crowned and tipsy.

That's when I met Jose, who became my personal guide to San Juan. The cost this time was a conversation in English. As



HISTORIC PASSAGES: Hieroglyphic stairs at Copan provide a clue to the royal house of Copan of the past. Its images are still being deciphered.

he walked me around the town, he spoke Garifuna to the people sitting outside their pink and blue houses. Their language is an African dialect with a little Arawak, French, Yoruba and Spanish thrown in.

The biggest threat to my well-being in Honduras presented itself on the walk back to Tela. A coconut dropped next to me in the sand with a thud. The next day at Lanctilla Botanical Gardens near Tela, the man at the office warned against spending

too much time under the fruit trees.

The gardens were planted in 1926 by U.S.-owned United Fruit Co., to experiment with exotic fruits. The project was later turned over to the Honduran government and is now run as a tourist attraction. The pure funkiness of some of the trees there had me saying "wow" out loud. Nobody noticed — I was the only one around.

■ *Bridget McQuate is an artist and writer living in Philadelphia.* ■

IF YOU GO

■ **Getting there:** American, Continental, TACA and Tan/Sahsa (the Honduran airline) fly into the capital of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. San Pedro Sula is four hours closer to Copan and the beach towns than Tegucigalpa is, but the capital is worth a visit if you have plenty of time.

■ **Getting Around:** Some of the more popular tourist destinations are the diving resorts along the coral reefs of the Bahia islands. Rafting and fishing expeditions are also attracting some active travelers. One obstacle to tourism is that the road and railroad systems were set up for transporting bananas — not people. Buses are cheap and easy to catch — as long as you have Lonely Planet's *Central America* guidebook to tell you when and from where they leave. If you can pronounce your destination, someone will put you on the right bus.

Cheap internal flights on Tan/Sahsa fly between the capital and San Pedro Sula and to the coast and Bay Islands. You can rent a car in the larger Honduran cities, charter luxury buses or join an organized tour.

One reason for coming to Honduras is the incredible cheapness of everything. My hotel rooms last year ranged from \$3.50 to \$12 for a clean, plain single with private bath.

■ **Language:** Some basic Spanish would be helpful for the more remote locations in Honduras.

■ **Weather:** February, March and April are prime months for traveling in Honduras. The rainy season is from May to December.