

# Tikal, or On the Soundness of Ancient Mores

by [Guido Mina di Sospiro](#) with photos by Stenie Mina di Sospiro  
(August 2018)



The Embraer 110 Bandeirante doesn't look exactly brand-new. Later on I'll read that this small twin-turboprop was last produced in 1990, which means that the one we were flying on was at least 28 years old, though I'd say a few more. The din inside is deafening, so even if I wanted to say some (famous) last words to my wife, she wouldn't hear them. It's strange how we shy away from risk at home, wear seatbelts religiously, pay insurance on this and that, but throw all caution to the wind when traveling to exotic places. The thing is, Tikal remains a difficult place to reach, and even when flying in, the airport of Santa Elena is about seventy minutes away by bus from the archeological marvel.

Once inside the minibus a guide tells us that the Petén, the vast region that makes up Northern Guatemala, used to be all jungle, but then was deforested only to find out, after what must have been a herculean task, that the soil was not suitable for farming: too thin, sitting on top of limestone ridges. So now the sparse population uses it for raising Brahman cattle, resistant to heat and, we're told, not too thirsty. Yes, because outside of the rainy season, water supply can be a problem in the region, as the Maya civilization knew all too well. It seems odd, because along the way we skirt the eastern end of Lake Petén Itzá, at 28 square miles the second largest lake in Guatemala, which, one would think, could have served as a reservoir.

Of course, there's no trace of seatbelts in the minibus, but by now we're past caring. Besides, if guardian angels do exist, they might as well keep in shape.

Once we arrive at the immense Tikal National Park we notice with surprise that there are no buses and, consequently, only a few tourists. We were expecting the siege the traveler encounters at Machu Picchu or, in France, at the *château de Chenonceau*. But that is not the case, which, as I'll explain, is a mixed blessing. It's not nearly as warm and sticky as we thought it would be, nothing like the heat experienced in Cartagena, Colombia, some years ago. Everything, in other words, seems auspicious for a good visit. And I will begin from the end, and that is, my overall impressions.





From the very start, looking up at the back of steep and lichen-encrusted Temple 1 (L), where the entrance to the city is located, we knew that all the hype was deserved, and then some. There is an overarching beauty to the whole place that is difficult to capture on camera and in words. Above all, the visual experience is startlingly similar to what Britons and Northern Europeans on the Grand Tour must have experienced in the 19th century. The classical

antiquity we discover here in the middle of the jungle is engulfed in vegetation much as Roman and Greek ruins in Italy were back in the day, before being restored in their entirety by alacritous archeologists of all nationalities. Quite a lot of work has been carried out in Tikal since Modesto Méndez and Ambrosio Tut, respectively commissioner and governor of Péten, visited the lost city in 1848, but so much remains to be *exhumed*, literally.

In the heyday of the Classic period, Tikal was neatly separated from the jungle that surrounded it by the work of its inhabitants. Nowadays, portions of it are visible *in spite* of the jungle, or rather *in the midst* of it. And what a jungle! The vegetation is pristine, more than lush, thriving;

we could feel an unusual amount of oxygen in the air we were breathing, from the intense photosynthesis occurring all around us. There's something tremendous in breathing pure jungle air, particularly during a day in which the heat is, mercifully, not an issue.



You walk along paths choked up by vegetation with howler and spider monkeys overhead and coatis (L) scurrying everywhere unafraid of humans and suddenly a sublime vista opens up in front of you. From an aesthetic standpoint, we weren't expecting anything quite as

sublimely beautiful. Yes, sublimely, in the sense the Romantics gave to the word.

And that remains one of the best rewards of travel: to find beauty. When travelers stand in awe resting their eyes on Umbria's medieval hill towns, in Italy, what stirs in them is an overwhelming aesthetic experience. Guidebooks and guides will have informed them or will proceed to inform them that such lovely hill towns were, in origin, military strongholds. It is curious how time has changed the function of such places and our perception of them. Plenty of cruel and ghastly things occurred centuries ago inside and outside the walls of such strongholds—but the contemporary traveler doesn't care. What registers is the sheer beauty of the place. And the same applies to Tikal: the place, in its enormity and exquisite blend of man-made and nature-made, is gorgeous. No



accumulation of trivia should alter this immediate perception—What was the function of the city? When was it built? When did it flourish? And so on and on. No: being here promotes a sense of arrival, of well-being and, strangely, even of housedness, though the place *is* exotic and so far from home.

Having said that, a few facts and figures may help.

Tikal remains to this day the largest excavated site in the Americas. It was the capital of a state among the most powerful kingdoms of the Maya that reached its apogee from 200 to 900 AD. The Maya region then was dominated in every aspect



by this city, which interacted with very distant neighbors such as Teotihuacan, in the Valley of Mexico, 30 miles northeast of contemporary Mexico City, and Copán, in what is today Western Honduras. After the end of the Classic Period, building activity ground

to a halt and the population declined. Eventually, Tikal was abandoned, toward the end of the 10th century.

Archeologists have been able to learn much about the city and its inhabitants thanks to the discovery of the tombs of many rulers and the findings within the various monuments. In addition to that, the Maya script—the only Mesoamerican writing system—was deciphered in the 1950s, chiefly by the

Russian linguist Yuri Knorozov. Since then, much has been learned about the Maya, and yet much remains mysterious.

In an archeological area of 6 square miles, more than 3,000 structures have been mapped out, ranging from pyramidal limestone temples—the tallest of which is over 230 feet—to palaces, residences, altars, buildings with different functions and platforms.

The sumptuousness of it all is overwhelming.



We start our walk at the foot of a giant Kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), the sacred tree of the Maya (below, with author behind), their *trait-d'union* between heaven and earth. By going around the back of the impressive Temple 1, we enter the Grand Plaza, which could hardly be more awe-inspiring. It consists of two temples facing one other—1 and 2 (above L)—and the Central and Northern Acropolis. There are a few visitors,



and some workers, high up on the temples secured by ropes. Accompanying my wife and me is a friend, and a character: Eduardo, a Cuban octogenarian with both mind and body as sharp as a tack. As we climb up the Northern Acropolis and Eduardo is taking pictures of a huge sculpted mask (above R), I notice a commotion in the center of the Plaza: one of the workers is being attacked by bees, a swarm of them, in fact. While he withstands the



brunt of the attack, some renegade bees leave the swarm. One starts buzzing around Eduardo. My feeling of well-being and housedness is still so acute that I give him the following advice: "Just don't move; stand still."

It's excellent advice—for the bee, which has all the time it needs to find a piece of uncovered skin and zoom in on it. Eduardo, with characteristic nonchalance, says, "It stung me; look, here's the stinger." But he's more concerned with the fact that his camera's battery has just died.

We walk back to the now almost deserted Plaza. Other visitors who were with us in the plane have dashed off as if they were



being chased by Moloch. One guide is left, and Eduardo tells him about his battery while his forearm is swelling fast, but he can't be bothered with that. The guide has no spare battery but, as it turns out, his camera uses the same memory card. So Eduardo proposes to give the guide his own memory card, and then hire the guide to follow us and take photos of whatever his employer decides. "The thing is," adds Eduardo as an afterthought, "I never look at the pictures I take, so... never mind."

In the meantime a few rancorous bees are attacking a girl whose hair reaches all the way down to her waist. It must be her pride, but it's turning out to be a major nuisance, as the bees have decided to ensconce in it. The poor girl is in tears, screaming and having fits of hysterics. She runs zigzaggingly to four soldiers who are patrolling the area wielding conspicuous Israeli automatic rifles. Two of them valiantly dart off, while the other two start picking bees out of her hair one by one.

With the bee emergency over, we are reunited with our fellow visitors.



We visit all the main temples and other notable structures in a glorious procession interspersed by patches of jungle, and continue to feel euphoric despite the bee incident because the place, stunning from the very first impression, keeps getting better, as if that were possible. It may be a lucky day; we're told that the night before it rained, so it's cooler than it would normally be. We're

also told that no one can climb the temples. Visitors used to be allowed to do so, then one climber too many lost their footing and fell to their death. In fact, I remember having to sign a form of consent before climbing Huayna Picchu, the mountain that rises over Machu Picchu, in Peru. And in a way I'm happy to be spared the exercise: after the exertion, the temperature would not feel so cool any more, and it would take up much more time than I'd want to spend on it. Moreover, the city was built to be experienced from the bottom, not the top.

We pass by temples that have been only partially uncovered as well as pyramid-shaped mounds that clearly cover structures in their entirety. Guatemala is a poor country still healing from a civil war in which 40,000 to 50,000 people disappeared and up to 200,000 were killed, and archeology must be seen as a superfluous pastime. It's surprising that a systematic uncovering and restoring of all structures would not be taken

on by some international organization, but that is the case. The University of Pennsylvania carried out major excavations from 1956 through 1970. In 1979 the Guatemalan government took over. Despite having been a filming location for the 1977 film *Star Wars*, and despite having been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1979, Tikal still needs a lot of work.

From an aesthetic/artistic perspective, it's perfect as it is: the blend of jungle and structures; the partly uncovered and fully covered but discernable buildings—all conjure up the images about which I wrote earlier: Roman and Greek ruins invaded by flora and fauna as the travelers on the Grand Tour beheld them back in the 19th century. From an archeological and historical perspective, the place is wanting. But even as it stands, I would recommend at least a few days to visit it.

As we go from temple to building, the guide keeps pointing out sacrificial altars (R). Possibly owing to the Black Legend (according to which anything either done or stated by the Spaniards must be either horrible or wrong/untrue), until recently historians were



reticent to believe the chronicles of Spanish conquistadors and their retinues that spoke about large numbers of sacrifices, also because by the time the Spaniards entered the scene, the Maya civilization had vanished. But archeological findings, and well as writing from the Mayans themselves—their script having been deciphered as noted—to a large extent



confirm what the Spaniards claimed: the Maya civilization was bloodthirsty and sacrifice-happy.



All sorts of sacrifices (altar, L) were carried out, animal and human alike. Blood-letting was particularly propitiatory. I won't go into too much detail; suffice it to mention that blood from the penis and the vagina was held in high esteem as the most sacred, owing to its fertilizing power. Captives from neighboring cities were periodically sacrificed to ingratiate the gods. While the Aztecs engaged in even more carnage, the parade of

sacrificial altars on display in Tikal leaves the visitor with little doubt. From a diplomatic standpoint systematically sacrificing people from neighboring cities doesn't really make for great public relations. But hubris must have been informing the leaders, and the victim was just a cog in the ritualistic machine.

The concept of sacrifice—from the Latin *sacrifico* (“I sacrifice”), from *sacer* (“sacred”) + *facio* (“do, make”)—is rooted in a cross-cultural or even universal belief in the law of compensation, which at its most basic dictates: *do ut des*,

a commutative contract according to which something is given so that something may be received in return. However, if the sacrificial victim is a captive from another city, a fundamental ingredient seems to be missing from the equation, as the offering is *costless* on the side of the offerer, while it couldn't be *costlier* on the side of the offered. There is an imbalance, and/or a logical fallacy. If, on the other hand, the Tikal Mayans did *not* intend their rituals as sacrifices but rather as offerings, that would constitute no logical fallacy, though it remains to be seen whether the gods would in fact be ingratiated by something that was so *costless* on the side of the offerer.

Pausing by one of the many sacrificial altars, I comment, "Maybe UNESCO should make some dungeon from a palace in Toledo, in Spain, a World Heritage Site. The Inquisitors too sacrificed people to their god."

"What a good idea," says Eduardo, "I'll write to them and suggest it."

"Actually," chimes in Susan, a sweet girl from Southern California, "it's all good."

Seeing our puzzled look, she elaborates: "Yeah, it's all good. If the sacrifices are carried out in genuine belief, then it's fine. Look, we don't have a body; our body is an illusion, see here? It stands *beside* us. The idea of being 'somebody' is like carrying around dead meat."

While I'm ready to dismiss this stance as New Age drivel, Eduardo breaks in with, "Well, I'm glad you think so, Susan. You see, I'm a part-time cannibal, and all this walking has given me an appetite. May I treat myself to your leg?"

She laughs and says, "You're funny, Eduardo." But for somebody who doesn't have a body, she probably established a new 100-meter dash record when she ran away from the bees just a few hours before.

And that's the problem with abstraction: be it Susan's well-meaning (?) assertions, or the Mayans' routine sacrifices: it loses sight of reality, and sanity with it.

I've come across a single intellectual who, in modern times, the 20th century, in fact, wrote enthusiastically about human sacrifices: Georges Bataille. In his words: "The victim is surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the accursed share, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the order of things; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings." Bataille maintains that by being sacrificed, the victim ascends into the realm of the sacred, the realm of the free subject no longer subordinated to the demands of useful production. "The world of the subject is the night: that changeable, infinitely suspect night which, in the sleep of reason, *produces monsters. I submit that madness itself gives a rarefied idea of the free 'subject,' unsubordinated to the 'real' order and occupied only with the present.*"



"The sleep of reason" is right: that's what abstraction produces—sanity is ignored, withheld, and the strangest, cruelest things suddenly have a logic of their own. The insistence on sacrifice in Tikal is linked to another astonishing factor: the lack of springs, rivers, *cenotes* (natural sinkholes) and lakes in its immediate vicinity.

In this respect, such an ancient civilization differs radically from, say, the Greek one. The ancient Greeks were masters at selecting the most suitable location for the type of city they intended to build. I thought it was a shortcoming only of modern western man to build cities in places unsuited for human habitation, for example Los Angeles and Miami, for opposite reasons: the former at the edge of a desert, the latter at the edge of an immense swamp. The Colorado River Aqueduct is but one of Los Angeles's various artificial water sources, while the Everglades have been separated from urbanized south-east Florida by a network of canals. Both "solutions" cannot realistically be considered permanent.

Much like modern western man, the Mayans of Tikal ignored the morphology of their chosen site. Then, to compensate for this blatant deficiency, they built ten reservoirs in which to store rainwater—for a city of as many as 90,000 inhabitants. A prodigious feat, to get by only through stored seasonal rainfall—or an act of arrogance, or folly?

The reality is that when water started to run short, more and more people would be sacrificed to ingratiate the gods so that it would rain. To our 21st-century mind this not only registers as unnecessary cruelty on an industrial scale, but

also as lunacy: all they had to do was build the city near a body of water.

The Mayans also believed that in order for the sun to rise, they had to sacrifice something or even someone every day to the gods. In short, there was always a reason for blood-letting, as attested by the ubiquitous sacrificial altars throughout the city.

The Mayan ethos is difficult to digest as it is apparent to us that there were bloodless ways to obviate the same problems. That is why I prefer *not* to think about Tikal as it was in its heyday, much as I prefer *not* to think about what went on inside the Coliseum in Ancient Rome. I'd rather enjoy both as they are now, Tikal in particular, majestic and yet still hiding in the jungle and, from an aesthetic and artistic point of view, so sublimely romantic.

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