

## **Survival Machete test in the Jungles of Belize Feb. 2015**

Ever since I was little wanted to try my hand at Jungle survival. It seemed like it would be pretty easy because jungles have so many resources to aid survival. Vines, giant leaves, fruit, lots of water... So with that in mind, I finally got up funds and made the time to do it. I also got a big push, when my friend told me that her mother, who was dying of cancer in her early 50's,(my age), once said to her, "If there is something you want to do in your life, do it now." That really struck home with me.

I really like the living off the land concept for more than just the feeling of being self-reliant, or self-sustaining, but mainly for feeling closer to nature and to feel that I am part of the system there. Drinking the water and eating wild foods from a place and sleeping outside in nature makes me feel more bonded to the place, and for me there is a sort of feeling of wellbeing I experience from that. I think it goes way back, an ancient intuitive feeling of, "I can take care of myself, I can provide for myself". I like to think that when I am eating wild foraged food that I am literally integrating that place into me, I am part of that place then, and it's a part of me. There is a certain magic in that for me.

I also have a feeling of being free when I do solo camping, especially when I have big long range views, like in the desert or ocean!

Since I am a survival tool maker, I was excited to test my new survival knife I just made called the Firefly and my SM24 machete.

There were a lot of firsts for me on this trip. First time, I had never traveled by myself outside of the USA. First time doing an extended camping trip in another country and first time spending that much effort and dollars to do a "Survival Vacation"!

My basic plan for this trip was to fly to Belize, then drive inland to the Jungle, visit some Mayan ruins and then drive down the Hummingbird highway, (Beautiful Jungle road), and then do some Jungle survival training with Mayan Guide Adventures for a few days. After that I planned to drive down to Placentia and get my kayak and begin my Tropical Island Castaway adventure and my Survival machete test. Read on below is my jungle photo essay.

My only real concern for the trip was bugs. I heard horror stories from people I knew, that camped in Belize and were so tormented by biting bugs, especially sand flies, that it made camping miserable.

These are the knives I took with me. Machetes, I made from 1095 high carbon steel, prototype SM18 and SM24. A hollow handled 1095 blade bush craft knife (below the black sheath). The “Firefly” neck knife made from stainless steel Damascus, with integrated ferro rod. CRKT Stiff Kiss, my favorite production light weight survival knife, 4 Credit card knives that I gave as gifts to my guides. A cheap multi tool, and a Victronox folder that is and EDC mainly for the scissors and tweezers. Here’s a link to a video of the gear I brought with me.

[https://youtu.be/x2d-oclOI\\_g](https://youtu.be/x2d-oclOI_g)



I arrived in Belize City about 3:30 in the afternoon, I was anxious to get my rental car and get going as I was not looking forward to driving at night on poor roads. It took about 40 minutes to finally get my truck and head off to Benque, (Benque Viejo Del Carmen), near the Guatemalan border. I was thrilled to see the tropical plants as soon as I got out of Belize City.



I was excited that I was going to learn some of these plants.

It is normally about 2 hour drive to Benque, but it took me about 3. There are very few signs on the “highways”, all highways in Belize are two lane roads with little or no stripping or reflectors. There are no street signs once you get into town so the only way to find your destination is to ask for directions. Once it was dark it compounded

the problem. Plus there were big speed bumps all over the place! On the highway! Some were not marked!

To keep with my preparedness discipline, as soon as I was out in the open road, I pulled over and got out my Firefly, neck knife, (you wear it around your neck like a necklace), and my lighter. I then stopped at the first gas station /market and bought bottled water. I was confident I had the basics. It was fun going into those third world markets, they do not have a lot of fluff; just the things that people need, and the patrons I encountered were very helpful and kind.

I was in good spirits even after asking 4 different people directions along the way, I finally arrived at Benque and the Benque Resort the "The Purple Mayan Hostel". My room was only 19.00 USD a night, since no one else was in the room I stayed in, I had the place to myself. It was clean and nice with hard wood paneling and floors. It had a large roof water catchment system going to a tank across the street.



Below, a simple house in Bengue.



The next day was a planned chilled day and Mayan Ruin day. I got out a little after 6:00am for a run and explored the town. I thought the town was so cool, lots of rundown houses and dogs and cats and chickens. People washing their clothes in the river. I then got into my

truck and drove to the edge of town to visit Xunantunich I took a hand cranked ferry across the river and then walked a mile to the site.





I saw my first Iguana lizards in the wild on my way in.



When I finally got to the ruins, I was impressed with how big the pyramid was, and the grounds and the other ruins. It was at least 6 to seven stories tall. My guide book kind of played it down as a lesser ruin. So the other ones must be really huge!









Highlights were, seeing the iguanas, seeing Howler monkeys there, and exploring the pyramid.







Also, I got a call from Jimmy, my 18 year old son, when I was almost on top of the pyramid! It was the only phone call I got while in Belize, I do not know how it came through.



Next, I got brunch in this tiny local restaurant, a burrito, it was delicious, so I asked for 2 more to eat as a picnic later.



I then made my way to a fruit stand where I bought a giant ripe papaya. Which I did not eat until I was on my island trip. I then got directions to Cahal Pech, another Mayan ruin. I hired a guide there and this guy was educated in Archeology from a college in Oklahoma! He knew all the subtleties of Cahal Pech and lots of the plants too. It was worth it.

Below Cahal Pech one of the first and oldest Mayan sites.







I then went back to Benque and reorganized my gear and my back pack for the Jungle survival trip. It poured rain that night, I was concerned that I would be doing my training in the rain. But just before 6:00am, when I got up, it calmed down to a sprinkle. I went for a run up to the boarder of Guatemala, then hurried back to get to the Mayan Guide Adventure by 9:00. I drove for 1 ½ hours on the



hummingbird highway, it was beautiful,



and I was excited about getting out in the jungle to camp and just be in it.

I met my first guides Francisco, and then Carlos. They asked me to show them the gear I brought so they would see if I needed anything. All my gear was good, I then whipped out my machete, (SM24) and they loved it! They all want one. I am not sure if they believed me that I made my knife (made from SS damascus), but they also really like the Firefly.

We hiked into our base camp about 2 miles from their main base/home. All of the while Francisco pointed out edible and useful plants. One tree, (Turpentine or Diesel tree), had these large berries on it and the husk is bright red. Francisco picked a husk up and asked me for a lighter. He lit the lighter and squeezed the husk and a big flame shot out as the liquid streaming from it ignited almost burning my eyebrow off, we all laughed, it was a good ice breaker.

We ate some termites



on the way in, they are actual pretty good, kind of a nutty flavor, and very high in protein, (higher than any animal meat). You just poke a hole in their nest and they come running out. Then lick your finger and some will stick to it and you can just lick them off.

Once we got to base camp, we saw that the roof had partially collapsed on the shelter that they had built there. The cross member was too light to support the load of palm fronds.

We chopped down a small tree to act as the center brace. Francisco then asked me to saw off an end to shorten it. My SM24 machete saw worked great! I think they were impressed. Way easier than chopping it off once it was cut down.







I pitched the Hennessey hammock, provided to me by MGA, between some trees. They are awesome hammocks and have a built in bug net and rain fly. They have no side entry zippers, you enter them from a slit in the bottom, than once your weight is on the hammock, the entry closes up tight. It works great, I slept well with no bugs!







- I then got some reminders on machete use. Carlos then went over how to sharpen a machete with a file. Video <https://youtu.be/qQf6AU62Wwg>

Later the main guide Pedro Garcia showed up to relieve Francisco. He showed me some machete skills... two things: one, never strike the thing you are cutting at a 90 degree angle, always at an angle. Two, commit to your strike. Make a full swing from behind your back, deliver each strike with full energy. Each chop is deliberate, efficient. Pedro and Carlos and I then went out to find and chop down a younger Cohune palm so we could eat its heart (heart of palm).

<https://youtu.be/v2aHJ7lacnw> Soap box>>> Some native traditions say that before you cut down any tree, you must ask permission of that tree (show it the respect that you would your elders), so I did this as Pedro began chopping. I think it is import to show gratitude to animals and plants we kill. By the sacrifice of their life, we are able to live. Humans and animals can only survive by killing other organisms. Since I know what it is like to be really hungry I always try to remember to be grateful for all creatures and plants that die for me. I do my best to always give thanks.

Below, Pedro Garcia's machete with one of my bush craft knives for scale. His machete's blade is about 28" long.



Below close-up of Francisco's machete. I like the lines of the unusual shaped blade. I believe it is a Imacasa model? Reshaped?



Below Prototype SM24 with Cohune Palm stump. Chops below the cut were my practice chops.







We all then, processed the heart and began cooking it. It was good we were all full.





The next day we did more plant ID, in which I learned practical uses, like, food, shelter, medicine, cordage, musical instruments, then went out foraging for Hutus which they also referred to as “fresh water conch”. They are ~2.5” long fresh water snails with a conical shell. We got a bunch of those and Cohune palm nuts.

Hutes and Obil leaves makes for a really tasty soup. Obil leaves are a kind of spicy leave that add a lot of savory flavor to anything they are cooked with. Pacaya palm buds in background. Pacaya has kind of a bitter taste, but they were plentiful and could fill you up. It is kind of a winter tradition in Belize to eat these cooked with eggs.



Cahune palm nuts. High protein. They use these to make palm oil. These are big nuts about 2” long. This bunch weighs about 200lbs!





Pedro with Cohune palm nuts



I also ate one of those big grubs. I had to, what survival trip is complete without that!



Cooking a Grub, yum! It was actually good cooked!



Looking kind of goofy, RFW processing Hutes snails. You cut of about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " of the end of the Conical shell so that later when they are

cooked, you can suck them out of their shell. They are good, chewy, like clam and abalone cross.



Large fresh water crab and the knife I made for the trip the Firefly.





- We also saw a Jaguar prints. They are making a comeback in Belize, yeah!



One of the best highlights for me on this jungle trip was hearing the Howler Monkeys at night. Such a huge and menacing sound comes out of them (think Sasquatch noise). I loved it, it is now my favorite sound that any animal makes here on earth! Right up there next to Coyotes. You can here a video of them here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LObpcHlvdKA>

There was lots of edible protein in the little creeks near our camp including: crab, crayfish, little fish, including catfish and snails.

Pedro was awesome, he is kind and considerate and conscientious of the life of the jungle; he would look for downed or dead trees or plants to do a demo on. He was respectful of the Jungle, not just a slasher like some of the other younger guides. He has and does work with training Dutch and British troops in Jungle survival. He worked with the Dutch for years and Brits for many years, he even helped train Prince Charles in jungle survival, when he was with the SAS.

We explored several caves, all of these are off the path on private property and have not had many visitors to them ever. One had a tiny opening then opened up to a big awesome room there was an ancient fire ring in there. A smaller one we found had been used by "loggers" as a place to camp they had trash everywhere we picked up most of it and brought it out or burned the trash. We found in that cave a place where it looked like a skeleton had been exhumed, there were human bones in there including part of a skull and also ancient pottery. We also found chert flakes (a hard stone similar in use to obsidian), which points to making of stone cutting tools. Further there were carved shells, drill to be hung by a cord. We of course left all of it for the archeologist.











I plan to send the Mayan Guides some Machetes (SM28) of my design once they are in production. I also learned some new traps, shelters and lots of plants. Just camping and being in the jungle was fun for me.

Below Carlos, RFW and Pedro Garcia





Pedro taught me the proper way to make a lean-to shelter. Once again, the survivor's friend, the Cohune palm. Split frond, lean-to shelter, made with vines for cordage. Cupped side of leaf faces out. Alternate the direction of the leaves when shingling.





Carlos cracked me up around the camp fire with his creole. Some of his phrases were so funny!

Carlos demos a water vine.



What I learned about machetes.

I learned that if you possibly can, bring a large machete with you between a 24" and 28" blade. Thinner blades are better, .07 to .085 about 5/64". The thin bladed machete is lighter which is good because you are working with them all day, mainly using it to push branches out of your way, but also to do shelter building firewood prep and all manner of things. A heavy, thick blade, machete will store more energy and theoretically cut deeper with each stroke, but in practice, it is more fatiguing to use and carry all day long. The longer machete is best for survival for these reasons. A long blade is useful because the tip speed is faster and allows for imparting way more energy into your work. Each chop goes in deeper with about the same amount of energy used. People that live in the jungle use them

to cut down trees often, and prefer them over an axe, (unless they have a chainsaw!). Also, when moving through the jungle, and not blazing a trail, the longer “reach” of these machetes allow them to easily move vines and branches out of their way; better than a short version. They did not slash their way through the jungle when foraging or looking for resources, they would mainly cut vegetating out of the way when hiking on and maintaining an established trail. Another advantage of reach is that it often seemed, a branch with fruit or a palm frond that you need is just out of reach, either too high or too obscured by brush. The extra length allows the operator to reach and get it.

Pedro, is a very experienced jungle survival instructor, he has taught for over 30 years. He is on the payroll of both the Dutch and British Special Forces. He offered me this story. He said the Dutch are issued a short machete with about a 12” blade, and they would have to work their asses off to cut down palm trees to get the heart of palm.

Survival is all about efficiency and using less calories.

I will be offering a couple of larger version as a result of my experience there.

I was relieved that insects were not a problem. I attribute this to being there at the right time of year, wearing good treated clothes, good bug repellent and sleeping with a net overhead. I feel fairly confident now that if I had to survive in the jungle that I have enough knowledge of plants and slow protein to be able to survive fairly well.

Great experience! If I had a bucket list I could cross it off! I want to go back next year and spend more time and go solo or with a friend for a couple weeks or a month would be ideal.

Who wants to go!? Seriously, email me.

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