

Mixing Archaeology and Touristic Development at Caracol

by Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase

Mayan ruins can combine a surprising mix of past, present and future. The jungle, with its tropical wildlife, carpets mounded remnants of once gleaming white buildings. These abandoned ruins are of interest to scholar and public alike. Through archaeological work, a semblance of how these buildings were used and an idea of who lived in them may be re-captured. Mayan sites like Caracol not only add valuable information to Belize's heritage, but may also contribute to the country's purse in the future.

Commanding Belize's Vaca Plateau, Caracol is one of the largest sites in the region - on a par with Honduras' Copán, Guatemala's Tikal, and Mexico's Chichén Itzá, Coba, or Palenque. The carved stone monuments at the site's center attest to Caracol's defeat of Tikal in A.D. 562 and its conquest of many other sites in Guatemala. In fact, for 130 years after the Tikal conquest, Caracol reigned supreme and unchallenged throughout Belize and the Petén. During this era, the site grew in size and permanently eclipsed Tikal in area and population.

The city of Caracol encompassed an area of at least 31.2 square miles with a population conservatively numbered at 99,000 people. An additional 80,000 individuals lived in the area surrounding the site. The total population of roughly 179,000 people - a population approaching that of the modern nation of Belize - lived in a small part of the country that is now unoccupied except for an archaeological camp with just over 100 residents.

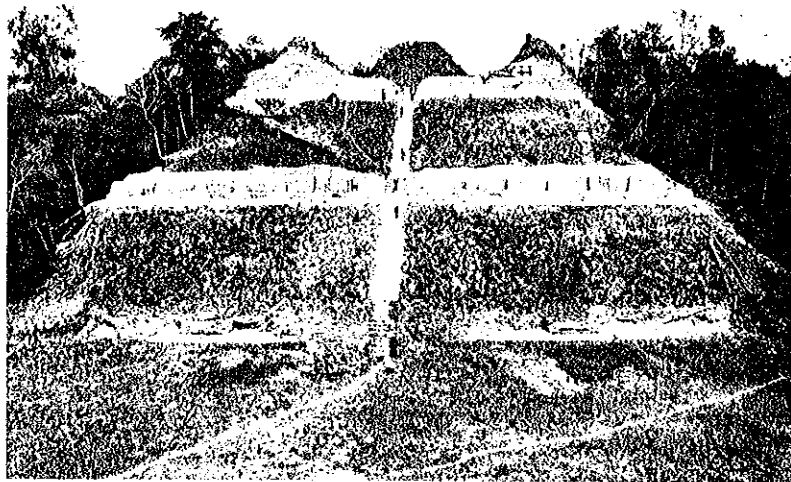
The Caracol metropolis was a technological marvel of its time. All available areas between

houses were made up of agricultural terraces; crops included corn, beans and squash, along with other useful items such as cotton. Rainfall was carefully channelled into a myriad of dispersed reservoirs with special clay-lined bottoms. Water management was very important at Caracol. One of the ancient Mayan reservoirs still provides water for the modern archaeological camp. For the site's ancient transportation needs, over 19 miles of plaster-coated road systems linked different parts of the

city. Special areas were constructed at the end of the roads; these likely served as both market areas and as stations to monitor (and perhaps tax) the flow of goods going in and out of Caracol. Hieroglyphic texts, erected at Caracol's public plazas, hint at various levels of administration and the existence of skilled warriors. During the occupation of Caracol, various specialists gained access to goods and rituals that had once been the sole purview of kings. By the end of the Classic time (ca. A.D. 800) they formed a powerful block of people, and the remains of their houses and garbage indicate that they had become almost as important as the family of the site's dynastic king.

Less than a decade ago most scholars felt that Caracol was just a minor Mayan center and not a giant city whose inhabitants altered the course of Mayan history forever. Our new understanding of the former inhabitants of Caracol is being attained as the result of a foresightful cooperative venture between the Government of Belize, the United States Agency for International Development and the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida.

For the last three years, the Caracol ruins have been getting a face-lift. Teams of archaeologists are excavating and recording various areas. They docu-



Caana, the most massive and tallest man-made construction in Belize, rising over 50 yards above the jungle floors

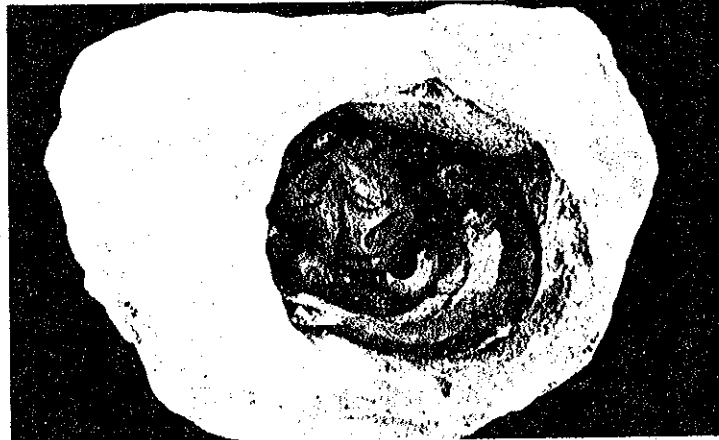
ment building plans, new findings, and how the various places were once utilized. These data and the detailed drawings will eventually comprise a permanent document on Caracol's history and its significance. Excavation teams carefully save the cut rock and white marl. Once an area has been fully excavated, a consolidation

team moves into the area to refurbish what remains of a given structure using materials such as building stones, cement and lime. Three major parts of Caracol's epicenter are being enhanced: the "A Group", a major plaza area and once an observatory complex; the "South Acropolis", once a residential palace area; and "Caana" (Maya for Sky Place), the most important building complex at the site and the largest and tallest man-made construction in Belize. Once the buildings have been "tourist-proofed", through the enhancement process, they are ready for visitation by Belizean and foreign tourists alike. And come they do, even when the road is bad - on foot, bicycle, horse and in an amazing array of vehicles.

As Caracol gains more international notoriety and publicity through its amazing archaeological discoveries, larger numbers of people will come to visit the consolidated buildings at the site. Within the next decade, Cara-

col will complement the cayes, becoming Belize's #1 inland tourist destination. The mixing of archaeology and touristic development at Caracol is producing something that is appealing to all parties involved - the continued economic development of Belize and better understanding of the Maya civilization. □

New Discovery



Ritual deposit showing position of jadeite head and associated shell and jadeite beads, all of which rests on a large shell above a pool of mercury in a hollowed-out stone box

At first it looked like nothing - a large stone located in a small open chamber. Yet, we were over 6 yards deep in Caracol's Temple of the Wooden Lintel. A pit had been cut through the floor, covered with large stones and then sealed. So, something besides a rock could have been placed there.

After removing the covering slabs, it became clear that no ordinary stone occupied the hole. Visible on one corner of the gray rock was a circular area sealed with red clay. The stone was hollow!

We carefully recorded the position of the container, lifted it out of the hole and took it to the archaeology laboratory. There we lifted the stone's lid. The day was February 20, 1991.

Inside the stone, the preservation was fantastic. A piece of cloth hung off the edge of a jadeite earflare and was draped over the top with a large sea-shell. This shell formed part of a pair that held the main offering. A pearl lay near the edge of the bottom shell in a bed of small pebbles of malachite. A large jadeite bead also protruded above the many stones. Shimmering at the bottom of the stone was a pool of silver mercury. The visible contents of

the deposit were so spectacular that we decided to wait on the full excavation of the stone until appropriate video equipment was on hand to record the moment.

That moment did not come until March 22, 1991. For a month the stone sat un-

touched in the laboratory; it was occasionally opened only to marvel at the preserved cloth or the mercury. Little did we realize what else had rested inside the rock.

After the video shots were taken, the visible contents of the deposit were drawn. The cloth, the pearl and a partially preserved seed were then removed. Next, the malachite pebbles were slowly picked out, one at a time. Finally the earflare was brought out of the container. It was now necessary to remove the large upper shell in order to see what else was inside. With a little difficulty, it came out of the opening through the rock. Immediately there were exclamations and "oohs" and "aahs."

Beneath the shell, bedded on a layer of powdered red hematite within the lower shell, lay one of the larger jadeite heads we had ever seen. It peered up at us after 2000 years of blackness. Its crevices were dusted with the red powder on which it lay. A separate jadeite claw pendant was at its neck. The jadeite bead noted earlier was positioned as its right earflare; a red shell bead formed its left earring. The whole scene was dramatic, totally unexpected, and all on video. ■