

Who's Wooing You? Guide to the Political Conventions

# Ms.

AUGUST 1988

\$2.25

## CYNDI LAUPER

Is she still having fun?

12 WOMEN WHO COULD  
BE VICE PRESIDENT

BREAST WARS  
Mammograms Under Fire

SUMMER  
FICTION BONUS

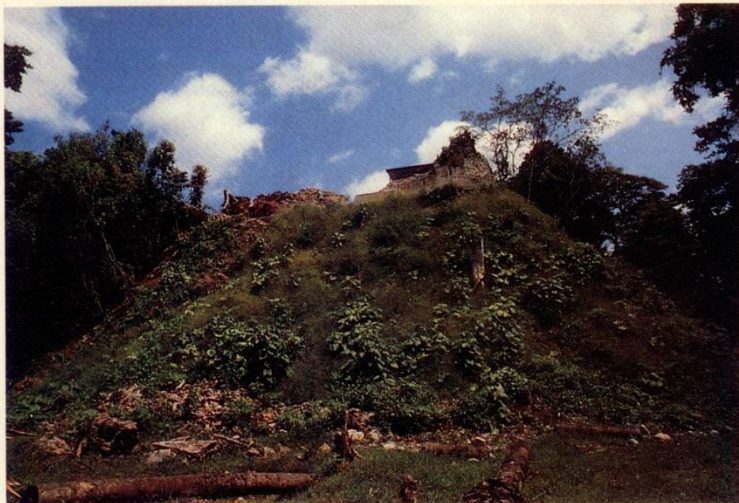
THERE'S A  
WOMAN'S FINGER  
ON THE  
NUCLEAR  
BUTTON!



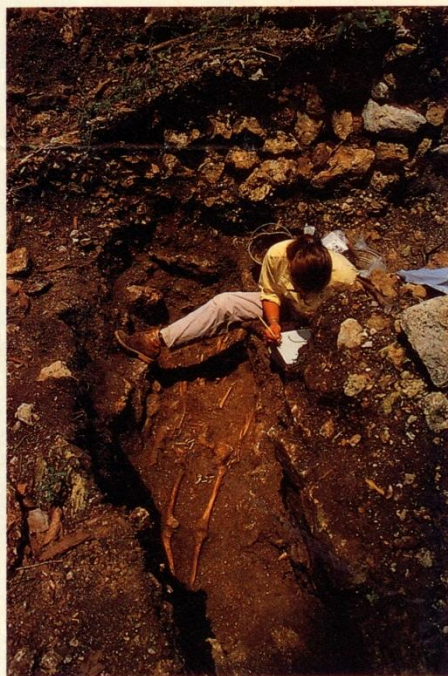


# Dig It

*Deep in the concrete jungles of Belize,  
a student of Maya culture discovers a ruin with a view*



Excavation paradise: in Caracol, archaeologists Diane and Arlen Chase found the death chamber of a woman in the pyramid of Caana, below, and the probable remains of a woman in the pyramid "A3," above. Such esteemed burial sites challenged accepted opinion about the place of women in Maya culture. Student Susan Jaeger, right, on the Caracol dig.



**F**OR YEARS I TRAVELED THROUGH the jungles of Central America, traipsing alone through dusty settlements of thatched huts, watching the women. As naked children ran beneath their feet, they would pound tortillas and scrub clothing in the river, living life much as their ancestors did.

Waiting for a rickety bus jammed with chickens and campesinos, I'd watch as the women shyly watched me. I felt their stares, curious and wondering. I'd smile and strike up conversations with the ones who didn't dissolve into guileless giggles. But most of the time, I felt like what I was—an ambassador from outer space.

Like many North Americans, I was in Central America because I was fascinated with what was buried in the jungle. I visited ancient Maya cities with pyramids that rivaled those of Giza and India. I roamed stone-paved highways, ceremonial plazas, and ball courts marked by monuments and carved stelae.

Flourishing between A.D. 250 and 900 in what is known as the Classic Period, the Mayas possessed all the elements of advanced civilization: writing; mathematics; court etiquette; a calendar; and a highly sophisticated system of reservoirs and irrigation. Their city-state, ruled by a semidivine leader and a class of male priests, reached south into El Salvador and north to the Mexican Yucatán, then a region more prosperous and populous than it is today.

But after the golden age, the priests abandoned their temples. The buildings crumbled beneath the encroaching bush, and the inhabitants vanished, along with their legends and their books.

Ten years after my last trip to Belize, I was back on the road to the Maya city of Caracol, wooed by a wonderful discovery. I came as soon as I heard that professors Diane and Arlen Chase, the young couple piecing together Caracol's mysteries, had uncovered something about women to challenge the normally staid world of archaeology.

The Chases, professors of archaeology at the University of Central Florida, had begun exploring Caracol in 1983, revealing that the long-neglected city was once home to perhaps 100,000 people in a space the size of Washington, D.C.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NADINE EPSTEIN;  
TOMB INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH BY D.Z. CHASE



Caracol, they found, was larger than Tikal, the Maya city thought to predominate in the early and late Classic Period. Almost all our ideas of Maya life are based on an excavation of Tikal undertaken jointly by the University of Pennsylvania and the Guatemalan government throughout the fifties and sixties. One theory believed that during the peak periods of Maya civilization, women played pretty much the same role that they do in Indian villages today.

But in 1986, the Chases discovered something that no one, not even they, had expected, so entrenched were their ideas about the Mayas. It happened when they excavated the pyramid of Caana, meaning "sky place," an edifice rising out of the jungle as high as the Statue of Liberty. (It's still the tallest "man-made" structure in modern Belize.) In the womb of the pyramid, where the Mayas buried their dead, the Chases discovered a spectacular, intact death chamber with red-striped walls and ceremonial pottery vessels. Inside, with jade in her earlobes and ornamental jade carved in her teeth (still a popular method of beautifying), lay the bones of a *woman*.

They discovered a similar burial pattern in the third highest pyramid in Caracol, one that goes by the name of "A3." But the bones were in such bad shape

that the Chases couldn't be sure if they belonged to a man or a woman. Even so, given the height of the pyramids (height was one indication of prestige), Diane Chase could conclude that "women were more important than we thought."

The date of the Caana burial was another revelation. Archaeologists had long been stumped by a period they call the Middle Classic Hiatus—a mysterious interlude around A.D. 600 when no new buildings or monuments were erected in Tikal and the city lay dormant. But on a ball court where the elite played a game vaguely akin to soccer, the Chases uncovered a monument recounting how in A.D. 562 Caracol conquered Tikal. The date on the Caana tomb was A.D. 634.

"She's buried at the same time Caracol dominated Tikal," says Arlen Chase. The strength of Caracol at this time may have had something to do with it being a more equal society than its class-divided, deeply hierarchical neighbors. But both Chases warn that this is pure speculation. All they've learned for sure is what kind of questions they should be asking.

The questions are crucial, they say. Until they had discovered Caana, even the Chases had assumed that only men were buried with such esteem. That discovery prompted the Chases to ask the question—were women important?—

which, in turn, set them to work on a new agenda. The unimportance of women in Maya society was so deeply ingrained, the Chases say, that even when the sex of a bone in an important tomb was in question, archaeologists labeled it male.

It can't be forgotten, too, that until a couple of decades ago, archaeology was almost exclusively an all-male profession, an old boy's network of white-haired patricians leading young male students out into the field. Their "delicate" wives usually minded the house and kept the bones and pottery shards clean. In many ways, their sedate lives were as hierarchical as any the archaeologists chose to study.

The old order is hard to visualize at the Caracol site, where the khaki-clad Chases squirm in and out of tombs and trenches, hacking their way through overgrown jungle paths with equal agility. The American contingent at the dig is predominantly women. When I was there, there were only two men: Arlen Chase and one student. The rest of the eight Americans stalking their way through Caracol's jaguar, boar, monkey, and snake infested forests were women. It was just enough of modern America to baffle the Belizean men hired to help.

Several hours on the road back from

## The Bare Necessities.





Caracol to civilization, I stopped to take a photo of the sun setting over the village of Santa Elena, near the town of Cayo.

From the window of an old, wooden stilt house (in Belize, the next step up from thatch), a middle-aged woman watched. I could see the heads of tiny children bobbing up from beneath the sill. I moved to take a shot of her but she disappeared. Minutes later, she was plodding down a wobbly wooden stairway to greet me.

"How do you like our country?" she asked amiably. I told her I loved it and was just returning from five days with the archaeologists at Caracol. "Where's that?" she queried. Like almost every Belizean (rhymes with Elysian) I met—be they black, white, Spanish, Indian, or any combination thereof—she had never heard of Caracol even though it was only 60 miles away as the toucan flies.

But the woman, whose name was Gloria Martinez, listened carefully as I told her about Caracol. Slowly she smiled.

"Why are you so interested in this Caracol?" she asked. Wary of being ethnocentric, I told her as politely as I could that I had the impression that women in Central America were sort of dominated by men and that I thought the world should know that this might not always have been so. And I thought she might



**Dish fulfillment: a Maya woman was depicted on this ancient pottery.**

like to know too.

At this her face lit up and she broke into a grin, her gold ornamental teeth shone in the hot haze of the low-slung sun. As we talked my perceptions of her changed. I realized she was more than a simple but curious country woman with grandchildren clinging to her skirts in front of a ramshackle house in a Belizean village. She was a professional woman; a

rural health expert, the nurse at the public hospital in Cayo. (As I later heard, a very fine nurse.) She told me she was very interested in the role of women and was involved in Belize's brand-new chapter of Women Against Violence.

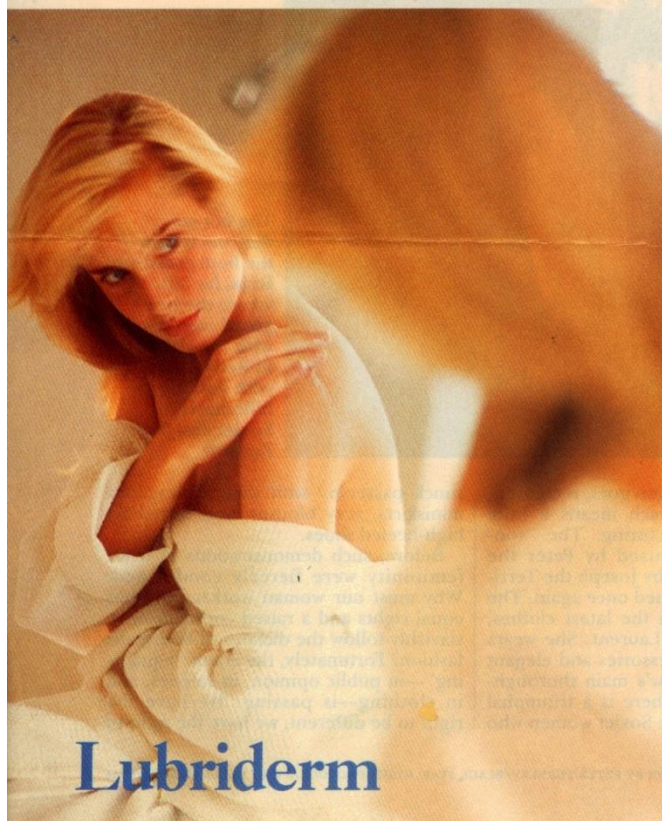
"You're right," she told me. "Women here don't have as many rights as men and have traditionally been dominated. This is very true."

But she was feeling optimistic, she said as she scooped up a freshly scrubbed granddaughter, tickled her, and told her she didn't have to hide from me.

"A lot of women are working now and making money. So they play a bigger role in decision making than before. Well, maybe not 50-50," she said, placing the child on the ground and watching her scamper through the dirt to her pregnant mom. "More like 30-70. But it's a start." ♦

*There are no tours regularly offered to Caracol and no place to stay once you get there, but in San Ignacio, Belize, you can hire Maya Mountain Lodge—telephone, 501-092-2164—to drive you through the bush, or try Chaa Creek Cottages, 501-092-2037. For further travel information, contact the Belize Department of Archaeology, 501-08-2106. Best to go on the weekends, when the archaeological staff is in camp, and may be willing to guide you.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY D.Z. CHASE



Simple. Basic. They're so much a part of your life, you wouldn't dream of starting the day without them.

Lubriderm® is also simple. Basic. It was created for dermatologists, so you know it's good for your skin. Lubriderm absorbs quickly and will leave your skin soft, smooth and healthy looking.



**Lubriderm**

**Everyday. Everywhere.**