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**2012**  
**THE MAYA END OF**  
**DAYS IN BELIZE**  
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An aerial photograph of a coral reef system. The water transitions from a deep blue in the distance to a lighter turquoise near the reef. A large, irregular patch of white and light brown coral is visible in the foreground, indicating coral bleaching. The text "Could this" is overlaid in a serif font on the right side of the image.

Could this

2012. According to the astonishingly accurate Maya calendar, that's

STORY AND PHOTOS



An aerial photograph of a coral reef system. The water transitions from a deep, dark blue in the foreground to a vibrant turquoise and light blue further out. A long, narrow strip of coral reef runs diagonally across the frame, showing intricate patterns of coral and sandy patches. The horizon is visible in the distance under a pale sky.

be the end?

when the apocalypse begins. You could worry about it. Or go to Belize.

BY JAD DAVENPORT







WILL THE WORLD REALLY END IN 2012?" I ASK CHOCOLATE-farmer Eladio Pop. A Maya man in his 50s, he sways in a hammock below the thatched roof of his family's open-air kitchen. He's barefoot and bare-chested after a day in the orchards near the village of San Pedro Columbia in southern Belize. "When you make war and pollution, those things will turn against you," he says. "It is not the gods who will destroy us this time. This time we will destroy ourselves."

Eladio's wife, Virginia, passes me a handful of toasted cacao beans from the iron griddle. The husks crumble and I pop the nutty hearts into my mouth. They're warm and taste bittersweet like scorched chocolate chips. The ancient Maya used the beans as currency and made a chocolate beverage that Eladio and his family still drink.

Along with chocolate, the Maya bequeathed their descendants a complex series of interlocking calendars that accurately predict everything from harvest times to lunar eclipses. But on Sunday, Dec. 23, 2012, the most important calendar, the 5,000-year Long Count, ends. I've come to this Massachusetts-size slab of the Caribbean Yucatan with my buddy Chris to find out how the locals feel about the hype. Our guide in southern Belize is Bruno Kuppinger, a German with a keen interest in archaeology. On our way to visit the ruins of Lubaantun, "Place of Fallen Stones," Bruno suggested a detour to have lunch with the Pop family and ask about the Maya calendars.

Archaeologists roll their eyes about an impending apocalypse, but Eladio and his family aren't laughing. There are too many omens. "I saw a big jaguar at the edge of my field," Eladio says. He points to a tumbled stone tower rising above the jungle a mile north. "It was one of the gods from Lubaantun. They are coming into the village. But they can take any form they want. They can look like a bird or a jaguar," he says, spitting out bean husk. "Or they can look like you or me." His children hear ghostly drumming in the nearby ruins, and the Crystal Skull of Doom is missing. Susana, one of his seven daughters, is patting out maize dough for tortillas. "They need to bring back the Crystal Skull," she says. "It may be a living god, and if they bring it back and bury it again, 2012 won't happen."

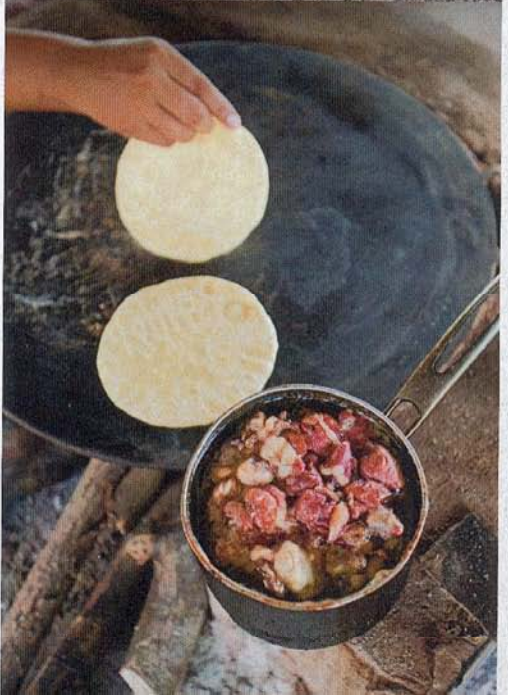
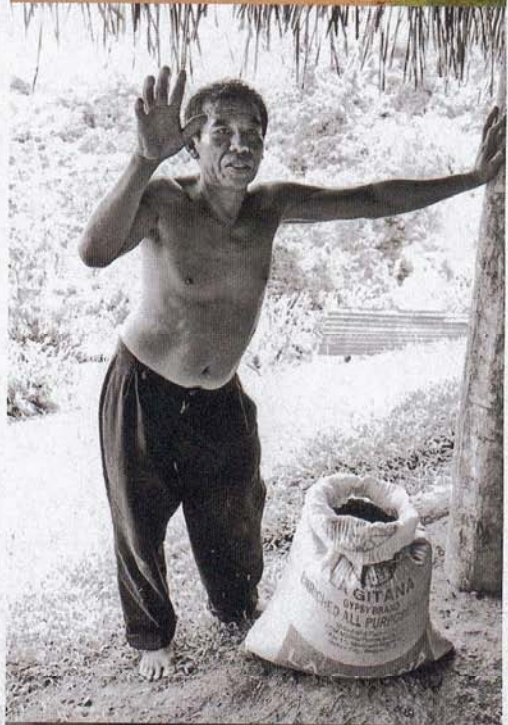
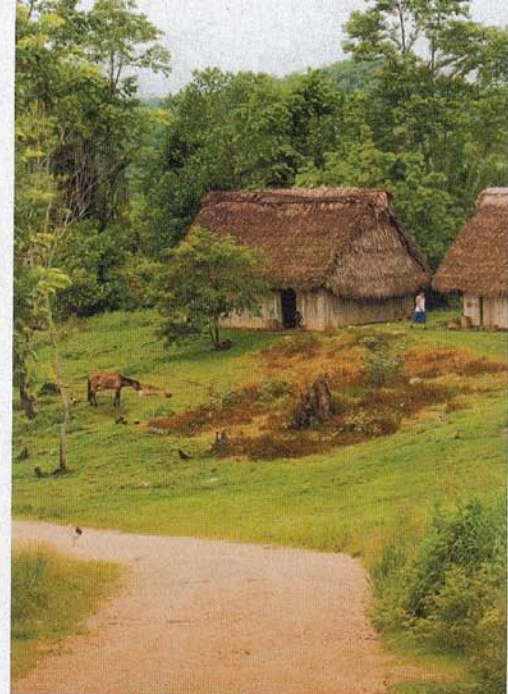
Anna Mitchell-Hedges, a Canadian orphan, claimed she discovered the Crystal Skull of Doom in 1927, on her 20th birthday. Or maybe it was 1928. Or 1924. She had joined her adoptive father, flamboyant adventurer F.A. Mitchell-Hedges, on an archaeological expedition to what was then British Honduras.

We hike to the ruins later that afternoon. Few travelers make it this far south. It's been three days since anyone signed the guest register, and we have the ghost city to ourselves. Before the mysterious collapse of the Maya empire, Lubaantun had been a regional capital. The acropolis covers half a mile of forested ridge above the Columbia River. We visit the narrow ball courts where losers' heads once adorned skull racks and terraces where nobles had their palm-thatched houses. Peeling red roots from gumbo-limbo trees snake through the mossy stones, and horseflies tap my head. The dark shadows of birds cross the courtyards, but when I look up, the sky is empty.

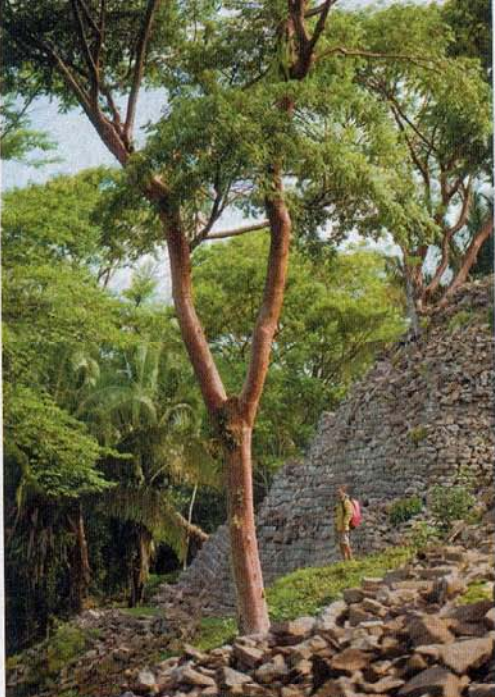
Bruno leads us to the back of the ruins and a grassy plaza the size of a tennis court. "She found it right here," he says. The frog call of a keel-billed toucan croaks out of the forest above the white-noise hush of the river. I perch on a wall made of suitcase-size stones fitted together without mortar. The warm stones feel almost alive. The Maya revered crystals, Bruno tells us. Shamans used them to predict the future. "But with the tools the Maya had then, the skull would have taken 300 man-years to make."

Anna passed away in 2007 at the age of 100. Today the skull resides with her widower who plans to display it in a custom-built museum in Sedona. So was it polished into existence by five generations of artisans as Anna claimed? Was it a gift from

Chocolate farmer Eladio Pop (right) sees signs of the prophecy, but village life goes on, as does the good life on the private island of Cayo Espanto (opposite).







extraterrestrials as others believe? Or is it a self-realized Maya god stolen from its sacred resting place? Jane MacLaren Walsh, an anthropologist with the Smithsonian Institution, says the skull isn't a 3,600-year-old Maya lens into the future, just a beautifully carved 20th-century copy of another crystal skull in the British Museum. F.A. Mitchell-Hedges bought it for 400 pounds at a Sotheby's auction in 1943.

It isn't just the Indiana Jones allure of a country with more Maya ruins than modern houses that draws people to Belize. It's that the adventure is so close to home. On my flight from Houston to Belize City, I didn't even have time to see if John Cusack survives the film *2012* before we landed. And then there are the islands, hundreds of sandy cays crowning the world's second-longest barrier reef. The universal dream of fleeing mainland chaos for an island sanctuary thrives in Belize. And the country is having a half-off sale — one greenback gets you two Belizean dollars. Retire here instead of Miami. Get 60 feet of beachfront on Ambergris Caye, and with the cash left over, you can buy enough Belikin beer to forget that it all might end in two years.

On our way from Lubaantun to the Cotton Tree Lodge, we stop at Tiki's Bar, an open-air cantina beside a Texaco station. The afternoon is hot and still. Chris chugs beer like water, and I'm downing cold Cokes when a carload of archaeology students from the University of New Mexico shows up in khakis and bandanas. It's like a band of pirates raided Old Navy. Their captain is Keith Prufer, a wisecracking, goateed Ph.D. who's spent parts of the past 16 summers in Belize deciphering Maya mysteries. I start in firing 2012 questions at him.

"The math was wrong," he says between beers. "The Maya were off by a year and a couple of months. The apocalypse happens next week." Snickers from his students turn into cigarette coughs. But Keith gets why I'm interested in the hype. "People love an apocalypse," he admits, "because they're always the ones who survive. It's never the good Mormons or the good Christians getting wiped out. It's always the bad guys." So what should I do on Dec. 22, 2012, I ask Keith. "Pay your January rent."

Chris starts hitting on a coed, and I reach for the wrong bottle of Coke. I know it's wrong because the bottle is warm, and dead bugs float in the caramel liquid. It had been sitting in the middle of the table on a Belikin-beer coaster. I lean back over the low wall to dump it out, and it's like I just pulled a grenade pin. "No!" the students shout. I freeze. I point out that the bottle is full of bugs.

"That Coke has been on the table ever since we've been here," one student says. "All afternoon?" I ask. "All summer," he answers. I suddenly feel very powerful. "What will happen if I dump it?" I ask.

"Something bad," the students mutter in unison, "something really bad."

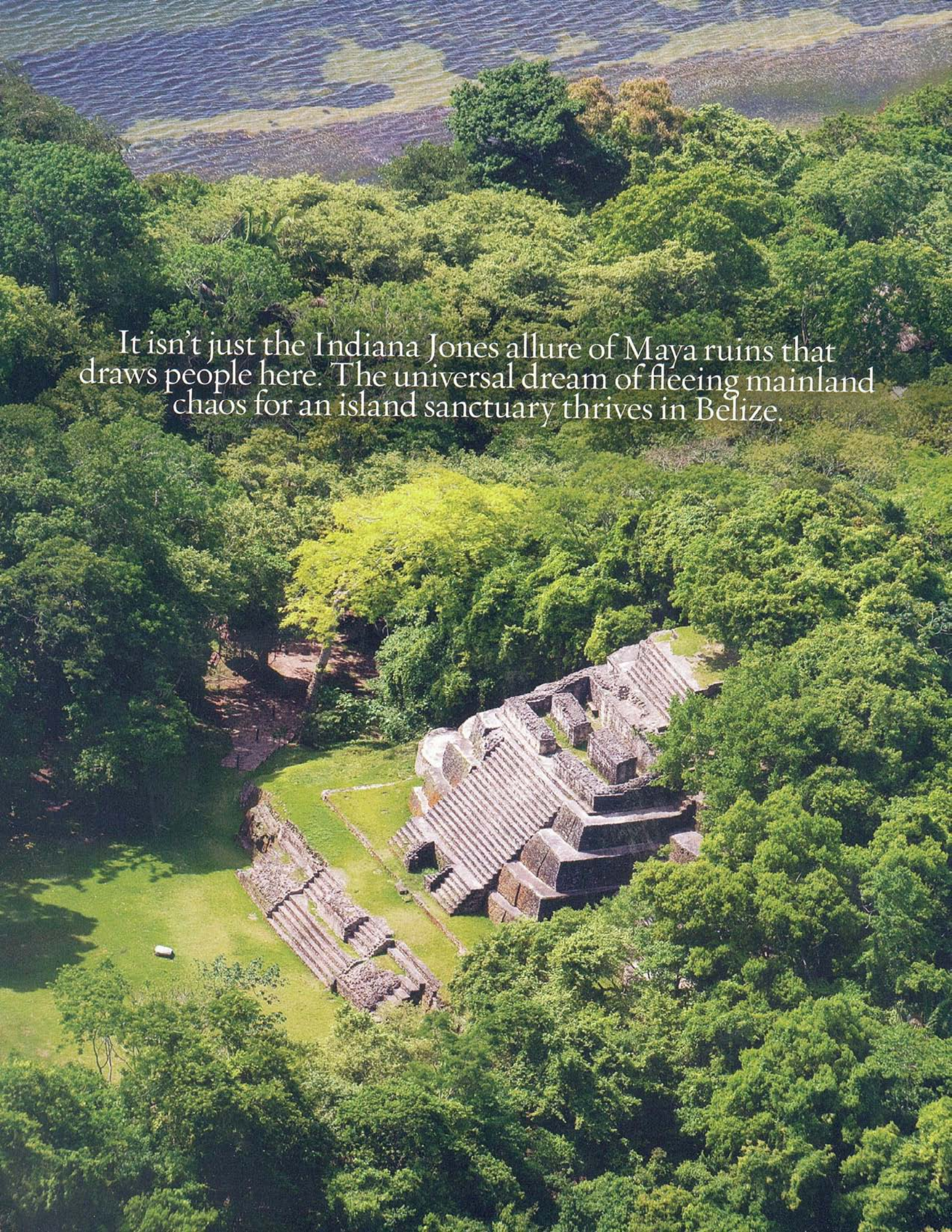
I set down the Crystal Coke of Doom. Little do I know it's already too late.

Ruins, glyphs, the landscape all hint at ancient Maya culture (and adventure now). A storm over the cays hints at impending doom, but pay next month's rent just in case.

THE NEXT DAY CHRIS AND I HEAD OUT TO DIVE THE SAPODILLA CAYES, the southernmost islands in Belize and the very end of the Mesoamerican Reef. We don't hear much talk here about the end of the world. Our guides, brothers Dennis and Oliver Garbutt, grew up on Lime Caye, three acres of sand on the southern tip of the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Dennis, the serious brother, manages the reserve. He talks about grouper spawnings and no-take zones, while his mother fries fish and plantains, a typical Creole lunch. I'm not sure what Oliver does other than fish and swim, but he's been smiling since we arrived.

"When we were kids, our mother had to chase us when it was time for us to go to school on the mainland," Oliver says between bites of snapper. "We would crawl under our beds and hang on. She had to pull us out there and throw us on the boat."



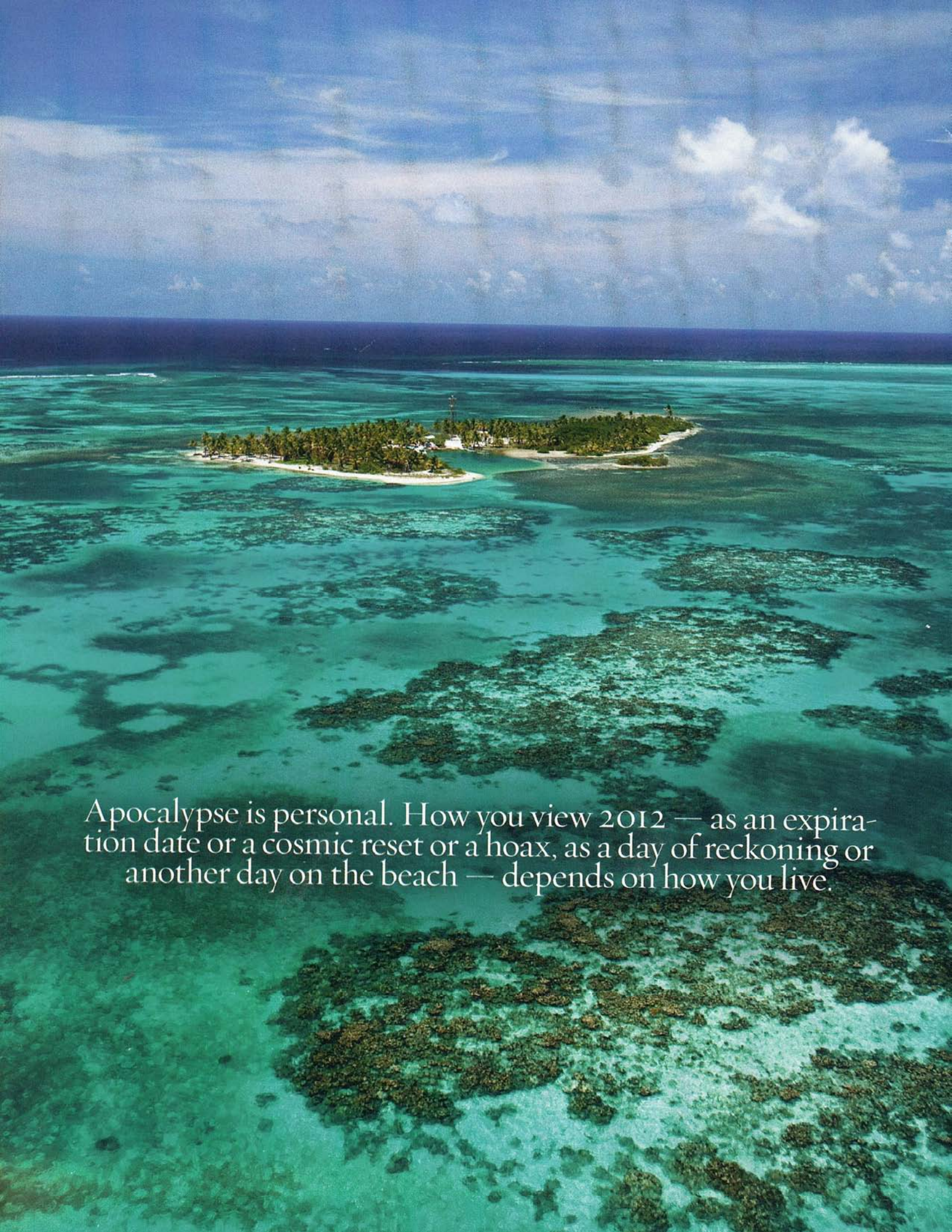
An aerial photograph showing ancient Maya stone ruins, including a large stepped pyramid, nestled within a dense, lush green tropical forest. A body of water is visible at the top of the frame. The ruins are partially cleared, revealing the stone structures and surrounding greenery.

It isn't just the Indiana Jones allure of Maya ruins that draws people here. The universal dream of fleeing mainland chaos for an island sanctuary thrives in Belize.







An aerial photograph of a tropical island, likely in the Maldives, featuring a dense line of palm trees and a few small buildings. The island is surrounded by shallow, turquoise water with visible coral reefs and sandbars. The ocean extends to a deep blue horizon under a sky with scattered white clouds.

Apocalypse is personal. How you view 2012 — as an expiration date or a cosmic reset or a hoax, as a day of reckoning or another day on the beach — depends on how you live.



I ask the brothers if they've ever found any Maya artifacts on the island. "I think they used these islands as a trading post," Oliver says. "We've found bits of pottery." Columbus met seafaring Maya traders here in 1502. By then, the empire was already in trouble, fraught with famine and war. Belize had no gold, so the conquistadors sought fortune elsewhere, but missionaries soon arrived to spread the word of God, and smallpox. By 1697, the last Maya city, Tah Itza, fell and the great Maya empire was gone. From Lime Caye I can see the mainland, only 21 miles away. An island would be a great place to seek sanctuary while the world around you crumbled.

I ask Oliver what he thinks about 2012. "Bring it on," he says. "Nothing will bother me on my island. It's all freedom here. You can walk out your door and go swimming or hop in a canoe and fish all day long." He laughs, "Let the end of the world come. It won't bother me." He takes another bite of his mom's plantain but then pauses. "Unless it happens to be a really big wave." I don't have the heart to tell him that that's exactly how the Maya gods destroyed the last world.

FROM THE MAINLAND IT'S A BOUNCY 90-MINUTE BOAT RIDE TO GLOVERS Reef Atoll. Past Tobacco Caye it's nothing but deep blue water until suddenly you're flying over green reef, bright and alive. The Maya had a glyph to describe it, Yax, the color of fresh corn in the field and the sacred Ceiba tree in a summer rain.

Jim Schofield, a former dentist and rock climber, helps guide the boat through the shallow coral channel. Jim has lived on Long Caye since 1995. In 1998, he and his wife, Kendra, set up Off the Wall Dive Center & Resort, a rustic scuba lodge with simple plank-wood cabins. Power comes from solar cells and a wind generator on the mast of a shipwrecked sailboat; fat black barrels collect rainwater; and guests use compost toilets. The island, like the Schofields, is a self-sufficient unit.

They share the island with "three cats, one bunny, 20 parakeets and 5 million iguanas." People come here to escape their BlackBerrys and to dive the 3,000-foot wall off the eastern shore. Not a bad place to wait out the end of time. "It's like a big blue fortress," Chris says as the boat enters the lagoon. Jim nods. "This is a perfect atoll; it's almost completely enclosed. There are only three natural passages into it."

Chris and I spend the next two days diving the wall and napping in hammocks strung from the stilted cabins, eating fish tacos and homemade pizza. At night I read by a kerosene lamp.

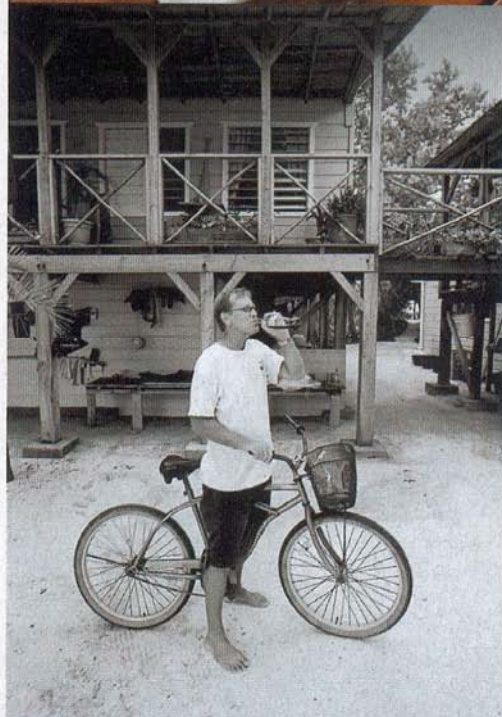
On day three, something changes underwater. The French grunts have sunk deep down the wall, and the barracuda have retreated into the shaded coral canyons. No one in our group spots any turtles or moray eels either, and the sea is a listless 86 degrees. Something is fishy. We surface to charcoal skies and warm rain.

"Something big is coming," Jim says when he greets us at the dock to help carry the empty tanks. "It's a depression and will probably turn into a tropical storm."

Eventually, Tropical Storm Alex will morph into a deadly hurricane, the worst storm Jim and Kendra have experienced in 15 years on Long Caye.

A banshee wind howls through the louvered shutters the next morning. Rain and sand rake the cabin, and everything inside gets wet. Chris and I sprint for the main lodge, a stilted wood-plank house stuffed with dive gear and coral-encrusted pirate bottles. Jim and Kendra hunker over their laptop, the screen filled with a ghostly white outline of Belize. An angry yellow-and-red radar smear looms. Long Caye is a third of a mile long and pinches in the middle to barely twice the width of the *Titanic*. The highest point on the cay would fit under an NBA basketball hoop.

"The worst is supposed to hit at 2," Jim says. I ask if we need to evacuate. Nodding at the rain-slashed skies, Chris answers for him. "Too late." (continued on page 95)



Jim Schofield of Off the Wall Resort (right) isn't worried. Cayo Espanto lunch (top), Cotton Tree Lodge (bottom) and Sandbore Caye (opposite) make it easy to see why.









## Belize (from p. 75)



## Belize

"Despite the coral-sand beaches and cheap margaritas, Belize just doesn't let you relax — there's too much to do. Caving the Maya underworld, diving the world's second-largest reef, exploring ninth-century Maya ruins. Save relaxing for your second (or third, or fourth ...) trip to Belize." — JAD DAVENPORT, WRITER/PHOTOGRAPHER

But it's not too late for a drink. Chris and I grab a bottle of 1 Barrel rum and sit in the heavy wooden chairs in front of our cabins as the storm picks up. It's an awesome spectacle, the sky black at mid-day and the wall of rain racing toward us. Maybe the Maya did get the date wrong. I think of the endless cycle of time, death and birth. I think of my two young daughters. I share these thoughts with Chris, who squints at me and nods.

"It's too bad Jim and Kendra don't have kids," he shouts. It's an odd comment from a guy whose next of kin is a St. Bernard. Then he shouts, "If they did, we could put our rum in sippy cups."

Whatever happens at 2 o'clock today, or at midnight on that not-so-distant Sunday, an apocalypse seems to be a personal matter. How you view 2012 — as an expiration date or a cosmic reset or a hoax, a day of reckoning or another day on the beach — depends on how you live. Eladio the chocolate farmer, who spends his days in the forest with the animals and trees, told me about the end of the last world. The ancient Maya had forgotten there were spirits bigger than themselves. "Then came the collapse," he said. But as his daughter fretted about distant prophecies, he told her lightheartedly, "Don't worry about 2012; you have plenty to worry about today."

Today on Glovers Reef Atoll, waves stampede the shore, their frothy manes rushing up the beach in hissing glee. The coconut palms bow in prayer, fronds folded against their trunks. Right now there's nothing to do but let the future come. Laughing, Chris and I hunch like turtles in our soaked windbreakers and cup our hands over our glasses to keep the rain out of the rum. ■ ISLANDS.COM/Belize

**DAY** Check into the Treehouse

- 1** > Fly to Belize (TZA) via Houston on Continental or American airlines. Arrange for transportation to Ian Anderson's Caves Branch Adventure Co. & Jungle Lodge. It's a 1½-hour transfer.
- > If you want your own bathroom, stay in one of the jungle treehouses. A little more rustic, the bunkhouse has bunk beds for eight. Check in, but don't take one anything too strenuous today. Just kick back by the pool and watch for toucans in the forest.
- > Don't forget to wear long-sleeved shirts and pants after dark, and douse yourself with heavy-duty insect repellent with DEET. The region's botflies aren't life-threatening, but they are worth a rather gritty Google search before you leave for Belize.

**DAY** Journey to the Underworld

- 2** > Hit the road early for a private, all-day adventure into Belize's most amazing cave — Actun Tunichil Muknal (but you can just call it ATM). After a short drive, hike through relatively flat jungle for about an hour. Drink lots of water and bring a stick if the river crossings are high. Then swim into the entrance of the cave. Don't worry — the water is clear and cool. Once inside you'll spend the next few hours winding through passageways the Maya believe are portals to Xibalba, their underworld. Along with 1,400 artifacts are the skeletal remains of at least 14 sacrificial victims, including the spooky "Crystal Maiden."
- > Bring a dry bag with shoulder straps to protect your camera and good boots with traction. Your guide will provide a helmet.

**DAY** Just Desserts

- 3** > Head back to the airport and catch a flight down to Punta Gorda, the southernmost city in Belize.
- > Guide Bruno Kuppinger will pick you up and take you straight into the Maya heartland to join a walking tour of a cacao orchard with a local farmer.
- > Dine on a Maya lunch of chicken, rice and homemade tortillas at a farmer's home. You'll get a chance to roast and crush cacao beans and sip a traditional chocolate drink.
- > Well fed, explore the nearby ruins of Lubaantun. Ask Bruno to show you where the fabled Crystal Skull of Doom was discovered (and have him tell you the story).
- > Check into the rustic Cotton Tree Lodge, a fan-cooled, mosquito-netted property about an hour away. Go to bed early because the roaring

howler monkeys will wake you up at the crack of dawn. Keep your lodge-provided headlamp by your bed in case the power goes off.

**DAY** Roam the Reef

- 4** > Take a morning dive at Lime Caye Wall on the southernmost tip of the great Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, second longest in the world.
- > The Garbutt brothers can take you out to their private island, Lime Caye, in the middle of the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve.
- > Don't forget a cheap, disposable underwater camera or an underwater housing for your camera (the Canon G11 is my favorite).
- > Their mother, Mrs. Garbutt, will hustle up some fried fish and plantains for lunch; then grab one of the hammocks and snooze through your surface interval.

**DAY** Lazy Daze

- 5** > Transfer back to Belize City and take Tropic Air to Ambergris Caye (just a 25-minute flight). There's no assigned seating, so try to get either the copilot seat or one on the right for fantastic views of the barrier reef.
- > Stay on Cayo Espanto, a private island. The Casa Aurora has the largest plunge pool, but the new Casa Solana has the best sunset views.
- > Spend the days swinging in your cotton hammock. You've earned some downtime.
- > Dine by tiki torch on the beach beside your bungalow. Chef Patrick will stop by to discuss your personalized dinner — go with the lobster if it's in season.

**DAY** Helicopter Touring

- 6** > Take a helicopter tour with Gustavo of Astrum Helicopters to Lighthouse Reef and the Blue Hole. He'll pick you up at Cayo Espanto's helipad. Fly at noon when the sun shines straight down on the reef and makes for the best photo ops.
- > Get a massage from Brenda, the masseuse whose talented hands have worked over everyone from Sean Connery to Penélope Cruz. Don't ask for deep tissue until you try her "medium pressure."

**The Facts PASSPORT NEEDED** > Yes, but no Visa required **CURRENCY** > Belizean dollars, two for one U.S. dollar **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE** > English **WHEN TO GO** > Belize has two seasons: "green season" from June to October is rainy but less crowded, and "dry season" from November to May is crowded with travelers.