

## The Maya and the Chaya

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Wednesday, June 29th, 2011 12:00 PM



Muyil pyramid, courtesy David Hammond



By **David Hammond**

I've got this old buddy in Tucson. I visited him last spring. He moved to that desert right after high school because he became enchanted with the place. I didn't get it. I mean, Tucson is interesting in a wild west kind of way, but it seems so...desolate. There's sometimes no explaining why people are attracted to specific geographies.

Similarly, I don't expect most people to understand why I am so entranced by Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. It's a scrub jungle, covered in rocks, with a relatively thin layer of arable soil, hot and unforgiving with a bloody history. The heat lies like a warm moist hand on the scraggly forest, and it actually seems to transport me in a semi-hallucinatory state, almost ecstatic, a little crazy from the heat.

A friend from Apple Vacations set me up with a driver and guide to take me from Grand Velas, a gorgeous resort on the Caribbean near Playa del Carmen in the Riviera Maya, to Muyil, a ride of about 80 minutes. It wasn't easy tearing myself away from a cushy suite to go tramping through the jungle, but like I said, my enchantment with the Mayan homeland is hard to understand.

Muyil intrigued me. I'd never been to this archaeological zone, though I've been to most of the major ones in this region.

I like these smaller, off-the-beaten path sites (Sayil, Labna, Kabah) because their very emptiness is a signifier of the vanished Maya, many of whom had absented themselves and their families to smaller jungle communities long before Cortez wannabes launched their frenzied slash-and-burn search for gold.

When The Wife and I visited Tulum in 1979, we were the only visitors at the place. It's now a crowded must-see attraction, which I still was thrilled to visit, but which has lost some of its alluring sense of abandonment and cultural tragedy.

At Muyil, I went straight to the gracefully articulated pyramid (misnamed "Castillo"), similar to the step-structure design of Tikal in Guatemala, deserted and stunning. I ascended the pyramid, respectfully repeating the ritualistic zig-zag climbing pattern that's necessitated by the small steps and that reflects the undulating movement of a snake. There's speculation that the snake played a huge role in Mayan religion -- it does, after all, "resurrect" itself during shedding -- though a lot of the intel regarding indigenous populations was lost when invading priests "saved" the people by burning all but a handful of their codices (I think something like 3 still exist).

When I came down from the pyramid, I noticed a sign that said there was to be no climbing on the buildings. I think that's a good rule but I'm kind of glad I didn't read it until I'd already had my moment at the apex.

Nacho and Gerardo -- my guide and driver -- showed me around. After they noticed my obvious interest in all things Mayan, Mexican and food-related, they opened up.

There is an undeniable sweetness about the Mexican character, a gentleness that was probably in the cultural DNA of indigenous peoples even during times when captives had their pumping hearts ripped out in sacrifice to a hungry sun.

Anyway, Nacho and Gerardo gave me a lot of information in our few hours together, much of which I'm still processing.

Driving home from the site, Nacho spotted a tamalyera and we stopped for a tamale. While we munched our snack, Nacho asked me if I'd ever eaten chaya, and I admitted I had not. He pointed out the chaya tree, growing in the intense heat, in the unforgiving ground, up against a building.

Turns out, chaya is a kind of miracle plant, with iron and other minerals in significantly greater percentages than, say, spinach. Yet few outside Yucatan seem to have heard of it. They've been eating chaya in these parts for centuries.

After my visit to Muyil, I spotted chaya on a number of dishes I had over the past few days. It shows up frequently as a garnish (which should not be eaten raw, as there are cyanide-related toxins in there):

I'm pretty sure I've seen chaya at Hispanic groceries around Chicagoland (though I could be mistaken); next time I see it, I'm going to buy some and prepare it. Through the backchannel, I have heard that they sometimes prepare chaya at Xni-Pec, one of the Midwest's few Yucatecan restaurants, in Brookfield (3755 Grand Blvd).

Nacho told me that when his grandmother used to make chaya, she followed the Mayan custom of singing to the vegetable as it cooked, so that it would turn out well (if it's not cooked correctly, or perhaps long enough, it can make you sick). It's possible that singing a song was a way for cooks to ensure that the chaya cooked enough (for instance, maybe the idea is that you have to cook it for the duration of the tune and not remove it from heat before the song, or song cycle, is over).

Hearing about grandmothers singing to their cooking chaya makes me want to spend more time in Mayaland. Just as temples and other structures are being reclaimed from centuries of jungle overgrowth, there are culinary folkways yet to be uncovered beneath the remains of a vanished civilization, which I find very exciting.

If you spot chaya at any local groceries in like Berwyn or Cicero, by all means let me know.