

Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM) Cave, Belize

Alex Graham, Guest Contributor

Photos courtesy of Phillip of Yute Expeditions



Editor's note: Alex was referred to me by a current ACKMA member and I am very grateful to him for sharing his caving adventures with us!

Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM) is a cave in the Belizean countryside near the quaint and colourful town of San Ignacio, Cayo District. Rated by the National Geographic as the most sacred cave in the world, it is an ancient Maya archaeological site littered with ceramic pots, stoneware, skeletal remains and many other clues of the past. Like something out of Indiana Jones, the cave is often referred to as the Cave of the Crystal Sepulchre, however, it is most commonly referred to in short as the ATM cave. Whilst the cave itself is not an automated teller machine (atm), it offers a unique caving experience that spelunkers and explorers are bound to find valuable.

Located only a stone's throw away from Guatemala in the middle of thick jungle, the ATM cave lay undisturbed for more than a millennia before it was rediscovered in 1989. Only a handful of licensed tour guides are allowed to bring visitors to the cave, all of whom are locals. In an effort to preserve the relics in the cave, no phones or cameras are allowed in, only a few small groups are allowed into the cave each day, and in some parts of the cave, you must take off your shoes and tread as lightly as possible to avoid stepping on any of the relics.

My tour guide, Phillip, drove myself and three other keen explorers in a minivan along a winding dirt road through the hilly countryside. The grassy hills were interrupted only by large boulders and crags and outcrops of limestone. After unexpectedly being stopped by the Belizean border patrol (a large python blocking the road), we arrived at the mouth of the jungle. As we walked through the dense jungle under the watchful eye of a noisy troop of howler monkeys, our guide explained the unique geology of Belize by comparing the landscape to a block of Swiss cheese. Belize is covered by a thick layer of dissected limestone that has dissolved to form numerous deep caves and springs.



The trek through the jungle is 45 minutes and involves three river crossings. The first crossing is in deep, cold water and is the most physically challenging of the three. There is a strong current in the river and a rope to hold onto for each crossing. After the third crossing, we arrived at the entrance of the cave (Figure 1):

The water in the mouth of the cave was a beautiful turquoise (as pictured) and colder than the river. The swim into the cave was much longer than anticipated as the water continues for quite some distance into the cave. After swimming for around two to three minutes, the water narrows into a thin, running stream and we clambered up onto the rocky terrain. The challenging (and fun) part about exploring this cave is that it involves a lot of swimming, walking, and climbing. You soon become used to transitioning between the three and the deeper you descend into the cave the less you care about getting your hair wet.

Figure 1: Entrance to the ATM cave (above)

The cave is enclosed and narrow in parts, at times highly claustrophobic – there are some very small gaps to squeeze through that leave you genuinely surprised (not to mention relieved) after you pass through them. Along the way, we encountered several colonies of bats and even a long-legged fishing spider patiently waiting for, I can only hope, smaller prey than us.

There is no shortage of stalactites glistening a pale pink from above as you swim and crawl through seemingly narrower and narrower gaps. After what I suspect was around forty minutes, we reached a large, conglomerate outcrop that jutted out of the ground like an almost ladder to a drier and elevated chasm of the cave. After climbing up the rock, we arrived at the first cavernous chamber. The first thing I noticed was that the endless amounts of ceramic pots and cups strewn haplessly along the ground. Our guide implored us to take our shoes off and tread lightly around the relics. There were some larger and unusual looking stalactites in this part of the cave.

Figure 2: Smashed ceramic pots (right)



Phillip demonstrated with a heavy-duty torch how some of these stalactites had been meticulously carved to create shadows of Mayan gods in the light. He explained how the Mayans would explore the caves in harsh times, usually droughts, to cook food for the gods and to eventually smash the pots as a sacrifice (Figure 2).

We headed deeper into the cave in our wet socks until we reached another high-ceilinged chamber. More ceramic pots and stoneware were piled up in unsystematic mounds interspersed with a number of skeletal remains, mostly finger bones and skulls. The skulls were peculiarly shaped in that nearly all of them appeared to have been flattened. Our guide explained that as the droughts grew worse and the Mayan civilisation was in decline, the spiritual visits to the cave became more and more frequent, the journeys deeper and deeper into the cave, and the sacrifices greater. As such, the skulls were flattened by a blunt force trauma to the head as a desperate plea to the gods.



The third and final chamber in the cave that we entered resembled a narrow alleyway with a low ceiling. Here we stumbled upon the most entrancing surprise: an entire human skeleton. The skeleton, affectionally dubbed 'The Crystal Maiden' due to its sparkling crystallisation, is in near perfect and complete preservation due to its calcification to the ground, a process aided by excessive rainfall over an incredibly long period of time. The seemingly normal (and unflattened) skull of the skeleton, pictured in Figure 3, poses an eerie and intriguing question as to how this person met their unfortunate fate.

The tour and travel services were provided by Yute Expeditions. They offer morning, mid-morning and afternoon tours in Spanish or English from \$125 USD. The tour includes a delicious picnic lunch that caters for both carnivores and vegetarians. The tour is approximately 3 hours long and includes hotel pick-ups and drop offs. The tour provider suggests a moderate level of fitness and a bottle of water. Bringing a change of dry clothes is recommended. Enjoy being driven home through the beautiful Cayo district in warm clothes with a full stomach after an incredibly memorable caving experience.

Figure 3: 'The Crystal Maiden' skeleton (left)