

Aim

"Treehouse? What are you talking about, treehouse?"

Amy and I were driving west across Belize in a rented Suzuki jeep. As it usually happens on our trips, I had made the arrangements, which Amy wanted to know nothing about until we were there. Now that we were there, and almost to our treehouse, she was both concerned and skeptical. I had to sell it.

"We're going to stay in a treehouse. It's next to a river, just outside of a small town. It's gonna be cool."

"I don't know, sleeping up in a tree?"

"It's only like twenty bucks a night," I added. I was appealing to Amy's cheapness. Perhaps she would appreciate the hotel's value, if not its unusual architecture.

"Treehouse? I don't know..."

I love traveling and I love traveling with Amy and I take my responsibility as trip-planner very seriously. Too seriously, usually, resulting in headaches and anxiety and obsessive behavior. I look for inexpensive places nobody knows about with excellent references, air conditioning and private bathrooms. I am suspicious of everything I read and worried that I haven't read enough. A suite of guidebooks is required to properly triangulate information. If a place isn't listed in more than one source it is probably crappy and possibly closed. If it is

listed in more than one book, I know that it will be overrun with British backpackers complaining about the local beer or worse, Americans. That there will be Germans there, anywhere, everywhere, is a given, so I don't worry about that.

A trip has to be fun, stimulating, sexy, exciting. I love how travel-time counts for so much more than home-time, how the first night away always feels like I've been gone for a week. A boring city, an indifferent meal, a lame hotel is devastating because it is an opportunity wasted, a percentage of our trip pissed away and gone with no memories or resonance or anecdotes. I work hard to not let that happen and this time, I thought I'd picked a good one. True, the island in Panama that on paper looked like a tropical paradise turned out to be a terrifying hole complete with a hostile guy with half a face and a bottled-water shortage, but I had scored in Paris, in Mexico, in Costa Rica. A cheap treehouse hotel in the jungle in Western Belize? It had to be, well, something.

After an hour's drive the scrubby coastal plain abruptly bounced into the the Maya Mountains. We crossed an iron bridge into the narrow, twisty streets of San Ignacio, known locally as Cayo.

Our treehouse hotel was on the other side of town, out near the village of Bullet Tree Falls. We found it, parked, met the crazy German owner, his wife, their daughter, her rabbit, and were shown around.

The place was more of a camp along the river than a hotel. There were three treehouse rooms, along with a couple of cabins on the ground and a larger house for the owner's family with a porch for eating breakfast and looking at

maps and the highly suspect Lonely Planet. Between the cabins and the treehouses was a small bathroom compound of individual showers and toilets, and a row of outdoor sinks protected by an overhang of the thatched roof.

The treehouses were huts built on plywood platforms that were partially supported by thick tree branches, but also by wooden columns anchored firmly into the ground. They were twelve to twenty feet in the air, reached by crooked wooden stairs that were covered in slippery moss.

Perhaps to distract herself from her discomfort at sleeping up there, Amy challenged our lodgings on a technicality. "That's not a treehouse. It's a hut on a deck," she criticized.

I attempted to hype its merits. "It's up in a tree, though."

"No," she dismissed it. "It's not a real treehouse."

When I booked the room, two of the treehouses were already reserved. That left us with the smallest one, which wasn't much bigger than the double bed jammed into a corner. There was no other furniture in the room. To get by each other, one of us had to lean against the wall while the other shimmied along the bed. There was room enough on the floor for our backpacks and duffel bag, but that was it. The floor was covered in layers of cracked vinyl sheeting, each as thin as a tablecloth. The windows were openings with tattered screens that were patched enough to keep out any insect larger than a softball. In Belize, that was about half of them. The thatched roof was also patched in places with plastic tarps. It looked like a fun place to spend the night.

We went into town, made plans for the next day, got some dinner and groceries and returned to our treehouse after dark.

Getting ready for bed involved ascending the awkward steps to the hut, sliding past each other between the bed and the wall, digging into our bags, gathering toothbrushes and floss and soap, Texas and clean underwear and flashlights. Then— gingerly back down the steps to the stalls and sinks. We flossed in the moonlight with the sounds of the forest coming from just outside the ring of light that defined the hotel in the absence of a common roof or walls.

Our toilet complete, we climbed back up the tree and went to sleep. It had been a long day and we were tired.

Rain woke me up a few hours later. Big, tropical rain hitting the forest, the tree we were in, the thatched roof of the hut and my face. Our snug little treehouse leaked. We scrambled around shifting luggage, rearranging the bed, protecting our shoes. Having done all we could to keep our stuff dry, we got back into bed. We were in the dark, in the jungle, in the rain, in a tree. It was peaceful and strange. I fell back into a deep, primordial sleep.

"J! WAKE UP! WAKE UP! WAKE UP!"

Amy was pounding on my chest. It was still dark, still raining. We were still in the tree. What had happened? My poorly developed guy-in-charge directive kicked in. I ran down the possibilities —Was someone in the hut with us? A bandit? An animal? Was the hut leaking more? Falling? Collapsing? On fire? No. None of the above.

"I have to pee."

I was still asleep. Mostly. This didn't sound like a crisis worthy of fully waking up to manage.

"So go pee," I suggested. "Take the flashlight."

"No. I'm scared to go down there."

"The steps? Just be careful."

"Not the steps—Down There. It's dark. I'm not going."

Was this about me escorting her to the bath-hut? That must be it. I was supposed to get up in the middle of the night and get down out of our cozy tree in the pouring rain to protect my girlfriend from the fierce jungle creatures while she urinated. No way.

"It's pouring. I'm asleep. I'm not going with you. Just go pee."

"I don't want to go Down There. Not even with you!"

I came up with what I thought was a pretty clever alternative.

"Hang your butt out the door. The rain will wash the pee away."

Amy was shocked at the impropriety of the mere suggestion.

"Someone will see me!"

"In the middle of the night? In the dark? Up in a tree?"

But Amy had a better idea. She got out of bed and rummaged around the room. She found something in the little wicker wastebasket and held it aloft in triumph.

"I'll pee in a bottle!"

What? What was she talking about?

"You can't! How will you aim? You're a girl!"

She seriously thought this was a really good idea.

"I can do it. I'm very accurate. Extremely."

"No way! You're going to make a mess."

"No I'm not. I can totally pee in a bottle."

What you have to understand about my wife is her knack for wildly creative problem solving, her complete disregard for convention, her indomitable willpower and her tiny, tiny bladder. She has to pee all the time. Amy has the unsettling habit of abandoning me as we board airplanes to pee while I anxiously push her luggage along with my ankles, certain that she'll be left behind. As I'm asked for my ticket and ID, Amy comes running, hurdling chairs and suitcases like OJ in those old commercials. Once, while stuck in traffic in New Jersey, Amy filled a Styrofoam coffee cup while squatting on the floor in the back seat of a station wagon. As for her indomitable willpower—when she was a child, her dentist said that she needed braces. Her mother took her home and told her to push against her teeth with her tongue while she slept. She did it. She performed self-orthodonture with her stubbornness and her tongue without even being awake. This is the woman I love. Who was I to say whether she could pee in a bottle or not?

"Go for it, then."

I heard shuffling, a struggle with clothing, the muffled sounds of a plastic bottle filling up, and then—

"Uh oh. The bottle has a leak!"

My emotions were being pulled between disgust at the fact that my girlfriend had just peed on the floor and glee that she had not lived up to her boasting.

"There's no leak. You missed."

"I didn't miss! I got it all in there. I saw it in the bottle, and then it disappeared. It leaked out the bottom. The bottle has a hole in it."

"How can the bottle have a hole in it if it was full of water when we bought it?"

"It leaked. Now I need something to clean up the floor."

She rummaged around and then cheerfully said, "Oh! I can use this."

I heard water being poured onto the vinyl floor.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Diluting."

She mopped up with something, opened the hut door and threw it outside. It landed with a wet splat on the shared landing.

Relieved, Amy crab-walked across me using only her elbows and knees, thumped her pillow, turned her back to me, and fell most of the way asleep in about five seconds.

But some little nugget of curiosity kept me awake.

"What did you use?"

The incident over with, she had cleared it from her mind.

"For what?" she asked through the fog of semi-consciousness.

"To mop up your puddle of diluted pee?"

"Wha? Oh. Your T-shirt." She snuggled down and added, "Don't worry. I picked the dirtiest one."

"You mopped up your pee puddle with my dirtiest T-shirt, and then you threw it out of the treehouse where our treehouse neighbors will step on it in the morning?"

"Uh-huh. Goodnight."

I fell asleep smiling.