

TIKAL

Guatemala

Birding trip January 5-8 2016

[Links to photos and species list at the bottom.](#)

Why and how we got there

Just past New Year I went to Tikal in Guatemala with my girlfriend. The main purpose was to simply leave Mexico to re-enter a few days later, to have my tourist visa renewed. It didn't necessarily have to be Guatemala, but since the cheapest border-crossing options would be US or Guatemala, I thought it sounded more interesting to take the southern route out of the country. Also because I had not been back to Tikal since I was there in 1988, and it would be interesting to revisit. Both to see the spectacular ruins but also to get a second chance with all the birds I missed back then, because I was not yet a real birdwatcher.

So we booked a week trip, self-arranged, leaving Guadalajara January 4th and returning on the 11th. It is possible to fly all the way to Flores (Santa Elena), the main city in Péten, the northernmost department of Guatemala, where also Tikal lies, an hour's drive away. But it would be a more expensive and also a not so fun solution.

When I left Guatemala back in 1988, I did it by boat along the river San Pedro, crossing the border with Mexico into the state of Tabasco, at El Ceibo. I wanted to do that trip again, so we planned to fly to Villahermosa in Tabasco and then use public transportation to get to Flores. Ideally we would have been able to do the boat trip. But both because of the long journey and the fact that Rebeca is not so fond of sailing, we opted for the land crossing without checking if the river option actually is still an option.

Luckily our flight would leave Guadalajara at 6 am, so with only a two hours flight to Villahermosa we would have the whole day to get to Flores which would be our first stop, before continuing to Tikal the next day.

Doing your research online of course you can't avoid hearing all the horror stories that travelers like to tell each other. However, being an experienced traveler I know that most of it is exaggerated. Most stories getting pumped up by the sheer nature of it – 5 feathers turning to 5 chickens. And so the general warning was not to travel after dark, but that even daytime buses were subject to attacks in remote parts – some bus drivers actually being implicated, calling their compadres en route when knowing if the day's transport would be worth an extra effort...

Though being a remote part of Guatemala, the stretch from the border to Flores, I found it unlikely that this road would be favored to make highway robberies. Would expect too much traffic. But still I couldn't help feeling that we should try to reach Flores before darkness, just in case. And with this early flight out of Guadalajara we would be good on our way.

Volaris, cheap and reliable, left and arrived on time, as did our luggage.

From Villahermosa the idea was to first get to the closest village to the border-crossing, Tenosique. We calculated some 4 hours to get to the border, a half to one hour to do the crossing, and then 3-4 hours from the border to Flores. 9 hours, and if all clapped well we would get there just before dark.

But it shouldn't be that easy. In the airport we had to accept that the next bus departure for Tenosique would leave at 11am, meaning that we would have to waste 3 hours in the airport (same bus from the bus station). Surely we would not arrive until after dark taking the option. Alternatively we could take a taxi but it would be something like 2500 pesos – too ridiculous to even think about it. These two had been my options to get from V to T, but as always does, a third option turned up: Taking a combi from Villahermosa to Palenque, and from there take another combi to Tenosique (why there wasn't a combi option directly from V to T I don't know or have forgotten). We would not save the 3 hours completely but it surely would be better than waiting. Had we had more time it would have been natural to actually make a stop at Palenque, visiting these major ruins as well on the same trip.

At around 9 am the combi started rolling, and well on our way we spent the time chatting with our new 'friend'. Sat next to us on the plane and was also going to Tenosique. Actually his idea to go via Palenque. Mexican, going back to visit family, and his brother-in-law was a taxi driver...could probably take us to the border. They communicated, gave us a price and we agreed to go with his colleague since he himself was occupied. Apparently there wasn't any other service than taxi, or the combi version if someone else would be going to Guatemala, so better accept it.

Arriving at Tenosique the driver came to pick us up, and we went to drop off our friend, but not until we had bought some of the local cheese, queso de doble crema, that he insisted on being better than good. And we were hungry so not a problem. It was of the rubber type that is not my favorite, but it had a softer core inside mixed with ham and chili. And with warm tortillas it disappeared quickly.

The normal price for taking someone to the border was 300 pesos, but since the bridge crossing the Usumacinta river had washed away some months earlier they had to take a longer and more rough route meaning that the price would be 350 pesos. Being from outside of course we had no way of knowing if this was correct or a realistic price increase, but when going back some days later that driver charged us the 300 pesos and took exactly the same route! So much for new friendships!

The transport from Villahermosa to the border, El Ceibo, via Palenque cost about 500 pesos per person.

Having read that the border crossing had been upgraded with more facilities and being regarded as the main entry point to northern Guatemala, I had expected a lively traffic. I had expected to see backpackers, tourist busses and trucks waiting in line to leave the country. But no: We were the only two persons wanting to cross the border this day! Or at least at this hour. Yes it was raining heavily and yes it was a week day, but still...Not a single person other than us.

The actual crossing of the border, entering the area in-between, reminded me of how we used to do it when I was young and we would visit my father's family on the island he's from: Carrying our luggage long ways between ship, train and busses.

The taxi dropped us off outside the border area, and from there you could walk or take a tuc-tuc. A 3-wheeled scooter costing 15 pesos we were told. Of course he charged us 20. Inflation and you know...

Inside we walked all alone to the migration office, and had our passport stamps. A few questions about when we would return, and that was it. Easy. And then only a few Brown Jays saying goodbye and we were on our way again, out in the rain. On the Mexican side the fenced off walking lane was covered with a roof but not so on the Guatemalan side. A symbolic difference reflecting the transition from not-so-rich-but-still-civil to less so?

Last time I tried to enter Guatemala was also in 1988, at the Belize border. I remember how the officials tried to have us pay extra to allow us to cross the border. Nothing like that this time. No one approached us, though a line of men was sitting under their shelter. Very observant but not servant! We had to carry our bags ourselves, up the steps to the Guatemalan migration office. Again swift expedition and out in the rain again. Welcome to Guatemala! 3 months you get on your bare face. No visa needed – when being Danish or Mexican.

We exchanged money with a guy next to the migration office, hoping that it would mean something in terms of reliability that he would have his business next to the official Guatemala.

And then we continued through the rain the last hundred meters reaching the first buildings and where the bus was waiting us. Or any person needing a ride into the country.

We paid 50 quetzales each for taking us to Santa Elena, which is the official name of the large city at the shore of lake Petén Itzá where Flores lies. It, Flores, is on a small island in the lake. Today connected with a bridge, but not so when I visited the first time. Progress. If you like noisy motors.

The only other foreigner on the bus was a young Honduran guy, who had been on his way toward the big American dream, but had faced the reality of many being cheated by his employer not paying him for his hard work. Had to return without money or means to continue to the states. This happened in Mexico.

We arrived somewhat late at the border, and when the bus finally started to move it was around 1530. It took 4 hours to drive the 175 km to Santa Elena, and we therefore had to drive the larger part of the trip in darkness. But no worries. The bus was soon lively with people. It was a chicken bus! Chickens and all sorts of living things most welcome – if there's room. Of course called so because it serves all the local communities in between, being the only lifeline to and from. Most of the other passengers only moved shorter stretches between neighboring villages. And so too the only two chickens that accompanied us this day. They have probably transcended way beyond the great roasting spears as of this moment...

The landscape was green and fertile, river land. Flat extensive agriculture in between low coupled hills, and the river bending its way toward Mexico. Very much like the Mexican side of the border, but passing through it, before it got dark, it was obvious that we had come to another country. A poorer country. Simple wooden cottages with roofs of tin plates were predominating. The oven design. Though I imagine that wood better than concrete minimizes the heat suffering. But probably not so much that it makes it actually pleasant – remembering how I tried not to sweat too much while lying on my mattress on the floor in the La Mancha, Veracruz when I was volunteering back in 2006. I recall almost 40 degrees C inside the house, that of course wasn't mosquito protected, and I therefore had to sleep with closed windows. La Mancha is another mosquito paradise!

This night though, after a day with rain from morning till evening, I'm sure these people would have no problems going to sleep. And one could wonder when that might happen, because as the darkness took over as we moved ahead, and one would expect that light would be turned on inside the houses and on the

streets, this only happened to a small degree. It looked like many houses still only had open fire to light up inside, or many just had a single bulb flashing in the darkness.

I remember it being so too back in 1988, and compared with the progress that has happened in Mexico during this period of time, it is incredible, and sad, to watch that apparently so little had happened during so many years. But I know it: Guatemala has always been poorer and more divided, and more violated. Not to mention that this part of the country probably being a low-prioritized outback to those ruling the higher offices in the south.

Arriving safely we got off the bus and took a taxi, paying 30 quetzales to get to our hotel on the island. It's a pretty small island, and one would expect a local taxi driver to know all streets and places, but not ours. Had to guide him by memory having checked the map before leaving home.

And so after 14 hours of traveling, we could finally relax and stroll out to have something to eat.

Flores

The next morning I took a quick walk along the water's edge, before Rebeca got ready. It was a calm day, still overcast but the rain had stopped. The town was nice. I wouldn't say beautiful but still picturesque, surrounded by the lake. The water was calm too and the green vegetation on the far shore looked very inviting. You could take a boat taxi to go there, but it was not part of the plan. Tikal had top priority. Because of the rain yesterday the water level in the lake was very high, flooding the first streets on the back side of the island. That gave me my first ever street-walking Northern Jacanas! And also Mangrove Swallows, Royal Terns, Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls and a Skimmer were added to the list as the first official species for me in Guatemala.

It was chilly so we found a waterfront restaurant with a protected corner to enjoy the view while we had breakfast. Atole made on oat and a sandwich style omelet. A tasty good start.

Being a tourist hotspot Flores is not cheap. We could probably have eaten and perhaps also accommodated cheaper if we had stayed on the mainland side, Santa Elena, but for the joy of it and the experience we did not regret having chosen Flores. And this despite the very noisy tuc-tucs running the narrow streets, along with the drunken tourists debating loudly in the early hours. The locals also said, standard procedure one might say, that it was less safe to stay over there – not so safe to walk the streets especial in the evening.

We planned on leaving for Tikal as soon as possible. Only had to buy some dry food to bring along, and to go to the bank to be sure to bring enough money. No cajeros automáticos in Tikal for sure, and though the hotel apparently would accept credit cards, the restaurants there certainly would not. And with the little shopping we had done so far in Guatemala we were pretty sure that the amount we had exchanged at the border would not be enough. Everything much more expensive than we had expected.

We were going to stay at the Tikal Inn, situated inside the park. That hotel had a shuttle service, but it was expensive, so we had the hotel in Flores arrange that a local combi service would take us. That's the way most visitors do it. A round trip cost 80 quetzales per person, and they run frequently. The trip takes an hour.

Tikal

The landscape around the lake and Flores is dominated by agriculture and settlements. But as one gets nearer to Tikal the landscape closes in, and when arriving at the gate bordering the park you are surrounded completely by dense jungle.

The gate is situated about 20 kilometers from the ruin and hotel complexes. It costs 150 quetzales to enter the park. It's a day ticket that allows you to visit the ruins that same day you enter. Local guatemaltecos only have to pay 35 quetzales! Somehow it is ok, knowing that people in general are poor 150 is a lot of money to spend on something that, though worth it, is not essential. Still, it feels like a rip-off that we foreigners have to pay 4 times the money, for the same experience.

And even more so when you find out that you have to pay that amount every day you want to visit the ruins, even if you stay at a hotel inside the park. We weren't aware of that, and since we were going to stay 3 nights, it would be 450 quetzales each just in entrance fees. A quetzal costs the same as a Danish crown, being loosely around 7 crowns to a US dollar.

I know the site is world class but still, to me that is pushing it a little too far. But what can you do? You're there, you want to have the experience, so you have to pay – we thought...!

And then we finally arrived at the site. Meaning: You arrive at the parking area being the central hob connecting the ruin area and the hotel area.

The combi service stops there. You get off – normally. Because we had gotten the idea that we could be dropped off at the hotel entrance, not having to walk and carry. So, since we were several thinking the same way, the driver agreed and went ahead and we got off in front of the hotel. Nice and easy.

But it only felt so until the receptionist told us that she couldn't find our reservation!

I had had it in mind that something like this could happen, because when I tried to make the reservation the first time, directly with the hotel, they told me there were no available rooms left. But then via booking.com I found a last-room-available offer, and got it. So in that moment I was sure that the systems had fucked up, and we were left with no room, and would have to go back. Though we had passed Christmas and being into the new year, it was still the very high season, and therefore the likeliness that they would have spare room would be zero.

Who did it, I'm not sure, but someone then asked the clever question of which hotel we were going to, and we answered: Tikal Inn of course. But this is not Tikal Inn it is the Jungle Lodge!!!

Another driver lost in his own neighborhood! But the confusion on our part was emphasized by the presence of a Swiss guy who said that he too was going to the Tikal Inn, so we felt assured that we were going right. But in the lobby he suddenly realized that he had arrived at the right place because he actually was going to the Jungle Lodge and not Tikal Inn. A distraught young man indeed.

But we were happy, though we now had to walk a long way back to our hotel. The combi of course long gone.

We arrived early, and had to park our luggage in the lobby an hour's time before we could have our room. Meanwhile we checked out the facilities. It looked nice with a large dining room in front of the central garden with a big pool (only pool in Tikal). We also checked the Internet, but had to conclude that only when you went to the women's toilet in the lobby area would you have a decent signal.

You don't decide to go to a locality like Tikal and then start complaining about lack of Internet access. Or if you do, you should probably have your perspective on life adjusted some. So it is only because they advertise with having Internet that you feel that it is fair to grumble.

We also went out scouting around the hotel while waiting. With potentially many new species awaiting me, I started to get into the glad-you're-here-my-love-but-I-simply-have-too mode, and couldn't wait. We didn't go far though. I accepted that. Better have the room quick and get something to eat, and then start exploring for real.

But it still proved to be a very valuable half hour of birding. Because beside the nice Roadside Hawks that apparently were local, I got two important lifers in an obscure corner of the entrance road to the hotel. A spot that would never have attracted my attention if not by pure ... serendipity.

It was a not very noticeable flowering large bush, and passing by, almost as we had to return to the reception, I saw a larger bird hovering in front of a flower. Hummingbird, instinctively, yes, and it was a beautiful female Purple-crowned Fairy! Click click, got a few shots and then it was gone. Only one I saw, and only saw it this once.

Standing there, bobbling inside, but indecisive whether I should involve Rebeca in my emotional state or not. Non-birders rarely tend to appreciate the significance of a lifer. I decided only to point out the beauty of the bird, and it was already gone anyway.

I flipped through the few fotos I reached to take, and was very pleased to see a few that would be acceptable as more than just documentation. And then something large was suddenly moving around the same bush again. Ah, it's back I thought, and hoped for better photos, but it wasn't the Fairy. It was a spectacular Long-billed Hermit! Fantastic. But hum hum hum, and then before I could do anything, it too was gone. Never saw it again, and as with the Fairy only saw this one bird. No photos.

We had to go back then, and of course very animated, imagining that if I would get such two lifers during the first half hour of our stay, it was going to be Happy Days on Earth for sure.

A third lifer I got in the same bush the next day. The other hermit, Stripe-throated Hermit! But incredibly so, it too was gone in a split second, only allowing enough time for me to id it. And also just saw this one individual during the whole stay.

And then we got our room. A pleasant surprise. It had been advertised as the cheapest in the hotel, so our expectations were at the moderate end of the scale. Had read reviews about noisy generators destroying the idyllic atmosphere and the sleep at night.

The luggage guy showed up, grabbed our bags, and started to walk out of the main building down along the closest bungalows. One of those I thought. Good, because they turned away from the swimming pool area. But then he continued out on a wood chip covered path leading away from the main area. And shortly after we passed an open hut with hammocks hanging between the poles. Very primitive with no walls, just mosquito curtains serving as such. Ahh, I've got it, I thought. The cheapest room in a jungle hotel of course has to be the all-the-way-back-to-nature type. Prepared for the worst we continued pass the hammocks, but then after walking almost one hundred meters a house showed up between the trees. Here we have 6 six rooms he said. We stepped up the short stairs, and he opened the door to a nice standard hotel room. It was just perfect! Away from the other guests and turmoil around the main building we were staying right in the middle of it. Of course still a part of the hotel ground, but we were at the very back end, right next to good forest. Couldn't have been better.

Of course no Internet. And who could also complain about the restrictions on light and hot water...Being self-supplied with electricity, lights were only on a few hours in the morning and a few hours in the evening. Enough to do your daily routines within a normal time frame. But you quickly get used to it, and there is really nothing as mind calming as not having access to modern life commodities. You just have to gear down, and follow the natural rhythm of day and night. Back to presence. We slept like babies..!

Tickets and eating

When we arrived we chitchatted a little with the receptionists, and found out two things. A good and a bad one it turned out.

The good one was about the expensive entry tickets. We could use a little trick: If we one day didn't enter the ruin area until after 3 pm, we could save one ticket, because when you buy a ticket that late in the afternoon it will also be valid the next day. That sounded very useful, because I already knew that I would also like to bird in the open area closer to the hotels and administration. We decided to do that.

So the next morning after having breakfast we started to drift around the area exploring, and eventually we ended up behind the main tourist building at the small pond there. Rebeca went shopping, and I went further ahead and found a trail leading into the forest behind the pond. Being a birdwatcher, morally I'm obliged to explore around the next corner to see what will reveal itself. Have to! I continued and it looked very promising. Nice. I returned to find Rebeca, and she had no problem exploring a bit off the official tracks. So we went ahead. There weren't many birds. It was around midday and very quiet. We continued and then after a short while we suddenly stepped out from the trail we were on, into the main road leading into the ruins! We had been there the day before in the afternoon and could recognize it easily. But we were way past the ticket booth! Meaning trespassing. Hmm... What do you do then. Law-abiding citizens we liked to see us back out the same way we came in, but honestly, we couldn't ignore our self-righteousness telling us that 3 times 150 quetzales simply was too much to be acceptable. So we continued...And frankly, just between us, we entered like this every time afterward.

Sneaking on we bumped into our Swiss friend from the day before, and he told us that he had done exactly the same, entering through the forest behind his hotel without paying. So perhaps it is a common practice. And perhaps not even a violation of the rules as such. I mean, of course the local workers, rangers and administration know of all these side tracks, and had it been their intention they could easily have blocked all of them. So I will like to think that they look through fingers with it, knowing that guests staying at the hotels in the park already are contributing extra to the area. I hope they think so. Positive.

The negative thing was the food at Tikal Inn. Knowing nothing about what options there were in the area, we decided to buy food stamps...vouchers, for all meals to the restaurant at the hotel. We weren't there to explore culinary specialties anyway, so we thought this one could be as good as any. As long as we would have something fairly good and plenty to eat, we would be happy.

The voucher included a dinner meal and breakfast. They cost 20 usd each. Not that expensive taking the type of place into consideration, but compared to what they offered, it was!

The dinner would include an entry, main dish and a dessert. There wasn't much to choose from, but this was acceptable when you go for this more economic voucher solution. So no complaints about that, and

we both were fairly content with what we chose for entry and main dish, but then it tilted: “And the dessert will have to be a slice of watermelon; that’s the only thing we have”. !!!? ...Please, We know we’re paying less with a voucher but a slice of watermelon is not much.

Our complaining was made mainly after having eaten the first two dishes, and knowing that they served very little and food prepared with very little effort and talent, we couldn’t help it. And it didn’t help either that the waiter was of the dumb unresponsive type. We, of course, spoke Spanish with him so it couldn’t be because of the language barrier that he didn’t seem to understand what we said. He practically didn’t respond to any of the things we complained about, and just waited for us to make our move. Finally we gave up on him, ate our ridiculous piece of watermelon and went straight to the restaurant desk where we bought several packages of biscuits and chocolate.

We decided not to do more about it. Lesson learned. Bad experience. Curiously the restaurant was full, which I in that moment could only explain with lack of other eating options.

So the next morning after an early birding outing, just me, we headed back to the restaurant hoping to be better served and filled up before the day’s exploring.

But no! It started out disastrous right from the beginning. No coordination between the different waiters that started serving us simultaneously, without them knowing it. We ordered with one of them, and then the next one came to ask the same. You would expect that two of them together would be able to complete the service in a more efficient way, but we continued to miss things like sugar, a spoon, napkins. And it continued. The food was very basic, standard toast bread, beans and a little egg. Way too little, even for a cheap 20 dollars voucher. We had to ask for the fruit that the menu said was included and they brought us a minimal plate with some of the pieces stained brownish and the pineapple still wearing its furry coat! And putting on top of that, that the waiters were of the same standard as the guy from last night, completely blank behind the eyes, not responding to any of our complains, we decided that it was the last time we would eat there.

The tricky part was that we had bought all the vouchers at once. With such a crabby service and quality it was easy to imagine a not-our-fault attitude when claiming our refund. We had to wait until the evening before knowing if they would pay us back, because the manager was away. Smelling indeed it did, but it turned out true. She arrived and we asked if it would be possible to cancel the unused vouchers, because we didn’t want to eat there anymore. She said yes, not even asking why. As if she had experienced it before.

With our 80 bucks safe in hand we then headed straight toward the restaurant at the nearby Jaguar Inn, which jungle drums in the meantime had told us should be much better. And it was: Waiters bright and responsive. The food delicious with a good selection of dishes. Nice atmosphere. As if we had been moved to a different planet. Of course it was also more expensive, but it didn’t matter. We wanted the feeling of well-being and full stomachs!

There is also a restaurant at the before-mentioned Jungle Lodge. It too looked nice when we were there briefly the first day, so probably worth a visit.

When we later commented about the food to the receptionist in our hotel, his only answer was: But it is the only hotel with a swimming pool....! And he meant it.

After that we started experimenting with the food. One morning we had breakfast with the drivers at the food stand in the middle of the parking lot. Nothing fancy, but solid. Chicken soup, eggs and beans as I recall it. Another at the Jaguar Inn, and the last night we also tried one of the independent restaurants lying along the highway before entering the parking lot area. Solid but basic. A bit too basic I think. Only had steak and fried chicken. But cheaper if that is important to you. I think I would have preferred to go back to the Jaguar Inn though, to celebrate an all in all very successful stay at this fabulous place among many birds and ruins.

Practicalities

Many mosquitoes in some areas, especially the old airstrip that is now a simple broad trail leading to and beyond La Aguada del cocodrilo, the crocodile pond. There was at least one medium sized croc present. There are few mosquitoes inside the ruin area.

And yes there are chiggers in Tikal too! Everything being well dry we only experienced few bites though. Around the ankles. But we had brought the alcohol to deal with them, so the suffering was minimal.

Easy to buy snacks and sodas, so no need to bring much. Though more expensive than Flores. Good food at Jaguar Inn restaurant. Probably also so at the Jungle Lodge. Tikal Inn a waste of time. Cheaper local restaurants along access road is also a decent option.

Tikal Inn: Only electricity between 530 and 8 in the morning and in the evening between 17 and 2200. By memory. However, they let the light stay on longer in the evening when we were there, due to many guests.

There are a few toilets inside the ruin area, but only near the most visited areas, like the Gran Plaza and Temple IV. But it should be fairly easy, even for women, to find a quiet undisturbed spot to do your business. Much understory and few mosquitoes – a perfect open air peeing combination.

You can buy souvenirs of all kinds. Also a small variety of bird books. I bought the one Frank B. Smithe wrote back in 1966 about Tikal. The first field and status guide for the area. Remarkably precise and interesting to be able to compare with today. But notice: There were two copies in the store that day. Both similar, but they were priced differently, one saying 125 and the other 150!

You can also camp if you like to. Didn't ask prices but probably fairly cheap. The camp ground was almost empty. Probably have to bring all your gear yourself, but can of course eat at all the restaurants.

Birding

And now to what it was all about for me. Or almost, because I really did look forward to revisit the ruins. And liked it! But with the only memory I had of birds from the trip back in 88 being a photo of an Ocellated Turkey, there was so much to expect. And so little time. Beside Tikal it would have been great to have visited the Quetzal site further south in Guatemala, but knowing that too much traveling with limited time available easily can turn a good trip into a nightmare, I

decided not to. So we relaxed and concentrated on getting to know all the ruins and to see as many birds as possible.

And I dare to say that 3 days were not a moment too long. New species showed up every day, and I would have loved to stay there for a month or longer!

To start from behind, I ended up with a list of 112 species seen or recognized by ear on site. But since I still have a batch of 140 sound recordings to go through, many which I could not identify in the field, it is most likely that the species list will increase. I'm pretty sure I have several recordings of the Green Shrike-Vireo for example, but never saw any of them. On the other hand I've also already had to accept that a recording that I first thought was the Jacamar was not, but indeed a Great Crested Flycatcher. So what the end result will be is difficult to say today. I will update the species list when it's completed.

The terrain is flat at Tikal so it is easy to move about, but being dense jungle you are limited to bird from the paths already existing, unless you have oceans of time and bring a good machete and a compass. However for a short-term visitor there should be more than enough options to have you happily going for the whole stay.

Roughly you can divide the area into two: The ruin site and the hotel/administration area.

The ruin site is characterized by mature tall stand forest with comparatively open understory. The hotel area is more open and characterized by cultivation, secondary brush and mature trees, but not so big as inside the ruin site. The old airstrip next to the hotel area is all overgrown with a trail kept open to reach the crocodile pond a few hundred meters ahead – called Aguada del cocodrilo on the map. Naturally this area too is secondary forest with a much denser understory than at the ruin area. This trail continues passed the crocodile pond, but it narrows in continuously. I walked several hundred meters passed the pond but didn't reach the end of the trail which was then only about 2 meters wide.

To point out best strategies bases on only 3 days of course is not possible, so I just try give an overall impression of what I did and what came out of it.

Your common daily companions will be Brown Jays, Melodious Blackbirds, Social Flycatchers, Moctezuma Oropendulas, Gartered Trogon and Red-lored Parrots. Seen or heard. The Plain Chachalacas were not as present as I would have expected, as opposed to Great Tinamou which is also a character species in the area, though heard-only. But both early, late and in the middle of the day. I also heard a single Thicket Tinamou. And of course not to forget the Howler and Spider monkeys. Many Spiders seen and few heard. The contrary with the Howler.

Inside the ruin area we let the site map dictate where to go and I just birded along. We wanted to visit all the ruin complexes and managed to do it well during the three days.

As expected the visual birding was complicated by the nature of the habitat, and it was mostly around the openings close to the ruins that we actually saw something. I would say that any place could be good at the right time and place. Depending on fruiting trees, water availability and more.

But talking to some of the local guides they recommended the area around the ruin complex the Lost World, at the back side of the area. We didn't stay there for so long, but the open area with smaller trees

definitely looked good, though I didn't see much – a few Eye-ringed Flatbills, Chestnut-colored Woodpecker and overhead a lifer: A single Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift!

If still present you should go to temple IV, the tallest of all the excavated ruins, and look for the pair of Orange-breasted Falcons breeding on top of it. You can also be lucky to see them from elsewhere if just passing by, saw one of them from the Gran Plaza, but it is more reliable to go to temple IV. If you're there for the ruins too, you will naturally end up there anyway, because it has the best of views overlooking the forest and the other ruins.

Climbing the ruins to get clear of the trees is of course always recommendable to look for raptors. Never did it though, because of so many other places to be at the same time. But I still had a nice Ornate Hawk-Eagle and a King Vulture, as the only raptors apart from the B and T vultures and Roadside Hawks. Both seen from the parking lot outside the ruin area. And the first was a lifer, yes. As were the falcons.

Another good lifer was the Slaty-tailed Trogons that we only managed to see once, and inside the ruin area, next to Palacio de las Acanaladuras. The first one I detected by call, and then while taking photos two more came in. The one photographed was a female, but never got clear views of the other two.

A calling Black-faced Antthrush near temple III was also a lifer. I recorded it but haven't reviewed the recording yet – really hope I got the id right...

Warblers, tyrann-flycatchers and woodcreepers were all well represented inside the ruin area. Gave me two lifers: Golden-winged Warbler and Rufous-tailed Flycatcher. See list for all species.

In fact, most of the time when you finally got to find a bird moving through the foliage, it would be a warbler. Magnolia, Black-and-white and American Redstart being the most common.

Night outings was a no goer on this trip, though some of the guards asked if we would like to do it, to look for Jaguars. Of course it would have been cool to see one. Apparently they actually saw two around the workers camp while we were there, but we still thought it was not very likely, and combined with being tired after walking the whole day, and being too expensive, we said no.

And there are only recorded 3 owl species in the area (Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Mottled and Black-and-white) and only Yucatán Poorwill of the local nightjar species, so, though arrogant to say it, it wasn't really worth trying for it.

Ocellated Turkey should of course also be mentioned. It is after all emblematic to the area. Want to see this species? Go to Tikal or Calakmul in Campeche, Mexico! Here they are easy.

And yes we did seem them, but not many, and mostly around the Gran Plaza where they foraged in the short grass like cattle or chicken. One was different with a funny knob dangling from the neck, see photo list. And others were good because they stayed on top of a ruin at complex R, and one I could photograph from atop when it flew down. The photos are not spectacular but still you get to see the plumage with the wings open, to better understand where all the kaleidoscopic colors and patterns fit in.

Parrots is probably also better inside the ruin area because you are able to get up and see them while flying above the trees. They do that a lot. Temple II at the Gran Plaza, which you can climb via scaffold like stairs, in particular is worth a try. From there you can also study the local Northern Rough-winged

Swallows of the Ridgeway type, dark undertail coverts. Apparently they roost or breed in the open top chambers of the temples. They generally looked darker and bigger than the subspecies I normally see in Mexico.

And this is all I'll say about birding inside the ruin area, and hurry on to tell you that when it comes to variety and numbers, the area outside the ruins was undoubtedly the best! In general I think it is because of mixed habitat, but it probably also depends on local variation, with water and fruiting trees being important factors.

3 places should be visited.

Or let's say 4 including the parking lot itself if you want to look for raptors – as much open sky as possible.

The first one is the old airstrip. It is practically an extension of the back end of the Tikal Inn property. Had Pheasant-Cuckoo, White-collared Manakin, Streak-backed Woodcreeper, the supposed Green Shrike-Vireo and the before-mentioned hummingbirds. Also my only Black-throated Saltator was seen here.

Wrens were few, Spot-breasted mostly, and a single White-browed and White-bellied. Many Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds around the hotel.

Some local guides took people down the track to find Rose-throated Tanager and Yucatan Flycatcher. And did. I didn't try for them much. Have seen them in Mexico, and the many mosquitoes didn't animate the patient side of me I'm afraid. Funny enough there were almost no mosquitoes inside the ruin area, but many outside. Probably because of the still water at the ponds.

The pond itself didn't give anything while I was there, other than a heard Blue-crowned Motmot. Could be that a dusk visit would reveal a rail or two, but think the other pond behind the tourist center is better for that.

Only registered three dove species during the trip, and two of them White-tipped and Gray-headed was here. However, I'm pretty sure I heard, and recorded, Blue Ground-doves as well at this spot, making it the better one for doves. The Blue Ground-Dove will be a lifer if correct.

The second place is the area around this other pond exactly – and surroundings. Behind the tourist complex. We had the wood-rails at dusk there and Green Heron, but with the mix of water, open air and brushy understory next to it, it is a traffic hub where many species pass by during the day.

An extension of this place is the workers camp that lies separated next to the tourist complex along the entrance road, toward the exit. This is where you will go to see Great Curassows. The cook feeds them every day – a pair – and they come right out in the open to pick up what she throws at them. I only managed to get a photo of the male before it approached the dining place. Up in a tree. Because, while I patiently waited at some distance for quite some time, they didn't come out in the open. They moved slowly, or nervously, around just inside the brush, tempted to come out but without doing so. I think my presence was a disturbance to them. Because, the cook told me that they normally come out even if she was there or other people present eating.

A bit further up the entrance road from the workers camp you find a tiny side road on the right side. It is the local garbage dump! Locked up albeit, a guard told me that the Jaguars often come close, feeling attracted by the smell. I had my only two Clay-colored Thrushes there, and only Blue-winged and Bay-breasted Warblers too. The last one a lifer!

Place number 3 is probably the best and most important in terms of local forest species.

It is the area behind the administration complex that lies behind the hotels on the right side of the entrance to the ruins. And while the old airstrip and the other area around the workers camp and the tourist complex have free access, this area is a gray zone between in- and outside.

It is dense forest and like that doesn't look much different from other similar places in Tikal. But it apparently is an old overgrown orchard that holds many fruit trees and the birds know it. That's how I remember the explanation but frankly I wasn't able to distinguish any fruit trees in particular. But there were birds. And good species!

It is a short trail that starts at one end from inside the administration grounds and ends at the other end at some restaurants that lies inside the ruin area, at the beginning of the road that leads to the ruins Uaxactún, some 23 km further inside the jungle.

You can enter the administration grounds without problem, at least we could. A guard even told us where the trail started. It is just after the last building on your left if you follow the road till you are about to leave the administration ground into the forest at the other end. Walk down along that building and it should be clear how to continue. In between the administration and the restaurants there are other buildings, one called a school, though it doesn't look like one.

People use the road to commute to and from the administration, and didn't seem to be bothered by our presence.

Unfortunately I only got to know about this spot the last day, and we only had time to visit shortly, but still it gave me species like Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, Green Honeycreeper (even talked to two local guides who had never seen this species!), Tawny-crowned Greenlet, Northern Bentbill, Stub-tailed Spadebill, Short-billed Pigeon and White-collared Manakin. And another day while we were birding along the Uaxactún road just outside the restaurants I had Red-capped Manakin and a Rufous Mourner, meaning practically in the same area.

It was another local guide that told us about the place, which I'm grateful for. Can only imagine what more it would have given, if we had known about it earlier.

Didn't ask him if the spot was permanently good or a temporal phenomenon, but if there really are many fruit trees in there, it has to be permanent, and will definitely be a first priority the next time I visit.

With over 300 species registered at Tikal, I only saw a smaller part, but still a good part I think. Of course it would have been nice to have seen the puffbirds or any antbirds, beside the Barred Antshrike I heard, or the more rare ovenbirds like leaf-tossers, foliage-gleaners, xenops or spinetails. Hopefully some of them will be revealed when I get through checking my sound recordings. But I can't help thinking that these are species that require a different approach than other birds, since I've had problems finding them in Mexico as well. Or perhaps they are simply rare.

Funny enough we didn't find any ant swarms at all during our stay.

The ruins and the site as such

I'm not that interested in the archaeological facts and the lives of the Mayans as such, but I'm very fascinated by the physical expression of the ruins perfectly surrounded by this mysterious green ocean of trees, soil, water and wild animals. It is truly magical. The colors combine perfectly, and to sit on top of Temple IV and watch the sky and the forest below and take it all in, is a divine experience. You feel animated and grateful toward life, not only that you can have the experience, but even more so that you are able to perceive it. That you are able to feel the difference.

I feel very much at home there. And I think most people visiting feel that is a special place. Entering the area is like entering a large cathedral. You feel awestruck when you start walking in between the tall trees, some perhaps 50-60 meters tall; especially the absolutely fantastic Kapok tree, La Ceiba, that greets every visitor a few hundred meters from the entrance (close to where we trespassed).

The only thing I liked about the movie Avatar was the precious tree of life, and when I saw this enormous Kapok my first thought was that this was their inspiration. This was the tree they were referring to.

The place is visited by hundreds every day I'm sure, and still you never get that sensation of being in a crowded place. Both because the excavated area is very large, though much smaller than the whole area that Tikal is supposed to cover, estimated 65 square km, but also because people naturally behave more quietly. You automatically feel that here is something that is so much larger than what the ordinary life of daily humans can offer. And it calls for respect. But it also calls for hope. People unconsciously feel a connection to these harmonious giants and they long to unite with them. I'm sure. I do.

I can only recommend that you stay as many days as possible in the park. To really get to appreciate the energies, and also to visit the different ruin complexes. You might think that they all are more or less the same. Steep constructions with few ornaments and many of them already pretty worn down by being exposed to the weather constantly. But they are not the same. There is a very unique atmosphere surrounding every place, and as is the nature of them, slow cool energy, you should enjoy them the same way – slowly.

Being almost 30 years since I was there the first time, it was difficult for me to remember what was different and what was not. I had a feeling that the airstrip was more open if not completely operational, and I also remember some 'chewing gum' chicle trees near the parking lot that I didn't see this time. And surely the hotels were not so elaborated, perhaps there was only one, or none, but I remember that it was possible to camp though, as well as today. And you could buy snacks. Not sure if the restaurants were there either.

And of course the main ruins around the Gran Plaza. We climbed Temple I too, which today is not allowed. And I'm also pretty sure that we climbed Temple IV to the very top, but this was before they build the stairs. A more serious matter!

I remember a Russian 'expedition' traveling the two continents in a big private bus (shame I wasn't envious enough to take action on such a life style).

And I remember some workers asking me how much my boots were worth, and that I was not willing to sell them.

I only visited a single day coming in from Flores in the late morning leaving in the afternoon before it got dark. Not much time, but still, all the time in between, I've kept saying that Tikal is the most precious of all the excavated Maya ruins. And this visit has only confirmed my opinion. I admit that I don't know all the Maya ruins, but most of the important ones, and after this visit I'm still convinced that this is a place of extraordinary value.

Back to Mexico.

We returned the same way we entered, and the only difference was that we took a bus from Tenosique to Villahermosa instead of the combi solution.

There were more people crossing the border this day, but mostly natives. I got my new stamp without any questions whatsoever.

We stayed in Villahermosa one day to do a little sightseeing. Visited the museum La Venta where the famous Olmek heads are on permanent exhibition. Discovered close to La Venta, Tabasco, by Frans Blom the Danish engineer who started out working for the oil industry but later fall in love with the new land and its indigenous people.

Brought the binoculars and camera while sightseeing. The museum lies at the edge of the lake Ilusiones. There is a lot of water in Villahermosa! Apart from an Amazon Kingfisher, my first in many years, the most interesting observation was a very large group of Olive-throated Parakeets coming in to night roost close to the museum, 500!

We were back in Guadalajara on time. Volaris!

I still need to analyze my sound recordings, so more will be added to photos and sounds, and this could also affect the total species list. When this comment is gone, the lists will be complete.

Link to photos and sounds:

<http://www.naturewatch.dk/header.php?file=bview&search=locality&id=Tikal%20PN>

Link to observations:

http://www.naturewatch.dk/header.php?file=download&articleid=tikal_january_2016_species_list