

The Mayan Calender

There have been many interpretations of what it will signify when the Mayan Calendar ends in 2012.

As usual Hollywood has chosen to depict a dark, gloomy side to the truth of what 2012 signifies, feeding people's ever growing fear.

It is important to remind ourselves that there are always two sides to the coin.

I was invited to attend the 2011 Mayan New Year ceremony by my teacher and friend Victor. 2011 is the year of the Jaguar. Traditionally, the Jaguar has the ability to help you with confidence and learning. An opportunity to grow. The Jaguar represents courage.

I was jubilant. What better way could there be to discover the truth about this ancient Calendar than to travel to the source of its existence and visit the people who live and breathe it?

Victor and I met in Guatemala in 2000. He is one of three shamans I have had the privilege to study with. I spent over five months studying with Victor in a lakeside village called St Pedro. Before leaving Guatemala in 2000, I had attended another Mayan ceremony in the highlands where the New Year Ceremony would be conducted.

The calendar itself is over 5,000 years old and is the foundation of the Mayan people.

It is believed that a god called Kulkulkna (the Aztecs called him Quatzalcoatl) came to the Mayan people from the sea. This god taught the people about agriculture, maths, science, the solar system, the planets and gave them the calendar. He taught them how to live in peace. One day this god decided to leave, travelling across the sea, promising that he would return back to the people.

In 1519 Cortes and his Spanish fleet arrived. They thought it was their god returning and welcomed them with open arms. In Bolivia, I visited a museum and saw the statue of this god. You can understand how they could have made such an error. This fatal mistake led to their rapid down fall as the Spanish brought nothing but death, destruction, greed and brutality.

The New Year ceremony was to be conducted by seven shaman women and Victor, a guest of honour. I was given permission to share this journey with you.

The story goes something like this.

The New Year ceremony would take place in a town in the highlands I had once visited over ten years ago. It is a town where time stands still. Locals live as they did centuries ago. They dress in traditional clothes, sell their produce in the local market, carry wood for the stove and still make their traditional foods, like tortillas.

Eager for adventure and knowledge, I caught the midnight flight from L.A. and arrived at Guatemala City around 6.30am. I then caught the mini-bus to a town called Antigua. A town influenced by Spanish architecture, once the Capital of Guatemala. It is located near an active volcano which you can climb. Once there I booked my ride to Panajachel which sits on the edge of the most spectacular lake. From there St Pedro, my interim destination, the place where I learnt to heal my wounds, is a twenty-five minute boat ride away.

The three hour bus ride to Panajachel turned into six hours. We were forty-five mins away from Panajachel when we came across a road block - police in their full armoured gear, guns and all. Right next to us was a beer truck, its security guards armed to the teeth with semi-automatics. Yes they guard beer with their lives here. I did ask for an adventure!

Common sense does not prevail here as some cars and buses chose to drive on the other side of the road into the oncoming traffic. So many close calls - welcome to Guatemala!

There was no chance of starving at the road block. Out of nowhere, women surrounded us, selling tortillas, fried chicken and fruit. They must have a radar. At least I got to know the people on our mini bus while we waited.

Finally we were on our way, packed in like sardines in the minivan. We arrived in Panajachel around 6.30pm. As luck would have it we were able to make the final boat to St Pedro.

Once on Lagoon Atitlan you feel transported. One of the largest and most beautiful in the world, the lake is a serene body of fresh water surrounded by volcanoes. The views are breathtaking and the sunsets spectacular. Time seems to slow down here. It's a place where you can stop and breathe.

The twenty-five minute trip turned into an hour as the engine died half way across the lake - what more could possibly go wrong? All I could do was laugh. Not bad for the first day....

My beautiful St Pedro! The place I loved, lived and worked in as I studied with the shamans has been invaded by commercialism since I saw it last. It is now ten times the size with a lot fewer trees. With commercialism has come the Evangelist preaching their god-fearing ways, giving with one hand and taking twice as much with the other. There is something like 70 churches now.

Even here, amidst this ancient culture, technology has made its mark. Nowadays everyone carries a mobile phone. It is the strangest thing to see a woman pull one out of her apron as she carries the clothes on her head to be washed in the lake.

What has not changed are the people that I fell in love with. So warm, gentle and incredibly generous. I got to spend time with my new friends from the bus, as well as my cherished friends from 2000.

One of the highlights of my time in St Pedro was watching the new moon rise over the lake as we sat on the roof of our hotel. I got to swim at my favourite spot where the water is still clean. With commercialism also comes pollution. There are new roads and Tuk tuks everywhere so we caught one for fun to the next town and it was like one long dodgem car ride.

After a few days meeting old friends and exploring my favourite haunts, I set off to meet Victor in Panajachel.

Victor comes from a line of Shamans. His great grandmother, for instance, was also a shaman. She was a herbalist. Victor spent fifteen years studying with the Time Keepers.

The Time Keepers are shamans who have dedicated their lives to the Calender. Passing their knowledge from generation to generation, they are born into the understanding that this is their lives work. They study the movement of the earth, stars, sun, the solar system. This has been their role since the start of the Calender – some twenty-something generations ago. Victor's understanding comes from them.

To my surprise he showed up in Panache in a black four-seater ute. I was travelling in style! No more chicken buses! I felt like I had moved up in the world.

We stayed at his friends' Villa overlooking the lake for the night and made our way to the mountains the next day.

We arrived to our destination in the afternoon. It was so cold. We checked into the same hotel we had stayed in ten years ago. The hotel has expanded since then and now boasts two levels and no bed fleas. Happy days!

The next day we went to visit the shamans who were preparing for the New Year celebrations.

We walked through the narrow streets, past the market place until we came to the home of the head shaman in the outskirts.

She looked like she was in her late 50's, with gentle eyes that showed incredible grace and strength. Her family has safe-guarded the knowledge since the Spanish invasion. This is a great responsibility and a lot of hard work, as it takes days to prepare for the ceremony. Next in line for her role is her grandson who, at the age of 10, is already being groomed for the position. Thus generation after generation of her family have been the keepers of the knowledge.

The shaman led us into a room. Directly in front and to the east was an altar with candles burning, piled with offerings of the first crop of the year - corn, seeds and flowers.

An altar is always placed in the east, perpetually giving thanks to the rising of a new day. A small window was set in the wall to the right of the altar and two benches sat either side of it, with a couple of chairs. I could see the other shamans inside as they were preparing for the evening's ceremony.

A Shaman is like a tree with 21 branches. Each branch has a gift to share, but they come together to work as one. The shamans present at our gathering were respectively a midwife, an oracle, a herbalist, a reader of bones (similar to a chiropractor), a reader of red beans – predicting outcomes, and a pulse reader.

What I found amazing about these women is that none could read or write yet they knew the Calendar. They count on their fingers to work out dates, or count seeds to predict a solar eclipse. It is a knowing they have that comes from within.

The ceremony did not start at a particular time that evening. The ceremony starts when the shamans feel it's time. This could mean a wait of an hour, or two, or even three. Unlike other religions they are not ruled by time.

First, the shaman drew two circles with sugar on the ground. The circles signify the earth going around the self and they are done with sugar or honey so that our thoughts become sweet. A cross is drawn with equal sides representing the four directions, four colours of humanity and the four elements.

Bark from a sacred tree that is only used for ceremony and pure leaves of tobacco are placed. Tobacco is sacred here as it can grow anywhere and no parasites touch it. Tobacco or sage are used to create smoke. Smoke and fire are held sacred as they are the food of one of the Mayan, deities Ahal. The smoke covers the shamans smell when hunting and helps them reach their goal.

Seeds are then placed, and candles. Black, white, red and yellow representing the four colours of the human race. Blue the sky and green representing the earth. An offering of animal blood is added (it was a turkey which was later cooked for the feast). Many prayers are made and the candles are lit.

To the descendants of the Mayans, to pray is to give thanks. When praying they are saying thank you to the earth mother, relatives, for their life, the harvest, their community and so on. They offer corn alcohol to the earth and then they drink it. This occurs throughout the night as part of the ceremony.

The offerings are then set on fire.

The ceremony is followed by music and dancing until the early hours. Afterwards, they eat sharing the food with everyone.

Once the ceremony was completed, I asked the shamans what 2012 signifies and why they believe the Calendar finishes at 2012.

There was no fear, no talk of destruction. I was told that, in fact, 2012 is something to look forward to. For the descendants of the Mayans it signifies a Golden Age, a time for humanity to grow and become more humane.

Lets face it, there is nothing humane in what we are currently doing to each other and this planet. According to the shamans, 2012 is the end of a cycle of planet earth.

This cycle runs for 5.126 yrs. It is a shift of consciousness and that is nothing to be fearful of. We are powerful beings, albeit beings who have forgotten our power through years of fear and deceit. It is something to look forward to. An awakening.

Some also believe that their forefathers' predicted that the people would stop believing in their traditional truths. Evidence of this lies in less and less ceremonies being attended as other religions take over.

Although the majority of people living in Guatemala are indigenous, their traditions and beliefs are discriminated against still today. In order for these women to run the ceremony they had to get a permit from the government, yet the Christians, the interlopers, are free to run whatever ceremony they wish, whenever they wish, without the need of a permit.

Though the path is written the destination is not. What is certain is that change is coming. The road to transition can be smooth or bumpy. We have been in slaved by fear and deceit for far too long. It is a time for all of us to take back our power and start creating a better world. The choice is ours.

Christina Christou
www.alkehela.com