

# Rite of Passage

By Tunku Varadarajan  
08.28.08

The day had unfurled a little more authentically than I'd bargained for when I decided that a trip to Guatemala would be just what my 9-year-old son – whose life is cocooned in a New York prep school – needed to shake the summertime dawdle out of his system.

It was a Thursday; we were in Chichicastenango, a Mayan market town famed for its fidelity to ancestral ways. We'd hauled ourselves up a steep hill outside of town, to a centuries-old open air shrine called Pascual Abaj. The aim was to take a quick peek at the panoramic view and, perhaps, sniff around the altar with our guide for the smells and stains of a recent ritual. You know, ash, embers, candle wax ... nothing more disconcerting than that. [http://www.forbes.com/travel/2008/08/26/fall-travel-deals-forbeslife-cx\\_ls\\_0826travel.html](http://www.forbes.com/travel/2008/08/26/fall-travel-deals-forbeslife-cx_ls_0826travel.html) What we got, instead, was an immersion in Mayan liturgy, ritual and worship so thorough that my son will, in all likelihood, be able to recall the details for years--and consider himself privileged to have seen it all.

A husband and wife, unable to have children, were atop the hill with a pair of Mayan priests, one male and one female. They had paid for a ritual culminating in the sacrifice of two birds, a hen and a cock. A sacred fire spat angrily in a pit, and we were

told this was the entrance to Xibalba, or hell.

Through an acrid haze, we saw the childless man pacing, brow furrowed, puffing hard on a cigar--tobacco is an integral part of Mayan worship. The priests chanted in the Quiche language, and a helper approached with a bird in each hand, grasped by the claws.

*Tunku Varadarajan's Guatemala itinerary was assembled, to his specifications, by [Our Personal Guest](#). He stayed at the [Posada del Angel](#) in Antigua; the [Hotel Atitlan](#) near Lake Atitlan; [La Lancha](#), near Tikal; and the [Westin Camino Real](#) in Guatemala City. Varadarajan is Forbes.com's Opinions editor.*

The cock was flapping hard – almost athletically – but the hen, piteously still, seemed resigned to her end.

The male priest took the hen from the man, and the female priest, her eyes gleaming, forced a large gulp of cane brandy down its throat. This caused the bird to react with great distaste – anyone who has sampled Guatemalan aguardiente will sympathize. "It is so that the bird feels less pain," our courtly guide explained in a whisper.

Pain abatement in advance of decapitation seemed a curious way to be humane, and I giggled to myself at the thought that the hen was now too drunk to care. My son, however, was hypnotized--and energized--by the

proceedings. The guide, thinking we'd be squeamish, was urging us to leave. My boy said, with uncharacteristic firmness, "Absolutely not."

And that was that.

The priestess held the hen by its feet and head as the priest approached, cutlass in hand, and, swish, performed a surgical beheading. Blood spurted up in an arc, and the priestess poured the rest of the bird's blood all over the ritual area, after which she released it.

The headless hen danced--my, how it danced--for what seemed like an eternity, before keeling over dead. The priests murmured and turned to the infertile couple: The pattern of the bird's dance had been auspicious.

Next came the cock, which seemed stately and dignified in the shadow of death. It had stopped its struggle in a sort of avian stoicism, and it met its fate much more quietly than the hen. However, it came to life after death. Headless and graceful, it leaped almost four feet in the air. "Whooh!" my son exclaimed. "Cool!"

"Think of another word," I admonished, tired, like all parents, of that lazy superlative American children deploy.

"Bloody, Dad! That was really bloody. I'm glad we came to Guatemala," he said.

Then, as an afterthought, he asked, "So, are the man and woman going to be able to have kids now?"