VISIT NOTES

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Na Bolom

Na Bolom was once home to famous Dutch archaeologist Frans Blom and his Swiss photographer wife Trudy Blom. The Bloms were great explorers and were amongst the first outsiders to come into contact with the Lacandon Indians hidden in the midst of the dense Lacandon rain forest in the Chiapas. The Lacandones are the only people who managed to escape Spanish colonization by retreating far into the dense jungle. Frans and Trudy established very close ties with the Lacandones.

Having bought their large colonial house in 1950, the Bloms soon decided to turn it into a museum and research centre on the Maya. An additional aim was to inform the public about the indigenous population of the Chiapas and support them. Well into the 1950s indigenous people were not allowed to spend the night in San Cristobal nor walk on the pavements. Consequently, the Bloms made Na Bolom a home for the Lacandones when they visit San Cristobal for medical reasons or to sell their crafts.

They chose to name the house Na Bolom, “the house of the jaguar” in Tzotzil, the local language, as it is a play on Frans’ surname Blom and his nickname Pancho, the Jaguar.

Today Na Bolom is a non-governmental, non-profit Mexican organisation. It’s a true hybrid. It houses a museum, a research centre, an hotel and a restaurant and runs a number of social and cultural projects.

The Lacandon Room

Lacandon was the name given by the Spanish to the people who lived in the rain forest. They escaped being colonised and converted to Christianity by retreating deep into the Selva Lacandona. They called themselves Hach Winik or True People. The personal links Frans and Trudi Blom established in the 1940s are still strong today. When in San Cristobal the Lacandones consider Na Bolom to be their house. They live mainly in three villages, Naha and Metzabok in the north and Lacanja-Chansayab in the south.

The Bloms acquired through bartering the objects for daily and ceremonial use displayed in this room. They were exchanged for salt, knives, machetes, shovels, needles and white cloth.

To the left of the door

God house. The making of the model was part of a children’s project aimed at linking the story of the creation, religious traditions and the rain forest. It gave
them the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a Lacandon. It is also a learning tool for the many school children who visit Na Bolom.

Today only Naha and Metzabok have a god house. The central part under the thatched roof is called the bed of the gods. This is where the god pots, the incense containers, are placed. The men take part in the ceremony by sitting on a bench under the thatched roof but the women are not allowed into the central part, they have to sit outside the god house.

**Cabinet to the right of the door**

Right hand corner. Photograph of Chankin Viejo, a friend of Trudi and Frans Blom ever since the early 1940s. An elder of Naha, he died in 1994, aged 104 having fathered 25 children from three wives. He has long hair and is wearing a white tunic made of bark. This is what Trudi wrote about him: “He is probably the least attractive Lacandon but the best and the wisest. He knows everything about the religion. He knows the stars and he has the heart of a great man.”

**Hach Nok the true tunic** decorated with the sun, moon and the stars.

**Wooden tools** used to beat the bark into a soft material. It is important not to break the fibre in the flattening process.

**Ceremonial Copal Pallet** in the centre with pellets of copal, the resin from the copal tree. Each pellet will be burnt in the “god pots” and provide food for the gods and purify the Lacandon community.

**God Pots** Hach Akyum the supreme god ordered the making of incense burners. Designs differ, vertical lines for male god pots and horizontal ones for female ones.

The decorated **Gourds (jicaras)** in this cabinet are used for offering balche to the gods. Balche is a mildly fermented drink made of honey and bark. It is drunk during ceremonies and is offered to the gods. Other gourds are used as food containers.

**Second cabinet to the right of the door**

**Upper shelf**

**Guitars,** Xuh’ipax of Spanish origin and adapted by the Lacandons. One is made of a gourd a stick of wood, cords of rubber and majagua fiber. The latter is a type of cactus which is also used as sewing thread.
**Lower Shelf**

**Ceremonial Drum;** made from clay and decorated with the head of *Kayum*, the singing god. Originally the tops were made of deer hide, now they are made of leather.

**Conch shell trumpet, Hup** used to invite the gods to the ceremony in the god house and to receive offerings. The conch is used throughout Mesoamerica to announce events and as a call to arms.

**Door facing wall: 1st cabinet on the right**

**Tunic and skirt.** Traditionally woven from home grown cotton spun by the women. Cotton is hardly grown now and women prefer to buy fabric.

Men from Naha and Metzabok have long hair and a fringe unlike the men from Lacanja who prefer long hair with no fringe. Older women wear a single long braid down their back decorated with tucan feathers if they are married.

**Photograph** of Kʼin Obregon and his four wives. Men are allowed up to four wives. It is said that the first wife welcomes the second wife as a companion and for sharing the work.

**Lower cabinet**

**Rattle, Tzʼot, Sonaja** made from a gourd filled with seeds. Similar maracas are depicted in the murals in Bonampak.

**Flute, Kʼul** means god. The flute is a pre-colombian instrument which represents sacrifice.

**Tortoise shell, Boxeʼak** one of the oldest percussion instruments used by the Lacandons. Similar to a drum, it is played with wooden sticks covered with wax at the tips. This instrument is shown in the murals of Bonampak being played with deer horns.

**2nd cabinet from the right**

**Tunic;** the garment is made from two strips woven on a belt loom sewn together with a space left open for the head.

**Loom and Spindle;** various photographs show women weaving using a belt loom and spinning thread by turning the spindle in a gourd bowl.

**Basket weaving** is still very much alive.
**3rd cabinet from the right**

**Hanging baskets**, *chuyup*, woven from *majagua* fibers within a hoop made of the flexible *bejuco* vine. They form a useful shelf. Others are used to wash and store food.

**Hammocks**, made of tree bark string. Most Lacandones now sleep on beds, ranging from a wooden platform with a thin mattress, to a standard bed set in the corner of a single room home.

**Wall to the left; 1st cabinet on the right**

**Clay and carved wood dolls and animals** fulfil two functions; they are toys for children and they also represent the gods. The figure with big hands is *Hach Akyum* the **supreme god** who holds the entire world in his big hands. The one which looks like a monkey is *Hayum* the **god of music** whose alter ego is the mono the monkey. There are a number of **white figurines** which represent **albino** Lacandones the result of much inbreeding. Chankin Viejo’s last son is an albino.

**2nd cabinet from the right**

**Woven bags** are still made and are used for carrying, storing food and sometimes babies.  
**Carved wood** domestic utensils and **pots**.

**3rd cabinet from the right**

**Leather bags** made from a variety of hides, including crocodile served as a pocket. The strap would be made of leather or braided managua fibre. After a lengthy curing process, the bag was made from one single piece of leather folded to produce a flap and then sewn up. They would carry flint for arrows, cigars to keep the bugs away, a fire making kit of flint, cotton and steel. Theses bags are no longer made of leather but from tree bark fibre.  
**Fish trap** used with a bait of corn meal, *masa*, and set in lakes and rivers

**Tobacco** is very much part of the Lacandon way of life. It is still planted and made into cigars smoked by men, women and children. The **scale** with the **stones** inside the gourd is set to weigh **one kilo**.

**Cigars** were used for healing, offerings to the gods and hospitality. It also played a central part in the **courting tradition**. The young man would spend three days talking and smoking cigars with the young girl’s father. If the father found him acceptable there would be an exchange. The young man would move into the young girl’s house and vice versa. He would spend time working in the **milpa**, the cornfield, and cutting firewood and she would do the cooking and the washing. If both families were satisfied with the performance then the young people could marry.
Bows and arrows, no longer used for hunting but still made in the traditional way. You can buy one in the Na Bolom shop. Nowadays Lacandones prefer to use guns or snares to hunt.

The Explorer’s Room

Portrait of Frans Blom as a young man. Frans was born in Copenhagen in 1893, to a wealthy merchant family. They spoke English on Mondays and Tuesdays, German on Wednesdays and Thursdays, French on Fridays and Saturdays and on Sundays, day of rest, they spoke Danish. He dreamt of adventure, Mexico provided that.

He arrived in Mexico in 1919 eager to discover the country’s archaeological past as well as its geography. He spent his first four years working for the Eagle Oil Company of Veracruz. His position as paymaster meant travelling all over Mexico to pay the workers. On one occasion he was held up whilst carrying the company’s payroll. At first he refused to hand over the money, but then thought it wiser to concede on one condition; the bandits had to give him a receipt, otherwise the company could accuse him of having stolen the money. They all signed.

Frans worked for the same company as a cartographer mapping the sites of oil wells. He was extremely accurate in spite of being an amateur and lacking the right equipment. It is during this period he came across Maya ruins in the Lacandon rain forest. A revelation! He is known to have said: “I felt the stones and temples were talking to my spirit.” He became an archaeologist, but an archaeologist with a difference. Whilst doing preservation work in Palenque he developed a new method of documenting a site which included geology, geography, climatology and ethnology. An article he published on the Maya drew the attention of the leading Maya Scholar at the Carnegie Institute who encouraged him to complete a Masters Degree at Harvard. Following that he helped found the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Frans first came across Lacandones in 1928. This room documents Trudi and Fran’s expeditions into the Selva Lacandona.

The first photograph on the left hand side shows how the forest is still being destroyed. The villagers use the slash and burn method to clear land for agricultural purposes.

The second photograph shows a mule train. Some 26 mules were needed for the long and arduous trip to the Selva which could last up to six months. Trudi used to annoy the arriegos, trail guides, by insisting she rode at the front.
In the fifties they decided to start flying into the Selva. We can see a photo of the plane on the airstrip which the Lacandones helped build. The first time the plane flew in they surrounded it with rocks to stop it from wandering off.

The hanging hammock was designed by Frans who was a very practical man. The fabric roof protects from the rain and drops of dew, the net from mosquitoes. The pots and pans were used in the Naha campsite which is still owned by Na-Bolom and provides the base camp for the tours in the Selva.

The two wooden boxes on the right were used to carry their own supplies; food, typewriters, books as well as supplies for the Lacandones such as salt, fabric, guns, rifles.

The camera is Trudi’s. She took all her photographs with this type of camera a Yashica-D.

Frans’ diary. He used his diary notes in the book he wrote about the Selva.

Foot chains were found in the 50s at El Cedro in the Zendales Forest. His diary notes mention that the men were branded. According to his book In the Jungles of Mexico life was so hard that 50% of the chicleros, collectors of chicle resin from the gum tree, and loggers of mahogany would die of malnutrition and illness. So whenever they ran out of men the companies requested a supply of prisoners who toiled as a chain gang in the rainforest. The practice died out at the end of the 19th century.

The Moxviquil Room

Originally Frans Blom’s desk was in the library. The saddle, typewriter, glasses, bottle of Mexcal, and the cigarettes give us a portrait of the man. He was hardly ever seen without a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

The carved chair with the Danish, Swiss and Mexican flags and initials F and B, given on his birthday, celebrates the couple’s newly granted Mexican citizenship.

Original, hand drawn maps, cover some 30 years of expeditions starting with his expedition in 1922.

The archaeological artefacts in this room are part of the Mexican national heritage. They are pending classification by INAH (Instituto Nacional de Arqueologia y Historia). They are grouped according to provenance, all Moxviquil finds are in the cabinets to the right of the arch, and the wall opposite, those from other regions but excavated in Moxviquil to the left.
Arch on the right wall

Photograph of San Cristobal in the fifties, a much more compact city then.

Map of the Moxviquil site situated to the north, in the Jovel Valley overlooking San Cristobal. Frans Blom started excavating the site in 1953. Most of the objects on display were found by Frans and some were donated.

Moxviquil flourished from the Pre-Classic to Classic Maya periods. The objects from other regions of southern Mexico found on the site indicate that it was on a trading route.

Right of the arch, clockwise

1st cabinet

In this first cabinet we see a number of incised and painted funerary vessels from Bonampak.

2nd cabinet

Assorted funerary vessels, incense burners on the left.

On the right the top shelf displays fossilised shells and to the right human and animal bones and teeth. On the shelf below are found a number of stone tools used for hunting and warfare. The bottom shelf contains domestic tools. They used local stones, chert, greenstone, basalt as well as obsidian imported from what is now Guatemala. There was a large deposit of flint, found in Moxviquil which leads one to believe it was a major trade resource for its inhabitants.

3rd cabinet.

Copal burning vessels decorated with human heads.

Ball Game fundamental to Mesoamerican culture from Honduras to North West Mexico was played in different ways. In this game the players, in teams of two or three, scored points by hitting a solid rubber ball with the upper arms and hips through hoops placed at a height on the walls of the court which was shaped like a I. The penalty for losing the most important games was death. There have been suggestions though that in some cities the winners were sacrificed instead. You can see a ball player wearing arm padding and what could be a stone yoke on the second shelf.

The stone yoke was tied around the waist. The ceremonial axe in the shape of a human head was also linked to the ball game.
The metal rings, earrings and axes were imported from other parts of Mexico. The Maya only started making their own metal objects during the Post Classic period from 1000 to 1500 AD.

**Ceramic figurines:** most of them were mass produced using a mould. They give us an insight into Mayan fashion, particularly hairstyles.

**Notable figurines:** second shelf from the top, largest in the last row, head with a curl in the middle of the forehead displays a hair style still worn today by indigenous women around San Cristobal.

Stepped display: a **head dress** denotes a member of the ruling class. This one is made of feathers.

**Full length** figurine on the left; dress decorated with what could be **jade** ornaments.

**Burial Urns** against the wall beyond the door. A number of **funerary urns** were found in Moxviquil. The largest contained a skeleton seated in the foetal position.

**Wall opposite the arch**

**Grinding stones** for corn made of volcanic stone. **Mono,** the large cylinder stone held in the hand and **metate,** the base.

The **calcified skulls** were found in caves. One is clearly deformed, showing a sloping forehead. The Mayan ruling class attached a board to their baby’s soft forehead in order to get the elongated shape so distinctive of Mayan rulers as depicted in carvings and murals.

Some of the Post Classic low relief **heads** represent skulls. One shows signs of wilful damage. They were part of the temple decorations.

**The Chapel**

The house built in **1891 in the neo-classical style** was meant to be a **seminary,** but as the owner had not made his wishes clear his inheritors sold the house. Consequently the chapel was never consecrated. The Bloms **bought** the house in **1950** for 11,000 pesos. After his father’s death, when Frans inherited some money, they decided it made sense to conduct their expeditions and research from San Cristobal rather than Mexico City were they had lived.

The Bloms converted the chapel into a gallery of **religious and colonial art.** After the **1910 revolution** led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa the
country turned strongly anti-clerical. It was forbidden to display any overt signs of religion. Priests and nuns had to wear civilian clothes, mass was banned in some states, religious paintings and sculptures had to be hidden for fear of being confiscated. A number of them were being sold to foreign collectors and the Bloms decided to collect and save them for the nation.

Three main types of religious artwork are on display here.

**Portraits** of saints mostly from the 19th century.

**Ex-votos** commissioned by the faithful to celebrate or give thanks for some blessing or miracle

**Sculptures** of saints from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

These works of art were created in local studios run by friars who employed indigenous painters. The studios received contracts from the church. Copies of the contracts still exist showing fees paid to them. The Spanish colonialists found in place a group of highly skilled local artists who could be relied on. After the Conquest they had to adapt to European styles and subject matter. They were encouraged to copy the Flemish, Italian and Spanish images the friars had brought with them and used to spread Christianity.

**The piano**, a Steinway, is a gift from a Californian friend of Trudi’s. It was shipped all the way down the Pacific coast, through the Panama Canal, up the Atlantic into the Gulf of Mexico where Trudi took delivery of it in Vera Cruz. Young conservatory students often come to practice here.

**Patio**

**The bell** outside the chapel used to ring every evening at 7pm to call guests, researchers, Lacandones and volunteers to the table.

**Iron Crosses**

The crosses too were the victims of the anti-religious movement of the 1920s and had to be taken down from the roofs. Traditionally the masons put a whole into the last roof tile, placed a cross and secured it with cement. It was a sign that the house was ready for occupation. Trudi wrote that in the 1950s these crosses were being sold for scrap. Frans paid “twice the going rate to save them for future generations.” The older ones are the simpler ones. The so called **Herramientas de Passion**, with symbols related to Christ’s Passion were added later together with individual whimsical touches.
Trudi’s portrait

She was a remarkable woman, with boundless energy, the driving force behind Na-Bolom. Born in Switzerland in 1901 to a protestant pastor father she showed early signs of rebelliousness. She studied horticulture but soon became involved in the socialist political movement of the time. She was the secretary of the anti-Nazi women’s committee. She was imprisoned by the Gestapo and spent five months in a detention centre in France. On her release she went to the United States to fundraise for victims of Nazi Germany. Subsequently, she decided to move to Mexico, a haven for political refugees. This rather regal portrait was taken in 1941 soon after she arrived in Mexico City. She was forty.

She left her mark as a journalist, campaigner, activist, feminist and an ecologist well before ecology achieved mainstream status. She was also an acclaimed photographer whose aim was to record a rapidly disappearing world, that of the indigenous people of the Chiapas in general and the Lacandon in particular. Some 50,000 photographs bear witness to that.

Trudi’s Room

The most colourful room in the house. She died in here on the 23rd of December 1993. After her death it was decided to re-arrange the room and make it part of the museum. It houses her collection of textiles, jewellery, crafts and a range of photographs. As many of the photographs and portraits of her show her dress sense ranged from the casual, to the glamorous and was particularly flamboyant when it came to jewellery.

The walk-in wardrobe contains her clothes and also to the left, a wedding dress from a local village, Zinacantan, decorated with feathers and embroidery.

The bed cover is a tapestry by Robert Semple, a friend of Trudi’s. It is inspired by the murals in Bonampak.

The painting on the easel is her last one. She was prolific in the 1970s. A number of her canvasses hang in the patio.

Above her painting there is a photograph of her last trip to the Selva.

Above the jewellery case, in the top row second from the right you can see one of the portraits of women who had fought in General Zapata’s army. This was her first journalistic assignment in Mexico and stems from her research into the role of women in the 1910 revolution.

The first photograph from the left in the bottom row shows Trudy combing Dona Beti’s hair. Dona Beti, Frans and Trudi Blom’s adopted daughter, still
lives here and takes groups to Naha, where she guides, cooks delicious meals, tells stories and visits the Lacandon families with the group.

The Bloms loved dogs and that tradition still carries on at Na Bolom. Above the closet door there is a photo of Pec, Frans’ dog.

**Fray Bartolome de las Casas Library**

Named after the first bishop of the Chiapas, strong defender of the indigenous people who successfully campaigned against slavery.

When the Bloms bought their house they soon decided to turn it into a museum and research centre on the Maya. Their aim was to inform the public about indigenous people, support them and also welcome researchers and volunteers. It is open to the public from 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday.

The library had at one stage the largest collection of books on the Mayas in the Chiapas. They house Trudi and Frans’ manuscripts, books, hand drawn maps and rare documents one of which was signed by the King of Spain in 1723. The library and photo archives provide an invaluable record of the lost indigenous traditions in the Chiapas.

On the walls are displayed the most valuable religious paintings of the collection together with hats worn by men in the Chiapas Highland villages.

**The garden**

When Trudi and Frans bought the house in February 1950 there was one single geranium in the grounds and what is now a lush garden was a grazing field for cattle. The organic garden with its range of native trees, medicinal plants and flowers is often visited by local school groups for educational reasons.

The mural in the back patio is by a Canadian artist in residence in the 1980s. It was used in a play in 1989.

The wood sculpture is titled the “Spiral of Life” and was created by Katsumi a Japanese artist in residence.

The two sided stone sculpture is by a New York artist and depicts the Mexican artist and friend of Frans’, Diego Rivera, as a child with his mama telling him how being a good boy will turn him into an invincible man. Look at the back and see for yourself what use Diego made of his mother’s advice.

The new buildings house offices, the photo and map archives, guest rooms and the three rooms set apart for the Lacandones.

**Casa Tzotzil**
The house with its thatched roof, mud mixed with pine needles walls and tied wooden frame is a replica of a traditional Chiapas Highland dwelling as found around San Juan Chamula. The house would accommodate up to four people. The smoke from the fire in the middle of the room would keep rats and insects out of the house. Dry goods were stored in baskets and woven bags which hung from rafters.

The door faces west in order to track the seasons through the shadows cast by the setting sun.

The altar inside has three crosses one for each barrio, neighbourhood, in San Juan Chamula. The cross is a mixture of Christian and Mayan symbolism. It is the Tree of Life, with its branches in the spirit world and its roots in the underworld and pointing to the four cardinal directions. Pine resin, copal, is burnt as an offering to the gods. Traditionally posh, a low alcohol local drink similar to balche, is offered to the gods and drunk as part of the ritual. Nowadays soda or coca cola is replacing posh as a way of stemming alcoholism. Carbonated drinks are favoured as the burping it induces is seen as a sign that bad spirits are being exorcised.

When the house was completed an initial ceremony was held in honour of the Lord of the Earth, to give thanks for the trees cut to build the house. A chicken was sacrificed and chicken soup was offered to the four corners of the room. Then the remains of the chicken were buried in the centre of the room. The ceremony is meant to appease the Lord of the Earth and prevent the forest “biting” the occupants through the collapse of the house or a fire.

Tree nursery

Trudi said “you have to make people love the trees”. She wrote an extremely eloquent article on deforestation which shows how ahead of her time she was. You can read the article in “Bearing Witness” a book which is unfortunately out of print. Trudi established the vivero, the nursery, to serve as a model for the reproduction of native species. Since 1973 the nursery has distributed an average of 5,000 trees a year. The saplings grown here are pine, cypress, ash and trueno. There is a trueno to the right of the Diego Rivera statue across the path.

The back courtyards contain displays of various community projects run by Na-Bolom. The Fondo Medical Lacandone is possibly the most important one. It provides primary health care for Lacandones and offers free board and lodging.

The hotel rooms set around the courtyards are individually decorated single. Each has its own fireplace, small library and a charming set of artifacts.
The Dining Room

The striking tapestry is also by Robert Semple. It is based on a carving in Yaxchilan, Lintel 25, and depicts the royal Lady Xoc participating in a blood letting rite of accession on October 3, 681AD with her husband Shield Jaguar. She pulls a cord of thorns through her tongue and lets the blood fall onto strips of paper she holds in a bowl. The paper is then burned so that the smoke can carry it to the gods. The pain of the ritual brings a vision of serpents which open their mouths to reveal the head of an ancestor with a message. In this case it is a message from Lord Jaguar, the founding King of Yaxchilan recognising the accession.

The Chinese Dragon/Jaguar is the work of an artist in residence. It was used in a play in 1989.

The chair in the corner was Trudi’s. She always sat at the head of the table. She asked that it should be kept in the dining room but not used after her death.

You can join the likes of President Mitterand, Kissinger and more recently the Queen of Denmark and dine in this splendid room. Dinner is served at seven and snacks throughout the day.

The Shop

Housed in the Garden of the Jaguar across the road, the shop implements a Fair Trade policy towards the many indigenous people who bring their crafts. It takes pride in selling high-quality carvings, textiles, pottery and jewelry. We also have a stock of books, postcards, and CDs for sale. All profits made are ploughed back into our many projects.

Like so many others before you, we hope you have found the visit informative and enjoyable.