Caves, Snakes, and Bodies, Oh My!

*Zip*! Camera’s away. *Whop*! Helmet on. *Klomp*! Sneakers ready. *Splish*! At the water’s edge.

“We’re about to go in,” informed the man who held my life in his hands. “And watch out for the snakes in the trees and water. It’s mating season,” he added nonchalantly. My eyes widened and I thought, what had I gotten myself into?

Belize was the typical tropical place in the summer: warm, bordering on hot if my sweat was any clue, with plenty of sun and plenty of beautiful blue water. However, one day my decision led me to a cold, dark, and deliciously scary place in this postcard tropical paradise.

While on a three week college study abroad trip, I spotted a vibrant and appealing advertisement for the tour I knew I wanted to take: Ancient Mayan and Lost World Cave Tour. The other girls in my group…not so excited. I ended up being the only girl in the group of three to sign up for this mysterious cave excursion. Not only was I the only girl, but my companions? They were a fourteen year old boy and a seventy year old man.

The day of the cave tour came, and as soon as we went off road and started to drive through a forest with no road, I knew this would be an experience like no other. However, I was ready. I was pumped. I was as jittery as someone on ten cups of coffee. When we arrive at the site, our personal items must stay in the van, and we begin the hike.

Our first warning comes as we hike through the forest. We must pass through streams and a small river to reach our ancient destination.

“You’ve got this, Hannah,” I told myself and trudged, shoes and all, through the freezing water.

Our second warning comes, and now we have to worry about mating season…for snakes! My eyes are moving from side to side so fast it feels like I am twitching.

“You don’t got this,” I whispered, chuckling to myself and picturing scenes from the movie Anaconda, snakes the size of school buses shooting through the trees with fangs the size of my face. We put on our helmets with headlamps and make our way to the entrance of the cave with our fearless leader in the front and myself nowhere near the back, in case a snake decides to make a sneak attack. We carefully walk down some stairs and see the cave entrance; it is only about 40 feet away, but with water separating us. Here, we get our third warning. Not only do we have to swim into the cave and find a rock to stand on, but we also have to watch out for the water snakes. Oh, great.

Go big or go home, I think to myself as I jump in, keeping the headlight above water and getting back to my obsessive looking around for water snakes. I have seen enough Animal Planet shows to know that you never want to meet one. The three of us and our guide make it into the cave with no bites and onto dry land, make sure our headlamps are on, and say goodbye to the last sunlight we will see for the next few hours.

A half mile is not that far to go, but when part of the trek I could not even touch the ground because of the water level, it sure does make the journey longer. And I loved every minute of it! Until the spider incident.

“Woh! Check out this spider!” I heard our intrepid guide call out.

The fourteen year old and the seventy year old wade over to that part of the cave. Apparently, it was one of those spiders you can only see in tropical climates, but I am not completely sure. I wanted no part of it. That is where I draw the line. I can hike and swim through water in the dark. I can climb up rocks to see ancient dead bodies. But spiders I will not do. It was enough just picturing the ones that could walk on the water and were around me at this very moment. Thankfully, we trudged onward.

After pulling myself through small holes, pushing my body through water and across slippery rocks, we stopped at a random point in the cave. We had gone about a half mile into the cave, but now it was time to go up. I was almost to the final destination, the big event. My hands were dusty and wet at the same time as I climbed. The excitement continued as we were told to take off our shoes and continue on the sharp, rocky cave floor in just our socks. But, go big or go home! We were almost there! Then, we turned the corner, and after climbing up for about five minutes, we entered the musty and old-smelling target.

Beside various pots, pieces of vases, and leftover fire pits, dead bodies lay everywhere, the bones a dark and dusty brown. Some were in pits, some had their hands tied behind their backs, and some had stab wounds in their bones, all giving us clues as to the ways and the reasons they died. We had just entered an ancient Mayan burial and sacrifice site where prisoners and unlucky people had met their spiritual yet sinister end. No museum had yet to touch this site and our guide was one of only eighteen people trained and qualified to see this location, lost until the 1980s.

After exploring the site and looking into the empty eye sockets of the people who gave their last breaths here, we climbed back down and began our journey back into the cave.

Once our clothes had been changed and we returned to our group, the questions began about our trip. I thought about the excitement, about how I now knew I could do anything I set my mind to, and about how some of the most worth-it adventures are some of the hardest or scariest, and I knew exactly how to tell my story.

I began, “I wasn’t worried until I heard, ‘Watch out for the snakes…’”