

Tai Chi In The

Rain

What do poisonous frogs, 30-pound edible rats, lobster-sized shrimp and tai chi have in common? They all could be found in abundance at a Panamanian rain forest retreat.

By Lewis Paleias



At left, Indian caretaker Antonio holds a capybara that the author states does not "taste like chicken". Linda Paleias, the lone woman on the retreat, practices qi gong while draped in mosquito netting.

Photos by Lewis Paleias, Ted Martinello, Linda Paleias and Dr. Yong-Juang-Ming

Deep in our cellular memory, the very core of our being, is a part of the soul that lies dormant in slumber, awaking for brief moments to peek out and remember something as it once was long ago, in a different place...verdant greens, dark blue skies...magic. The rain forest is such a place.

The "safari seed" was planted last January at a seminar Dr. Yang Jwing Ming was giving at YMAA-Gold Coast, Fla. During the lunch lull we were approached by Ted Mattingly, a friend and student of mine. Shuffling back and forth in his hands were photo after photo of a lush, green paradise: untouched and mysterious. Pictures of

vipers, poison arrow frogs, parrots... images to tease the mind and appeal to the adventurer in us.

Somehow he sold us on a private expedition to this heart of darkness. This pristine piece of virgin Panamanian jungle was owned by his uncle and contained two Mayan pyramids, untracked rivers, a gold mine, still unnamed creatures and more risk than any city boy could ever imagine. Roads? What roads? How could we possibly say no?

From Panama City we drove by SUV to the town of Chepa, where we picked up a 4-wheel drive truck. We had to ford seven streams and rivers before reaching the horses, which



Dr. Yang and company fording a Panamanian river.

Forest



would take us even deeper into the unknown. The actual site reminded me of Boy Scout camp. There were a few thatched huts, some rangy chickens and indifferent cows.

The caretakers, Antonio, Daniel and Rosa, made us immediately welcome. They spoke no English so communication was accomplished either through Ted, who is fluent in Spanish, or by pantomime.

James Yang practiced his college Spanish and did his best to keep up

with most conversations.

What tai chi insights can you glean from the rain forest? As the pace of life accelerates, as we get bombarded by more and more bits of information, it becomes increasingly difficult to find time to practice, let alone apply tai chi principles to our daily lives. A quiet mind and a still heart are hard to cultivate in our frantic, goal-oriented lifestyle.

In the rain and cloud forests, however, time slows to a crawl. There is no virtue in speed. Move quickly and you risk falling on slippery rocks and foliage. Placing hand or foot anywhere without first looking incurs the risk of snake bite or

worse. As I blindly reached to balance myself while jumping over a fallen tree, Daniel, one of the Indian caretakers, stopped my hand to show me the deadly bullet ant I was ready to grasp.

"Slow down," he cautioned. A little later he caught a small basilisk lizard for us to admire.

Time simplifies and returns to distinct separations of day and night. When the sun goes down it is time for bed. A candle and flashlight are not enough to push the darkness away. As dawn approaches you arise.

Between the
rooster



Clockwise from bottom right: Lewis and Linda Paleias work on their da hu routine; Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming taking a break to eat tropical fruit; Dr. Yang and son James enjoy the old West Panamanian style; and home sweet home for the adventurers.



and the morning jungle chorus further rest is impossible. Then you stumble to the cold stream for a bath, clouds and mist surrounding you; small fish nibbling the soap off your body. After a bath it's qigong time. As you practice tai chi coiling qigong, you can feel the earth energy draw up your yongquan (bubbling wells), coil up your spine and shoot out your palms (loagong cavities) far up to the crisp, clean sky. The trigrams Heaven, Man and Earth become on swirl of energy. Afterward, nothing could be more natural than a round of tai chi or bagua zhang to make you feel at peace with the universe.

Finding some perfect bamboo-like sapplings gave us a great opportunity to practice our staff routines. The Indians applauded "Ole". After watching us play pushing hands, the locals

wanted to give it a go. Once they caught on they had a blast, but after watching Ted and me pound each other with hsing-I five elements, they decided to quit while they were ahead.

On our first night in the jungle, surrounded by the flickering light of a candle and small lantern, while the shadow of bats flitted in and out of the muted glow (vampire bats were a problem in the area), Dr. Yang regaled us with Chinese ghost stories. While Ted translated the tales into Spanish for the Indians, James whispered to me, "I've heard these from when I was a kid."

All the stories had a moral...all were fun. The next night the Indians told their tales. Of sorcerers, black magic...of dark shapes forming out of the jungle depths...of man-killing jaguars...of a

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Tai Chi In The Rain Forest



The author (left) and Ted Mattingly perform an empty hand vs. tai chi saber (in this case machete) set. Above, Paleias assumes the "snake creeps down" posture while keeping a watchful eye for snakes.

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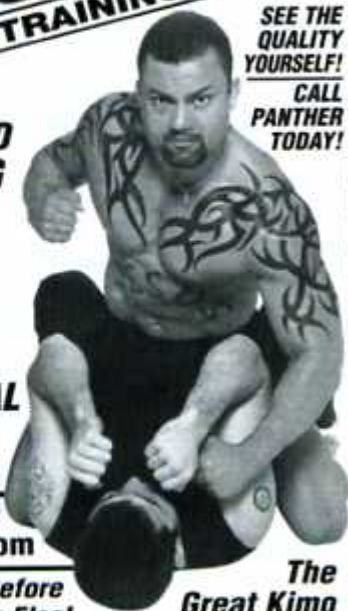
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Tai Chi in the Rain Forest

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malevolent white spirit which nightly floated through the room in which Dr. Yang and James were sleeping; pressing on the chests of hapless visitors.

We were told to listen for a change in the bark of the poison Sopa toads, which warned of the approach of the deadly snakes. That did it. There would no sleeping that night.

Another mind shift is that the journey becomes much more important than the goal. Tromping through the forest stream in search of the waterfall was really about experiencing the taste/sound/smell/tactile and ventricular sensations of the trek. When we ran out of yucca, an important staple in our diet, it took James and a village worker two hours by horseback to make the trip, crossing streams and clabbering over mud, practicing Spanish and, I'm sure, having a great time.

Bird watching is a given. The sheer volume of bright, flashing plumage — yellow, greens, reds — was breathtaking. Bright yellow flycatchers, crimson "Blood of the Bull" tanagers, flocks of Mealy parrots, and the sight of a Keel-billed toucan tossing figs in the air and swallowing them were visuals to excite the brain.

One afternoon the rain just wouldn't stop. During the torrential downpour we all ran outside to soap ourselves and take great, cold showers. Toward evening the rain turned into a misty cloud. Ted and I practiced tai chi saber with machetes until we could barely see. After watching silently, Dr. Yang asked, "Who taught you that form?" "You did," I answered, "12 years ago."

"Okay," he said. "But on the strike, aim for the dan tien. Another thing, on the pause keep the blade pointed downward." School continues, even in the jungle. When we returned to the camp, we found Dr. Yang demonstrating chin na to the natives by flashlight. It was fun to see Antonio, who had stared down a jaguar before killing it with a pistol, afraid to give Dr. Yang his hand.

Then the fireflies came out. In America they flash. Here, each is a jewel as large as your thumb. They light up continuously. They looked like shooting stars, glowing fairies in the mist. They were followed by the Sopa toads looking for a free firefly meal. Glowing like orange warty pumpkins, they threw out their throats as we knelt down to gawk at them — until we discovered they can spit venom into your eyes. Even skin contact with this poison leaves blisters.

Food was another adventure. Running out of the food we brought (easy to miscalculate with five hungry martial artists), Dr. Yang purchased two super free-range roosters (hens are saved to feed the baby chickens which seem to be always under your feet) to supplement our rice and beans. There were plantains, yucca, strange fruits and small wild bananas for dessert. During a rough jungle hike the ever-present dogs started wailing. Not knowing if they treed a jaguar or game, Daniel and Antonio chopped a path with their machetes to find them and returned with a large Paca (capybara). This 30-pound rodent looks like a cross between a muskrat and pig. I can report that it definitely didn't taste like chicken. Daniel told us that at night you can

"When we returned to the camp, we found Dr. Yang demonstrating chin na to the natives by flashlight."

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find giant camarones (shrimp) in the jungle stream in which we had previously waded. In pitch blackness he strode off into the forest with just a dog, flashlight and machete. We worried about him because you take your life into your own hands when you venture into the jungle at night.

Not to worry: In less than an hour he returned with a huge cache of lobster-sized crayfish and prawns. I don't know if these creatures were known to science, but they were delicious.

One private memory for me was the pleasure of a round of tai chi on the ancient pyramid mound, bat falcons on the hunt, yellow flycatchers in the bushes, parrots overhead, a three-toed sloth in the tree — at peace with the world. In the rain forest I rediscovered my silent voice...I could hear myself think.

Did the rain forest change me in any way? Yes, I think so. Would I go there again? Yes, in a New York minute. ☺

Lewis Paleias studies the internal arts under Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming. He can be reached at cloudchi@aol.com

Wushu Then and Now

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and forms and select the best for the nation's welfare.

A few years later the world got to see the results of this effort. The place for wushu's first international debut was Nazi-dominated Berlin; the occasion was the 11th Olympic Games in 1936. There, 11 young Chinese knocked the collective socks off the sophisticated sports audience.

China had made a daring decision: to include among its other athletes a first-ever demonstration team of three women and eight men to display one of the greatest art forms from Chinese culture.

Tryouts for this wushu team began in Shanghai in May 1936, resulting in the selection of 15 athletes, several of whom came directly from the Nanking Institute. Additional trials were held with the number of athletes reduced to the final 11, including Hao Min-Wei of Nankai University who would serve as team coach. China's full team of competitors and martial artists then sailed for Germany at the end of June.

The wushu team first performed for a general Olympic audience Aug. 11

and one day later for an international assembly of all competing athletes. The one-hour performance consisted of 20 sets, beginning with a tai chi form by all 11 participants. Following were sets by three young martial artists who were to become, some 40 years later, key figures in wushu's development. These were Wen Jing-Ming (1905-1985), Liu Yu-Hua (later to become Wen's wife), and a 19-year-old Muslim youth, Zhang Wen-Guan. Wen performed men chuan, a form of his own creation, to demonstrate an extraordinary range of flexibility and balance; Liu did her signature double broadsword; and Zhang did cha chuan, the Muslim "Tah" family form, later to become part of China's compulsory long fist competition routine.

The audience of 10,000 was on its feet! According to China's wushu historians, each event drew longer and more enthusiastic standing ovations, requiring the martial artists to perform two or three encores.

Finally the stunner of the day came: empty hand vs. spear. The international audience stood and roared! No one in the West had ever witnessed its

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