Plumeria on Karst Cliffs and Limestone Hills facing the Road to Lanquin Caves, Alta Verapaz

Text: Nicholas Hellmuth, Photographers: Nicholas Hellmuth, Edwin Solares and other photographers of FLAAR Mesoamerica

FLAAR Reports, FLAAR (USA) and FLAAR Mesoamerica (Guatemala), May 2025

Introduction to *Plumeria* near Lanquin, Alta Verapaz

Since several of the helpful and capable employees of FLAAR Mesoamerica are Q'eqchi' speaking Maya, we have accomplished field trips for many years over two decades throughout Alta Verapaz. It is essential to have Mayan-speaking people on your team when you enter a remote area.

One year while driving from Cahabon back to Coban by the back roads we saw a *Plumeria* flowering atop a limestone area. So we stopped the vehicle to document this frangipani. The local people said that we should ask permission of the owner of the property, so once we got his name and phone number we requested permission and returned on another field trip. We have photographed these frangipani flowers in 2015, 2016, and 2023 because no botanical herbarium list has *Plumeria* documented from this area. Also we eventually found more *Plumeria* growing on karst cliffs on the dirt road to Cahabon.

Cahabon was literally a Spanish capital during the conquest centuries. Today it is a lovely Q'eqchi' town nestled in a mountain range. There is an economical hostel, Hotel San Angel, where you can stay, and an economical restaurant just one block away. The hospitable owner of this hotel is Victor Argueta. If you are a botanist or ecologist he knows lots of local areas and the owners of most of the ranches that you might want to explore (lots of *Heliconia* species in this area of Alta Verapaz). The native Maya market at Cahabon is worth visiting to see what edible plants and medicinal plants are still available in Maya markets.

We usually arrive at Cahabon from Senahu—the scenery along this route is amazing—high mountain ranges all around you. In the evening you realize you are driving "above" the cloud forest—since the clouds are literally below you! As you near Cahabon there are Q'eqchi' Maya houses with roofs made of *Heliconia* leaves (platinillo), though most have been replaced by tin roofs in recent years. Fortunately we have documented the Heliconia roofs inside and out. We have visited schools in this area and donated educational banners from our MayanToons.org projects.

Lanquin is most famous for the cave there. And not far away in Alta Verapaz, the water cascades of Semuc Champey are very popular (lots of cacao orchards in the surrounding hills). So Alta Verapaz is worth visiting and exploring.

Here you can see this karst lime-stone area rising above the surrounding maize fields. The *Plumeria* is on top (further to the left so not visible here).

Gaby Cabnal was our assistant for over a decade. Her daughter Shaila came on dozens of field trips. The two Maya men are workers on this private property. Hellmuth is using a giant primary lens to capture a nice view.

This is the same rock outcrop from another angle. *Plumeria* grows on top because this high area is not chopped down or burned for slash-and-burn milpa agriculture.

North side of the dirt road leading to Lanquin. Any car can handle this road—4x4 is always helpful but you can get here with any normal car.

High hills is the trademark of “Alta” Verapaz compared with often flatter and lower areas of adjacent “Baja” Verapaz”.

The *Plumeria* tree is on top of a giant boulder area between the house and the road. Since this limestone is high, it is not available for a garden or milpa, so the *Plumeria* survives.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, June 30, 2015. So the “Flor de Mayo” can also bloom into July, since this photograph is the last day of June. We have seen one Flor de Mayo tree circa km. 34 from Guatemala towards the west, blooming many months each year (since we drive this highway many months every year for decades, to get to our field work in Peten, in Alta Verapaz, and in Izabal). Sadly, that area was bulldozed several years ago.

Area of karst that has not yet been eroded away. The *Plumeria* probably species *rubra* is on top, because no one cuts down the vegetation on top of such a large rock area since that area on top is not suitable to grow maize.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth with Nikon D810 camera and 45mm Nikon lens.

The giant rock with trees on top. The maize milpa is at the left and in front.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth with Nikon D810 camera and 45mm Nikon lens.

Either one tree with “hundreds” of branches and twigs or a clump of several *Plumeria* next to each other.

321mm focal length on Nikon Coolpix 59900. This was the rudimentary camera that we had ten years ago. Once donations came in it was possible to have much better cameras.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive of Flora, Fauna and Biodiverse Ecosystems of Guatemala.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, June 30, 2015, with Nikon Coolpix 59900, zoomed to 750mm.

Plumeria rubra, Flor de Mayo, may flower, along the road to Lanquin caves, Alta Verapaz. Photo by Edwin Solares with Sony ILCE-1 camera, Sony FE 200-600mm F5.6-6.3 G OSS lens at 600mm focal length, on May 25, 2023, 6:57am.

The Sony ILCE-1 is also known as the Sony Alpha 1 or A1, a very good camera that was possible to acquire when a helpful donation came to FLAAR.

For future field trips (in year 2026) would help hugely if our team had a Sony 400 to 800mm zoom lens since we need the 800mm capability to see flowers that are far away.

Plumeria rubra, Flor de Mayo, may flower, along road to Lanquin caves, Alta Verapaz. Here you can see the tiny yellow area in the middle of this local wild native frangipani flower.

Photo by Edwin Solares with Sony ILCE-1 camera, Sony FE 200-600mm F5.6-6.3 G OSS lens at 600mm focal length, on May 25, 2023.

Plumeria rubra, Flor de Mayo, may flower, along road to Lanquin caves, Alta Verapaz.

Photo by Edwin Solares with Sony ILCE-1 camera, Sony FE 200-600 mm F5.6-6.3 G OSS lens at 600mm focal length, on May 25, 2023.

Plumeria rubra, Flor de Mayo, may flower, along road to Lanquin caves, Alta Verapaz.

Photo by Edwin Solares with Sony ILCE-1 camera, Sony FE 200-600 mm F5.6-6.3 G OSS lens at 600mm focal length, on May 25, 2023.

Most Plumeria flowers begin in April and continue flowering into June. In a few areas the flowers continue more months.

Plumeria rubra, Flor de Mayo, may flower, frangipani, along road to Lanquin caves, Alta Verapaz.

Photo by Edwin Solares with Sony ILCE-1 camera, Sony FE 200-600 mm F5.6-6.3 G OSS lens at 600mm focal length, on May 25, 2023.

In April 15, 2015 we found lots more *Plumeria* growing along the hills over-looking the road.

The branches and twigs wander out at many different angles.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, Nikon D810 camera with Nikon 400mm prime lens.

Interesting “wandering” growth pattern of the branches of the *Plumeria* along the road to Lanquin.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, Nikon D810 camera with Nikon 400mm prime lens, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive of Flora, Fauna and Biodiverse Ecosystems of Guatemala.

Wandering branches of *Plumeria rubra*, with a few clusters of flowers. April 15, 2016. Most wild native *Plumeria* begin to flower in April.

This is so far from the road that you need a 200mm lens to show the entire tree.

Most of the branches head up diagonally but a few are “wandering”.

Our 400mm lens makes it possible to capture this view of these *Plumeria* trees up on the hill. Not all botany or ecology projects have this lens.

April 15, 2016, lots of the leaves have died. Compare this with our photos in our other FLAAR Reports of *Plumeria* at Nakum and *Plumera* along the Rio Los Esclavos—none of them have dead leaves during flowering season.

I estimate that all these *Plumeria* trees are on steep hills because these areas are not chopped down for slash-and-burn milpa agriculture.

Plumeria rubra on hillside facing road heading to Lanquin.

Plumeria rubra hidden on steep hill slope, overlooking the road to Lanquin.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth with 200mm Nikkor prime lens on Nikon D810 camera.

At least three *Plumeria* shrubs are on this rocky hill.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, Nikon D810 camera with Nikon 200mm prime lens, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive of Flora, Fauna and Biodiverse Ecosystems of Guatemala.

Here along the road to Lanquin the *Plumeria* is on steep hills and karst cliffs, just as we found the last week of April, 2025, at the turnoff of the highway from Coban to Sayaxche —the turn-off to Rax-ruha.

Millions of pine trees in the Highlands of Guatemala but none on these karst hills west of the Candelaria cave area of Alta Verapaz or the Lanquin cave area as seen here.

The *Plumeria* is atop the limestone cliff at the right.

There is slash-and-burn milpa agriculture even on steep hills. But the local farmers have not yet chopped down the forest here, so you can still see several *Plumeria* trees.

The hillside milpa is visible in the lower right corner.

Close-up so you can see that it’s the large mature leaves that are wilting and will eventually fall off.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth with 400mm Nikkor prime lens on Nikon D810 camera.

Close-up so you can see how the frangipani flowers cluster together.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth with 400mm Nikkor prime lens on Nikon D810 camera.

Two sturdy Gitzo tripods are the best of those years.

Hellmuth encourages other photo-graphers besides just himself, since some take better photos. That is why we bring more than one tripod since we have more than one photograph er.

Milpa agriculture even on this hill. The Flor de Mayo is further to the right (not visible here).

For many years we rented 4x4 double-cabin pickup trucks, Mazda or Mitsubishi were the available brands. Toyota is too expensive for rental agencies to offer them.

Nowdays, thanks to a kind donation, we have our own pickup truck, a VW Amarok that has more space for the people seated in the pickup and is automatic. Although I have been driving stick shift since 16 years of age, it is safer to drive automatic so if you are in a sudden emergency you can focus on speeding your vehicle away without having to focus on shifting gears. Plus, Mazda and Mitsubishi in 1st and 2nd gears are very very slow—so not effective to move fast. Another advantage of having your own vehicle is having better tires—all terrain tires—good for the highway and also helpful for the dirt and mud roads in remote areas.

History of Photography, including Plants

My first photography of plants was of the rain forest surrounding the Maya ruins of Palenque. I visited here by myself, travelling on a 3rd class bus, then a train, then in the back of a pickup truck (from Palenque train station to the town). These photos were featured in my high school thesis, and since most 16 year old students don't go to Palenque by themselves (from where I was studying Spanish in Saltillo, north of Monterrey, Mexico), the thesis won 1st prize at the high school and that got me accepted at Harvard. Harvard wants more then just the #1, 2 and 3 in a class (I was not at that rank); but Harvard also wants a percent of students who are inspired to achieve atypical educational results—in my case to learn about Maya archaeology, architecture, and the surrounding rain forests.

I then experienced the rain forests between a Lacandon village that was many kilometers from Bonampak. I was kindly accepted as a student intern by the INAH archaeologists at Bonampak when I offered to help them carry their equipment from the airfield the long distance to Bonampak. I also offered to help them set up camp. So I saw lots of ecosystems hiking up and down the hills and crossing the creeks between the Lacandon airfield and far away Bonampak (no air strip at Bonampak in the early 1960's).

Then I went to Tikal in summer 1963 for a week and again in summer 1964 for a week, and the archaeologists Chris Jones and Peter Harrison noticed that I had a Leica camera and was a student majoring in Architectural Sciences. So Peter Harrison asked if I could return in January 1965 and assist the Penn Museum project for an entire year. WOW, what an opportunity. And since these were the Hippy Years it was common for students to take a year-off from college and go elsewhere to experience something new. So I learned about the plants and animals of Tikal during 12 months and I accomplished lots of photography. The Penn Museum magazine rated me "2nd best photographer of the Tikal Project" (obviously they listed Bill Coe as the #1 photographer). It is usually not "allowed" for a student to take better photos when the head of a project. In fact every time a Guatemalan student photographer of FLAAR had an opportunity to work for a while with a professional commercial photographer the students were only allowed to set up the cameras and lights—but prohibited from doing any actual photography. The lead photographer does not want present or future competition. This is precisely why I encourage all student photographers at FLAAR to do even better photography then me (National Geographic published my photos already in 1977 and Hasselblad Magazine published my photos a year or so later).

80% of the photographers at FLAAR often indeed do better photography than I do, and their name is listed in the captions of their photos. Even the photography assistants are allowed to take photos and often their results are excellent.

FLAAR has experience photographing flowers of the Maya world, wild plants with edible parts that could have helped feed the Classic Maya, plus we do panorama and now aerial photography of biodiverse ecosystems in many areas of Guatemala (so more than just the Reserva de la Biosfera Maya). We also photograph insects, arachnids, birds, and mammals. Our goal is to have these images available to students and scholars around the world, plus to show people around the world that Guatemala is a great place to visit.

Because the *Plumeria* trees are so far away up on karst hills and cliffs, we don't have Nat Geo style closeups in this report (until a kind soul can donate the funds needed to buy the 400-800mm Sony lens since most of our photographers prefer Sony cameras in today's digital era).