



The Ahau Chronicles



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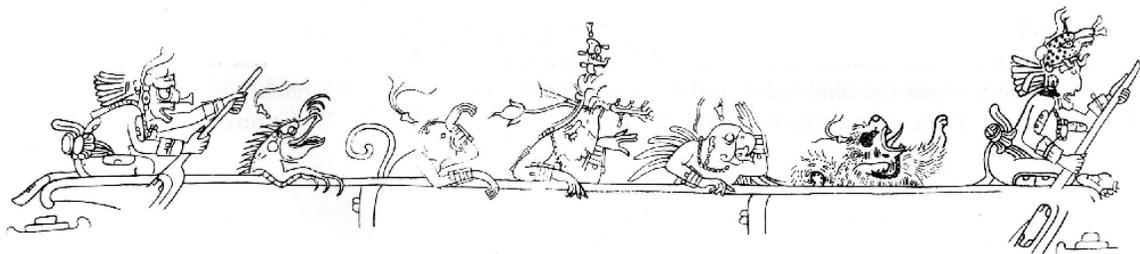
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Russian Satellite Crash

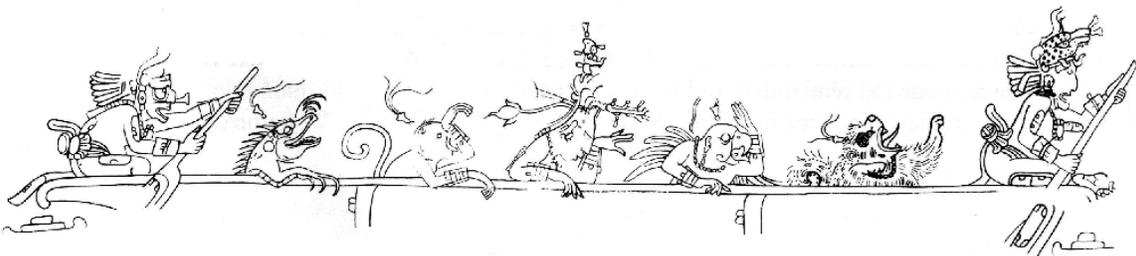
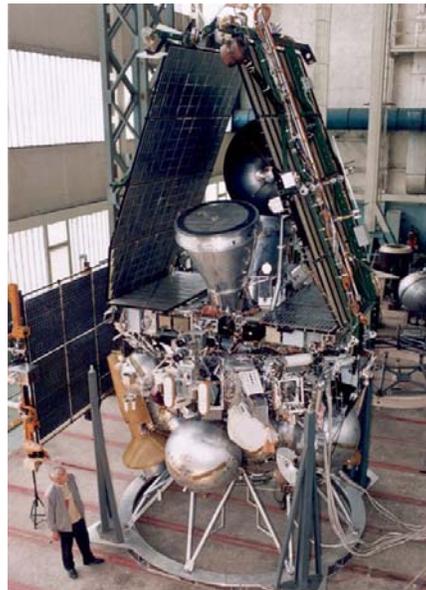


After stalling in earth orbit on its way to Mars, the Russian Phobos-Grunt satellite, shown at left before launch, is expected to crash down to earth in January. The possible crash site cannot be predicted until the orbit begins to decay. Although there is supposed to be no nuclear fuel on board, the fuel it does carry is toxic and it is hoped will burn up in the upper atmosphere. The fiery re-entry of a satellite is quite a spectacle. The last attempt by the Russians to send a satellite to Mars also failed, in November 1996. I witnessed it re-enter over Robinson Crusoe Island from the beach where we were having a lobster cook-up over a campfire. No one knows where the next crash will occur in the first month of 2012.





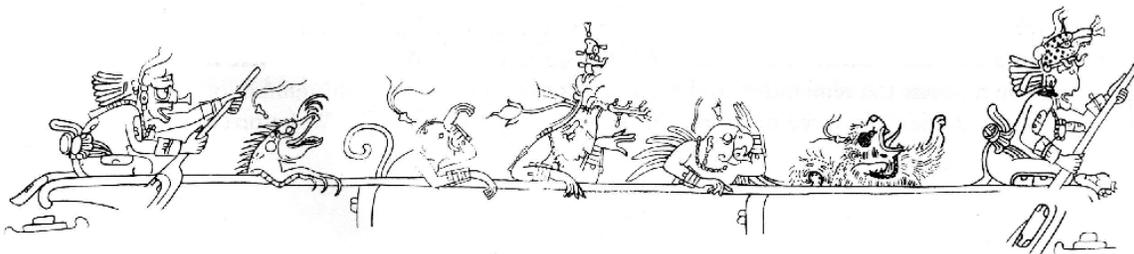
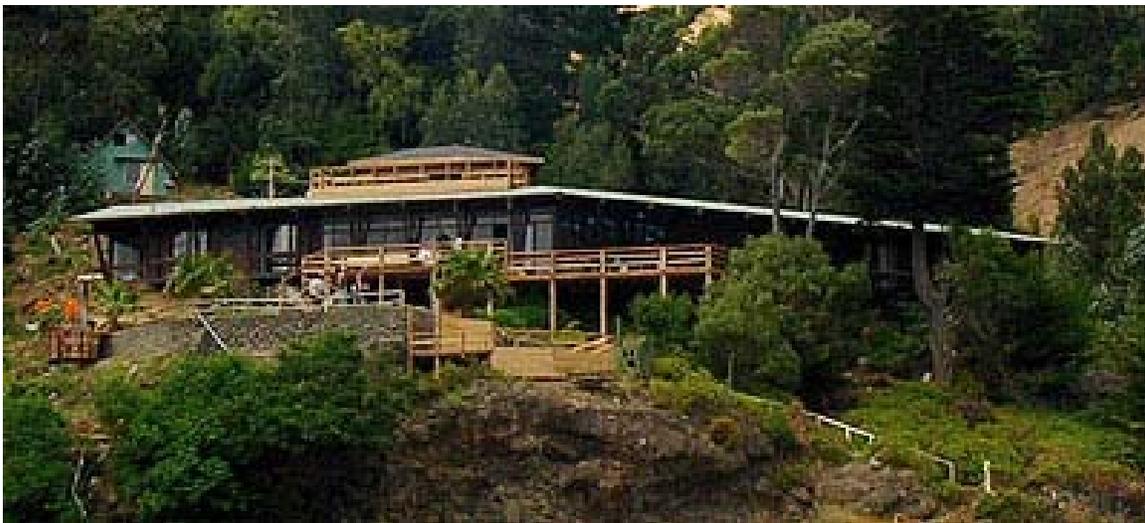
The Russians launched their satellite from the Baikonur Cosmodrome around midnight on November 8th, likely around the time I was blowing out my birthday candles. The launch occurred on the 15th anniversary of my first full day on Robinson Crusoe Island back in 1996. The reason I draw these parallels is that the crash of the Mars 96 satellite was directly related to my discovery of the island monument, and the cyclical nature of this story seems distinctly Mayan in flavor. The Phobos-Grunt satellite below left was based closely on the design of the Mars 96 satellite (below right). It seems ironic that they should both share the same fate, a fiery death crashing back down to earth.



The evening of Saturday, November 17th, 1996 was a clear night in early spring on Robinson Crusoe Island. There were four of us on the beach in front of the future site of Pedro Niada's Flying Fish hostel, cooking lobster in a large pot over a campfire. My islander friend Danny Abriel and his mother were there as was another youth known as Chino. With the four of us arrayed around the campfire we had eyes covering the sky in all directions. Danny's mother broke the quiet night when she shouted "¡Mira!" ("Look!"). From behind the mountain ridge at the western end of the bay came a fireball streaking across the sky. We all stood staring in amazement at the spectacle which sailed across the inky darkness. I knew that the ocean horizon appeared at eye level from the seashore and was trying to calculate when the fireball would crash into the water or disappear beyond the horizon. After about 5 seconds, the fireball began to break apart with a second smaller fireball trailing the first, much as I have depicted in the graphic at the beginning of this newsletter. After another 5 seconds or so the pair disappeared below the horizon as quickly as they had appeared and we all stood awe-struck for some time afterwards.

The next morning word quickly spread throughout the village that what we had witnessed was the crash of a Russian satellite bound for Mars. The villagers spoke about the event and how there was a frantic search for the radioactive batteries which contained 200 grams of plutonium-238. Years later, researching the crash, I learned that the second fireball we witnessed was likely the solar panels being ripped from the spacecraft after they had been automatically deployed by an on-board computer convinced it was already on its way to Mars.

The excitement of the satellite crash soon faded and island life returned to normal. I continued camping at the eastern end of the bay for another few weeks, enjoying the relaxed lifestyle and exploring the island. Beyond my campsite at El Palillo was a secluded bay further east where a small resort, then named El Pangal, was run by a kindly island woman named Lala. I decided to rent the blue A-frame cabin shown below at left.



In early December, shortly before I relocated to El Pangal, I had discovered a number of dead birds along several of the paths that I had been hiking on for more than a month by that time. During the same period a cholera-like epidemic began to sweep over the village with many people falling ill. Public health notices began to be posted around town warning people not to eat uncooked seafood, to wash their hands often, and to take care with the hygiene of small children.

During my very first night in my new cabin in El Pangal, I was awoken with crippling stomach cramps that had me doubled over in bed. The cramps would subside for a while but would then return with agonizing pain. I began to recognize that the pain would return whenever a gust of wind would rattle the cabin. Unable to sleep, I lay in bed and began to formulate a frightening hypothesis: the wind-born poison was plutonium-laced air from the Russian satellite that we witnessed disintegrate in front of our eyes. The plutonium would have fallen into the water where the wind and water currents had carried it into the island bay over the course of several weeks. It explained the sickness of the villagers, who subsisted off of now-tainted seafood, while the dead birds I had found were quite literally the “canaries in the coal mine”.

Fearing that the island village had been contaminated by radioactive fallout I resolved to leave the next morning for the other side of the island. My earlier campsite at El Palillo gave a picturesque view of the mountain ridge behind the village and I had witnessed on many occasions how the clouds would blow in from the far side of the island, creating a vaporous waterfall billowing over El Mirador, the low pass over the ridge shown below. I reasoned that if the wind currents blew from the other side of the island into the village, rather than the other way around, then the far side of the island would have been relatively protected from wind-born contaminants. Furthermore, the high ridge would have presented an additional physical barrier to the spread of any fallout from the village side of the island. I departed at daybreak for the far side of the island.

