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Guatamalans, a people rich in folklore, clamor to recent 'UFO' sightings

The Baltimore Sun

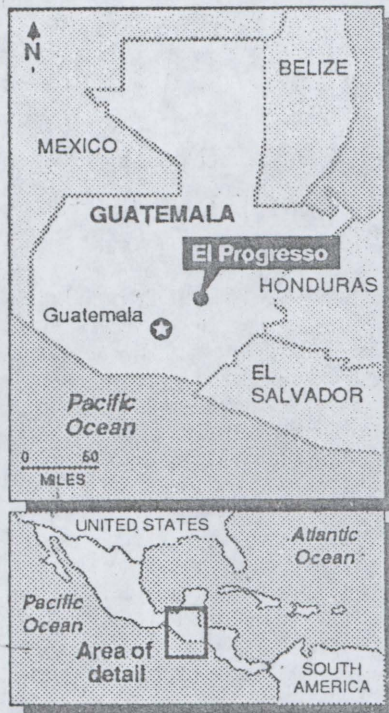
EL PROGRESO, Guatemala — The mysterious lights have been appearing in the sky over eastern Guatemala nearly every night for the past month. They have brought thousands of sightseers to this mountainous region, dominated the headlines of the country's newspapers and become the national preoccupation in a land whose mysteries are usually more heartbreakingly earthbound.

Beside photographs of "disappeared" people, above articles about battered corpses dumped on rural roadsides, newspaper headlines ask, "What are the true facts about UFOs?" Day after day, Guatemalan newspaper readers used to more somber fare feast on the eyewitness accounts of doctors, lawyers, pilots, police officers, engineers and private citizens.

"We were able to observe the UFO (unidentified flying object) with absolute clarity," reads a typical account. "It suddenly emitted a powerful light and passed about two kilometers away from us.

The lights, when they appear, invariably show up between 7:50 p.m. and 8:20 p.m. Every evening about that time, hundreds of people stream into this area, about an hour's drive from Guatemala City, to see the UFOs for themselves.

As darkness fell over the jagged terrain one night earlier this month, the road that links Guatemala City with the Caribbean coast was lined



—Journal-Bulletin Graphic

with parked cars and vans. Salsa music and American rock songs blared from car radios. A beer salesman in a loudspeaker truck broadcast a running commentary on UFOs, laced with plugs for Gallo, the national beer, while his assistants sold bottles to the crowd.

A pulsing light appears

As 7:50 approached, people began scanning the eastern skies.

Suddenly, someone shouted: "There it is!"

A pulsing white light appeared over the mountains. As it approached, a group of women cried, "It's a UFO!"

"It's an airplane," said a small boy standing with them.

"No, it's a UFO," one of the women said.

"It's a helicopter," the child insisted.

"But listen, it's not making any noise. It's a UFO," the woman said.

"A UFO! A UFO!" the child cried.

The light passed across a broad valley several miles from the onlookers and disappeared behind a mountain range. About 20 minutes later, another light winked. Then the skies were empty of everything but the stars.

At 8:20 p.m., the crowd began to disperse. Some people wondered whether they had simply seen a commercial airliner making the Panama-Mexico City run. But most seemed convinced that they had had an encounter with the unexplained.

James Baillieu, a law student from Melbourne, Australia, had paid a Guatemala City cabdriver \$50 to take him to a spot about five miles farther down the road. From that vantage point, he said, he was able to get a closer look at the UFO.

"I was looking at it through binoculars," he said. "It had two bright lights, one red, and a wedge-shaped tail. It looked like an airplane, but it was much bigger than an airplane."

Part of the folklore

Guatemala is a nation with a largely illiterate population. It has three active volcanoes, frequent earthquakes, an active guerrilla insurgency and a military with a well-earned reputation for random violence. This potent brew of man-made and natural calamities keeps a lively canon of modern folklore. The UFOs are being seen through the prism of that folklore.

Thus, the lights are heralding another earthquake; they are responsible for the winter's record cold temperatures; they are drawn to Mayan ruins in the area; they are drawn to a modern cement factory in the area.

More educated guesses — that is, the guesses of the more educated — suggest that the aircraft are international gun-runners, drug traffickers or military aircraft of some non-Central American nation.

A government that denies the existence of death squads here cannot quite bring itself to deny the existence of flying saucers.

Here to help us?

Estuardo Velasquez, the director of the government's Institute of Seismology, Vulcanology, Meteorology and Hydrology, conceded that institute observers had detected the presence of some kind of aircraft in the region. But he was not about to jump aboard the flying saucer bandwagon.

"All we can say about these machines is that they've been observed flying parallel to the Sierra de las Minas mountain range on a north-east to southwesterly course, at an altitude of about 1,000 meters," he said patiently.

However, an institute technician who had been working quietly during the interview took a reporter aside after Velasquez left the room.

"I saw the UFOs myself," he said.

"You should go out and see for yourself," he said. "They won't hurt you. I think they're here to help us."