



# On the Trail of the Maya Explorer: Tracing the Epic Journey of John Lloyd Stephens (Alabama Fire Ant)

*Steve Glassman*

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**A Mesoamerican travel book from two perspectives and two centuries.**

In 1839 John Lloyd Stephens, then 31 years old, and his traveling companion, artist Frederick Catherwood, disappeared into the vast rain forest of eastern Guatemala. They had heard rumors that remains of a civilization of incomparable artistic and cultural merit were moldering in the steamy lowland jungles. They braved Indian uprisings, road agents, heat, and biting insects to eventually encounter what is today known as the lost civilization of the Maya.

In 1841 Stephens published *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* to instant acclaim with both American and international audiences. His conversational style was fresh and crisp and his subject matter, the search for lost cities on the Central American isthmus, was romantic and adventurous. Stephens's book has been characterized as the "great American nonfiction narrative of the 19th century." Indeed, what Stephens wrote about the Maya makes a major contribution to Maya studies.

Steve Glassman retraces Stephens's route, visiting the same archaeological sites, towns, markets, and churches and meeting along the way the descendants of those people Stephens described, from mestizo en route to the cornfields to town elders welcoming the Norte Americanos. Glassman's work interlaces discussion of the history, natural environment, and architecture of the region with descriptions of the people who live and work there. Glassman compares his 20th-century experience with Stephens's 19th-century exploration, gazing in awe at the same monumental pyramids, eating similar foods, and avoiding the political clashes that disrupt the governments and economies of the area.

Stephens's books are still widely available, but his importance to literary professionals has been overlooked. With this new travelogue, Glassman reaffirms Stephens's reputation and brings his work to wider critical and public attention.



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