

February 2011

Yucatan Peninsula

Cancun

Welcome to the world of the Maya. We're all somewhat aware of the amazingly sophisticated civilization that the Mayan people developed. Architecture, astronomy (the Mayan calendar accurately predicted solar and lunar eclipses), writings (the Mayan codices are still the subject of serious academic studies throughout the world), mathematics (the Maya invented the concept of zero).

Yet when I see them, I just wonder how they accomplished all that. They are so short. Most are barely four feet tall. I guess I can be rightfully castigated for possessing a prejudice against the vertically challenged. But that's not all. Their facial features go against my concept of beauty and handsomeness. Both the forehead and the chin slopes back at an acute angle. I understand that Mayan parents used to tie a board to their babies' heads in order to assure this slopiness (Is this a real word?). The Mayan head is a pumpkin, and the ears stick straight out. In general, their bodies are thick, if not round. Nonetheless they are a proud people and friendly, easy to know. They look you straight in the eye.

Cancun is both a large city and a beach resort. Cancun Beach is a Miami Beach --- miles of high-rise hotels, clubs and restaurants, but situated on a long and narrow peninsular. We stayed at a delightful condo resort, **Coral Mar**, located in Pok Ta Pok on the opposite side of the bay from the beach. Although the bay wasn't a popular swimming area, the resort had a pool large enough to do laps. We had only one good day of sunshine and warm weather. Other days the sky clouded over at about 11:00AM and the wind kicked up. So we never spent much time on the ocean.

However, we did explore the Yucatan. South to **Tulum** was our first Mayan archeological site. Located right on the blue-green Caribbean ringed with white sand beaches, it exuded tranquility. Our Mayan guide was a very good teacher, who had the eyes to see and point out the intricate carvings and frescoes, and elucidate their meanings.

Tulum held special significance for the Maya. At one time it was an important free port city where rival tribes were able to trade goods. When the Spanish conquered Mexico, they prohibited the Maya from sailing the seas, and commerce among Mayan tribes died. However, the Maya were strong and independent. Tulum was never conquered by the Spanish. Uprisings continued against the Mexican government until 1935, when the Maya finally ceded Tulum to the government.

We traveled west four hours to **Merida**. The beginning of our trip was hair-raising. We started out with a quarter tank of gas. Since it was a four-lane toll road, we figured there would be plenty of gas stations. Just after entering the highway, a sign informed us that the closest gas station was 165 kilometers! Chuck assured Anzie that this was impossible. It was, after all, a busy toll road. There had to be other gas stations; maybe not on the toll road itself, but surely in surrounding towns. Chuck's confidence waned as he noted that we were the lone car on the road for miles and miles. Plus, we could find little or no evidence of civilization, even ranches or farms. Chuck's ultimate solution?

We drive until we run out of gas. Then we'll just wait for help to arrive. Looking at the map, we couldn't determine from whence this help would come – there being no exits!.

Finally we reached a toll booth, at which point we were coasting on fumes. There had to be a gas station close by, right? Wrong. We explained our problem to the toll takers. They directed us where to park while one of them went over to what looked like a house located about 30 yards from the toll booths. A man came out wearing a t-shirt and what appeared to be policeman's trousers – dark blue with a stripe. After a conversation the man re-entered the house, and came out seconds later with a gas can, Praise the Lord! He gave us ten liters of gas; charged us about ten bucks; and we were on our way. Obviously we were not the first to have this experience.

We made it to **Valladolid** for gas and lunch. We partook of a wonderful and relaxing repast at an old world hotel/restaurant on the central square. Anzie bought two beautiful brocaded blouses in a galleria artesana next door.

Merida and Uxmal

We arrived at the home of friends Harriet and Tony in downtown **Merida** at around 4:00. Funny, ever since we met them on that canal cruise last April, we've been trying to get together. It should've been easy. After all they just live nearby in Cambridge. Instead we get together in Mexico. Go figure. It's only because we heard an edition of "Says You" with Tony Kahn as a panelist on an NPR broadcast from Booth Bay Maine on our computer one night, that prompted Anzie to e-mail them from here in Mexico. The e-mail went something like this: "We're here in Mexico and have an extra bedroom, why don't you come visit?" Harriet wrote right back and said, "We're in Mexico too and have an extra bedroom, why don't you come visit?" As we were leaving for Mexico City and Cancun the next day, a visit together was meant to be.

We spent two nights at Casa Reisner/Kahn. The first night we dined at a wonderfully funky restaurant, **Casa de Frida**. Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera's mistress and wife, is an absolute icon in Mexico. The food was excellent, as was the conversation.

The next day we visited the ruins at **Uxmal**. Not that we are experts mind you, but of the four ruins we visited so far in Mexico, these are the most elegant. Perhaps it's because they are of a comparatively recent vintage – 700-900 AD. The corners of the 125 ft. main temple are rounded, giving it a softer look than others. The carvings are in good shape and of fine design. Our guide pointed out that the design of Mexico City's Museo de Antropologia was inspired by Uxmal's Palacio del Gobernador.

We walked through the ball court. Historians aren't exactly certain about the rules of the game, called **Pelota**; however, it must have involved passing a ball through stone hoops, which are located about 20 ft. off the ground along the sidewalls at the midline of the field. It looks like a hybrid of lacrosse and quiddich, of "Harry Potter" fame. One of the reasons we liked this site so much was that it is full of trees and birds, with very few people. A true spiritual site.

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/791/>

We stopped at a restaurant with a pool on the way back to Merida. After lunch we sat alongside the pool, read and napped. We saw more of Merida than we ever expected, or

wanted to see, on our return trip. Harriet had broken a coffee carafe that morning, so as we had a car, we offered to take them to the local Wal-Mart to replace it. Well, we found it in the middle of the busy center of Merida at rush hour, but couldn't figure out how to get to it. We could see it, but no matter how we tried, we couldn't get to the parking garage and entrance. It appeared that the only way to get there was to be born there! After 4 times around the block, going up one way streets wrong and other traffic infractions, we finally made it. Fortunately it seemed that all the police were at a 2x1 happy hour some where.

The next morning we bid our fond goodbyes, and headed back to Cancun. We stopped at **Chic hen Itza**, probably the largest and most famous Mayan ruin. The main temple is adorned with carvings of the feathered serpent, Kukulcan. At the spring and fall equinoxes the sun hits these carvings so they appear to slither down the sides of the temple. Thousands of spectators appear to witness this phenomenon.

We walked from the temple about a quarter mile to the **cenote**. What looks like a pond is actually the entrance to an underground river. It is estimated that over 3000 cenotes exist in the Yucatan. Their existence is attributed to the porous limestone rock. Jacques Cousteau explored this cenote and discovered 80 skeletons, as well as thousands of pieces of jewelry. Scuba diving tours are advertised of the underground freshwater rivers that are entered through these cenotes. We were interested in seeing a cenote after reading Barbara Kingsolver's book "The Lacuna" last year. It's possible to swim and snorkel in some of them, but we never had the time to do it. Another time.

We didn't spend much time at Chichen Itza. It was mostly because we were turned off by the rampant commercialism. From the entrance we were forced to walk a quarter-mile gauntlet of vendors selling *kitsch*. On the temple grounds we were swarmed by vendors. The walk to the cenote was another gauntlet. So we left after an hour without seeing the entire site. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chichen_Itza
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/483/>

We made it back to Cancun without incident, and with gas to spare. We found a terrific Thai restaurant, the **Thai Lounge**. You don't see a restaurant with a dolphin aquarium in the bar every day. Each table is enclosed in its own tiki hut. Muy romantico! The food was excellent.

We spent the next day at the hotel reading, swimming, working on our tans and staying out of the car. The following day we headed for the airport for an uneventful trip to Mexico City, and then to San Miguel by bus.

Hasta luego,

Chuck & Anzie