MY TRIP TO MEXICO

I really wanted to see the pyramids of Egypt this summer, but with tensions in the Middle East (especially against Americans) at an all time high, I thought it would be more prudent to wait until newly elected President Obama was in office for at least a year before taking the trip. My initial hope was that the new president's foreign policies might have a more calming affect in the Middle East than his predecessor's. With Egypt out of the picture, I focused my attention on the Maya civilizations of the Americas, and the more I researched, the more Mexico emerged as a likely Plan B for seeing my first ancient pyramids. The incentives were many: the country is right next door, the currency exchange rate favored the US dollar, I speak fluent Spanish, the travel tour company I selected – Caravan Tours – was very reasonably priced, the airfare was cheap, and, most importantly for me, Mexico has a lengthy history of fascinating ancient cultures which, on many levels, were comparable to that of the Egyptians. But as soon as I began planning the trip everything seemed to go – pardon the pun – south.

The first inkling that all might not be right with Mexico began in December, with almost daily reports of gang-related violence. More than 10,000 people have been murdered in Mexico since 2006 in what has become an internal war amongst the various cartels for control of the country's multi-billion dollar drug exporting business. I was assured by Caravan Tours that most of these killings were along the Border States and not in the areas where we would be visiting; besides, our bus would be traveling along an expensive toll highway patrolled heavily by federal police and the military. This eased my concerns until I Googled the hotel in Veracruz where we would be spending one of our nights and discovered a news report about nine murdered drug dealers who were found stuffed into a SUV right outside the city limits, all with their hands and heads cut off. What a nice vacation visual that conjured up. And as frightening as the nonstop reports of violence were, they quickly took a back seat to the broadcasting of the Swine Flu outbreak newly gripping the Mexican nation. The capital even closed down for several days as authorities instructed its citizens to stay indoors to prevent spreading the disease. Then, in May, a minor earthquake hit Mexico City, and fears of more tremors or an even bigger quake started to circulate. By now I had already paid off the entire tour and purchased the separate airfare, so my chagrin was growing by the week. This vacation seemed wrought with more perils than an Indiana Jones movie. It didn't help matters at all that every person I told about my trip stared back at me incredulously and said: *"Are you crazy?"*

To add to my increasing anxieties, Caravan Tours cancelled the original dates of my trip (July 17 to July 24) due to lack of travelers. I was told I could be placed in the tour that left a week earlier (starting on July 10th), but this presented a new set of problems for me. As a Postal employee my vacation leave is granted by my superiors, and once

they've approved your leave during the prime summer months changing it requires a diplomatic skill normally reserved for the upper echelons of the State Department. I had to kiss so many asses I nearly developed hemorrhoids on my lips. Of course, once the new vacation dates were approved, I now had to worry whether or not Caravan would cancel *these* tour dates, as well. And by June a new health outbreak was spreading throughout Mexico. Dengue Fever, a debilitating (but not often fatal) disease carried by mosquitoes was rampant in certain areas near the rain forest and sea resorts. *Ay, Chihuahua*. I was beginning to think the Mayan Gods did not want me to see their pyramids.

Ten days prior to my trip, my 85-year-old father, who was a fit and healthy man, suffered a massive brain stroke while exercising in his living room. He was taken to the hospital immediately with complete paralysis along the entire right side of his body. A powerful clot-busting drug was administered and he began to recover from the paralysis quickly. Over the next several days while in Intensive Care his condition stabilized and he became well enough for them to transfer him to a rehabilitation center where the long arduous process of physical therapy would take place. I was now torn over whether to stay with dad and cancel my tour. My best friend Armando advised me to go, reminding me that my father was recuperating and there was nothing I could do for him while he was in the hospital. I discussed the situation with my step mom, who also counseled me to go, and decided to continue with my trip.

Fate was not ready to ease up on me just yet. Three days before departing, my Postal vehicle at work was broken into and my wallet, containing my ID, ATM and credit cards, was stolen. At this point, I could have just given up, tossed my hands into the air and accepted this final sign that a trip to Mexico was not in my foreseeable future, but this 'last straw' had the opposite affect on me. *Damned if I hadn't gotten this far*! I was determined to see Mexico even if it killed me. And to prove it, I left with only eight days worth of clothing, a passport and my newly replaced ATM card to my name. And so my journey began….

DAY ONE

I arrived at Miami International Airport three hours and fifteen minutes before my Mexicana Flight was scheduled to leave. I must be the only person in America who actually heeds the TSA advice on arriving early to allow time to clear the airline security protocol; in other words, *I had almost three hours to kill at the airport!* I purchased several news magazines and sat near my terminal gate and began reading. From the get-go, things didn't go as planned. My flight was delayed almost thirty minutes. I had requested an emergency aisle seat for the extra leg space, but was shocked to discover the actual seat was very narrow and cramped…(um, I did not consider the possibility that my ass had grown considerably since the last time I flew)…and the man sitting next to me was even bigger than I was. We looked like two Weeble Wobble toys jammed into a square peg. For some reason, the entire emergency row's headsets did not work, so I

wasn't able to listen to the on-board movie, a hilarious comedy judging by the roars of laughter around me. When the food cart rolled to a stop beside my seat, I discovered that my foldout tray was broken and wouldn't come out of the armrest. I literally had to eat with the plastic plate resting on my lap and my arms suspended in front of my chest like some human Tyrannosaurus Rex. Later, when they handed out the Immigration and Customs forms they ran out of English copies. I required the assistance of the couple sitting next to me to insure I was filling everything out correctly. (Um, my Spanish language skills are far better than my Spanish reading skills). The couple, who were visiting family and friends in Mexico City, proved very helpful in navigating me through the entire Immigration and Customs process when we landed.

Caravan Tours sent me an itinerary booklet with instructions on what to do once I landed in Mexico City. I was to proceed to a taxi stand known as Sitio 300 and purchase a transfer to my hotel; the fare would be reimbursed at the reception meeting later that evening. I had read numerous reports about tourists being lured into 'unofficial' airport taxis and later robbed at gunpoint, so I was very leery when a man came up to me holding a Caravan sign and telling me to follow him. He recognized me as a Caravan tourist because of the tag on my luggage. This was my first guided tour, so I continued to be suspicious, telling the man I knew how to get to my hotel. Within minutes an attractive young woman from Caravan Tours joined us; she not only had my name but my flight number listed on a sheet of paper. All smiles, she purchased my transfer and guided me to the taxi stand. I was still a little paranoid, but then I figured, *what were the chances of being robbed twice in one week?*

Mexico City is the second largest populated city in the world. There is currently an estimated 24 million people living within the city limits, comprising one fifth of the country's overall population. It is nestled in the Valley of Mexico, or Anahuac, a huge basin stretching 60 miles long and 30 miles wide, and is surrounded by mountains on all sides except the northern section. Mexico City has a peak elevation of roughly 8000 feet, and the temperature is quite comfortable during the summer months. In fact, it gets very chilly in the mornings. The city is built on an old lake bed with no underlying bedrock, and this lack of unstable subsoil together with the region's volcanic makeup constitutes the city's major threats: *sinking and earthquakes*. In 1985, a massive earthquake killed more than 10,000 people, and evidence of the quake, in the form of abandoned and decrepit buildings that were never torn down, were evident on my ride to the hotel. Most of the residents of the city live in what appear to be urban sprawls that extend way out into the valley and up into the surrounding mountains. I photographed some of these neighborhoods from the highway leading out of the city the following day, and the pictures seem like a blur of little concrete block homes and apartments, many not painted, giving the impression they are stacked on top of each other.

My ride to the hotel was a real eye-opener. The streets, back roads and major thoroughfares leading into the Centro Historico (the Historical District), where my Sheraton Hotel was located, were lined with run-down homes and buildings covered in graffiti. These were not nice-looking neighborhoods, by any account, and I started to doubt my safety for a moment. After a while, though, it all looked the same, street after

street of urban decay, and I became more preoccupied with the way my driver zipped in and out of traffic. And it wasn't just him; *everyone* was driving like they were maneuvering the final lap at the Indy 500. What was even more astonishing was the absence of honking horns or obscene gestures or name calling, as if the residents took this insane driving for granted.

By the time we reached the Sheraton in the Centro Historico, the scenery changed dramatically. The hotel is in the downtown area, and the city now resembled what one imagines a major metropolis to look like: high-rise buildings and elegant shops, museums, churches, government structures and parks. The Sheraton is a beautiful five-star hotel. I had a large room with a king-sized bed on the 27th floor with a spectacular view of the city. It was only 4:00pm when I arrived and dinner wasn't until 7:00pm, so I went down to the lobby and acquired a map of the area from the concierge, and spent the next two and a half hours exploring the Centro Historico areas near the hotel.

Across the street from the Sheraton was *Alameda Central*, a park named after its many cottonwood trees. I made my way north along Avenida Juarez, realizing for the first time just how populated Mexico City was. Everywhere was the hustle and bustle of city life; the sidewalks crammed with people and vendors. At the first intersection I got a glimpse of the traffic and the teeming crowds on other streets. After a few blocks, Avenida Juarez merged into Francisco I. Madero Avenue, a narrow cobbled stone street previously known as Plateros Avenue due to the many silversmiths who set up shop here. Today, many jewelry stores still line the street. This section of Mexico City is the oldest part of the city, pre-dating the Spaniards. On this site Hernando Cortes first saw Tenochtitlan, the great Aztec captial from where Montezuma ruled his empire.

As I made my way down the narrow Francisco I. Madero Avenue, I saw a number of historical palacios. Almost every structure, in fact, was the previous home of some important colonial Spanish family and designated a historical site; by law, the facades have to be maintained in their original conditions even if the buildings are now nothing more than storefronts. I saw the Templo de San Francisco, a church commissioned by Cortes himself. At the Museo Del Estanquillo I stepped inside to discover an impressive art gallery of Mexico's finest painters.

Further up the street I came upon the famous Zocalo (Mexico's official main square) with its enormous Mexican flag, known also as the Plaza de la Constitucion. Originally a grass field, it was paved after the 1910 Revolution. At 12 acres in size, it is one of the largest town squares in the world. Along the sides of the Zocalo are several major historical buildings, including the *Palacio Nacional* (the National Palace) – built over Montezuma's original palace – and extending over four city blocks, housing not only the Federal Executive Branch but more than 18,000 bureaucrats, as well. Along another side of the Zocalo is the Merchants' Arcade and City Hall. On another side stands the majestic *Catedral Metropolitana*, one of the most beautiful churches in all of the Americas, built over a span of more than 240 years and containing three naves and spectacular paintings, sculptures, ironwork and period furniture in its 14 chapels. The cathedral is unique in that

it has become a de facto religious museum, and during actual church services there are tourists wandering about snapping photos.

I made my way back to the Sheraton via Tacuba Avenue, another of Mexico City's oldest streets, lined with more museums and historical palacios. Fronting one end of *Alameda Central* is the *Palacio De Bellas Artes* (the golden-domed Fine Arts Building). I took a shortcut across Alameda Central and was surprised to see entertainers working the park. There were musicians in one section and a very funny, if somewhat ribald, comedian telling jokes in another. The park itself was not very clean, and the areas around the water fountains smelled of urine. I'm not sure how safe this area was at night… *but I had no intention of finding out*.

Dinner was a delicious buffet in the hotel's Los Dones Restaurant. At 8:00pm, all the tour members gathered for the first time in a conference room on the second floor where we met our Tour Director, Tony Valdez. There were 27 members in our tour group, eleven couples and five single travelers, representing various nationalities. There was Gabriel and Anica, from Poland/Croatia; Somkhit and Suchitra (Sam and Sue) from Thailand; the Ahujas' from India, Sharlene from Canada, William from New Zealand, Asan from Pakistan; the rest of us from the U.S. Tony appeared nervous, and the introductions seemed a bit awkward. But as the tour continued our group bonded into a friendly unit. Tony laid out the itinerary for the following day and then most of us retired to our rooms for the evening.

DAY TWO

Breakfast was at 7:00am. Most of our meals were taken in the hotels, and I must admit the food was very good with few exceptions. In fact, by adhering to the tour's feeding schedules and drinking only bottled water, I was able to avoid Montezuma's Revenge, although some of my fellow travelers were not so lucky. At 8:00am sharp we all boarded the tour bus for the drive to Teotihuacan, Mexico's greatest archaeological site. Our guide for today was Joaquin (or Jack), a spry 74 year old who was very knowledgeable about Mexico's history.

Let me pause here and give you a brief history lesson of my own, if for no other reason than to make this journal more informative:

The study of Mesoamerican cultures (a region stretching from the north of Mexico down through Guatemala and parts of Honduras and El Salvador) is divided into three ages: the pre-Classic (2300 BC to year 0), the Classic (0 to 900 AD), and the post-Classic (900 to 1519 AD). The earliest inhabitants of Mesoamerica are believed to have come from Asia, crossing the Bering Strait during the last Ice Age and settling in Alaska around 35,000 years ago. These migrants continued southward in search of better lands and warmer climates favorable for hunting and gathering. There is another archeological

theory that argues other cultures of Australasian and Malayo-Polynesians also made it to the Americas thanks to their canoes and knowledge of sea currents and winds; similarities among various ethnic groups throughout the American continent support this hypothesis.

The first inhabitants of Mexico settled in the north of the country 20,000 years ago. Relying on hunting for subsistence, they gradually moved further south, concentrating in the Valley of Mexico because of its climate and abundance of natural resources. Eventually, they had to keep moving as they over-hunted the areas they settled in, and so there was even further migration southward. This way of life changed radically by the 7th century B.C. when the natives discovered agriculture, domesticating the corn plant. From this point on, nomadic clans became sedentary and the first permanent settlements arose, with a sex-based division of labor (women sowed and harvested; men hunted). And while most of what is now Mexico was inhabited by this time, only in certain areas of Mesoamerica was there a variety of cultural development. Over a short period of time, though, cultures grew in Mesoamerica that in spite of great distances shared *spiritual traits* (same Gods under different names, a belief in life after death and the need to build temples to worship their deities) and *material traits* (agriculture, the use of lunar and solar calendars, specialized markets and stone carvings).

One of the greatest political, religious and trading centers that emerged during the Classic period was the urban area known as Teotihuacan. The name is derived from the Nahua Indian translation (the language of the Aztecs) meaning “the place where the gods live”. It was built just east of Lake Texcoco (approximately 30 miles northeast from present day Mexico City) and was inhabited by natives from the Valley of Mexico around 300 B.C. But it was in the 7th century A.D. that the city reached its splendor, with an area covering over 20 square kilometers and containing more than a 100,000 inhabitants. Its influence was vast in the region.

Teotihuacan was the first city in Mesoamerica to have a theocratic and military government in which priests also carried out military duties. In addition, the priest class made all the important decisions and controlled everything connected with trade. The rest of society was composed mainly of craftsmen (almost no farmers) who constantly grew in numbers due to the city’s commercial needs. This constant migration of laborers, particularly from Oaxaca, led to the creation of different ethnic neighborhoods. The main commercial activity was trade. Knives, masks, spear points, blades made of jade or obsidian were bartered for food, stone and luxury items such as jewelry. Teotihuacan-made products even reached the distant regions inhabited by the Maya of Central America.

One of the major contributions to Mesoamerica left behind by the peoples of Teotihuacan was religion. Many of the gods that emerged from this culture continued to be worshipped right up until the Spanish Conquest. Deities began to be shown with human bodies. The most important Gods were: Huehuecuhtli (god of fire and old age), Tlaloc (god of water), Yacatecuhtli (god of merchants) and Mictlantecuhtli (god of death). The most important religious ceremonies – which included rituals ranging from hymns to human sacrifice – were carried out in the temples built in the city center.

The decline of Teotihuacan started in the 4th or 5th centuries AD. There are various contributing factors. The city grew so much that it caused detrimental environmental change; wooded fertile areas in the region became depleted and turned into desert. There are also signs of destruction at the ruins, which indicate outbreaks of violence. This violence, in turn, may have been caused by any number of factors: ethnic tensions amongst the various neighborhoods, a class struggle between the ordinary people and the ruling class, or an invasion by Chichimecs (nomads from the north) who set fire to the city upon entering it. However it declined, by the 9th century AD, the city was deserted.

When our bus arrived at Teotihuacan we were one of the first tourists there, and let me tell you, it was impressive. Jack, our local guide, told us we could observe the Pyramid of the Sun – rising between the mountains – along the road even before we reached the site. But when I craned my neck to look out the right side windows of the bus, all I could see was this black mountain off into the distance. Imagine my awe when the thing I thought was a mountain turned out to be the pyramid itself. This thing was HUGE. In fact, it is the third largest pyramid in the world.

As we entered the site Jack took us on a tour of the first ruin known as the Palace of Quetzalpapalotl, the most elaborate of the buildings. It is presumed to be the home of a prominent citizen or priest and has well-preserved murals and carvings. In the courtyard are pillars decorated with bas-reliefs depicting the *quetzal-papalotl*, a feathered butterfly, and symbols relating to water. Beneath this structure is the Palace of the Jaguars, so called because of the jaguar images adorning the walls of the courtyard. And further underneath the original palace is the Substructure of the Feathered Snails, a temple beautifully decorated with images of, well, feathered snails. The underground temple was a little cramped causing one of our travelers, an elderly woman named Julie, to faint momentarily. Julie ended up in the hospital twice during our tour after complaining of shortness of breath and pain in her side; she later flew home when we reached Veracruz and our group was reduced to 26 members.

We emerged from the opposite side of the Palace of Quetzalpapalotl and onto the Plaza of the Moon, a remarkable cluster of buildings. The plaza is surrounded by staired platforms and has a square alter in the middle. Over-looking all of this is the Pyramid of the Moon on the north end of the Avenue of the Dead (a walkway so named because when the Aztecs discovered Teotihuacan they thought the structures and smaller pyramids lining it were the tombs of deceased giants). The Pyramid of the Moon is 140 feet tall and has stairs on its south side. It appears much taller, though, because it was built on higher ground. We were able to climb the steep stairs, one lung-busting step at a time, to the square altar in the middle (the top of the pyramid was closed off to visitors). I'm not sure if it was the elevation, the steepness of the stairs, or my overall physical conditioning, *or perhaps a combination of all three*, but I damn near had a heart attack climbing the Pyramid of the Moon. I was panting like I'd just finished a marathon. But the view from this vantage point was spectacular. You could see the entire length of Teotihuacan from here.

After carefully climbing down, we proceeded up the Avenue of the Dead towards the Pyramid of the Sun. Along the way we stopped to photograph the low structures that flank the Avenue. One had murals of pumas. By the time we reached the end of the Avenue of the Dead, souvenir vendors overran us, something Jack cautioned about on the bus. I tried to ignore them, but *dang* they were persistent. One guy literally walked in step with me holding up this beautiful replica of the Aztec calendar made of solid obsidian rock. The man kept repeating over and over how he needed to feed his family…and I fell for it. I ended up paying 300 pesos for a piece of rock. And when the other vendors saw they had a 'live one' they bombarded me, too. I forked over another 200 pesos for several obsidian and turquoise turtles. I'm surprised I didn't walk out of there with a pyramid strapped to my back.

Standing before the Pyramid of the Sun was a jaw-dropping moment. Rising at more than 250 feet, with sides that measure 735 feet wide, the pyramid is a sight to behold. Most of the Mexican ruins that are open to the public have been partially or fully restored, but even still, the original grandeur of this structure is breathtaking. What makes this monument to the gods even more amazing is the fact that it was built without the benefit of the wheel or metal tools. Constructed of adobe brick and faced with volcanic stone, it has 248 steps and five levels. After my experience on the other, smaller Pyramid of the Moon, the idea of climbing this mountain of stone seemed daunting indeed. I became quick friends with a member of the tour named Barry Nakamura, an associate professor of history from Hawaii, and we decided to climb this thing one level at a time. After reaching each level we would stop for a few minutes to catch our breath and take turns photographing one another. We made it all the way to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun. It was quite windy up there. Standing atop this pyramid, which towers over the valley, was exhilarating. One could almost feel a spiritual connection. In fact, there were several people praying and meditating at the peak, and I decided on the spur of the moment to say a quick prayer for my father.

The climb down, albeit slow, was not as bad as I had imagined. By turning partially to my left side, and maneuvering the steps one at a time, I was able to get down without suffering vertigo. The only part we were not able to see was the southern most structure known as The Citadel, a vast sunken square surrounded by a low wall and encompassing 17 acres. It was from here that the priests ruled the city, its inner esplanade once held thousands of standing people. The courtyard has several temples; the most elaborate is the restored Temple of Quetzalcoatl (the Feathered Serpent).

Exhausted from all the climbing and walking, our tour group returned to the hotel for a delicious buffet lunch. Afterwards, we piled onto the bus again and took a brief tour of the Centro Historico section of Mexico City. We drove around the Zocalo and stopped at the National Palace for a quick visit. There was a strong security presence here; in addition, as we entered the visitor's section we were scanned with hand-held devices that can detect an increased body temperature, such was the fear of spreading Swine Flu that nobody with a fever was permitted entry! Inside the National Palace we entered a large courtyard, and as we climbed the central stairs to the second level we came upon the famous mural by Diego Rivera called "Mexico through the Centuries", depicting

Mexico's history from the Aztecs down to the Revolution of 1910. The mural was painted along the central staircase walls from 1929 to 1935. Diego Rivera also painted a series of frescoes along the north corridor of the second level between 1945 and 1951, showcasing the lives of Mexico's natives, but this work remains unfinished. The Artist died in 1957.

The history of the National Palace is a fascinating one. The original building was erected in 1523 – over what was previously Montezuma's palace – as the official residence of the Spanish conqueror Hernando Cortes. It had a fortress-like construction designed with Tuscan-style architecture, and housed the Viceroyalty for over two centuries. After being partially destroyed in a fire during the riots of 1692, the palace was rebuilt in 1693, which is the existing building we see today. The third level was added in 1927. From within these walls, Mexico has been ruled for almost five centuries.

Our next stop was the National Museum of Anthropology located in *Chapultepec Park.* This beautifully constructed building is one of the finest anthropological museums in the world. It was built along the Mayan concept of the "quadrangle", an open patio surrounded on all sides by buildings with open corners, connecting the outside with the inside. The patio contains a marvelous architectural design of what looks like a giant square umbrella that is constantly raining down water from its center. As you enter the main lobby, there is a section called Introduction to Anthropology that gives the visitor an idea of how the study of anthropology evolved and what it entails. The main level of the museum is divided into halls devoted to Mexico's early civilizations, exhibiting fascinating artifact from the various Mexican cultures: stone carvings, temple reconstructions, sculptures, ceramics, furniture, jewelry, masks, decorative objects and other arts and crafts. A deliberate feature of the museum is the dramatic lighting that accentuates the remarkable artistry of the larger sculptures, including the best-known Mexican artifact, the massive Sun Stone, more commonly referred to as the Aztec Calendar. The second level has exhibits focusing on Mexico's native cultures, showcasing musical instruments, traditional costumes and artworks. Sadly, we did not have enough time to see the whole museum. I recommend to anyone who visits Mexico City to put this site on your short list of things to see.

I must admit, by the time we got back to the hotel I was thoroughly exhausted. After another buffet dinner I excused myself and went straight to bed.

DAY THREE

Today, we rose earlier than usual. Breakfast was at 6:30am. We needed to be checked-out and on the tour bus by 7:30 sharp for our trip to Veracruz. On Sunday mornings, the police close off many of Mexico City's downtown streets to allow its citizens to stroll, bike and otherwise gather freely, and vehicular traffic of any kind is not permitted. Our bus had to be out of the area before we were closed in. It was very chilly in the morning due to the elevation of the city, and there was a rather offensive odor in the air from the

pollution. One of the things that struck me about the downtown area was how dingy and dirty many of the historical landmarks appeared from the outside. I soon learned that the accumulation of smog within the Valley of Mexico causes a sooty-like substance to coat the city whenever it rains, and trying to maintain the facades of these centuries-old buildings clean is a never-ending – and apparently futile – battle.

From this point on, our tour included a series of long bus rides (totaling almost 2500 kilometers) throughout the southwestern States of Mexico. The country has 31 States and one Federal District (which is Mexico City itself). Vicente, our incredibly talented driver, maneuvered our massive, modern bus through the small streets and busy thoroughfares of the nation's capital and onto Federal Highway 150. As we left Mexico City behind and entered the States of Mexico and Pueblo, the highway rose higher into the mountains and the scenery was *breathtaking.* Miles and miles of mountains and hills covered in lush vegetation. I took some spectacular photos from inside the bus of the sun rising above the fog-covered peaks. In the distance we could see the snow-capped volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl. Winding along this mountain road, it was hard to imagine this was the same country we had left behind in Mexico City.

We did experience *one* scary moment while traversing the mountain highway. Or scary for me, anyway. We had traveled so high that the two-lane road became shrouded in almost blinding fog. Vincente didn't seem to mind and pushed the bus faster, passing vehicle after vehicle until we were lined up with an oil tanker which just refused to let us pass. We continued racing through the mountain fog, the tanker just a couple of feet next to us. I kept thinking at any moment we would collide and one of us would go crashing into the valley below. Tony, our tour director, sensed our anxiety, and launched into some lengthy fact-based description of the area in order to get our minds off the situation. But let me tell you, I was so preoccupied with the thought of us crashing that Tony could have been insulting my mother and I wouldn't have paid attention. Luckily, the highway began to descend and we left the fog behind.

We finally entered the state of Veracruz, the oldest port city in all of the Americas, shortly after 3:00 in the afternoon. Our hotel for the night was the elegant Gran Hotel Diligencias situated in front of the zocalo (the town square) in what is the Historical District of Veracruz. The city was celebrating its 490th anniversary, a remarkable achievement considering its often-turbulent past. But the aura of historical precedence one might expect from visiting such an old city wore off quickly; apparently, every city we toured was almost *that* old (and seemingly founded by Cortes or one of his storied captains). About the only new towns we saw were situated along the highway, tiny enclaves aptly fitting the 'one-horse' description.

We were famished, having spent nearly eight hours on the bus, and devoured the hotel's buffet offering like a rescued group of shipwreck survivors. The rest of the day was free to sightsee around Veracruz. Barry and I teamed up and got a map of the city from the bellhop. Tony had also given everyone a list of scheduled cultural events going on in the various town plazas. The history of Veracruz is very colorful. In 1519, Hernando Cortes led an expedition from Cuba to the Mexican coastline, landing his small

army on the little island of San Juan de Ulua in the harbor where Veracruz later was established. The name he bestowed on Veracruz was La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (the Rich Town of the True Cross). A prophetic name, indeed; Veracruz would become the main departure point for Spanish galleons loaded with Mexican silver. In fact, it was the commercial gateway to the rest of the world… and the reason so many pirate ships attacked its shores and foreign countries invaded its land. A massive fort (el Castillo San Juan de Ulua) was built – beginning in the 1530's and finished in the late 18th century – on Gallega Island in the harbor to protect the city. Smaller fortifications were also erected in the town (like Fort Santiago) for additional cannon firepower. From this port city, Cortes ventured out and conquered the mighty Aztec Empire, establishing Spanish colonial rule in Mexico.

The layout of the central city is easy to navigate, with narrow streets laid out in a grid pattern. It was difficult to get lost, especially around our hotel. The Plaza de Armas, the main square, was directly in front of our hotel. On the east side was the 17th century *Palacio Municipal* (Town Hall) and on the north side the Cathedral (*Catedral de Nuestra Senora de la Asuncion*), built in 1721, which has a loudly tolling bell tower.

The Plaza has black and white tiled walkways lined with palm trees, giving it a tropical look. Arched Spanish-style arcades, or *porteles*, shelter a series of open-air cafes that fill up at night with the festive atmosphere of Mariachis and other musical entertainers. Mexicans love to party and the streets are filled nightly with revelers. There is a carnival each year in Veracruz that rivals Mardi Gras in spirit if not in size. It originally began as a somber religious festival but over the centuries has turned into a massive celebration with parades, floats and street wide partying.

Barry and I walked eastward towards the *malecon*; a seawall promenade that hugs the harbor then turns south towards the gulf shore. Along its dark, sandy beaches (the color is due to volcanic rock) beach-farers sat in plastic tables beneath umbrellas that seemed to extend almost to the water. Along the *malecon* are numerous shops and restaurants under thatched roofs. In the distance you can see large sea vessels and cargo ships in the harbor. This is the place for seafood. The Fish Market two blocks south of the harbor is housed in a two-story building taking up an entire city block. Rows of fresh seafood, live crabs and neatly stacked fish await you, as due numerous stands selling seafood cocktails made with shrimp, oysters or octopus.

We met up with some fellow Caravaners and decided to take a one-hour open-air bus tour of the city. Veracruz is a beautiful little town. Unlike Mexico City, which in places seemed dirty and not well maintained, the parks and streets here were very clean. We saw posters around the municipality extolling its residents to take pride in the city and not litter, and graffiti was kept to a minimum. Parts of the area reminded me somehow of the quaint seaside townships in south Jersey. And there was a business section with modern malls and some upscale neighborhoods of beautifully designed homes. Along the tour route we saw high-rises and construction sites of even more high-rises to come, an interesting mix of architectures.

Later, around 5:30 in the afternoon, the Plaza in front of our hotel filled with locals who came to watch a cultural folkdance show. Group after group of young Mexican dancers in traditional wardrobes performed folk dances on a platform in the middle of the square. After our buffet dinner, some of us walked the Plaza's ring of open-air cafes taking in the nightly revelry.

For centuries, Veracruz has been a crossroads of the Americas, with cultures from the Caribbean, Europe, Africa and Mexico meshing into one exotic mix. And nowhere is this more evident than in the musical flavor of the city. Strolling Mariachis compete with mirimba bands and string trios playing guitars, harps and *jaranas* (a guitar-shaped five string instrument unique to Veracruz). The local dances also reflect the city's rich cultural mix. The *zapateado,* for example, is of African origin, introduced by slaves, a fandango-derived staccato movement of the heels danced to the *son jarocho,* a fast, uniquely modified percussion beat that is quintessentially Veracruzan. A more refined dance is the *danzon,* a Cuban import influenced by European ballroom dancing; it is less frenetic than the *son jarocho* with gliding movements, arm in arm steps and women waving fans – maneuvers designed to minimize sweating in the hot and humid climate of the region. There is also an ethnic/racial diversity here not seen in other parts of the country. African-Mexicans are common. This was a very interesting place. We only spent one night in Veracruz, it was mainly a stopover on our way to Palenque, but I really enjoyed the city and wished we had stayed another night to further explore it. I definitely wouldn't mind going back.

DAY FOUR

Another early day. Breakfast at 6:30am, back on the bus by 7:30am. We continued further south along Highway 180. Our next stop was Palenque, the capital of Chiapas, the southern-most State in Mexico. It would be another long bus ride; the mountainous terrain of the previous day gave way to flat, grazing ranch lands, farms, mango orchards and pineapple fields. We crossed several rivers, including one that was once considered a possible waterway for building a canal similar to Panama's. When we passed the toll plaza entering the State of Tabasco (yes, like the sauce), we stopped for a 'boxed lunch' off the side of the road near some public restrooms. The lunch consisted of a skimpy sandwich, a banana, a small bag of chips and a cookie. Tony jokingly asked me whether I preferred "ham and cheese, or cheese and ham?" Having been spoiled thus far with delicious buffet meals, I couldn't help but wonder if everything was going to be downhill from here on out. To make matters worse, this was not a public rest area like we have back home, there were no benches or tables, and we literally sat along the curb, or, in my case, behind what looked like a metal trash container. I think the flying bugs ate as much of my sandwich as I did. The highlight of our lunch stop was when a member of the group (Paul from California) thought he saw the ground moving, and on closer inspection discovered it was a colony of huge red ants carrying leaves back to their nest. Like typical tourists, we began photographing the insects. I almost got in trouble when I took a

photograph of the toll plaza, not realizing there were several armed policemen in the background who did not want their picture taken.

Back on the road again, Vicente drove as fast as he could along Highway 180, but it still took us a total of more than six hours to arrive at Villahermosa's La Venta Park, our first scheduled tour stop of the day. Villahermosa is the capital of Tabasco State, and is located on the banks of the Rio Grijalva, one of Mexico's two major waterways. Cortes founded the city in 1519 after defeating a group of Indian warriors. As tribute to their conqueror, these Indians gave the Spanish Conquistador an Indian Princess baptized Dona Marina who became Cortes' mistress and trusted advisor, becoming an invaluable asset in his conquest of Mexico. She is both revered and reviled in Mexican history. During the 1970's, the discovery of some of the world's richest oilfields – plus the development of extensive hydroelectric projects and successful agricultural programs – transformed this hot, humid port city into a major business hub.

Our sole purpose in Villahermosa was to visit La Venta Park, a combination mini-zoo and outdoor archeological museum. It spreads along the shore of a man-made lake (*Laguna de las Ilusiones*) and contains 30 Olmec stone monuments, some weighing up to 30 tons. These massive rock carvings were originally discovered during the 1930's at the ruins of La Venta, an Olmec ceremonial center near the Veracruz state line. When oil exploration threatened to destroy these precious historical monuments, they were transported to this site.

The Olmecs was the first culture to emerge in Mesoamerica, in the pre-Classic era. Archeologists sometimes call this the 'mother culture' because it also influenced the development of inhabitants from the Central Plateau, Guatemala and El Salvador. The Olmecs settled in the region of Veracruz and Tabasco because of fertile agricultural lands bathed by the Grijalava and Papaloapan rivers. But because the Olmecs lived in what is a predominately wet region, very little material traces of their culture survived and not much is known about them. For example, nobody knows what language they spoke (unlike the Mayans whose descendents still populate these areas). The word "Olmec" is of Nahua origin and means "inhabitants of the rubber country" (due to the abundance of rubber trees in the region). And since no skeletal remains have been found, their physical characteristics are also unknown; although, judging by their stone carvings they appear to have been short and thickset, with high cheekbones, crossed eyes, flattened noses and fleshy lips.

The Olmecs did not have a cohesive political union and lived in independent city-states, surviving on agriculture and trade. There seemed to be a ruling class made up of priests and warriors, and another lower class of farmers and craftsmen. There is some debate over whether a specialized group (merchant class) controlled trade. Their deities are represented with zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and mixed figures, and were associated with the forces of nature. The Jaguar was the most important animal due to its strong, symbolical charge. Their rituals pertained to the lifecycles: death, water, fertility and agriculture. Around 100 AD the Olmecs vanished mysteriously; it is believed they

may have scattered into the rain forest and merged with other Indian groups, although what led to this is not known.

Upon entering La Venta Park visitors are greeted by a group of caged monkeys. There are also tigers, a jaguar and other large cats on display. There is a massive ceiba tree (the tree of life) at the entrance to the archeology trail. As we wound our way through this natural path, we encountered large monuments and sculptures made up of solid basalt stones weighing thousands of pounds. There are three colossal Olmec stone heads scattered throughout the park, each wearing a war helmet and displaying the typical features characteristic of Olmec art: faces with wide noses, infantile expressions and full, down-turning lips resembling the mouth of a jaguar. The heads are believed to be carvings of the various Olmec kings. Other artifacts along the wooded trail are sculptures, stone altars, columns, stela (carved stone tablets) and a tomb. The trail was designed to make it feel as if you're traversing a forest, and there are many free-roving animals in the park. As I was taking a photograph of an Olmec warrior statue, I felt something brush up against my leg. Imagine my surprise to see a coda monkey standing next to my feet. In fact, the place was crawling with them. Towards the end of the trail some of us took a group photo in front of the largest Olmec stone head inside the park, inadvertently offending a Mexican local who felt we were acting in a disrespectful manner. There was a bit of kidding around, I admit, while posing in front of the giant head, and I felt guilty afterwards and apologized in Spanish to the tourist for my group's behavior, reassuring the man we meant no disrespect.

I realize that describing the ruins and artifacts I saw while on my trip do not do justice to their grandeur or beauty, so I encourage anyone who reads my journal to also view the photographs I took. We boarded our bus again and drove another hour and a half to Palenque, where we would be spending the next two nights. It was an exhausting day due to the long bus ride and after our buffet dinner in the hotel's restaurant I decided to call it an early evening. I did buy some nice Indian jewelry and crafts from vendors lined up in the parking area of the hotel before I retired to my room.

DAY FIVE

The hotel we stayed in Palenque was the Mision Palenque, a kind of throwback to the roadside motels of my childhood, situated inside a gated, beautifully landscaped piece of property. Its lush greenery and giant ceiba trees lent a serene atmosphere to the place. There was a nice pool area and lounge with nightly musical entertainment. Palenque is the capital of Chiapas, the southern-most state in Mexico, and is located in the lower foothills of the Sierra Madre in one of the wettest, most forested regions of the country. It is a small town with narrow hilly streets and seemingly very little to do and see in terms of tourism. But it is the gateway to the Palenque ruins, perhaps the most haunting of Mexico's archeological sites. Chiapas is also famous for the Zapatista guerilla uprising during the 1990's, and most recently a frontline battlefield in the war on drugs, so there is

a heavier military presence along the toll highway here. But the most striking thing about Palenque is the heat. This was one hot and humid city. And I live in Miami!

Today, we were allowed to sleep late. After breakfast (the fruit selection was awesome) we boarded the bus at 9:00am and headed out to the Palenque ruins. This ancient Mayan city most likely began as a farming community around 150 BC and flourished between 600 and 800 AD, ruling an area covering much of what are present-day Chiapas and Tabasco states. Around 900 AD the city was abandoned for reasons unknown, and still heavily debated by historians. For centuries the Palenque ruins remained hidden, obscured by the surrounding jungle until the late 1800's. Excavation and aerial surveys of the site reveals there are more than 1400 structures in an area stretching a mile wide from east to west, although only 5 % has actually been uncovered. Our guide was a very knowledgeable young man named Rick who claimed that the money donated for excavation work is sometimes diverted by corrupt politicians, and so this great city remains largely in the jungle. Upon entering the ruins, you encounter a series of spectacular stone buildings, some of the best-preserved archeological structures in all of Mexico. The most striking is the Temple of the Inscriptions, a 90-foot-tall pyramid built as a tomb for Palenque's King Pakal, the city's most famous ruler, who reigned for 68 years. This is believed to be one of the only pyramids in Mexico constructed expressly to be a tomb. Unlike Egypt, where pyramids were designed to be the pharaohs' final resting places, in the Mayan world these magnificent structures were used to honor and worship deities, and to serve as powerful symbolic seats of power for the ruling classes. Because of strong local protests over his removal, Pakal's body is still enshrined inside his 18-ton sarcophagus deep within the Temple of the Inscriptions. His giant stone coffin and burial chamber are decorated in ancient Maya writings and drawings, which have allowed archeologist to piece together a history of these people.

To the immediate right of Pakal's tomb is another smaller tomb believed to have been that of either his mother or his wife. Visitors are actually permitted to enter this tomb site, and let me tell you, if you're claustrophobic you might want to skip this. They only allow ten people in at a time through a very narrow stone passageway that leads to a slightly larger hallway with various rooms, one of them the actual tomb itself. It felt like a sauna in there, and by the time I gratefully exited the chamber I was dripping sweat from head to toe.

Just to the east of the Temple of the Inscriptions is Pakal's Palace, a complex of stepped buildings and four courtyards (used to provide light throughout the structure) connected by a series of corridors and an extensive system of underground passageways. We made our way through the underground sections and climbed our way to the upper levels, visiting bedrooms (the beds were made of stone), an art gallery with carvings of Pakal's coronation, and even toilet facilities for both men and women (an underground canal served as a sewer system). Rising above the palace is a four-story observation tower believed to have been used to view the winter solstice, a unique feature in the Mayan world.

Behind the palace, at the southeastern edge of the ruins, is The Temple of the Cross. It is one of several structures built by Pakal's son, King Chan-Bahlum, inside of a spacious plaza that includes Temple 14, which contains more carved inscriptions, and the Temple of the Sun, which is believed to house Chan-Bahlum's tomb. Projecting upward from the Temple of the Cross are vertical roof combs, a decorative architectural feature favored by Mayan builders. The sun would shine through these combs and reflect on the steps below.

Although we spent quite a bit of time at the Palenque ruins, I was not able to see the site's northern end referred to as the Northern Group of buildings. There is a ball court here, and the Temple of the Count, named after Frederick Waldreck, an early explorer. This particular structure is the best-preserved, made with five stepped tiers. Before heading back to the hotel for lunch many of us shopped for souvenirs amongst the many Indian vendors lining the access road just outside the ruins. This site was one of my favorites; I tried to imagine what this spectacular city must have looked like more than a thousand years ago, and marveled at how the Mayans could have built such a spectacular place in the rain forest.

After lunch, we were free to explore the city of Palenque. Barry and I were going to take a walking tour of the area with the help of a map provided by the hotel. But then Sofia, one of our fellow Caravaners (who was traveling with her ten-year-old nephew Casey) mentioned that the hotel offered free bike rentals and asked us if we wanted to join her and her nephew on a bike tour of the city. Her sales pitch was, *"Why walk when you can bike?"* Barry agreed, and so did Victoria, a 17-year-old traveling with her grandfather, Bob. I was very reluctant since I hadn't ridden a bicycle in over twenty years, but Sofia threw the adage "once you know how you never forget!" in my face. I have to admit, I was attracted to Sofia, and I only acquiesced so that she wouldn't think I was a wuss. Besides, Barry was older than me and he was game. *Boy, did this turn out to be a mistake!*

After signing in with the bellhop, we each grabbed a bicycle from the rack in the parking area. These were not very good bikes, the tires were low on air and the seats shifted position at times. The brakes were also suspect. Regretting my decision almost immediately, I struggled to keep up with the other four members of my biking expedition. To make matters worse, the streets of Palenque are very narrow and maneuvering around the traffic was a hair-raising endeavor. Not only that, I hadn't seen this many hilly streets since San Francisco! After careening down one traffic-filled roadway we would have to pedal uphill to the next one. I was heaving and panting and praying I would not suffer a heart attack in Palenque.

Seeing how much trouble I was having trying to pedal my bike – a Stingray that was way too small for me – young Victoria suggested we trade bicycles. *I could have hugged that kid!* I made it almost to the other side of town with no problems on the bigger adult bike; that is, until Sofia took us down this steep avenue. At the bottom, the street evened out momentarily and then climbed sharply in the other direction. I knew I was in trouble the moment my 240 pound frame began pulling me faster and faster downhill. I was

pumping the hand brakes for dear life but to no avail, this thing wasn't stopping with my heft onboard. As I careened towards my certain death I tried dragging my feet along the street hoping to slow the impact. When I hit the bottom of the hill, prior to propelling myself upward on the other side, the momentum of my weight bouncing on my seat caused the metal rod holding the seat in place to actually *bend* all the way back. This made the slender sharp end of the bicycle seat point upwards into my rear end. The bike was now wobbling uncontrollably and I couldn't even sit down to stabilize it without performing a colonectomy on myself. I finally threw my feet down onto the street and held onto the handlebars with all my might and was able to stop, albeit painfully. My first reaction was to see if my testicles were still in place; the next was to turn the color of magenta from embarrassment. I don't know what kind of metals they use in Mexico, but they definitely need to upgrade them…um, at least that's what I told the members of my biking expedition when they saw the bent metal rod that used to support my bicycle seat. On the long walk back to the hotel I had ample time to ponder the implications…if my ass was big enough to bend metal, *maybe I should skip the dessert tray at dinner*. Barry was nice enough to accompany me back. The others decided to continue riding. I could have sworn I heard Sofia snickering as she pedaled away…*how emasculating*.

After returning the bikes to the hotel, Barry and I went back out again and walked the streets of Palenque. If there was something exciting about this place, we sure didn't find it. The town was quite unspectacular, really. The only signs of life were around the small town square. By the time we sat down for dinner the other members of our bike expedition had already conveyed my unfortunate happenstance to the rest of the tour group. There was some playful ribbing at my expense. But actually, it *was* a funny story, and I enjoyed telling it. Afterwards, I looked forward to a good night's sleep. Tomorrow was another early day and I retired to my room exhausted and aching from my hips down. Strange, though, I dreamed I had won the Tour de France…

DAY SIX

Breakfast at 6:30am, back on the bus by 7:30am. Nothing like consistency! Today was the longest bus ride yet. We were on our way to Merida, the capital of the Yucatan, but had to travel north through the state of Campeche first. More farms and grazing lands, and off into the distance we could see rolling hills. The toll highways of Mexico are the way to travel by road in this country. They are wonderfully paved and maintained, and even offer complimentary motorist insurance against accidents with each toll paid (I believe up to 150,000 pesos). There is a free roadside assistance service that patrols these highways called Green Angels. They can also provide first aid in cases of emergencies. And rush hour traffic is virtually non-existent. Of course, one of the best features is safety. Unlike the regular roadways used by most Mexicans, these highways are well protected by federal police and army soldiers. Each state is responsible for maintaining their section of the highway, but for the most part the roads are in great condition uniformly throughout the country.

For lunch, we stopped in a restaurant overlooking the Gulf of Mexico in the town of Champoton. The waterfront along the state of Campeche is the base for Mexico's largest gulf coast shrimp fleet, and most of us were treated to a delicious broiled shrimp lunch. Hours later, we crossed into the Yucatan state and arrived at the unique Mayan ruins of Uxmal shortly before 4:00pm. Although Uxmal is not a large site, we weren't able to see it all because we arrived so late. The site closes at 5:00pm sharp, no exceptions. I was very disappointed, suggesting to Tony that Caravan should schedule this visit for the following day; it was a shame to travel by bus for so long and not have adequate time to explore Uxmal, especially since this stop is listed so prominently in the itinerary.

Uxmal is surrounded by an irregularly shaped wall that encloses a series of monumental temples and palaces. Because of its beauty and size, archeologists believe Uxmal may have been the most important settlement in the low hill areas of the Yucatan known as the Puuc region. The city was continuously occupied between 500 BC and 1200 AD, but experienced its most glorious days during the Late-Classic Period, between 700 and 900 AD, when its influence reached beyond the Puuc region. There is no other Mayan site on the Yucatan peninsula with buildings as majestic or beautifully carved as Uxmal. Around 950 AD, for reasons not entirely known, the city was abandoned. Years later, another Yucatan Mayan group known as the Xiues tribe occupied Uxmal until the end of the eleventh century before moving on to their new capital at Mani.

Near the entrance of the ruins is the famous Pyramid of the Magician, also called the Sorcerer *(El Adivino*). The names given to Mexico's archeological buildings were bestowed by either later inhabitants or explorers; nobody really knows what the ancient tribes called them. At 125 feet tall, this pyramid is both higher and steeper than *El Castillo* in Chichen Itza (another grand city-state in the central Yucatan). The structure is unique in that it has rounded walls instead of the usual sharply angular features of other Mayan pyramids. Archeologists have discovered that Mayans often built pyramids on top of pyramids, and The Sorcerer contains five superimposed layers, corresponding to Uxmal's five separate periods of construction. Like any modern city today, the ancient city-states did not spring up overnight, and were constantly being reconstructed over the centuries. There are staircases on both the western and eastern sides but visitors are not permitted to climb them, probably due to their steepness.

Facing the western staircase of the Pyramid of the Magician is a large courtyard called the Nunnery Quadrangle (*Casa de las Monjas*), a group of four elongated low buildings, containing more than 70 rooms, surrounding a large rectangular open space. Standing in the middle of this courtyard, you can appreciate the overall harmony of the design even though the buildings are terraced and occupy different levels. Archaeologists believe the Nunnery Quadrangle was used as a school or served an administrative function. The exterior of each quadrangle wing have magnificent decorative details, including stone masks of Chac (Uxmal's greatest king or governor who ruled during the 10th century), entwined serpents, mosaic patterns and latticework designs. The southern wing has an arched entryway, once the complex's main entrance.

South of the Nunnery, atop a small hill, is one of the finest Mayan architectural achievements: The Governor's Palace. This low, narrow structure (more than 300 feet long) was built on three levels (it includes 24 pieces divided into three separate bodies all joined by arches) and is considered one of the best examples of the Puuc architectural style. Its upper façade is covered with intricately carved stone figures and geometric designs. If you stand back along its eastern side you'll see 103 stone carvings of Chac that together form the image of an undulating serpent. The serpent was considered a symbol of both land and fertility. Towards the back of this building is a smaller dwelling known as the House of the Turtles due to its many turtle carvings along the top exterior walls. This house is believed to have had some function associated with the palace. And from this vantage point you can gaze down upon the Ball Court below. The 'pelota', or ball game, was a classic game played throughout the Mayan region. The court in Uxmal is small, compared to the one in Chichen Itza, but occupied a central role in the community's activities. This ritual sport supposedly called for the sacrifice of a member of the losing team. I will explain more about this game later.

West of the Governor's Palace is a high temple known as The Great Pyramid (*La Gran Piramide*), which appears to jut out of a nearby hill, and the rising crest of another palace called The Dove Palace (*Las Palomas*). These two structures, which we were not able to see in great detail due to the site's closing time, are believed to have been constructed before most of the main buildings were erected.

At five o'clock on the dot, several burly site employees began shooing everyone out of Uxmal. But a small group of us did make it to The Great Pyramid ruin and managed to take some nice pictures of it before we were forced to leave. Outside in the visitors' entrance, I purchased some souvenirs and took photos of the Mayan vendor (I asked permission first, something the tourist manuals insist on). Many of the inhabitants of this region are direct descendents of the Mayans and exhibit their main distinct physical characteristic: they are, how shall I put it, *small in stature*.

We continued on to Merida, the Yucatan capital, arriving just in time for dinner. The hotel we stayed for the next two nights, Hotel Casa Del Balam, was the nicest one of the tour, situated in the Historic District and facing the Opera House. It had a serene Colonial ambience with elegant stone arches, interior patios and lush poolside gardens. The elevators had heavy wooden doors and were quite small, adding a European feel to the whole thing. The floors in my spacious room were tiled in black-and-white, and the bathroom sink had a painted floral pattern in its basin. I had two gated windows overlooking separate sections of the city.

I acquired a map of Merida from the concierge after dinner, and Barry, Martha (another Caravaner) and I went on a brief walking tour around the Plaza Grande, the main square, which was only two blocks south of the hotel. Merida is known for its silver jewelry; in fact, Tony advised us to purchase all of our silver jewelry here if we were so inclined. Over the next two nights I ended up buying a hefty ring, with the Aztec Calendar stamped on it, a necklace and a heavy bracelet – all of solid silver – for only $125. I felt like a Spanish Conquistador with all my bling. The streets of Merida were full

of tourists and locals shopping and dining even at this late hour. We made our way along one side of the Plaza Grande, but it was already nighttime. Most of the stores were preparing to close and we decided to head back to our hotel and revisit the area the following afternoon.

DAY SEVEN

Breakfast at 7:00am, aboard the bus by 8:00am. Today we were short five people. Paul and Charlene had already seen Chichen Itza on a previous trip and decided to sightsee in town instead. And several other tour members had become violently ill during the night, with nasty bouts of Montezuma's Revenge; Chana, Barbara, and Barbara's husband David, could not make the trip to Chichen Itza that morning. Barry had also been stricken but managed to make the journey after Monique and I plied him with travel sickness medications. According to him, he was doped to the max! Fortunately, by sticking to the Caravan meal plan (um, with one lucky exception: a road side tortilla place) I was able to avoid getting diarrhea throughout the trip. But I had packed enough Imodium to plug up the Hoover Dam if need be. This was my first journey out of the United States since the early nineties and I took all the necessary precautions. Staying healthy while traveling is not a passive endeavor, something I learned while serving in the Peace Corps. For example, we'd been advised to wear plenty of insect repellent at the ruin sites, and Caravan's website even recommended a particular brand called Skin So Soft made by Avon Products. I purchased the largest bottle they had and shared it with Barry and Monique. Before arriving at each of the sites we would go through this ritual of 'greasing' ourselves up, but it turned out to be for naught. The only place with biting insects that I experienced was La Venta Park…and that roadside lunch box stop back in Tabasco. But, still, it's better to be safe than sorry, and I would recommend to everyone traveling these parts, especially during the rainy season, to stock up on sun block and insect repellent. Dengue Fever, which is spread by mosquitoes, is not the kind of souvenir you want to bring back home.

It took us about an hour and a half to reach the Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza in the central Yucatan. Let me stop and give a brief description of the typical Mayan city-state:

The ancient Maya belonged to groups of natives from similar ethnic stock but who spoke *different* languages, covering a vast region including what are now the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco and the Yucatan, as well as the countries of Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. They formed powerful city-states at Bonampak, Copan and Palenque. These independent centers were ruled by a governor (or King) who had absolute power but was assisted by a council of elders who helped with the administration of the State. Subsequently, the elders had a series of servants and professionals whom they relied on to fulfill their duties, thus creating a well-structured, functional system of administration.

Maya society was organized under a complex system. Each had a ruling class (governor and nobles/elders) who carried out the administrative, intellectual, religious and military duties, and collected taxes. On a lower level was the merchant class who, although inferior, lived well and even luxuriously because the elite richly rewarded their services. Below them were the artisans and farmers who had to pay heavy taxes in order to be free, have societal rights and be protected by the group in power. And lastly, there existed a slave class, people who were made slaves through either war, as punishment, or to pay off a debt.

The Mayans used slash and burn agricultural techniques and took advantage of the rainy season to plant a wide variety of crops (including cacao which was used exclusively for trading). Over time, commerce became the biggest activity of these city-states, and Mayan traders traveled as far as the Central Plateau of Mexico and all the way to Central America, exchanging a huge variety of goods and food crops.

While Europe was floundering in its 'Dark Ages', the Mayans were flourishing. This culture was the one to show the most interest in science and writing in Mesoamerica. They adopted the vigesimal system of the Olmecs, but refined it by introducing the concept – and symbol – for zero. They invented a 365-day solar calendar (with a leap year) and a 260-day lunar calendar, as well. They could predict the movement of Venus and predict natural phenomena such as eclipses. And their obsession with measuring and registering time led to the creation of various units to record the passage of time, from Day One (*kin*) up to 64 million years *(alautun*). Mayan architecture was outstanding, evident in its imposing pyramids and structures with fine decorations, sculptures, pottery and paintings, made all the more magnificent due to the lack of draft animals, wheeled conveyances, metal tools or pulleys. Structures were built primarily from locally quarried limestone. The Maya pantheon was made up of a series of gods depicting the forces of nature, the daily activities of life and even such abstract concepts as numbers and months. These were religiously curious people whose philosophical musings led them to believe that others existed before them but were somehow eliminated by the gods because of religious and physical deficiencies. The most venerated deities were Itzamna, the supreme god; Kukulkan, god of wind; Yum Kaax, god of corn; Chaac, god of water (I purchased a small statue of this god…um, seeing how it rains so much in Miami); Yum Kimil, god of death; and Kinich Ahau, god of sun and time, among others.

Around the beginning of the 10th century, the great Mayan city-states started to be abandoned by their inhabitants. Archeologists believe this was the result of soil exhaustion, population growth, civil wars, natural disasters and invasions by other tribes. The fall of Teotihuacan (in the Mexican Valley) and the decline of the Maya culture further south are the events that marked the transition to the post-Classic period. During this time, Indian groups from the north known as Chichimecs (these were made up of various groups who spoke a common language, Nahua) began invading and settling the Central Plateau regions of Mexico. One of the first Chichimecs were the Toltecs who later established an empire, with their capital city of Tollan (Tula), controlling such distant regions as Guerrero, Oaxaca and Yucatan states. The Toltecs adopted agricultural methods from the Teotihuacans, but preferred trading for food. They created great

cultural and trading centers. And although not much is known about their religion, they were the first to have war gods, such as Tezcatlipoca. Eventually, the Toltecs, like all the other great Indian cultures, were displaced by the arrival of another Chichimec group from the north known as the Mexicas, or the Aztecs, who, in 1325, established a settlement on a small islet in the middle of Lake Texcoco (where Mexico City now stands) and would eventually expand militarily and rule most of Mexico. This would be the last great Indian empire prior to the Spanish conquest of 1521.

The last archeological site we visited on the tour was Chichen Itza, founded sometime around 435 A.D. The name derives from three separate words of the Itza-Maya dialect: *Chi* (mouth), *Chen* (well) and *Itza* (the actual Mayan tribe). "The mouth of the well of the Itza", which referred to the Sacred Well, a symbol of respect for water in an arid region that had no surface rivers. With little rainfall in this section of the Yucatan, these Mayans had to rely on an underground river (cenote) and a complex system of canals and aqueducts to trap rainwater to survive. After the decline of many of the other great Mayan city-states, the peoples of Chichen Itza continued to flourish, almost up to the time of the Aztec Invasions, because they managed to accept and merge with other cultures, like the Toltecs. In Chichen Itza you will see a blend of Mayan-Toltec styles; there are Toltec stone sculptures and carvings of jaguars, columns of marching warriors, feathered serpents, etc, evident throughout the ruins.

The poor local guide who led us around Chichen Itza definitely had his hands full with us. During our site visit, Asan and Mr. Ahuja (the tour members from Pakistan and India) bombarded this poor fellow with question after question; at one point an argument ensued over how many months there were in the Mayan Calendar, which reached such a heated level that some rather angry words were exchanged. Many of us in the tour group were embarrassed by this unexpected outbreak, and the Mayan guide, who probably had never been challenged like this before, seemed rather beleaguered. I guess a week of long bus rides brings out the worse in some people.

The ruins consist of two complexes connected by a dirt path. The older, southern section contains mostly Mayan ruins, and the northern complex combines both Mayan and Toltec influences. You enter Chichen Itza through the Northern Zone, and the first great structure is the Pyramid of Kukulcan (the Mayan name of the Toltec king, Quetzalcoatl), although it is also known by the Spanish name *El Castillo*. Measuring a height of about 100 feet, it has a set of stairs on each side with a very steep incline of 45 degrees. I once briefly dated a woman who had actually climbed the Pyramid of Kukulcan and had sent me a photo from the top of the structure looking down at the ruins. I had hoped to replicate the photo, with me in it, and send it to her as a surprise, but due to erosion of the steps and a fatality back in 2006, the pyramid is now roped off at the base and climbing it is prohibited.

The Pyramid of Kukulcan is a marvel of mathematical engineering. In 2007 it was designated "one of the New Seven Wonders of the World". A natural phenomenon occurs twice a year during the spring and fall equinoxes (on or around March 21 and Sept 21); as the sun makes its descent, the shadows cast by the terraces on the north staircase form the

body of a serpent, whose actual sculptured head rests at the bottom of the stairs. Thousands of people from all over the world come to witness this event each year. The entire pyramid was designed as a calendar. The stairs each have 91 steps, adding up to the 365 days, and divide nine terraces on each side into two, which is 18, the actual number of months in a Mayan calendar…well, some say there are really 19 months in a Mayan calendar (the source of the earlier argument between our tour members and the guide), but the 19th month is considered unlucky; it consists of only five days, August 1-5th, and if you were an ancient Mayan and unfortunate enough to have been born on one of those days you would have been sacrificed. Recently, new excavations have uncovered what appears to be another foundation buried beneath the original structure. And inside the Pyramid of Kukulcan is a smaller, much older pyramid, which can be accessed via a stairway at the foot of the north staircase.

To the north of the Pyramid of Kukulcan is a platform with 25-meter sides, each with a central staircase, the top adorned with carved heads of serpents. The four walls of the temple are decorated with bas-reliefs representing the symbol of Venus (a power symbol) and a Quetzacoatl, a feathered serpent, with a forked tongue and the claws of a jaguar. To the east are the Temples of the Eagles and the Jaguars, which show carved jaguars and eagles grasping human hearts. Nearby is the Temple of the Skulls (also known as the Tzompantli Temple) a platform shaped like a T, its walls covered with carved heads. These heads are believed to be the victims of sacrifice (as they were often put on spikes for display), or perhaps famous residents of the city. Personally, I think these heads represent the ball, or *pelota*, players who were beheaded after the games concluded. Like some macabre hall of fame…

Which brings us to the adjacent Ball Court, one of the largest such courts in the entire Mayan world. This was a ritual game played on special occasions. The playing field itself measures more than 450 feet long and over 100 feet wide. Two walls run parallel to the field and are composed of three panels with a border formed by a bas-relief representing a serpent, terminating with a snake head on each end. In the center of each wall, about 25 feet high, are two stone rings in the shape of intertwined serpents. One of the fascinating architectural designs of the Ball Court is the amazing acoustics. The stones used to make this structure were heated to a certain degree, which enabled them to create echoes. One can stand at one end of the field and hear a conversation on the other end. There were seven players on each team, and, according to our Mayan guide, these were all fanatical priests who were more than willing to be sacrificed at the end of the game. The object was to maneuver a 6-pound ball of rubber through the rings without using your hands. It is debated whether or not a canasta-like scoop was used, or if they banged the ball around with their heads, elbows, hips and knees. It seems that the latter would have resulted in a lot of broken bones. Another point of fierce debate is whether it was the winning or losing captain who was sacrificed after the game. Either way, the participants believed they would be joining the gods and saw it as an honor to be sacrificed. Sometimes, though, the games lasted for days. If they *did* kill the winners, you have to wonder how seriously the game was played. I know if I were the team captain, I'd be saying, *"Aw, shucks, I missed again!"*

On the far-northern tip of the site is the Sacred Well (or cenote) that is more than 180 feet in diameter. The walls descend more than 60 feet to reach the water, which in turn is another 60 feet deep. The bottom is covered by more than 10 feet of mud; the water is colored green by algae. There is also a steam bath on the south side of the cenote, with ruins that look like steps.

On the eastern side of the Pyramid of Kukulcan is the Temple of the Warriors. This Toltec-influenced temple has impressive rows of carved warriors and a roof boasting fine sculptural details of the rain god Chaac, feathered serpents and mythical animals; it is guarded by a reclining Chac Mool figure (symbol of divine fire). And next to the temple is the Group of the Thousand Columns, an area believed to have housed Chichen Itza's elite, with long rows of Toltec-style pillars covered in bas-relief, although numbering far less than a thousand. In back of these structures, further east, is the Market area, a large open space surrounded by a colonnade with 25 columns.

Because of the time we were not able to see the Southern Zone of Chichen Itza; structures with such names as the Ossuary, Astronomical Observatory and School of Philosophy. Or even the much smaller Mayan site called Old Chichen. To gain access, one needs to hike down a dirt path for about 15 minutes, and it is recommended that only the true archeological student make the journey since the buildings are not restored and resemble piles of rubble in some circumstances. The Northern Zone of Chichen Itza, what we saw, has been mostly restored, but if you look at photographs of the area prior to restoration, it doesn't really look like anything other than mounds of stone. For me, how modern day archeologists were able to put all this together is another marvel that rivals the pyramids themselves.

Well, my journey to see the ancient ruins of Mexico came to an end when we left Chichen Itza that afternoon. We went back to the hotel for lunch and then were free to explore Merida, the capital of the Yucatan. Barry and I headed out to the town square (Plaza Grande) to check out the local sites. On one side of the square is the *Catedral,* the oldest cathedral in the Americas, housing what is supposed to be the largest wooden cross in the world at its altar. An interesting story about the cathedral was that the wrong blueprints arrived in Merida; supposedly, the cathedral was to be built elsewhere and a simple church was to be constructed here. The building was erected using stones from the Mayan temples that made up the original town square. On another side of the Plaza Grande was *Casa de Montejo,* the official residence of Francisco de Montejo, who founded Merida in 1542, now used as a bank/museum. On another side of the plaza is the Government Palace (*Palacio de Gobierno*), the federal building built in 1892. The second floor has a large hall adorned with stunning murals by Fernando Castro Pacheco depicting traditional Mayan symbology as well as violent images of Spanish subjugation of the native population. There is also a panoramic view of the main plaza from up there.

At our farewell dinner that night, we celebrated Casey's 10th birthday by taking turns at thwacking a piñata. It took forever for the thing to burst and spew forth its candy innards, but Casey made out like a bandit. Afterwards, Victoria and her grandfather, Bob, joined Barry and me for another round of silver jewelry shopping. Returning later that

night to my hotel room I felt a little sad that my trip was coming to an end. I carefully packed everything away and made sure I had collected everybody's email address. I promised everyone I'd send a copy of this journal when I wrote it.

DAY EIGHT

Today was nothing more than a four-hour ride to the International Airport in Cancun for the return flight home. We set out after breakfast, and along the way we were treated to a DVD presentation on the bus' video system that Sam (from Thailand) had made of our trip. He must have been up all night editing this thing. Afterwards, he gave us all a copy. That was really nice of him. *Thanks, Sam!* On the ride to Cancun I was able to reflect on my last seven days. I'm not really sure what I expected to find in Mexico, but I was pleasantly surprised at what I *did* discover. Our trip took us through the states of Mexico, Pueblo, Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo. Eight Mexican states in one week, a real whirlwind tour. I often thought of Mexico as nothing more than a large Third World country, a typically arrogant American viewpoint. This trip, though, really opened my eyes. I did see poverty, and quite a bit of urban decay in Mexico City, but I also saw a country modernizing itself. I saw a nation of bountiful resources, of vast scenic spaces that are still largely underdeveloped. The country has an incredible potential. It is the land of a proud and festive people, with a glorious history. I'm glad I chose Mexico for my first guided tour, because it really set the tone for all my adventures to come.

The trip home was uneventful, other than a brief 'musical chairs' situation at the airport between Mexicana Airlines and American Airlines. Although I was booked on a Mexicana flight, the actual vessel was American Airlines so there was a bit of confusion as to which terminal building I needed to go to. I ended up going back-and-forth. My flight out of Mexico was delayed thirty minutes, just like the flight coming in. *Hmmmmm*. There was a kind of symmetry to the whole thing. And now, having written this journal the trip is complete. I wish to thank my fellow tour members for their companionship. A tour is only as special as its members, and this was a great bunch of travelers.

Until next time, *"Viva Mexico!"*

Richard C. Rodriguez

My trip to Mexico was from July 10th to July 17th, 2009.