



Notes From The Yucatan

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A Yucatan Travelogue

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Being The Various Adventures Of Lee van Laer And Neal Harris,
In Which They Escape From The Oppressions Of Civilization,
Discover Strange And Wondrous Places, Eat Exotic Foods, and
occasionally get lost.

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Ouch

Cancun to Tulum

Life is like this: I started out our first day by backing into a sapling.

Way to go Lee, the \$1000 deductible has now been met. We can put all the additional dents we want in the rental without fear! No need for caution. Wahoo!

The pressure is on now to extract an additional \$1000 of pleasure from the trip. This is good. We businessmen wouldn't know how to have fun without this kind of pressure.

Neal & I are in an obscure corner of yucatan (xpu jil pronounced shpoo-heel) at the Chicanna ecovillage resort ,and we're going to Calakmul tomorrow. Have hatched plan to visit Palenque as well.



Xpujil

This place is in middle of nowhere... and the original place we booked, Rio Bec dreams, fumbled our reservation. We got lucky that the only other decent place in town had a room! It even included a "special" bug who we carefully evacuated lest he/she prove noxious.

There are loads of "forgotten" ruined cities here in Campeche. One guide said there are over 5000 sites on the peninsula, yet only about 100 have been excavated.

Tulum was lovely, very picturesque, but a relatively minor site as far as any ruins go. It has a fortified wall, but the wall does not look like it would really do too much to keep away a determined army. More likely, I believe, the city was surrounded with a wall in order to protect the trade goods which landed here. There is one temple with some impressive paintings which, unfortunately, cannot be approached closely enough to inspect them in any detail. This is also a problem with the main temple, which was closed off, but reputedly has some very good images of the "upside down" God.

The beach makes a very good impression indeed, even on a brief visit.



Tulum

We swam on the mayan riviera AND in a cenote today, then drove a long way without any additional dents (I'm saving them up to enjoy later.) Skipped lunch, ate fruit and corn chips. Hoping for a more serious dinner, even though Neal isn't hungry- due to being stuffed with corn chips, mango, coconut and papaya.

Days 2 & 3: The Rio Bec area



Itzamna, Creator God, Hormiguero

After driving hundreds of miles through mostly deserted countryside (deeply covered in jungle) we arrived in the state of Campeche last night.

The past two days saw us braving a series of potholed roads punctuated with dogs and topes (speed bumps) to visit some of the more obscure (but nonetheless very impressive) Mayan ruins in the southern part of Campeche state. We started out with Hormiguero (it means "anthill" in Spanish) where we saw an impressive palatial residence noted for its doorway, which represents the monstrous mouth of Itzamna, Mayan God of creation. Judging from his dentition, he was strictly carnivorous. Many of the Rio Bec style buildings boast these dentured doorways, which give the entrant the impression that they are entering the belly of the beast- a figurative reminder, perhaps, of the idea that man is a food for something higher than himself.

Speaking of food, we have eaten THE best mangos and papayas ever here, all bought at tiny local markets. These, along with corn chips and enough fresh water, can keep you alive out in the jungle.

From Hormiguero, we bounced back to Xpujil, which boasts an highly unusual

and impressive temple with three towers--then on to Becan and Chicanna, in the same vicinity, both with ample large pyramids and many outlying structures. The more of the Maya you see, the more apparent the enormous size of their civilization.



Becan has one exemplary preserved stucco facade which hints at how elaborately decorated these temples were in their heyday. It's a must-see, up there with Ek-Balam, which we saw last year.





Rio Bec style doorway, Chicanna

We ate lunch at a tiny local place in Xpujil. Mistake! Neal ate something that polluted her and has been forcibly worshipping fierce Gods of the Mayan digestive underworld ever since.

I finally convinced her to take some antibiotics today (I keep 'em rather handy on trips nowadays) which should clear things up. Yesterday, though, she was not firing on all cylinders. This didn't prevent her from joining me in climbing the major double-pyramid at Calakmul!



Stela at Calamul

Calakmul was a huge force in the region: the major rival of Tikal, a city located in what is now Guatemala. Today it's in the middle of the Calakmul national forest and can only be reached by driving 60 kilometers on a tiny, tiny road, through very thick jungle. This is a long haul, and not for the faint hearted. Like many of the ruins in Campeche, however, there are very, very few tourists.

While there we saw not only ruins ad infinitum, but also spectacular woodpeckers, turkeys, peccaries, deer, agouties, coatis, and one cryptically large mammal which may-just may- have been a jaguar.



Peccary- Calakmul

The trek out to the ruins is exhausting, and the complex is spread over a vast area. We were wiped out by the time we reached the largest pyramid, but we had to climb it- and we did. By the time we were done it was all we could do to stumble back to the car.

Today we're taking it easy, rummaging about Campeche, a sleepy little town with some nice real estate in the old section. Tomorrow we plan to mount more ambitious plans, probably to Edzna.



Calakmul



Yucatan, #1

In the night the darkness presses hard
Against false arches.
New moons do not have the power
Of old ones.

The lights of villages
Cling to broken doors and bougainvillea
Afraid that they, too
Will be separated from what is alive
And left for tourists to adore.

Even the dogs lie in the roads to own them
There's little enough left as it is.
All the great priests let their blood long ago
Pulled the last thorns through foreskin
In the vain hope of salvation

Which always lies too far in the future
To be of any use.



**Yucatan, #2:
Hormiguero**

They built their houses near where the bees gather
In the tall trees
Where the pond sends up rushes,
And hawks wait in trees
For the dark bodies of squirrels.

Houses with jaws for doors
Mouths to swallow up
The sweet fat of man, send it to the belly
Of the underworld.

Itzamna who made the many worlds
Knew these men and hungered for them,
For the skin they wore.

He ate them one by one, then
Hovered here holding stones in the air
For a thousand years
Waiting for visitors.

Come, He says, and let me show you
How death is measured:
By increments of mercy.



Edzna

Days # 4 & 5- Hochob & Edzna

Another long day, which is ending at a seafood restaurant playing music with a singer who is on key and a chorus which is abysmally flat.

I wish Neal hadn't pointed this out to me, as it is ruining the otherwise superb shrimp.

Today we went to Edzna, the largest Mayan city in western Campeche. The site boasts an impressive pyramid with roof comb and- more impressively- two fine, large (by large I mean LARGE) stucco heads at the base of a smaller structure. The heads, which still sport a good deal of their original pigment, are a reminder of how elaborately decorated Mayan structures were. They were consummate artists; what remains is a mere shadow of their former glory.

The birding here was good. Some fine shots of motmots were obtained.



Mot-mot

We ate lunch in the car sitting in the parking lot (bread, cheese, salami) and set out for more obscure sites. We did make it to Hochob, which had one Chenes-style temple (doorway featuring the jaws of Itzamna) and a number of very well preserved cisterns. These spooky holes in the ground, drilled straight down into the limestone, look like entrances to the underworld. How they excavated them using stone tools is anyone's guess. I bet it wasn't fun.

This site-located on a fine hilltop with superb views- was littered with tens of thousands of pottery shards (they were even plowed into the gravel of the parking lot) attesting to how few visitors get here-we were the only ones there today. The shards displayed a tremendously wide variety of qualities, textures, glazes and finishes, suggesting that the site was occupied over a long period of time.

Turkey vultures have adopted two ruined towers here, adding a sinister charnel-house air to the place as they lurk about. I kept expecting to trip over corpses.



Hochob, with vulture accessories

The roads are poor and there are NO road signs to speak of- a problem that became more annoying as the afternoon wore on and we failed to find two other significant sites on our list. We did see many miles of road, punctuated by two dramatic bird incidents. In one, an eagle had pounced on a dove in the highway, and we got a terrific view of them just before the only truck on the road for miles, speeding hell bent for leather, came from the opposite direction and forced the eagle to choose between holding on to the dove and being mashed to a pulp against the truck's grille.

The eagle and the dove, I am glad to report, both lived, but the truck ruined the photo opportunity.

In the second sighting we saw a very colorful vulture (either that or a most unusual hawk,) but again failed to get any decent pictures.

In suc-tuc, a town too small for maps, we came across a run-down, unlikely garage storefront with a sign that said "Miel." It hit us both just after we passed it that this means HONEY in Spanish. Whoah there, pooh bear!! We turned the car around at once and bought some, decanted into (believe it) a soda bottle to take home. Yucatan honey is justly famous! Delicious stuff.

Another town greeted us with a group of blond haired, blue eyed, pigtailed local Mennonite girls hanging out on the roadside dressed like 19th century pioneer children. They emigrated here nearly 100 years ago en masse from Germany and have farmed the area vigorously and successfully, while keeping their culture mostly intact (they still speak a form of low German amongst themselves.) A surreal but slightly angelic vision in these backwaters of Mexico.

Finally back in Campeche, we have eaten pompano and shrimp and are contemplating tomorrow's adventures.

Neal ordered flan for dessert, proving once again that she is not only loving, but also wise.



Bird, Edzna



Yucatan, #3
Hochob

I.
The eagle who eats souls
Pins a dove against the highway.
Its feathers spread like a black shroud
Over her white-winged back.

Why do his curved wings
Know grace
Instinctively?

It is the color
Of talons, sun-washed walls:
Everything necessary is already
Right there.



II.

Holes in the limestone
Led down to water
A thousand years ago.
They have been collecting darkness
Ever since.

Black as night,
Deep as the well of the soul
They no longer hear
The thirst that made them

Long forgotten,
Long forgotten,
Breathing in the night
Single dark eyes, ever turned
Towards the same stars

It is here, exactly here
Under the earth so sweet
That all the birds of heaven finally rest.



III.

For a thousand years,
Break pottery
Into ten times ten ten thousand pieces
And scatter it.

The blood-red pieces
Burnished with excessive care
Still stand out from the rest.

Those few are signs.
Dead things still carry magic in their bones.

Day 7- The Coast



This morning we had a conversation at breakfast about how the impression of food, as it's prepared, allows the body (using its formidable instinctive parts) to chemically prepare for the food it is about to receive. A complex subject, this led us into a long discussion about the nature of photons, matter, and the three being-foods of the universe: matter, time, and light. It may sound unrelated but it's all part of a fascinating whole. But enough on that.

The western coast of the Yucatan from Campeche south stretches into what seems to be sun-baked infinity. We drive south through the morning, past leggy mangrove swamps, through fishing villages where boatmen patiently repair their nylon nets, alongside great blue herons stalking in the turbid shallows of the gulf. Pelicans and cormorants line themselves up by the dozens on pilings and crowd onto unoccupied boats in comical avian gangs.

It's hot, and the sun is merciless against a stone-blue sky. The idyllic white sand beaches are deserted. Any turn off access (there are few) will quickly yield shells- conchs, turkey wings, whelks- that would have been snapped up in an instant anywhere else. Large, beautiful pieces of dead coral roll in the surf. We pause to grab beach treasures, realizing that every second out here is an invitation to the sunburn Gods to fry us and make us easier for Itzamna to digest. Retreating, we're forced to navigate once again through the impressive

piles of plastic garbage bleaching here by the roadside.

We're looking for a perfect little stretch with some shade, but the marquis de sol designed this beach. Palm trees stand well back in the brush; we move on.

Coming into Sanbucay, a fishing village, we quickly realize that the last time any Gringos visited this place was back when the Spanish originally invaded. There are no places for tourists to get anything, except the ongoing possibility of sunburn. We decide to head further south- which is a little like deciding one is already past the teeth of the beast, might as well go deeper into the belly.

The coastline continues to monotonize until we reach the Hotel Playa Punta Perla, a surprisingly charming place with tables on the beach- which is deserted aside from us. We order shrimp tostadas and sopa de marisco, staring out into the tranquil rolling waves of the gulf. The only discordant note, if it is one- even it seems vaguely charming- is the offshore oil platform far out on the horizon.





The conch shells on this beach look even better than on the last one... I find out this is because the best-looking shells that wash up are still alive. The mollusks are frisky little buggers, extending their clawed mantle (the "claw" is actually the operculum that seals up the shell entrance, doing double duty), along with a surprisingly well developed set of eyes, to see where they are. Neal & I take pity on them and toss them back into the breakers- all the ones we can find, that is. Beach conditions make it evident that each day sees a lot of baked conch. Poor little guys.

Viewed through binoculars, the oil platform is really quite impressive. I'm not sure how to square that with my lifelong fascination with beach life (today I saw perhaps a dozen different excellent varieties of soft coral- some fire engine red and covered with soft spines-, sea squirts, starfish, sea cucumbers). The two impressions clash with one another: technology versus biology. Today, even here in the remote stretches of the Yucatan, they meet--whether I want them to or not.





Small Towns

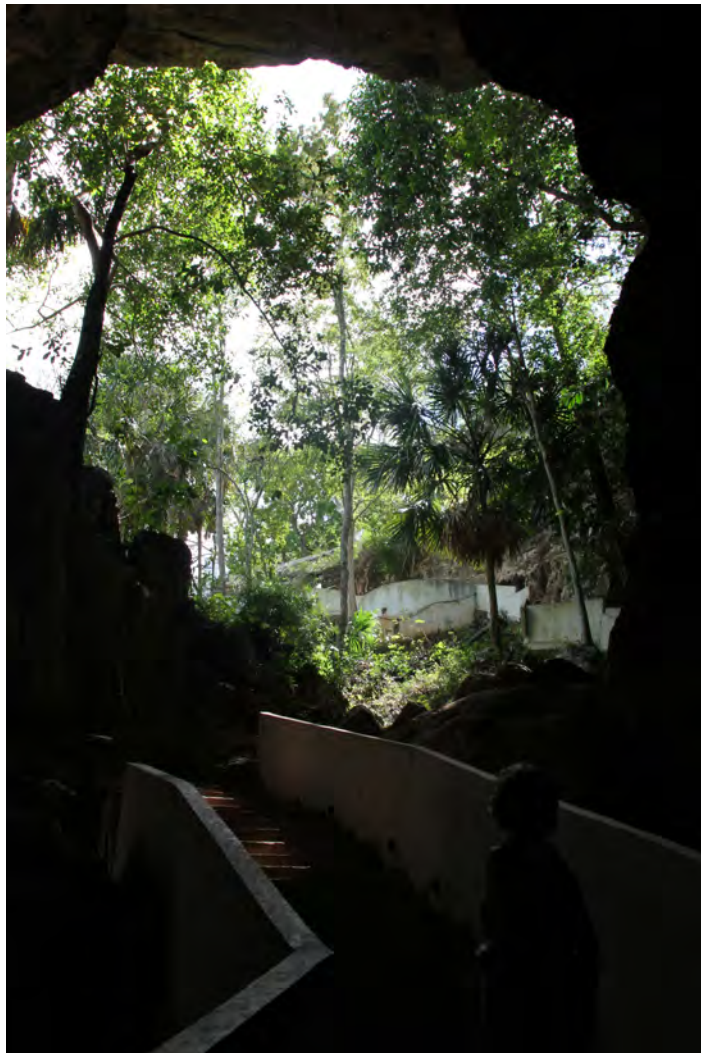
I drive through small towns
Where the paint peels
The dogs are thin and tired.
I cannot be indifferent.

This is all as true as the light of candles
As yellow churches next to the smokestack chimneys
Of a century past
As true as the rope they made,
And silver plate.

The new glory may not look like the old glory
It never does
But glory is measured in the color of the light
Not what is reflecting it.



Day 8- Wandering Loose Out There



Xtacumbilxuna'an

Today we decided to drive out to Hopelchen-the hotbed of the yucatan Mennonite community- and from there see the Grutas de Xtacumbilxuna'an (shtaa-koom-beel-shoo-naan), a large cave which is... well, large. On the way, we pass one man on a motorcycle which appears to be running on a sewing machine motor, fueled by Hail Marys. Later events suggest this may have been a Sign.

After a pleasant picnic lunch, we descend into an impressive hole in the ground. Like other holes (i.e. Cenotes) this one falls on the rim of the

cretaceous impact crater that formed when the meteor struck at Chixulub 65 million years ago. The bedrock around the rim was fractured, allowing erosion to begin-- so all the large cenotes in the Yucatan were formed over millions of years as a direct result of that spectacular explosive event. Today, a map of the Cenotes forms an unmistakable ring, with the sleepy little beach town of Chixulub on the north coast at its center.

The limestone formations here are not particularly impressive, but the further geological implications (as if the meteor wasn't already enough) are. It's apparent from the huge size of this cave, and the positively enormous potholes in the tunnels that run out through the bottom, that incredible amounts of water flowed through here at one time- demonstrating that there were periods when the Yucatan was much wetter than it is today.

Admittedly, those times almost certainly predate man's presence, but they are a sobering reminder of the fact that climate can, and does, change radically over time.

It's dark and spooky and slimy down there, and the principal hole plunges 100+ feet straight down to the cave floor. It gives us both the willies, let me tell you. Even so, the locals used a huge ladder made of logs to climb down and get water, back when it still held water. They had some nerve. The cave now has gruesome, dirty mannequins of Mayans glued to the ladder to give an idea of scale. It's weird and creepy.

After the grutas, we set out for Santa Rosa Xtampak, a ruin that isn't even IN our rather reliable guidebook, but rates an inaccurate marker on our map, and is touted by the tourism bureau in the neat, topiary-bedecked little town of Hopalchen. Although we are warned by Senor Local Turismo guy that "the road is bad."



Hopelchen

First we find out that the otherwise reliable map we have shows the road to the ruins about 20 kilometers off where it actually is. This causes a lot of confusion, and unnecessary expenditure of valuable petrochemical sources, until the guy at the Grutas explains, reassuring us that the road "is actually OK." We backtrack and find it, finally.

OK turns out to be a very relative term. The road would be OK in, for example, our subaru, which would not fit in checked baggage. We find the turn off; about 3 miles in the road deteriorates into a nightmarish series of rocks and potholes. It is passable, but only with care. We set out off into the hostile (you do read the news, don't you?) Mexican countryside without a clue.

It's a nail biter. More than once we decide to turn back and then press on. (In case you are wondering if we're complete idiots, you now know for sure.) I am chanting to myself, "if the car breaks down here we are SO screwed" and other cheerfully paranoid thoughts, like drug cartel guys pulling us over and shooting us because it's been a slow day for victims so far.



The road goes on. And on. And on. There is no end to it. There are no signs, houses, towns, people, or anything. Just endless forest punctuated by the occasional field of burnt stubble, which is not a reassuring sight either. It goes on, to be precise, for about 17 unpredictable miles, and this is a road that doesn't really let you do much more than 15 mph on a good day.

An hour and many skittish, bright green parrots later, after multiple stops to move the larger rocks, we roll past a veritable ghost town and into the site, which is (against all reasonable expectations) staffed. Surprise! We are the only visitors today. Who woulda thought?

After paying our modest fees, we climb a dramatic series of stone ledges, to arrive at what we expect will be a smaller, less interesting site. We've seen those here a number of times; they're cool, but not worth a drive like the one we just did.



We come upon a few interesting structures and think that's it. As we walk further, however, the piles of stone sequestered into stacks and rows by archaeologists go on. And on. And on, just like the road out here.



It slowly dawns on us that the majority of this site has not been excavated. Not by a long shot. The large pyramid here that is still completely buried in jungle is HUGE. I mean, Calakmul huge; Edzna huge. There are more buried structures everywhere we look.

As we stumble through the ruins, a light drizzle falling and the light fading, it gradually becomes apparent that this is a major site, which is so far off the map it does not even rate a mention in most guidebooks or descriptions of the region. The atmosphere is spooky, cool, Indiana Jones. We climb to the top of the ruined pyramid (which, perhaps, tomb robbers haven't even tunneled into yet- an amazing amount of work would need to be done to clear any path whatsoever into this rubble) and are treated to mysterious views out over thousands of acres of mist-covered jungle.

There isn't a sign of civilization out there anywhere.



On the way back down, exhilarated by the revelation of this huge, buried, and forgotten city (they don't even know what the actual Mayan name was yet) a grim discovery. Artifacts generally missing from most Mayan sites- flint blades- are here on the path leading up to the city. Not just a few of them-once you know what to look for, spear points, arrowheads and sharp cutting flakes which were originally embedded in clubs are found with ease. It seems likely, in other words, that a battle was fought here at the entrance to the city, because the remains of weapons are scattered everywhere.

This place is worth the trouble getting to. Let's hope they pave the road someday.

On the way back out, we see some remarkable birds which we're unable to identify. I will have to buy a birding book for the Yucatan when we get home!





Speaking In Tongues

Give me the tongues of serpents
The frozen words of the old gods
The ones who threw feathers over their shoulders
To create the wind

And let the dead speak through me
In their robes of white cotton
All set about with jade beads, and carnelian

They want to sing of shells, of many colors
Sung from the sea with flutes
And the young girls with black hair, the ones
Who bleed when the moon is full
And need no knives to do it.

This is why they buried themselves in stone
And carved their names in it:
To live forever in the deep
Of limestone caverns, where roots fall
To turquoise water.







Day 9- Campeche

Friday dawns aggressively overcast, with blustery cool tropical winds sweeping in. We head to the first of two local archaeological museums, located 3 km outside of town at an impressive fort which was designed to deter pirates, completed at the beginning of the 19th century... just as pirate attacks were on the wane. Like most governments, they did the right thing, but only after exhausting all other alternatives.

Filled with spectacular jade burial masks, pottery, and other mayan artifacts from Calakmul and other major cities, the museum would be fantastic... If not for the fact that all the lights are out, and the interior of forts with thick walls and few windows is, as you might imagine, universally dark and dingy.

We squint our way through the exhibit, which, one might argue, gives it an added air of mystery. One would argue this, that is, if one wasn't busy crabbing about how the lights ought to be on if they're charging you admission. It also turns out to be a great way to find out just how well the ASA 6000 setting on my new Canon works- very well indeed, as it turns out. Weirdly, the pictures are better than what we can actually see in the dim light. Technology isn't all bad after all.



Jade mask, from Calakmul

The jade pieces are glorious, and the pottery amazing, demonstrating extraordinarily fluid and fluent brush painting technique, as well as a wide range of superlative zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures representing Gods, priests and animals. The essence of their culture- and perhaps even our own human nature itself- is distilled to a potent proof by material, craftsmanship and ingenuity.

We continue on to the smaller of the two archaeological museums, also set in one of the old forts (baluarte) that ring the city, where the lights are, more fortunately this time, on. This one has a fabulous collection of stelae and stone carvings from all over Campeche state, focusing on architecture and style, along with excellent english explanations of the imagery and context. It's a home run: both museums are well worth seeing.





A stop at the local square leads us into the back of the "Italian" coffee shop, a chain that serves a credible espresso- which is rare in a country that seems to take pride in assuring its customers that what they're drinking is genuine Maxwell House instant coffee. (I have discovered that I'm not too proud to drink it, and that it's better than nothing.) The shop's back door opens out to a charming little piazza open to the sky, with long creepers of purple bougainvillea spilling over faded walls. We pause for a while here, savoring the simplicity of coffee and silence.



Realizing that we are well past overdue on lunch, we mosey back through town towards the local market, which is in character with local markets in Cambodia, Thailand and other third world countries: a hodgepodge of booths and stalls under largely improvised shelter, stuffed to the gills with an abundance of fresh local produce.

I love these places. Habaneros by the thousands, tumbled into wooden trays, flash their wrinkly, rumped yellow and green, proving that no one here is afraid to eat the hottest stuff possible. Oranges are stacked neatly in bowls-- radishes and cilantro arranged in bouquets. The world around, fruit sellers don't just sell fruit: they make the fruit look beautiful, as though the act of display were the ultimate reason it was grown. You just don't get this in a modern supermarket, where it's all about sheer quantity. Going to a small

local market like this is a direct reminder of how we lose our humanity as we commoditize everything. The impact of color, of abundance, is touching and wonderful, especially in association with the beautifully earthly faces and colorful embroidered clothes of the women selling it.



At a local market, we become again, for a brief moment, human beings again-not cogs in a machine relentlessly determined to standardize us all out of a personal existence. It's moments like this that I begin to see that consumerism is as sterile and disgusting as communism: it's the new communism, a state of the corporations, by the corporations, for the corporations.

The market is divided into sections: in one part, we find fish, including red snapper, sea bass, and (more disturbingly) baby shark, a local delicacy. The tiny (that's a relative term) hammerheads on display are heartbreaking when you think about the fact that sharks (very nearly unique among fish) only give birth to live young, leading to very low reproductive rates. At the rate we are going (especially given the Chinese, with their positively noxious obsession with shark's fin soup) sharks will be largely extinct within the next fifty years. Also on display are beautifully mottled ray's wings, magnificent but equally

unsettling. There's no doubt they would look much better if they were still on the rays.



We wander through the market randomly, on instinct alone, lost amid the rambling clutter of stalls and merchandise, until we stumble on to the food section. The first place we come to looks downstairs- they are all humble, unassuming eateries- but it is bossed by a confident, heavysset mayan woman who tells us in Spanish we understand next to nothing of that her food is superb, and we had better just sit down and eat it, thank you very much.

She serves us excellent panuchos de pollo (little bitty round tortillas with veggies and chicken meat piled on them) and we wolf four of them down. This is breaking all the rules: digestive distress often follows exactly this kind of folly, but we get away with it, and all for the low cost of about five dollars.

While we're eating we have a delightful chat with the local man sharing our table. Repeatedly during this trip local people have been friendly and generous. There's a lot of laughter and goodwill here; a far cry from US news reports of Mexican gangsters gunning people down. It has struck us more than once that there are probably far more people dying of gun violence in the USA every year than there are in Mexico, but our media doesn't cover that. Apparently we're more far comfortable with Americans killing one another than Mexicans doing the same. Those silly Mexicans! Don't they know guns and violence are bad things?

Ahem.

Our newfound friend informs us that a respectable residential property inside the old city in Campeche might cost \$200,000 US these days. Hard to believe... And with the tourism potential there on the rise, that won't last long. There are a LOT of deserted properties in Campeche. Possibly a great place to bail out of the US rat race (which leads us all inexorably onwards to crappy, overpriced nursing homes with bad decor and ugly fluorescent lighting) and spend our latter days baking quietly in the sun, where health care is less able, but still affordable.



Everyone is moving here

Lunch over, we pay a meandering visit to the local artisanal crafts stores, which turns up little of interest. We get the car and visit the local car wash to clean off the sand and dust that has accumulated over a week. This car wash is entirely by hand; they helpfully provide a cheesy but acceptable seating area with a couple of glossy Mexican magazines featuring women who aren't quite naked, but either ought to be or want to be, not certain which.

Another friendly chat with a middle aged guy who has retired from the oil industry ensues. He and the car wash guy both look at my famous \$1000 dent

and somewhat deflate me by advising that the damage is nowhere near that severe- maybe \$300 or \$400 at the most. I don't know whether to be glad or feel insulted by this ego-deflating downgrade of my destructive abilities.



Back to the hotel, where we hang for a while before eating dinner at the Iguana Azul, a touristy eatery which serves food no better than lunch at about eight times the price. We try to comfort ourselves with the delusional idea that the kitschy life sized painted wooden skeletons sitting at the piano and in various corners upgrade the experience. Then it's home, and to bed.



Ticopo

A yellow dress has been ironed.
Flowers are blooming on the roadside.
The sun and the wind are joyful in the morning
When they join hands.

At the church, they still strike the bell by hand
Knowing that God listens better that way;
Fingers still do the work fingers were made to do:
Touching the arms of lovers.

So paint bright colors on every wall
Never mind that the dogs will pee on them
Or that they will fall down soon enough.

Sing, sing for the time when the afternoon
Is as slow as the bicycle wheels of old men
Riding their grandchildren around the square.

The papaya slings its pendulous weight

Downward into green heaven.

Those leaves have been hanging over sweetness for ten thousand years
And they are not done yet.



You just never know what you're going to see in Mexico.







Day 10- Campeche and Cancun

Exit strategies are a man's domain. We men know how to handle these things. This is why I am the one who goes to fetch the car this morning.

Because one block of the street we are on is closed, and due to a complex set of one-way streets, I proceed to drive it around many blocks many times before finally arriving at the front of the hotel. We finally get all our motley luggage (ranging from top of the line Tumi ballistic to cCstco green shopping bags) piled into the car and chug off to Mega, the local giant supermarket, which looks like it is trying hard to be wal mart but failing. Mega has turned out to be one of the best places in town to get espresso, as well as sugary pastries. Take note: you can save huge amounts of money when traveling just by locating the local markets and supermarkets, and eating bag breakfast and lunch every day. Strategies like this one cut hundreds of dollars off trip expenses, and you often eat better than when being fleeced at local restaurants.

We load up and head out, making a mess of the front seat with crumbs. Before long we are cruising north at high speed, with everyone else passing us. The average Mexican driver seems to be convinced that driving upwards of 90 mph is perfectly acceptable.

After a good deal of dithering we finally make a picnic stop at Oxkintok, another site not marked on maps or described in guidebooks. It turns out to date for the most part from the early to late classic period, and (unsurprisingly) has numerous Puuc architectural features. The pyramids are relatively modest, but it's a large site. When we climb to the top of the central pyramid, we are easily able to identify dozens of hummocks off in the distance which represent other major structures that have not been excavated yet.



We have the place mostly to ourselves; there are several unique and intriguing features in the form of pillars shaped like men. One temple is called the temple el Diablo, since a figure on the front has two holes in its forehead where, one feels certain, horns were once placed.

Now, it's easy enough to understand why horns might show up in any European or Asian art: after all, the bull was a domesticated animal across Europe and Asia for thousands of years, and cults such as that of Mithras were very mainstream. This wasn't the case at all, however, in central America- I'm hard put to recall any Mayan art whatsoever showing bulls, buffalo, or other creatures with horns- so one has to wonder just what this figure represents.

I'm inevitably called to remember Gurdjieff's Beelzebub, whose horns feature prominently in his Tales. Although Moses' famous horns on the ceiling of the

sistine chapel were the result of a mistaken interpretation of the bible (which has to go very high on the list of the world's most embarrassing mistakes) horns, in other cultures, aren't translation errors at all, but esoteric symbols. They represent, among other things, the left and right channels down which energy flows in tantric and yogic practice. Given the striking similarities in the overt use of serpent symbolism in Hindu (Eg. Angkor) and Mayan art, and the likelihood that Mayans had a similar, if completely unrelated, understanding of spinal energies, the use of horns here may well point to esoteric practices.



Ruminating on this idea, we finish up our picnic lunch and move on, headed for the cenotes de Cuzama, a series of three spectacular deep-water holes out in the sticks. Each one appears as a small crack in the bedrock, leading down into a huge, light dappled pool of turquoise water that sinks off into untold, creepy, pitch black depths.



Access to these gorgeously dreamy sites is achieved quaintly, with a horse-drawn cart that follows old henequen railway tracks through a defunct, but formerly huge, plantation out into the bush. Even though it's drizzly and hardly the weather to be gallivanting about half naked, underdressed and dripping wet, we come across numerous tourists who are in fact half naked, underdressed and dripping wet. They are all shivering, but insisting that they love their misery.

Our driver's name is Jesus; our horse, canelo, has a mind of his own and isn't that interested in doing his job. The primitive rail track just barely holds the carts on it; it's one way, leading to a repeated ritual in which one of the two drivers (determined, it would seem, at random) unhitches his horse and pulls his cart off the rails to allow the other cart to pass.

The cenotes themselves turn out to be well worth the jaw-jarring, ass-numbing two hours of travel that it takes round trip. Descending through, in the furthest cenote, a very small hole in the ground, one enters a subterranean wonderworld of turquoise water and huge roots hanging down from the ceiling, for all the world like a movie set. The other two cenotes are equally remarkable.



On the way back out, we pass by the town of Eknakan, one of many former henequen boom towns. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the

heyday of huge sailing vessels, these oversize members of the agave clan, sporting six-foot long blue-green, bladed leaves, were grown here by the millions, stripped of leaves, which were then pulped for fiber, providing untold miles of strong rope for the world's sailing industry. It built fortunes, cities, opera houses; henequen fiber from the Yucatan ultimately moved silks, killed whales, lit lamps.

The steam engine put an end to all of that, stranding the tall ships, leaving behind an endless series of ghost towns and abandoned plantations.

Some few-like the hotel we are staying at tonight, Hacienda San Jose- have been rehabilitated; the majority are crumbling into glorious, picturesque oblivion.



Eknakan, a tiny town out in the middle of what is now objectively nowhere, boasts several. It's obvious this town once had a lot of big money; now, it has absolutely no money, none. It is barely a blip on any radar.

On the way back through, on a whim, we stop the car and I get out to take a few photos at a hacienda gate I spotted on the way to the cenotes. The gate draws me inexorably towards it, as though it has its own force; what was going to be a few quick outside shots becomes a trip down the rabbit-hole. Neal, still in the car, has no idea I'm falling off the wagon out here...



Passing through the gate, I am unexpectedly confronted with a nearly mythical wonderland: a vast courtyard, overgrown with weeds, with two positively enormous trees (their trunks must be fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, their canopies spread out to cover a circle sixty or more feet in diameter) bursting out of the immense stone enclosures that once held them. Their roots grip the stones beneath them like a vise; the effect is overwhelming and intense. Stricken, I stagger forward, barely heeding the horse poop and cow dung which I suddenly realize is all over the place.

A miffed, mangy dog, potentially threatening, scoots out in front of me, but after exchanging stares, he decides I'm scary-- or perhaps just worthless as a source of food-- and high-tails it out of there.

Sobering up- but only slightly- I step more carefully forward, my camera firing over and over again as I document the crumbling walls, trees sprouting from rooftops, staircases, more arches, gorgeous tile floors torn up and scattered by local vandals with nothing better to do.



The place is magnificent, spectacular, a movie set. I want to buy it, transform it. I go back to the car and get Neal so that we can walk through and marvel at its atmosphere, the sense of a mysterious energy combining today's eroded presence with hundreds of years of former glory.

We puddle-jump through small towns to the hotel, with a few rambling runs around town squares while we try to figure out which way we are supposed to go- these tiny towns have few signs, if any. Fortunately we've done this enough by now to expect it; it's no longer a source of frustration, just another typical Yucatan day.





Trees at a Henequen Hacienda

I don't know how to speak about
Those two huge trees

There are inside me but they won't come out
They have sunk down deep
To some level well beyond my mind

And their huge roots have curled
Around the parts of me
That cannot think about exteriors.



Last resort

It is unrealistically blue by this sea.
Unable to resolve this, or compete
The wind blows so strong
It finally overwhelms even the most expensive enthusiasms.

Only drunk tattooed marines dare this tide.
While their girlfriends watch, sarongs afloat in vodka tonic
They pull pink shells from the sea
With clumsy toes.

Young lovers get the best seats
At windows by the sea
Which they do not really deserve
Since they only look at one another

And the piano player plays on and on
Like a gently demented one-trick pony
One classic theme song after another
Rendered lovingly
So that no one can hold his obsession against him

The food is nearly perfect
In a way it should not be, nothing is actually supposed
To meet expectations-
The world is expected to fall short
So that it can be held accountable.

All of it is measurement of one flavor or another
Applied to what is perpetually
Immeasurable;
Like some man who has read a few Zen books
I can make it sound good
But I don't know
What I'm talking about

As Martha told her little brother just this afternoon
The pool is too deep
To see the plastic fish on the bottom:

But that didn't stop him from throwing them
Really far, anyway

Men are like that
Even in their youth.





Words

After many words are erased
Discarded as inadequate
A single few will emerge
Truthfully.

They are the unknown ones
Who no longer belong to the world
But have broken loose
To swim in warm currents
Towards other hemispheres

Perhaps the place where the eels breed
Where sea anemones put down feet
Comb water with their radiance.

Those words will draw stone from water
Put it under them until they stand
In the midst of life
And will need no explanations
As companions.

