



A YUCATAN HONEYMOON

It is one of those unwritten rules of life that any couple cohabiting for a prolonged period of time and living in a state of marital negligence will inevitably develop a favorite set of reflexive responses to The Question. Everyone knows them, the piquant statements you say to your polite but persistent aunt/uncle/sister/drunk brother-in-law-to-be in order to calm nerves. After a period of trial and error we discovered that a dash of humor would lighten the situation just enough to give the entire issue a temporary heave-ho. One of our favorites was this: "We'll get married when we figure out the perfect honeymoon." Ha-ha. But we meant it (at least I did). After thirteen years of cohabiting in a state of conjugal bliss our conception of a proper wedding required a proper honeymoon, and that meant something more than a night on the town. So when the time came to put an end to our matrimonial tardiness we put our heads together and came up with an idea for a great honeymoon. Then we took out a loan. Hey, what is debt for? And at the end of it all, after the trip exceeded all our expectations, I had the pleasure of saying to the polite but persistent ones: "See? And you thought we were kidding."

We chose Mexico, the Yucatan specifically, as the honeymoon site for two reasons: Gen had never been below the Border (the Velveeta Curtain) except once to Rocky Point; and two, we both had a strong desire to see the great Mayan ruins. Actually I had been to the Yucatan once, but that was so many years ago it was like a dream from a different life; I wanted to return. Then there was the beach factor. Life, and the plans for the marriage, were beginning to get crazy, so much so that the beach sounded and looked like heaven itself (but then I always was a sucker for a well-shot advertisement). So the Yucatan it was, the only question that remained was - how? We bought the proper books, perused the proper maps, consulted the appropriate people and arrived at the not-so-startling conclusion that we needed more help. Should we try to 'do' Cancun? What if we start on Cozumel? How many ruins should we try to see? Should we fly to Merida or take the bus? And talk about rental car piracy - what did we look like, members of the Spanish Royal family? It was bewildering.

I of course wanted to see it all and do it all. Gen concurred and so we spent many waking hours discussing plans and reviewing options. It was like solving a riddle, I was sure that if we thought about it hard enough the answer would reveal itself magically, so deep was my blind faith in hard work. We got lucky instead. Billy, our Travel Agent, casually recommended an American-owned 'tent resort' on the beach near Playa del Carmen and when I made inquiries I discovered the same group ran tours, called 'Treks' into the interior of the peninsula - to the ruins, all the ruins, to Palenque and Tikal even! There were short Treks and long Treks and then there was the Granddaddy Trek - three countries, five major cities, and eight 'Greatest Hits' ruins in ten days! Naturally this was the trip we wanted to do. Naturally we couldn't afford it. Of course we took it - hey, like I said, what is debt for? There was more good fortune awaiting us - there was another couple who desired this long trip, but would they agree to our dates? Yes indeed. We were set ; all that remained was to sandwich the Trek between stays on lily-white beaches, one in Cancun and the other at Kailuum, and we were set. No sweat! Oh yes, there was the minor matter of getting married first.

The honeymoon began on Wednesday, May 27th. I quote from my diary : "10am, Dallas Airport. Am too tired to think or write clearly. Just one or two iotas of sleep last night. Spent night at Connie's in Albuquerque to catch 4am flight to Dallas. Went to bed at 11pm, back up at midnight. There were drunk frat rats making noise in the garage below us and Rollin drunk in next room. Laughing noises, toilet sounds, banging, anxiety, etc finally push Gen over the edge. She speaks 'strongly' to the frat rats, to her brother, makes a pot of coffee and writes Rollin a long, tear-mottled letter. She believes he is too intelligent to be so self-destructive. She believes he is on his way to becoming a homeless bum. I believe he is throwing his life into the garbage can. She has reached the end of her rope - nothing but tough love from here on out. Good. But, no sleep for the weary. At 3am we call a taxi and slip into a dark New Mexican night. Driver is inhumanly cheery. Sleep on the plane? Not much. Bored and sleepy in Dallas. Three-and-a-half hour layover, time enough to eat, read a lousy newspaper, snooze, worry about sitting next to a gathering crowd of boisterous Texans, and wait. Dreams of white - sheets not sands - dance in our heads." It was an inauspicious start, but a start nonetheless.

Our idea was simplicity itself and can be summed up in one word : decompression. We scheduled two nights in Cancun, at the El Presidente, strictly as a bridge between the jungle of the previous weeks and, well, the jungle. No doubt some honeymooners, maybe most, who come to this corner of the globe target Cancun as their only destination. Why not? The hotels have air conditioning, clean bathrooms, safe water, pleasant service people, a swimming pool - all the comforts of home (plus a beach), which is exactly why we were moving on. But first came the down time, the quiet time, the decompression, the sleep. We hit the hotel around 2pm, hit the pillows about 3pm, and didn't awake until after dark, way after dark. We needed the rest, it had been a hard first day, and a hard two or three months. We slept the sleep of the just, the just plain tired. When we awoke we felt in need of sustenance so we stumbled down to the beach-level restaurant, overcame a mild case of resort sticker-shock, ate, rode the elevator back up to the fifth floor, crawled into bed and went to sleep again. We were paying heavy money for this room but we didn't care because we were in Mexico! On our honeymoon!! Decompressing!! Zzzzzzzz.



WELCOME TO MEXICO!



I quote from the diary : "Thursday, 11am - on the beach. Too distracted by the elements to concentrate. We are sitting on a windward Cancun beach in our new bathing suits and our pale skins. Actually Gen sits in the sun, I keep my library legs carefully hidden. The trip from Dallas was uneventful. The airline food was surprisingly good and we dozed fitfully. The first view of the Yucatan was a bit of a shock - it was so flat. We westerners are not used to such flatness. I could not perceive any scale in the jungle below us. Were those trees ten feet or one hundred feet tall? How could anyone endure such uniformity? I looked for Mayan sites, of course, but could not see any, of course. We flew lower and lower and I knew we were really in Mexico when it appeared the plane was going to do a belly-flop in the jungle. At the last second, the very last second, cement appeared and the plane made a bumpy landing. Mexicans give the impression of not working any harder than is necessary which is good and bad - good because they don't participate in the ugly Anglo habit of overkill (let's face it, if Cancun were owned by Americans it would be three times larger); and bad because their work has a shoddy, unfinished feel." So much for first impressions.



HAPPY BRIDE

WHAT A CUTIE!



WAITING FOR A PIÑA



Tulum

CROQUET ANYONE?

Our first full day in Mexico was spent on the beach in the company of good beer and warm water. Most of our conversation was given over to recent events, namely our wedding five days prior. It had been an incredible wedding, an almost perfect celebration of love, life and the joys of good friends. We had planned it that way. I mean it, back in January, on the drive back from an archaeological conference in Tucson, we laid the groundwork for the festivities in a careful manner. We decided right then and there that the weekend would be not so much focused on us as on our friends. So we cast some stuffy traditions to the wind. Instead of a unnecessary rehearsal dinner we chose to throw a party at our house the night before the wedding - and it was a blast! Everybody came, drank, talked, laughed, and drank some more. Then Saturday night, after the wedding, we held a family dinner at a swanky Santa Fe restaurant and that also worked out perfectly. Then we had scheduled a Sunday morning brunch at our hotel for our out-of-town guests which also was a blast. That night we went drinking with Dan and Susan and Mike and Rina where we ranted about politics, art, literature, history and so on - just like the good old days. We wanted to mingle as much as possible, to shake the hands of people we might not see for years and hug the friends and loved ones who meant so much to us. We looked at the weekend not as an opportunity for people to come and celebrate us, it was a weekend to celebrate comradeship, family, and, as Mike might have put it, the ties that bind. It worked. Durkheim (and Gail Kelly) would have been proud.

We were picked up at ten by our host, Lynne, who would travel with us to Merida where we would meet the couple from Louisiana and our regular host Roger. It was a bit complicated. But rather than think about all the details right now we just threw ourselves and our luggage into the large, air-conditioned Suburban, said "Olá" to the driver Fernando and tried to relax as he drove us south toward Tulum at a rather rapid pace. Lynne was mellow personified, dressed in a T-shirt, shorts and flops, she had the carefree, sun-baked look of someone who has spent maybe a few too many years living on a beach. But she was a good host, patient with all our 'early-in-the-trip' questions. The tour company paid for everything except food and drink and so we turned ourselves over to Lynne's casual expertise on all things Mexican. That was a nice feeling, I highly recommend it. Our only real concern was illness - we had brought nearly every anti-diarrheal we found find. Things had gone too smoothly to get sick now. I crossed my fingers.



VALLADOLID PLAZA



CHICHEN

Our itinerary was to begin the day with a tour of the lovely, and crowded Mayan city of Tulum, followed by a tour of mostly unexcavated and sticky Mayan city of Coba, followed by an overnight in the lovely, sticky Mexican city of Valladolid. From the diary : "9:30pm - in bed, Valladolid. We're not in Cancun anymore. Friday night on the plaza - lovers sitting on benches, traffic creeping along the street, children on bicycles slowly circling the large square, amateur boxing night adjacent to City Hall, the approving crowd, the wide open buildings, the cool moist air, the colonial church (and the microwave tower)

"We were picked up at our hotel by Lynne and the driver Fernando. In Mexico the law says tours must hire local drivers and guides. Good for them. We checked out of Little-Las Vegas-by-the-sea and hit the road. Travelling in the lap of luxury I felt like a turista (which I was) but wasn't complaining. The four-lane highway quickly melted into a two-lane free-for-all. I watched the white line under our right wheel weave in and out of existence. Sometimes it was consumed by erosion, sometimes it disappeared into the jungle. The concept of a road 'shoulder' apparently is a foreign one in the Yucatan. The view from my air-conditioned cell was a curious one. The jungle was not what I expected or remembered - neither as dark green nor as riotous (though quite dense); the autos on the road and the billboards alongside it were more 'modern' than I anticipated; and yet the whirling, flashing images of huts, pigs, people and peasant life were as picturesque, and disturbing, as I expected. I have not travelled enough, I knew, and I felt like a martian on a 3-D ride through another world. I knew this alien feeling would pass with time but for the moment I just sat quietly and watched a foreign land zoom past me at 70mph, images bouncing off me like music sometimes does when my ears don't want to listen.

COBA

SMILING
GEN →

DIVING GOD
↓



TEMPLO DE LAS



"Tulum was prettier than I remembered. It looked like a Hawaiian miniature golfcourse with clipped green lawns, palm trees, a cool salt breeze, and a bunch of funny-looking buildings. I remarked to Gen that it was the perfect place for a croquet game. It was. After the guide left us (we later spied him snoozing in the shade) we blended into the crowd and meandered over the site. Much of it was roped off, a sign of the times, and we perspired despite the strong breeze, a sign of the climate. Outside the walls we ran a gauntlet of merchants and had a round of Pepsi under the cheerful, and chatty, gaze of a restaurant proprietor. I looked out at the market - I had never seen so many T-shirts per square foot. This wasn't Cancun, but was it Mexico? Or was it a hybrid, a half-monster born of tourism and desperate poverty? I didn't know." And I still don't.

VALLADOLID



FRIDAY NIGHT AM



"NOHOCHUL MUL"

Which

Land is like a language, best understood by those who have lived a lifetime with it. Land, like language, has a unique vocabulary and a grammar which can be memorized by the casual student but whose deeper meanings, its joys of nuance, license, and other poetic universes will remain closed to all but the most dedicated traveller - and native speaker. Land, like language, can be approached with a handbook of trite expressions and well-thumbed preconceptions, but to write or speak about foreign land from books or ideas is to risk ridicule. And yet it is a risk we must take. Over the years I have tried my hand at various languages, french, russian, spanish, even arabic, without much success. I kept coming up with the same observation - why am I studying a foreign language when I feel so clumsy with my native one? Even with my head start, won't it take a lifetime to explore english properly? Why not devote my energies to the craft and care of well-turned english? Why not indeed? And yet the call of foreign language persists, as does the call of foreign land. I believe the two calls are the same, the same urge, and I can't really say why. It must be more than mere curiosity that drives one to the study of strange languages and foreign cultures.

I think it must have something to do with a need to know that 'otherness' exists, the need to see and hear and taste and touch the new so that we might gain a fresh perspective on the familiar. When Thomas Wolfe wrote 'you can't go home again' he wasn't talking just about time, he was speaking of distance too, the distance between New York and North Carolina. When Claude Debussy took time out from his composing career to study counterpoint, the long-dead musical form perfected by Bach, just so he could 'fully understand what he was rejecting' he became a traveller. To travel, on land or in language, is to return home a stranger. When you are away you think of home, and nothing is ever quite the same again.

In the jungle I thought of home, of New Mexico and California and the West; though I must admit my initial thoughts were turned to the disparities in climate. I was hot and sticky and miserable. Who could live in this day after day? In the Mayan city of Coba, which is almost entirely unexcavated and densely covered with humid jungle, I struggled a bit with thoughts of home and 'otherness'. I wondered if I had brought enough clean clothes. I wondered what the hell was making all that racket up in the trees. I wondered how Stephens and Catherwood endured their 19th century trek through this country without going mad. But I also marvelled at the fecundity of the jungle and the strange feast of sight and sound surrounding me.





EMETARY OF SKULLS



SACRED



GIRL & BOY MEET A CHACMUL



To travel is to enter a world of duality - fascination and abhorrence, superficiality and profoundness, misery and joy. How many travellers have felt this : I don't want this trip to end ever - and I can't wait to get home. To travel is to swing between extremes and settle, finally, somewhere in the middle. If nothing else the time spent in the Mexican jungle, the effort spent climbing up and down its ruined edifices, changed the way I looked at the landscape around Santa Fe and beyond. Let me put it this way : I used to think Wyoming was a foreign country.

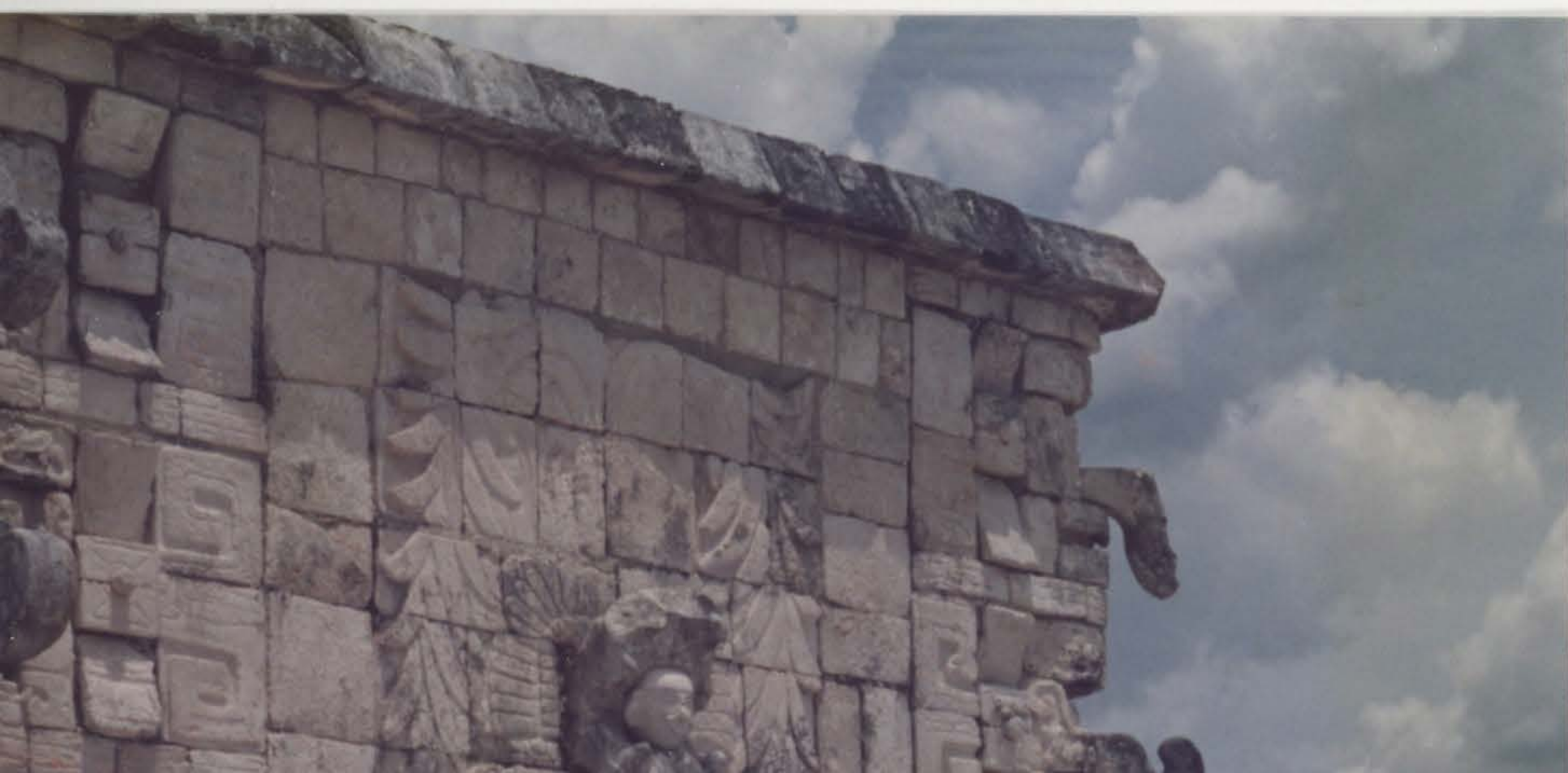


MAYAN ARCH



EL CASTILLO

EL TOURISTO



Lest anyone get the wrong idea, I have been out of the country - to England, Australia, and Mexico. In fact I had been to the Yucatan once before, during the summer of Nixon's resignation, and had seen many of the sights we would on this trip. But that was an eon ago, I was fourteen and dumbstruck by the jungle, the ruins, the older kids, the boozing, the sleeping around and the complete indifference my travel-mates displayed toward this exotic country. I was on a four-week, six thousand-mile auto tour of Mexico organized by the Orme school of central Arizona. We drove from Phoenix to Guanajuato to Mexico City to Oaxaca to Villahermosa to Merida to Chetumal to Puebla to Guadalajara to Mazatlan and back to Phoenix. Talk about returning home a stranger, I never recovered from that trip. I wanted to be archaeologist, a photographer, a writer, and a collector of world cultures. I was old enough to be zapped by the romance of the new and young enough to be excluded from the older kids' adolescent shenanigans. I ran from museum to museum, climbed ruined after ruin (and begged our bored hosts for more) and snapped a billion photographs with my little Kodak X-15 Instamatic. I also got lost in Mexico City's fabulous Anthropology Museum; picked clean by a teenage shyster on the streets; nearly succumbed to a terrible fever on the Caribbean coast; stood outside in the cool Mexican air while by roommate 'talked' to a young girl; listened to two other roommates discuss the early signs of VD; ate strange food; swam in strange water; and bought so many souvenirs that my suitcase resembled a miniature pregnant elephant. It was an incredible trip, I wanted it to go on and on - and naturally I couldn't wait to get home.





Now, nearly eighteen years later, not only was I returning to some of the same sights I saw in 1974 I was carrying the same suitcase. I swear this is the truth - it was the same miniature elephant, only a little less pregnant (and on a diet). I was eager to see how things had changed. On Saturday we drove from Valladolid to Merida with a three-hour layover at the famous Mayan city of Chichen Itzá (which our driver Fernando called Chicken Pizza). It was pretty much as I remembered it, grand, elegant, and antiseptic. It was also very hot. Even our guide Tomás seemed to conserve his energy (or had he led one tour too many?) We toured the site slowly, stopping at every fragment of sculpture Tomás could remember. Tours are frustrating, the words are interesting but your feet are itching to move, to go, go, go. Tour guides compound the problem by starting with the details first ("Here is some blue paint...over there is some red paint..."). This just fine with Gen who, being an archaeologist, appreciates the details more than I, who tends to skip straight up to the Big Picture, even if it is wrong.

After two hours we paid Tomás off and wandered free through 'old' Chichen. The 'Pizza' was too neat and clean for my tastes. It was as if Disney had purchased the city and decided there were just 'too much mess' associated with a ruined site. There were no artifacts, the true sign of prehistoric activity, the grass was neatly mowed, and even the unrestored buildings had a 'cleaned up' feel. Maybe other tourists liked it this way, backlot archaeology I like to call it, but I preferred a real ruin, like Coba. Before we left I climbed the stairs to the Observatory and took a photograph of the Nunnery through the teeth of an outraged snake. It was a private photograph - eighteen years previously I had had stood here and taken the exact same picture. It was the moment I knew I wanted or could be a photographer, and an artist by extension. It was a weird photo for a fourteen year-old to take, a snake eating a temple, but I distinctly remember feeling proud of having taken it. I felt, even then, it was the start of something new in my life. It was one of those moments, and I think everyone has had at least one, when you feel a door opening, a possibility developing. I trace my evolution as an artist directly back to that photograph and that moment. As I closed the shutter for the second time I thought to myself: "I should try to come back in another eighteen years and do this again." That means I would be nearly fifty years old, either a hero or a bum. It was a frightening thought. It was time to press on.



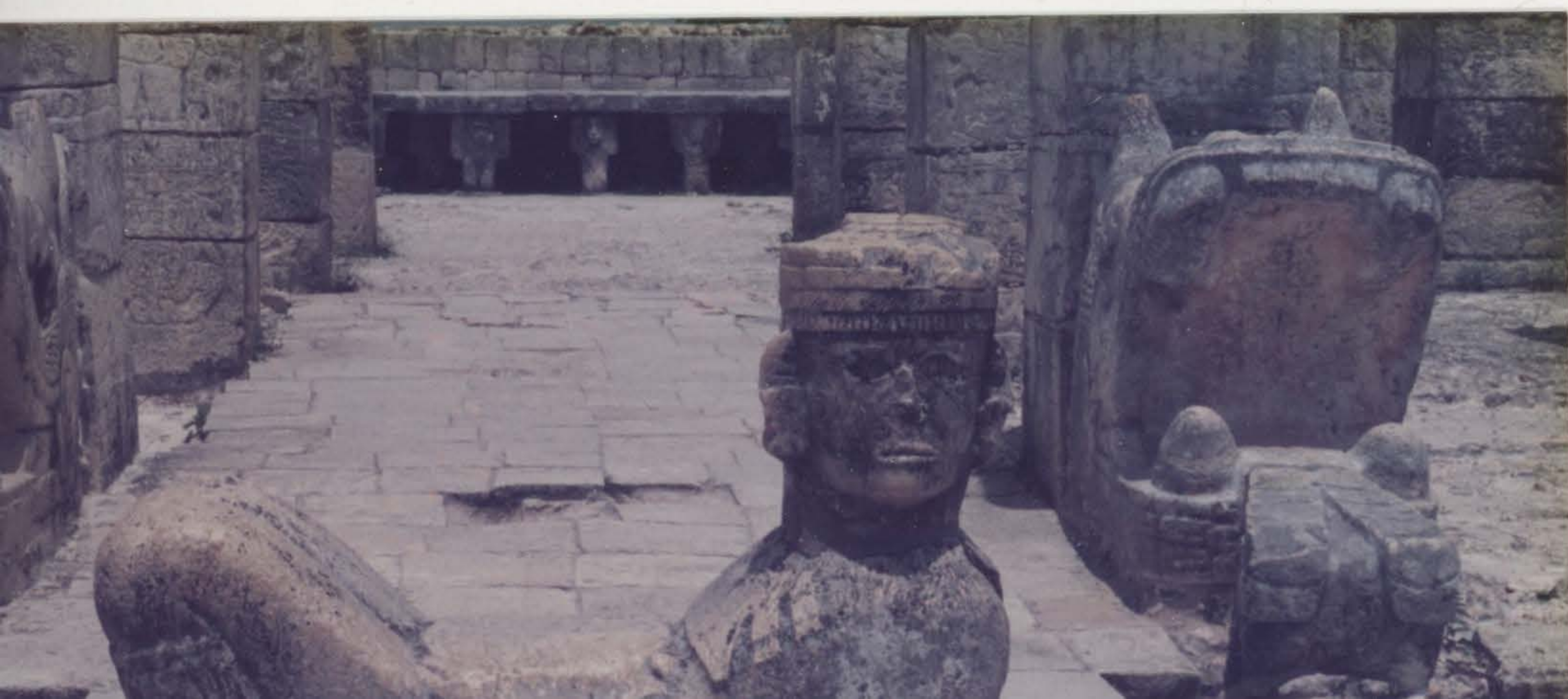
RED CENOTE

(IN COLOR)



OLD CH...

From the diary : "7pm May 30th, 1992 - Merida. Am sitting in a lovely room tucked away in the heart of the capital of Yucatan. It is a corner room in an old house, a ceiling fan and three sets of open windows constitute the feeble attempts at cooling. Just showered and removed the daily patina of sweat that accumulates here. Lovely weather, sticky, sweaty but tolerably cool, with peek-a-boo clouds. Relaxing now after a pleasant stroll around the plaza with Gen and Lynne. Merida is a busy, bustling, noisy place, every inch a 'big' city and every inch Mexican..." (I fell asleep).





MERIDA

ON THE PLAZA

That night we said 'goodbye' to Lynne and 'hello' to Roger, owner of the old house and our host for the rest of the Trek. Roger was a character. With his clipped moustache, southern accent and perpetually pinched expression he looked and sounded like a ruddier version of William Faulkner. He seemed to be in a state of constant mild aggrievement - as if the world smelled slightly sour to him. Gen thought he seemed like a man who had been disappointed in life, though all outward signs indicated otherwise. But what endeared Roger to us was the way he answered our questions - if he liked the subject, if the topic involved food or Mexican politics or history, he could whip out a humorous, well-turned answer in no time flat. But some questions elicited no response at all - he would just look at you as if you had just accused him of kicking the cat. I remember over our first dinner that night I asked about his decision to move to Mexico - why did he do it? He just stared at me and said nothing. "Great" I said to myself, "I've ruined the rest of the Trek for everybody." The conversation drifted to another topic and we let it go. Then, about five minutes later, Roger turned to me and said "Do you want the short answer or the long one?" He wasn't angry, he was just thinking.



T DOOR



In Merida we also hooked up with Bill and Jennifer from northern Louisiana who would be travelling with us for the duration of the Trek. They were great (except for Jennifer's nicotine addiction) and we were relieved. The success of a trip depends as much on the quality of one's travel-mates as much as the scenery. Bill was the head honcho of a waste treatment plant and Jennifer worked as a secretary for a large company. They were both divorced, with kids, and had been each other's Significant Other for sixteen years or so - another modern couple. Bill's hobbies included archaeology (!), ecology, computer software (a business actually), plants and animals, and travelling. He owned and maintained forty acres of backwoods Louisiana as wilderness and planned to donate it to the Nature Conservancy when he died. But Bill also liked to hunt pigs with his dogs - he must be what they call an antebellum environmentalist. Jennifer was a little less complicated - her views on the 'Negro' problem were not especially enlightening - but she was a trooper and I admired her for her stamina and good nature. When the going got hot, and sticky, neither one uttered a peep of complaint. Which is more than could be said for Roger.

Our dear host blew our minds Saturday night, after leading us through one of the most scrumptious meals I have ever eaten, by sitting us down in a small Merida plaza and peppering us with scenarios of disaster. Did we bring anti-malaria pills? Malaria!? Who said anything about malaria? He didn't want the nuisance of anybody getting sick on the trip - were we taking anti-bacterial pills? Bill and Jennifer nodded (though they weren't the big red ones he recommended); Gen and I shrugged 'no' solemnly. Roger shook his head. Then there was the risk of ambush by guerillas in Guatemala - did we know there was a civil war still going on? Of course we did, but who cared? A trip was cancelled once, he said, because the main road was closed when insurgents blew up a microwave tower. I began to wonder : did Roger want to take this trip or was he just playing games? Gen thought he was just the worry-wart type. Well, he got us to worry, that's for sure.

On Sunday we did not have any spare time to worry, or to write in a diary for that matter. We 'did' five major Mayan ruins in eight hours, more or less. We started at the top with the great city of Uxmal, truly one of wonders of the ancient world. Uxmal is a ruin of great contrasts - massive and yet delicate, beautifully restored and yet mostly unexcavated, accessible on aesthetic and visceral levels and yet a complete puzzle culturally. I have come to believe that we will never truly understand the Maya, their society is so alien to our own - but more on this later. Uxmal put the zap on me as a teenager and I was delighted to feel that zap again. The place has a quality of experience that is hard to describe - you feel the Maya more directly here than at any other ruin, at least I do. At Uxmal the Maya have a more human face - it has something to do with the light, and the line of their architecture. It is fascinating to me what is cross-cultural : smiles, handshakes, beauty, color, touch. In Uxmal you come away with the powerful urge to tell the nearest Mayan ghost : "Well done." Uxmal speaks through the ages and across cultures in the way only a beautiful ruined city can. To walk through Uxmal is to experience, what one author called, 'the pleasure of ruins.' Truly.

The rest of this day and all of the next became a blur of travelling. It is one thing to think about travel philosophically, but it quite another to spend two days in the back of a large, well-cushioned Suburban. It's hard to return home a stranger when you keep dozing off. Gen spent the time picking up spanish words - one she learned from Fernando was 'columpio' which meant 'swing' or 'sway'. She pointed at my lolling head next to her and asked Fernando, "columpio?" I never heard the end of that. After Uxmal we 'did' Kabah, Sayil, Labna, and Edzna. Roger didn't think we could make all five in one day so he marched us around the sites like Little Bo Peep. The ruins were beautiful, I snapped too many photographs and began to worry about having enough film for the trip. At Kabah we marvelled at the grotesqueness of the Chac masks; at Sayil we split up briefly - some us disappeared into the jungle while some of us climbed the Great Palace; at Labna Roger led us on a world-record sprint; at Edzna he had to pay 'after-hours tax' to get us into the site. Roger was brilliant in this way, he spoke fluent spanish and loved to wheel and deal with the natives - no one gave us shit because no one gave him shit. He also put us up in the best hotels, such as the seaside beauty in Campeche Sunday night; and he knew where to eat. In Campeche he found out where the locals ate and we had one of the best meals of the trip. Roger, despite his peculiarities, was an outstanding host.





MAN

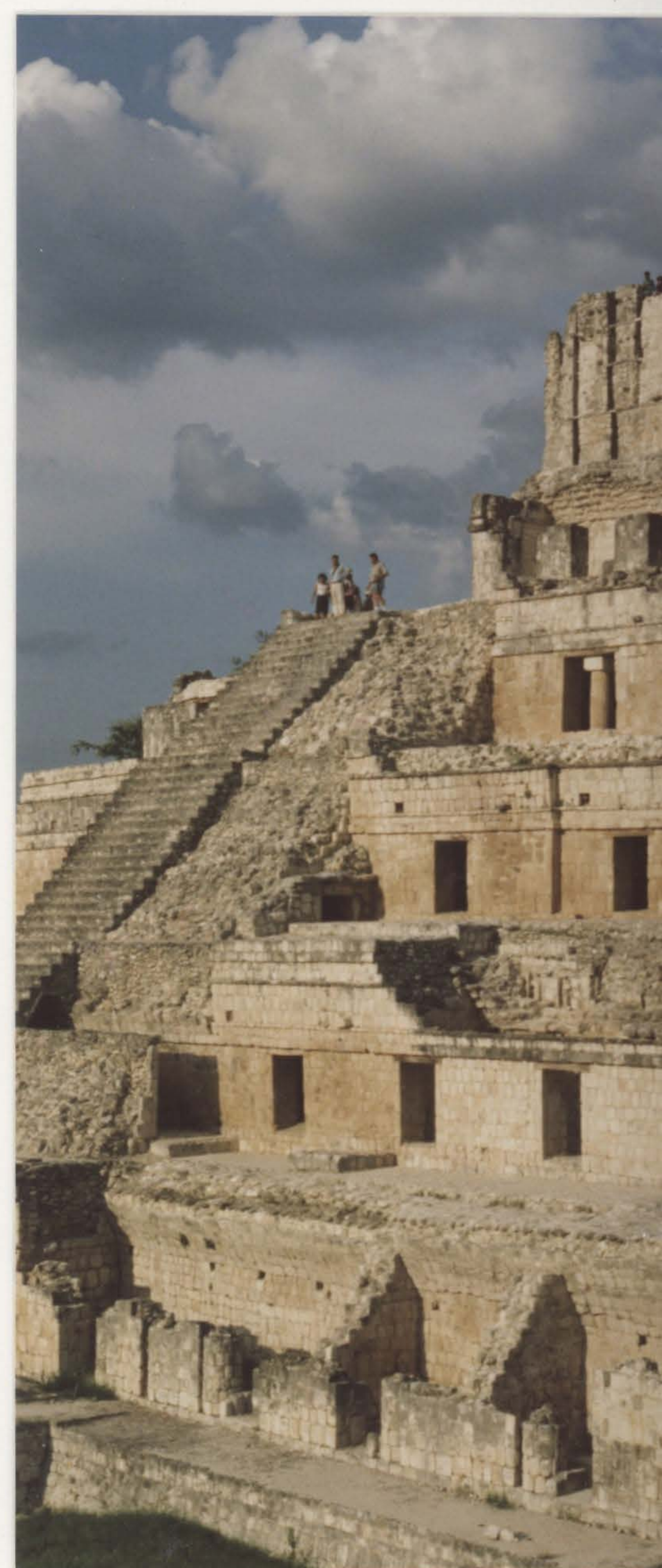
SAYIL



CENTER COURT



EDZNA



Driving from Edzna to Campeche Fernando announced he knew a shortcut - and took it despite Roger's quizzical frown. The town was tiny (so tiny I can't remember its name) and it was beautiful. Since it was off the tourist track it seemed 'purer' than other Mexican towns, a feeling that immediately tossed me back into the split personality of the traveller. I loved what I saw out the window, the children running along the weedy railroad tracks, the ice cream vendor dispensing cherry-flavored joy, the look and feel of the architecture - while at the same time despising my superficial contact with this world. I was a gawker, we are all gawkers at some time, and yet I was sincerely interested in what I saw. About half-way out of town I threw down a mental gauntlet - I admitted to myself that I was happy to be a tourist, even proud.

Let me put it this way, in my home town of Santa Fe there rages a silly, frantic debate about the hordes of tourists that descend on the city nearly year-round now. The squeaky wheels complain that tourism is a hollow, shallow, boorish sham perpetrated on the unknowing by the unrepentant. The other side responds with variations on a popular bumper sticker seen around town which reads sarcastically : "Less Tourism, More Strip Mining." A town must have an economy to survive, why not tourism? It is relatively clean, non-exploitative, and upbeat. But driving through this Mexican town it all comes suddenly into perspective - who is not a tourist? I mean, how can someone return from Greece or New York or Mexico to Santa Fe and say to strangers "Go away, we don't want tourists here"? Maybe they never leave town, the ones who gripe, but I doubt it. So, how do we respond to this double-standard, for it is a question that cuts to the heart of a traveller. Do we stop gawking, hiding instead behind a masquerade of know-it-allness, or do we extend a hand to the Texans on the Plaza and tell them "Golly I'm glad you're here"? I don't know, but I can speak for myself - I gawk at the Texans as much as I gawked at the Mexican in this little town and I am not going to stop anytime soon.



PALENQUE

HOT + STICKY

We spent two days at Palenque, one of the jewels in the Mayan Triple Crown. The second night we ate supper in town (leaving a forlorn-looking waiter all alone in our hotel's restaurant) and walked through the city plaza which was brimming with life. " Gen and I held hands and strolled Palenque's streets. Everywhere there was life, lovers, mothers, daughters, vendors selling ice cream, vendors selling rock 'n roll, vendors selling televisions... We agreed it was good to travel, it was Gen's first real trip out of the country since high school and we promised each other to travel more frequently. We sat with Fernando on a bench in the plaza and pestered his good nature with more questions about language and culture. Eventually Gen wanted to walk some more but I, like the others, had gone native and just wanted to sit and listen and be."

TEMPLE
OF
THE
SKULLS



STI
MOH
PAL



TEMPLE
OF
THE
JAGU



TEMPLE OF

"The next day began with a bang - on our door. We had put in a Sam wake-up call which, being Mexico, meant we were actually awakened at 5:20, mas or menos (the national motto). We showered, dressed, and were on the road by 5:59. Roger had given us a 6am deadline and so, being Americans, we made it (ah, clichés). Where were we going? What were we doing up so early? Guatemala - two hours by car to the river, three hours on the water, then five in a van on terrible dirt roads. Guatemala. As we drove into interior Mexico, off the beaten path, two sights became everpresent - electricity and the PRI (Mexico's ruling party). The former was represented by utility poles strung along every road, the latter by hand-painted signs and slogans in every village. Roger confirmed my suspicion - coincidence? I think not.

"After a quick stop for breakfast we reached the end of the road, the San Pedro River, the heart of darkness where hot words were exchanged between rival boatman, soft words were exchanged with Fernando, and photos taken. Finally everything sorted out and we climbed into a roofless, narrow river boat for a fascinating but interminable trip through a sun-blached landscape. We were excited for the first hour or so - jungle clearings, birds, small rapids in the river, but after a while it became hard work to pay attention. Feelings of exoticness and mundaneness alternated. I felt like our boatman looked - bored, hot, and eager to reach our destination."



OUR AUTOBUS



FERNAN

"Broken out of my reverie - border station and unnecessary anxiety. Men in green uniforms, a long walk along a causeway - hot and still. Under a thatched roof sat an entire squadron of serious-minded boy-soldiers with guns. I have been in the boat too long - they are Mexicans but I think they are Guatemalans and double my anxiety. I worry about my camera in the boat. Roger's stories are getting to me. We step up one at a time, but nothing happens. No one even frowns. Back in the boat, more of the same. Guatemala looks a lot like Mexico. I put my head in Gen's lap and try to sleep under a relentless sun. Roger announces that "this is a slow boat", covered himself with a white shirt and disappeared for the rest of the ride. We motored on and on. Jennifer and Bill tried to lean against each other in different positions before finally settling with her leaning over his back while he covered her with a bandana stuck under his hat. Gen, ever curious about the world and ever able to find something interesting to look at, sat there in her LA Dodgers cap and kept a lookout.

We alighted at El Naranjo, Guatemala, a backwater nowhere that vied for Last Place on Earth. Naranjo's only value was the accidental result of being the terminal spot of the very long, hot road from Flores in central Guatemala. It was pure Third World. Roger pointed out the Mayan ruins nearby that were being used as an obstacle course by the Guatemalan Army. I wanted a photo but dared not expose my camera to local eyes. We were greeted by one cheerful face, Jose Juarez, our driver, who smiled probably because he had work.

In the immigration station we woke the officer, from his hammock, and stood in line patiently, and sweatily, as he processed our paperwork. I finished first and stood at the clipboard's open window and tried to make sense of what I was seeing: five children on one horse's back, a skinny dog, a skinner horse who barely had the energy to swish its tail, Jose sitting in the sparse shade, the Mayan obstacle course, a bird, and not much else other than palpable heat and humidity. How did they live here day in and day out? The answer is - they have to, either poverty or ignorance or preferred solitude makes them stay. I, of course, will not.

THE
RIVER TRIP
INTO GUATEMALA



Gen





Next came an insufferably long ride in the Toyota van, five hours of bumps and rolling the window up and down as an endless stream of tanker trucks passed us going the other way. Five hours of roadside human poverty as well. We passed innumerable small villages, each as squalid as the next. The houses were nothing more than plywood shacks with a palapa roof, one after another. Mothers and children and pigs and dogs watched us pass with what looked to me as expressions of vast indifference. Their lives seemed rooted at the subsistence level and nothing more. But while I was somewhat appalled by this Gen had a different reaction - she thought these people seemed 'content', more 'hopeful', and 'less burdened' by the vagaries of modern life. They just seemed poor to me. This must be a common feeling among travellers - the need to act on first impressions vs. the knowledge that you have no right to interfere. Whose standards are they anyway? The air in this part of Guatemala was thick with smoke, the product of deforestation. Two hundred yards on each side of the road had been or was being burned to the ground. The reason? Cattle, and survival. Bill said later he saw \$1 million dollars worth of hardwood lying burned on the ground. Yet how do we step in and say this is wrong? It is their country but our planet, our common heritage.

Checkpoint - Guatemalan guards read our passports upside down. Then they search the van. Roger seems more annoyed than worried. They take their time - when does one begin think about paying the 'road tax'? We're free. The final thirty-two KM to Flores were the worst. Roger had warned us that the condition of the roads in northern Guatemala was a political statement both to Belize, with which it was embroiled in a territorial shouting match, and to the local peasants (read: rebels). If this was true then this stretch of road was an upraised middle finger of the highest sort. It was so bad we had to drive in the gutters. I said it was a Third World country.

We arrived in Flores about four in the afternoon dusty, thirsty, and numb from the parade of images of poverty and environmental destruction. As usual Roger put us up in the best place in town, La Casona which was very clean and had great views of Lake Peten Itzá. It also had tiny rooms. Flores is a tiny town on a tiny island in the middle of a large beautiful lake. It is connected to the mainland by a very busy and dusty causeway which we had to negotiate several times on foot. But right now we just sat tight on the third floor of the hotel drinking Guatemalan beer and watching a huge storm pass to the south of us. Gen remarked that the sky seemed so far away here, that storms loomed larger. Lightning flashed as we talked, a few drops fell, and then something very central American happened - the lights went out. All of Flores was cast in darkness. I shrugged, went downstairs and 'rescued' two more bottles of beer from the heat. It was a lovely storm, a symphony of light and sound above our heads and a captive audience sitting in the semi-darkness below.

After an hour or so someone reminded us that we needed to eat. Oh right, food. Flores was homebase for a Guatemalan culinary delicacy called 'tepesquente' and the time had come to test it. Roger had been singing its praises for days now, but with his usual sly-guy smile. Then he told us the rest of the story - tepesquente was a large rodent that lived in the jungle, a sort of furry rat. Jennifer demurred saying "That's all I need to hear." But Bill's interest was piqued, so was Gen's. So it was tepesquente-time and we found it on the mainland at a restaurant called El Rodeo. I must say right now it was the best meal of the entire trip. Roger knew his restaurants. Despite my jokes the jungle rat was truly delicious. Bill proclaimed it the finest meal he had eaten in years. Roger smirked. And so who would had believed it, there we were, buried in the heart of a Third World country, half the city lost in darkness, eating jungle rat and proclaiming it the finest meal in years? It is the unimaginable moments such as this one which make life fun. So, if you are ever in central Guatemala go to the El Rodeo in San Benito, order a tepes kabob and see what you think. Try a Gallo beer too, raise one for our little party and to the unexpected blessings in life.





Thursday morning we went shopping. On the drive in the previous day Gen and I separately observed an object of desire. It was amazing that two people could think so simultaneously. The object was a cheap plastic olla (jug) used for hauling water in the villages. They were painted in bright colors, exactly as they had when they were from ceramics. Gen liked the continuity, I liked the colors (bright red and white or green and white stripes). When we bought two in the market everyone, from the city-folk to Roger, thought we were nuts. Gen said it was like travelling all the way to Santa Fe from Flores just to buy Tupperware. Exactly.

We shopped in the market, we shopped at a soda store, we shopped for fabrics. When we were done we had \$40 to our names - and a week left to go. Oh well, isn't that what newlyweds are supposed to do - live on the edge? We packed, ate a \$1 hamburger and walked around Flores which is a lovely town. But I was feeling impatient, I wanted to move on to Tikal, one of the main reasons we came on this trip. Soon it was time to see the Great City. The van arrived at one. The only paved road in northern Guatemala runs between Flores' airport and Tikal. That statement by the government is for itself, and the tourists. Near the Park we entered a United Nations designated World Biosphere - but nothing changed. All one still saw was poverty, deforestation (though older), pigs, and people everywhere. It's good to see some things are universal.

For most of my adolescence I dreamed of visiting Tikal, the mother of all Mayan cities. I remember pestering my father about how we were going to get down there. When I was fourteen and down here previously I remember being greatly disappointed that we were going to skip Tikal. It was typical adolescent feeling, I couldn't be happy with every other major Mayan ruin, I had to have one more. I remember opening the tour book we used on the trip and staring at the word Tikal - it symbolized all that I could not have, a perfect dream for a fourteen year-old, close and yet so far. I remember when my father took us to the Black Moustache restaurant in Scottsdale one night for dinner, without my mother, and laid before us a grand vision of a family trip to Honduras and Guatemala to see Copan and Tikal. It was a grand plan and I remember the rush of possibility, but I also remember the realization that we would never go - not with my mother, and not without her.

My father was an incredibly earnest man, I never felt great disappointment when his plans failed to materialize because I knew in his heart he wanted to go. But our life together as a family had become too complicated for grand plans. At least he dreamed and I respected him for that. I dreamed too and for a while Tikal became a shining example of all the things my family could have done but chose, for one reason or another, not to do. After a while the dream faded a bit, or was replaced by more immediate dreams, but the Great City continued to reside in the back of my head as a hopeful possibility. I would, I knew, one way or the other get to Tikal and thus complete my father's, and my, dream. I would see the city for the whole family, I would. But when I actually found myself sitting on Temple 11 watching the sun set on the Great City and listening to the incredible sound of the howler monkeys in the jungle, I was surprised to feel more relieved than passing through a moment of catharsis or Epiphany. I thought of my father and mother, yes, and I remembered the scrawny teenager to the north, yes, but mostly I just felt happy, happy to achieve a long-standing goal, but happy most of all to share this moment with the person I loved more than any other in the world.



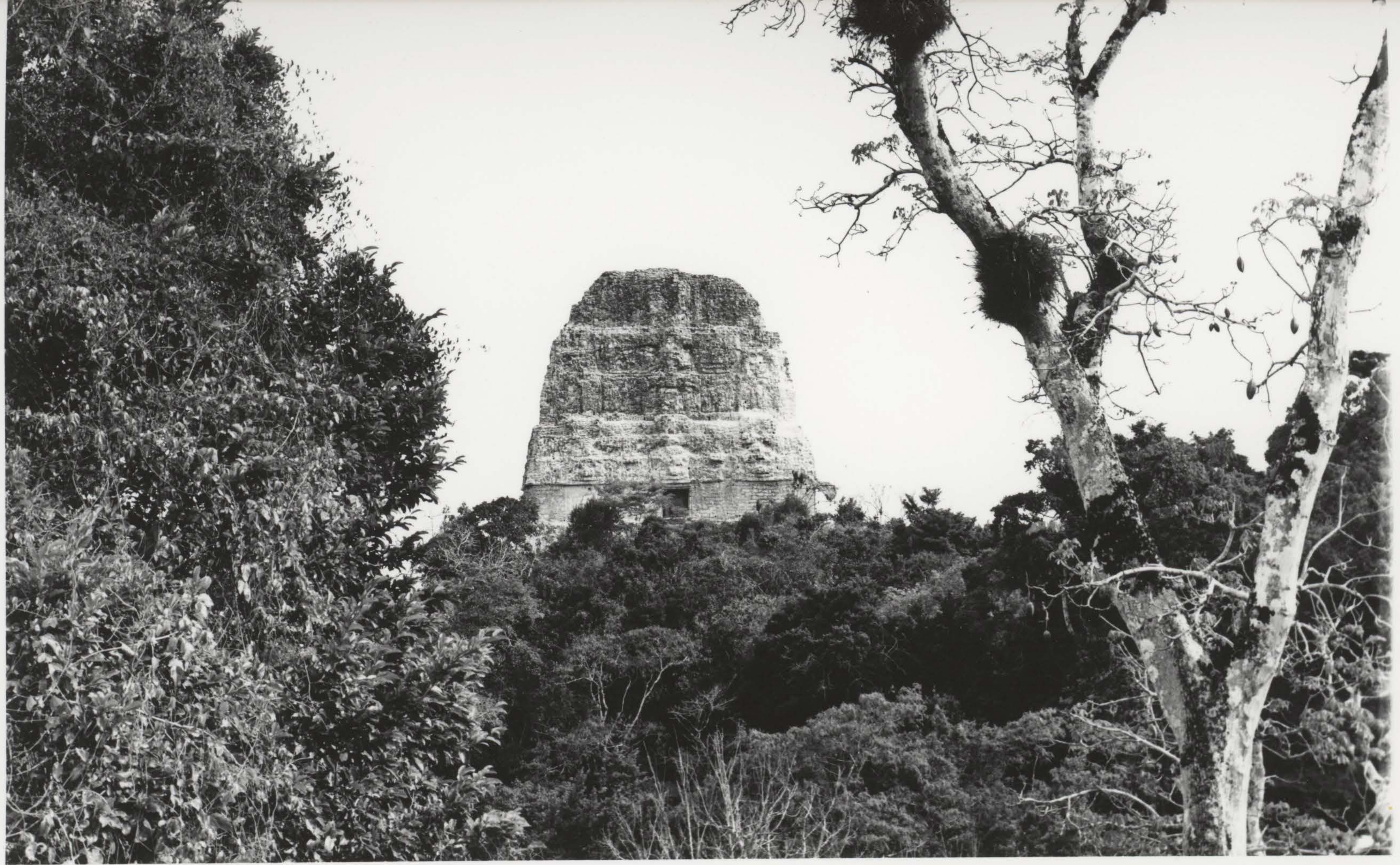
We stayed at Tikal for two days and two nights. That first afternoon we hoofed it directly for the Great Plaza via a ruined temple that almost got the better of Gen. The next day we slowly explored central Tikal, the North Group, Temple W, the 'Lost World', the Plaza again, Temple V, and more. We walked with Bill and Jennifer for most of the day. We commented on how different each Mayan city appeared, on Chichen Itzá's relative sterility, Uxmal's lovely colors and mystery, Palenque's grace and human scale, and Tikal's immensity. What you really notice when touring Tikal is the jungle's role - here and there the jungle has been pushed back so that the visitor can appreciate the city's majesty, but mostly Tikal belongs to the jungle. The traveller must visit separate temple groupings via paths carved from the riotous jungle. Spider monkeys leap among the treetops as unseen crickets keep up a noisy racket all around you. Everywhere is the heat and humidity and breathless density of jungle air. As you walk structures loom out at you from the darkness. Every inch of land around you is city, ancient plastered, decaying city. It is pure Maya.





At the top of Temple W, the tallest structure in all Mayaland (Tikal felt a bit Disneyesque - where do you begin? which Temple do you see first? which path should we take?), we joined a crowd of perspiring tourists to revel in the view of the jungle from above. We were also confronted with an odd sight - the temple existed as a ruin from its base to its top platform, only the temple itself had been 'restored', but clinging to ropes from the roof comb were half a dozen Guatemalan workers, their job? Picking weeds from the temple facade. It was like a scene from *Alice in Wonderland* or *Dante's Inferno* (which is what it felt like). Even 140 feet up there was no breeze, it seemed as if the entire state of Guatemala was holding its breath. I was running out of film as well. I don't know which made me sweat more.





A skinny metal ladder led to the roof of the temple. Jennifer declined but the rest of us climbed right up. On top I was struck with an observation. I told Gen "This isn't the Park Service." She laughed, she knew what I meant. If Tikal were in the U.S. and under the control of the Park Service, well we certainly wouldn't be standing on the roof of this temple, most likely we would be down on the ground staring up, probably from a paved, wheelchair-accessible viewing platform. What would be different? Good - there would be a detailed sign in front of the Temple explaining all about the Maya (and they wouldn't fade like those at Palenque); Bad - this is as close as we would get to the Temple; Good - there would be a great museum with loads of interpretation and filled with groovy artifacts; Bad - there would be a pizza parlor right next door; Good - there would be signs marking trails and the trails would be graded and paved; Bad - there would be signs marking trails and the trails would be graded and paved; Good - much more reconstruction and archaeology would have been completed over the years; Bad - we would feel so guilty about it there would no more reconstruction or archaeology for a hundred years; Good - restricted areas would keep yahoos from trampling down the ruins; Bad - restricted areas would be everywhere. And so on. Which is better? Ours, of course, but barely.

After two or three hours of sticky strolling we returned to the Great Plaza in hopes of catching up with Roger who had waited at the hotel for a tardy tour guide. Roger was there but sans guide (who never showed) and oblivious to our needs so we pressed on. After a hardscrabble climb up and down Temple V we drifted into the beautiful Plaza of the Seven Temples. We entered through the ruined east wall which strongly resembled a scene from Stephens and Catherwood's books complete with spider monkeys in the trees. We lolled around the semi-cleared Plaza; mahogany, ceiba and other lush trees shared the open spaces with a fertile carpet of green grass. It was the ideal spot for a spirited game of Mayan croquet. Bring back the Empire! Bring back those white, starched clothes and those little wooden balls. At least the losing team won't have their heads chopped off.



After another round of refrescos Gen and I left Tikal for a respite back at the hotel and a bit of necessary shopping. I was saving my Guatemalan Queztals for a Tikal T-shirt, the touristic frivolity I knew I would indulge in. Back at the hotel Gen and I sat in a large wooden swing, ate lemon snaps and drank purified water while I talked about my mother for a short spell. Tikal had brought back a series of memories that I needed to share, well not needed since I long ago made peace with my family, but needed to relate to Gen since she came in only on the tailend of the festivities. Besides, we were married now, my fortunes were hers and vice versa. Our family histories, both alive and buried, were intertwined, for better or worse. For better I'm positive.

That afternoon we returned to the Great City and spent all our available time exploring the labyrinth called the Central Acropolis. We had the elaborate structure nearly all to ourselves. We climbed and poked and sat and read. We marvelled at the spindle-shaped lintels and gazed across the jungle tops. We pondered the perplexing configuration of the maze-like Acropolis and came to rather unstartling conclusion that the Maya were just plain strange folk, at least strange by our standards and probably by many others. Earlier, up top Temple V, I was confused to discover only one, tiny room at the summit of this massive temple. What possibly could be the function of this worthless room? Then I thought : what if it served no function at all? What if it were merely a place for the priest to retire to until the faithful populace melted away? Was it a coincidence that these great temples all stop just above treeline, as if the Maya were demonstrating a symbolic mastery over their (failing) environment? I thought not.

To my slightly trained, partially educated, eyes the Mayan world seemed inordinately steeped in symbol and ritual. A temple with a tiny room was perfect for a priest's symbolic domination of his flock whose upward turned eyes must have considered this mere man a god. And what were to make of this Acropolis, this mass of residences, rooms, walls and stairs that were heaped upon each other in an almost arbitrary fashion? Was this what the Maya face looked like when turned away from the peasants? Was this the Mayan mind stripped of its ritual and symbol? I could see a world increasingly and aching stratified, buttressed by symbols until a sort of cultural rigor mortis settled in. Tikal began to look to me like a Mayan house of cards, built higher and wider over a land and a people which no longer had any meaningful contact with their rulers. To my simple mind the ensuing collapse of the Classic Maya seemed inevitable. Ritual and symbol are the dressing, not the meat, of cultures.

We left the Acropolis and stepped onto the Mendez Causeway with every intention of taking a leisurely last stroll to a far away temple. But my my tow hurt so we detoured into Group G (for Gen) where we spent the last moments of our stay in the Great City poking about in a lovely ruin, with secret passageways, and watching the spider monkeys dangle from the trees. Finally the heat and humidity and the dying day forced us on our way, out of the park, out of the country, and more slowly, out of the honeymoon. Every trip has an apogee, not so much a moment of climax as much as the eventual point of turning. What goes out must come back, or else it is not a true journey. This moment, the final walk through the jungle to the park entrance was the apogee of this trip and I knew it. Gen thinks I'm shamelessly sentimental but I tend to think of it as helplessly sensitive. I think in terms of apogees and memories and turning sensations. I have a hair-trigger nostalgia, true, but it has developed because has been good; I have met good people and seen good times. And I miss each and every one of them.





A word about our hotel - it was terrible. That's not fair of course, Roger put us in the best of the lot, unfortunately the lot was terrible. Part of it wasn't the hotel's fault, such as the endemic lack of circulating air, but part of it was, such as the lack of electricity (and overhead fan) at night and the bug-infested room that passed as a 'bungalow'. The nights were pure hell - you sweated all the time mostly due to the fact you must 'sleep' under a bedsheet in fear of falling bugs from the organic thing they called a roof. Every morning my pillow was soaked through with sweat. Roger didn't help matters - during both suppers he smirked his way through various descriptions of tropical diseases borne by bugs that fell from that fell from organic things that looked like roofs onto people without mosquito netting. We did have mosquito netting, didn't we? We didn't. He regaled us with stories about scorpions, dengue-fever carrying mosquitoes, and the dreaded shaguas beetle with laid eggs under your skin and caused a form of asthma that was 'worse than death.' Roger thought these stories were amusing. Roger, of course, slept under mosquito netting.



Everything after our stay at Tikal was mostly driving. The next day we drove a long distance over bad roads (the pavement ended at Tikal) to the Guatemala-Belize border where we were picked up by Lynne and driven to the Mayan ruin of Xuantunich where we met our old friend Lisa and toured with her for two brief hours. She told us about this blowout party taking place that night but our hosts declined the invitation - we had too much driving to do. So Gen gave Lisa a big hug and we were on our way - another five hours in the van. That night we stayed at the breezy Crooked Tree Resort in Belize somewhere, sipped Belizian beer on a pier in a lake and slept soundly fanned by the steady lake breezes. That night we had taken a vote, birds or more Mayan ruins the next day? To my surprise Bill wanted to see more ruins so we interrupted the day's eight-hour drive for one last peek at history. We popped into Kohunlich which was impressive, which also finished off my film. I was free now! Then we cruised to Kailuum and arrived battered, stinky, drowsy and completely road-weary.





It was a great trip, we all agreed, but we could go no further. Twelve ruins in ten days, three countries, three vans and one boat. The trip spiraled down as we went from air-conditioning to ceiling fans to tents on the beach. Our clothes smelled, our film and money shot, our eyes replete with enough Third World images for a decent spell. At least we avoided getting sick and now we were on the beach for four days of rest and recovery, just the way we planned it. It was perfect, just perfect. Good weather, good company, good food, good sights, great spirits, no bugs and plenty of memories. Isn't that what a honeymoon should be - perfect?