

DATE: September, 18, 1998  
TO: Gale Greenleaf, Professor  
FROM: Tom Penick, Student  
SUBJECT: Trip report on visit to the Yucatán region of Mexico, August 16-23, 1998

## **SUMMARY**

My wife and I planned this vacation to revisit a region of Mexico we had enjoyed in the past and to explore parts of it we had not seen. We planned to go snorkeling, visit some Mayan ruins, sample the local cuisine, and take lots of pictures. Twelve years prior, we had stayed at Akumal, a small resort community on the Caribbean coast. On this trip we returned to Akumal and also visited the eco-park, Xcaret, and the Mayan ruins of Xel-ha, Cobá, and Chichén Itzá. This report is a record of our experiences and our impressions of the visit.

## **THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA**

The Yucatán peninsula includes the Mexican states of Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo; the country of Belize; and northern Guatemala. To the west and north lies the Gulf of Mexico and to the east is the Caribbean Ocean. Refer to the map in Appendix A. Our visit begins in Cancún, a major resort city in the northeastern part of the Yucatán.

The northern Yucatán is flat and covered with dense tropical growth on a base of limestone with a thin layer of soil. The region has no surface rivers since rainwater seeps through the limestone and forms channels underground. In many places, underground pools form and the ceiling collapses to form a large open well called a *cenote*. Since the cenotes are essential for water supply, settlements are often found next to them.

The peninsula is dotted with numerous Mayan ruins. The better known ruins are Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, Tulum, Cobá, and Palenque. Some of the sites were great cities covering many square miles. Most were not inhabited at the time of the Spanish conquest, although the Mayans continued to make pilgrimages to the ancient sites.

## **OUR DESTINATIONS**

We intended for our principal destination to be Chetumal, a Caribbean port on the border of Belize. Due to the high airfare to this destination, we elected to fly into Cancún on an inexpensive Funjet charter and rent a car there. Since we arrived late in the day, we drove only as far as Playa del Carmen for the first night.

### ***XCARET***

Early on the 17<sup>th</sup>, we continued south to Akumal. On the way, we encountered an "eco-park" called Xcaret (esh cah **rett**). We paid the \$40 per person entrance fee and made a day of it. The park is located where an underground river empties into the Caribbean. There are two cenotes: one has been converted into an amphitheater, the other is used for swimming. Swimmers may also explore the connecting semi-underground passages and the mouth of the river. A guided tour takes swimmers through an underground section. The water is clear and has abundant

tropical fish. For an extra fee you can swim with the dolphins in their pens. Some guests are allowed to participate in the dolphin show where the dolphins leap over them as they bob nervously in the water.

The amphitheater featured a quality Vegas-style show with a Mayan twist. A number of animals were on display, including pumas, panthers, monkeys, and caiman. The restaurants were excellent. The park contained some small Mayan ruins, and a museum with models of many Mayan archaeological sites. There was an orchid greenhouse, a mushroom research facility, and a botanical tour path through the jungle. The grounds were clean and attractive. Tourists, bussed in from Cancún, crowded the park.

### **AKUMAL**

Since we left Xcaret late in the day, we decided to stay the night in nearby Akumal. We arrived to find there were no vacancies at the hotel where we had stayed on a previous trip. Continuing south for 3 km, we found a luxury beachfront condo for rent at the hotel Oasis, where we stayed two nights.

Highway 307 was under construction and we had been frequently diverted to a dirt roadway alongside. A slow-moving water truck made regular passes to wet down these sections to alleviate the dust problem. This continued despite the fact that it had been raining and in some places the water was quite deep. The water truck dispensed its load via a man riding on the rear bumper wielding a high-pressure hose. He seemed to take pleasure in rinsing off any mud-splattered cars that came within range.

When we questioned our landlady about our intended destination of Chetumal, she commented that it was not a particularly attractive city and that the municipal government relied heavily upon revenue from citations issued to visiting motorists. Because of this, the road conditions, and the fact that we were enjoying ourselves where we were, we decided to save Chetumal for another trip.

### **XEL-HA**

On the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>, we visited the nearby Mayan ruins of Xel-ha (shell **ha**). This is a relatively minor site, not visited by the tour busses. Arriving at 11 a.m., we were the first visitors of the day, and spent two hours exploring the site by ourselves.

We discovered that Highway 307 was actually built through the site. There are a few small structures that have been cleared of jungle growth and partially restored. Also cleared was a Mayan roadway, or *sacbe*, that was about 1/4-mile long and led to another group of structures next to a cenote [1, p. 106].

Where the river feeding this cenote enters the Caribbean, lies the eco-park Xel-ha, similar to Xcaret but not as fancy or as pricey. Back at the condo we snorkeled in the Caribbean and photographed a manta ray.

## **COBÁ**

We departed early on the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> so we could be at the ruins of Cobá when they opened at 8 a.m. This is the largest of the Mayan sites, some 80 square miles with about 6500 stone structures. There are five lakes next to the site, which is unusual for this region of underground rivers. Some 50 radiating roadways connected the city to the surrounding area, one of which went straight to Chichén Itzá, 62 miles distant. This seems remarkable since the Mayans had neither the wheel nor beasts of burden [1, pp. 105-107].

We were the first visitors to enter and began the 1-mile walk to the largest pyramid, Nohoch Mul. The site is mostly overgrown jungle and the walk down the path was quite beautiful with the sunlight streaming through the trees and the morning fog rising from the ground. The pyramid is 42 meters tall and has a square structure at the top with interior spaces. The restoration is rather crude, with steep, uneven steps.

We toured the other structures and probably walked five miles. The site is off of the main tour bus route so there are not a lot of visitors. The few we saw were European. After leaving Cobá, we returned to Playa del Carmen, where we had stayed the first night.

## **PLAYA DEL CARMEN**

Playa del Carmen is on the Caribbean coast and is a jumping-off point for trips to Isla Cozumel, which can be seen in the distance from the beach. Both a ferry and an airplane make the short hop to the island. It's a fairly large town with an ample supply of restaurants, shops, and hotels, but without the glitz of Cancún. We relaxed and enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, we departed for Valladolid, which is located in the interior near the archaeological site, Chichén Itzá.

## **VALLADOLID**

To get to Valladolid, we first drove to Cancún. Chichén Itzá is highly commercialized and a toll road has been built for access from Cancún. Our map noted that the toll road and its \$24 fee targeted tourists with rental cars and that everyone else took the perfectly good free road (Highway 180). The problem is that signs direct traffic to the toll road, and the free road is unmarked. After searching for some time, we finally left town in the right direction and it wasn't until later that we were able to confirm that we were on the right highway. The road was indeed acceptable and we didn't mind having to slow down for the speed bumps, or *topes*, in the small communities along the way.

We found the colonial-style hotel, El Mesón de Marqué, on the main square in Valladolid and checked in. Somehow we got the best room in the hotel, which overlooked the central courtyard/restaurant in the old part of the hotel.

The following morning we rose early and drove the 45 minutes to Chichén Itzá. Once again, we had difficulty since the signs to Chichén Itzá led only to the toll road.

## ***CHICHÉN ITZÁ***

We weren't the only visitors to arrive at the 8:00 a.m. opening time but nonetheless we were able to get in and take a few pictures before the crowd arrived. Chichén Itzá had been more thoroughly cleared of jungle growth and the restoration had been done by skilled workers. The main pyramid, with its steep stone steps, challenged even those who weren't afraid of heights. Seeing the ambulance stationed behind nearby trees did not boost my confidence.

The guides like to tell visitors about the young women who were sacrificed in the cenote of Chichén Itzá. Actually, the bones of men, women, and children were all found in the cenote [2]. The cenote has vertical walls that rise about 30' above the water level. Since this was the primary source of water, I suspect that many of these deaths were just accidents involving people collecting water.

Back at Valladolid, we discovered Cenote Zací just a few blocks from our hotel. It's a beautiful area that occupies a city block along with a pleasant restaurant. After another night at the hotel, we drove back to Cancún to catch our afternoon flight.

## **IMPRESSIONS**

We enjoyed our trip the most where we could avoid the influences of the resort city of Cancún. We found it unpleasant to be subjected to the double standard where tourists are expected to pay to use a highway while locals do not. At archaeological sites we were able to avoid the bussed-in crowds and some of the tropical heat by arriving at opening time. I would speculate that the reason tour buses do not follow this practice is so that their riders will be more eager to return to the air-conditioned buses in the midday heat, thus shortening the time required to conduct the tour.

## ***HIGHWAY 307***

The coastal highway is so torn up by construction along the entire Cancún to Tulum section that we traveled, that one should consider avoiding it. The new highway will be divided and made of concrete, so the project will probably take a long time.

## ***THE INFLUENCE OF CANCÚN***

Cancún's influence along the Caribbean coast persisted along the entire Cancún-Tulum section. We saw only upscale developments, one after another, along this route. Inland development is almost nonexistent. The Cancún to Chichén Itzá toll road, which typically does not connect with crossing highways, serves to discourage traffic to many interior cities. The use of tour busses, with their limited destinations, tends to isolate these areas from tourists as well.

Although the toll road has an exit for Valladolid, this city seemed all but abandoned as a jumping-off point for Chichén Itzá, with most visitors staying in Cancún. We felt welcome in Valladolid and were treated as wanted guests rather than cash cows.

## ***ENJOYING THE MAYAN RUINS***

The archaeological sites are impressive but there are several forces conspiring to make visits unpleasant. These include heavy tourist traffic to Tulum and Chichén Itzá; the intense heat, sun,

and humidity of the low-lying tropics; road conditions; and mosquitoes. We recommend being at the gate at 8:00 a.m. with sunscreen applied, and carrying drinking water and mosquito repellent. The nature aspect of these early morning walks was enjoyable. We observed wildlife, especially birds and about five unusual varieties of butterflies, saw some unusual red fungi, and enjoyed the lush tropical vegetation. But still the neon turquoise of the Caribbean beckons, and if we visit again, we expect to push south of Tulum in search of undeveloped shores.

# APPENDIX A

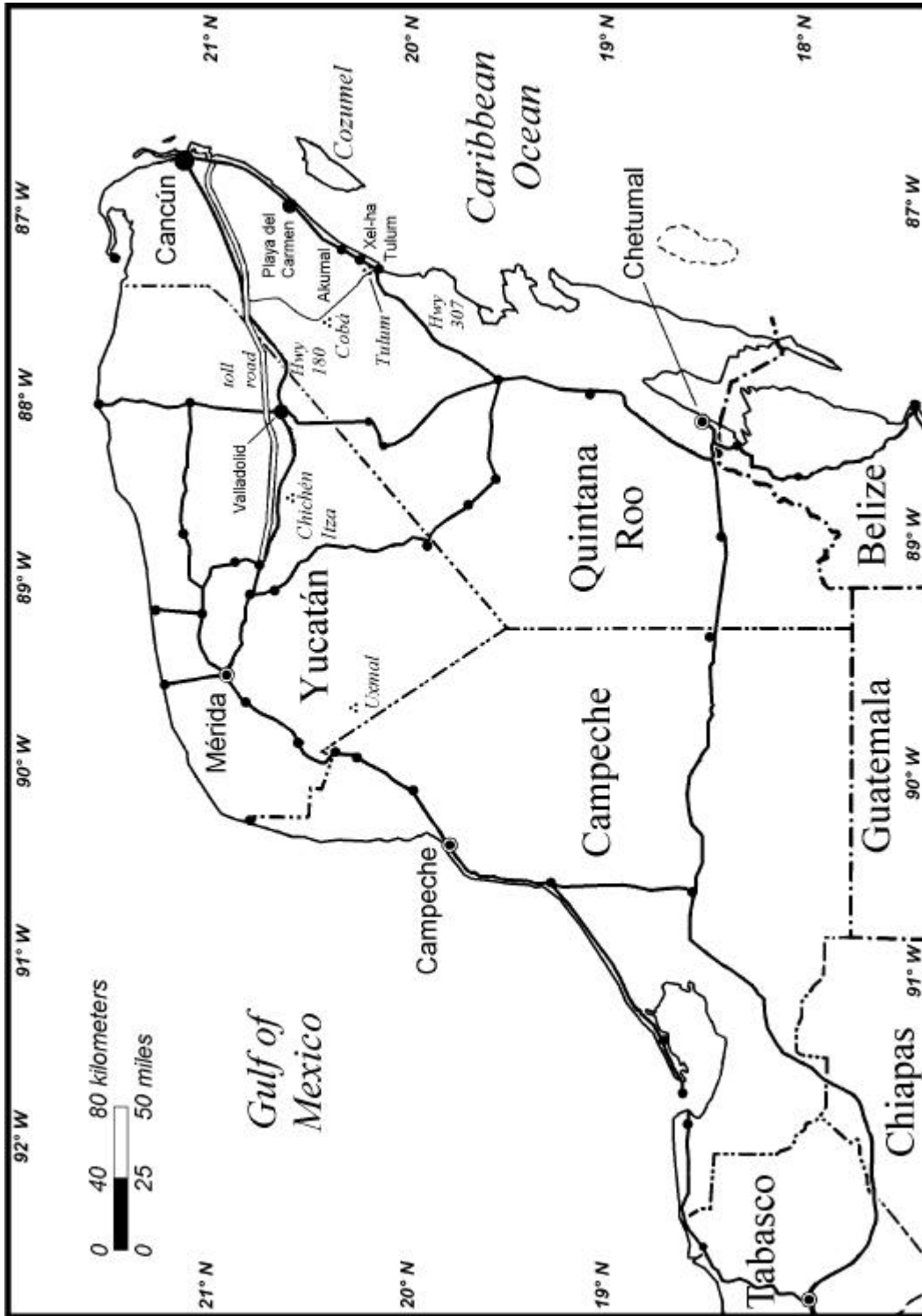


Figure 1. Yucatán Peninsula

## REFERENCE

- [1] Antoinette May, *The Yucatan A Guide to the Land of Maya Mysteries Plus Sacred Sites at Belize, Tikal & Copan*. San Carlos, CA: Wide World Publishing/Tetra, 1997.
- [2] Plaque posted at the site of the cenote at Chichén Itzá, as seen on August, 22, 1998.