

## Mexico October-December 2005



Mexico City is an entrancing cultural grab-bag. A benefit of dictatorships is the architectural legacy of monomania they sometimes leave behind. The Palacio de las Bellas Artes was erected by Porfirio Diaz, who ruled the country for thirty-four years from 1876. Its façade is classic revival, but the interior is a triumphant display of art deco, including huge, dynamic murals.

After the decade of revolution that ended in 1920 it was government policy to convey propaganda to the illiterate masses through publicly sponsored art. Diego Rivera's astonishing murals, more amusing today than polemic, are secreted throughout the city like treats at Easter. We discovered dozens on the two floors surrounding two quadrangles inhabited by the Ministry of Education. There are also impressive works by less well-known artists in public buildings. One of them, David Siqueiros, an ardent Stalinist, was jailed for spraying bullets at Leon Trotsky (see below).

In the comfortable suburb of Coyoacán there are two 1940s modernist cube houses side by side, one maroon, one blue. The first contains Rivera's studio, cluttered with personal memorabilia — implements for grinding and mixing paint, books, papier mâché grotesques and pre-Columbian artefacts. The second, smaller, house is Frida Kahlo's. An aerial walkway connects them, so she could

bring him his dinner. That's macho Latin culture for you. On the other hand, we both feel it's just as well he did most of the art and she did most of the cooking.

In the 1930s they were hosts to Leon Trotsky before he acquired his own fortified home not far away. He spent 12 hours a day at his typewriter, relaxing by tending his pet rabbits and making occasional forays into the countryside to add to his collection of cacti. The walls of his bedroom are scarred by bullets which rained through his window when a couple of dozen armed men burst into his courtyard. Trotsky and his wife eluded these incompetent hitmen by hiding in the corner closest to the window. So, a few weeks later the Soviets sent back the man with the ice-pick.

The Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park is a must, even for people who don't like museums. The architecture of the building is astonishing, with a detached roof hovering over its spacious quadrangle on a giant pillar. The exhibits present a coherent story of the exotic civilisations that rose and fell here between 2000 BC and the arrival of the Conquistadores.

As the night wears on the mariachi bands gather in their gaudy costumes in the seedy Plaza Garibaldi. For a few dollars they will serenade you with guitars, drums and trumpets while you stand in front of them, deeply embarrassed.

The corrida del toros in Mexico City is the largest in the world. The building seems quite low, and when you enter you discover why. The arena is sunk into the ground, like a vast pit. The first Sunday of the season turned out to be a historic afternoon. The arena resounded with an ascending crescendo of 'Olés' as the strutting Valencian, Enrique Ponce, controlled his bull with graceful elegance. Ponce was awarded two ears and a tail — a rare accolade — and was carried about the ring on the shoulders of his entourage. For his valour, the bull also received an award, though posthumously — an *arrastre lento* or 'slow drag' from the ring by the yoked horses. It was the best of all bullfights, and then came the worst. A young Columbian matador, Fermín Rivera, was disgraced when he failed his *alternativa* — the ceremony in which a novice becomes a full-fledged bullfighter. He plunged his sword into the animal thirteen times without locating the heart or the lungs, while the crowd booed and slow-clapped and tossed seat cushions into the arena — before Rivera gave up in disgust. We had thought that bulls never survived a corrida, but the recalcitrant beast was led living back into the corral, and will be allowed to die peacefully in pasture.

Mexico City does not deserve its bad press. Yes, it is huge and polluted and undoubtedly there is squalor in its many poor barrios, but it is fascinating. On the *zócalo* (main plaza) where Moctezuma entertained Cortéz is a handsome colonial building, which since 1775 has housed the Nacional Monte de Piedad. Within its dark, lofty pillared halls crowds queue at brass-trimmed windows where clerks scrutinise objects with loupes screwed in their eyes, then give or take money. It is a Dickensian scene and the Piedad has a Dickensian function: it is the capital's pawnshop.

In Mexico you can go almost anywhere by bus. And it's all computerised. At the counter they swivel the computer monitor around so you can choose your seat. Although, on the first class services, it's impossible to book a seat out of line-of-sight of the monitors that blare non-stop mindless American movies.

In Pátzcuaro, west of Mexico City in the state of Michóacan, the childish rituals of 'Hallowe'en' are taken seriously. On 31<sup>st</sup> October the streets fill with stalls selling elaborate floral bouquets, chocolate skulls, tiny sugar coffins and special breads. After dark the action moves to the cemeteries. We spent the night of the 'Day of the Dead' touring cemeteries filled with flaming candles. Families huddled in the cold over graves heaped with flowers and offerings of bread and fruit, keeping vigil over their dead. The next day was a national holiday and crowds flocked to the local cemetery for a jolly picnic. Musicians played, children frolicked and vendors sold balloons and snacks while graves were tended and the windows of the elaborate glasshouses that shelter some of them were washed.

We've done it again. Once, we boarded a train intending to travel from west to east across the Indian ghats from Kollam to Madurai — and awoke halfway to find ourselves on the southern tip of the subcontinent. We were on the right train, but its route was counter-intuitive. Similarly, when we finally tore ourselves away from the charming colonial city of Oaxaca, we boarded a bus assuming it would take the direct route from east to west across the mountains to the Pacific Coast and Puerto Escondido. That name means 'hidden port' and it must be, because we never found it. We had wondered why the bus would take ten hours to cross this relatively short stretch. Like the Indian train, it avoids the mountains, going south first, then back up north. As it toiled up the coast in the encroaching darkness we decided to jump bus at Pochutla where we could get a colectivo taxi to Puerto Angel on the coast.

A sound decision. While Puerto Escondido is renowned for roiling surf, rendering the beaches unswimmable for middle-aged paddlers, Puerto Angel lies in a quiet, enclosed bay. Fishing for the local small tuna is still more important than tourism. The young fishermen roar their dinghies straight up onto the sand, flipping up the prop of the absurdly powerful outboard engines at the last instant. We found a hotel right on the beach and some simple shacks serving lemony Margaritas, fantastic seafood and great views.

We also discovered a secluded cove half-an-hour's walk away. There was a solitary palm umbrella on the beach, and we could walk a few steps or swim in the blue sea to a shack in the next cove, where there was fresh fish and beer for lunch. Chuck reckoned this was just the spot for him to write the fourth draft he had to submit to the Greek film script workshop as soon as we returned to Blighty. He reckoned he would need four days. In this paradise he finished in two, but we spent four days in Puerto Angel anyway. It's that kind of place.

San Cristóbal de las Casas, a colonial city architecturally similar to Oaxaca, has the sharper air of a sterner climate. It sits in the Chiapas highlands above 2,000 metres, where the vistas are Andean and the faces Indian. One Sunday morning

we were crossing the zócalo on our way to spend the morning in a museum when Judith noticed the police had closed the square to motor traffic. She approached a small, portly policista — all Mexican policemen are small and portly — to ask if anything was going on. “Un desfile”, he told her. We didn’t know what that meant. So he obliged by executing a neat, little Charlie Chaplin goose-step. And that’s how we got to see the three-hour parade celebrating the Anniversary of the Revolution on November 20<sup>th</sup> (which the tourist office had neglected to mention when queried about events). There was an endless river of marching groups and bands from every school in the area, from social groups, karate classes, (American) football teams, and the volunteer fire department. Many of the thousands of children were dressed as revolutionaries in sombreros and banderillas with toy rifles and false moustaches. Others performed athletic demonstrations, tumbling, kick-boxing, or nervously balancing on human pyramids while marching or pedalling on bicycles. The firemen stopped every hundred metres or so to erect a ladder twenty-five metres high, supported by taut ropes, and send a couple of men to scamper up on it, afterwards descending to leap through burning hoops. Can you imagine Ken Livingstone getting the London Fire Department to do that?

We rode out from San Cristóbal to the Tzotzil village of Chamula where the peasants remain still somewhat apart from modern society. The women wear white embroidered blouses and heavy wool skirts and fold scarves on their heads to ward off the sun. The men wear wide sombreros and dress all in white with sheepskin serapes draped over their shoulders. The horses surprised us. They were spirited and obedient, and we walked up through pine forests, trotted in country lanes and cantered across meadows against a magnificent backdrop of mountains. At the market in Chamula there’s a small church that seems more pagan than Christian. There are no pews inside and the religion practiced here is polytheistic. The walls are lined with coloured statues of various saints — dozens of them — and whole families of peasants venerate the one they choose. They place rows of candles before them and also bottles of Coca-cola or Fanta — then kneel or squat to chant in the smoke and gloom. The floor is littered with candlewax and straw. Afterwards, the wax is carefully scraped into plastic bags, to be remoulded for use another day.

Ruins: we explored fifteen — each different and remarkable in its own way. There’s not much left of the sophisticated Aztec city of palaces and causeways that an astounded Cortés saw arising from the middle of a lake — just a few walls, passages and courtyards. But after five hundred years, smack in the middle of a city of twenty million people, it’s amazing that any trace of Tenochtitlán still exists. It’s right on the edge of the zócalo and includes an excellent museum which explains how the generations of buildings enclosed and incorporated older walls and temples. To the north of Mexico City the site of Teotihuacán is a two-hour journey by tram and bus. It’s an immense pre-Aztec vista of pyramid temples, vast walled enclosures and boulevards.

The only remains of Tzintzuntzán, a Tarascan city in the state of Michoacán, near Pátzcuaro, are its vast retaining walls, uniquely rounded at the corners. Monte Albán, just outside Oaxaca, is renowned for its stunning location. The Zapotec

civilisation lopped off the top of a mountain situated at the conjunction of three green valleys. Also reached from Oaxaca is Mitla, a Mixtec site right in a modern village, where you can climb down into dank underground chambers, and Yagul, a Zapotec hillside complex of streets and houses with a commanding view.

The summits of the huge palaces and pyramids in the extensive Mayan site of Palenque, nestled in the hilly frontier of the state of Chiapas, offer long views over the green Yucatan plain. The isolated Mayan ruins of Yaxchilán on the Guatemalan frontier are reached after a three-hour car journey and a 45-minute cruise down a jungle river, and while you explore it, howler monkeys roar all around. Bonampak, also Mayan and not far away, retains coloured murals which still tell gruesome stories.

We took a local bus to tour four Puuc Mayan sites near Mérida in Yucatan. Sayil has a well-restored Gran Palacio adorned with masks of the raingod Chac; the Palace of Masks in Kabáh is covered with these representations, some retaining the long curved trunk-noses; the buildings in Labná are connected by a long raised causeway. The jewel of the Puuc crown is Uxmal, with its great pyramids and a unique cloistered quadrangle.

The spectacular buildings of Mayan Chichén Itzá in Yucatan justify its reputation and there is the added joy of watching timid American tourists of all ages and shapes crawling up the pyramid steps on their hands and knees and bumping down again on their bottoms. We were grateful that our last site visit provided a more intimate memory: the little-visited, restful oasis of Ek Balam, a Mayan site reached by colectivo from Valladolid. There, that's fifteen.

Forget Tex-Mex, which is debased. Mexican food is varied and appetising. Fresh fruit became our standard breakfast: generous slices of papaya, pineapple, melon, watermelon and banana attractively arranged on a large platter. For lunch it was usually tacos — in a restaurant or freshly prepared in a street stall — crusty, cornbread tortillas filled with chicken or pork and salad or just about anything. For dinner our favourites were chilles relleños – mild peppers stuffed with cheese or meat, chicken molé — the chocolate sauce with a bitter taste like tamarind, and any fish served a la Veracruzana — a tangy sauce of tomatoes, onions and olives. Judith thrived on fresh fruit drinks such as Guayaba (Guava) and Guanábana (Soursop, like custard apple). The exotic fruits and some vegetables make wonderful ice cream. Leche quemada – burned milk – is an acquired taste. Mango with chille is marvellous and so is tamarind on its own, but with added chille it made Chuck gag. He found a way to make fizzy American-style Mexican beer palatable. It's called Michelada. You dip the rim of a huge, bowl-shaped glass into salt, shovel some chopped ice into it, add a bottle of beer — preferably oscura (dark) — then add lime juice, Worcestershire sauce, and chille. Deeply refreshing on a hot day, and such a sophisticated taste it takes a long time to drink.

Campeche is not the sort of place one aims to go, but where one can end up between bus journeys. It sits on the Golfe de México where the Yucatan claws north towards Cuba. It's been here almost five hundred years, since the second

generation of Conquistadores wrested this swampy coast from the Mayas. The old quarter still has the aspect of a settlement, a grid of one-storey houses in faded pastel colours slumbering in the sun, surrounded by the fragments of stone fortifications thrown up to keep the Caribbean pirates at bay. Its many churches have been built and rebuilt over the centuries. Campeche was one of the key ports along the route transporting New World riches to Spain, and thus a favourite target for filibusteros (buccaneers). Today the sea has retreated from the old forts and the city has turned its back on it. The seafront is now bordered by a ring road and a desolate malecón where no one walks. A fringe of dirty beach is littered with the sunburnt and barnacled hulks of fibreglass boats — perhaps relics of the recent hurricane Wilma — and has a heady, sulphurous aroma of dead fish and raw sewage. But there's a shaded zócalo and restaurants serving good seafood. So we stayed a while in a cheap hotel that, like most of the prominent old buildings, had once been a grand colonial mansion. The public rooms were gloriously tiled and our room was painted in the pastel colours of the town — blue and pink and green. In the zócalo we hear a parade coming around the corner. It was a saint's day, and regiments of Christian Action groups assembled from parishes around the area — in sombreros and native dresses, or T-shirts and baseball caps — to march and sing and wave banners protesting their faith.

Go to Mérida on a Sunday. At nine o'clock on Saturday night the zócalo and surrounding streets are closed to traffic, and remain so for twenty-four hours. Chairs are set out on the square and in the parks, food stalls open to serve hot tacos and cold fruit drinks, and restaurants move chairs and tables onto the



streets. Live music throbs everywhere, from guitar trios to mariachi and marimba bands to cool jazz groups. A happy, swirling display of hot-footed folk-dancing carries on for a couple of hours, and afterwards the audience gets up to dance. The entertainment is all free and not just for tourists, who are vastly outnumbered by the locals. It goes on every Saturday night and all day Sunday. What about it, Ken?

On the waterless Yucatán plain the Mayans relied on collecting rainfall, but also drew water from cenotes. These are caverns which lie under the limestone crust, below the water table. They are believed to form a more or less continuous underground network extending throughout the peninsula. We are indebted to our Swiss friend, Peter Christman, a resourceful traveller, who told us about a unique cenote tour that doesn't appear in our guide book. When we sought out

the backpacker hostel we found that the tour no longer operated. But we got the information to do it ourselves. First, a forty-kilometre ride in a colectivo to a dusty crossroads hamlet. Then a three-kilometre jaunt by bicycle taxi to a hacienda. Where a cart was wheeled onto a derelict narrow gauge railway, a horse was attached to the cart and we trundled off on a tour of three cenotes. This funky transport system originally served to harvest henequen, a hemp fibre used to make rope. This industry perished with the invention of nylon, but the railway remains, traversing acres of countryside. The limestone crust is pocked with holes and you have to be careful to choose the appropriate entrance into the cenote – the hole with a rusty ladder fixed, more or less, inside it. Twenty or thirty metres below you find a deep, still pool illuminated by shafts of light from above. Trees thrust their roots down into the water; bats screech and swifts dart above and small black fish circle below. The water is transparent and surprisingly warm, but it takes some courage to push off into the darkness behind the massive knot of tree roots. We also visited a couple of cenotes outside Valladolid which are provided with concrete platforms and are used as local swimming holes, and there's even one in the centre of the town — yet they still exude a sense of mystery.

Peter Christman also recommended our funkiest hotel. The Trinidad Galería in Mérida is not quite sure whether it's a hotel or an art gallery. It's a labyrinth of patios and passageways littered with looney paintings, absurd sculptures and objets trouvés cluttering the passageways or hanging from tree branches. Our room was claustrophobic, but there was a charming, cloistered swimming pool and it cost only about £17 a night.

There was only one Occasion of Panic. In remote Palenque both of the banks in town refused to disgorge cash to our debit cards. So Judith inserted her credit card, and the machine ate it. We e-mailed our bank, telling them in capital letters NOT to cancel the credit card, because Chuck still had one using the same number. So they did. And refused to explain why the debit cards wouldn't work. Moral of the story? There is still a role for travellers' cheques.

When we arrived at Rio Lagartos, the little fishing port was eerily quiet. It looked like Hurricane Wilma had wasted it. Fortunately, the one wakeful inhabitant was on the lookout for tourists and greeted us as we stepped down from the local bus. César swiftly installed us in a room on the seafront, arranged a line across our room so we could hang out our still-damp washing, and took us out in his skiff to observe the birdlife in the salt marshes. Hurricane Wilma had torn up trees and shifted sandbanks, and the tourists had been put off by rumours that the famous flocks of flamingos had been devastated. But they were still there in numbers and we were rewarded with the sight of them streaking like red arrows against the setting sun.

César also recommended a restaurant, which he thought might open at eight p.m. It didn't, and we wandered the dark streets for some time until we found an open kitchen. Although the tourists had disappeared, the town had not been seriously affected by Wilma — at least not in comparison to a previous hurricane a few years ago, when the water was chest deep in our restaurant.

We spent our last night in Cancún, far from the famous white-sand beach, but close to the bus station and handy for the airport. The next morning we took the local bus to the zona hotelera, where five-star hotels and shopping malls are jammed cheek by jowl along 15 kilometres of barrier island. Hurricane Wilma struck here two months ago. The flimsier constructions — marquees, petrol station forecourts, signs and verandas — lay in ruins. Massive thatched roofs hung in shreds and palm trees were stripped bare. Several hopeful signs denied the evidence of our eyes: 'Yes, we are open.' Where the beaches had been there was a bank of sand and concrete to clamber down. Ninety percent of the renowned white-sand beaches had been swept away. Cancún attracted twenty million foreign visitors last year. They spent \$11 billion, and the resort is a major prop of the Mexican economy. In the run-up to the peak Christmas season we saw half-a-dozen people.

When was then last time you 'reconfirmed' an airline flight? We flew with Delta Airlines, which, unbeknownst to us, had gone into Chapter One — a kind of receivership limbo — shortly after we bought our tickets. We didn't give our return flight a thought until we arrived at Cancún airport. Our flight, via Cincinnati, did not appear on the electronic monitor. Indeed, no Delta flight was listed. At the Delta service counter, chairs were upended on desks and a tatty sign gave a telephone number to call. Eventually, at the very end of the bank of check-in counters, we found that life still existed on planet Delta. The inhabitants had never heard of the Cincinnati flight, but eventually allowed that the service must have been cancelled post-Wilma. There was one Delta flight out of Cancún later that day, but, they said, it was already full. Nevertheless, somehow they managed to squeeze us onto it. Then the only trauma that lay between us and a nice cup of tea at home was the ordeal of fingerprinting, hollering, footwear-removing, confusion and general harassment just short of cattle-prodding which passes for immigration procedures under the jaundiced eyes of Homeland Security at Atlanta airport. All designed to prevent us from getting in, when all we wanted to do was get out.