

Mayan trip

November 2004

We were booked on 7 day cruise in November of 2003 out of West Palm Beach on the East Coast of Florida, which would have been nice, as we could visit my mother. However, the cruise line changed the embarkation port to Tampa on the West Coast of Florida. Because of this change, I kept checking the web site, and discovered much to my dismay, the flight to Chichen Itza was not going to be offered. The main reason we were going on this cruise was to visit the Mayan ruins-my reason, anyhow.

I was down on the cruise line website some time later and found a 10 day cruise in November 2004 that stops at Progreso on the Yucatan Peninsula and offers a trip either to Chichen Itza or Uxmal. It also will stop at Costa Maya and Roatan Island in Honduras, so I will be able to visit 3 Mayan sites. The ship will also call at Cozumel and Grand Cayman, where I will have chances to either snorkel or SCUBA. I called up our travel agent cancelled the 2003 cruise and booked the other one for 2004.

We had been on the ship before, but it was only after the 9/11 attack, when a lot of passengers were unable to fly to Nice to board the ship. It will be interesting to see how it is with a full complement of passengers.

After doing some checking with American Airlines and AMTRAK, we have decided to fly into West Palm Beach and visit my mother for a few days, then take the train across Florida to Tampa to catch the ship. We will overnight in Tampa and probably visit my uncle and/or our former next door neighbors.

We just got notified by our travel agent that we have been upgraded to a veranda suite, and there will be a flight from Cozumel to Tulum, so I will be able to visit 4 Mayan sites on the cruise.

Since we had an early morning flight, we stayed at a hotel about 10 minutes away from the airport. The day before our flight, I went to the American Airline website and printed our boarding passes

Our flight from LAX to West Palm was uneventful, since we were not fed on either leg, I bought some sausage in DFW airport, and we had that for lunch. The hotel we stayed at had a problem with their elevator caused by the hurricanes, so we got a room on the first floor. We spent a day and a half visiting Steve's mother, and really enjoyed it.

She had cold cuts for us to make sandwiches for our train trip, which was a lifesaver as the café car on the train has a limited menu and there was a long line. The train was about a half hour late pulling into our station because of all the people getting on for the holidays. We pulled into the Tampa station after dark, and I got a taxi for us. I had him put Sally in first while I got the luggage. I had read somewhere of fake taxis waiting until someone putting their luggage in first and the taxi would take off.

When we got to the hotel, we were quite surprised to see Amtrak's wheelchair come out of the taxi! The taxi driver had apparently loaded on, thinking it was ours. It turned out to be fortuitous, as we found a great restaurant, the Bonefish Grill, about a block and a half away. I wheeled Sally there instead of her struggling over the uneven ground with her walker.

The next day, on the way to the ship, we dropped the wheelchair off at the station before going to the ship. We went through the usual preboarding exercises, and were taken to our suite. The envelope with my shore excursions was waiting, but when I checked it out, the ticket for the stingray trip was missing. I went to the shore excursion desk, and was told there was a change because Grand Cayman had been devastated by hurricanes; we were going to Belize instead.

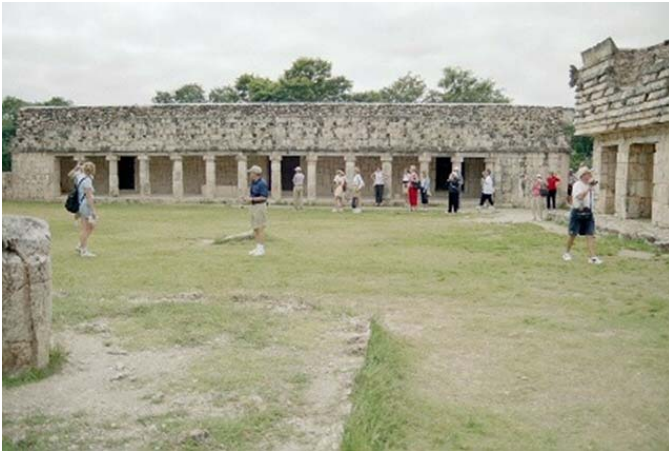
The next day I went to the shore excursion desk and check out the trips that were offered. I selected one that went to the Lamanai ruins, and booked it.

The next day was Thanksgiving, which was a sea day. This had to be the best Thanksgiving Sally and I have spent. We were in our 300 square foot suite with veranda, sitting in our robes, when the room service waiter appeared. He brought our tablecloth, appetizer, soup, salad, Sorbet, main course, and dessert. He also brought a bottle of wine to go with it. By the way, the main course was lobster, not turkey!!

The next day we docked at Progreso on the west side of the Yucatan Peninsula and were taken to Uxmal, one of the Mayan sites. I had a choice of this site or the more famous Chichen Itza, but a friend at work that had been to both recommended Uxmal. Upon entering the site, the first structure we saw was the Pyramid of the Magician.



The unusual thing about this pyramid was that it was elliptical rather than square. From there we went to the Quadrangle of the Birds, where there were carvings of birds on the walls. The largest area was called the Quadrangle of the Nuns, and the buildings have carvings of snakes on them.



Our next stop was at the Ball Court, which had a large stone circle with a hole in it protruding from the wall. Our guide explained that the two teams were made of 7 men each, 6 on each side on the flat surface, and the two captains were on the slope near the circle. The ball could only be hit with the elbows, hips and knees. The first team to get the ball through the hole won, and the captain, being the best, was sacrificed to the gods.



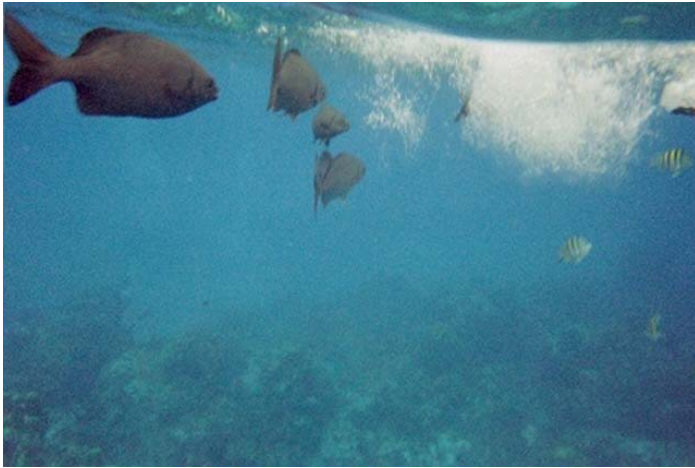
As everyone headed to lunch, I decided to climb the Great Pyramid. I had read that the way to do it was to climb at a diagonal and the worked very well. I also used the same technique descending. It took about a half hour for my pulse rate to get back to normal, but a cold Cerveza helped cool me down. I thought I would be holding up lunch, but there were still people in the buffet line when I got to the restaurant.

Saturday I was able to sleep in a little, but when I looked outside, the Carnival ship Ecstasy was docked across from us with their 1500 party hanties. I looked at the attire of their passengers, and the number of children, and was glad I was not on that ship.

Today I was to take a flight to Tulum, but since I was the only person booked on it, they cancelled it. I opted instead for a drift snorkel trip to Palancar reef, off the North coast of Cozumel. It took a while to get there, and we passed two Celebrity, one more Carnival, and a Princess cruise ship. I had read there are times when there are as many as 16 ships docked! That sounds like St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands!

There was one lady going with us that had a bikini on with the bra at least one size too small, and the capper was that her mother was with her.





That aside, we snorkeled for about an hour and a half, which was enough to see the fish, and use my underwater camera. I learned a little more about technique with it when I was snorkeling in the Galapagos Islands. I hope some of the pictures do come out. The last one I took was of a ray on the bottom- I tried to get a picture of one in the Galapagos, but all I got was half a wing. I remembered to bring some fresh water with me to wash out the salt water from my mouth. The crew came around with Dos Equis beer for those that wanted it, and it tasted great-better than the stuff in the states. He then came around and offered another, and by the time we had docked, I and consumed 3! I guess it was to get the salt water taste out of my mouth.

I came back to the ship, and had lunch with Sally, then took off to do some shopping-I was looking for a charm for her, but the prices were too high. As I headed for the ship, I had to go through a Duty Free shop. I had passed it on the way out, and glanced at their prices, but I thought they were about the same as in the states. I took a closer look, and discovered that they had a sale on Johnnie Walker Black, which is Sally's favorite, and it was in liter bottles- one third more than a fifth. While I was at it, I also found a bottle of 12-year-old single malt that also was in a liter bottle. All's well that ends well.

Sunday I took a tour of the Chacchoben Mayan ruins. The site is still under excavation, and there are many structures that have not been unearthed. When the Mayans abandoned the cities because of famine, disease and war, the jungle took over. In many places there are large trees growing on top of the structures, as many were abandoned over 500 years ago. There were a number of pyramids, but the nicest thing was that it was very overgrown, so most of the walking in the site was in the shade. The guide also showed us a beautiful but tiny orchid that I took a picture of and will hopefully turn out. Unfortunately, or fortunately if my quadriceps were speaking, the guide said we were not allowed to climb to the top of the pyramids.



On my quest to explore more of the Mayan sites, we landed at Rotan Island off the coast of Honduras. We were taken to the airport, and were put on a Czech twin-engine turboprop. The flight was uneventful, but the landing was not. I expected to land at an airport that was somewhat developed, but it was a gravel runway covered with cowpats! Having had similar experiences in the past, I was more surprised than upset, however.





We were driven up a dirt road until we came to the highway, and then were taken to the Mayan site at Copan. The site was still under development, but a large portion of it had been excavated. Our guide showed us a one Limpar note, which had a representation of the site on the reverse. Upon entering the site, we were shown a scale model of the site.

One section that was really interesting was one that was allowed to be flooded during the rainy season, and there were stone carvings of water lilies that would appear to be floating on the surface.



The site, like most of these sites, was not completely excavated, as it is extremely time and money consuming. There was a ball court like the one in Uxmal, but the game was played differently. There were 3 stone heads on each side at the top of the slope, and the object was to hit one with the ball. The ball was solid latex rubber, and weighed about 4 pounds. On one side, was the Grand Staircase, which was covered with glyphs, or Mayan symbols.





We were taken to lunch at a hotel in Copan, and since the exchange rate was 18 Lempiras to the dollar, I got enough for everyone in our group and gave them as a souvenir.

The flight home was uneventful, after the takeoff from the gravel strip. It had an upslope at the takeoff end, and the plane was taxied up the slope-to give it a running start, I guess.

The next day we landed in Belize, and I took a combination river cruise and visit to the Mayan site at Lamanai. The river cruise was exciting as the boat had 2-200 hp outboard engines and could really haul.



We spent part of the tour looking at some of the wildlife, and I guess it would be just like the Amazon River on a smaller scale. We arrived at the site, and because of the ecological requirements, we had a picnic lunch consisting of chicken, rice, and beans. All the food had to be brought in and the remnants carried out of the site. There were a number of pyramids at the site, some of which had not even been excavated for lack of funds. At the bottom of one pyramid, however, there was a large mask cut into the base.



The trip back to the dock was faster, as we did not stop to view any wildlife, but the amazing thing was that the skipper knew which way to go when there were multiple tributaries.

The national beer is Lighthouse beer, and I bought one, thinking I could send the label to my brother-in-law, but the label was screened onto the bottle. I will have to either scan it or try to copy it for him.

Wednesday was a sea day, so I slept in then ordered room service for lunch. Thursday was also sort of a sea day, because we could not dock at Key West until after 8 PM. It seems there is a tradition that everyone gathers at Mallory Square at sunset. Obviously, if we would have docked it would have blocked out the sunset.

Friday morning I went on an Eco Kayak tour of one of the mangrove islands. It was a lot of fun, but it was low tide and there were a couple of places the water was so shallow I got out of the kayak and had to tow it. I felt like Humphrey Bogart in the African Queen. After that I walked into town to stop at the famous Green Parrot Bar, which was Jimmy Buffet's hangout. I had a beer there that was touted to be one of the best local beers, but it was insipid.



I just printed out our boarding passes, and tonight we pack and get ready for the trip home. Fortunately, we will have Sunday together before I have to go back to work. The trip home was easy, other than a strange happening in DFW.

I went to the sausage place and bought a sausage sandwich. Since they did not serve beer, I went to TGI Fridays, and put the sandwich down while I went up to the bar. They were out of the first five beers I asked for, but they did have Bass ale. I went back to my seat with the beer, and my sandwich was gone! I went back to the bartender, and told him what happened, and they offered one of their sandwiches at no charge, which was nice. I carried the sandwich back to Sally, where we shared it by our departure gate. The flight from DFW to LAX was nice, as it was not full and we got to sit in the center section where we each had an aisle seat and an empty seat between us.

We are now home until February, when we go to Antarctica!