

## Mexico Journal 2004-05

Tuesday, November 16, 2004 Pickering, Ontario to Forest City, Arkansas

Technically, we left home last night at 5 PM. A few errands, dinner with the Parkinson's, and early to bed after a day of packing and wrapping up details related to leaving life behind for a couple of months. We're getting away weeks earlier than last year--and returning even earlier. Liz insists we be home by mid-January. She has her art supplies, I have an electronics and software development project, we each have a pile of books, 2 hammocks, snorkels & fins, light clothes...everything fits in Liz's Escort wagon, with the back end riding a little low.

After the alarm watch beeped at 4:30 AM we were quietly out the door by 4:45. Blasting through traffic-free Toronto in the left lane of the 401, we were across the first border at Windsor/Detroit before 10:00. First problem: two Tim Horton's toasted bagels with cream cheese lost between the pickup counter and the highway.

It's getting harder to find a new or interesting route through the US after 4 trips. It doesn't help that all of freeway America looks so much the same. We went the expedient way through Cincinnati, Louisville, Nashville, Memphis. We could have gone a bit further but 1050 miles gets to be enough for one day. The cheap motels of Arkansas beckoned and in we went, Sophie Secure and unseen in her smuggling bag. Finally some sleep was had.

Wednesday, November 17, Forest City, AR to Austin, TX

Any time you tire of crossing borders, go to Texas. After 6 provinces and states Tuesday, we made it across Arkansas and well into Bushland. We shouldn't complain about the sometime torrential rain, with attendant visibility, traction, & traffic problems since the day before was apparently much worse. Down in south Texas (our destination) places had 2 inches of rain Tuesday and 5 inches in 3 days. We chose the Dallas route over the Houston option but it was only the least of evils. It does take you through Austin, though. After endless hours of Texas we talked ourselves into quitting early in Austin, over 4 hours short of Mexico, to check into a free-internet motel, get some dinner and visit a bookstore. Dinner at the Outback will hopefully be the most expensive we will see this trip. I got some work done by remote control over the internet connection, books were bought, and sleep eventually came.

Thursday, November 18, Austin, TX to Edinburg

We failed to get the promised early start and had Austin and San Antonio traffic to deal with, but those Texans do build some freeways. The rebuilding is hell though, with narrow lanes between guard rails going by at 75 MPH, if you keep up with the rest of the heavy traffic. This was the scariest driving yet, and I write this from south-central Mexico. With a McAllen Wal-mart stop to stock up on a few things easier to find in the north, we arrived at the McAllen/Reynosa border in early afternoon, ready for Mexico.

Unfortunately, Mexico wasn't ready to have us. When you cross the border for any long stay you need an FMT tourist permit. You get it for a couple dollars, keep it with your passport and never think about it again. We've each had 5 or more of them. Turns out, they have fine print on the

back that says you have to turn them in when you leave. Who knew? No big signs at the border, no mention in the guide books, and have never been a problem. But they have computers now and the Reynosa immigration guy decided to be a hard ass. "You have an uncanceled permit", he tells me. "I can cancel it if you pay the fine: 1500 pesos per month for ten months since you left Mexico". About US \$1400. Just for one. Liz didn't happen to keep last year's uncanceled permit, so she wasn't so lucky....it can't be cancelled, the fine keeps adding up, and she can never go to Mexico again. We tried to plead ignorance; that the fine and banishment seemed unreasonable; we just wanted to come and spend some money. There had to be a way to solve this problem. But in the way of hard-ass border officials everywhere in North America, he said that these are the rules and it's too bad but it's our problem, not his. Go talk to the consulate if you want.

So off we went to the consulate, which we finally found off the beaten track in an old part of McAllen. It was now an hour after their 3 PM closing time. What to do? Back into the cheap motel coupon guide we went, and back into an internet-equipped room in Edinburg, Texas a bit north of the border. Dejected and incredulous, we called embassies, sent emails to any addresses we could find, considered our non-Mexico winter options (having already paid large deposits on two places in Escondido). With poor pizza in our room we spent another night in Texas.

Friday, November 19, Edinburg, TX to Ciudad Mante

>From the title it's clear things worked out. Such a difference a day can make. We chose to drive to Brownsville / Matamoros, a bigger border with at least a US consulate in walking distance across the border, a Mexican consulate not too far away, and the scene of the ultimately successful effort three years ago to cancel my old vehicle permit to allow our 2001-2 trip. First we went to the Mexican consulate to no avail: "they make those decisions at the border, we can't help you here". We decided to walk across the Rio Grande and try our luck again. The hombre at the immigration desk looked at my old permit for a moment, turned it over, and marked the rule about canceling permits. We explained that we knew that now, and would never forget again. Also that Liz didn't even have her permit to cancel. He said "Okay, but just this once," and cancelled them both, with no fine.

As an international traveler, your entire experience seems to lie in the luck of the draw at the border guard station. They are gods in their little realm, and if they smile on you all is great, if not your life is taking an abrupt turn for the worse. Perhaps bringing Sophie along made the difference - it was too hot to leave her in the car, and they didn't seem to mind her in the Mexican border offices. In a bid to push our luck some more, we went into the next room to get a car permit. Liz had never cancelled the 1999-2000 permit on the Subaru, which is now melted into some new product. But the guards were smiling, the office wasn't busy and we had a 2002 emissions testing report from Ontario, with the VIN number of the car recorded, which was deemed adequate to prove it wasn't in Mexico anymore. An hour in the Aduana (customs) office (with the same woman who helped cancel the truck permit) and in lines number 1, 2, 3, and 4, and we had a car permit too. We had been holding our breath so long we felt like we had won the lottery and it was all we could do to retain our chaste and reasonable composure and not jump up and down cheering. The trip was on, if a day delayed.

We had a late start across the border, though and the challenge of trying to find a new route through Mexico. We chose the free road toward the gulf coast, but bore inland toward Ciudad (city) Victoria, thinking we might make it no further, and we wouldn't make it down the long, lonely, possibly flooded coast road to Tampico by dark, anyway. It was a good choice. The roads through the agricultural plains of the north are smooth and fast, and we even chose to go beyond Victoria to Ciudad Mante before quitting a bit after dark. We even managed to cross the Tropic of Cancer along the way.

Saturday, November 20 Ciudad Mantes to Ixquhilpan

The choice of the route in between the familiar inland route and the familiar coastal route seemed so great yesterday. It is a nice way to go, just not a fast one. We've written before about amazing Mexican mountain roads, continuously twisting, rising, and falling; here's another. If we had a camcorder on the roof we could make you all seasick. We averaged maybe one-third of yesterday's speed. The road was in reasonable shape and not too busy, although passing slow trucks was not for the timid. No problema.

We doubled back when we found ourselves already past one site we had read about in the guides but had never visited: 'Las Pozas' -- the pools and constructions of 'Sir' Edward James, a grandson of British royalty and acquaintance of Dali, Magritte, etc. who settled in the misty mountains of north-central Mexico near Xilita. His medium for expression of surrealist fantasies was reinforced concrete, and it's more than a bit bizarre to see the gigantic organic forms his money, with the help of a local foreman, brought from his imagination to the jungle of the Sierra Madre. The guide says that James died in 1984 leaving no provision for maintaining his fantasy, although Liz maintains that any surrealist would love the way the jungle is reclaiming the structures. In a way Las Pozas is just another immense, mind boggling Mexican ruin.

Eventually the road straightened out a bit as we dropped (after dark, again) into the valley and found a room in Ixmiquilpan for the night. Mexico has this great innovation in adultery which we call the tryst motel. At the edge of town is a walled compound with a narrow gate. Inside are many motel units, each with a garage stall and curtain to cover your vehicle. The attendant stops by for the reasonable rent (in some cases through a pass-through window so they never see your face). You need to make clear however you will be there all night--there is usually an hourly rate. Next to the garage, or perhaps up a spiral staircase, is a room with clean bedding (try not to think too much about it), bathroom, towels, TV, sometimes mirrored walls or ceilings. Obviously the intent is to sneak off with someone other than your spouse and not be seen. For us, they offer secure parking, cleanliness, economy, and most notably great ease in dog smuggling. We bought a roasted chicken for a few dollars nearby and had a mirrored picnic dinner in our room with an attentive dog audience. It was Very romantic.

Sunday, November 21 Ixmiquilpan to Tehuacan

All roads lead to Mexico, the city, but it was out of our way to join them. We found on the map, and as needed on the ground, some secondary highways which allowed us to bypass, at a distance, the largest city in North America. Our course took us through Tlaxcala, site of major ruins we have previously visited. We stopped in this colonial city for lunch--and a much needed excellent caf, con

leche for Liz. After a few days of weak American coffee followed by a few more of Mexican Nescafe, we needed to revive the dozy Liz. Refreshed, we skirted around Puebla, another large city known for its Talavera pottery, universities and the largest VW factory in the world. It now turns out water-cooled front wheel drive cars & trucks having made the last old beetles just a few years ago.

Our reluctance to use toll roads gave in to expedience. Here the advantage of toll roads becomes avoiding small towns, cities and commercial strips with their attendant topes (speed bumps) rather than avoiding hills and curves. Outside Puebla we committed to the new toll road to Oaxaca after taking the longer free road last year. After days of 2nd gear hills and 300 degree curves around mountain cliffs it made for a relaxing and amazingly fast drive. Even the toll road is mostly 2-lane with only wide shoulders for slow vehicles being passed, but it's easy to drive at northern freeway speeds with the light traffic. Incidentally, magna sin unleaded gas is 6.24 pesos per litre, barely up from last year, making it a bit cheaper than Canadian gas was when we left home and barely more than Texas prices.

In early evening, we made Tehuacan, a fair-sized city several hours short of Oaxaca, and chose to quit there, rather than press on in the dark. We've been in the car a lot of hours lately. Another tryst hotel welcomed us (and unknowingly, Sophie). Feet up with a beer, we practiced our Spanish a bit watching US movies with Spanish subtitles.

Monday, November 22, Tehuacan to Oaxaca

We've had to hurry after the slow start and the border delay, but we are back on schedule, sort of. I had imagined two nights in Oaxaca but we will only have one. It was a quick drive up and down the amazing, now desert, mountains to Oaxaca. Such a difference the toll road makes here...the old road is so steep and curvy, there are places where you are directed to drive in the left lane as the trucks can't turn tight enough. The toll road saves two or three hours on a six hour drive. We drove in past a bunch of hotels and motels, but it made no sense to check into any of them before dark with Sophie to manage. We eventually found parking downtown and headed out on foot.

Oaxaca is a 16th century Spanish town (built on an earlier Aztec site), with the attendant narrow roads between walled city blocks. The city has enjoyed fabulous growth and success over the last few decades and the growth of the automobile population on these finite narrow streets has been tremendous, even since our first visit in 1999. It is best enjoyed on foot, so off we went to the Zocalo (central square), the markets (a tablecloth and a few other purchases), the Museo Arte Contemporaneo (Liz, while Sophie and I checked e-mail), as well as any open commercial galleries we could find. All the while we had our eyes peeled for possible hotels. One hotel saw Sophie and said no, others seemed too high priced after the bargain rates the previous two nights.

In early evening we had drinks at the Zocalo watching the scene, then walked around in search of dinner, only to return to the same restaurant. One of the three lone gringos anchoring a second row sidewalk table overlooking the square seemed to be nursing the same beer as when we had first arrived 90 minutes earlier. It must be an art. Liz ordered a veggie Tlayuda and I had pork tacos; it was pretty good.

It was time to tackle the lodging question in earnest. We decided to try for another tryst place on the outskirts of town toward the coast. Liz drove in the crazy evening traffic. The first place wasn't a tryst, and had huge kitchen units that were frankly not so clean. It was 250 pesos, 100 more than the night before. The next one looked OK but they wanted 360, as did the next. So we drove back into town, looking for all those places we passed on the way in: 500 pesos; 900 pesos and heavy traffic, crazy taxis and trucks. Finally we settled into a place for 300 and were successful getting Sophie in, mostly because the desk clerk probably didn't care (it's not worth the risk of rejection to ask). This room was about as clean, but was noisier and about one sixth the size of the original 250 peso place I rejected. Oh well.

Tuesday, November 23, Oaxaca to Puerto Escondido

We wanted an early start on the road over the continental divide and down to Puerto Escondido, so we threw the stuff in the car (now a scrambled mess) and off we went. The coast road is as twisty, narrow and as steep as ever, but that's nothing new now. We stopped for gas, breakfast at a place with no menus (C\$12!), for a few photos, and not much else. We were in Escondido and on the phone to our first landlady's office, by 2 PM, in the steamy, heavy atmosphere of the coastal tropics. We wanted warm, and we sure have it. I can't tell yet if it's just me or really that much warmer than usual.

Ghema, our absent landlady's helper, finally found us and led us to Casita Hansel & Gretel, our home for 19 days. It's in a different, more central part of town than our previous digs out near the surfer beach, and is further from the water, but we can walk to three or four beaches in a pinch. We have a downstairs bed, a loft bed, kitchen, large shady patio, adequately maintained and appointed, for US\$25 a night. It will work fine, particularly if the little fridge can ever get things truly cold. It's for sale too...\$32,000 US. The hammock is hung, the car unloaded.

We took a late day trip to the town and surfer beach to watch the sun sink into the waves of the pacific as our cool Victoria cerveza bottles sweated on the umbrella-covered table between our padded beach chairs. This is the life.

Groceries were fetched, and a nice pasta dinner with Chilean red wine was enjoyed before we both crashed early after eight days and 3300 miles. It's supposed to snow at home.

Wednesday, November 24, Casita Hansel & Gretel

We woke early but read and lazed for a while. It was about 9 AM and already hot by the time we walked up and over to the Rinconada Caffecito for breakfast. Our hosts of last year operate this and two other restaurants in town, plus a dozen or so units of lodging at their compound. Caffecito serves good food and is fairly priced. It is nicer to sit at the other one, with the partial sea view and breeze, but this is OK. We finally remembered while we were at a phone and called to suspend Liz's Canadian car insurance since it is useless here (we have Mexican insurance). The shame isn't that Norte insurance won't cover us here: it's that Mexican insurance doesn't cover us up north; it's much cheaper here. Families have also been informed of our safe and timely arrival at our destination. Mom will have to think up something new to worry about.

After breakfast I finally found the Shangri-la, up the hill from our place last year but across town now. Robert, the owner, has free, wireless high-speed internet for his guests and I negotiated 200 pesos (about C\$22) for unlimited internet use inside or just outside his compound. This will allow me to supervise my unattended data collection computer in Portland, Oregon, when my five heat-pump energy use monitoring systems homes around Oregon call the toll free number to send data each morning. I'll have to bring a folding chair and charge my laptop batteries, but it seems an adequate working environment. I'll be working here. Really, really hard.

Martes, 30 Noviembre, 2004.

Dennis has gone to try, once again, to sort out data retrieval issues. Sitting in his camp chair in a dusty plot of land just outside the hotel compound of a wireless internet provider, he is usually hatted, in open light shirt, loose trunks and is working hard. He does look odd with chickens running around, the odd mangy dog sprawled in the dirt and laptop computer perched on his knee, but this is more and more Mexico. Dennis has struck an agreement with the owner of the hotel to use his internet connection at the odd times of day he needs to. I suppose Robert, the paunchy gringo owner sees nothing odd. There is a sign posted on his gate offering web design and photo services, so he too probably does his share of work sitting in a camp chair semi-dressed. I expect the bulk of his business comes via internet from the US, so why not keep up with this work while tending a small hotel in Mexico?

We were on location by 7:30 this morning: Dennis to work, while Sophie and I took the more usual walk on the beach. Sophie almost caught the crab of her dreams--the largest I've seen in this area--almost the size of my hand. Luckily for both of them her pounce missed and the crab scuttled safely into the ocean as she dug frantically in the last place she had seen it. At eleven she is a little less excited about a long hot walk, but she is a happy girl along the shore and will make up for it later with naps in the shade at our casita. She likes to flatten herself to the cool cement floors but has also excavated two comfortable dog pits in the garden. Depending on the sun, she is either under the banana tree or sheflera (?) Yesterday she had situated herself on the walk so she could supervise the comings and goings of a repair man (fixing the hot water tank) and the cleaning lady (wonderful--but still makes me uncomfortable). Sophie didn't move as the cleaning lady swept around her. I made a comment to the woman about it as she passed a few minutes later returning the broom. At that moment an unripe mango dropped from a tree on Sophie. She yelped and came running to me. The woman and I both laughed at the poor dog. Sophie hasn't selected that particular resting place since.

We have been in Escondido for a week now and our routines of walks, work, swimming and reading are pretty much set. I think I have finished composing most of my postcard project images and just need Dennis to relinquish his internet connection for a while to confirm file information for specific printers. My cheap California option has raised their rates--probably for the Christmas rush--so I also need to find an alternative or risk waiting until January when I get home. I'd much rather have it printed and waiting for me somewhere so that I can deal with last minute MFA and teaching issues when I get home.

I have almost finished Sontag's "The Volcano Lover" and a collection of essays put out by the Banff Press called "Obsession, Compulsion, Collection". Both books consider similar issues and

have been interesting to read together and think about in relation to my paper on collection. (I'm so glad I wrote it before I left. I was even considering re-reading Foucault's "The Order of Things" today after it was cited in one of the essays I just read. Maybe not. Its not the best reading for here, and it was last year's nightmare trying to get my head around writing about it.) I haven't unpacked my painting supplies yet, but I've been thinking about them. I found this huge beetle while walking around a gas station with Sophie. A 6" moth dropped on me in bed last night. We found it on the floor this morning and got it outside. I didn't kill it. I did take some photos of it. I've also been picking up tile shards and stones. Something will come together soon. I've even decided where to work so that I can get the best light.

Our casita is fine although dark and less ideal than imagined. We are very close to Manzanillo beach, a small, but good beach for swimming. Dennis-Mr Sunset, is disappointed however, that this daily event is occluded here by a rocky headland. We have enjoyed colourful sunset displays in all of our favourite places so we can't complain too much about having to drive to each of them. Previously we had stayed near Zicatela beach and had been high enough up the hill to catch a good breeze and sunset view even from our lodgings. We are now in sector Hidalgo, closer to downtown, but around the coast facing mostly south. Our casita is also pretty much at the bottom of a hill. There are more mosquitos, barking dogs, roosters and radios. The surfer scene at Zicatela is here replaced by fishermen and their families with a few richer gringos in luxury condos clinging to the cliffs and the odd expat with a casita like ours. We were just visited by Mina, a German woman who has lived here for sixteen years and runs a youth hostel in town. She is looking after our place for Nancy the real estate agent we are renting from, who returns from NY tonight. We have been invited to cocktails at Nancy's to celebrate her return. From the description of the location, we'll be seeing how those neighbors with an ocean view live. "Fancy Schmantzy Nancy" is Mina's description.

With a fan at night the mosquitoes aren't too much of annoyance (nothing like camping in Ontario or Minnesota!). Earplugs are a basic sleeping essential it seems like everywhere in Mexico. We've thwarted whatever was eating our bananas every night by covering them with a big pot. I've covered the dishes with a tea towel to thwart whatever it is that's pooping on them from our palapa ceiling. The fridge has finally got cold enough for Dennis's icecubes---I can see we won't be having homemade Margaritas despite the perfect glasses on the shelf. Early morning Mexican news and advertising blasting; mid afternoon dinner and siesta battling radio pop from one side and a preference for large Mariachi brass on the other is a bit trying. Evening, it seems everyone needs the t.v.. soaps loud enough to hear outside. But..we're on vacation right? What right do we have to complain? I've maintained for years that listening to the radio and watching Mexican t.v. is a good way to improve one's Spanish. Dennis just gets his earplugs for the time it takes me to give in and suggest we go out for a while.

Two little girls are marching around cemented area in the next yard in their mother's high heeled shoes. They like the click-clacking sound they are making in these fancy shoes. I must stop and get dressed for the party.

Jueves, 2 Diciembre

Nancy's house is open along one side--the ocean view with the sweep of Zicatela to the Point is spectacular. The modern architecture features expansive smooth white floors met by spare white

walls. It has blue accented white furniture and large blue abstract paintings hanging in just the right spot. Needless to say it is a tad more upscale than our little palapa roofed casita in the valley. Dennis has a date with Nancy this morning to set her up with pay pal so that real estate renters can pay their deposit on line. I'm sure I'll hear more about the day-lit stunning view when he returns. Everyone at the party was friendly although it was clear we were the youngest and least well heeled of the crowd. Most of the talk was real-estate buying and selling --who owns what, where, and what new projects --preferably with golf courses-- are planned for the next few years. (gag! This is what we like about Escondido--no large condo developments with golf courses!!) We were polite and friendly too, although it seemed that when most learned we were renting that little casita down the way and they wouldn't be making small talk with us by the pool, we were passed by. We did enjoy talking to "Nancy's" Mexican building contractor and his cousin about Mexico, Canada and US relations. Mexicans find the use of the term American for those who live in the United states insulting --it is imperative that you say those from the United States-gente des Estados Unidos , as we are all Norte Americanos. As with any building project, the new multi unit condo complex he was building around the cliff from Nancy's had a tight schedule--due to be finished in April. Things were going better now that the rainy season was passed and he wasn't pumping water from the foundations and trying to stop landslides (it sounded dreadful). Now he just had to keep everyone working as hard as they could as long as they could (which also sounds dreadful). Nancy had a model of the project in her living room. It will have great views...but I don't think it is for us. Several others at the party were discussing the possibility of buying in, either as an investment or as a home -probably both, but there was still that lack of a golf course issue. "Puerto is changing"-- everyone says so, just in a different tone of voice than ours.

I think as much to purge ourselves of this vision of the future, as to make up for a day when with work/parties etc. we didn't go for a swim, we drove first thing yesterday morning down the coast to the small beaches of Mazunte/San Augustinillo/Zipolite/ Puerto Angel. Even here each year brings changes but these are still on the scale of more or less sand on the beach and another palapa restaurant serving fish. All these places are on the Lonely Planet map and there seem to be a fair share of blond dreadheads shuffling about, but not too many of the cocktail crowd.

We stopped at my perennial favourite, San Augustinillo for a swim and a lunch of a refresco (coca frio and agua minerale con gas) and guacamole in the shade. This is a beautiful double cove surrounded by steep forest covered hills. Several small rocky islands are just off shore. Fishermen had just brought in their catch and after selling it to locals who came down to the shore to meet them, they spent the next hour or so repairing their nets. The tide was out and we walked the beach to the rocky headland. While Dennis and I took turns swimming and taking photos, Sophie the mountain goat, clambered the rocks chasing crabs. Of course she pretended not to hear us call when it was time to go--leash/car--crabs?--but the tide was coming in again and although she was fearless we were beginning to not enjoy her boldness in the face of the rising waves. There are more houses here than when I first fell in love with this stretch of coast--there is even an internet cafe! I tried my real estate pitch on Dennis with this new technological hook, but he is not interested in "getting in early."

>From San Augustinillo we drove on through Zipolite and Angel and down a rutted path to a beach we had read about for years in various guidebooks but had failed to find. There is a sign now. We spent the late afternoon snorkeling around the rocky cove of Estachute looking at a multitude of



tiny electric blue, larger pale flat mauve blue and still larger flat striped and yellow tailed fish. (I must get a fish identification guide.) There was no one else there but some local boys. It is amazing how you lose track of everything else when snorkeling. At one point a boy (also wearing a dive mask) swam close to me--the last time I had seen the boys they were at the other side of the bay. All I saw was this large long shape near my head (his arm)-- we both screamed and thrashed the water trying to get away. Popping up we both laughed between coughs of salt water, before readjusting our gear and returning to the underworld.

Viernes, Diciembre 3, 2004

Another day, temperatures headed for the upper 80's, from lows in the mid-70's, sunny, humi \_\_\_\_\_ ;çf€¥\_§`©ª«¬\_®¯±\_´µ¶·,¸¹º»\_\_¿ÀÁÂÃÄÅÆÇÈÉÊËÌÍÎ\_ÑÒÓÔÕÖ\_ØÙÚÛÜ\_\_ßàáâãäåæçèéëìíî\_ñòóôõö÷øùúûü\_\_ý\_d, lazy. It does become hard to take on much physical activity voluntarily. Yesterday I started the process of getting Nancy's paypal account going, a chore to be completed later, perhaps this evening or another...she said she wanted to do the next part later in the day when she could offer us a cocktail again. She's an ex-New Yorker and realtor; I suppose the deals she makes here are miniscule compared to that market, but she's a bigish fish in this small pond. Liz had it a little backward; Nancy is the rental agent but Mina is the owner, of this place, of a Hotel & Hostel downtown, and I presume of another house or condo somewhere here.

Yesterday we hassled with Liz's website....it seems her domain name registration lapsed again, as it did two years ago. It turns out they've been sending the reminders to an email account she hasn't used in years. I was on line, ready with my credit card, ready to reregister it but didn't know the password. Later we were over again and found a way to get the password but it turned out our credit cards were back at the casita so I'll have to try again today. The internet connection was also down in the morning yesterday so it was a frustrating day for computing. My data collection project, which I am doing by remote control of a old laptop in Portland, OR, is still not working. It seems I can control things inside the computer but everything else seems to be problematic from the toll free phone service to the modem on the desk and I have to impose on others there to check and diagnose various problems. It should start working again any day now. It has worked fine for days or weeks at a time between upsets.

It's about 2 miles across town to the internet access, over five speed bumps, and through the main intersection of the coastal highway and the Oaxaca road. I've come to know the road well, know when the taxis, trucks, and busses are going to cut me off, where the deepest holes are. The car is fine but lacks the ground clearance for the biggest topes (speed bumps); if you come down to hard the frame behind the front wheels thunks on the concrete, or the exhaust scrapes somewhere.

I've been reading too, though less academic material than Liz: the current Atlantic Magazine, written pre- but delivered post-election, Margaret Atwood "Cat's Eye", an old Heinlen Sci-Fi novel, Carl Hiasson's humorous novel "Skin Tight" about the vanity, corruption and greed in south Florida, and I'm just finishing Ian McEwan's "Atonement". I also hoped to do some data collection system development but I seem to need a Microsoft development software package that may be

impossible to get here. I've got my hammock up but in the least shaded place in the yard so it's not getting enough use.

The casita is working out OK though the noise and lack of breeze, and occasional lack of electricity are problems. The mango tree sheds leaves everyday; apparently there's no autumn here so leaves are continuously replaced. Maybe every few minutes one audibly falls. The neighbor with the cabinet business (mostly outdoors) turns out to be the quietest one, though we do hear the planer or saw a few times daily. The other neighbors' construction, radio and dogs are the greater noisemakers.

This morning we walked Sophie along the concrete path over the rocks along the pacific to the town beach and back up along the streets. Along the beach we were adopted by a skinny dog which followed us home but we sadly left him outside the gate. Hopefully he can find some new owners among the holiday crowds.

Jueves Diciembre 9, 2004

Dennis is off interneting and I'm holding down the fort--or rather keeping it up. I just finished sweeping the previous day's trailed beach sand and night's animal droppings from the floors inside and out. There are always more mango leaves to sweep up as well--deciduous trees here, rather than losing all their leaves at once, lose a few daily. This type of mango seems to drop more than others, and they're large too: they, and their premature fruit, fall with a thud. Freshly fallen mango leaves are attractive though --mottled gold and red --although this fades in a day to brown. I finished three paintings of the leaves the other day--the leaves visibly changed as I worked both in terms of colour and curl. While furiously mixing colour for the paintings, I kept thinking about appropriateness of media: these leaves look so litho-like to me. I could imagine layers of transparent washes and splashes of colour. The tonal range of others cried acid-tint. Oh well, I have no desire to sweat over a litho stone in this heat. I did however hand print some of the leaves onto some Japanese paper I brought with me. The mango leaves are so big and tough compared with leaves at home. The veins are very pronounced and gave a clear impression time after time. I'll take these images back to my 'midden' of information. Who knows where they'll turn up in the future.

Sophie is close and subdued despite the honking of the Agua man on the next street (water--I'll have to get a jug) and the barking in response of the neighborhood dogs. We're getting more acclimatized to the Mexican noise level although there are still times when it gets to be too much. Last Saturday began with someone practicing the accordion at 7 a.m. to the accompaniment of a drum machine. He wasn't very good. Then neighbors on three sides turned on their radios. And some dogs had an argument. It seemed like the whole day continued in this vein with the added barrage of a carpentry project -hammers, planers, saws- on one side and concrete reconstruction on the other (not only relatively quiet mixing--there was a lot of breaking up needed too) Eventually we went to the beach. It was so blustery at Bacocho, the beach we chose, we had to face each other to communicate. We did spend a few hours there--we virtually had the place to ourselves. The waves were great for body surfing and we were both into our books.

Returning we made dinner and then the party started. The music was so loud we had to shout. And of course there were fireworks screeching into the air and extra loud firecrackers banging. Sophie

didn't like this noise and did her best to hide as close to Dennis or I as possible. We thought it was coming from the town square so put Sophie in the house as safe and insulated as we could and decided to stroll up there ourselves to see what was going on. The square was dark. Wandering the equally dark streets we eventually found the source of the music. It was coming from a neighbor's house on the next street, just up the hill from us. The lay of the land, wind direction and position of speakers made our little casita as acoustically perfect as party central. We decided to take a longer walk downtown, where although every little club and restaurant had their own sound system beckoning customers, none beat 'home' for volume. We eventually returned to rescue our poor dog who had hidden, curled up in the laundry pile in the closet. We shouted goodnight, put in our earplugs and went to bed.

Sunday morning we got up early. Dennis wanted to check his project results on the internet and I planned a nice long walk along the beach with Sophie and then a return to pick up Dennis and go out for breakfast. When we arrived at Dennis's internet spot Sophie wouldn't budge from the car. I lifted her out and she sat down. It became obvious after some tugs on the leash and cajoling her for a while that my walk plan was not happening. She was too tired. I lifted her back into the car, took a short stroll myself and got back into the car to read and wait for Dennis to finish. Sophie slept at our feet through the excitement of going to a restaurant, then wanted to be carried from the car back to the house. Something was not right. All day she lay in a hole she had previously dug for herself not eating, not drinking, just quivering and not responding to our attentions. Dennis and I got worried. Had she eaten something on the beach? Had she been stung by something--a scorpion perhaps? We had found one under the dish drainer in the kitchen. We took turns saying to each other--has she moved yet? Should we take her to the vet? We didn't go to the beach.

Dennis and I finally left her, when she wouldn't get up for her evening walk, and went to the cliff walk ourselves to look at the sunset. We felt guilty. I voiced my concern about not finding someone to cremate a dog in Mexico. Dennis was thinking his worst thoughts as well, and had decided on ice, to keep her body until we made it to the States. Funny that we couldn't say these things with her lying near us. We spent the evening reading with her lying between us still quivering. Dennis had to return to a project problem on the internet early Monday morning and then go to Nancy's at 8 a.m. to help her with her paypal problem again. He resolved to ask Nancy for the name of her vet and take Sophie there in the morning.

Dennis left while it was still dark. Half asleep I looked up to see Sophie with her head up listening to Dennis leave. When I got up a little while later she was still in bed. When I emerged from the bathroom she was sniffing around outside. She wanted to go for a walk. We were outside on the road when Dennis returned in the car. She dashed off to greet him. She wanted her usual after walk cookie. She ate her food, drank her water. She was fine. Who knows what was wrong on Sunday, we were just happy to have our old traveling companion back.

Sabado, Diciembre 11 2004

Days merge with walks, interneting, swimming, reading and painting. Thursday became more eventful than we had planned. With our increasing animal problem at the casita, we had both now confirmed that the main problem was mice, we thought it wise to look at our second lodging choice prior to moving in. The longer we waited the less chance we had to find something else, if it too

had issues. Dennis had earlier in the week contacted the rental agent and asked if we could see it. We had agreed on Tuesday afternoon but this had been postponed to Thursday afternoon to give them a chance to clean the place "after some iguanas had had their way with it". I was steeling myself to be less than agreeable if there were problems--I hate this kind of conflict. I put on my most assertive beach wear- shirt/skirt --monosyllable clothes mean no nonsense. I got Dennis to brush his hair and off we went. The new apartment was in an area of town that is supposed to be more upscale, but there were lots of overgrown building lots and many other half built dream projects--had we rented one of these derelicts?

We were greeted at the Casa Rincon by Zicatella Property agents Evan and Darlene who showed us around the freshly painted, third floor studio apartment. Although much smaller than Casita Hansel and Gretel, the negative comparison ends there. The apartment is open on three sides to ocean breeze. The palapa roof is well maintained and so far rodent free. There is lots of light. We are high enough that we can see the ocean--including the sunset from our apartment. The empty lots actually facilitate this. There are many beautiful flowering trees planted nearby and the apartment is at the height of many colourful birds flitting among them. There wasn't a woodshop next-door. We heard no radios and swerved around no barking dogs on the street getting there. We asked if we could move in immediately.

It was agreed that we would pack and return at 5:30 to pay our remaining rent (did I mention that the new apartment cost less than Casita Hansel and Gretel?), get the key, watch the sunset and move in. We spent the afternoon packing, then walked to Playa Manzanillo for a quick swim before showering, packing the car and leaving. All went as planned until the showering--I went inside the house while Dennis readied the car for our belongings. I was greeted by the first mouse, caught in a sticky trap that Josee the cleaning woman had brought over earlier in the day. I hate sticky traps. They always make mouse removal a drawn out drama. In this drama the poor thing had fallen from the loft where the trap was placed, and now was among our packed belongings on the floor below. It took me opening the door to reactivate the mouse who was stuck by its tail and hind legs. Of course it started scabbling away when it heard me screech. Wet, sandy Sophie wanted in on the excitement and I had to try to grab dog, keep mouse from sticking to anything else and summons Dennis out on the road to get rid of the thing. Dennis of course didn't see how it should be his responsibility to mete out death, but between us with shopping bags and pot he got the poor mouse outside although further gummed up on the trap. He swung the mouse in the bag a few times against a rock with us both wincing and jumping at each thwack and Sophie barking and squirming in my arms. I'm sure this display was incomprehensible to our neighbors, but now we were late and quickly switched gears to clean up, pack the car and leave.

Domingo, Diciembre 12, 2004.

It is quite peaceful here. The hum of the full sized (!) but struggling fridge is the only minor annoyance. Dennis sighs audibly when it finally shuts off. He has been down on the ground leveling it, shifting it, trying various insulating tricks to no avail. Its o.k. A fridge works hard here. In one of Dennis's "Someone should invent.." conversations some engineering genius would make a secondary market insulation cover for hot climate fridges. They would make their other Mexican million on beer foamies.

We have walked to Carrizallio and Bacocho beaches from our new digs although walking to the Aldoquin (pedestrian plaza) is more of a hike, as is the main town. We left Sophie in the apartment yesterday morning, drove the mile or two into town and parked in the shade of a side street. From there we walked a circuit up one street to the market and down another exploring shops and the market proper. Dennis had a list. I was looking around. We needed a key cut, an orange juice squeezer (we forgot ours at home), supplies to make a reading light, a dust pan (for the small amount of sweeping here compared to the casita) and a few groceries. Dennis had also lost his ball cap and was in the market for another. He finally gave in and paid 50 pesos --it seems everyone's hats are 50 pesos. I think he imagined one like the Mexican made one I had picked up at the dollar store at home. This one is made in Vietnam.

For dinner last night we cooked fresh fish fillets we had bought at the market for 18 pesos..\$2 Canadian. They were good although I should think of another way to prepare them besides "mojo al ajo" (fried in garlic). This is the way they are prepared at just about every restaurant in town. More than once I have gone down a Mexican menu ordering one thing or another only to be told "no hay" (don't have it) and end up with "fillete de pescado mojo al ajo." This is not a major complaint --its usually good-- its just a bit repetitive. On the lunch front, Dennis wonders if I'll ever get tired of guacamole. I don't think so. I try to restrain myself to every other day--but it is so tasty with carrot sticks and a few totopos--and avocados are so plentiful. They taste so much better than the expensive, astringent, turnip hard things that pass for avocados at home too.

After dinner we all got in the car and drove down to the Adoquin for a stroll. I have been reading a great book called "Wanderlust: A History of Walking" and tried to explain the concept to Dennis who walks with a mission--at least Sophie has a leash to restrain her. It was hard to maintain the proper strolling pace with those two. There were many families, groups of young people and as the evening progressed, couples strolling the Adoquin last night. Many were dressed up; the idea is to see and be seen, to promenade having private conversation in public. The practice became popular in 18th century England (think English landscape gardens, also Wordsworth) but has been an evening activity in Spanish and Latin American countries much longer.

One 'lap' of the Aldoquin and Dennis was ready to drop Sophie at the car and participate in that other Latin custom: get a drink and watch others stroll from a chair. There were many places offering 2X1 drink specials and Dennis had also seen one that beckoned with a sign that said "Ladies Drink Free until 11". We spent the next hour perched on stools on a second floor balcony overlooking the Adoquin, watching the crowd change from families with ice cream cones to increasingly, young couples making the scene. I had the requisite 'Lady on Holiday' Margarita (weak of course--this being 2X1) but the icy lime was refreshing. Sipping, I mused, is the correct method of drinking a cocktail in such a situation. Dennis said the ice would melt, dilute his drink and he was thirsty, now. I tried to maintain a conversation centred on sipping and strolling as practiced and probably related arts. We tried to locate true connoisseurs of these arts on the street below. We laughed again at the 'Extreme Sipper' we had encountered on the Zocalo in Oaxaca. Could there be competitions; "sip offs""stroll-a-thons"? Ladies were once instructed in proper posture for walking and strolling. I wondered if anyone had written a book on 'sipping'? But Dennis's drink was long gone, he had sipped some of mine and was ready to go. Besides, the music was getting louder, the bar filling up and our table was probably needed by one of the practiced, strolling and sipping, younger crowd.

The last few days, by Den,

She has is mostly right, though she has her attitude wrong sometimes. My comfortable walking speed is faster than hers; who decides which is too fast or too slow? Last year she read and wrote for her MFA almost the whole time we were here, but this year it's a crime for me to spend too much time across town connected to my remote-controlled computer in Oregon, working. But I digress. We actually get along well here without the busy-ness and attention demands of home.

What's not to like? Now we're in these clean, airy, light, quiet, cheap quarters with a recovered dog and even my data collection in Portland is working better. Besides keeping that going I'm trying to work on development of a new energy-use monitoring system for buildings which seems to require me to learn entire new systems of software development, plus long-ignored forms of math. I was doing Google searches of "digital analysis of harmonics in waveforms" while Liz and Sophie walked the surfer beach from la punta (the point) to my internet connection spot during sunset Sunday evening.

We still have many difficult daily decisions, from 't-shirt & shorts' or 'tank top & swimsuit?' to 'Zicatela, Carrizalillo, Manzanillo, Marinero, or Bacocho?' (beaches) to 'fresh fish or fresh roasted chicken?' and 'Corona or Victoria?' All this on what we estimate to be about \$40 a day (Canadian) for both of us-if you average in the trip down, plus what our firehouse is consuming in terms of mortgage, electric, gas, and taxes.

It's our impression that somewhere people are wearing socks, boots, shirts, sweaters, jeans, coats, hats, and gloves, and scraping cars, shoveling sidewalks, seeing little daylight, bombarded by insipid holiday music. Well, we get some of the music here and we'll get the rest soon enough but this reality seems somehow a bit preferable. Even Orion the hunter is lazily lying on his side down here with the changed latitude. Crickets are singing, and our house has open walls on three sides. Mosquitoes in December - that's a good problem.

We are now living further west, 3 miles from the internet connection I arranged. My laptop picks up signals from two others over here, though, so I might have to make friends with a neighbor to save the commute. We have four big speed bumps to surmount just to get to the highway. I finally realized why my mostly identical car clears them better... I put taller tires on it years ago and the extra inch or so makes a difference.

We still hear some fireworks; Mexicans seem to save them for special events like "daytime" and "night". The other noises are so reduced here that the droning fridge is our worst sound problem. We can also hear any construction, etc., in the neighborhood, and smell what's cooking nearby. Life is less isolated by walls, windows, or open space.

We've been seeing schools of fish offshore, and we think dolphins a few times. It's common to see the gulls and pelicans splashing down for a fish. We don't know if the fishing pressure here, said to have greatly increased in recent years, has markedly reduced the populations, but sometimes the water seems to boil with them.

Lunes, Diciembre 13, 2004

One thing about having few walls and lots of light---you wake up early. We seemed to have lazed a while in bed this morning listening to Sophie's tummy rumble (why? Who knows.) I am trying to come to terms with my "Candidacy Statement" a plan of what I want to do for my final MFA semester. Its basically a proposal for my graduation exhibition and I've written enough of those (for much larger shows) not to be too worked up about it, but an exhibition proposal usually morphs over the longer time period it takes for the exhibition to finally happen (sometimes years). This proposal must address work to be done in such a short time frame (5 months) when I am teaching full time-AND I have to defend my choices before my faculty committee in February. I outlined my current ideas to Dennis while we took turns massaging the dog's tummy. (Perhaps she has us trained?) It seemed like we had been talking about the work, the installation, the lighting etc. etc. for a while before we decided that maybe a walk would settle Sophie's rumbles. "Did someone say walk?" At least we got the right reaction when we decided to dislodge Sophie from her comfortable position.

Laundry and drinking water were the projects for today. I had previously handwashed most of our clothes in the outdoor laundry sink at the casita. There were many clothes lines hanging around the yard and things dried quickly. Here we have strung one clothes line for towels and bathing suits which dry very quickly in the breeze but we have already lost most of our clothes pegs and the bowl they were in, over the edge. This wouldn't seem like such a problem except for the gently sloped tile roofs below us. They are just too far to reach and impossible to jump over and stand on-the tiles would slide off. Dennis managed to collect three of the pegs that had landed on the first peak, with me grasping his legs and the balcony and him going over head first, the rest we can see-along with various other casualties of falls-but not reach. Anyway-there is a laundry not far away, which will wash, dry and fold our clothes for a few dollars. We packed up what we had including the long pants and socks we haven't seen in weeks, and took this on our walk with Sophie.

We were surprised the laundry wasn't open. Dennis thought we could go and have breakfast until it opened. Neither of us was wearing a watch, but craning my neck I could see throught the grilled door of the shop that the clock on the wall said it was barely 7:30. The laundry opened at 9. Knowing Dennis's thoughts on lingering over food, I knew that an hour and a half over (cold) scrambled eggs was not going to happen. Lingering is right up there with strolling and sipping. Dennis informed me he had no intention of carrying the laundry home. I wasn't about to leave all our clothes, sheets, towels etc. on the street. Dennis had a plan. He dumped the laundry on the ground. Pushed the bag through the grill and garment by garment began to push clothes through the grill and back into the bag. "Engineering Genius." (I could tell by his grin.) "Help me, already." Then all he had to do was swing the bag up and onto the table nearby. "Done. Let's go." I don't know what the woman thought when she opened the shop at 9:00 but when we went to get our laundry a little while ago, she laughed at Dennis's explanation and said it would be easier if next time we remembered she opened at 9:00.

Eating lunch-guacamole day (!! ) the "Agua" man called and we got our garafon of water. It seems our chores are done. Dennis has started a new book, Greene's "The Quiet American" and I'm still savouring "Wanderlust: A history of Walking". We plan to go today to the town beach- Marinara, so that Dennis can see if there are any volleyball games in the offing, then on to internet.

Noche Bueno (Christmas Eve) 2004, Casa Rincon

Life goes on here day by day with swimming, computing, dining continuing in the now familiar and comfortable style. The days stay near-perfect, highs of 85 and lows of 70 or so.

Last night we had a dinner guest, Diane Kulpinski. Last week we had ordered dinner overlooking the Adoquin, the main tourist avenue which closes to traffic nightly for strolling, when a single gringa, tall and tanned, selected the restaurant we were in and came in for a table. I motioned an invitation to join us and she did. Introductions revealed Diane was a photographer on a 6 month bicycle trip around Mexico, from, of all places, Bend, Oregon. I knew her name from her former job as the photographer for my former daily newspaper, but it seems we never met in 15 years in the same small city, though we have a few acquaintances in common. We had a long conversation (which pleased Liz greatly after so many quiet meals across from me), and parted friends. Without phones we had no way to reconnect, till we passed her on the street as we drove across town on the way to dinner and interneting two nights ago and invited her up here for dinner last night. Again good conversation over dinner and wine and water ensued, such that we were all quite surprised when I noticed it was already after midnight. All of us admitted that we were usually in bed by 10.

Diane's biking around Mexico roughly counterclockwise having started north of Mexico City, then southwest to the coast, down to here, then (by bus, to avoid the nastiest mountain roads) to Oaxaca, then the isthmus, San Christobal, Palenque, and over to the Yucatan. From there she's headed back west along the gulf, and over the northern highlands toward the west coast, as I understand the plan. Seems, ambitious, brave, and wonderful. She typically bikes in the mornings and gets 50 km or so in, then stops for the hottest part of the day. We did much of her route a few years ago, by car, and that seemed long.

Last week one day we noticed a trickle of water running down the street in front of the house as if a spring, or more likely a leak, had sprung. We wondered how long that would take to get fixed, or if we should try to report it to someone. But a work crew arrived the next morning...one fellow on a bike, another with a shovel and a bucket of parts and tools. They proceeded to pry up a few dozen of the paving bricks, shovel sand, remove their shoes to better work in the muddy hole barefoot, and finally expose the problem pipe...about a 1/2 inch plastic pipe by the looks of it, the local water main. The section one of the men cut out had an old patch-- an 8" length of rubber hose, clamped with twisted, now rusted, steel wire for clamps, on either end.

He had a couple of foot section of new plastic pipe, and I hope some couplings and glue, though perhaps this year's municipal water main repair budget can't spare 70 pesos for such frills. He did have more of the hose, at least. In any case by mid afternoon the patch was complete and tested (I noticed the first test had failed), the hole was refilled and the paving stones back in place, though there are low and high spots there now. Imagine a city water department up north sending two guys with a bike, shovel, and bucket out to fix a water leak....no truck, no backhoe, no traffic flaggers, signs, or even orange cones. Definitely not the efficient Mexican way.

Speaking of noise, hissing water is one we can't seem to get away from. Here, again the holding tank is near our living area, and when the city water is on, every morning at 7:30 it seems, the tank gets mostly full and then hisses and sputters for hours as the float valve not-quite closes, not quite



drowns itself. A simple geometric rearrangement could silence the sputter, but nobody seems to care or bother. It's another one of those things that some engineer should resolve.

One of the local delights is the availability of cheap oranges (20+ for a buck or so) and fresh squeezed juice. Last year we finally made the investment in a nice cast juice squeezer to allow easy enjoyment of this bounty. However, not mentioning any names, the person who packed the kitchen stuff left it safely on the sun porch in Port Hope this year. (!And the person who drinks orange juice should have remembered it himself!) At the market I selected a cheap replacement--only for this year--a pot-metal cast thing with two hemispheres, handles, and a hinge mechanism, to squeeze cut-in-two oranges, with a modicum of spraying juice. This worked for about two glasses of juice before the casting failed near the hinge, leaving me juiceless again. The investment of a couple hours drilling holes with a tired drill battery, soldering a new hinge mechanism out of key rings, were required to finally restore it to the trash can it so well deserved. Now oranges must be cut into six pieces, which barely fit in the similar lime squeezer.(That who remembered to bring?) There is the satisfaction of saving 25 pesos per large glass vs Cafecito. Another few bags of oranges and I'll have the good one paid off, even if I can't use it until next year.

Diciembre 25, 2004, Liz

Feliz Navidad! Its Christmas and everybody is doing what they want to do: Sophie is napping on Grandma's blanket; Dennis is at the beach playing volleyball and I have been painting and listening to some music I have been missing because it was not amenable to conjugal bliss. It is 5:00 and the sun is shining although it is a little bit more cloudy than it has been in a while. It is warm of course, and I am bedecked in my Christmas Outfit of striped (it has some red in it!) bikini top (Thank you Honest Ed!) and shorts. Sunset is in an hour and Dennis should be back unless he is held up by a winning streak.

We walked to Carmen's Cafecito for breakfast. This was a treat although we have a hard time not stopping there on our morning walks. They make a mean cinnamon roll that is just the right size to make a breakfast of our usual fruit and granola perfect. Today Dennis had the Gran Slam ("D's" at the end of a word are not pronounced here and therefore do not show up on the menu). Although the price has risen to 29 pesos during our time here (about 3.00) it still figures up there with its namesake Denny's version--3 pancakes, 3 eggs, 3 slices of bacon---but no sausages, Dennis reminds me. But there's still enough bacon for Dennis to save a slice (2! d) for Sophie. They have a 'sin carne' version of the Gran Slam with a nice selection of fruit, but I opted for the "Homlet Vegetariano". It is very good and filled with a mixture of spinach, tomatoes, cheese and whatever other vegetables are currently at the market. Carmen's whole wheat rolls are nice for a change too. And there's actually unsalted butter to put on them! Most bread here is white and butter is rare. I've come to the conclusion that because we are 'white' we are served white bread in restaurants, rather than the corn tortillas served to Mexican customers. I haven't decided yet whether it would be insulting to ask for the preferable tortillas. Cafecito is one of the few places in Escondido which brews good dark roast coffee from the region, although I have begun to see that other restauranteurs have noticed Cafecito's emphasis on coffee and are beginning to follow suit. This is good. Why serve instant Nescafe when Oaxaca state produces excellent coffee? We waddled home from breakfast and then Dennis napped in his hammock with Kafka's "The Penal Colony" while I painted.

There is a truly "Biblical" sky at the moment. It looks so much like a Sunday School paper illustration that I expect to see "And God Spake" illuminated in the central cloud at any time. The sun is obscured by a

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\_\_\_\_\_ Æœ \_\_\_\_\_ ÿ \_\_\_\_\_ violet/blue cloud that has its edges  
backlit in glowing gold -to orange. Rays of light streak up and out across the sky from all angles except the bottom which is magenta before it reaches the azure ocean streaked in orange. It is awesome--and Dennis is just coming up the steps. Good timing.

Diciembre 26, Den

Christmas has come and gone in the usual low-key way for us in Mexico: without much hype. We enjoy the shield from commercial bombardment afforded by our situation. Perhaps there is less commercialism here than up north but our lack of language proficiency, our lack of daily press and junk mail, and our lack of television insulate us from most of what there is. We went out to the big gringo turkey dinner Christmas eve cooked by Brad the Zicatella bbq guy. It was o.k. but there were no seconds or leftovers like at home. We also went to breakfast Christmas morning, at the local Cafecito. I went looking for another volleyball game (I had found one on the previous afternoon), but found none, so returned home with an expensive roasted chicken dinner (80 pesos, more than double some others on a different day of the year) for sunset through a uncommonly cloudy sky. Christmas night is also the anniversary of our first meeting in Cozumel in 1998, so we've had seven December 25's now, six in Mexico.

After dinner last night we walked the mile or so down to the Adoquin to walk the strip and see what was up. There were lots of Mexican families strolling with ice-cream cones or sitting on the curb with tamales from the ladies with their carts at the end of the street. Some lucky children had inflatable toys or foam iguanas from hawkers on the street. Most people walked from one end to the other and back occasionally looking at the 4x100 playera (tshirt) stalls, jewellery, carved wooden Jaguar heads, spoons, combs or shell chotkas for sale. The bars hadn't opened to the dancing partying crowd and there were no drink specials advertised for this night. A group of drummers held court for a while, drawing a decent crowd in front the small hotel that presents a big violet concrete wall to the street, ignoring the terrestrial scene in favor of the fisherman's beach and boats behind it. We walked onto the beach for a while marveling at the huge yacht anchored just beyond the fishing boats. There were many families down on the shore as well. We could tell most were taking advantage of the bright lights directed on harbour to get a last swim in and hopefully tire out some children prior to a night's nearby camping or squeeze into a hotel room. Many small hotels we have stayed in have this kind of room-several beds and not much floor space-perfect for family sleeping and not much else. Sophie made it the mile back uphill without complaints, and neither one of us particularly minded her slowing of our pace. We heard the disco beats begin as we mounted our stairs ready for bed.

Beach volleyball was fun the other day. I played with a few Mexicans, a New Zealander, a German, and an Argentine among the players at various times. Hard sweaty work though, demanding a sunset dowsing in the Zicatella waves to rinse the sand clinging everywhere.

I've finished (or quit) reading the Kafka without being particularly impressed. He carefully creates every detail of a situation and the characters therein, then simply stops. I may have to pick up the Henry Miller again. Timothy Findley's "Not Wanted on the Voyage," a humorous exploration of the Noah's Ark tale, held my attention for a few days, though again without much payoff at the end.

(Liz) We spent an afternoon at Agua Blanca last week. This is a beach down the highway towards Hautulco about 25 miles. We had gone there once before but it was high tide and there was not much walking on the beach or clambering around the rocks to be done. It is not called Agua Blanca for nothing-the waves are high and white and quite treacherous. We planned this trip after consulting the surfer's tide table and looked forward to a long walk among the rocks, tide pools and along what we had seen earlier to be a long empty beach.

The beach is behind an overgrown field and we missed the small sign and the dirt track the first time, but found it on our return. We shared the beach with a school group on an end of term class trip. Knowing the hassles of planning school trips, I wonder who had composed the paperwork for groups of boisterous teasing, pushing, shouting 14-16 year-olds to be transported, standing room only in the backs of private pick-up trucks? Not to mention the curriculum value of swimming in waters with a heavy undertow, with the option of clambering out on the slippery rocks in the rising tide to fish or dive for oysters. And then there were the head count issues. While most of the group frolicked in a large tide pool that made an ideal swimming hole, others we noticed on our long walk and surreptitiously strolled off in couples To do what young couples do when the teacher is out of sight and otherwise distracted for the afternoon. Near the end of the afternoon I left Dennis and Sophie to walk closer to the group and perhaps swim in the large inviting tidepool. (The tide had risen and it was gone.) I noticed one harried rounding up a group. Had the other teachers left already? Was there not one supervisor for every 10 students? In his florid state I can't imagine him ever venturing beyond refereeing the co-ed soccer game he was now trying to break up. This game was enthusiastically played between the rocks and wooden stakes driven into the sand. The kids seemed to have had fun and no one had injured themselves tripping over the rocks that encroached one side of the 'field' or had impaled themselves on any of the short stakes that marked the goals.

I write this after team writing full curriculum objectives for senior biology, politics and visual art students to go to the zoo: behind the scenes discussions with biologists studying ways to prevent further decimation of species; a follow up on a unit on animal rights issues; a photo essay relating to these same issues; sketching 'the crowd'--live animals and people in specific architectural space. Our permission was denied by our former school administrator on the grounds a trip to the zoo was not educational. Of course the most educational aspect of this or any trip is the interaction of the students and the teachers in a differently structured environment: wonderful, memorable learning happens. We returned to the zoo the following year (after this administrator had left) and had a great, educational time. As harried as this Mexican teacher looked, a good time was had by all.

Dancing for the community holiday presentation on the square must be another curriculum objective. On our way back from town the other night we caught some of the spectacle. The appreciative audience was mostly seated on ubiquitous plastic bar chairs in front of a stage that has been set up in the town square to accommodate all the holiday events. Others chased small, bored children behind the flank of chairs or jumped-up to photograph or videotape the performance of their talented children on the stage.

The same boisterous age group we had seen on the beach was performing this night. The acts must have come from various schools for we saw three separate performances from three similarly aged groups. From where we were standing we could see them all alternatively fooling around and practicing their footwork behind the stage. Each group represented a different dance style and was wearing different 'regional' costume. The first two groups were similar with their familiar mix of accordion, horns, guitar, dance tunes that slowed the twirling dancers every once in a while to almost a stately Spanish quadrille before speeding up again with lots of hoots and calls from the boys. The sexual come-on/rebuff of the traditional dances was updated by one teacher/coreographer by having a boy and a girl come up to the microphone and introduce the song with a rhyming taunt. I'm not sure how politically correct these taunts were by the response of the laughing crowd, but in most cases I was happy to hear the girls loudly take the show with their performance of the taunt.

The group from Puerto Escondido was wearing light white clothes indicative of the heat on the coast. I'm sure the other group who was more heavily attired envied this as all were visibly sweating during the energetic dances. The Escondido girls were wearing embroidered blouses and full circle skirts, while the boys wore white shirts with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, white pants and straw, short brimmed fedora type hats. Their enterprising teacher/choreographer had arranged the dances to music with lyrics featuring the attributes of Puerto Escondido. One was a song that a neighbor at our first house played incessantly--perhaps it was one of these students practicing or just as likely this was a new upbeat song that the inventive teacher had used to lure the students into practicing. I've since heard the song many times in shops and restaurants.

I think sewing their outfits and embroidering the local flowers featured on them was also a curriculum objective for the girls, although there was no similar 'traditional craft' in evidence for the boys. The varying degree of fit and floral shapeliness (despite being all the same stencil) I think is evidence of this conclusion although Dennis thought 'some mother' had taken on the task. I don't think the sewing would have past the test with "some mother' myself.

The last group we saw seemed to have spent all their time on the costumes to the detriment of the choreography. This teacher--sweating at a single drum and also in a costume of her own--blew the budget on an Aztec review. There were many huge feather and sequined headresses perched precariously on obviously proud heads. All had leg rattles, but the boys had shiny multicoloured sequined (mylar?) breastplates and armbands of more or less complexity depending on their role in the performance. They had done their research--although some of the girl's costumes in particular had an Egyptian bent. I suppose male warriors and dancers are more populous in extant friezes and wall paintings. The teacher also had to get around the inappropriate nude virgin sacrifice thing somehow too. Some of the larger girls were high priestesses in long white satin gowns with Chichen Itza style zigzag trim. A few slimmer girls were more scantily clad in short colourful tunics somewhat like the boys but somehow making them look more like Cretin Bull Jumpers than Aztec warriors (--but what do I know?)

It was rather spectacular when, on the darkened stage the teacher's single drumbeat was heard and the brilliant procession of students slowly paced in with four boys in the middle carrying an elaborately gowned girl standing on a board. Her legs and arms spread to show off the costume I assume, but definitely were useful for balance. They group slowly circled the stage in time to the rhythm of the drum---they had practiced this. When they had all gone around the stage once, the

boys lowered the girl to the floor and they all stood in place and stamped their feet. We clapped and breathed a sigh of relief that the girl was safely on the ground.

The rhythm of drumming shifted to signify the next scene. Some remembered what direction they had to turn in --others forgot then followed a step behind. Perhaps the stage was smaller than they had practiced on--the headdresses were huge and a few headdresses collided to the horror of their wearers. Eventually it became clear that this movement --turning and weaving in and out of lines of costumed performers was pretty similar to what the dancers in the last performance had done--only slower. It functioned to show off the costumes I guess. They got this movement over finally. Perhaps we were all more impatient with this movement because there was just the solemn drum beat -no catchy recorded tune to hum along to. (Dennis was doing a lot of yawning.)

The next movement had something to do with the gift of fire from the God -the boy in the most elaborate headdress, with the attendance of the high priestesses. There was a bit of a breeze that threatened the eternal flame in the centre of the stage, but we mostly got the idea as the students filed past it with their torches to light and then stood stamping their feet with torches raised as the drum beat got more and more insistent. Few torches actually lit -probably to the relief of several parents-- but, oh well, the show must go on. Next there was some sort of athletic jumping and sliding by the tunic dressed girls and boys before the solemnly standing God, high priestesses and sacrificial girl. They didn't sacrifice the girl that had been carried in at the beginning-I can imagine the classroom discussion about this! Blood/ No Blood? Which is more historically correct? Which would make for a kinder gentler Aztec vision? I expect many of the students voted for sacrifice. It would be more fun--um, authentic. There was probably a line up of girls wanting to practice their death throes as well. I expect it was a lively discussion. I assume it was decided (the teacher weighing the vote) that they should do enough dancing to appease the God, and thus avoid bloodshed.

The girl got back on her board, the boys picked her up and the group filed around and eventually off stage to the same beat as they came in on. Whew! From where we were standing we could see (and hear) the students excitedly talking, pushing and pulling off headdresses. The teacher still stony faced although truly drenched in sweat, descended from her position at the edge of the stage and got one of the warriors to fetch the drum. I think she was too exhausted to deconstruct the performance--besides it was over, they did a good job. They could practice movement two more thoroughly next time if she decided to tackle 'Indigenous History in Dance' again. "A" for effort.

January 20, 2005

Feliz Ano Nuevo! We've been back in frigid Canada for a busy week, and are finally getting down to sending our journal from those last warm, sunny, relaxing days in Mexico.

(Liz) It is the tangential experiences that I enjoy most when travelling: unplanable experiences that connect you. We were casually chatting with some Berkley-ites at the next table one breakfast about Sophie (of course), Mexico (where we had met), Guatemala (where they had met 25 years before), Bush (a frequent topic and one which no American we've met in Mexico can believe was elected president again) and finally things to do in Puerto. The woman mentioned a small b&b/restaurant that had its own farm to provide the fruit and coffee for breakfasts. She said going

for breakfast there was an interesting and enjoyable treat. I decided we should check it out and convinced Dennis one day to walk up the steep cobbled lane behind the fancy Santa Fe Hotel, to "Tabuchin del Puerto".

Within the quiet gated courtyard of this small hotel we were invited to sit at one of the several long tables set for breakfast. A thermal pot of excellent coffee was set on our table while we perused the all-vegetarian breakfast offerings. Soon an elderly man descended from the upper floors of the hotel and proceeded to greet those in the restaurant by name. He introduced himself to us as Paul and welcomed us to his restaurant, inquiring after our names, nationality and professions. When I mentioned that I was an artist he perked up and said he too had made art at one time taking courses in San Miguel and working with artists here in Puerto as well as in the country at his farm in Nopala. He told me he had a press at the farm, but hadn't used it in years. Before I could find out more, Paul excused himself with an errand in Town. "Hmmm" I thought. "A press."

Our food was slow in coming much to Dennis' chagrin. It seems conversation among guests was most important. Unfortunately we had sat at a vacant table and could only overhear a conversation at another table about a trip to Paul's farm in the country undertaken by one of the couples. I eavesdropped intently as the woman described how a worker had taken them around the farm, naming each plant for them. (!!!!) I have been searching for years for names of Mexican plants and was quite excited. Paul however had gone to the bank and our breakfast was finished, so I glean no further information. I needed to orchestrate another meeting and hopefully a trip to the farm. Time past and I mulled over the problem, every once in a while trying to talk Dennis into another (slow, small--but delicious Mexican tofu) breakfast at the Tabuchin. Eventually, Dennis came up with the brilliant suggestion that I just go to the Tabuchin and ask Paul if we could have a tour of his farm.

With our time in Puerto coming to a close I worked up my courage and one afternoon made my way back to the hotel to find Paul. The cooks in the hotel kitchen I eventually found, eventually understood my request and eventually summoned Paul (by house phone). I reintroduced myself and asked if a tour of the farm might be possible. There was silence, and then Paul explained that he didn't actually run tours, (more silence), but if we were really interested, we could go to the farm. It was a long way away. I explained again my plant and print interest and he became a bit more animated and told me that yes, he had some prints at the farm as well as the press. He also had several books on Mexican plants that I was welcome to look at and he would call Gabriel his helper to tell him to expect us. Gabriel knew his plants. The price? "Well, no price. But Gabriel might appreciate something." I arranged for us to return to the Tabuchin for breakfast the next Tuesday when Paul would draw us a map to the farm in Nopala. I was buoyed by this plan and hurried back to the beach to find Dennis and Sophie and tell them the news.

Tuesday morning wearing long (thin) pants and hiking shoes for the first time in over a month we drove across town to the Tabuchin for our breakfast meeting. Paul greeted us and in a lengthy narrative described the road to Nopala while drawing us a map. Nopala is no more than 50 k from Puerto, but the route into the mountains sharply twists and turns making the trip last over two hours. Eventually we got to the small farm and were met by Gabriel and two friendly dogs. Gabriel showed us through the house that Paul had set up as another B&B, but which he no longer runs. In the portico were about a dozen old stone matates for grinding corn. I wanted to stay and just look at those beautifully shaped forms for a while. Inside, each room had colonial antiques, retablos as well as other paintings and prints. Several tables held an array of Zapotec? clay antiquities dug up on the

farm. The dining room walls were lined with Mexican prints and paintings (50's on?) and more were stacked on the floor. I had many questions but Gabriel spoke no English and my Spanish questions on the nature of art and antiques could only be rudimentary. Between us we did our best.

Paul's books on art, plants, gardening and house building were on shelves in the corner. I thought I could happily and busily have stayed a week just in this room, but we hadn't actually been outside to see the farm or find the press yet. I quickly wrote down the titles of the most likely plant books, took a few photos of arrangements of pottery shards, took one last, long look at a large stunning drypoint of tree roots and followed Dennis, Gabriel and the dogs outside. A second building with similar bedrooms taken over for storage revealed the press. It was dismantled but appeared to have all components except blankets. I could imagine a resourceful printmaker arranging with Paul to consider an artists' residence. It would begin with a few days on the beach at Puerto staying at the Tabuchin. Then having relaxed and got to know one another a bit, they would drive into the mountains to stay at the farm . Days would be spent sketching and hiking in the mountains and around the town of Nopala or printing in the soon to be rejuvenated studio. Evenings would be spent conversing over wonderful communal meals around the large table in the dining room. This would be followed by reading, and bed after such full country days. The residency would end with a small exhibition and another few days in Puerto before the non-Mexican artists, sadly, had to leave. Paul had some wonderful prints by Mexican artists and we have seen many more on our travels through Mexico. It could be a spectacular exchange opportunity for everyone. The price? I don't. know. Perhaps it could be sponsored partly by consulates, or a foundation....

The farm is an overgrown jungle of citrus, papaya, banana, pistachio, cocoa and coffee trees. Gabriel patiently led us to individual trees and named each in Spanish, while I scribbled phonetically spelled words and took photos. We also saw varieties of pineapple, lemongrass, chiles, cilantro and other food plants. One large, long podded plant that I had seen everywhere in Oaxaca Gabriel identified as "Tabuchin." One mystery solved. My previous tree enquiries had garnered only "arbol" ("tree"well, yes) or "tule"(which is the name given to the huge 1000 year old tree outside of Oaxaca city, but which is a word found in none of my dictionaries. I have been told that other different looking trees are also called "tule." "Maybe," people say with a shrug.) My photos of the plants aren't art, but they give me enough info to remember the names--especially if I can get my hands on a good Mexican plant guide. The farm of course had mostly plants used for food, what I really need is someone to lead me across the country naming the myriad of species. I do have a wonderful photo of Gabriel's hand holding a cocoa bean he had peeled for us and one of the dogs, which I will send with thankyou's to Paul and Gabriel.

(Den) As our days in Puerto became scarce and precious, it got harder to take the time to write; we made a list of things to do, places to see or swim, and food to try before leaving. We never did get to the bottom of the list so I guess we'll just have to go back. Liz was done with her postcard designs, and had selected a printer to produce 1000 each of her twelve designs. There was some confusion over computer files, holiday delays, misunderstood scheduling, and suddenly the plentiful lead time was gone, and it would be a stretch to get them delivered to my niece Rachel's house in Kansas by the time we got there. We suggested putting them on the bus to Michigan but the printer eventually decided to pay the extra cost of 2-day shipping to Kansas instead.

We got in some swimming or snorkeling most days, though I had a couple low-action days. As they do a couple times a year, my sinuses decided to erupt. Maybe that snootful of salt water from an unexpected wave, maybe some allergy kicked in. Whatever started it the histamine further irritates the sinuses which respond with more histamine. Antihistamines are the obvious treatment but a sufficient dose to stop my nose usually puts me on my back anyway. Between various nose drugs and the passage of time it got livable in two or three days and went away in a week or so.

One problem was beer; I had only a few days to come up with 20 empties to get my deposit back at the beer deposito. With the timely recovery, and dedicated effort, I was just able to meet the challenge before we departed.

Most of the snorkeling late in the trip was at 'Playa Coral' (according to one handmade sign and no map), the near end of Bacocho beach, a 10 minute walk from home. Liz came back from one swim excited about a octopus sighting. There were always many plate-sized, yellow-tailed fish, sometimes in a huge school, other times individually feeding along the rocks. One memorable swim I noticed a few foot-long, more tubular-shaped fish swimming along with me. I turned around to see hundreds of pairs of eyes coming at me. I reminded myself that there were no pirannas in these water and relaxed. Later that swim I saw a sea turtle swimming toward the surface and away from me. It's hard to judge distance underwater so it might have been two or three feet long and 15 or 20 feet away through the not-quite-clear water. As I headed back in I got my third treat - a ray flapping along. It was maybe 14 inches square plus the long tail and nasty teeth up front. I was glad they don't hang in large schools. Later we saw two of them from above as we walked along the same beach, their tips rising above the waves sometimes as they swam along the beach just offshore.

The last few days of the year brought back the skydivers, who set up shop at the Arco Iris hotel and try to lure customers for US\$200 tandem rides down from 10,000 feet. It looks like such a blast with the maneuverable chutes (much like frameless hang gliders). You can watch the plane circling and climbing for minutes, then finally see specs falling if you have good eyes or binoculars and a flexible neck. The chutes begin to pop open ... two, four, seven, eventually 14 or 16 circling, banking, swirling. It has to be great fun. Last year they always did a sunset jump; this year they did one just before sunset, scrambled back into a van, packing chutes along the way, and got in a last ride just after sunset (at least sunset from the ground). The beach crowd forms a landing strip and they come zooming down, pulling up at the last moment to stop their forward momentum and settling gently on the sand. Someday...

We've made the mistake before of heading out for new years eve too early and giving up too soon, so we decided to skip a gringo pot luck and eat at home. When we got around to heading out at ten o'clock, thinking we could take a cab from our very quiet neighborhood and avoid driving. Unfortunately our neighborhood was so quiet no taxis were even cruising (keep in mind at least half of the autos in Puerto are taxis, and generally one passes by on any arterial street every minute or so). We walked towards the adoquin thinking a cab would be along any time. By the time we got downtown and saw the first cab we had given up and walked the rest of the way to Zicatela beach along the sand, maybe a 3 kilometer walk overall. We watched a band and singer playing at Sol & Rumba and made our way down to the gringo party at a palapa along Zicatela. Cervezas were had, and the music had people dancing between breaks for chicken-shit bingo (number



squares in the bottom of a makeshift pen, sell numbers, add a chicken, and the square with the chicken dropping wins) and for the new year's countdown. Of course there were fireworks all over the beach and downtown, and we worried a bit about Sophie's stress level. Our fears proved groundless as she was later found unconcerned on the bed in our quiet end of town.

There was a street party overtaking the street at Casa Babylon, the 20-something hang-out, with more good music. The bar was pretty unattainable but many of their slacker clients bring their own one-liter bottles of Sol or Corona anyway. We walked back to the Sol & Rumba and watched the music there. Liz started to dance a bit but I noted that the glare in our eyes was the overhead beach security light and we were the best-lit people for a mile around. We moved into the shadows. Back downtown we made a 2005 trip up the adoquin and found a taxi for the mile-plus back home. Our neighborhood was a quiet as we left it; too quiet for New Year's.

By January 5th we were unhappily resigned to our impending departure, and packing up the art, computers, tools, clothes, kitchen, books...a carload. I got the car into the courtyard parking spot and began loading up, trying to put the heavy stuff forward to keep the back from dragging over speed bumps any harder than necessary. With some containers, some careful fitting, and a bit of stuffing in, under, and around it all fits easily. We watched one last lovely sunset from our flat, and went out for one last dinner at Brad's barbeque place.

In the morning the car was just about loaded when the manager came by to inspect Liz's cleaner-than-needed place and return the deposit. By 9:00 or so we were on the road back past Nopala (Paul's farm) and up toward Oaxaca. The road hasn't changed, still bobbing and weaving, curving and climbing, needing third and second gear past farms, woods, villages, and livestock. The miles slowly added up, and the elevation too, as we got into pines again. We dropped back down into the valley of Oaxaca at Sola de Vega and across to the capital in mid-afternoon. Remembering our motel-search problems on our way through Oaxaca in November we went straight to a favored place and paid the going 350 peso rate. Parking was no longer available but we could use the lot down the street for a reasonable overnight rate. Off we went on a walk to see the zocalo and art exhibits. Liz went into the contemporary gallery on the pedestrian street from which Sophie and her keeper were banished. Across the street a young girl was soliciting donations, apparently for voice and accordion lessons; she enthusiastically was demonstrating how badly she needed them. Sophie and I walked on, beyond earshot.

It was a bit cool, but with Sophie along we had to eat outdoors on the square. Writing this now from January Ontario, how funny that thought seems. We went off shopping; I bought 5 pirated DVDs for 20 pesos each, and we ambled as a threesome through the colorful and narrow aisles of merchant's stalls. Eventually it was late enough to qualify for the low overnight rate at the parking lot and we moved the car back, packed Sophie in her smuggling bag, and headed two floors up to our little room in the back.

The morning light got us up and away, Sophie back in her bag, we hauled our stuff back to the car and got going fairly early. Unfortunately our planned path out of Oaxaca required a left turn we couldn't make. Our right led to a complicated intersection where a U-turn seemed inadvisable, and a sign to the left promised the route toward the isthmus; our road was toward the isthmus a few miles so we followed it out a large boulevard not on our inner-city maps. As we met the isthmus

road we guessed our turnoff was ahead, but obviously it wouldn't be noteworthy if we were right. It was a 30-Km detour before we turned around and found highway 175 north.

Veracruz, on the gulf coast 350 Km away, was our goal. Here was another entry for our twistiest road in North America' contest. The pavement was mostly OK, traffic light, and we headed up and through and over and around the mountains. I counted generally 10 curves between kilometer markers, so I think we rounded about 1800 curves between Oaxaca and Valle Nacional. This is more curves than between, say, Tampico and Port Hope. Some of it was steep and curvy enough to get us down to first gear. This road, although slow, saved something like 100 kilometers versus the toll road through Puebla, plus a pile of pesos in tolls. Do I need to mention that the views through the mountain were breath taking?

After Nacional, we were on the moist and verdant gulf coast. We began to see cane fields, and trucks or tractor-pulled wagons bristling with sugar cane on the way to the processing plant. With the water comes more life of all sorts, particularly human, so the towns get more frequent and larger. Even so the going to Veracruz wasn't too bad. We consulted our Lonely Planet guide and worked our way into town along the gulf from the east to the old port neighborhood. The recommended hotel had apparently learned it was the best deal and doubled the rates but we found another, with parking, down the next street. We wandered around a bit and found the main square and a few restaurants, one of which got our dinner business. Here there was a Mariachi and Marimba Battle of the Bands going on for captive restaurant customers, with groups to our back, left and right. As one song worked to its last chord, the other two bands raced to get their first, loud note out a beat before the other. There was also dancing on the stage in the square. Everyone but me, it seemed, was in long pants and long sleeves. Such a bad trend.

In the morning, it was just  
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\_\_\_\_\_ few turns and guesses to find our road west and out of town. We planned to head out for a while before finding breakfast and dog-walking room. That took miles longer than expected but we eventually found a roadside diner with a bit of raw space around for Sophie to, um, use. Breakfast wasn't their strong suit but we managed to eat. In between the trucks and the cane trailers, we managed good time on the multilane road. The gulf coast here has a long strip of motels and resorts for Mexico City residents to escape to the beach when it gets too hot up there. It's probably hotter at the beach, and it's not a great beach compared to the Pacific beaches, but it's a beach. The highway hugged the coast for the first half of the day's route, then went inland through Poza Rica and north through citrus groves and under increasingly impressive volcanos to the huge high toll bridge over the ship traffic into Tampico.

We've been around Tampico several times, and through it a time or two, but have never had a decent map or particularly clear understanding of it. We parked and shopped, ate and walked, and decided to try for a tryst or other motel on the outskirts rather than the grim hotel choices the city had to offer. The apparently main road went past a nice park and lagoon, and the signs petered out. We wound up in the gathering dusk headed out some boulevard we didn't recognise, and sure it was the wrong way. I pulled into a Pemex station for gas and advice. The road seemed to be heading

for a beach I knew we didn't want. But the gas guy seemed to want us to go straight to the second light and left. Off we went and soon we were going past a miles-long and miles-wide Pemex refinery complex. We came to a large highway and a couple of motels we rejected; one that rejected us (they didn't have an all night price); and finally onto a new divided highway lacking traffic, roadside trade, light, or signs, but which seemed to be headed north. Down this nice but lonely road about 20 km we finally found the main road at Altamira (high view), and landed in a motel there.

That highway isn't on any of our old or new maps; I'm convinced it's just there for the pemex trucks and traffic. It seems to be a shortcut around town and to the dig bridge south without the bother of city traffic. Being the national oil company, and the biggest collector of taxes, what Pemex wants, Pemex gets.

Altamira is a small highway town with the usual strip of auto services, a motel, a few restaurants, etc. We soon had a motel and parking arranged, and went out to seek dinner. Our travels along the main street and some side streets revealed nowhere to have a beer or wine with dinner, and we inquired of a friendly local where we might find such a place. He didn't know any so we figured on take-out chicken and maybe turn the search to take-out beer and ambled away. As we were about to cross the street he came trotting up with a new idea...the square was down an unlikely-looking dark street and there was a restaurant there. So off we walked, and sure enough the square was several dark blocks away. The square itself was brightly lit and filled with children, at an epiphany party. We made our way around the crowd, found the small place recommended and had a decent taco dinner and cold Corona while watching tv with the waiters. The party had apparently distracted all other customers. They were happy to serve us as long as our ordering didn't distract them from the sitcom for too long. We made our way back to the car, smuggled Sophie through the car park and up two flights of stairs again, to a little but adequate motel room, tired from a long day.

In the morning we left the tropics, crossing the tropic of cancer among the citrus groves of Tamulipas state's coastal lowlands. The roads got flatter and straighter, and faster. The volcanos fell behind us as we began to see sparse brush cactus again. We have a hard time deciding which crossing to use; Matamoros is a bit further out of the way, and crossing at Reynosa would give us a chance to have our permits cancelled by the uncooperative bureaucrat who refused us entry in November. Motels on the US side were less expensive at Brownsville/Matamoros, we know where to deal with permit cancellations there, and our border luck has always been better there, so that became the choice. Arriving at the border station, after a little navigation trouble through Matamoros, we set about the paperwork and had our car and personal permits cancelled in half an hour or so. While waiting for Liz who was dealing with the car permits, I spoke with some Californians intending to bicycle to at least Palenque, 850 km beyond Veracruz. Good luck to them.

Clear of our Mexican obligations we inched over the bridge to the Brownsville border guards. Our car was full enough, we young enough, and we'd been gone long enough, far enough south to get their attention, so they waved us over for further inspection. Two of them started going through our bags as I unloaded them from the back of the car. I got about a third of the way into the car when they got bored and decided we were the tourists we claimed and seemed and called off the search. We had declared a half-bottle of rum and a bottle of white wine so they made me take those over to

a little booth to pay \$1.85 duty. Lucky they gave up before they found the red wine or little mescal bottles...or Liz's various little plant bits...or the cockroach that crawled out of a ceramic bowl after we got home.

So we found ourselves in a less friendly country, Texas, with our Mexican car insurance useless. A stop at a phone booth allowed calls to our Canadian insurance office and our parents to let them start worrying about us driving through the US instead of Mexico. We found a discount (US\$45, over 500 pesos!) motel with internet, and went to get the car looked at and the oil changed. We managed to spend an hour at Wal-Mart and get out without spending much. Dinner called and we were in freeway-world Texas. A chain roadhouse supplied Texas-size beers and OK food, but then it was 320 pesos with tip. Is it harder to acclimate to northern temperatures or prices?

Our 500 peso Red Roof at least included free breakfast in the lobby so we fueled and loaded up before hitting the 3000 km of smooth asphalt called the United States. Our goal: get from the Rio Grande valley to at least Oklahoma in a day, which is to say get over Texas or get Texas over. The northern edge of Texas is halfway from Mexico to Minnesota. The Escort quickly adjusted to US freeway speeds as chain restaurants, gas stations, Wal-Mart's passed our windows. Since we were heading for Rachel's house in Manhattan, Kansas our course went simply north on I-35, through Fort Worth rather than Dallas, and on to Oklahoma City. It's not a completely horrible way to spend a day, but nothing to write home about. At least the motel discount flyer got us to a \$40 Super 8 in OK City. The temperature dropped as the latitude rose, and we hated it. I didn't bring much for warm clothes; perhaps a mistake. In the morning the last bit of Oklahoma went by fast and we were in Kansas. And in snow. Their first cold snap and snow of the winter waited for us, I guess. We'd get to know this weather system way to well in the next days. Dire road reports led us to skip the shorter scenic route to Manhattan in favor of the safe, boring freeways, and we were at Rachel's on schedule in early afternoon.

This put us ahead of Liz's postcards, which were due the next day, sometime, somewhere. We had a parcel tracking number but no info on the delivery time. As arranged earlier, though, we hopped in Rachel's Honda and drove to a art installation being put up in a magnificent public library in Topeka, an hour east. The print installation was right up Liz and Rachel's alley, and the drive to and from gave them a chance to discuss art, education, etc. Rachel made us a great dinner (we met her partner Tor earlier but he had a small business workshop to attend in Kansas City).

The next morning was set aside for seeing the Kansas State University Art department and facilities. Between waiting for the package and Rachel's three classes (short first day) we managed lunch and a campus tour. We were expecting Liz's postcards to be shipped to the department but on one tracing number check noticed the address hadn't been updated and they were headed to Rachel's house-we dashed back there. We still needed to get some miles behind us but couldn't leave without the cards, and the day was sliding past. Finally the UPS truck rolled in a bit after 3:00 and we quickly said our goodbyes and hit the road. With another 140 pounds of 12000 postcards our butt was now officially dragging. The nasty weather system was still with us, but had warmed to rain which increased in intensity as we approached St Louis long after dark.

We pressed on through it, keeping up with traffic which meant driving way too fast for wet roads in the dark. But this is America, roads are smooth and straight, mostly well marked, and fast. It was

white knuckling scary through whether Liz or I drove. We crossed the Missouri River and a bit later the Mississippi to southern Illinois. It was late and we were tired so the Days Inn in Effingham (or some f'in town) found room for us. At least we got 460 miles out of the way after 3 PM.

The next day we came to miss the rainstorm, as Illinois finished, Indiana slid by, and Michigan brought snow. We skipped around Detroit to head for the crossing at Sarnia, and despite the snow and cold, life was good until all movement stopped passed Flint; finally the radio informed us there was some truck wreck ahead and we had no options but to wait as the daylight faded. We still had some Michigan, the border, and 400 km of Ontario to go before getting to Pickering and a free bed for the night. Finally traffic began to crawl then merge and finally move normally.

We got to the border in the dark and cold, and flashed our passports. The guard asked us what we bought and we simply couldn't think of much since the wine was by now gone and there was only dregs of rum. By the time we got to a ceramic bowl he'd heard enough to wave us through. He was more interested in the fishing prospects in Port Hope which he had apparently more experience with than us. The snow and cold continued, but so did the trucks and Escort and we rode our old storm all the way to Mel and Betty's about 10:00 PM. It didn't feel exactly great to be back in the cold, snowy, dark, but after over a week on the road and two days in a storm at least it was a relief to be pretty much done driving.

We caught up a bit with the folks before bedtime and had a nice breakfast and talk in the familiar kitchen in the morning. The now-trivial last leg to our 45-degree house, the unloading, the food restocking, the giant pile of accumulated mail, the resettling, the chores, the accumulated work, all started absorbing our days. The snow gave way to bitter cold to welcomeus home. Every day we're still wondering if we should be swimming at Carizalillo, Zicatela, or Bacocho, eating fish or chicken...will it be a good sunset tonight?

Liz, Dennis, & Sophie a Oaxaca, uno tiempo mas 2004/5