

Viaje con Sofie: 2001-2

Friday December 7, 2001 South Padre Island, Texas.

Well, we're almost in Mexico...we left Port Hope Monday at noon in beautiful weather (unlike last year's snowstorm) and breezed down the highway in what could have been spring warmth. Crossing the border at Detroit went smoothly, with little wait and nothing more than the usual passport check and questions. We motored uneventfully through Michigan and into the dark as Ohio and Indiana rolled along, finally calling it quits near Terra Haute in a freeway motel.

We try to vary our route but that means we are getting further away from the fastest route across the USA heartland. Dennis thought it might be nice to see the Arch in St. Louis and the lower Mississippi, and navigated us that way. Unfortunately our highways never approached the river except to cross it at St. Louis, Memphis, and lastly near Baton Rouge. Our second day's motoring landed us in Jackson Mississippi with a catfish dinner for me (and Sophie--American portions being way too big) in anticipation of more fresh fish to come. Wednesday we headed down through Louisiana past trees shrouded in moss and over many bayous. It seems such a mysterious-primitive-lush landscape. I'd like to go back and explore it sometime.

Wednesday afternoon we arrived in Houston and took a detour to Fry's electronics to purchase a bigger memory card for D's camera. We were slowed by Houston's evening rush hour and decided to use our time eating dinner rather than sitting on the freeway. Having only snacked all day we ended up at a suburban TexMex restaurant. It being a balmy evening we availed ourselves of the opportunity to sit outside in their patio--the first of many all fresco meals to come. A stream ran by the landscaped patio. What I thought were squirrels, then muskrats, near the patio fence, turned out to be a family of nutrias. These small beaver-like creatures were busying themselves eating rhododendron leaves and stray tortilla chips, washed down by frequent drinks from the river. Dennis tells me Nutrias were an exotic species imported from the tropics, meant to be farmed for their fur and meat. Nutria is not their real name but was given to them to make them sound like a healthy meat source. The market never developed, and some escaped to enjoy--and populate the area. The waitress called them nutri-rats. Rush hour and dinner over, we were on the road again discussing the merits of camping versus the Super 8 near Corpus Christi. Dennis: It was warm enough to camp and we had enjoyed good beds and restaurant dinners two nights in a row--we could save some money; we could see a bit of Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ?); there was a campground on Padre Island and it would be nice to give Sophie a good run on the beach in the morning rather than a quick tour of a gas station verge and a smuggle in and out of a motel room.

Well, Padre Island won and we lost. The trip in through Corpus Christi was longer than we expected, a seemingly endless parade of nothing but fast food joints and mega stores. A dense fog was settling in as we drove further past oil refineries and then darkness. We finally found the state park at 10:20 p.m. It closed at 10 p.m. So...Dennis was determined (and tired) after driving all this way so we pulled into a nearby dirt road and parked. While I walked Sophie into total damp, foggy darkness along the dirt path, Dennis moved our luggage into the front seats and unrolled our bedding in the back of the car. This was the plan anyway. A few steps up the road the mosquitoes found Sophie and I. She quickly did what she needed to do and we returned to the car to stand swatting as Dennis swatted, swore and threw the gear forward. We all then leapt into the back of the car with only a couple of hundred vampires instead of the uncounted horde outside and began the contest over the fluids remaining in our veins.

Our newly clean car interior was splattered with blood and littered with carcasses and sand from our feet. Infuriating humming continued sporadically through the night despite our efforts. Sophie panted

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uncomfortably in the heat. The sticky humidity rose in the tightly sealed car. Dennis and I sweated and checked our watches hourly until daylight. Tired, rumped and uncomfortable we dragged the luggage between the front seats to the back of the car, climbed into the front seats to avoid opening the doors and drove back through the fog at first light. We never did see the beach or Corpus Christi, just the highway Denny's that appeared like a vision through the fog later that morning.

"Original Slammed" and cleaned up, we laughed at our experience of the night before as we headed down the highway to Brownsville and the border. We found the bridge we needed and crossed the Rio Grande without incident. Having imported vehicles to Mexico for the last 3 years we knew the ropes and got in line with ownership, passport and license already copied and ready to hand over. But...they now have a computer system that checks I.D. with a record of vehicles previously brought to Mexico. Dennis' 1976 Datsun truck, which he drove to Mexico in 1998, was not recorded as leaving. He could not import another vehicle to Mexico as long as this one was still there. Apparently you are required to return your importation documentation and get a stamped receipt at the border when you leave. No one asks for it. We've never done it.

When Dennis returned to the US with the truck there was no Mexican official to do this at the small border crossing. Although the American Customs agents thoroughly searched the vehicle there was no record of the truck leaving the country. Dennis now had to prove the truck was in the US before we could bring in the car. An original letter (no fax) in Spanish from a US official might be enough.

The truck in the meantime had served as yard hauler before being left in Hood River, Oregon with a friend, Howdy. It was in such an idiosyncratic state it could never be legally driven in Ontario, and needed the right attitude and skill-set to be workable even in Oregon. Howdy had used it for hauling as well until he sold it to a local kid last August. Dennis's task was to prove this to the satisfaction of the Mexican officials. We left the Mexican Customs Office and drove back to Brownsville. Sophie and I stayed in the car while Dennis walked back across the bridge to the American Embassy in Matamoros to explain his problem. They were sympathetic and said they would write a letter on his behalf, if there was documentation proving the truck was in Oregon. They called Oregon to get the DMV records to show the change of ownership. The Datsun was still in Dennis's name. The kid had not registered it (that would take insurance and \$30, a lot to ask on a \$200 1976 Datsun.

(D) This was not going to be easy or quick. We baled from the Rio Grande and took a Best Western room on South Padre Island. How do you prove a Datsun is in Oregon? The Hood River police had no record of the registered letter they sent me in Bend last summer threatening to tow it as an overparked eyesore the week before it was sold. I hadn't had any parking or speeding (yea, right) tickets in it. It sounded like the Hood River Police would do me the favor of looking at the truck and faxing a letter that it was there, if I could determine its location, but they referred me to the Oregon State Patrol first. More conversation with Howdy, on his cell phone from a meeting, elicited a promise of an overnight fax of the sales agreement the kid signed.

Then it was simply a matter of getting the two matching phone directory listings for the kid's name (neither was right, but Howdy reported that one of them argued that they had paid plenty for that Ford truck already and it shouldn't be repossessed!) I woke Howdy at 7:00 AM and he agreed to track the kid down before his 9 am meeting. Via the kid's parents at the gas station he patronizes, Howdy found Tim at his grocery checking job, ready to offer to pay the registration fee himself, when Tim explained that the front wheel fell off the truck shortly after he got it. Just yesterday he had signed the title over to a mechanic in the next town. He only remembered the probable name and approximate location of the shop. Howdy reported all

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this to me as he drove late to his meeting. (Muchas Gracias Howdy) I managed to get a number from Information and YES! he had the truck and gave me his address (and thanked me for warning him the cops might be by).

The City police in that town determined the address wasn't in the city limits. I explained my needs to the Wasco County Sheriff's dispatcher (the fourth police force now thus informed) and they agreed to send a deputy over when time allowed. I composed and sent a fax with the whole story, all the contact and truck info, and a sample letter they could put on their letterhead and fax back to satisfy the consulate and maybe the Mexicans. They thought they could get that done by about 2 PM Texas time, really pretty fast. This was kind, voluntary, and fairly amusing for them. The fax finally came about half an hour after our extended checkout time so we were committed to another night in Texas. I called the consulate and dashed 30 miles back to the border leaving Liz & Sophie to walk on the South Padre Island beach.

I got to the consulate about 3 PM, half an hour before they closed till Monday. My savior Debra Johnson at the consulate, had already called the further amused sheriff to confirm the content of the fax. She directed the Mexican staff to translate the Wasco County letter to Spanish and compose another (original!) on US consulate letterhead assuring the Mexicans that the Datsun was really, really in Oregon. Here's some interesting trivia: embassy documents aren't stapled, they're riveted together with brass rivets like Levi's. Unfortunately they were out of fresh rivets and could find exactly four in various stages of bent which wouldn't feed through the riveter. After I mentioned my Mechanical Engineering background Debra came out to the public side of the bulletproof consulate counter and we eventually got one rivet installed. Just half an hour wasted over a rivet. The consulate staff could go to their Christmas Party and I could confront the Mexican Bureaucracy.

Back at the bridge, the clerk at window #1 sent me across to the Other Office as expected. That person inspected my copies of the consulate letter and produced another version of the same facts. Then she tried to explain in Spanish where on the other side of Matamoros the office was that had to stamp and sign her document. She said the cab ride would be expensive but without that \$20 (US) cabbie there was no chance I'd have found what turned out to be the 2nd floor of the Policia's detective squad building at 4:45, 45 minutes into their 2-hour siesta. Finally the cabbie snared somebody who disappeared inside and came out with the letter stamped and signed a minute later for a tip of only \$10 US, half the cost of any of my previous three interactions with Mexican police. It is still not clear to me if we were at the right office but someone across town stamped and signed it and that seemed good enough for clerk number two (and now I find out she speaks English!) She produced a third document and I could finally go to window #5 and cancel the 1998 Datsun vehicle permit. This cleared the way for another half hour back at window #1 getting a new one for the car. Just one more hike across the Rio Grande toll bridge, and I could drive back to the San Padre Island happy in the knowledge that five police forces, Howdy, a kid, his parents, a mechanic, a taxi driver, three US Consular staff, 30% of the bureaucrats of greater Matamoros, and I had managed to allow us to continue our vacation tomorrow.

The Christmas parade down Padre Avenue was not enough to keep me from the Best Western, or from the drive through Pizza and Beer store. The pizza is on the right, the beer on the left, and one guy operated both separate businesses. The beer was decent but we voted it the second-worst pizza of our mutual experience. It hadn't improved much by breakfast.

Saturday December 8, Cerro Azul, Veracruz

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Crossing the Rio Grande is really not too tough with your paperwork done. We navigated the worst of Matamoros pretty quickly and the guy at the document checkpoint 10 miles out of town liked our shiny new car permit sticker too. The huge farms of the gulf coast lowlands gave way to the greener volcanic remnants further south. The guides all say the toll bridge at Tampico is preferable to the long way around. At the junction we took the toll road, just like we did last year and I did in 1998. Next time for sure we will remember that the toll road does not lead to the toll bridge, but does lead to the much slower route. With the sun starting to drop from high in the sky (none of that low northern winter sun for us!) we started evaluating options for the evening.

This part of Mexico gets few tourists and short treatment in the guide books, so as dusk turned to dark, and empty bellies grumbled, we settled for paying too much for our little concrete bunker here at Cerro Azul. With an O.K. chicken dinner and a couple Victoria Cervezas each we've dropped about 380 pesos here, maybe \$65 Canadian at the worse-than-ever current rate.

This year gas is 5.6 pesos per liter, about \$.95 Canadian per litre or \$2.25 US per gallon, vs 95.9 cents in Brownsville. As I write Liz is asleep with pillows over her ears to drown out the air conditioner which is drowning out the trucks, busses and dogs outside. It will have to do.

Sunday December 9, Jalapa, Veracruz

The rooster didn't start crowing until after the truck traffic was rumbling past. Our sheet plus their blanket was almost enough warmth. The 'hot' water started cool and slowly got colder. Perhaps we might have chosen a better motel. We continued down the coast road past Poza Rico but decided to revisit Jalapa to catch the Anthropological Museum we had missed last year. The road to Jalapa from the north is less traveled and maintained than the east-west road used by traffic from Mexico City, Puebla, and Veracruz. Our road was in decent shape, considering it rises 7500 feet in 50 miles of sharp curves. We started in orange groves and crested a pine forest. Jalapa's famous rain and fog notwithstanding, we found the museo on the second pass.

(L) The Museo Antropológico de Jalapa is an amazing place. It was designed by the New York architectural firm Edward Durell Stone in 1986 covers 9,000 square metres in the university precinct. It conforms to the shape of the sloped landscape and is surrounded by a botanical garden. The floors are a grey marble and the walls are smoothed concrete slab with imbedded particulate stone. Looking down the main gallery the space descends shallow step by step, articulating mesoamerican cultures from oldest to most recent. Light from the open courtyard at the end draws you forward. Just entering this space is breathtaking! Then of course there are the artifacts—several Olmec heads may be found in the interior galleries as well as in jungle habitat areas to the side. Polished semi-precious stone ceremonial weapons from this period are also exquisite. There are many laughing clay figures from burial sites as well as animal figures small and large. My favourite sculpture was a lifesize clay figure of a man singing(?) His raised hand gestures, open mouth, half-closed eyes and tilted back head made him seem like he was singing something very soulful. He also had a wonderful textured garment—perhaps he was wearing feathers? Individual thumbsize pieces of clay run in rows around his body, arms and legs. Unfortunately there were no post cards available in the bookshop so I didn't get a reminder of this figure for myself or any of the animal or laughing figures to send to people who would like them. The museum requires a camera permit for photos—that we didn't have—as I found out when I readied the D's digital for the third time to take a photo. Oh well.

After enjoying the museum we set off to the Centro to find a hotel for the night and something to eat. Navigating the steep foggy streets we eventually found a parking spot and D walked Sophie while I went in

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search of a hotel. I found us a room at the Hotel Salmones for 220 pesos which was only a slightly more shabby version of its earlier colonial grandeur. Although smaller and not remodeled, I chose a quiet room facing the garden courtyard rather than the first proffered streetside room. After dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant we were in for the night with a bouncy Sophie watching those northern blokes in The Full Monty speak Spanish.

Tuesday December 11, Ciudad del Carmen, Tabasco.

Jalapa is a coffee town! After a lechero grande for me and a jugo naranja for Dennis we were on the road down through the mountains towards Veracruz. Neither of us wanted to deal with Veracruz again after our mordido incident last year so we skirted the city and headed through the Tuxtlas to Lake Catemaco. Unfortunately it was foggy and rainy in these coastal mountains too, so we only caught glimpses of the lush volcanic landscape. (We'll have to return to this area) The weather cleared as we drove into Catemaco so after a short walk along the malecon by the lake to get our bearings we sat down in a patio for a late lunch and planned our next step. The motel/camping question arose again. It being low season and most hotels empty we decided we were safe in leaving that decision until we had checked out the beaches for possible camping. The ocean beaches at Lake Catemaco are very far, though through incredibly beautiful country, from the town. As the sun began its decent we still had seen no water and the road had gone from slick new pavement to gravel, to rutted mud, to strange parallel stone (?) tracks that often were precariously elevated from the mud, then broken making us hold our breaths as we tried to keep our wheels on the tracks and not plunge into the mud. We knew that if we didn't find the Playa Escondida, mentioned on the sign miles back, soon we might get stuck in the dark, in the lush undergrowth. We finally came to a spot wide enough to turn around, and seeing no evidence of ocean ahead we gave up and began the trek back. Oh well.

We did camp however, in town at the tiny trailer park, where we parked our little wagon behind a big Quebec camper to shield ourselves from the array of flashing Christmas lights adorning the nearby restaurant. 80 pesos later (40 each so we could use their servicios) we rearranged the car and unrolled our bedding so that we could crawl into it after a much needed beer and dinner snack to cap off the latest adventure.

(D) Oh, for the quiet campsite at Lake Catemaco. We woke up this morning, despite earplugs, to the sound of some sort of shots or explosions which were loud enough to make it through the drone of the air conditioner, the roar of some motor in the courtyard, and the sound of the traffic outside. This motel may be noisy, and smelly, but it was very hard to find. We left Lake C. in good shape after bakery buns and coffee on the lakeside malecon, then traveled down the road toward Acayucan and Villahermosa. It was a busy road clogged with traffic and construction so the going was tedious. At Acayucan, where I had parked my truck and caught a bus three years ago, we hit a supermarket for a few items and got back on the open road. A few-mile detour was involved in the search for the non-toll road but we found it eventually. The toll roads are so expensive here that 80% of the traffic uses the old, narrow, free road while the 4-lane tollways remain nearly empty.

At a gas stop I beat Liz to the passenger's seat to let her drive for a while. We read about Villahermosa in the guides and set out for a lunch in the "Zona Remodelada," a new pedestrian area downtown. With much traffic and inadequate maps we circumnavigated the zona without finding parking and grabbed a spot near a major intersection when it was presented. Perhaps people in VH don't eat much because the dearth of attractive restaurants. We choked down a couple of quesadillas and steak tacos (d) on a noisy corner and re-entered the fray. With only one missed turn we were back on Highway 180 now heading northeast up the

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east side of the gulf, toward the coast and hopefully some tourist beach spots, Playa Azul, Frontera, Playa el Bosque, and Ciudad Del Carmen. Playa Azul has apparently disappeared since the signs were put up, so we headed toward Frontera.

Liz then smashed the first of many bugs for the evening. The others were mostly mosquitoes allowed into the car at a military/drug check point, but the first one was a beetle, the Volkswagon sort. I was distracting her with some map information from the guidebook as we unknowingly approached (another) speed bump. She slammed on the brakes too late for the old bug ahead of us, flattening its bumper over the engine hood. (L) Once we were sure we were all OK, Den jumped out of the car to see how those in the bug were doing. I caught my breath and attended to a startled Sophie who had luckily been asleep behind the passenger seat and was not hit by my small painting table which flew forward out of its ceiling rack on impact. (We had already discussed that the table should be tied in...) The man and his father that we hit were fine and after a few of my shaken "lo siento" (I'm sorry) and Dennis's claim that he had seguridad (insurance-which it appeared no one wanted to deal with anyway by the look on the driver's face) we agreed to the \$500 peso (about \$85 Canadian) reparation of damages suggested by the driver. This seemed fair to us and probably made his day. We all shook hands and said goodbye and Dennis took back the keys. I was still shaking.

While he was checking our car for damage (nothing more than the license knocked off) and readjusting the seat for him to drive, Sophie surprised us by taking advantage of the open door and dashed onto the road in pursuit of a large truck lumbering over the topes---that's when I screamed, Dennis leapt in front of (d- little) oncoming traffic to retrieve her and I thought the world had ended. Fortunately we all survived.

At Frontera we could find no tourist accommodations so we took the paved secondary road toward El Bosque, a fishing village near a lighthouse at the end of a river and a playa sign. The playa treated us to a wonderful sunset but offered no services. We could have camped as no one was around but we of course were hungry and had no food other than some pretzels and shortbread in the car. The village was quite primitive and seemed to lack even an abarrotes (like a corner store). So...we were back on the road in search of a place to spend the night and have a meal.

Driving through the Mexican night is not fun. None of the small towns we passed through had hotels or restaurants but many topes and few lights. We finally found ourselves at the toll bridge to Ciudad del Carmen where after paying the 53 peso toll we were free to search the streets for a hotel.

(D) We tried the main street. We tried the waterfront. We tried the road out of town. We tried asking the Pemex gas guy and even a Taxi driver there. The only motel they claimed to know was attached to the strip club down the street and for some reason Liz rejected that option. We finally tried the stretch of highway around town and stumbled upon or Motel/Restaurant for the night. It wasn't cheap, clean, quiet, or well-equipped, but it was there. Liz ordered "Jaima" off the 'fish' menu, without being sure what species it was. I got the chicken. When they brought her plate of crab, she was a good sport but uncertain it was the best choice. About then the few mosquitos started. Eating 6 crabs is slow work, even if you know what you're doing. Slower if, like Liz, you don't know the best way to operate Mexican crab-exoskeleton-cracking pliers. It turned out to be a leisurely meal.

Thursday December 13, Progreso, Yukatan.

We are in a serviceable hotel near the center of Progreso, a beach/port town north of Merida, the largest city on the peninsula. We got here with little additional trouble or vehicle damage. Bar music is wafting in the window as the ceiling fan groans rhythmically. The rotating port lighthouse beam misses our window

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by a few meters. Dinner was good and inexpensive, with live music to boot, though the cervezas were about double the best price we've seen. A stroll down the beach and around town, and a trip up two flights with a dog in her smuggling case were the evening's entertainment.

A couple hours after the hitchcockian birds first woke us up on Wednesday, we bade a not-to-fond farewell to Del Carmen and continued east and now north on our tour of the gulf coast. Of course the road just beyond the Pemex offered several better-looking motels. Oh well. The road closely follows the vacant coast for many miles, with the occasional vacation homes or small settlements. You have to wonder if it is frequent hurricane country or what that such lovely coastline is so unsettled. We knew we would make it easily to Campeche, capital of that state. On the way in we noted a campground as an option. Campeche is an old place, conquered by the Spanish and then several times raided by pirates (of present-day Del Carmen) until walls and ramparts were erected around 1700. Some of the wall and all of the fortified corners are preserved. We found a parking place inside the walls, and a tourist information office.

Hours of touring, walking, driving, and looking later we settled on a once-rejected old hotel. The large room must have had 15-foot ceilings. Plumbing and electricity were obviously relatively recent ideas in this building (not that either service was modern or sufficient. There were many (realtor-speak) "deferred maintenance issues" in the areas of cleanliness and paint. But what do you expect, right downtown, near a free Orchestral/Choral concert and a book fair, in a charming old walled city, for US \$9 a night? We ate (too much) across the street, strolled the book fair and caught half of the concert before retiring. We are under the ceiling fan and one of the tissue-thin sheets, next to a screened and curtained window over the street. The earplugs are working out OK.

I should mention, part of the day's drive was back to that campground. It is now a private club, from which we were rejected for lack of a larger vehicle: "Where's your RV?" "We sleep in the car" "You can't stay here". On the way back to town I needed to brake hard for a huge unmarked speed bump. Again the painting table, still unsecured in its overhead rack, slid forward. This time I was ready and held it above our heads my right arm. That guided it into the rear view mirror, resulting in a lovely star pattern of cracks in the windshield glass surrounding the glued-on mirror support. I may be the only guy to break two windshields *from inside the car* without getting hurt. Once I left a black can of photographic dust-off (pressurized propellant) on the dash of a parked car on a sunny afternoon.

Thursday morning we got going somehow without either breakfast or coffee, off to see some of the many Mayan ruins of the peninsula. First stop was Edzna, a stunning site partially recovered from the jungle in a joint Mexican/Guatemalan effort. The five-story temple, one of several buildings atop a several-acre two-story human-built rock platform, was the most remarkable of the several buildings excavated to date. Another, nearly as large, mostly covered in jungle, is visible from the top. Yes, the top. Unlike other sites we've visited, people are allowed to climb the exceedingly steep 5 story (rebuilt) stairway to view the ancient city and hundreds of square miles of relatively flat jungle. The sole concession to modernity is an inch-thick rope through iron rings as a handhold. The couple of dozen grade-5 kids we watched used it to descend unhurt. (Imagine daring to guide 20+ kids up and down a 5-story stone stairway about 60 degrees steep.)

Next we stopped at a limestone cave formerly used by the Maya to access underground water. This site had formerly been developed with tourist facilities above, great concrete stairs and walkways down a hill and into the cave, electric lighting, etc. Apparently the development was the brainchild of a politician now gone. A single man serves as maintenance department, guide, and gardener. The road in is potholed, the restaurant closed, the lights failing, the walkways unswept, and the cave is great. 40 pesos well spent.

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We started driving past more Mayan sites (we'll revisit later; still we haven't had breakfast), even famous Uxmal, to stop one restaurant short of the right one, and caught the end of a French bus-tour group's drinking songs and partying as we ate at last. It was a short hop to Merida, We skirted the city to check out some of the villages further north, along the gulf coast. We managed to find our way to the arrow-straight, one-lane paved road to the most western fishing village. We spoke there to Mr. Chi. He likes Canadians. He's renting a house to one—Toronto art critic Mays, a friend of friends of Liz. There's something to that 6 degrees of separation theory.

A tour of the next towns and of larger Progreso's tourist zone, led us to this room. Technically there is TV. The set is on the east, the cable is on the west, and even together they can get only four fuzzy Mexican stations. The water seems to work and now both the music next door and Liz are quiet for the night. Maybe tomorrow we'll get this on the net.

Friday December 14, Progreso, Yucatan.

After one day of looking we haven't found a place here on the Yucatan gulf coast that really grabs us and says 'paradise' the way places on the Pacific coast have. We drove east today, visiting five villages, checking out the beaches and services, keeping eyes peeled for rental signs, and generally trying to find that 'just right' place. The coast here tends to be straight, with little vertical rise on shore or drop in the water. The incredible pier here extends six kilometers (you read that right) to get deep enough (just 30 feet) out to load and unload cruise and cargo ships.

The water is a bit cloudy near the shore, and most of the coast is losing its sandy beach to erosion. In many areas property owners have built narrow jetties (two rows of narrow posts supporting a couple-feet thick pile of limestone rocks) across the remaining beach and well out into the water. This might preserve some sand, but makes walking and running on the beach difficult. It also captures seaweed and flotsam. The high season here is July-August when Merida is unlivably hot, and the coast population triples to 120,000. Right now over half of the houses are vacant and tourist-based business are open only limited hours if at all. It is a cheap time to be here but not too exciting. The housing offered is reasonable but it's frustrating seeing so many cute, clean, small, nice places unused but unavailable. It is warm, and consistently humid to the point of frequent dankness. Things don't dry out.

As all of that makes it sound, we are thinking of moving on into Merida, around to some of the Mayan ruins, then maybe over to the Carribean coast. That would put us in tourist land at the peak of the Xmas season, but with Sept 11 maybe enough people will stay home to leave that area within our range of cost and crowd-tolerance. Maybe we'll stumble upon the perfect rental tomorrow. At least tonight's Hoter San Marcos has a non-lumpy bed.

Wednesday, December 19, Puerto Morelos, Quintana Roo.

(D) It's been a long time between entries. We've seen a lot of the peninsula and a lot of Mayan ruins. Tonight we are sleeping within a 100 meters of the Caribbean instead of the gulf, after four night's inland.

We left Progreso Saturday morning bound for Merida, the biggest city on the peninsula with a few hundred thousand people. It has a faster life, several museums, and much commerce. We drove in on Paseo Montejo, a broad boulevard named for the conquistador and long-time leading family. After parking, we

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made our way toward the main plaza, meeting on the way Alfonso, a 30-something high school History teacher eager to practice his English with us. He spoke Spanish, of course, and Mayan as well. He was full of stories and information; he gave me a tour of the murals and paintings at the Government headquarters (which was a brief Yucatan history lesson), guided us to a shop for authentic Panama hats for the sun, and told us that both museums and Mayan sites were free on Sundays. Altogether a fine fellow; we hope he writes us.

We chose 140 peso per night Hotel Oveido, a former grand mansion near the plaza to stay. You drive through the open-air lobby to parking in the back. Wanting a quiet room away from busy street noise, we hiked a long walk back around, upstairs, and to the back again to room 225, all with a little dog in a carry bag. We only had to do that about 8 times in three days. The room was typically tall, easily 15 feet, and acceptable.

After a meal of fresh pasta in a nearby Italian restaurant, Liz stayed up figuring Sunday's museum tour. (L) Sunday morning began with buns and coffee on the square, watching people set up their stalls of crafts to sell to the Sunday strollers expected later in the day. We drove to the regional anthropology museum housed in a Beaux Arts mansion in a wealthy area of town, north on the Paseo Montejo. The city was quiet so we had no problem finding shady parking for the hour we were to leave Sophie. The museum was interesting but much less impressive than those in Mexico City and Jalapa, particularly considering the importance of the subject here. Next we found the Museum of Decorative Arts upstairs in a much more dilapidated old mansion. This museum showed examples of the costumes of each region of Mexico. The embroidery and weaving was quite impressive. There was also quite a good selection of ceremonial masks in dusty cases. The building was hot and the young guard was lying asleep on a bench. I hope the artifacts are not lost due to negligence as they are unlike anything currently available.

The Modern Art Museum (MACAY) was back at the main square, to the left of the Cathedral, down a closed street. Large scale, brightly painted metal sculpture dramatized this passageway. Inside (yet another former mansion) we found a concert taking place in the shady green courtyard. Slipping behind the stage at a song break, we ascended the stairs to the second floor galleries. Here we were ushered by guards into distinct exhibitions at each of numerous doors along the open hallway overlooking the courtyard. The first room displayed the chronological history of art from cave paintings to surrealism using faded Janson reproductions and a few artifacts. In contrast the next room had an installation of large humorous fur-framed oil paintings which would be quite at home in the Queen Street gallery strip. Interesting exhibitions of drawings and paintings of more or less established Mexican Artists followed including a series of bug drawings by the Oaxacan Toledo whose work we carried back to Mexico from Canada a few years ago. The final room of this colonial mansion was painted hot pink and yellow and was devoted to an exhibition of wild guache paintings of crazy chickens and angels by another Master artist.

At this point we decided to do something that was Sophie-inclusive and drove to what was supposedly a large park and zoo. The plan was to walk in the shady park for a while, have a cold drink and slip into the nearby Natural History Museum if time and shade allowed. The park was a children's amusement park with a little train that rattled round and round as well as other noisy diversions. Sophie liked it. We all had cold drinks in the shade and moved on. The Natural History Museum was small with a few aging dioramas and was generally geared to children from the amusement park.

Somewhat museum-ed out and only early afternoon, Dennis suggested a trip out to the local ruins at Dzibilchaltun which had been highly recommended by native-son Alfonso. The hottest part of the afternoon found us baking in sun and ruins, then cooling off in the cenote (sen-no-tay) a spring-fed natural limestone

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pool which furnished water for the ancient city. Sophie the intrepid pyramid climbing dog needed that as much as anyone. This site actually has a very impressive little museum which I wish we had more time to explore. The afternoon's detour was well worth the effort.

We returned to our room for a rest before heading out for the evening. Strains of competing concerts from one square or another could be heard bouncing off the stone walls. We finally went out Sunday night to find the Christmas Parade noisily circling the square. There were many floats with waving costumed children tossing candy and small toys to the crowd. Santa was not the grand finale. Following his float came two brightly lit Coca-Cola trucks with young elfen-men lobbing wadded Coca-Cola t-shirts. Next came the honking traffic that had been held up behind the parade. We all laughed and waved to the bridal couple chauffeured in their decorated model-T who were near the front of the traffic jam--and as quickly as possible turned the corner away from the parade route.

We strolled the main square with the rest of the crowd listening for a while to a small orchestra playing for older dancing couples in front of the municipal buildings. The deft moves seemed slowed to match the crowd and the heat. Tall European descent dancers dressed in Guaberas (light cotton shirts for men) and dresses with high heels for women, moved alongside the much shorter Mayans. Some of these older women were dressed traditionally in beautifully embroidered huipiles. These impeccably white simple square necked shifts are embroidered around the neckline and hem usually with flowers significant to the wearer. A lacy (cutwork) underslip hangs below and the whole outfit is both beautiful and coolly practical. On a later circle of the park the music had changed to a 4-piece band with a crooner. We returned to our room to music from a different nearby park and finally got some sleep.

(D) We had learned that a pressing need, laundry, could be addressed near the square. Drop off your bag at 8:00, pick it up after noon for 100 pesos, about \$16 Canadian; not cheap, but we were needing this service. With the morning to burn we shopped a little. I got a new pair of glasses, with the eye test, for 500 pesos, about \$85 Canadian or \$53 US. They look and work much better than the old pair of Liz's I've been using to see distances for the last couple of years.

After picking up the specs and the wash we blasted out of town to see some more ruins. We got back to Uxmal (on the road to Campeche) and located a place to camp (actually a motel that would let us park near an old building with a key to use the plumbing in one of the units. We dashed to Uxmal and toured the ruins for several hours. The immense amount of human labor represented in these colossal ancient works is impossible to imagine. The scale of the endeavor, in the absence of machinery or even metal tools, is mind-boggling enough; the craftsmanship of the stone-carving, and stone-fitting is beyond knowing. Beside the enduring limestone monuments you have to imagine a vastly larger complex built mostly of wood, long since reabsorbed into the jungle. Drama was provided by a storm which moved in while we were atop one of the principle temples to Chaac the rain god. We were totally soaked but enjoyed the rest of the site before leaving.

Uxmal closes at 5 pm and reopens for a 7:00 sound and light show. We returned to the hotel to clean-up, ate dinner during a thunder storm in the near empty dining room (the only other customers a Dutch family) and determined to get our money's worth, headed back to Uxmal as the rain let up. We weren't the only intrepid vacationers and as the hour struck 7 the show began. It was a bit hokey but worth seeing and hearing. The low angled coloured light bathing the principle structures created dramatic highlights on the architectural details and carvings. The bombastic music and impassioned narration fueled the imagination, even when trying to make out the Spanish. Adding immensely to both dimensions was the continuation of the lightning and thunder in the distance making the event, despite our apprehensions, truly memorable.

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Back at the motel we settled into the car for a long night. Between the thunder, the heat, a few bugs, and the motel-complex lighting we got some rest, but little sleep, before the birds started in at first light. We rolled out and up to the restaurant for “breakfast” which was nescafe, juice, and slices of the Mexican version of Wonder Bread (Bimbo) toasted to cracker-type crispness for a steep 35 pesos a person.

Off we went, ruining and caving. We stopped at one of the smaller sites (Xlapac) along the “Puuc” route (Puuc means hills in Mayan) and also visited the large Loltun cave, formerly a cenote which had been drained following the meteor which crashed near Progreso millions of years ago and which is thought to have killed the dinosaurs. I was very impressed with the Loltun tour. The rains started again while we were submerged. It was interesting to look up from one of the few openings to the sky and see the miracle of rain as the ancients had.

We got going via Tikul and after a light lunch finally found the pottery place recommended in the guide, but Liz was unimpressed. Lunch was unimpressive as well. Finding the way out of town was difficult too. Oh well. We had chosen not to head back to Merida to catch the main road to Chichen Itza, but to take the secondary road, which cuts across to meet the highway. We finally did make it, though it didn't look good as the undercarriage and exhaust bumped along a kilometer of rutted construction-zone dirt. Mexican road crews don't seem to bother much with detours. I suppose the thinking is that there's probably always a way through a construction zone and you are expected to find it while staying out of the way of the gang of workers and their equipment.

Finally to the highway, we motored to Piste, a service-town near Chichen-Itza. We settled into our low budget rooms/shirts/supplies/camping/hammocks place, taking a 120-peso room rather than attempt sleeping in the car with rain coming again, and nowhere private or level to park. Nice room!!!! Large, clean, painted, with functioning utilities-----all you could ask. We headed out for dinner nearby with entertainment provided by loud American guys on a one-day rental car excursion from Cancun, now just 200 Km away. Good luck to them, and I'm sure the locals much appreciate the dollars they traded for junky crafts (better customers than we ever are or were), but unfortunately they reaffirmed all the negative stereotypes of Americans abroad. They left at 6:00 planning to drive 3 hours to Playa del Carmen, via Cancun, party late, then return to Cancun before the car was due at 10 AM. Some Americans are very scary.

We decided to catch the sound/light show at Chichen-Itza at 7:00 PM in anticipation of visiting the ruins the next day. It frankly wasn't as good as the Uxmal version (less of a “Greek Drama” and more of a history lesson) and the lightning and thunder added less. But you have to be impressed with your first views of the pyramid, the classic image of Central American pre-Columbus civilization. There is less carving and detail on the surfaces to be set in relief by the lights at Chichen Itza than Uxmal, and you don't sit as close, so the lighting doesn't create any great effects. There were also many more people at Chichen Itza and when the show was over we followed the crowd back to their Mayaland Hotel before realizing the mistake and had to retrace our steps through the now darkened ruins to return to the main entrance in order to find our lone vehicle in the carpark.

We woke up better rested this morning. All was well until part way into the morning routine when we discovered that there was no running water. I fetched a bucket from the mostly drained swimming pool to do the essentials (I guess we're campers anyway). We packed and cruised the street for coffee, settling for nescafe, juice, pancakes and eggs at a hotel restaurant. Piste is growing fast and trying to snare every tourist dollar available, with all the good and bad that means. New hotels abut trash-strewn vacant lots, and everybody's got a sign out (mostly English) touting their route into your pocket.

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It took all morning to tour most of Chichen and we were there as it opened. The 91 steps up the pyramid gave wonderful views of jungle and ruins. The Temple of a Thousand Columns and the array of similar columns near the "market" once supported thatched roofs over large areas. Two cenotes provided water. Piles of rocks around the reconstructed ruins turn out to be sorted by shape and carving style; the rebuilders are faced with a monumental puzzle. At least they don't have to carve them. We baled as the day grew hot, and as bus after bus disgorged Cancun tourists into the entryway.

We decided to head to Puerto Morelos for some beachlife for a few days or perhaps through the Christmas season. The road here was OK but our expected secondary road short-cut couldn't be found. The policia in the town that the map showed the road leaving from, advised against it and that was good enough for us, as the "rare" winter rain was beginning again for the third straight day. We had to drive to, and around Cancun to get on the Caribbean coast highway which connects Cancun, Puerto Morelos (where I write), Playa Del Carmen, Tulum, Chetumal, and the many resorts now dotting Caribbean Mexico.

Puerto Morelos is best known as the not-too-touristy town from which the cargo ferry goes to Cozumel. Tourism is catching on though, as motels reach further in to the mangroves, new villas are going up and the downtown plaza is being redeveloped. It feels tonight like a muddy construction zone. The Cancun horde is being felt in all the brochures for entertainments available in the local travel agent. We haven't really seen the beach yet, but our ex-Brit-ex-Canadian host has another apartment we might rent for a couple weeks if we like it here and the unseasonable rain ever quits.

Thursday, December 20, Puerto Morelos, Quintana Roo. Bajo la lluvia con una perra humido

(L)This means, if I've translated correctly, "in the rain with a wet dog". I suppose this is redundant ---Who would have thought that it would be raining?--- and it would be better to say "en la cuarto con una perra humido"- "in the room with a wet dog". It has rained off and on all day as we have learned has been the case in Puerto Morelos since September. This is very unusual and is not good for business here or in Cancun. We read in the paper today that hotel occupancy in Cancun is only 50%. Whether this is because of the weather, the threat of terrorism or they've built too many mega-resorts, we don't know, although such low occupancy is not good for the tourism industry. Even here we've seen many se vente (for sale) signs on condo and hotel complexes. Hmmm...and I'm listening to Mercury Rev sing "and dreams are often wrong". I suppose the dream of a Caribbean Paradise is hard to hold on to.

We have walked the beach between downpours; bought a few groceries at the local tienda; internetted to check the weather forecast (unfortunately not good for the whole Caribbean); Dennis is happily watching the movie channel (he says he's practicing his Spanish with the subtitles, but I have my doubts). He has also fixed the cable for the building, which required him to find a ladder to untangle and reconnect some wires caught in a tree. He also magnanimously found a wrench in his toolkit to change the gas for the hot water. Apparently the landlady's was missing. La perra humida has been happily sleeping in a wrinkle of blankets at the end of the bed. And I am trying to think of a good plan for what to do next.

Who would ever think of rain in the Caribbean in December-this is supposed to be the dry season. Hmmm...Dennis seems quite happy watching cable and Sophie napping. (Its pouring again) Me? I'm still trying to figure it out....I guess I could spend some more days walking between downpours. I could pull out my paints and with enough light in this dark room and...paint something. Or...I could convince

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Dennis that we could subscribe to cable when we got home and keep driving down the highway. So..we skip swimming for a while...Tulum, Chetumal, Palenque, San Christobal de Las Casas etc. etc. will keep me more than stimulated despite the rain. And then...perhaps this front will be over and we can return to a Pacific beach for January. It won't be the Caribbean, but oh well. With the weather and fear of flying affecting tourism I don't think hotels will be as booked-up as usual. The holiday celebrations in San Christobal would be interesting, or this might be the year to catch the Day of the Radishes carvings in Oaxaca. The deliberations and research continues, it gets darker in here and movie number three begins.

Saturday, December 22, Puerto Morelos, Quintana Roo.

Well, Dennis, "Mr. Let's Make the Most of the Situation We're In" prevailed over Ms. "I don't like it, I'll Find a Different Solution". The weather cleared yesterday too-although it is still very windy. Sarah, our landlady and Dennis seem to have struck it off. She agreed with him that staying was a much better idea than moving on given the cost of things here in Quintana Roo and the in-coming crowds for the holiday season. We've moved from our original room to a larger, airier studio apartment for a week. The apartment isn't as close to the ocean as the other, but balconies front and back and increased light make a big difference. Our fridge isn't working and neither are some lights in the building, so Dennis has struck a deal with his friend Sarah for reduced rent in exchange for attending to these problems. I hope the "hour or two" job he started several ago hasn't become a major ordeal. He and Sarah have gone out and returned with more electrical wiring—it seems the lights weren't wired correctly in the first place. Now they've gone off to find a part for the fridge. Sophie is napping on the cool tiles beside me and I've been sorting through some of the bits and pieces of plants and sea life that I've collected in the last few weeks in preparation for painting.

Yesterday after coming to a conclusion in the "should we stay, or should we go" discussion, we set off for Playa del Carmen to see how the last few years have changed that small beach resort we'd each visited in 1999. A 2000-01 brochure we picked up shows resorts dotting the coast from Cancun to Punta Allen, where our latest Moon Guide hints at some development but shows a relatively undeveloped coastline. Unfortunately the brochure has the most correct information and even more huge new "Gateways to Paradise" were being bulldozed out of the jungle as we passed. We drove down from the highway through the Mexican service town towards the beachfront and parked near an immense luxury hotel complex under construction. We wondered if the fall rains had slowed their construction schedule since they were obviously not going to make a Christmas opening. As large as this hotel appeared, it was not above three stories. Happily there are no highrises being built in Playa, so I suppose despite its sprawl visitors can imagine they are still visiting a small Mexican town. When we got to the beach we realized that we were not at the north end of the strip but development continued as far as we could see.

Late Friday morning only early arrivals were setting themselves up on the beach. It was still a bit cool but intrepid sunners were stripped to catch what they could. There were many more people here than we'd seen in a while but obviously Playa was not yet at capacity. The beach here is smaller than we remembered. Erosion of the shoreline was staved off in areas with sandbags but for the most part the fine white sand beach was only about 20' deep. With the usual beach furniture set up to lure business, walking the length of the strip required numerous wet detours. The ferry to Cozumel was loading as we approached the ferry docks. Looking at the waves I was reminded of Heather and my rolling retreat from Playa del Carmen to the repetitive "Feliz Navidad" from the tinny sound system, each of us taking a different tack on the eyes open or shut issue to relieve the waves of nausea. The weather will have to change significantly before Dennis and I see what's new in Cozumel.

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We met the Dutch couple on the beach who we'd seen near Uxmal, and again at Chichen. With two teenagers in tow they had settled into Mom's Hotel for a few beach days before heading home. They had had a full week's itinerary of ruins, churches and haciendas and with hopefully a day or two of sunshine and beach the younger half of the foursome would be happy. Although they enjoyed themselves, they had found that their trip was about 30% more expensive than their guidebook had suggested. They were curious about where we were staying and I think planning a longer, rougher trip similar to ours through less developed Mexico, without the bug squeamish younger two.

We strolled back through town noting a new McDonald's, Burger King, TGI Fridays and Subway. Oh well. Playa still has many funky little hotels and restaurants and we stopped in the shade of little place for a drink and 25 peso huarache (large tortilla filled with beans with a red or mole sauce, lettuce and cheese-chicken if desired) The friendly (German?) proprietor brought water for Sophie and seemed to be doing good business with tourists and locals alike with the restaurant, a little hotel behind and a tienda (like a corner store). We did notice that many hotels still had vacancies. The few price lists we noticed were in the 400-600 peso range for a room with a fan. This is more than we've been paying anywhere, but they're probably nicer and this is high season. Actually, for a week in the sun, it probably wouldn't be too bad and would be much cheaper and more pleasant than staying at a Motel 6 anywhere!

We left Playa del Carmen in early afternoon heading down the coast to Paamul which our guide said was a small beach worth exploring. It didn't mention the trailer park, hotel units, restaurant... Beyond the large trailers with their palapa-like sun shades we found the beach. We definitely didn't have it to ourselves, but we spent a pleasant few hours exploring the rough coral shoreline—and a few minutes in the crystal blue ocean! Finally in water!!! The clouds cleared and in we went. Unfortunately with the wind it was better to be fully submerged or out altogether. This would be a good place to snorkel as even from the shore we saw a number of colourful fish. There is a small reef not too far out which would be good to look at, although dangerous now in the wind and choppy water. There were many big beautiful rounded pieces of coral along the shoreline and it was a great temptation to bring them all home. I resisted and took many photos instead. After our walk we stopped for a drink in the shade of a palapa by the restaurant (Yikes!! 35 pesos for a beer and a water) before heading back to Puerto Morelos.

On our way back we decided to pick up some groceries at a big new Chedraui supermercado just off the highway on the edge of Playa del Carmen. Except for the language difference we could have been in any big Supercentre with everything from clothes and sporting goods to housewares, hardware and groceries. Stocked up with fresh buns (to eat in the car!), fruit and vegetables, water, beer, Chilean wine (they had a surprising selection of German Wines not available in Canada) we headed back to a nice Mexican stir-fry dinner.

Dennis and Sarah were unsuccessful in their hunt for the refrigeration man—we may not have a fridge today—oh well. Dennis has re-estimated his current job at —about an hour—for the rewiring (not the simple switch replacement) and it is now 2:00. Oh well. This is Mexico. The sun is finally shining.

(D) It seemed like a good deal, looking at a couple minor-sounding electrical problems for a day's free rent. Oh well. I hadn't been aware I was the third guy to work on the lighting problem, or that the first two had made it worse, burning out a switch, disconnecting and taking the circuit breaker, and misconnecting wires beyond all recognition. I did manage to get it figured out and working within the limits of the available parts. If she gets a new switch and breaker on Monday, it should only take "another hour or so" (my refrain

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to Liz all day) to earn our free day. As for the fridge, with the new part which came about 4 pm, it began to work, though for only 8 seconds at a time. We wound up swapping fridges with the vacant apartment below us making Peter, Sarah's 16 year old son and myself now the movers. Besides the other problems the electrical service here runs about 100 volts on one phase instead of 120 which caused a series of other complications, discussions and experiments when I replaced some burnt out lightbulbs with new florescents. Ah, life in Mexico....

Monday, Christmas Eve, Puerto Morelos, Quintana Roo.

(D) Christmas is an odd time to be a tourist far from family, but it works out pretty well. We are spared major portions of the crass commercialism thanks to our limited Spanish vocabulary and reduced access to all media. The holidays here in tourist world bring other stresses; suddenly there are a lot more people around. Every child in Christendom got out of school Friday, and more than a few have climbed out of planes in Cancun. Restaurants and hotels may not be over half full but that's triple the business they had last week.

We got a late start this morning. The weather is still a bit blustery and unsettled so we decided again it wasn't to be a snorkeling or ferrying day. A review of the guide revealed that admission to the ruins at Coba and Tulum is likely to be free tomorrow (looks like a traditional Christmas for us!) so it seemed silly to go today. That left a few options for the day, and cruising Cancun was chosen. We entered the Hotel-strewn strip of sand from the far end and worked our way back toward the town and the oldest hotels. Cancun is more like Las Vegas than either is like anywhere else. There's no gambling but there's a gaudy strip of ostentatious hotels cheek to jowl on one boulevard, in a warm and beautiful setting, with flown-in tourists piloting rental cars back and forth. You don't need any Spanish as hotels, fast food, cars, clothes, and anything else is sold under the same names you see up north. We stopped at one of the few public beach accesses for a walk down the beach past condos and hotels (the beaches are all public--if you can get to them).

The light beige sand washed by blue-green Caribbean is all you could want, unless you want to turn around without being assaulted by intense development. Red flags confirmed that the crashing waves clawing back the sandy beach made swimming unwise, so we walked along the shoreline. This is the only place where, near the public access, we saw a sign indicating no dogs. We walked the other way and had several conversations with tourists smiling at Sophie chasing surf and missing their pets at home.

We piled back in the sore-thumb dirty car among the shiny rentals and navigated our way to and through Cancun town to find the Isla Mujeres ferry dock at adjacent Puerto Juarez. A review of the rates and schedule for future reference (the car will not be joining us for any trip to Isla Mujeres) and we were headed back through town hoping to find not-too-tourist Cancun without a map. We had no success in this endeavor but did get lunch and escape without injury to fender or flesh. We tried a couple of side roads toward the beach hoping to find the proverbial perfect deserted beach with an inexpensive, friendly palapa restaurant. No such luck but we did car-tour the humungous Mayan Palace Hotel/Resort complex and then found a new way along the beach road to Puerto Morelos.

We took a break and a walk and a weedy swim at the beach nearby before preparing for dinner at a small place just off the square. Liz's whole red snapper evidenced a dire need for marine orthodontia in these

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waters, but was good with the light garlic. (Dennis didn't enjoy my toothy fish-ventriloquism) The smoked pork chop was nice too. Sophie 'Bonecrusher' Parkinson has already pulverized and swallowed her share.

Yesterday (Sunday) we tried another beach to the south-Xlococo, noted in the guide as empty for camping with a no-electricity restaurant on the beach serving fresh fish. The road was horrible enough to make us hopeful, but electricity has made it there now, as well as hotels, a resort, a number of private homes and precious little camping. We did get a good afternoon meal from an older establishment. That held us until a snack dinner back at the apartment. It had rained here at Puerto Morelos, but not on us further down the highway. We keep hoping for the 'normal' dry weather to show up.

Liz went to bed early. While I was writing the streets started to come alive with voices, music, a car blowing its horn all over town and children letting off fireworks. Of course our windows are open, and the car horn woke her up. Now the rain has restarted and it might quiet down again.

Wednesday, December 26, Puerto Morelos, Quintana Roo.

(D) It was a warm Christmas again, unlike those reported from Ontario and Minnesota yesterday. Slush in Ontario has us wondering about the state of our bathroom ceiling which had begun to seep on rainy days last fall. Snow in Minnesota has us glad to hear noisy tropical birds out the open windows.

For Christmas we drove south to Tulum and then northwest up to Coba, a large Mayan archaeological site which has been only partially recovered from the jungle. The ancients built many roads here (Sachbes), some about 2 modern (mexican) lanes wide, elevated one or two meters above the jungle floor, one about 100 km (60 miles) long going toward Chichen Itza. They even found a large stone cylinder nearby apparently used to compact roadways. If only modern Mexican highways were as enduring! The highest pyramid in the Yucatan is at Coba – 45 Meters or about 12 stories tall, ascended by 120 tall steps. We were wondering how many centuries the ancients held the record for North America's tallest building before the first skyscrapers finally passed them as elevators came along. Only about four areas have been cleared at Coba, and the view from the pyramid includes nearby and distant hills, at least some of which are man-made.

We left Coba in early afternoon thinking we might go to the beach south of Tulum for a swim and a snack, then tour the Tulum seaside ruins after the heat of the day, but before the 5 PM closing time. Finding a suitable beach-and road-accessible, affordable lunch took quite a while, and then the service was...well... at a very relaxed pace. For some reason we found ourselves at a small beachside restaurant staffed and frequented by extremely beautiful and well dressed Italians. Caio, Bella---go figure. After a walk down the beach our chance to see the Tulum ruins was gone.

As we approached Playa Del Carmen on the way back north, the idea of a little side trip via ferry to Cozumel came up. Leaving a tired Sophie to guard the car on a dark and quiet side street, we caught the 6:00 ferry over to the island, giving us till the last ferry at 10 pm to see the old and the new around town, have some dinner, and maybe dance to a couple songs at Joe's Reggae Bar, where we had met three Christmases earlier. Cozumel hasn't changed too much. Most of the familiar places were still around, except the little French coffee shop Liz liked, and, sadly, Joe's.

We had walked by the old location before some locals informed us Joe's had moved, changed names, and recently closed. There would be no romantic revisit. We surveyed all the nearby streets trying to choose a restaurant, then had an unsatisfying meal anyway. We took a walk along the seafront tourist strip, observing

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the many slick shops catering to cruise ship passengers, and the new large shopping complex built at the base of the cruise ship dock so they can shop, eat, and drink without actually even touching Mexican soil or cracked pavement. Almost all the prices in central Cozumel are in US currency and the conversations in English. As we sat along the seawall passing time until the ferry, the rain started. It was pretty heavy by the time we were under an awning on the lee side of a cruise-junk shop but then it really cut loose for a few minutes. As the ferry departure time approached we braved what was left of the shower and made our way out to the boat. Another smooth-enough ride in wet clothes returned us to Playa. Before we got to Sophie we paused to hear some music as we walked along. (L) A young Mexican rock band sang originals in Spanish as well as stilted accent English covers at an open-air club on the pedestrian mall. Radiohead's Creep was performed well despite the odd shift of American English through Spanish from its Northern English roots. A South American band played at another club complete with a dextrous dancer balancing a growing tower of glasses on his head. I wonder how these older, well accomplished musicians feel about the glasses stunt that really gets the camera flashes going? (D) There seems to be a little more life in Playa del Carmen. Car and dog were fine (no rain here!) and we got back to Puerto Morelos a bit after midnight.

After the morning walk and breakfast I washed most of the last 6000 or so miles of dirt from the car. With just a found bucket, brush, and rag I didn't get it all the way to notably shiny, but it is probably best not to attract attention either way. Liz swept and washed our white tile floors (bad colour!) to get the sand and dirt problem there a bit more under control. She now has her art materials and collected samples out. We would like to get these entries sent today and maybe make some art. Sophie is resting on the cool tiles, tummy-up, happy for a day off.

Sunday, December 30, Xcalak, Quintana Roo.

(D) Don't ask us how to pronounce it. (L-Shkalak) We're at an end-of-the-road fishing village at the south end of the Yucatan Caribbean coast. For now the roads are dirt, the infrastructure minimal, the pace slow. The new road in, the cruise ship dock up the coast, the new airport, and the real estate vultures with web sites posted, all hint that the slow pace here might be changing. If you want to get in on the next (Cancun/Cabo/Playa del Carmen/...whatever) you can still get in for about \$65,000 US but not for long...so the Real Estate agents say...(L-or there might be a hurricane that washes it all away or...)

We came down today from Puerto Morelos after vacating our little apartment and repacking the car. We decided to skip Tulum again (too many buses and cars in the mid-day car park) and made for this yet-vacant coast. Tonight we are tent camping with electric and plumbing provided by Mike, a lodging/diving/ice/whatever you need provider at the end of the dirt road through town. He seems like an easy guy to get along with. I might even be able to help him figure out an alarm system he's having trouble with (here we go again).

Thursday we were slow getting going (8:30). Liz painted most of the day and I internetted for a while to get the last journal sent, check the weather forecast (still disappointing), and answer a few e-mails. Back on the balcony, Liz heard a loud noise, followed by a big blue flame and smoke coming from the electrical pole nearby, signaling the end of electricity and internet use for the afternoon. By the time I returned to the apartment Liz's natural light was fading and it seemed like a good time for a long beach walk with Sophie. By the time we returned with plans for pasta by candlelight, electricity and local radios had been restored.

(L) After a successful day painting a lacy bit of coral and a sea fern on linen, I resisted struggling with the shifting light in trying to make sense of Wednesday's conch and leaf and drove Friday morning to the Jardin

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Botanico near the crucero (where the road to Puerto Morelis leaves the main highway). Dennis and Sophie opted to read and sleep rather than join me on my buggy jungle mission. This university study centre covers about 150 acres with trails through semievergreen tropical forest with specimen areas featuring labeled trees, bromelads and cacti. There is also a nursery where native plants are propagated for reintroduction to cleared areas. The site is bounded on one side by the highway and the other by a mangrove swamp. The other two sides-up and down the highway- are probably already slated for resort development.

Many birds and insects flitted in the air and except for two other couples I encountered once, I spent several hours happily wandering alone in the jungle. One area had an old chicle encampment and I learned the function of all the V slashes I had seen on trees. There was also a small ruin of an ancient Maya village found while mapping the jungle trees. Unfortunately in the shady gloom I didn't have a fast enough film to photograph the many very sculptural grinding stones lying in the undergrowth. After following the trail for sometime I found myself skirting the mangrove swamp as the sun broke through the clouds. Submerged leaves appeared like shimmering pools of amber amidst the roots/branches.

Climbing the ridge away from the swamp I came across what had been labeled "lookout" on the map near the entrance gate. An aluminum extension ladder leaned against the tallest tree on the ridge. A small Tarzan-style wooden platform in the uppermost fork of this tree could just be made out through the forest canopy. Sky? Breeze perhaps? Both would be nice after wandering in the humid buggy gloom for a couple of hours. Soo...no fear of heights I secured my camera and started climbing. At the end of the first set of rungs some old electrical cord wound around the coupling to the next section made me feel really safe. Another cord lashed the ladder to a branch wedged into a fork of a nearby tree. So I climbed. As this section of ladder grew narrower, the slight vibration to the ladder became more pronounced and rhythmic. There was no where to lash the end of this section of ladder to, except the next even narrower full extension which seemed to vibrate even more and for some reason seemed at a steeper angle than the last two. If a Liz falls in the jungle does anyone hear her scream? I couldn't stop now.

Finally I grabbed the wood of the platform instead of the slippery aluminum and hauled myself onto the wood. At this point I allowed myself to conjecture when the last person might have climbed here and whether the wooden platform was about to rot though. But...tapping around with my shoe I decided I could stand...and enjoy the view and cool breeze. With my head the only thing above the forest canopy there was only green on three sides seemingly forever. On the fourth side I could make out the change in foliage that was the mangrove swamp with the communications tower indicating Puerto Morelis beyond it and then the Caribbean. It was breathtaking.

Returning to Puerto Morelis I gave a ride to a young Italian couple who had been 2/5 of the visitors to the garden that day. Their taxi had not returned to get them. The lookout? No way. Hah!! Ask me if I can still yodel and pound my chest like Tarzan.

Back at the apartment Dennis and Sophie were just waking up from their nap. I jumped into a cooling shower and changed with the promise of sunshine and an afternoon at the beach. After lunch we decided to head out in search of that elusive empty Caribbean beach, with Playa del Carmen and a happy hour palapa, being our last resort. Despite the Spanglish of the small Playa Secreto sign down the highway, we veered off onto the dirt road through the mangrove. A gate at the end of the road protecting a row of new ocean villas dashed our hopes of the promised Secret Beach until we were told by the gatekeeper that we could park outside the gate and walk in. Not quite secret, not quite exclusive, but for a few Mexican families playing volleyball at one end -who had also parked and walked in - Dennis, a free Sophie and I spent a quiet afternoon reading, dipping in the waves and combing our near-empty beach for ocean treasures.

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It is interesting how one beach presents an array of coral; another seems to have a particular type of shell. This beach had many varieties of sponges washed in by the waves. Sophie and I had a happy time sniffing and poking through this unusual beach collection.

By 4 p.m. the steady breeze was feeling cool on wet bathing suits and we decided to head to Playa Del Carmen to pick up my slides, meander the streets, and have dinner at one of the many streetside bar/cafes. The young Columbians I chatted with at the next table gave us the last Corona in their bucket when one of their party returned with a lead on a room for the night. It seems accommodation in Playa del Carmen was tight this Friday evening. With the 2-for-1's we had ordered it seemed the best plan to have dinner where we sat. The beer was much better than the food. With another stroll of the town we decided tourist land was fine, but we were not their market. We got back in the car, stopped at the Chedraui store for a few things and headed back to Puerto Morelis.

(D) Saturday we finally had a day of the weather we came to the Caribbean for: the gentle breezes and warm sun lasted through the electrical-repair/artwork hours and we got to the beach after lunch with snorkel in hand. We took turns paddling around the weedy shallows, looking at weeds, rocks, fish, sponges, and coral. I saw a pair of pike-looking predators maybe 30 inches long. Also some shimmering blue fish, striped ones, and some tiny flashes of color darting into the weeds. Liz followed a school of hand sized yellow striped fish for a long way before her mask filled with water and she discover how far out she had floated.

I had been hoping to find a Pollo Asado (grilled chicken) dinner like we've sometimes had elsewhere in Mexico, but the sign on the shack down the street never seemed to be there when we were hungry. We cruised the main streets of the village without luck and decided to look at the non-tourist part of town up at the highway. Eventually we found a roadside restaurant with a fifty-peso (\$8.50 Canadian) Pollo Asado to go, cut up, with tortillas, rice, beans, salad and salsa included. We'll be eating the leftovers tonight and still have lunch leftover. The free range chickens grow big and juicy here. Such is the luck, finding the right weather and the right dinner on the last day in town. That extra day for electrical work has started to look better, though.

Monday, December 31, 10 PM , Chetumal, Quintana Roo.

(D) New Year's Eve finds us, as usual, not at some wild Mexican fiesta. They usually don't start until after midnight. We think the whole country is asleep from 6 to 11 while we look for dinner and something to do and then starts the party after we give up.

Chetumal is not a typical Mexican town. There are many grand 4-lane divided boulevards, but not much action. There is no central square with the usual cathedral and governmental headquarters (it is the state capital, but the government buildings are along the bayfront). It's cleaner than most cities, but seems less lively, with few restaurants, bars, or clubs. There's a grand manicured drive and walkway along the waterfront but few vendors or patrons. We are at the Hotel Boston, a concrete bargain at 90 pesos. Small, but clean enough and the plumbing works. We parked in the courtyard and Sophie was barely smuggled to her position at the foot of the bed. The overhead fan is noisy. The bed is molded concrete with a 4 inch foam mattress. Our other option tonight was to camp out on a apparently vacant bit of property we found along the bayfront street out of town a few kilometers. There we might have had a great full moon view and a nice night in the car. Maybe also hordes of mosquitoes, or some bored cop pounding on the window at 3 am, so the Boston will do.

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Today's drive took us back from Xcalac up the new but boring roads north and west to the Cancun highway, then south. Along the way south we stopped for a nice afternoon lake swim at Lake Bacalar, before motoring into Chetumal. It was a treat to swim in fresh water after salt. This lakeside swimming area reminded Liz of the Sunday afternoon family drives to Lake Scugog when she was a kid: lots of families staking their place in the shade (palapas here not trees); cement dock and other slightly disheveled lakeside accoutrements; a snack bar; and lots of squealing as children hurled themselves into the cool, clear lake.

A drive around, a walk around, and another two drives around before and after sunset have shown us most Chetumal but there's not much to grab visitors. (L-the bayside drive through the middle-class neighborhoods to "cottage country" was certainly lovely. We even stumbled upon a newly excavated ruin complex that we were allowed to make a quick tour of before the sun set.) It may be a great place to live but they are in no hurry to sell out for tourist commerce, like the rest of the Yucatan Caribbean coast. A nice thing, if inconvenient for us tonight.

Wednesday, January 2, 2002, Palenque, Chiapas.

(L) An early New Year's Eve (I was asleep by 10) had us up and on the road to Chiapas before most of the rest of the city stirred. We found little commerce open until had been driving for several hours through beautiful increasingly hilly, tree lined roads. We had even hopefully checked the Belize border for a restaurant or abarrotes. Nothing doing even there. We finally stopped at Xpujil and had breakfast at the restaurant attached to the bus station. You could pick up buses here that would take you back to Playa del Carmen for 88 pesos (about \$15 Canadian) or even to Brownsville Texas for I think 360 pesos (\$55)

Finally fed we decided to stop at nearby Becan to see some of the earliest structures in the Rio Bec area, dating from 500 BC. Becan was an important religious ceremonial centre. It exhibits the distinctive Rio Bec style of "palaces" with flanking towers that are built on pyramids with what look like temples on top. There are vestiges of red pigment on many of the buildings. It must have been an incredible site to come upon these tall brightly painted buildings in the jungle. There are two enormous sky serpent masks (8'?) on different buildings. One I didn't notice until I had climbed to the top of the pyramid stairs. It is constructed out of stone. On another building, now protected from the elements, there is most of a highly detailed stucco mask with some of its blue, red and black paint still extant. I think what is most amazing at Becan is the moat which surrounds the entire complex. It is 15 m wide, 4 m deep and 2.3km in diameter. Archaeologists believe this protective construction was needed because of constant wars with Mayapan (in Yucatan near Merida!) in the 2nd century.

We drove throughout the day through beautiful countryside and arrived in Palenque around 6 p.m. Locating a hotel was much easier than we have ever experienced. We are installed at the Hotel Posada San Juan where for 150 pesos we have clean room with a balcony overlooking the town, hot water, fresh paint-soft yellow walls with a cerulean blue ceiling, parking, a firm bed and a dog who was welcomed as we walked into the lobby! Tourism is a major money maker here and there are many hotels. But unlike the coast these are modest hotels and the tourists are mainly backpackers and others who come to see Palenque's ruins or explore some of the rivers and waterfalls in the jungle nearby. It's quite laid-back. Unlike the Cancun/Tulum Mayan Riviera corridor, I haven't felt like I was misplaced in a beer commercial yet.

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Last night we wandered the town, circled the Zocalo, ate a good inexpensive dinner and felt happy. Unfortunately, it has rained most of today... The heavy rain abated some after a late start, long breakfast, nearby umbrella purchase to walk Sophie comfortably and some interneting. We found a place to get our muffler fixed and Dennis deposited Sophie and I back at the hotel and went with a book around 2 p.m. to deal with the Mofle. It is now 4:20 and from the sound of kids letting off firecrackers to startle poor snoozing Sophie, I'd say its finally stopped raining. The ruins will have to wait until tomorrow.

(D) I got back as Liz finished. That she didn't hear me coming verifies the success of the muffler mission. I got the oil changed, too. 773 pesos well spent (\$85 US or \$130 Canadian). Naturally a small Mexican shop lacks the exact muffler for my car, but Benito removed the steel hangers from the old muffler, welded them onto a slightly longer, slimmer new one, and made a shorter, custom tailpipe to match. All for 650 pesos, in about an hour. Me gusta mucho los mecanicos de Mexico!

We wandered downtown Palenque again, finally choosing the pizza place near the square for our supper. The barely-baked mess that resulted has elevated the South Padre Island pizza we complained about earlier to 3rd-worst of our mutual experience.

Saturday, January 5, 2002, San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas.

(D) San Cristobal is lovely, interesting, inexpensive and, to us, cold. The nights here require multiple layers and are a big change from the nylon shorts / tank top weather of the Yucatan Peninsula. The Posada La Cabanita is quiet, clean, cheap at 120 pesos, and completely without heat. But the car is safely parked and Sophie is welcome unsmuggled. With the extra blanket we're cozy enough, at least until we get up.

We arrived here yesterday after the twisty drive from Palenque, with a stop at the Agua Azul waterfalls. There has been so much 'dry season' rain lately that the river is running high and the Agua is more 'Maron' (Brown) than 'Azul' (blue). We found our bearing and lodgings here last evening, and had a walk about town to dinner and live music at a small bar. Today we shopped the streets, Liz bought a handsewn alligator and a sheep to keep her Zapatista family company, and visited Na Bolom, a non-profit museum/cultural center working hard to preserve the environment and culture of the Lacandon forest peoples.

There are some things to report from Thursday and Friday. Thursday we braved the steady but light rain to slosh through the mud at the Palenque ruins. The ruins include tall temples, a several story observatory, carvings, paintings, and many lovely courtyards. Unlike the Yucatan Maya, they had both natural hills and abundant streams to work with so they built atop some hills and controlled the water. My new theory is that the Mayan cities were abandoned after thousands annually slipped and fell to their deaths down the steep wet stone temple stairways.

After the ruins we decided to brave the rain some more and went up into the surrounding mountains to the Misol Ha waterfalls. They were beautiful but they would be spectacular with a blue sky behind (and sun warming the viewers). On the way back from Misol Ha, I did a bit of unintentional off-roading, losing traction on the wet pavement approaching a curve (driving too fast, obviously). I got the car headed straight so as not to roll and bounced to a stop maybe 20 feet from, and 6 feet below the highway. The people behind stopped to make sure we were all right, and arranged to send a tow truck up when they reached town. Before the truck arrived, a couple of Mexican opportunists with a pickup and a rope managed to pull us back up for 300 pesos. The car seems mechanically undamaged, but the lower portion of the driver side

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doors are dented in a bit. The fender and headlight trim we found nearby were from some other rigs that missed the same curve.

A bit shaken but relieved it hadn't been worse, we returned to Palenque for dinner and another night at the Posada. Friday finally brought the end of steady rain and we headed right back past the scene of our incident and beyond to Agua (Not) Azul (with all the rain) and to San Cristobal. The drive brought us up and down and around, through towns, citrus and banana trees, then pines. The road was good and uncrowded, but nothing beats Mexican mountain roads for keeping your interest, since you can rarely see more than 100 yards ahead, and you better be looking (for animals, oncoming busses, speed bumps, missing pavement...) Again quite a change from the Yucatan with its arrow-straight roads through miles of flat, low jungle.

After the hit-and-miss dining in Palenque, we've enjoyed San Cristobal, consistently finding good food at reasonable prices. The streets are cobblestone, narrow, mostly one way, with stone-paved sidewalks against the concrete walls of the colonial homes and buildings. There are many travelers here, younger than elsewhere, many from Europe, particularly Germany. San Cristobal is probably best known for the Zapatista uprising a few years ago. The Chiapas tourist info doesn't happen to mention them but sub-commander Marcos, with his trademark black cap/mask, is all over on t-shirts and posters and Liz maintains that in the mountains we passed a group of young men sitting near the road wearing balaclavas. New Presidente Fox has made peace so there isn't any apparent resistance now although the group is still around. Chiapas is set to grow and will no doubt change a lot in the next few years. It is a beautiful state with abundant natural resources, hopefully change will husband the resources wisely and yet bring better conditions for the native populations.(Chiapas is named, incidentally, for the Chia plant; yes the stuff used for Chia-pets!)

Sunday, January 6, 2002, San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas.

(L) I have been overwhelmed by the beautiful weavings and embroideries for sale here. Most are made by women from local community coops with particular patterns and styles of dress indicating particular villages. There is also a lot of Guatemalan clothing. Any of it, anyplace else, would be interesting, here, there is just so much choice-so many people with so many piles of dresses, and shirts, and pillow cases, and blankets, and hats, and belts, and purses and...that I don't know how to choose. We wandered the market a bit yesterday on our way to and from the Santa Jolobil Weaver's Cooperative store. It was good to visit the store to get an idea of where things were coming from and what different qualities were like before heading back outside only to be accosted by some poor woman (Chamulean, I think, by her dress) wrapping a shawl around me and proclaiming "que bonita". Sure it was, but also acrylic and also available in stacks at the local department store. I felt somewhat educated in repeatedly saying "no, gracias", but also abashed at my power to buy: I could have bought it anyway and bought another too for less than a meal in a restaurant.

A trip to Taller Lenateros saw another San Cristobal craft initiative. This is a papermaking studio which produces beautiful handmade paper using local plant materials. The paper is available in various sizes (mostly small-but I'm sure they'd make special orders) and bound into booklets, books and printed small press volumes. There were some examples of block printed and silkscreened artwork using the paper too. Unfortunately none of the paper was appropriate for my work.

I went to the Museo de Artesaneas today and saw more displays showing different craft items from different areas of Chiapas. Bolstered with this information and yesterday's I probably could more comfortably wade through the market, but today is Sunday and the sellers are all at markets in their own villages. Oh well...another time. I really like San Cristobal's colonial architecture, surrounding pine covered hills, clear

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air and quiet pace. I hope to return someday...perhaps on that oft dreamed of 3 L's artist tour that includes drinking cappuccinos in the Zocalo in Oaxaca.

There's good coffee here too...

After wandering the streets and dining Den and I decided to take a drive to Zinacantan a village 10 k from San Cristobal. I had read about and seen some examples of the embroidery done here and had also heard that they earned income from cultivating flowers in outdoor gardens and greenhouses. We wound our way into the mountains past herds of sheep, curbside garden patches white with Calla Lilies (many restaurants here have waist high clay pots here full of these lilies) and breath taking vistas back down to the valley and up to peaks shrouded in clouds. Arriving in Zinacantan late in the afternoon we had missed the market but were witness to most of the village gathered near the church dressed in their finest celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany with firecrackers going off and gifts distributed to the children from the Three Kings. It was a beautiful sea of dark woven fabric glistening with elaborate floral embroidery. The men were the most colourful, wearing tunics completely covered in roses, chrysanthemums, lilies...some wore short white pants and later a band approached all in colourful tunics with white short pants and short crowned black hats with long multi-coloured ribbons. The women and girls wore their usual dark skirt and white blouse with a shawl of the same dark cloth embroidered with flowers on the shoulders.

It was an incredible vision although Den and I were both too shy to stand watching the festivities. Instead we parked and looked into the few open booths with embroidered goods for sale. Most displayed placemats and table runners with coarsely embroidered sunflowers or animal motifs. There were a few examples of the fine embroidery I had seen at the coop store and a few of the shawls and tunics traditionally worn by the community. At the last booth the girl showed us her sunflowers, some quite charming animal runners (although all in a disappointingly odd colour scheme) and some shawls. Her shawls were quite lovely and after many presentations by her and exclamations of approval by me, Dennis decided he would buy me one. 140 pesos later (about \$22 Cdn!) I am the proud owner of a beautiful Zinacantan shawl. I wish I could buy them all.

Tuesday, January 8, 2002, Hotel Lizeth, Puerto Arista, Chiapas.

(L) I had to stay here..

We've passed through three mountain ranges since leaving San Cristobal Monday morning. There's been some hair-raising driving and we've gone from cool mountain air, through high desert plains to the Pacific Coast, where for the first time in a long time we have enjoyed sunshine, warmth, a swim and a cerveza under a shady palapa watching the pelicans coast the waves and the sun set.

After much debate we left San Cristobal Monday yesterday morning, heading for Chiapa de Corzo then Tuxtla Gutierrez the state capitol. Our other option had been to head to Comitán, another colonial city and then down the Guatemalan border, perhaps crossing into Guatemala for a day (walking not driving—that'll be another trip...) then along the coast of Chiapas towards Puerto Arista. Being Monday the museums I wanted to see were not open and by the time we reached the Sumeridero Canyon that interested Dennis, the light was fading, so...we may not have made the best choice...but, oh well.

The chosen route was breathtaking in more ways than one---fear, beauty—driving through the mountains to Chiapa de Corzo. This town is on the Grijalva River and is the launching area for boat trips up the canyon. We had lunch by the river but decided not to wait for the next two hour boat ride, opting instead to try to

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find the road out of the city of Tuxtla Gutierrez that led to the canyon scenic road sin mapa. Tuxtla is a bigger, more modern city than we had negotiated in a while but we eventually lucked upon the road and made a race with the sun for the canyon.

We were told the gates would be locked at 5 p.m. so with 80 minutes and 22 km of steep switchbacks and five Scenic Overlooks to stop at, we rose to the challenge. It became a game with Sophie, us leaping from the car with dog and cameras in hand and dashing to the verge of the precipice to see the how the descending sun cut the vertical drop of limestone. Sophie of course was most interested in the retaining walls and caused quite a stir when she performed her Famous High Wire Circus Dog Act with the 1800 meter drop.

We made it to the end of the road and back with 10 minutes to spare and entered the fray of Tuxtla rush hour traffic with the next order of the day on our minds: a hotel. After the ease with which we had rented accommodation in Palenque and San Cristobal, we were dismayed by the lack of hotels in downtown Tuxtla. After circling streets in search of the one budget hotel listed in our guide book, we found it had become apartments. Turning the corner we chanced upon the Hotel Maya where we landed for 140 pesos, with ants in the bed, a wet floor, a tv (!) a smuggled dog, much complicated negotiation over parking, and a lot of noisy coming and going from the -by the hour- lower floor rooms. We wandered the streets for a while to check out the commerce, the main plaza, find something to eat and avoid our room. We decided over dinner that Tuxtla had nothing on San Cristobal and Palenque. Oh well...

(D) After an adequate Tuxtla breakfast and a bad night of sleeping, we chose to leave the city, with the zoo, botanical garden, and museum unseen. Avenida Central took us west out of town. We left the trucks behind at the junction to the coast and started down another gnarly Mexican mountain road, twisting and dipping around the tight curves with mountain on the right and thin air (cliff) on the left. The road was in good shape, and not the narrowest we've seen, and with the drier climate (no roadside brush) the views down the valley and beyond to the Pacific were spectacular. Clearly not many Norteamericanos drive this far south but it still puzzles us that even the guide books fail to mention these National-Park type roads and beautiful scenery. These would be famous routes anywhere else. (Of course a twisty mountain road isn't everyone's idea of fun, right, Dad?)

Eventually we dropped to the coastal plain and made our way south to Puerto Arista, a beach resort town/fishing village apparently used by Tuxtla Gutierrez families in the summer, Easter and Christmas vacations. There are few services here, though a mile or more of wide gray sand beach is lined with palapa-type restaurants, mostly closed now. Suprisingly there are few motels; we saw (empty) places for 700, 350, and 250 pesos and were getting into the car to leave the last one, after lunch and a swim at the beach, wondering where to go next when the proprietor came out to offer us a room for a reduced 150 pesos (\$16 US). All the small rooms in the Lizeth inexplicably face the street rather than the ocean. There's only one faucet in the shower (not hot), there's no TV, the pool is less than sparkling and overall it's a much better deal than that 140 peso dump in Tuxtla. It's at the beach.

Dinner was a burger, tacos, and quesadillas, with cervezas at tables set out in front of the streetside stands. That means you're sipping beer in the right lane of the divided 4-lane boulevard through town but in the hour or so we were out, the traffic was one pickup, one 3-wheeler and 3 or 4 dogs. From the beach after dark the lights on a line of about 20 fishing boats offshore looked like a distant row of farms strung along a lonely road with a power line. This may be the biggest beach resort in Chiapas but it's got a long way to go to even get noticed among Mexican resort towns, but we like it. Too bad there isn't a little house we could rent...oh yes and internet.

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Thursday, January 10, 2002, Huatulco, Oaxaca.

(L) Our morning walk on the beach at Puerto Arista had us picked up by a bold desayuno proprietor for a very basic Nescafe, Huevos Revueltos and tortilla breakfast. At 100 pesos for two it was more expensive than the food or surroundings warranted, but we recognized as he did, that we might be the only customers on the beach all day. We welcomed his chatty talk as we walked the beach informing us that the beach was 26 kilometres long (!) and the fishing boats we saw on the water were shrimp boats that came from Oaxaca (Salina Cruz) and as far away as Baja California—he even pointed to one and said Russe! There were no ports big enough for boats like these along this long, straight, sandy shoreline.

After breakfast we decided Puerto Arista was wonderful but not for us—yet. We packed up and drove to Boca del Cielo –Mouth of Heaven- a few kilometres down the coast. Here a white sandbar creates a barrier between the crashing ocean and calm lagoon. It was –heaven- again with few hotels. After wading in the lagoon for a while and no boat available to take us across to the sandbar to see if any Palapa restaurants there had accommodations, we left. There seemed to be some sort of town/fisherman’s meeting happening by the dock that was much more important than two stray gringos. This would be an incredible place to disappear to... with your little RV, kayak and satellite internet...

By late morning we were headed back along the coast towards Oaxaca through mountain ranges more like Utah and Nevada than anything we had seen before. More breathtaking vistas-eventually oceans and mountains- presented themselves and once again there was no where to stop and admire the view. More than once I caught myself telling Den to “look at that vista—no don’t” as he negotiated the curves and I hung on. We arrived in Huatulco around 6 p.m. and found a room for the night. A stroll around town, dinner and drinks at two of our favourite old hangouts almost felt like home after so many weeks of newness, and made us consider a longer stay.

Although Huatulco has an artificiality about it, being one of Fonatur’s (Mexican Tourism Agency) inventions, over time La Crucecita (the Mexican workers’ town) has developed its own charms. There’s a small market and enough local need and tourists who venture forth, to keep modest restaurants and other services going. Dennis likes the good roads, water and sewage-not to mention internet, and I like the range of nearby vegetation and the varied coastline with the choice of nine beautiful bays to swim in.

After a good night’s sleep, a walk to Chahue beach with Sophie for a swim, fresh buns from the bakery, some fruit and a take-out cappuccino for me (!) we decided to pack up from our motel room and give ourselves until 1 p.m. to find a week’s accommodation. After that we were going to the beach, finding another motel for the night and leaving in the morning—Den has an allergic nasal eruption going and doesn’t feel like another long day of being in the car.

We found an apartment through Pro Casa Huatulco a small real estate office that we used in 1999. The 2-bedroom apartment is similar to the one we had then, but in a different part of town. It has more light and breeze and is hopefully quieter. It is also freshly renovated--paint, new tiles in the kitchen, clean little gas cooktop... and is actually quite charming for a three storey cement bunker walk-up. At a thousand pesos a week (\$110 US) it’s cheaper than budget hotels.

After unpacking the car, getting the fridge going and dropping laundry off to be picked up later (I love that) we went to El Maguey Beach for the afternoon. Den read and battled with his nose; Sophie sniffed the

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beach, met the local dogs and snoozed in the shade. I read and snorkelled. Although no Caribbean Blue, the Pacific here is clear and the snorkelling around the headlands reveals sea urchins, some coral and surprisingly brilliant yellow and electric blue fish. The most amazing thing today though was swimming among thousands of 6" grey fish that I at first thought through my fogged mask, were a colour variation in the sand floor. They flowed in a stream around me for about 10 minutes. It was wonderful. Such grace and subtlety of movement! Such unity to the school.

Returning to the apartment after 5, Den was wiped out from either the drugs he'd taken or the fever that made him feel cold in the 80 degree warmth. I left he and Sophie to nap while I went to get some groceries for dinner and the next few days. Although none of us has eaten since this morning a light pasta dinner seemed preferable to restauranting again. Den and Sophie have retired to the bedroom and I have the luxury of another glass of agua minerale con limon and a table to sit and write at.

Saturday, January 12, 2002, Huatulco, Oaxaca.

(D) For a fast-growing major tourism effort, the Bahias de Huatulco isn't growing especially fast. There are construction projects going on, and noticeable changes from year to year, but for a guy from Bend, Oregon, (which tripled in size the 12 years I was there) it's no big deal. This is the fourth straight year I've been to this part of the coast (from here to Puerto Escondido or so), mostly because the weather's always been good, the drive lovely, and the level of tourism means that services tend to be available. It works out great for us that Huatulco never seems busy when we're around; lodging is inexpensive and the beaches are uncrowded. It seems that the place is built for gringos but the low season prices need to bring in the Mexican middle class and that seems to have become the main market for many businesses, along with sales to all the local service-trades workers. Today we met some Germans camped at Chahue Beach with a great camper built from a 60s Mercedes military 4-wheel truck. They said they were on a long trip: 13 years and 40 countries so far. Made us feel like lightweights with our silly 3-month odyssey.

After the morning walk to Chahue with Sophie for a swim we worked on artwork (L) and computer/photo archiving. After a lunch of beans and fresh guacamole on tostadas we finally got going to a far beach, which we never found. The boulevard gave way to a 2-lane paved road, to a dirt road, to a sandy 4-wheeler trail which we walked for a while without success. So it goes.. back at the town beach (Santa Cruz) our post-dip Cervezas were an outrageous 20 pesos (\$2/3). Liz picked up a few botanical samples to photograph in the failing evening night. I have requested that the glove box is not the place for such items when they are lined with thousands of tiny barbed points. This request came a day too late.

The digital camera has been fun to have; we just have to hope this laptop makes it home in working order since all the photos are on my hard disk. The only problem has been the lousy software Kodak/Adobe provided for transferring the images to computer; it's slow, crash-prone, hogs memory and disk space, and creates bigger files than the camera while discarding some useful data. So frustrating. Maybe there's a version I can pay extra for that works logically and efficiently; that's the modern marketing strategy. In any case I've got over 400 images stored so far. We had hoped to be attaching some to these journals but that useless software uses over 100k to store a photo at its lowest resolution, and for floppies and e-mail that's just too big. I do have hard drive room for hundreds more; thousands, it seems, since Windows 98's disk cleanup program (which I've run 6 or 8 times this trip to make room for the photo software) suddenly found 700 meg more room last night (about 20% of the hard drive). Should I be happy or mad?

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Tuesday, January 15, 2002, Huatulco, Oaxaca.

(D) Another few days, another few beaches. We rose early this morning we took a hike along the last couple of miles of the Copalita River (which defines the eastern end of the Huatulco development). We also forded the river near the outlet, stirring up thousands of birds, and walked another mile or so to the rocky headlands east of the mouth. Sophie chased crabs and finally caught one, smiling proudly as the spiny legs dangled from both sides of her mouth fu-manchu style. Thankfully she didn't find the flavor and texture to be all she had hoped. Liz found several of the myriad ocean rounded granitic rocks to be indispensable to her collection; as I was wearing the pack, I was less impressed.

After lazing about in the surf and sun we made our way back across and up the river with an increasingly wayward dog. Finally she thought she'd lost us and undertook fording/swimming the river to join a farmer plantation she apparently mistook for us, mending the fence around his new banana plantation. She made it across in spite of the strong current and was exhausted by the time I could get back downstream and across to get her. She had an easier trip back against my now-soaked t-shirt. We returned to the car and apartment without further trouble. Now she's sleeping off her adventures in a the siesta at my feet.

Monday morning we walked to and around town in the morning, picking up some buns and groceries instead of the morning swim/hike. Not to be denied, though, we drove down to Chahue in the afternoon where we could swim and enjoy the late afternoon low-angle sun and the shadows creeping along the sand. Much to our surprise there was a 4-story cruise ship anchored in 'our' bay. They haven't yet built a cruise boat dock here so there was a steady flow of water taxis hauling cruisers to and from the Santa Cruz Bay docks. To our greater surprise, as we swam out from shore, we saw another, larger cruise ship anchored around the corner. A big day for the local merchants, no doubt, even if only a fraction of the clients leave the ships. Looking at those ships, it's hard to see why they don't fall over; they look like they are 90% above water. I wish I knew how the submerged hulls are shaped.

Sunday we had the Chahue swim, and a pollo asado (broiled chicken) lunch, and in the afternoon went to the middle beach at Conejos Bay, just west of the Copalita. It hasn't yet been developed, though the boulevard above has signs advertising the "Zona Hotelaria Conejos". It's a big and lovely bay, with strong waves where we were, miles of sand, and few people (two other small families besides us). It will be too bad if they do sell the real estate and plant hotels on it. We knew it when....

Our days here are already growing short, as we must leave the apartment Thursday morning. We will have had enough time to enjoy the old and see the new here, and to relax out of the car a bit. A little painting (L), a little writing, much reading (D), and a lot of sleeping (Sophie) will have us ready to go the few miles to our next beach, back south and west along the southern Mexico Pacific coast.

Wednesday, January 16, 2002, Huatulco, Oaxaca.

(L) We're just back from an afternoon swimming and reading on our own private bay. We drove to the second smaller Conejos Bay this afternoon after a late lunch. I had been fighting with breeze vs. heat and shifting sun since our return from walking Sophie this morning before finally resolving the pale mauve blossom painting I had begun two days before. Who knows what this one originally looked like on the tree? When I began the painting Monday the blossom had been on the ground for a few hours. The heat and direct light on my table took a further toll as I drew the shape and decided which squares it should be painted on. It changed again as I laid down the shape and first colour on two squares-one board with plaster and 1 oriental paper printed with drypoint. Despite ice (while on the table) and refrigeration (when I was attending to other

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things) the blossom was creased with brown and was a warm beige before I got too far. A substitute (paratype) was picked up this morning on our way back from Chahue with Sophie. But no two blossoms are the same... This blossom suffered a similar fate as I worked against time to correct the composition and colour on the oriental paper, but eventually I was satisfied. The looseness of the image on the plaster I decided I liked, but will probably add an other element to the painting at some point.

One positive note about these tissue paper thin mauve blossoms; the first one, after the original colour had left, I left to dry completely. The blossom and attached buds are an interesting twisted shape and array of browns that will be interesting to paint on linen. I've stored it in one of my watchmakers' cases for future reference.

Yesterday I had a good day painting: five beautiful scarlet blossoms emerged seemingly effortlessly on the paper and board. I am truly thankful for days like that. Today sweat dripping down my back, I finished the mauve blossom and decided to give up further detailed observation work and turn my attention to the stencil I had cut earlier in the week. This stencil is based on a Colonial wall decoration we noticed that had been painted around when the old convent in San Cristobal had been renovated. I had only sketched the leaf and "sweep" motif but had worked out a repeat pattern that I wanted to try on some of my work. Mixing up the paint that was quickly drying on my palette, I added the stencil to about 10 boards and papers. I'll look at them later to see what should be done next.

This is our last night in Huatulco. Sophie thinks that bed is a good idea after her busy afternoon chasing crabs on the beach. She has made herself a good little nest to sleep in beside me. Dennis and I are now desalted and desanded and although feeling equally lazy are planning a walk into La Crucecita for internet and dinner. Life is good.

Friday, January 18, 2002, Hotel Oasis, Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca.

(D) We've quickly settled into the familiar rhythms of Puerto Escondido, and into the familiar Hotel Oasis. We stayed here for a month last winter and have committed to two weeks this time. The big waves are still crashing on Zicatella, the miles-long surfer's beach, and the sun sinks into the waves on schedule a bit after 6:00. After tomorrow, when we can get back into the room we had last year, it will feel like we never left...

The Oasis isn't much of a Hotel; all the rooms have kitchens, and are rented for weeks or months rather than days. The prices are reasonable; our two thousand pesos (\$220 US) will get us two or three nights where we are and the rest of the 14 nights upstairs. It's a lesson in how different rooms can be: up there there's light and air, 2 bedrooms, a view of the pacific, and the sound of waves crashing, while here there's only small windows in the kitchen and bath facing the neighbor's wall, and a droning fridge. There is a deck with hammock and table, and it's serviceable, but.....

The rest of P.E. seems not to have changed a great deal either. A couple of new places are operating, along with most of the old. We had shrimp and fish at an orange-glowing Mexican eatery last night, with world-cup soccer on the TV, and found afternoon/sunset beers on the beach both nights. The grocery purchase yesterday made for 3 meals 'in' today, with pasta for dinner by candlelight on the patio (there is a lightbulb hanging above, but only from one wire...) Getting back in my Escondido role, I even ran on the beach this morning, though my time and distance are less impressive than my last effort, 53 weeks ago. The beach here really is wonderful; cleaned by the big waves, busy but not crowded, warm but only too hot in the full afternoon sun with the breeze.

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Since we last wrote we woke up to our last morning in Huatulco, and managed to clean and vacate the apartment by 10 am, even with a morning walk to a Crucecita bakery. The car gets a little more full every time we load up—we've added a pink, blue and orange broom to our haul. We drove via Puerto Angel, the southernmost tip of Oaxaca, and past Zipolite, Mazunte, and St...., any of which would be nice places to be for a while sometime (L. a slow and beautiful week away). Unfortunately none of them seem to have lodgings with kitchens readily available. We did see a basic but servicable motel room with a beach view over the downstairs restaurant, that goes for \$100 pesos, about \$11 US, per night. With three meals for two, life at the beach would cost about \$40 US per day, eating well. A great deal, but compared to the memory of our great apartment here at the Oasis, we just weren't sold and we kept going west. Having passed Puerto Angel, now we're starting north as well, so we've sort of turned the corner toward home, as we should, 6+ weeks into a 3-month trip.

Sunday, January 20, 2002, Hotel Oasis, Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca.

Well we're still in the dark cave...hopefully this will be resolved today by our ultra-laid-back host Mike. I would like to settle into painting but our room is dark and hot and our patio is dark and exposed. I've been warned by D. NOT to plug in my halogen work light--I'd probably kill the electricity for the whole Zicatela sector. I'm trying to be patient. Perhaps I could get some action out of Mike by just "trying" the light...

I did devise another stencil pattern Friday working with the Colonial sweep motif, a stylized leaf and a florescence and bud taken from a date palm in the courtyard of the Oasis. I've been listening to Zigur Ros this morning pairing printed papers with specimens I've collected. It's a very meditative activity; looking and thinking and rearranging and thinking some more.

Yesterday D's legs were a bit stiff so we decided a walk to La Cafecita for a big breakfast would be better for his health than running. The bustling scene there was as remembered: lots of cheerful Mexican families, young and old gringos enjoying good reasonably priced food. Dennis' Grand Slam ("much better than Denny's") seemed to ease his pain and I enjoyed a good cappucino with Carmen's whole grain french toast and fruit plate. We waddled back to the Oasis hoping to find the upper apartment vacant.

Laundry was becoming an issue and I wanted to see the results of a couple of rolls of print film I had taken, so we decided to vacate the Oasis for the rest of the day running these errands before driving to a far beach. There has been some further building near the cliffside parking at Bahia Carrizillo so we did a bit of dusty off-roading before finding the path down to the beach. I expect this simple entry will change again soon. We read in the local paper that 114 Ocean View home sites are available along this cliff. They would have spectacular views, but one of the pleasures of swimming in this sheltered cove is floating on your back looking up at the verdant cliff with nothing but blue sky beyond. Oh well...

We spent the day swimming and reading except for an interminably long half hour or so when a very young and friendly, large chocolate lab decided Sophie would make an excellent playmate. Hibo just wouldn't take old Sophie's rebuttals seriously. The situation escalated when Hibo's child masters repeatedly shouted and hauled him away (he weighed as much as the 3 of them it seemed to me) Hibo thought this was a good game: Sniff Sophie, get crabbed at by her, get shouted at by the boys, then have one of the boys haul him away into the water, run back to bounce at Sophie. Repeat. I was getting a bit concerned Sophie might inadvertently snap at one of the boys in her rush to fend off Hibo. And who knew how protective Hibo was of the boys? The boys were getting bored running after their dog so Den and I got the job of hauling Hibo

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back to the boys. We were all covered in wet dog, sand and slobber. We tried putting Sophie's leash on Hibo but he slipped his collar when we gave the leash to the boys and bounded back to Sophie. The leash on Sophie made it impossible for her to get away and defensive of us as well as her backside. I tried sticks to distract Hibo: Sophie decided to chase them too. Den tried to take Hibo into the water with the boys and ended up badly scratched on back and shoulders when a wave made the water around Hibo suddenly deep and he tried to mount Den for stability. Finally I walked away down the beach hoping Hibo would follow. Sophie and Hibo followed, circling me the whole time. I was thinking it was time for Dennis, Sophie and I to leave, when Hibo heard the whistle of his adult master coming down the hill. Rescue! Hibo bounced at Sophie a couple of more times before he was finally severely dominated by his master. Hibo lay down and we all went back to a peaceful day at the beach.

We saw an eerily beautiful sunset at Carrizillo. As the orange globe slid to the horizon it did not send the usual glow across the water. Instead even as it slipped beneath the water line it remained a distinct, intensely coloured divided disc. After sunset we returned to town to pick up laundry and photos. A happy hour sign near the car promised tapas with 2 for 1 Margaritas which sounded good to me after all that sun and little to eat since breakfast. We munched popcorn, roasted peanuts and pickled carrots sipping the drinks (small –2 glasses with the volume of one -but tartly refreshing) and looked at my photos before returning home.

Showered and dressed the evening dinner question loomed. It being Saturday night Dennis was up for BBQ so we left a very tired Sophie resting on the cool tiles under the fan and headed for the Split Coconut. This was the old gringo bar we frequented last year so Dennis could live out some hippy fantasy, listen to Blues sometimes, eat meat (hippy?) and also watch football with the Americans. The Split Coconut has moved to a more sheltered, beach view location away from the Zicatela strip closer to Playa Principal. The same English speaking crowd was there eating burgers, chicken, porkchops and steak from the BBQ. Looking around we were still the youngest patrons. I guess this is a better location for their market—closer to better hotels and they don't need the street exposure from young surfers. Returning along Zicatela we stopped by the old location, empty for now (the partying would pick-up later we were assured) but for a sincerely singing couple with their eclectic guitars and the barman. The barman cheerfully told us he had sold everything at home in Huntsville (Muskoka!) and moved here to make a go of it. He looked and spoke so much like my nephew Ben. The next generation of big tropical dreams...

Monday, January 21, 2002, Hotel Oasis, Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca.

(D) Upstairs at last. We raised the issue yesterday afternoon, as the people upstairs had yet to make a move. It seems they decided to stay longer, but now this room was promised to and paid for by us. They agreed to swap rooms, but only after the Monday morning cleaning. So we spent four nights in the dungeon instead of two. Now we have space, light, breeze, view, the sound of waves crashing, privacy up the spiral staircase...life is good, even if we have to feel a little sorry the couple with the baby is now is now crowded into the dungeon. But not too sorry, they already had 'our' room two days extra.

I got my 3+ miles in yesterday and today, but to catch low tide, and the firmer sand, I have to run in the midday sun. Later this week as the moon fills up, the tides will be more favorable for morning exercise. I'm ahead of my pace of last year, running miles under 8 minutes, but I would like to have twice the endurance by the time we leave; running in the cool mornings will help.

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Having finished “Memoir of a Geisha”, a mystery called “Philosophical Investigation”, Faulkner’s “Light in August”, Sacks’ “An Anthropologist on Mars,” Mordecai Richler’s “Son of a Smaller Hero”, and Roth’s “Zuckerman Bound”, I’m reading “House of Sight and Shadow” by Nicholas Griffin, set in the primitive medical world of early-1700s London. I’m within a few books of the bottom of our literary bag, so a trip to the “International Friends of Puerto Escondido” library might be needed. Having all this time to read, and no flow of New Yorkers to swallow, I get more books read in Mexico than in the 10 months up north. I sort of failed to make it to any great used book sales or stores last fall so the selection is, ah, eclectic, as you may have noticed. We still have a Ken Follett set within Medieval architecture, a world war one novel from Lily, and two non-fictions about eccentrics and popular delusions I haven’t touched. I don’t think I’ll make it through “Spanish Verbs: Ser and Estar.”

(L) D. has devoured my pile of books...and I’m actually still studying my Spanish vocabulary...I take my cue-cards to the beach or flip through them at breakfast. Ser and Estar are essential. I enjoyed reading Stevens’ two volumes “Incidents of Travel in Yucatan” describing his mid-nineteenth century exploration of Mayan ruins. He was the first white man since the Spanish Conquest to describe many of these cities. It was interesting to compare our view of various sites with his. His exclamations of awe at coming across this sophisticated architecture overgrown in the jungle heightened much of my experience. The books are illustrated with engravings done after on-site drawings by his companion Catherwood. These, as well as evoking that nineteenth century romance of far off lands, were wonderful to compare with some of the reconstructed edifices today. The books are also quite entertaining describing their difficulties with weather and food and language...we have nothing to compare with their struggles.

One of the sources of Stevens’ research on the Yucatan was a document written by Bishop Landa. The sixteenth century Spanish missionary responsible for burning all the Mayan texts and idols he could get his hands on. His widespread torture of the Mayans in an ill conceived plan to convert them to Christianity finally got him recalled to Spain. “Yucatan, Before and After the Conquest” is his apology/justification describing as much as he can the heretical practices of the Mayans. I found an English translation (the first!) and find it fascinating. It is such an utter tragedy that so many Mayan texts were lost—only fragments of three codices remain—despite himself Landa describes an extremely sophisticated society. Interestingly a Mayan mathematical formula Landa copied into his text was, centuries later, key to decoding the Mayan calendar and encriptions on buildings.

(D)Yesterday afternoon we ran some errands (back to the cash machine for me) and went to the ‘town’ beach for late afternoon and sunset. We had to move from our first chairs and umbrella as the kid wanted 40 pesos for rent; I thought when we said it was too much so late in the afternoon and got up he would lower his offer but he let us walk away. Our next kid took the 20 pesos I thought fair after a short negotiation. Two volleyball nets were set up but nobody played; I guess I’ll have to get out my ball and stir one up. Eventually the sun sank into the waves as is its habit around here; again the reflections off of the water disappeared as the red disk dipped into the sea.

We came home for a pasta dinner and never made it back out.

Tuesday, January 22, 2002, Hotel Oasis, Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca.

(D) Liz woke up with a red and sore right eye this morning (sand from flipping in big waves while body surfing perhaps?). It hadn’t improved after a beach walk and breakfast so we sought relief in town at the Farmacia. Some visine-type drops provided insufficient relief so we committed to more errands and another pharmacy in town, which had some antibiotic drops and between the two it seems less red and a bit less sore

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now. Our many other stops in town resulted in a reading light, fruits and veggies, a dish basin, tablecloth (50's blue-green plastic), masking tape, tracing paper, soda, wine, cash, a bandanna and a morning spent. By the time we got home and had lunch it seemed too late and hot to run so I seem to be taking another day off.

After I wrote yesterday we walked to the town beach for a swim and sunset view from the overlook above the rocks separating Zicatella and Marinero beaches. With the elevated view I took the opportunity to take a series of sunset shots; it is so cool to be able to take shot after shot with no concern about film costs with the digital camera. The only problem is having all the files accumulate... We came home for a shower and then decided to head to the Aldoquin-tourist walkway for dinner, eventually settling at Alicia's. Her prices are amazing, with a sign full of 20-peso specials (\$2-3) such as fish fillet or chicken breast with rice and salad. The food is OK; we thought it about one lime short of quite good. Strolling the Aldoquin we finally stopped at one of the bars with 2-for-1 drinks. My Gin & Tonic seemed weak at best and Liz has had her fill of Pina Coladas for 2002. Never trust a 2-for-1 unless it's beer at a known reasonable price, and then be sure they're the full size beers! (L-you have to laugh at D's indignation...)