

YUCATAN -- 1974

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(Dzibilchaltun, Chichen-Itza, Uxmal, Labna, Sayil)

Our first expedition was to Dzibilchaltun, site of the National Geographic Society-Tulane University excavations of 1959. The road to these ruins runs through miles of henequen fields; the plant supplies the famous Mexican sisal. We left Merida by taxi for the 10-mile ride to the ruins. Its significance is that it is believed to be the largest (20 square miles of temples and pyramids) and the oldest (1500-2000 B.C.) pre-Columbian City discovered in the New World. Here is mute testimony of a sophisticated civilization marked by spectacular achievements in astronomy, mathematics, architecture and art. Under the leadership of Dr. E. Wyllys Andrews the team of archeologists, surveyors, divers and artisans opened a new perspective into the dim story of the Maya. From the cenote or natural well they probed for Maya relics eighty feet below. Some six thousand artifacts and bones were brought up. An unbroken jar estimated to be 1000 years old was discovered here.

In Maya Dzibilchaltun means "where there is writing on flat stones". A feature there is the limestone causeway which spans its center. In places it is eight feet high and it is wide enough for four automobile lanes. It is long as Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House. This impressive white road or sache leads to

the Temple of the Seven Dolls and connects it with Cenote Xlakah, the Palace, and the Standing Temple.

A fascinating thing happened! A couple, both scientists as well as Doctors of Divinity were visiting, also. We seemed to be the only visitors at the time -- it was nearing dusk. This pair from St. Louis were armed with facts and figures and were equipped with tape measures. Their intention was to measure the dimensions of a certain structure to compare it with dimensions of structures at Stonehenge and in Egypt. Animatedly they shared their knowledge and enthusiasm with us.

It was dusk and the experience was eerie. Our friends prayed "O Cosmos, O Cosmos" at the top of the Astronomy Building. . . . in answer to my question of what faith they believed in they announced, "We are Witches . . ." It seems they believed in the Witcher (?) beliefs . . . their explanation of the population of the earth was way out . . . spinoff from the expulsion of Lucifer. They told us of a book "The Hitching Post". I think it had to do (if I recall what they explained) with all human beings coming from one source between Mars and Jupiter . . . astrolades destroyed formed a planet, Jupiter. Another weird book on the subject is "Worlds in Collision" by Emmanuel Velikovsky.

Seven small clay figurines were found beneath the floor of one temple. These "dolls" and the jar from the cenote can be seen in the small museum on the grounds. The

Temple of the Seven Dolls escaped destruction because its discovery showed that it was stuffed with limestone and buried underneath a larger temple. It is believed that the Maya desired its preservation. The temple has true windows and four-foot thick walls. Dr. Andrews believed that it may have been the tomb of an inept Maya. Each of the seven effigies shows a monstrous deformity which suggests that the dolls may have been priestly devices for curing disease.

Chichen-Itza

Chichen-Itza means "edge of the well" in Maya. By bus we drove the 70 miles east of Merida and stopped to visit Kabak.

Splendidly preserved the first settlement of Chichen-Itza dates back to about 510 A.D. Subsequently abandoned and then resettled by the Itza led by the Toltecs, it was finally abandoned about 1200 A.D. Archeologists in the twentieth century explored and uncovered the ruins. We climbed into the Castle to see the jaguar (idol) -- a treacherously high climb. The air was still and stuffy and the climb up the ladder was frightening. I wished half-way up I had not attempted it.

We clambered in a hurry to the Top of the Temple of the Warriors to see the statue of Chacmool (rain god) before a tumultuous thunder storm. The Ball Court resembles a stadium and a sacred sport of the Maya was played here.

The question of how the Maya raised their enormous stone temples and pyramids without benefit of metal tools, wheeled vehicles and beasts of burden is unsettling. Yet they quarried 50-ton blocks of stone and transported them through dense jungle and rough country. There are about 25 intriguing sites for the tourist to visit at Chichen-Itza, all beautifully preserved and all mysterious!

Back to El Castillo (the Castle Tower)! Steps numbering 91 -- 4 times around -- make 364 and the top

platform is considered the 365th step symbolizing the number of days in the year. The Maya were amazingly exact mathematicians, astrologers and scientists. Inside this pyramid are these narrow 63 steps I mentioned before -- at a 75° angle. Clif scampered up them like a squirrel. I labored all the way. A young Mayan girl climbing directly before me caught my anxiety and concern. "We're almost there," she said, "keep going!" We made it and the prize at the top -- an incredible piece of Mayan art -- a tiger throne -- was worth it. The throne is red and its eyes are of jade. A girl outside looked at Clif and said, "Are you Solzhenitzn?"

Other impressive buildings are:

1. nunnery -- a Toltec style building richly ornamented. Panels show warriors, huts, jaguars, birds.
2. sacred well of sacrifice -- Maidens were thrown in to be offered to Chac, the god of rain. Rich jewelry, gold and fascinating artifacts were discovered in this cenote.
3. temple of the warriors -- has 1000 columns.
4. El Caracol -- brilliant astronomers measured time at this astronomical observatory, accurately taking into account the leap years. We climbed these 63 steps to pat the head of the famous Chacmool statue, who blessed us with rain!

There are only 3 Mayan codices left to history as the Spaniards destroyed the rest in their zeal to introduce Christianity and curb "heretics". These 3 codices are in Dresden, Madrid and Paris. We saw a copy of the Dresden codex in the Merida Museum.

Usually one takes a baedeker on a trip! A word of advice to the Yucatan traveler -- go equipped with John L. Stephens's two-volume "Incidents of Travel in Yucatan"! Ellen gave me these two paper backs for my birthday, and they proved to be invaluable!

In 1841 Mr. Stephens, an attorney, Mr. Catherwood, an artist, and Dr. Cabot, an ornithologist made an expedition to Yucatan. Stephens's account of his travels has become a great classic of travel and exploration. He's articulate, humorous, accurate, and his style is like Mark Twain's. Illustrations by Mr. Catherwood and drawn from daguerreotype pictures double the appeal of the books. They are realistic, exact, show interior and exterior views of Mayan tombs, as well as the hieroglyphics and drawings found on Maya temples. His original sketches have been made into engravings. These are reproduced in the two volumes and show the Yucatan student what the ruins were like in 1841.

Labna and Sayil

On February 27, 1974, at 6:30 A.M. we left Merida for Uxmal where we met our 19-year-old driver Carlos. We met at Muna near Uxmal (we had visited its ruins and those of Kabak the day before -- House of the Dwarf, Nunnery, Governor's Palace, House of Turtle, House of the Doves, etc.)

Carlos' jeep was red and it had a colored steering wheel. We were 10 tourists (mostly Germans) in all and we were in 4 jeeps. Clif and I rode alone with Carlos.

It is 50 miles from Merida to Uxmal and 25 miles from Uxmal to Labna. From Labna to Sayil it is 8 miles. But I am ahead of my story!

This jungle trip is one of the most exciting and unique jaunts we'd ever had! It took us 2½ hours to ride through 25 miles of labyrinthic jungle to see Labna, truly, a jungle jewel. The road was dirt, little more than a path. Carlos had to stop to fill up deep holes with brush to afford passage. The jungle was enchanting at first -- trees with wild yellow exotic flowers, morning glory, banana, fruit trees, heneken, maguey, palmetto bushes, elobeliaccia trees and oriole nests and wild mimosa! Carlos and the 3 other drivers brought out box lunches at Xactal near the Labna ruins (1½ miles away). We all sat around on stones

amidst a ruin and had chicken, sandwiches, watermelon, pineapple, boiled eggs.

The road was of dark rich red clay near the ruins. Our path through the jungle was only a clearing wide enough for a jeep to penetrate the denseness. Actually, we had no idea it would take $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours and would be 25 miles long! At one point, I was somewhat frightened ... "whatever had possessed us to do this," I remonstrated. Along the way we saw distant mounds (more evidences of previous life) and old walls (XLAPAK).

At lunch dogs appeared to share handouts and a Maya girl came from the small settlement to draw water from the well. The homes were thatch-roofed huts.

We gazed at Labna in awe as we approached it in the distance -- the ruin looked like a Roman villa or a modern-day country club in the distance -- an amazing and incredible vision deep into the jungle. At Labna there is a 45 ft. high pyramidal mound with designs in stucco running around it. (See Stephens's description). Also there are beautiful arched gateways, gracefully proportioned -- many beautifully excavated ruins -- priceless experience! Dr. Cabot, coming upon Sayil suddenly from the woods with no trees to obstruct the view -- viewing its 3 great ranges and immense proportions considered it "the grandest spectacle he had seen in the country". It was 3 stories -- the lowest story is 265 ft. in front and it had 16 doorways!

Our Yucatan experience -- with a taste of Merida
Mardi Gras -- was exhilarating but Labna and Sayil were our
highlights!