

December in Mexico - 2014

by Larry and Pavla Luckham



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First night. We flew into Cancun and picked up our rental car, late. It wasn't the car we had reserved. They didn't have what we wanted but said we could make a swap at their office in Playa del Carmen. We drove down to Playa, our first planned stop. After checking into our hotel it was time for dinner. We decided on making it simple so just walked the promenade until a place called Yaxche caught our eye.

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First order of business, Margaritas. Viva Mexico!



Pavla is the adventurous eater starting out with peppers!

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I'm more traditional and this meal was great.

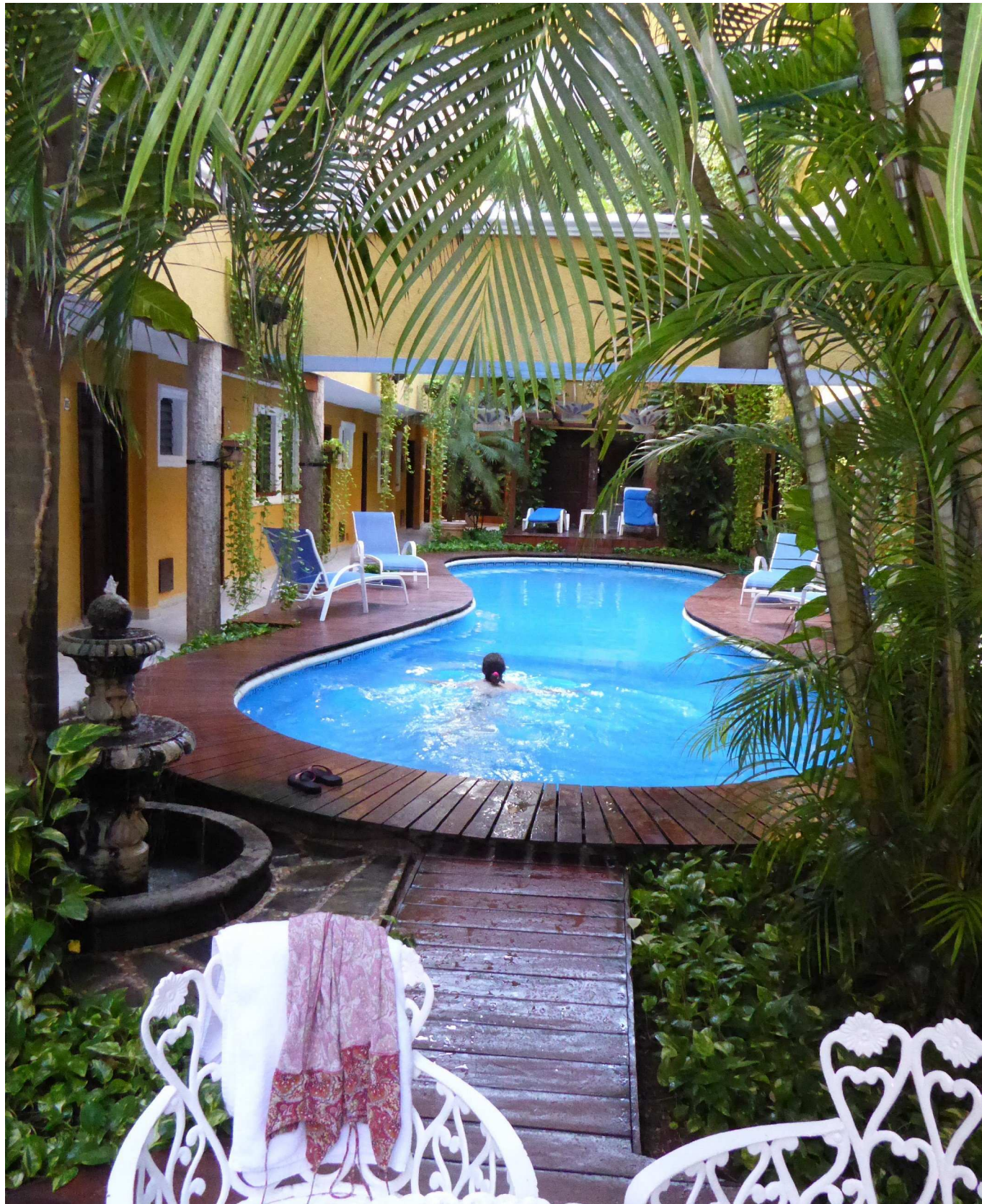


A favorite for after dinner in the Yucatán is the Mayan coffee ceremony. The glass rim is moistened with an orange slice then dipped in sugar and heated. A mixture of Xtabentun, which is the nectar of the Xtabentun flower, fermented with honey, anise, and rum liqueur, and Kahlua is first heated over an open flame in stainless steel gravy boats, then ignited and poured at increasing heights from one boat to the other by a skilled person. In the final step it goes into the glass already filled with hot coffee. A treat to watch, and to drink.

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We had a nice hotel.





With a nice pool.

And, we were able today to swap cars
for the one we wanted.

And really cool onyx all over. Wonder if it came from the abandoned onyx mine that we discovered at El Marmol in Baja a few years ago?

We had planned to only stay in Playa one night, but decided to extend for a second night. Alas, this hotel was fully booked.





So, we moved a couple of blocks to our second little hotel, the Hotel El Campanario, this one across from a church. In Mexico almost everywhere is just across from a church.



While walking around town we had stopped in the afternoon at a little cafe for a cold cervesa and met a very nice young man who was a professional chef, though not at the place we met him. He had a recommendation for dinner, a place called La Perla, which is where we ended up that evening sampling Pixan cuisine, Mezcal, and grasshoppers. Yes, grasshoppers!



The next day it was on to a place we've visited before called Cenote Manatee. The freshwater of the cenote flows through porous rock a couple of hundred meters into the ocean.

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There were a bunch of SCUBA divers exploring. It wasn't very deep and Larry was able to hang along with them just free diving.



After the swim it was a walk across the road to have a nice lunch and a couple of colorful shakers of Margarita!

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The next stop was Tulum. Hotel Barrio Latino, our regular place, was booked so we tried a new hotel, Don Diego de la Selva.



Pavla quickly adjusted to life in a hammock.

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The pool was pretty nice too.



The owners grew fruit and had bee hives in the jungle in back.

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Tulum has some wonderful beaches, mostly "private" which just means that you are supposed to be either staying at the hotel that "owns" the beach, or that you are eating in their restaurant. We found a nice little place to spend the afternoon with lunch and cervesas.



Not a bad view!

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After lunch, another dip!



Pavla has a new love!

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Pavla liked her shell shower.



Even with a passing thunderstorm, it doesn't get any better than this!

We drove back out to the beach in the evening to meet a couple from Guatemala that we had met in the afternoon for dinner. It turned out that she was under the weather so that didn't happen.

What did happen was that we discovered that our car had only one working headlight, on the driver's side. It was very difficult driving the narrow dark roads with people all over with only one headlight.



We decided to stay another day, and, once more, the place we were staying was fully booked. So, we moved to this lovely little hotel.

We took some time to take the one eyed car to the Tulum office of the rental car company. Then we went to breakfast. When we returned they said all was well with the car. That turned out to be not quite the case.



All the furnishings, bed, couch, tables, etc. were concrete. Simplifies some things!

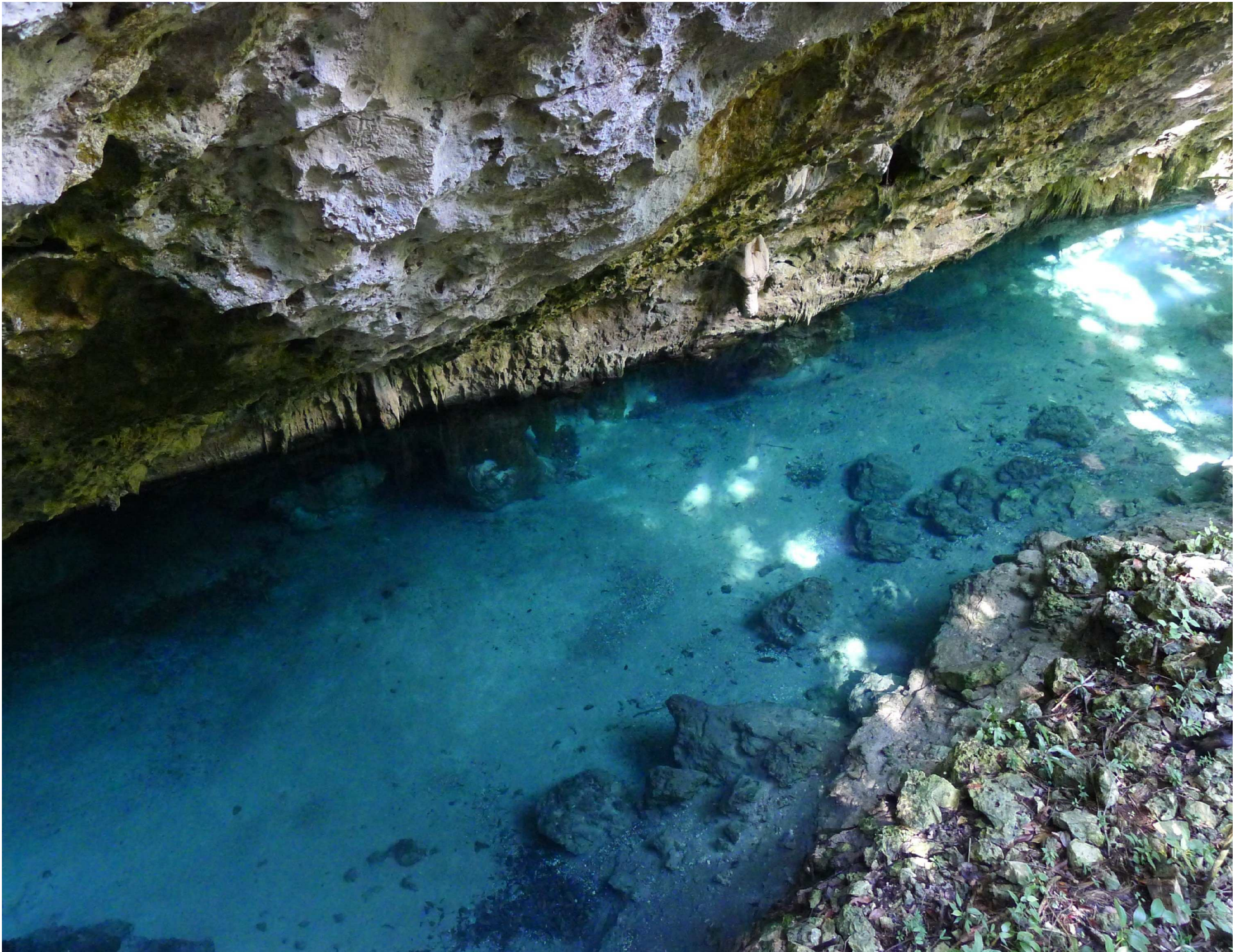


The land in this part of Mexico, like much of Florida, consists of limestone deposited over millions of years. Also, like Florida, there are many limestone caves, many of which are either completely or partially freshwater filled some of which reach the surface. These are called cenotes. In some areas locals have made a business of guiding visitors.. In other areas you are on your own.



We opted to go with a guide through part of this one. Some of it is only partially water filled, other parts are completely filled and only accessible by SCUBA.

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Swimming in cenotes are one of the most fun things to do in Mexico.



After a few days in Tulum we headed south and west to Laguna Bacalar. What turned out to be a wrong turn down a dirt road ended in this little settlement on the lake. It looked like a potential place to stay, but there was no one around so we decided to continue on.





Our next try at a dirt road off the highway resulted in this encounter with a couple of guys and a pickup that was out of gas. Apparently this was not the first time since they had a gas can in the truck bed. The problem there was it was out of gas too. After about 15 minutes of trying to make the truck run without gas they pushed it aside so we could pass.



At the end of the road we found a delightful little place that consisted of a central kitchen and dining area with scattered cabanas .

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Pavla always wanted to have a "Princess Bed" and here it was!





A short walk down a slight hill and here is Laguna Bacalar.



Nice spot to swim from, or to just sit and enjoy the view.

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The place had kayaks so we availed ourselves of a couple and went for a paddle.



Laguna Bacalar at sunset.

The plan had been to drive from Laguna Bacalar to Calakmul and tour those ruins but by the time we got to the entry gate, which is about 60 kilometers from the entrance to the ruins, it was too late in the day. So, we asked the lady at the gate if there was any place to stay in the area. Bear in mind that this is a long way from any towns. But, the lady at the gate directed us to a dirt road two hundred meters farther down the highway. We turned down the road and made our way to a house with an open door and only a small boy inside. Pavla inquired about a room in her best Spanish and was directed to the back yard. There we found his mother chatting with a young woman, and three small cabanas.

The young woman rented one, we rented another, and after explaining that we would go a bit farther down the highway to see smaller ruins at Balamku got a request from her to come along. She did, and off we went to Balamku.

It turned out that Anais was French, but was working in Mexico City as a French teacher. She was hitchhiking around the country on a week of vacation.





Backyard cabana.



Balamku.



The ruins at Balamku are neither extensive nor impressive. What turned out to be even more interesting than the ruins was what was in the trees above.

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The jungles in Mexico are full of treats. Around Balamku the trees are full of spider and howler monkeys. Lots of monkeys. They put up constant chatter and are in constant motion traveling from tree top to tree top.



Back on the highway, but before the entrance to Calakmul we had noticed an unusual roadsign. It was just a yellow triangle with a black bat in the middle. Batman? No, a bat cave. We left Balamku and decided to drive back to see if we could find the bat cave. We thought we'd missed it and turned around to head back when a police officer stepped into the road and directed us to pull over.



It turned out that he was only helping us to find a very difficult to find place to park to get to the trail to the bats. We parked and walked about a kilometer into the jungle to the cave just as 4 million bats began their nightly flights.



After returning from the bats we became the first customers at the cabana lady;s brother's not quite open restaurant next door. We started out disappointed because he hadn't even gotten any beer in stock yet, but the dinner was excellent.

The next morning, after a nice breakfast, we headed for Calakmul with our new friend Anaïs.





The ruins at Calakmul are impressive.



Only a part of Calakmul has been uncovered with large patches between the largest pyramids still covered by jungle.



Knock, knock.

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Pavla and Anais atop a pyramid with jungle as far as the horizon.



Roadside stop for lunch then on to Escarcega where we dropped Anais at the bus station so she could head back to Mexico City and work. We headed on to our next destination, Palenque.

Driving in Mexico is unlike driving almost anywhere in the United States. Mexico does have some fine modern intercity highways and many completely adequate roads. Signage is quite good and it's not particularly difficult for a North American driver with some experience to get around, particularly with the advent of portable GPS receivers. Excellent GPS mapping is available for all of Mexico. When traveling in Mexico we take our Garmin GPS and I keep our map data current.

But, that's not to say that all roads are up to U.S. standards. For one there are thousands of miles of unpaved roads that serve whole communities. Some of these are graded and usually passable. Others may be little more than two tracks through desert, or across or down a dry wash where it's near impossible to follow. There are also many thousands of miles of paved road that are very narrow, deeply rutted, or where whole sections are washed away. Mexico has been spending heavily on road improvement for a decade or more and encountering roadwork is not uncommon at all.

Mexico, although not a rich country in comparison with the U.S. is not totally impoverished. The stereotypical image of poor Mexicans driving aging junkers is just that, a stereotype. There is a growing middle class and current model cars, including luxury cars are common. Mexico also has a multi layered system of public transit. Large intercity busses connect cities and towns. These are both regular and luxury class. In rural areas there are multiple choices of bus transport. Think "yellow school bus" just not yellow, and not just school. There are also, especially in the cities and towns, passenger vans and taxi's prowling the streets. And, finally, in rural areas there are pickup trucks, usually small Toyotas, with a canvas high top over the bed, wood benches down the sides, and usually a rider, or two, hanging on the bumper!

The way it seems to work in Mexico is that road signs for things like "no passing," or "speed limit 100" are only regarded as suggestions, which absolutely no one pays the slightest attention to. This is possible, in part, because although Mexico has dozens of different levels of police, highway patrol is not one of them. If driving at 100 on a highway with a 90 speed limit you can expect to be passed by big rigs or intercity busses doing 130, and guys in SUV's at 150. We take it as gospel not to pass on curves, or going over a rise with no visibility. That gospel is unknown in Mexico.

I've been driving in Mexico a long time. I drive pretty defensively, and only after careful consideration execute a "Mexican maneuver" to get around a slow moving obstacle. I also have a rule against driving at night in Mexico. I avoid it like the plague. There's absolutely nothing like driving down an unlighted highway at night doing 80 in the 90 zone, and coming around a curve to find a fully loaded old truck with no lights at all showing either completely stopped in the road, or creeping along at 20.

Oh, and then there are the topes. Mexico loves topes. Topes are speed bumps. They come in several configurations, some fairly gentle, others teeth shattering. They are everywhere. In towns, entering towns, leaving towns, at bus stops, anywhere the local merchants want to slow traffic to get more business. Some are marked. Many are not.

The road from Escarcega to Palenque goes through mountains with lots of little settlements, lots of topes, lots of slow traffic. During this trip there was road construction. Daylight disappeared. Driving at one point through a long construction zone, no traffic lanes, headlights coming directly at us, passenger side headlight useless. Counting the seconds before I might need to swerve right to avoid collision. I have no idea if there's road, shoulder, or a 500 foot drop 10 feet to my right.



We knew where we planned to stay in Palenque, but did not have a reservation. Evening traffic in the city was heavy. We missed a turn and had to loop around. We turned into the street where our desired hotel was located and were immediately stopped by road construction barricades. I turned the car off. I was exhausted. Looking left I was relieved to find that we were in front of our hotel. This was the scene the next morning, but when we arrived at 9:00 the previous night it was just as busy.

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When we went to check in the clerk asked how long we would be staying. Pavla said, "One night." I said, "Two nights." I was not hitting the road without some R & R.



The hotel had a nice pool and patio.

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Very pleasant, though not the best restaurant in town.



Quite nice!

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Nice plaza. We watched a troop of kids rehearsing a dance program for a while.



One of many Christmas decorations around town, this one dried corn leaves with electric lights. The Burning Man festival would be proud!



The next day we went to see the fantastic Mayan ruins at Palenque.



Garden and jugal entering the ruins of Palenque.

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The ruins at Palenque are among the most impressive we've seen both in the complexity and sophistication, but also just the immense scale.



Fellow pyramid climbers helped with a picture of us together.



One of the few ruins that have been restored to the point that visitors can go into some of the passages.



Palenque.

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Palenque.



Palenque.

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Pavla is the finer of all things cool. She found this nice little Italian restaurant on a dirt road a few kilometers outside of Palenque.



We left Palenque and once more headed up into the mountains on our way to San Cristobal. Coming around one of these turns we encountered a rope across the road with colored pennants hanging from it. Each end was held by a small girl. Their mission was to stop traffic to sell something.



A bit outside of Palenque we stopped at a place called Aqua Azul where the locals have set up concessions along a popular river with waterfalls and striking blue water.



Aqua Azul, Chiapas, Mexico



There are many swimming holes. Pavla joined some friendly local women at this one and had a ball. Next time I'm going swimming!



Waterfall, swimming hole, waterfall, swimming hole.

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Tranquil Aqua Azul.



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The courtyard of the Posada Diego de Mazariegos.



The Posada Diego de Mazariegos is a lovely classic building.

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Our room on the third floor.



One of the great features of the Posada Diego de Mazariegos is that there is a pot bellied stove in every room. You can call down to the desk and someone will come to your room, with firewood, and build a fire for you for something like \$10.



The hotel dining room almost ready for breakfast.



San Cristobal is a lovely old town with some streets reserved for walking. Mayan women everywhere selling crafts.



We found this little restaurant just down the street from our hotel and went in for sopa de lima.



The town square was only a couple of blocks from our hotel. We found a crafts fair underway.

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Colorful houses and shops everywhere.



There are churches on top of many of the hills in San Cristobal. We walked up to this one one morning. There had been a carnival on the streets and steps just below a day earlier and many of the booths and rides were being taken down.



Later in the day, on the other side of town, another church on another hill. We needed to climb up to that one too.



We love the colorful buildings! Just like Casa de Colores, our home.

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Of course Christmas was approaching so special decorations were everywhere. Behind the Christmas tree, under the blue cover, was "Ice Mountain" for sledding minded kids. But, the real surprise was under the white tent to the left, an ice rink.



The ice rink rented skates and had music and operated from late morning until well into the evening. The locals, especially the kids, were having a ball. And there were some pretty good skaters. Pavla would have skated, but the waiting lines were always too long.



Every town in Mexico no matter how big or small has a town square, and the square is always a gathering place. This was especially true during the days before Christmas.



Feliz Navidad!



One evening we came across a Christmas program on the square. The kids on the left, in uniform, were part of a much larger band group.



Like most larger towns San Cristobal had both a permanent craft market, seen here, and a general food and sundries market. We went through both.



The relative openness and calm at the entry to the San Cristobal Mercado Municipal belies the narrow confines and bustle once into the aisles.



The aisles in the market get narrow and crowded. I didn't want to be pointing a camera into peoples faces, something that's hard to avoid, so the photos in the market were all taken with the camera just hanging by the strap around my neck, but pointed in a general directions and the button pushed at intervals.



The lady that sells chickens' booth, next to the booth that sells toys. This was only one of many chicken vendors and not all the chickens seemed to be prepared for market the same way. For example, some were red. I have no idea what made the difference.



Even in the market isles there were walking vendors selling different things.



This booth was selling various decorative LED lights and bags of candy.



Another early morning walk on colorful streets.

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Another early morning walk on colorful streets.

Another early morning walk on colorful streets.





Another early morning walk on colorful streets.



This little historic church was near the entry to a building that included offices for a group dedicated to promoting breast feeding, and another all about weaving.



The breastfeeding/weaving building had a nice garden in the center.



On our first visit the looms were not in use.

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But, we came back later in the day and watched this gentleman expertly weaving with an amazing rhythm.



Pavla had read something about a botanical garden called Orquideas Moxviquil out on the edge of town. So, one day we walked way the heck out until we finally found the place. It's privately owned and funded by an American? We paid a small entry fee and were guided through this greenhouse by a young Mexican man who was very knowledgeable and spoke very good English.



This is the second for the two large structures on the grounds.



Quite impressive.

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Pavla having a great time!



I don't remember what our guide called this one, but it was only one of many, many exotic plants.

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This guy was probably four inches tall.



Purple something.



This guy was way too long to get it all in the picture.



The other greenhouse was typically humid but this one, as you can see, is even more so.



The other greenhouse was typically humid but this one, as you can see, is even more so. Also, this one is not fully developed yet and will get lots more exotic plants.



Back in the center of San Cristobal we found the textile museum.



The textile museum is housed in a building with another museum featuring local history.



These pull out display drawers contained examples of many different weaving styles. The display cases and lighting were very high tech. Each time you pulled out a drawer it broke an infrared light beam that turned on an overhead LED light to illuminate the display. It went off when the drawer was closed.

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This was a great museum in both it's artifacts and particularly in the sophistication of the design itself.



San Cristobal is also know for amber and there is a small museum dedicated to amber.



Amber in both natural state as well as made into decorative objects.



We have never signed up for a guided tour. But, in order to visit one of the Tzotzil villages of Mayan people it's necessary. There is a booth at the entry to this village, Zinca where a toll is collected and casual wanderers are not welcomed with open arms. Our guide was of mixed ancestry and spoke the native language, which is not Spanish. Interestingly the native people are predominantly Catholic.



Part of the reason for restricting visitors to guided tour groups seems to be that the guides then bring visitors to the native market to shop.



Local agriculture.

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This was the second Mayan village that we visited, though this visit was primarily to the church on the square.



The women from these villages can be identified by the heavy black wool skirts they wear.



Paint, tile, and clothing provide color and joy.



Fancy REI baby carriers haven't made any inroads here.



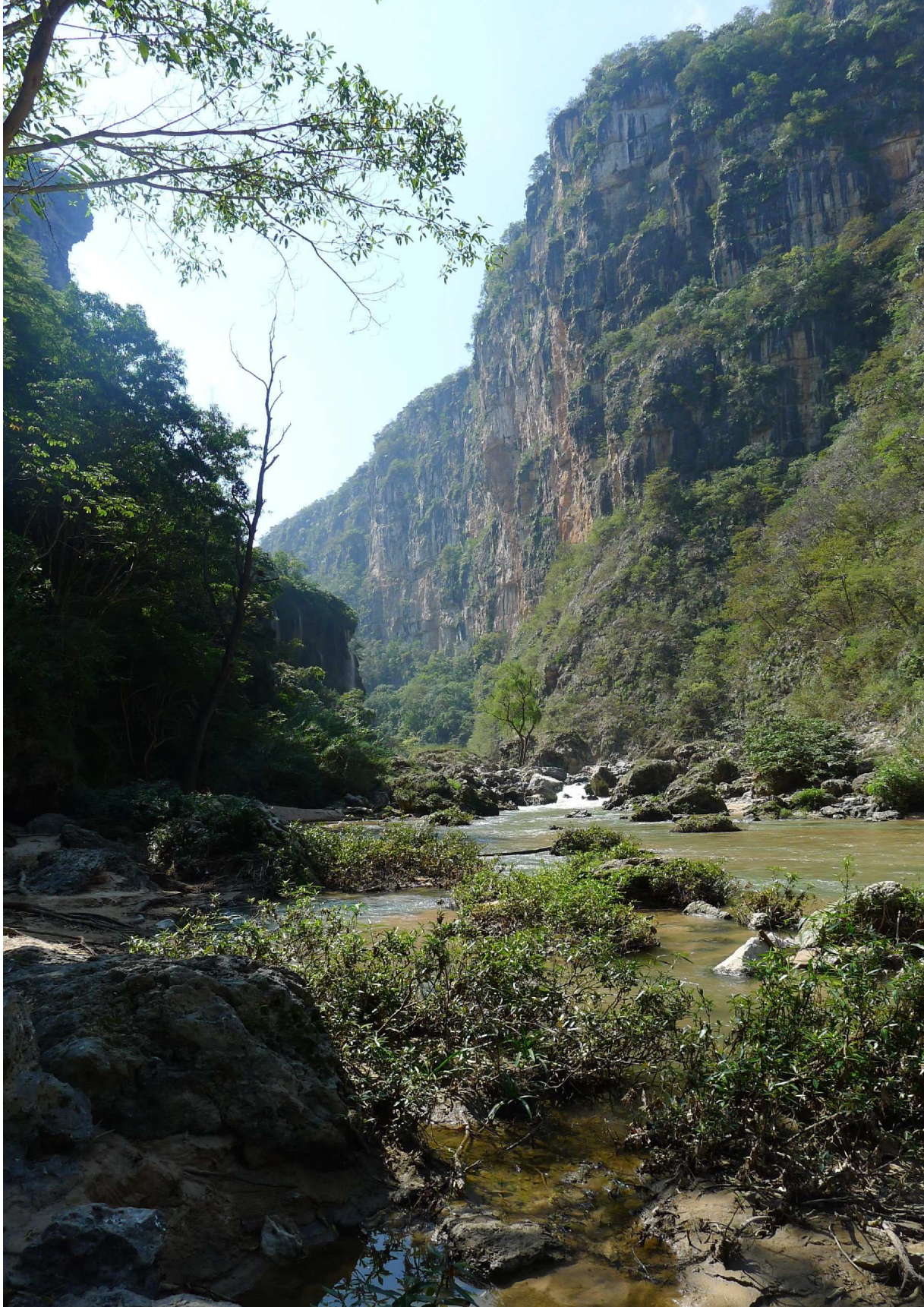
While others were still inside the church I took a walk around the outer plaza. Yes indeed, that's hundreds, maybe even thousands, of pounds of fireworks!



Another of Pavla's finds was a hike deep into a river canyon, Cascada del Aguacero. Access is operated, as is often the case in Mexico, by a cooperative. This little cafe was closed when we started the thousand step climb down. We hoped it would be open and the beer cold when we climbed back up. It was not!



Much of the way down was steep enough to require stairs, which were thoughtfully provided.



The view of the canyon from the river was quite spectacular.

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The river itself was easy to navigate and mostly not more than knee deep, except in a couple of places.



One of the many waterfalls, some quite high. We later discovered that there was a side trail that could have taken us under one of the high falls.



Villahermosa is a mostly industrial city. We got to Villahermosa well after dark and opted to stay at a convenient Hilton.



The next morning we visited the Parque Museo la Venta which turned out to be a great choice. The park is a combination of zoo and anthropological exhibit of Olemec artifacts. It's beautifully designed with high tech LED lighting for night visitors, rear projection digital projector screens and sound system. I almost wished we could stay another day and come back at night.

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We finally saw toucans and parrots but in an aviary and not in the wild.



Lots of these guys were running around throughout the park. They weren't part of the zoo, just locals. I think they are some sort of badger.

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I think I've met this guy somewhere, just can't remember where.



Wonderful park.

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This part of Mexico is also jaguar territory. This guy was in constant motion.



Crossing the Laguna de Terminos bridge from Zacatal to Ciudad del Carmen.



Restaurant Memin in Isla Aguada. We needed a stop for gas and Pavla was hungry so we pulled off the highway into this town at the end of a long bridge spanning on of the entrances to Laguna de Terminos. We went for lunch first. This place was literally right on a beach with fishing boats pulled up on the sand.



I ordered fish tacos and cervesa. Pavla was trying to select a type of fish and method of preparation from the menu, in Spanish. What she got was an entire fish, food for a family, not just a lunch meal. It was one of the few times I've seen Pavla unable to finish a meal. As it turned out getting back on the highway we had missed the Pemex station and spent the next half hour in fear of running out of gas.



Driving in Mexico! Semi passing semi at a high rate of speed forcing the oncoming truck to the shoulder. And this wasn't even a scary one.



The Hotel Plaza Colonial is where we stay in Campeche. It's very pleasant, located in the old walled city, only a few blocks from the central square and the malecon.

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We were on the third floor this time.



The church at the left is on the central square.

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The view of someone's nice roof garden across the street from our room.



There aren't as many of these around as there once were, and this one has definitely been around!

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Pavla buys a Panama hat.



We like this little restaurant at the corner of the central square.

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The malecon near the old city.



The North end of the malecon, a nice walk from downtown, has a number of places to eat.

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Lots of people, including us, come down to the malecon to watch the sunset. It's a Pavla favorite.



Not all of the old wall that once circled the whole town still exists, but some sections have been preserved. Inside the walls, in the old city, streets are very narrow. Many are one way and because of the buildings, mostly blind intersections. Outside they are much wider and more modern with traffic lights.

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Every Mexican town large enough to support one had a municipal market. Fresh food is really fresh. No cellophane wrapped product here.



Folks here have a very close relationship to their food. Pavla loved it. This fellow was only too happy to show us his daily shark catch. When you get fish or meat it can still be bleeding.



When you get vegetables some still have dirt on them. That way you know they didn't come from a vegetable factory.



Sure, we have pork today!

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There's the mercado municipal and then there's the mall. Think you're in a California suburb? A modern, air conditioned, shopping mall in Campeche.



The square was ablaze with lights, many animated, and sounds every night.



The square was ablaze with lights, many animated, and sounds every night.

Town squares in Mexico are a central gathering place and usually filled with people day and night making for a very pleasant place to hang out and watch people.





Grotas. One day Pavla found some caves way out in the jungle somewhere. Some of these run for miles, much of which has not been explored. There is a local cooperative that provides guides.



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Deep in this cave were artifacts our guide identified as being Mayan.



While most of where we went was stand up space, some was not. When we found a wet and muddy hole into a small chamber only Pavla wanted to get muddy.



Mud washes off, eventually.



Our hotel in Merida, the Hotel Gran Real Yucatán. We found this place by accident on a previous trip. It's very nice. We had made a reservation for a couple of days before leaving California. But, when we arrived we asked the clerk to extend our stay a couple more. He did so, we paid, and then the next day were asked for more money. It got worked out but the day clerk wasn't very helpful.

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Hotel Gran Real Yucatán.



Our room at the Hotel Gran Real Yucatán.

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Porto del Peregrino is probably our favorite restaurant in Merida. Pavla found it on a previous trip. I think we ate there four times on this trip.



Porto del Peregrino.

Porto del Peregrino.





I don't know the name of this square but it's halfway between the main square and our hotel and has always been a lively scene.

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One day we drove out to Celestun a small beach town to the West of Merida.



Celestun is a small beach town west of Merida. It's a launch point for trips to see flocks of flamingos. You hire a panga and guide right on the beach through a coop that decides which guide is next. Some people wait for others to split the cost. We just hired for ourselves. Our panga is the blue one on the right.

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Paddling out of the shallow water near the beach.



As an added bonus we passed a flock of white pelicans on the way.

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Flamingos are huge and there were hundreds of them. The pink, really salmon, comes from the carotenoids in the shell fish they eat. Juveniles are white.



Flamingo city.

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As ungainly as they look, in flight they are pretty graceful.



As ungainly as they look, in flight they are pretty graceful.

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Back on the beach it was time for lunch and cervezas.



Merida was alive with free entertainment. This group of musicians and dancers were performing a jazzy folk dance.



Merida was alive with free entertainment. This group of musicians and dancers were performing a jazzy folk dance.



One of the wide boulevards in Merida. This one is home to several museums.

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Once a private home, now a museum.



Very similar to our Candelario Medrano pieces.



Another private home turned into a museum, except this one is still occupied by the 97 year old widow who owns it. This museum is really dedicated to her family history. So much of poverty in Mexico.



Main hall looking to the front entry.



Main hall looking to the back door.



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Another free concert, this one folk music, we think.



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We had passed this little home in the wall cafe a number of times, but it was open on Christmas morning so we had breakfast.



It took some looking to find the place where we bought Pavla some opal and silver jewelry and me a Guyabera shirt on our first visit to Merida, but we did find it.

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Looking for more.



One afternoon walking down the street we came across a little store that seemed to be selling old typewriters and adding machines, some beautifully restored like this one.

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The store's owner noticed us looking at his wares and stepped out to show us even more marvels.



Toy seller on one of the many squares.



Always the indigenous ladies selling their crafts, usually weaving.



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The meter was turning so it's still in service supplying the electricity to something.



This unsecured lever is the disconnect switch for a 12,000 volt overhead line. Pulling it would, at least, take down an entire block, probably several blocks!

[illegible]



Nightlife on the square.

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Nightcap at the Hotel Gran Real Yucatán.



On the way from Merida to Cancun Pavla took us on a detour to visit the little town of Valladolid.

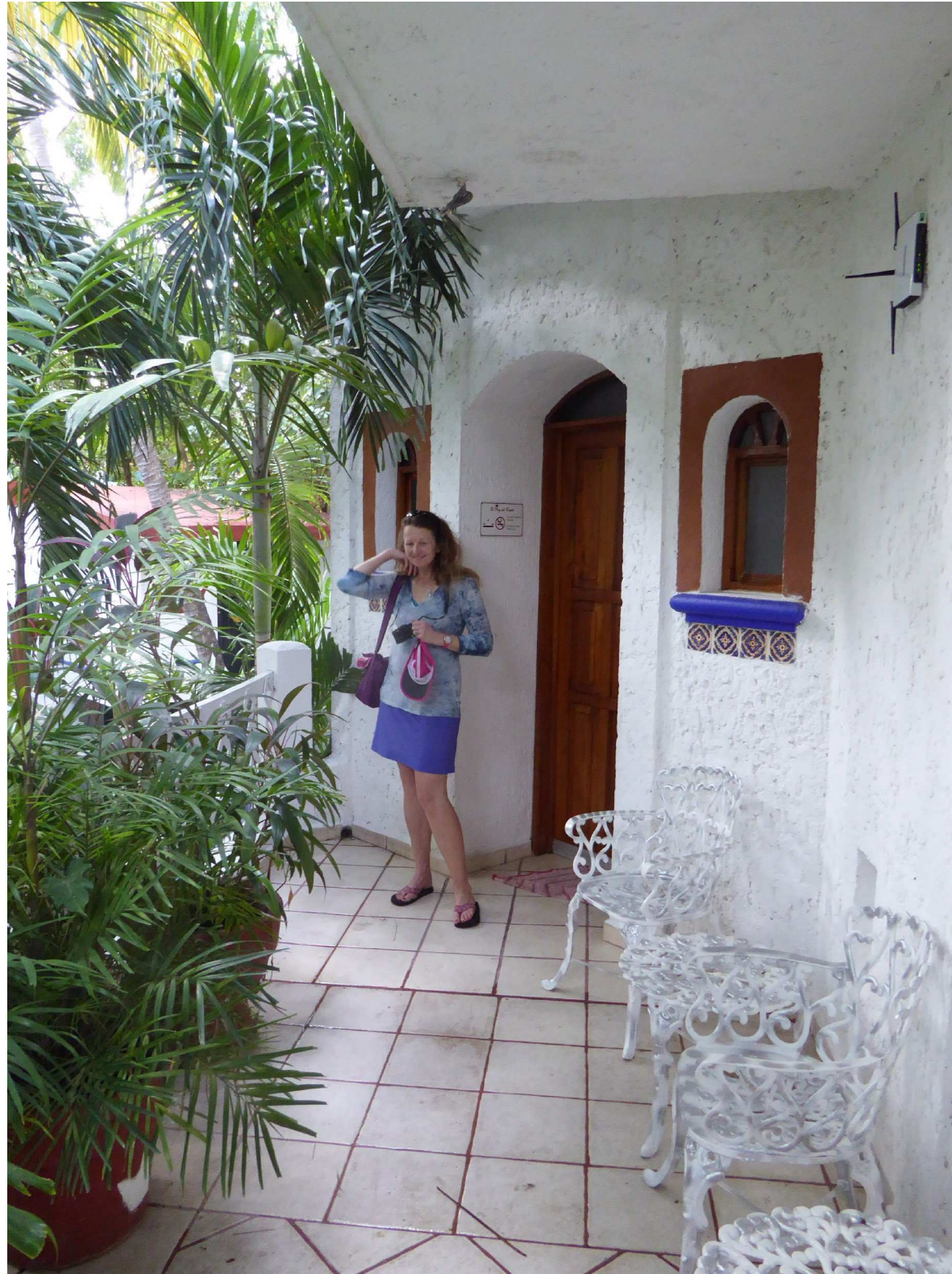
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Life on the town square.



This guy had a following. When he stopped they stopped. When he said "sit" they sat.



Back in Cancun and Pavla found this very nice little hotel walking distance from the car rental place where we returned our rental car.



Pretty little hotel with nice gardens and a very small pool.

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We had an afternoon free so we took a bus out to the tourist hotel strip so Pavla could get in one more swim.



This was a find! Excellent pastries!

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Last night in Mexico for this trip. We dropped the rental car off and on our walk back to the hotel stopped at an Italian place for dinner.



The hotel scheduled an early morning cab ride to the airport. Waiting for our flight home. The end of another adventure in a favorite part of Mexico.



