

1979 MEXICO

I didn't keep a journal on this trip but have created the following from my photograph album.

January 19, 1979. I joined a Swan tour at the Mayaland Hotel at Chichen Itza. Swan is an English tour group and we not only had a tour manager, Hilary Smith, but also a resident expert, Albert Dutton, the retired curator of the British Museum. We were housed in thatch-roof cabins. It is an interesting group from all over the English-speaking world. One American, Norman Schur, living in England is writing a book about the differences between English English and American English.

Chichen Itza was an old ceremonial center for the Maya World. It dates from 400 AD and was abandoned by the Maya about 964, when the Toltecs invaded. The Toltecs rebuilt many of the buildings to their style.

We saw the Red House, which shows the Mayan construction, with both a roof comb and the corbelled arch. The beams in the corbelled arch have no structural value but they were added to show the deviation from the Mayan huts, which used roof rafters to support the thatch.

We saw the observatory where astronomical readings were made and a sweathouse, which was like a sauna. There are many inscriptions but no one has been able to decipher them.

The Rain God, Choc Mol is considered the symbol of Chichen Itza. Serpents are often depicted coming from his nose, which were thought to represent sun and rain bringing life to the dry Yucatan plain. His main statue lies in a semi-reclining position and on his flat stomach were placed the hearts that had been ripped from live persons, as offerings to the Serpent God, Kululan. The Mayans didn't make live sacrifices. The Toltecs started this about 950 AD.

All Mayan ruins have a ball court. Although the rules of the game have been lost it is thought that it resembled soccer. The losing captain lost his life! One inscription shows the decapitated captain, his blood spewing forth to fertilize the soil and bring new life.

The pyramids of the Maya were not tombs, although an occasional burial has been found. They were built to support temples. The Castillo is the tallest building in Chichen Itza. I climbed it, and then climbed it from the inside, for every 50 years a new pyramid was built using the old one for a core. The temple inside the Castillo had a statue of Choc Mol and a jaguar throne, which was the symbol of royalty.

The sacred center of Chichen Itza was a natural well in the limestone. Here they made offerings to the gods. Maidens were thrown in and if they were still afloat hours later, they were thought to have been spared by the gods so that they could relay messages from him.

The whole complex had been covered with growth and the tree roots tore some of the buildings apart.

The present-day Mayans live in bamboo-thatched huts and the ladies wear huipils, an embroidered dress. Sisal is the main crop of the Yucatan Peninsula because it grows wild in the dry climate and unfertile soil. They can get three or four crops a year.

Our next stop was Uxmal where we stayed at the Hotel Hacienda Uxmal. Uxmal is thought to have been the most beautiful of the Mayan cities. It was built during the late classic period, during the seventh century. There is a low ridge of mountains nearby and the towns are Puuc or hill-style.

The Pyramid of the Magician is oval shaped. It is actually five pyramids superimposed on one another every 50 years. The façade of the great pyramid was cleared 1971-1975 by the Carnegie Institute. The Palace of the Governor has a phallic symbol in front of it. It is oriented to the summer solstice when fertility rites are thought to have been held here. There are great three-dimensional reliefs on the façade.

The ball court at Uxmal is only one-tenth the size of the one at Chichen Itza. Behind it is the platform that supports the Palace of the Governor, the Turtle House and the Great Pyramid. There is another building that was named 'The Nunnery' by the Spanish explorers. There are carvings on it that resemble crosses. A great corbelled arch leads into it. Snakes on the façade represent fertility.

Twelve miles from Uxmal is the small town of Kabah. A Mayan road connected the two. A great arch stands at the entrance. Kabah is a Puuc or hill style town, which means 'hand blows' in Mayan. This refers to the many blows needed to create the Codz Poop, which is known for its stylized Mayan masks. The palace has a mansard-like roof, which is unique among Mayan Ruins.

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Adrian Digby, our guest lecturer, tells us about the Codz Poop. He gives a lecture each night on what we are to see and often disagrees with what the local guide has told us!

The natives living near Sayil were selling souvenir huipils. Mr. Digby thinks Sayil is the most beautiful of the Puuc sites. We admired the inscriptions on the palace. The arch at Sayil was found intact and did not have to be rebuilt like the arch at Kabah.

This part of the Yucatan does not have natural wells and water is a problem. There are old cisterns still being used by the natives. The Mayans live as their ancestors have for centuries. The women make endless tortillas or weave hammocks and other textiles.

At Muna we stopped at a local village and were shown a cooking hut, which was separate from the main building. Our guide, Ben, demonstrated the mortar and pestle. The main building was sparsely furnished. People sleep in colorful hammocks, which are put up each night.

Poor as they are, the Mayan women are always spotlessly clean in their white huipils. They seem well fed on a diet of beans, corn, squash and tomatoes. They still speak Mayan although Spanish is the main language. They use archaic slash and burn types of agriculture and are their own beasts of burden. We saw them carrying enormous loads on their heads or backs. The wealthier families are building two-room cement-block houses and have electricity and the inevitable TV antenna.

We stopped at the small museum in Merida to see a Choc Mol statue and also a mask. The colonial city of Maya has obliterated all Mayan ruins, which might have been there.

Palenque is one of the most dramatic Mayan sites. It sits in a rain forest high above the flat plain. It was the dry season, but it poured rain the whole time we were there. Some people made makeshift umbrellas from the large palm leaves but I just got soaked! Palenque dates from 500 to 800 AD and is noted for its handsome roof combs with open fretwork.

In 1952, a crypt was discovered inside the Temple of Inscriptions. This was the first time evidence of a burial was found in a pyramid. Most of the pyramids were built to support temples. Only the heavy slab that covered the tomb is still in the tomb. The rest is in the National Museum in Mexico City. Dates on the temple date its dedication to 692 AD. The palace is in a remarkable state of preservation. A white plaster relief in the palace is thought to be the crowning of Pacal, the man buried in the Temple of the Inscriptions. The inner patio of the palace had marvelous decorations. There is also a Temple of the Sun at Palenque.

We went on to the Hotel Victoria in Oaxaca. Around the beautiful pool, even I got sunburned. Oaxaca sits in a broad valley of the Sierra Madre Mountains. We were shown the Zocalo or Central Square and the cathedral, which was started in 1553. They were expecting the new Pope, John Paul II, and were erecting reviewing stands at the cathedral. We walked through the interesting Juarez native market.

At the Hotel Monte Alban we were treated to a performance of regional dances and enjoyed the colorful costumes.

The Santo Domingo Church in Oaxaca has an overwhelming baroque interior. On one wall is a genealogical chart of the Guzmanes. In the convent of the church was a regional museum, which is famous for its Mexican gold, found in a Oaxaca tomb.

Our guide, Gabriel, pointed out that we have now left the Mayan world and are where the Zapotec Indians settled about 1000 BC. About 800 AD, the Mixtec Indians started to move into the area and the present population is their descendants or Spanish.

Monte Alban is the most important site of the valley. It was occupied from 1000 BC to 1200 AD. The mountain in the middle is not really connected with the Sierra Madre Mountains. On the plateau the Indians built their temples and had an easily defensible fortress. By this time we have well developed pyramid-climbing legs to scale the pyramids. There is a huge monolith, thought to have been a sundial for the Zapotecs and Mixtecs were keen on astronomy. They needed to know when to plant their crops. The observatory is the only building in the complex not oriented to a cardinal point of the compass.

There is a ball court but although it was part of the culture, it contained no rings. There were stellae at the Dancer's Pyramid thought to be connected with the fertility rites.

Lambityeco was built about 800 AD. It is a small site, surrounded with unexcavated mounds. It is a Zapotec ruin and potshards were used to fill out the mortar between the stones. These stones weren't as well fitted as in earlier buildings. The site is late Zapotec but there are the first signs of the Mixtec geometrical designs.

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Yagul. Much of the original buildings were probably painted red. The site is Mixtec.

Mitla. The Catholic Church dominates the town and at noon the bells chimed for almost five minutes. Mitla is Mixtec and dates from the 19th century. It was still occupied when the Spanish came. Apart from the site, we also had lunch in Mitla and watched how the native weaving is done.

A word about our British Tour Manager. She was very efficient. Once we stopped for 13 minutes. When I asked why not fifteen, I was told that Mr. Swann had calculated that with his configuration of tourists that they only needed 13 minutes to use the rest room.

There is a 2000-year-old Cyprus tree at Tula, which is 42 meters around. Tula was the Toltec Capitol before they moved it to Chichen Itza. There is a pyramid there, which shows the Mixtec influence in its carvings.

At Cuilapam we saw an unfinished monastery, which was started in 1555. It was abandoned in 1663 when the order moved to the Santo Domingo Church in Oaxaca. Some of the columns in the Monastery collapsed during an earthquake. The church is still in use here and the Pope made a stop here on his recent visit.

And finally we came to Mexico City, where we stayed for several days. This gave us a chance to enjoy the National Museum with its priceless collection of Indian artifacts. There are so many things to see, one day does not do it justice. Of course, we had been told about its wonders in the guest lecturer's talks and really enjoyed seeing them.

We had one lady on the tour, who was always a little late for the bus. This is, of course, a no-no. Hillary, our tour director, put u with it until we got to Mexico City. The lady came running out one morning, got one step on the bus step and said, "I must go back and get my camera!" Hillary didn't miss a beat. "In that case you will miss the bus!" The lady was in tears but got on the bus without her camera. When we got to the first stop, Hillary found a cab and instructed the driver to return with the lady to the hotel, pick up the camera, and then meet us at the next stop. The lady was never late again!

We went to Xochinalco to see the Temple of the Plumed Serpent. It is thought this was an astronomical center and Mr. Digby, our resident expert demonstrated what the original astronomical instrument might have been.

We went to Cuernavaca, a delightful town where many Americans have retired. The Church is charming, incorporating parts from all periods of its architecture.

The Palace of Cortez contains a small museum, but its main treasures are murals painted by Diego Rivera, depicting the history of Cuernavaca.

We ate lunch at the lovely Mananitas Restaurant. It is a treat to eat out for the tour has had table d'hote dining all the way. Traveling with the British is interesting for it is not like traveling with Americans. We stay at nice hotels, but they are not necessarily the best ones. Also the British are so reserved that there is not the noise you suffer when you travel with an American group.

The Shrine of Guadalupe was interesting, for it is the most important Catholic site in Mexico. The Lady of Guadalupe made many 16th century murals. There are four different basilicas. The original 16th century chapel still exists on a hill behind the rest. Both the lower churches are sinking, as is much of Mexico City, for the city was built on an old lakebed. Pope John Paul 11 had just been to visit the shrine two days before and flowers were still decorating the façade. The reviewing stands were still set up. The newest basilica is just two years old and is unusual with its circular altar area and modern designs. The Pope gave his blessing from its balcony.

We went to Teotihuacán, the pyramid complex near Mexico City. The pyramids to the sun and moon are along the street of the dead. The site flourished from 300 to 900 AD when it was abandoned. No one knows why it as abandoned. However it had influence over all Central America. On the summer solstice the sun sets exactly in front of the Pyramid of the Sun. There are 240 steps to the top but I only made it half way. With the altitude at 8000 feet you tire very easily during a climb. Stucco originally covered the building but it was removed, in error, in 1910. Around the citadel are smaller pyramids. The outer pyramid covered an earlier one and the carvings on it are remarkably preserved. We also toured the Palace.

The National Palace in Mexico City also has Rivera murals, depicting Tenochtitland (now Mexico City), the Aztec capitol. In downtown Mexico City the National Theater stands where the main Aztec pyramid in the Zocalo. There were seven pyramids superimposed on each other at 52-year intervals.

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We had lunch and toured the museum at Tepotzotlan.

We also saw the St. Cecilia pyramid, which is much restored. It was a small parish church for the Aztecs. We had a farewell lunch in Mexico City for many of the group are rerunning to England.

I went on the extension to Guatemala. We went to Tikal, a wonderful ruin. It is still being excavated. This is the largest of all the Mayan sites.

Also in Guatemala we went to Lake Atitlan. I was on the beach early one morning and heard a sort of titter. I turned and there was a Japanese taking a picture of me. I guess I am in some slide show identified as a Guatemalan!

Then I went to Honduras to see Copan, a most interesting ruin. My guide was an Indian and because the ride was long we talked of many things. I asked him if he had a Mongol spot, for I had understood all Indians have one. He proudly dropped his pants to show it to me!