

A Return to the Yucatan OR Bucket List #11: Swim in a Cenote ... Check! Part One

Two years ago, friend Sheila and I joined MexiMayan, the travel arm of the Chicago Archaeological Association, for a trip to visit Mayan ruins in Mexico's Yucatan. We enjoyed it so much that we roughed out a return itinerary with Ricardo Vasquez, the guide. Last summer, when it was time to make hotel and flight arrangements, we turned to Dr. Ed Barnhart, director of the Maya Exploration Center, and asked him to use our rough plans to develop a final itinerary. The result was an eight day program visiting the minor Mayan ruins of central Yucatan, with Celestun Biosphere Reserve thrown in for good measure (for Sheila), accompanied by an expert guide and a car and driver. Afterwards we planned to spend three days on our own on beautiful Isla Mujeres, a small island off the coast of Cancun. Perfect!



As luck would have it, Dr. Barnhart selected Ricardo, our MexiMayan Ricardo (!), as our guide. He is an expert on everything Maya and because both Sheila and I have a good history background, he does not need to start at square one with his interpretations (the Mayan beginning of the cosmos is a long, convoluted story) and is able to meld together culture and history with what we have already seen at other major Mayan sites like Tikal, Chichen Itza, Copan, Palenque, Bonampak, etc. Toward the end of our time together, he even throws in a bit of "Ancient Aliens" lore just to keep things interesting.

You have to love a man who wears beautiful necklaces as easily as others wear a necktie. He likes jade carvings and always has his eye out for intricately carved samples, or pieces he can have strung into something fabulous. His necklaces are spectacular, he has a love of the Maya and their history, and he is a true gem in every sense of the word.

We are joined by Cristian Reyes, who has been driving people around for 20 years. He said he had never been to some of the places on our itinerary. Armed with his GPS, he turns our comfortable Honda Odyssey minivan in the right direction, often off a main street or highway, onto unmarked roads that morph into tracks that turn into trails that lead to hidden Mayan sites. This delights us to no end.



Christian and Ricardo - a great team!



Christian is a kind, helpful man who always has a bottle of cold water waiting for us, knows the best rest stops and even stores a duffel (with extra stuff!) for us while we visit Isla Mujeres.

At most of our stops, we are the only visitors. Some archaeological sites, like Ake are on hacienda property which, in addition to the ruins of a once-elegant colonial mansion, includes a sisal factory. Yaxuna is a community-owned site where locals, care for the area, keep it tidy and serve as guides. I loved Dzibilchaltun for its ancient astronomical observatory, where the sun lines up during the spring and fall equinoxes, and for the walk thru the property where we enjoy birds, butterflies and some unique foliage.

The most developed and touristic Mayan site we visit is Ek Balam, where we encounter maybe 100 people (at the most) and it seems crowded to us. Though my pyramid-climbing days are over (unless I have two guides: one to pull and one to push!), we do a nice kora (Tibetan word for circumambulation) around the back of the acropolis (main pyramid and the second largest ever built by the Maya in the Yucatan) to see the unrestored sections. The edge of the jungle butts right up to it and we had a feeling of deja-vu seeing the structure as archaeologists discovered it.

Ohmygod...those steps!



Luckily the Great Mundo Maya Museum in Merida has an exact replica of Ek Balam's main chamber — the tomb of ruler Ukit Kan Lck Tok, located half-way up the acropolis, including stucco sculptures of rulers, warriors and exquisite geometric patterns. So we didn't miss a thing by not climbing.

And there is always Izamal, a lovely colonial town that sprang up around seven pyramids - some located in people's back yards! The Spaniards demolished one of the larger structures and plunked a huge church complex on top. All the buildings in the historic center are painted buttercup-yellow making it a visually beautiful town. I had visited in November and, knowing I would be returning with a specialist guide, was more interested in seeing the museum than walking to the pyramids. At the time, I noticed decorative horse carts waiting by a small square and later was able to talk Ricardo and Sheila into riding one around the ruins. It is a lovely experience as we enjoy seeing the town and its famous pyramids at a nice, slow pace, rather than whizzing from one to another in our car.



Caves were sacred to the Maya. We visit Balamkanche Cave which the ancient Maya used for rituals. Via 200 uneven and steep cement steps and walkways, it descends 1500 feet and with each step we take, air becomes more stiflingly humid and hot. Sheila walks part way with us, I gut it out as far as the main chamber called the "Ceiba Tree." This is where a group of stalagmites and stalactites have joined and now resemble a tree with extensive roots as well as a spreading canopy. This was an important ritual site and is still strewn with thousand year old urns, incense burners and decorative bowls left in situ by archaeologists. I wait for Ricardo and Cristian here, while they explore further to the river at the end of the cave. No one else comes by and I have the



magnificent “Ceiba Tree” with its museum-quality pottery all to myself.

Each site on our itinerary has something special about it -- an auspicious location, noteworthy architecture, unusual glyphs, an eminent burial, sculptures, still visible sacbes (raised paved roads connecting temples, plazas and even cities), etc. Each is a delight to visit.

A few museums are included in our itinerary for good measure. The Grand Museo Maya in Merida is on our program, but having visited before, I return to the hotel, while Sheila and Ricardo go thru it. Most smaller museums we visit are connected to a site, but we also visit the City Museum and the spectacular Casa de los Venados (home of the deer) in Valladolid.



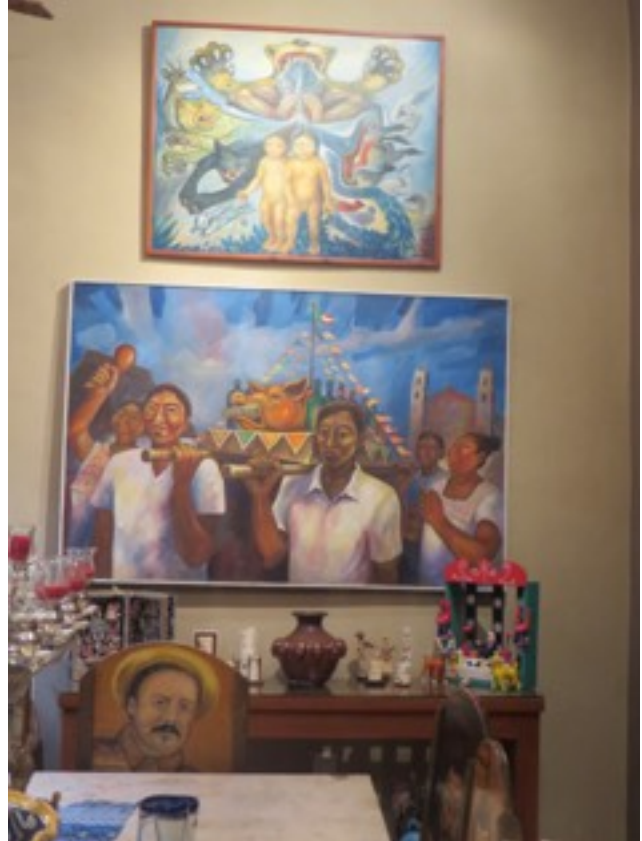
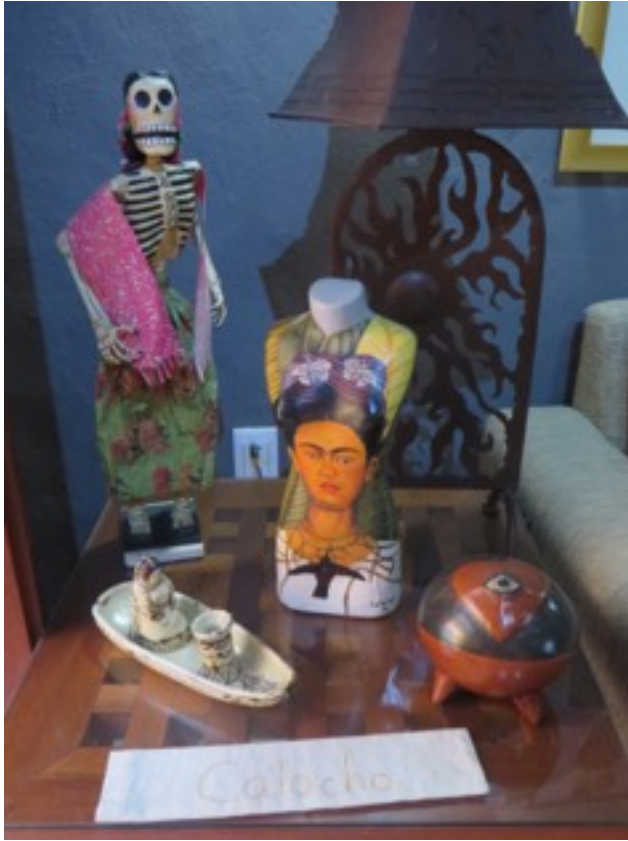
The Casa de los Venados is colonial mansion that has been completely restored by John and Dorianne Venator originally from Chicago. They bought the dilapidated building in 2000 and took eight years to carefully remodel the interior. They started collecting high quality Mexican folk art directly from artists 50 years ago and designed the house around the their 3,000 piece collection. It is now considered the largest collection of museum-quality Mexican folk art in private hands.

In addition to the main living quarters, it has several guest “suites”, and every visitor’s favorite is always the “Freida Suite,” jam-packed with images of her and her designs. The Veneturs believe in sharing their art collection, so open the home to tours every Sunday at 10am and all admission fees are donated to charity.

A video of the restoration as well as highlights of the collection are on youtube. Search: “Casa de los Venados Valladolid”

Photographs can’t do this private museum justice. To the right is the beautiful courtyard, and below, the family’s dining room.





Top right: details from the "Freida Suite;"
top left: the walls are covered with
original art from corner to corner.

Left: Sheila admires the lovely pool.



I'll never forget the lovely little town of Mani with its huge church and significant history. This is where in 1562, Franciscan Priest Diego de Landa burned so many of the Mayan codices and books as well as torturing and killing those who, he claimed, worshipped "Idols." (I hope he is now burning in hell).

I want to remember this quiet little town more for the friendly woman I found working at her sewing machine using the light coming through her front door, who was kind enough to hem a pair of pants for me. When the work was finished and I asked the price, she said 10 pesos (50 cents). "Permiteme darte

veinte," I asked (please allow me to give you 20). She was so pleased and so was I.

The thing that brings me great joy when I travel is meeting and talking to people. I'm in that stage of life where I don't need more "stuff" and am trying not to buy anything. I like to talk with and interact with people and have come upon the perfect solution. I bring things that need to be fixed! The lovely woman in Mani took care of my alterations; Tony at Lung King Jewelry Repair (Booth #23-25 at the public market in Merida) worked with some silver jewelry to make it more fashionable and did a wonderful job. I also bought a pair of earrings from him, and Sheila had him replace a mother-of-pearl accent that had come off her watchband. He was so appreciative that he gave both Sheila and I beautiful calendars.

Remember the expensive bead bracelets I discovered at the Ilias Lalaounis store (a if-you-have-to-ask-the-price-you-can't-afford-it kind of place) in Mykonos? When I returned home from that trip, I bought strands of natural stone beads at Hobby Lobby and had bracelets strung at a small booth in Merida's Plaza Diamante, a jewelers mall in Merida, not far from our hotel. I now have five of them!



And the food!!! Last November, Victor Palacios (guide for Explore's Tastes of Mexico tour) introduced me to the delights of Mexican food which is far more than tacos, quesadillas and chimichangas. It is some of the most complex cuisine in the world and always is served perfectly seasoned. Ricardo and Cristian move us forward to the delights of humble local restaurants and street food. Where else but in a teeny mercado (public market) in a teeny town can you try venison tacos for 10 Pesos (50 cents) each? It is a local family's specialty and they have had a booth in Izamal's Public Market for decades. And ohmygod, they are superb! Ricardo is smart and takes us to eat early as he knows their popularity and that by noon they will have run out. Around 12:30 I walked by the booth and it was already tidied up, closed.



A family runs this simple stand in the public market specializing in venison tacos. Home made tortillas are covered with thin strips of venison, slivers of radish and onion and sprinkled with juice from Valencia oranges..... Yum!



We missed the boat regarding swimming in a cenote (clear water in an underground cave) at Dzibilchaltun on the second day of our tour as Cenote Xlakah, was not very deep and the water looked pristine. We didn't realize we should bring our swimsuits that day, but we made up for it with a wonderful swim at Cenote Hubiku.

That little white blob is me swimming in the cenote.
Photo by Christian

It is so well organized, with changing rooms, outdoor showers, lockers and you can even rent a life jacket and I'm glad I did. There are ropes in the cenote delineating how far out you should swim as it goes very deep at one end (80 to 100 feet) and there is a good chance an undertow might carry you to the underworld.

In addition, the site has a wonderful buffet restaurant with the crispest salads of the entire trip.

Before Ricardo left to return to Merida, we rough out an itinerary for a return visit in January 2020. I can hardly wait!



January 2019