

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

Part Two

Isla Mujeres

I first heard about Isla Mujeres (Island of Women) from Cindy, a former student and member of my International Club, as after graduation we kept in touch. She spent time in Mexico during college and loved it. Way back in about 1975, she told me about this island and suggested I “must” visit someday.



I don't know why I never did. It is so easy to take the Ultraferry from Puerto Juarez in Cancun to Isla Mujeres. It is such an amazing service. The ferry runs every half hour, has comfortable seating, places for luggage and even a snack bar. It is only a 25 minute ride either direction and cost is 300 pesos (\$15.USD) round trip.

The day to visit finally came two years ago on the MexiMayan trip, where we stayed at the lovely NaBalm Hotel on Isla Mujeres. Of course Sheila and I hoped to stay there again, but word was the hotel was closing and that gorgeous property being turned into condos.

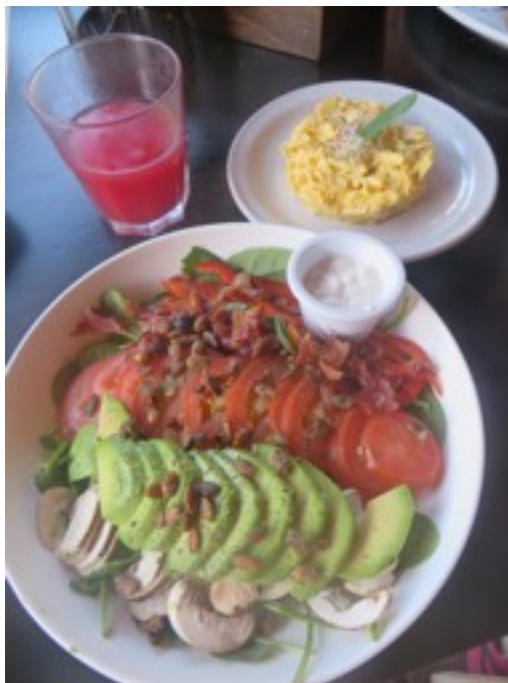


We were so disappointed when we found the closing date was August 2018. After a bit of google research and calling for information, we decided on Playa Arena Hotel, a small property on the same beach. It is a good choice: nice size rooms, pleasant staff, good air-conditioning and stable wi-fi. What more could we want??

At the time our reservations were made, only one ocean-view room was available. We all know cancellations happen and a few days before we were due to arrive, I checked to see if another ocean-view room might be available for me. In clicking around, I was surprised to learn that the NaBalam Hotel was actually open! Apparently the condo deal fell thru, so they closed for a few months, did a bit of remodeling and opened again in late December. We took a walk up to see it, enjoyed snooping around and planned to spend a day on their part of the beach. Unfortunately this never came to pass as we ran out of time!

We did very nicely with food on the island too, though we missed Ricardo's recommendations and company.

Talking with locals and seeking out suggestions, we enjoyed dining around on the island, favorites being: Mocombo Restaurant and its paella (at right) and grilled fish (for Sheila).



Sailfish Restaurant and its coconut shrimp (below) was a favorite; and Lola Velasquez Restaurant had wonderful breakfasts and a coffee bar. (breakfast salad at left)





Isla Mujeres is only five miles long and not very wide - just a block or two in some places and up to a few blocks in other spots. Manuel Hildago, the main pedestrian tourist street, runs about five blocks and is lined with restaurants, souvenir stores and jewelry shops.



The parallel streets have lovely old wooden arts and crafts style homes. A little further out, there are newer homes, many owned by foreigners. Surprisingly, there is still a fair amount of property for sale here.

Sheila had mentioned that it would be nice for us to donate beads to the Women's Beading Cooperative on the island. These local women support their families by making and selling beaded jewelry and they are very good at it. So we both brought beads for them, and I also had some pieces to be re-strung.



Ladies of the Cooperative.



We planned to make a day of it along with visiting the Temple of Ixchel (moon goddess) at Punta Sur at the southernmost tip of the island, but Sheila took a vacation from her vacation and spent a quiet day enjoying the beach. I hired a taxi for a few hours and went alone. Surprisingly I had the same taxi-driver (car #83) who drove our group two years ago and I still had his card with my notes!

It was a rainy day so I had the walk through the sculpture park to the wave-lashed promontory where the Temple of Ixchel stands all to myself. It is a glorious and sacred location and the spot where the rising sun first touches Mexican soil.



Glyph for Ixchel



There is not much left of the temple of Ixchel, but it is a nice walk thru a sculpture park to reach it.

In the past, various people have mentioned Isla Holbox to me, so I asked around. From what I can gather it is like Isla Mujeres 20 years ago. No cars are allowed on the island and people zip around on golf carts. It is just 26 miles long and one mile wide and THE place to swim with whale sharks during the summer months. Next time!

And finally.....

Why do I feel so happy and comfortable here??? The Mexican people are so kind, friendly and considerate and, bless their hearts, they put up with my terrible Spanglish. With every single interaction, I am welcomed and treated with kindness and respect. Is it because it's their nature? Or because I'm a woman of a certain age? Or maybe because I've found a place just four hours away that has everything anyone could ever want: hospitality, cultural richness, historical significance, natural beauty, traditions, art and cuisine.

This I know for sure -- I'll be back!

Mayan Sites visited:

Dzibilchaltun- - There were settlements here from 500BC until the arrival of the Spanish. Their observatory is called the "Temple of the Seen Dolls" as they find figurines buried inside. I especially liked the corners of the building, as the stones resemble a Mayan face.





Ake

Early Classic period (255-550 AD) and known for its system of Sacbes - raised stone roads that provide access to other settlements. The site is located on original hacienda property, and now the location of a sisal plant - which we were invited to tour! Christian, who has driven people all over the Yucatan for over 20 years said it was his first time visiting this site!

Pyramids at Izamal

founded in Early Classic period (750-200) BC and occupied until the arrival of the Spanish. The city of Izamal (one of the oldest cities in the Yucatan) is built around five pyramids - all of which can be climbed. And, of course, the Spanish built their church on top of the largest one.

Yaxuna



Middle pre-classic era and known for its long (60 mile) scabe that runs straight from the center ceremonial pyramid of Yaxuna to the center of Coba. This location was continuously occupied from the pre-classic thru the post-classic eras. Archaeologists have discovered pre-classic temples from 400 BC underneath the pyramids we see when visiting.

Mayapan - Yucatan capital after Chichen Itza

late post-classic from the 1220's to the 1440's, when it was destroyed and abandoned. Often called a "mini Chichen itza"

Balankanche Cave

known to the Maya as early as the pre-classic period (1000BC)

Ek Balam

The seat of a Mayan kingdom from the pre-classic until the post-classic period



Glyph for EK Balam

Cenote Hubiku -. cenotes were sacred to the Maya. They were not only a source of fresh water, but a passage to the underworld as they were often very deep. Today the more accessible cenotes are popular swimming spots.



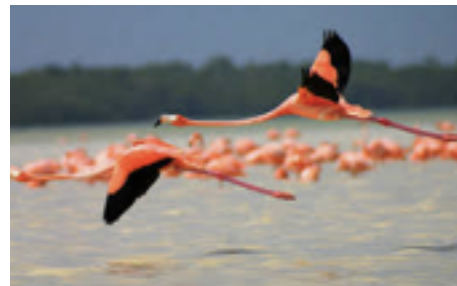
Temple Ixchel

Temple to the Goddess of Fertility; aka the Moon Goddess. It is located at the southern tip of Isla Mujeres at a place called Punta Sur. Ixchel is also thought to have invented weaving.



Calacmul - This site was one of the largest and most powerful cities in southern Yucatan. It is considered one of the “secret sites” of the Yucatan as it is difficult to get to and not often visited. The site is very close to the Guatemala border. Glyph at left

In addition to visiting these wonderful archaeological sites, we enjoyed Mexico’s natural beauty at Celestun Nature Reserve with its thousands of flamingos and birdwatching on a ride thru a mangrove swamp.



The best part about visiting Mayan sites is the opportunity to walk, walk, walk around the ruins sometimes on narrow paths thru the jungle.