

REPORT FROM THE YUCATAN

When we left the AFMA convention in Cancun to spend a “week in the bush” some of our friends were variously surprised, impressed or doubtful. I promised to report how the week transpired.

I just returned from a delightful breakfast of freshly squeezed orange juice, local papaya and eggs Motuleno – a layer of black bean sauce, a crisp corn tortilla, two soft fried eggs, a layer of tomato salsa, bits of ham with melted cheese on top. We washed it down with good Chiapas coffee. We were on a delightful second floor balcony overlooking a setting of grounds and geometric azure pools that is pure Architectural Digest. In fact the Hacienda Temozon has been featured in that magazine. The architect for the restoration was from Mexico City but the Interior Designer from Bali. What an inspired combination!

Temozon is an old hacienda whose last incarnation was the production of sisal in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was totally dilapidated and recently purchased with land for \$20,000. The factories, storerooms and offices have been lovingly reincarnated as guestrooms filled with local period furniture but balanced with the modernity of sunken plaster hot tubs and enough comfort to please anyone and enough ambience to soften any soul. With 26 rooms, this is one of the largest of the haciendas open to visitors.

The haciendas were an extension of feudal Europe dating from the 1520's and were the basic form of rural organization in Mexico with the local Indians attached to the hacienda as serfs or worse. They focused on cattle and grain in the early years, sugar, sisal and other products in the 19th and early 20th century and after decades of neglect are now finding a new life as weekend retreats for wealthy Mexicans or a stop for the slightly more adventurous tourist. The civil war of 1911-1921 was a struggle by the increasingly disenfranchised peasants to recover some rights to their lands. During a period of industrialization the haciendas were under pressure to mechanize, to add land capacity and to replace workers with machines. The political structure encouraged the hacienda owners to use the legal system to slowly capture the best lands around their haciendas to permit expansion.

Emiliano Zapata was a horse trainer in the state of Morelos near Cuernavaca and became the best known of the rebel leaders along with Pancho Villa and others who challenged the aristocracy. At the end of the brutal war the economy, the country and the haciendas were in ruin. Although we think of the current Zapatistas of Chiapas as far-out leftist guerillas, they are tapping into a very deep strain of sympathy in Mexico. Virtually every recent President of Mexico has named one of his sons Emiliano.

The Yucatan haciendas suffered less than other areas of the country since the degree of control by authorities was relatively high. 30 families controlled most of the wealth - the land and the haciendas – which were the equivalent of our modern factories. Since the peasants were not always appreciative of the owners, many chose to live in the historic City of Merida where on a single boulevard they built mansions that would have been a

credit to Paris – in fact most of them were imported lock, stock and marble from France. Today they are museums, shops, restaurants and a few remnants of those families. The sisal boom began with the invention of the mechanized combine in America in the mid 19th century and ended with invention of plastic substitutes in the 1930's. The Yucatan sisal haciendas were slowly abandoned and today many are gaunt and blackened walls filled with the huge rusting boilers, drive shafts and miniature rail lines of the early industrial age. Charlie Chaplin would feel quite at home! The hacienda chapel is often the only building that had been retained by the surrounding village.

The Hacienda Temozon is one of the most spectacular of this genre and was used as the meeting location for Presidents Zedillo and Clinton in 1997. This was our third hacienda and as we met the managers along the way and shared war stories we were royally welcomed at the third stop. Eduardo, whose father was a survivor of Lviv, met us at the Temozon and upgraded us to the “Cuarto del Patron” which happened to be the room assigned to Clinton. The three rooms with 20 foot ceilings are very generous with lovely antiques, surrounded by jungle full of birds, a shaded patio, a great view, private use of the old cistern converted to a swimming pool etc. It really is tough!

At sunrise I walked into the surrounding village. The drive from the highway is lined with simple homes and buildings of which the majority have three-year-old ochre paint on one side only. The village leading to the hacienda of President Vicente Fox was also given the paint treatment last week in the expectation that the US President-elect would make a quick visit to Mexico. The side streets tend to have no paint or a bit more variety (personal choice not Government issue) of a deep mustard, pale blue, pale green or white. The majority have no paint and many of the village streets are impassable even for a LandRover. There tend to be more dogs than people and they seem to share the space amicably with a great variety of chickens and turkeys. Presumably those dogs unwilling to play by the rules no longer exist. Primary school students were on their way, the boys in navy blue short or long pants, a white shirt and it seems an optional tie. The girls wore matching skirts and blouses. I walked beyond the perimeter of the town and found the already depressing pattern of abandoned fields....

We also visited Hacienda Santa Rosa, smaller and more remote at the end of a road where the space occupied by potholes exceeded the pavement for the last 5 miles. There was no pretense of paint in this village and the surrounding population created a symphony of sound both evening and morning. I walked a village that was vivid evidence to the collapse of an economic system. The majority of the rocky fields in the Yucatan have been abandoned and have reverted to bush – many since the advent of NAFTA. The hennequen plant that produces sisal is essentially a cactus that can grow on soils depleted by millenia of Mayan agriculture. Corn has always been grown as a subsistence crop with very low yields. NAFTA requires Mexico to open its markets to America and Canada. They now benefit from cheap Iowa corn, wiping out the local producers in most areas – but have no crops with which to reciprocate. There was a story this week in the local paper about avocados. Mexico is an excellent producer and has been declared disease free by American authorities – but the US restricts imports anyhow to protect its California producers. As a result the producer price of Mexican avocados is

one third that of a California producer. Imagine our standard of living if furniture producers in say North Carolina or Manitoba were required to sell their product at one third of the wholesale price level?

Several farmers were experimenting with small papaya plantations using wells, small pumps and hoses. The plants were spectacular – I only hope someone will buy the papayas. Their last local success was aloevera but suddenly the buyers stopped coming... The Yucatan has historically also done well with its very tasty honey but recently the Chinese have entered the market with a similar product that is cheaper and cleaner. The Europeans have now shifted their buying to China..... and so it goes. The result is that the men have little choice but to leave in search of employment. Many from Santa Rosa travel two hours to Merida to be day-laborers, some head for the maquiladoras and some cross the border..... The descendants of the Maya still retain many of their traditional ways. The women in the village wear the delightful white cotton dress with hand embroidered designs around the neck and at the bottom of the dress. They look clean and beautiful even returning from a day in the fields or carrying a heavy load of firewood on their backs.

Santa Rosa really was the end of the road. I walked the right of way on the far side of town no longer used by any vehicle. A few miles out of town I chanced on a surrealistic old cemetery. There were small wooden crosses with recent dates – and a large wall filled with open cavities. The cavities were stuffed full of tin boxes with loose lids – each box filled with bones. The boxes were a little small and leg bones or a skull were having trouble remaining inside. Apparently if the families do not continue to pay for the burial plot, the bones are dug up, placed in a box and the plot is sold again – or so we were told.

The third hacienda was San Jose with 11 rooms. It is set deep in the jungle with only the sounds or silence of the wild. It was our favorite spot. The swimming pool had a shaded area with a hammock that permitted you to sleep in partial shade with about two inches of your body in the water. Late afternoon I was awakened by a tremendous whir as dozens of swallows attacked the surface of the pool to pick up all of the insects that had drowned that day. The hacienda is shaded by trees that are centuries old and lit softly and tastefully by dozens of concealed lights. It really was a magical effect –and only three rooms were occupied that night. It is interesting that during this whole week we did not meet a single Canadian or American tourist at any of the haciendas or at the restored home in Merida. It seems that only Europeans and Japanese come to these places. For one thing – you need to drive your own vehicle since they are not large enough for any tour group. Do North Americans really prefer Cancun???

The vehicle. Leona spotted a black BMW convertible in front of the Ritz-Carlton in Cancun – it belongs to the owner of the hotel. We decided to enjoy the summer skies and drive in comfort! The toll road is so high-priced that it is virtually empty, very straight and in excellent condition. The BMW was a real joy at 150km per hour plus. Even the major local roads were devoid of traffic. The regional roads around the Maya ruins are in

excellent condition totally without trucks. We could travel well over 100km per hour even locally.

In addition to the haciendas, our other goal was the Mayan ruins. With a private car it is possible to arrive at the fabulous but popular destinations such as Chichen Itza and Uxmal before the tourist buses from Cancun or Merida get there. With a private guide these are really world class sites. The local folk suggested we also stop at the lesser visited but equally spectacular sites – often locations still being excavated. A highlight was Oxkintok, a great city with very active restoration. We arrived at 8:30 at the end of a gravel road and were the only tourists there. We could drive our convertible among the ruins and take one of those photos great for an ad!

Another highlight was the result of a wrong turn and a dead end. We arrived at one of those Stone Age caves where the ancestors of the Maya presumably lived. There is a famous cave of this type at Loltun – reception center, stairs, plenty of lights etc. The cave at the end of this road was totally undisturbed and the pottery shards were still lying on the floor of the cave. There are wall paintings and some more elaborate carving in an underground cavern that was a Mayan ceremonial center. There was an old man at the cave and he took us on a tour with a gas lantern and a few flashlights. This requires a climb down an old metal ladder of 30 feet or so then about 2000 feet underground and downhill through various caverns. It was one of the highlights of the week!

I am writing this last paragraph feeling very mellow. Tomorrow morning we begin our 13-hour trip back to Winnipeg. We just completed a TEMESCAL or Mayan sweat lodge ceremony on a very peaceful beach – complete with all of the incense, incantations, hot lava rocks, tea, a plunge in the ocean and good camaraderie. We decided to unwind the last day at a very pleasant 36 room hotel south of Cancun – on a 3 mile bay that is shared with only one other hotel. If the procedure delivers its promise we should return to Canada free of toxins, fears and any unpleasant thoughts.

As we emerged from the sweat lodge onto the dark beach we could see the glow of Cancun to the north and Play del Carmen to the south. Possibly the tourist factories of Cancun are the haciendas of our time – and the Mayan people live outside the gates as they have since being discovered.

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