

Travel to the Yucatan December 1 – 8, 2007

Joe and Susan Peter and Mary & Joshua Middendorf

Written by Susan Peter, for my mother, Edna Cramer

Photos to illustrate this story are many. I suggest you open them in a second window, arranging the two windows side by side, so you can view them as you read. Alternatively, you could print this text and read it with the photo pages open on the computer nearby. If you haven't already, you might want to glance at the Overview.

Preface

Almost 10 years ago Joe and I, Mary and Shippy arranged to take a Green Tortoise tour of the Yucatan Peninsula. After we bought our plane tickets the trip was cancelled and a year later we rebooked the tickets to go to Panama, which was a great trip.

Since then, Shippy spent much of one summer in Costa Rica, and Mary has still wanted to go to the Yucatan. Josh has not done much foreign travel and she and Josh have been uncomfortable about an independent trip there. Joe and I, who have traveled to lots of cool places, have been equally uncomfortable about a trip to this part of Mexico. We decided four was a good number for security, and friends of friends encouraged us to rent a car, so we did.

Saturday, December 1, 2007

Joe and I got up at 3 AM and were at the Delta ticket counter at PDX at 4:45 for a 6 am flight to Cancun via Salt Lake City. Cold weather in Salt Lake meant our departure was delayed for an hour and a half since our plane and many others before it needed to be de-iced – sprayed down with hundreds of gallons of antifreeze. (They do it in special area, collecting and reusing the glycol.)

Our plan had been to arrive in mid afternoon (3:30 PM) so we could get to our lodgings before dark. Mary and Josh arrived on a much shorter, and direct, flight from Chicago; it left at 9 AM and arrived in Cancun before 1 pm. They picked up the rental car from Avis, paying extra so we could all four legally drive the car, and we also paid an extra \$25 per day for insurance. US insurance is no good in Mexico and this seemed like a reasonable investment. The sun was setting as we approached the landing strip and it was quite dark by the time we cleared customs and had our passports checked at the Mexican immigration booths.

We wandered out into the front lobby, assailed by the crowds of official greeters and tour operators. When we didn't find recognizable faces, we decided we should use the only cell phone we brought with us to try to call Mary. It didn't work. We made a couple of inquiries and, though many Mexicans here speak some English it is not a broad range of questions they are equipped to answer. We were however soon told that we need to dial 001 and then Mary's cell number.

This makes little sense to me. The cell phone is smart enough to know who I am and where I am; why isn't it smart enough to know that I am still wanting to talk to the same daughter I always call at this number? Why don't I have to tell the cell phone that she is in Mexico? I am sure there is an answer for this question, but I am sure it is not simple.

So, when in Mexico, calling someone else in Mexico on their US Cell phone, dial 001 first. Then it works. Easy. Expensive, but easy.

They were virtually pulling up to the curb by the time we got the call dialed. This was the only time we used our cell phones to call each other on the entire trip.

In the dark we drove south from the airport. (We were told you aren't supposed to drive at night in Mexico because of the danger of bandits; this may be a myth.) The airport is already south of Cancun, and Mary, who was charged with the overall planning and decision-making, had decided we should spend our first night in Playa del Carmen. She decided this even before she and Josh spent the afternoon driving through the maze of Cancun.

Playa del Carmen

This 50 km stretch of good quality divided highway actually bypasses Playa del Carmen. Confused, we were looking for landmarks on our travel guide maps that weren't there. This is a small town however, and we were only a few blocks west of downtown, our goal. A grid of maybe 20 streets north/south and 10 east/west, by the time we had figured out their one-way grid, speed bumps, and located the Walmart (listed in the guidebook), we had explored most of the city. We quickly found a restaurant that was probably not far from the beach, if the closed off streets was an indication, but it was too dark to see and we chose not to go exploring in that direction. Getting a room after dinner was more difficult.

The youth hostel (across the street from Walmart) was totally cool and we should have stayed there; the rooms faced out onto a central courtyard, with stick-built bridges and ramps serving as porches for the rooms. Here stick-built means skinned branches of 2-4" diameter, not lumber. A bit fragile feeling, but definitely in keeping with the tropical outback look. This is not put-on for effect; it is how many buildings here are constructed. The price was right -- about 250 pesos each -- but the young female desk clerk warned us it would be noisy. As usual, we had not brought ear plugs along, so we chickened out. I did not get photos of this busy and friendly place.

Using the car instead of our feet, we were not successful at finding her suggested alternate. Finally we found a two-story concrete hotel that looked very nice, with a swimming pool and lovely gardens and colonnades, for the modest sum of 600 pesos per room. The rooms looked ok, but once settled in, we felt we had perhaps overpaid. It had dirty bathrooms, minimal towels and toilet paper. In actuality, we were not yet accustomed to reality. Our proprietor wouldn't take our visa card (the restaurant had) and Joe and I walked a few blocks in the dark to find a OXXO convenience store with an ATM so we could get sufficient pesos to pay him. We had not purchased pesos in the airport or before the trip. The ATMs usually give a fair exchange rate.

The island of Cozumel, reputed to be a snorkeler's and diver's paradise, is just off the coast of Playa del Carmen, but we did not go there.

Sunday, December 2

We shopped at Walmart for some breakfast and lunch groceries. This is a Walmart Superstore and with parking lots takes up about 4 square blocks in the center of Playa del Carmen. With parking at ground level beneath, the moving sidewalks carry shopping carts at a slope up to the store. Outside of Cancun, we saw nothing else like this in our travels. This store apparently sold everything, including motorcycles, but then I suppose that might be true of Walmarts in the US also.

We continued south on the divided highway, #307. We knew the beach to be at our left, but as was true last night, never saw it. This is a flat land with forests along the road. Actually, we decided they could be called jungles and determined that jungle connotes a place where the visibility is limited and unknown dangers lie within. And tropical maybe. They didn't actually look unfriendly or dangerous, or terribly thick. They were also disappointingly short; I am spoiled by the giant conifer forests of the Pacific Northwest. However, combined with the flat terrain, they were tall and dense enough to ruin any view. There must have been side roads we could have taken to the beach, but we didn't see anything promising. What we did see on our left was many resorts with huge concrete entrances that were supposed to be impressive.

Xel-Ha

At 1 PM we found Xel-ha (pronounced Shel-a or Shel-ha) on the right. This was listed in our book as a little government run archeological site with a cenote. (Pronounce the ending e as a long a.) We paid 30 pesos each (less than \$3 US) and walked around, looking at the signs. It has a few preserved wall paintings, and we enjoyed what we saw and read, but these were not impressive ruins. A couple of other cars came and went while we visited there, but mostly we had the place to ourselves. We studied the map they had posted, changed into our swim suits, and prepared to walk down the road to find the cenote. Many ancient Mayan cities are associated with these fresh-water pools that form in collapsed caves.

The park ranger saw us preparing for our walk and came over and opened the gate so we could drive instead of walk. It is a good thing. We probably drove about a kilometer before the dirt road died, then we walked on the continuing "trail" for another kilometer through the encroaching jungle and jagged rocks. It was very hot and we were on the verge of turning back when we discovered we were on the verge of a pool about 15 feet below us. We fought our way through the prickly branches and found a ledge where we could enter the water, and also be able to climb back out. We all went in, taking turns sharing the 3 snorkels. It was very deep, and most of the perimeter was just sheer limestone walls; it was not a very comfortable place to be all alone. We walked back, saw a cactus which didn't seem to fit with the rest of the vegetation, ate a picnic lunch at our car and left.

Tulum

We arrived in Tulum, 63 km south of Playa del Carmen, in the late afternoon and made the ruins there our first stop. These sites all close at 5 pm. Well, almost our first stop. We spotted a Youth Hostel International sign across the highway from the Archeological site's entrance and pulled in. It had a pair of rooms for about 30 pesos each, and included breakfast. This is the Lobos Hostel, and Lobo, the owner gave us the room keys telling us we could pay him later. A nice guy, he is clearly European in origin, but

seems to have been living in Mexico for a long time. You'll find reviews if you search Google under "Los Lobos Hostel Tulum".

We could have walked into the site, but didn't realize that and drove instead, incurring a 40 peso parking fee in a huge but mostly empty parking lot. We walked along a road at least a kilometer to get to the entrance and Tulum's walls (city walls are a rarity). Had we purchased a tour ticket from a private seller, we could have ridden in an open air tram pulled by a tractor disguised as a steam engine. Entrance fee here (and in most sites we visited) was 39 pesos. This is posted as \$39; the Mexicans use the \$ for their peso and it is a bit disconcerting. When we were reading the guide book info on the way down, we had misunderstood the price to be in USD (US Dollars). In the US of course, this would be not entirely unexpected. A famous, highly visited location. Prices in Cancun and the surrounding area are all over the map. There are fancy "rain forest / cenotes / wildlife / Maya ruins resorts" along the road that DO charge that much in USD.

We were very pleased to see it was actually less than \$4 US, in case we wanted to be able to return the next morning. It is reputed to be a large beautiful site. And it is. It has mowed lawns and well manicured paths lined with little lights hidden in holes cut into rocks. It is famous for being on the coast. A fortified port city with low headlands, light houses, and a very pretty little beach. And quite a few people. It was challenging to get photos without other tourists in them. Many signs telling people to not climb on the buildings were ignored. In less than two hours we had time to walk the length and breath of the site twice if not three times. This site is also famous for its history in the Caste Wars, which we learned more about as we traveled.

We returned to our hostel, got a recommendation for dinner and drove into the town of Tulum. We regretted the recommendation when after an adequate dinner the waiter tried to cheat us out of our change. Dinner cost about 325 pesos (service included) for the 4 of us (\$32), and we gave the waiter 400 pesos. When he didn't bring us change and we asked him for it, he responded by insisting we had only given him 300 pesos and we were trying to cheat him. We had all seen and discussed the bills we had given him, so knew we had not make such a mistake. When pressed hard, he responded by giving us 80 pesos in change.

Our private rooms at Los Lobos faced the road, but as Lobo had said, with the air conditioner on we couldn't hear the road noise. And the cute conch shell shower heads almost made up the for cold water. Tiny rooms, but our eyes were closed most of the time anyway. Very pretty and large patio in the back where they served us a fine breakfast was another good compensation. This is a hostel, so had we wanted to we could have cooked our own dinner; we did store our perishable food in one of their "public" refrigerators. They offered free use of their computers for email etc, and had the world's tiniest in-ground swimming pool which we didn't use.

Monday, December 3

We all woke up early and headed out to see the beach south of the ruins (accessed on foot via the same roadway we walked to the ruins). Mary and Josh left at 5 AM and actually got out onto the sand and saw the zona hotelaria. Joe and I got a later start, were unsure of our destination, and turned back prematurely. Later we drove around the town, trying without success to find our way by road to the zona hotelaria. I wanted

to see how big and elaborate they were; Mary says they weren't, though some of the prices are still high. We did see some rather slummy parts of town and the jungle along the edge of town where people dump trash of all description, leashed pigs root next to smoldering burn piles, and shacks with yards and laundry lines could be seen deeper in the woods.

By 9:30 AM we were ready to leave town with two goals. One, to visit Grand Cenote, recommended by the same young woman who had suggested last night's restaurant, and the other, to get to Bacalar before dark, a distance of about 200 km further down Hwy 307. This should have been easy, but the route was lined with distractions.

Grand Cenote

Grand Cenote is 5 km down the road to Coba, another famous site, but not part of our itinerary. We would not have gone out of our way to see this cenote except for the recommendation. This same woman wanted us to go to Coba, telling us it is the only site on the Yucatan where you are still allowed to climb the pyramids. I was tempted, but Mary was in charge, fortunately!

Grand Cenote was a delightful surprise, and in retrospect, one of our best choices. Unlike the cenote at Xel-ha, this is a developed site with a wooden stairway down. We could have rented snorkeling equipment here, and it is the perfect place to use such. The clear water revealed plants and fish, the adjacent caverns, stalactites and pillars and spooky dark reaches. A white sandy-floored tunnel connects to a second cenote with orchids growing on an island in the center and tropical vines hang down from the rim above. We were the first visitors of the day and enjoyed it for an hour pretty much by ourselves. By the time we left, much later than anticipated, there were a dozen or more swimmers and scuba divers in the water. We took many pictures here, though none underwater which would have been spectacular. These cenotes used to be regular limestone caves formed when sea levels were lower. As such, they have the usual stalactites, mites, and pillars. Now they are flooded and these formations are underwater to be swum between and among.

We bought gas on the way south. The posted price was around 7 - 7.5 pesos per liter. We never ended up paying that little. The highway banditos around here seem to be the smooth-talking light-fingered Pemex station attendants who perform magic tricks with your paper money. The Pemex stations are as large as truck stops (which they also serve of course), and have all the usual conveniences of a snack shop and clean restrooms (tip required). Pemex is the only game in town, and they are spaced infrequently.

Limones

The highway here is two lane through jungle which occasionally arches over the road. There are places where widening is in process, and in the town of Limones they have widened the roadway and elevated it 10 or 12 feet above the rest of the streets in town. We were just going through this town, at a very reduced speed of course, when we spotted the Maya temple Josh had just read about. Getting down off the highway was fun, and it took a few loops through town to get to the base of the pyramid. By then a greeting party of children was there to meet us. They scrambled up the stones ahead of

us and encouraged us to follow to the top, then offered us hands as we climbed back down (this is the harder part). This is a small pyramid by Mayan standards, but the largest yet that we had seen. It stands right next to the town's shiny new water tower. I took pictures and had the kids talk into the microphone, showing them the pictures and sound. They were very pleased. We gave them small coins for letting us take their pictures. In return they brought us a green orange (which Joe didn't realize was probably actually ripe, so he refused it, then 4 little nani fruits (which I rejected later when I tried them a day later), and finally various flowers – some of the pretty yellow ones from the Mandeville vine family, hibiscus, a big yellow daisy-type.

It was a pleasant visit. As we left we watched them run home to their little stick houses. Very nearby, off Hwy 293 that leads west to Mérida, is another site Josh found in a guidebook as we drove along. This is Chacchoben and like virtually all the other sites we visited (except Limones) is operated by the Mexican government (INAH). This is a National Archeological Investigation Site.

Chacchoben

We arrived at 4:20 PM which is very late for this “mañana” culture. Fortunately, the independent guide who was offering his services for the modest fee of 200 pesos, arranged with the park ranger to lock the gate after our tour, so the ranger could go home at the usual 5 PM closing time. Joel (pronounced Hoel) gave us a very fine tour until darkness fell – about 1 1/2 hours. He told us when we arrived that he was very happy to see us because he had had no customers all day long. (Cruise ships normally bring bus loads of tourists ashore at the “famously remote and idyllic” Xcayal, and/or Xcalac down the road further, and trek over here, but Hurricane Dean recently destroyed the docks there.)

Chacchoben means the land of the red corn people, and the site here gets its name from the nearby Mayan village which is possibly equally ancient. As at most sites, only a few of the temples have been “excavated.” This term implies that they have been dug up, but of course they are really hills that have been uncovered. As Joel explained it, the first temples (or observatories) built were small. When the new ruler wanted to improve on the previous structure, he built a larger one by covering over the existing structure. To some extent these are like layers on an onion. The topmost layer has been covered over with vegetation, including many generations of full-sized trees.

As these trees grow, decay, and fall, their roots dislodge and displace the stones. Their leaves create humus and soil that fills in and smoothes out the pyramid's stepped sides into a rounded hill. Moss and ferns grow everywhere. To excavate one often means removing this outer layer of building stones, (now tangled in dirt and roots), the most recent enlargement of the pyramid.

There were many such hills here that, due to special circumstances, we were able to view more readily than normal: just a few months ago, August 21, the day after Joel's birthday,) Hurricane Dean, a category 5 blow, came through here (45 km from the coast) and thinned the tree tops, among other visible damage. The fact that the natural terrain is almost totally flat is not obvious since the near trees typically hide one's view

of most everything behind. Much more light than normal is currently getting into this site, and much better visibility of these hill-like shapes.

Several structures here are excavated and some painted decorations are protected under palm thatch roofs. Entire plazas are elevated 20'+ above the forest floor, and these serve as platforms on which 100' tall temples were built. This entire city is said to be many square miles and the area settled as early as 1000 BC; the height of building activity here occurred AD 200 – 700. There are ancient roadways here and foundations of residential buildings, and at least two large (un-elevated) plazas.

Joel also told us about the plants – the chicle tree used for chewing gum until synthetics replaced the natural product a number of years ago. The ancient Maya flavored this gum with allspice and chewed it after meals to clean their teeth. There were chicle trees with old slash marks from the sap collection method used, and he showed us an allspice tree with its fragrant leaves. There is also a heaven tree with massive thorns and a branching pattern that gives it its name. We saw strangler figs and mahogany trees, patches of newly sprouted little papaya trees and leaf-cutter ants with their highways. It is clearly a constant project to keep the vegetation off the ruins. We gave him the 200 pesos he asked for, and another 100 for a tip. He was very good and had patiently answered our questions for an hour and a half, when he too probably wanted to go home.

Bacalar

So, we returned to Hwy 307 and continued on our way, again driving after dark. We passed the town of Bacalar, looking for a hotel listed in our guide book as having rather tacky shell decorations everywhere. The quantity of shell decoration was understated, but I didn't find it tacky. The Hotel Laguna was easily spotted from the highway, and though overshooting, we eventually found our way back to it. This is again a divided highway – from here all the way to Chetumal, the capital of the state of Quintana Roo.

We ate amongst the shells at the hotel's open air restaurant while we admired the conchs decorating the outdoor bar, and the swimming pool perched on this hillside above the Laguna Bacalar, a very large freshwater lake 40 miles west of the Caribbean coast. This is a very pretty hotel and it has a view! The classiest we have been in so far, it has only a few mosquitoes trapped in our rooms with us. Plenty of towels and screened windows that close not with glass, but with wooden louvered shutters. Every room has a great view. Before bed, and again in the morning, we walked down the hotel's stairway to the water's edge, but we did not take the time to swim in this beautiful "lake of the seven colors."

Tuesday, December 4

We drove to Bacalar, the town, and visited the fort briefly. This is said to house the best museum in the area. Don't get too excited. Though good, it was small. From this viewpoint we saw more rebuilding in Hurricane Dean's aftermath and it is interesting to see the construction materials and methods. Sticks for walls and roof frame, and either grass bundles or palm for thatch. We also learned a bit more about the Caste Wars. As with Tulum, this town is an important site in this 19th (and even 20th) Century war for freedom of the enslaved indigenous people.

It was time to restock our picnic supplies, and Bacalar has no Walmart. We were reduced to strolling main street and its tiny shops offering everything.

We continued south, re-passing Hotel Bacalar and discovering the “famous” Cenote Azul a few hundred feet away from it. Not as nice as Grand Cenote.

Where we might have turned east on Hwy 186 to go to Chetumal on a large bay of the Caribbean, we turned inland toward Xpujil (pronounced Shpoohil), a hundred kilometers to the west. We could have continued south 5 km past this intersection and found ourselves in Belize. Now as I type this up and realize how close we came to this bordering country, I regret that we didn't take the few minutes to do so.

Dzibanche

We soon turned off Hwy 186 to divert to Dzibanche, another ancient Mayan city. This is quite a ways off the main roads, and we traveled through the town of Morocoy and at least 20 km on a mostly very good unpaved road. Then a considerable distance on an asphalt road with many bad potholes. We paid our minor entrance fee and drove another 2 km to the Dzibanche archeological site.

Dzibanche is huge and wonderful. The best yet. There were no rules against climbing these structures and we hiked to the tops of the two largest. These could be called observatories as much as temples. And of course there is archeological evidence that they were very much used as observatories, but mostly, as soon as you climb to the top of one you realize, when deep in the jungle, it is the only way to see the sky. The views from up on top are great!

We were the only visitors at this site until moments before our departure, when we saw a small tribe of local boys scamper up a temple, and then back down and into a waiting pickup truck.

I found an allspice tree here, and at the same time, having wandered off the trail, I also found an anthill, and the ants in turn found me. I spent several minutes getting bitten as I cleaned the ants off my sock and sandal.

Without benefit of guide, we saw three high temples and four low ones surrounding two large courtyards. No doubt there was much more of this site as yet uncovered, but we spent too long there as it was. Realizing we should not take the time to explore the adjacent Kinichná site (1 more km down the road), we returned to Hwy 186 and sped off for Kohunlich. Most of these highways, 2 lane, divided, have speed limit signs of 100 km/hour. We have been forced to reduce our speed on dirt or potholed roads. Sigh... Usually the visibility has been very good.

Kohunlich

We arrived at Kohunlich, site of 6 foot tall carved stone faces, at 5 minutes before closing and the park ranger said “cerrado” as we walked up to him. He indicated that it is a 20 minute walk to the site and that we should come back mañana. We were disappointed to know that would not be happening for us.

Xpujil

We continued down the road to Xpujil. Shpoohil...this has been the most difficult name for me of the entire trip! Coming into town again after dark! (That's now 3 nights out of 3.) Unfortunately, all of our guidebooks say to avoid staying in Xpyjil, implying that it is a real dive. At night, with the armed police guarding this major crossroads in this most remote of regions, it really looked like it could live up to its reputation.

Fortunately, our tour guide Mary, had found in our guidebooks a nearby community with several strongly recommended accommodations. This is Zoh-Laguna, 10 km north of Xpujil and off the unnumbered (and barely paved) road that travels most of the length of the boundary line that divides the states of Quintana Roo and Campeche. This is a one lane (though bi-directional) road without striping of any kind, much less mowed shoulders, but hardly anyone else was using it, so we bravely tore on ahead.

We almost missed our turnoff when we flew by the sign, but then we backed up and found this cute little town less than a kilometer off the "highway." It was just the other side of a low ridge and that was why we couldn't see the lights of the town. Kids were playing basketball under lights in the town square and we soon found Mercedes' Bungalows. Mercedes doesn't speak English but we understood her to say that not only was she full up for the night, so was everyplace else in this tiny town. A teacher's convention. Hoping we had misunderstood, we located a second "hotel" where the message was repeated with clarity.

So we referred back to our guidebooks...(we had three specific to the Yucatan with us: a *Rough Guide* with the best maps, *Lonely Planet*, and *Moon*.)

Rio Bec Dreams

There is little commercial development down in this lower-central part of the peninsula, but Mary had chosen Calakmul Archeological site as a primary destination and it is "nearby" Xpujil, as are several other choice sites. So we returned in the dark on the lonely narrow road to nasty Xpujil (there is nothing more to the north for 100 km), and decided to try for the Rio Bec Dreams resort located about 10 km west of Xpujil on Hwy 186. We were very happy to arrive there at 7 PM to find a Canadian hotelier with available jungalows (bungalows in the jungle), and an (outdoor) dining room where dinner would be served to the guests at 7:30. These are airy cabins raised off the ground with screened windows all the way around. Each jungalow had electric lights, its own wash basin and pitcher on a little counter, and comforters on the beds for a cost of 350 pesos. Meals were extra and he requested to be paid in cash – pesos or dollars. The community toilet and shower facility was also elevated and roofed, and by the second night we had hot (warm) water. The comforters seemed entirely out of place, as we had enjoyed fans and only a sheet on previous nights, but Rick said we'd need them, and whether it was elevation (!?) or distance from the warm Gulf Stream waters of the coastline (Rick's explanation), it did indeed get chilly at night and we used the comforters. <http://www.riobecdreams.com/accom.htm>

This was (other than the hot water situation) the best place we'd stayed at so far. Each pretty little bungalow is separated from the others and raised pathways connected

everything; during the rainy season (we were there in dry season), this is essential. They are the epitome of my ideal of a jungle experience. It was very cute. In the morning I found tracks of a large heavy peccary(? A animal that resembles a wild pig, but is not related or dangerous...says the guidebook.)

Again, we were asleep by 9ish and back up before 6 AM.

Calakmul

Wednesday, December 5

As we were expecting to be in Calakmul for the entire day, Diane (or the cook) at Rio Bec Dreams packed a picnic lunch for us. Rick gave us specific instructions about buying gas for the car. It was 15 km east to the nearest Pemex station and we wanted to go west, but as our journey would be a long one, we needed something close to a full tank. Pemex is a state-owned monopoly; the stations are franchises.

So on our way west we watched for a mechanic (a “taller”) sign and a small restaurant on our right. When we pulled in between a pair of big semis, we asked one of the men about buying gas. He wanted to know how much (this is all in sign language remember), and Joe indicated a 5 gallon bucket would be fine. So the mechanic filled the bucket and he and his helper carried it and a siphon hose over to the car and put it in our tank. This is black market gas and it really is a truck stop/bar sort of place. They charged Joe more than Rick said they would. We smiled and paid and were happy for the convenience.

55 km west of Rio Bec Dreams we turned south. 65 km more on a windy narrow dead end road brought us to Calakmul. At least it was in good condition, except for the big muddy hundred yard washout at mile post 38. But it had been a couple of days since the last rain, so it was again passable in our low little car.

We were surprised to find a tour bus from Campeche and 4 cars in the parking lot. The place seemed to be teeming with folks who arrived ahead of us! However, there are three different routes you can follow through these ruins: the long, the short cut, and the really short cut. Mary wanted to see it all, and after coming such a distance, why not? We took the long route and by the time we got to “the good stuff” everyone else was gone. We saw no other tourists all day until the last half hour when another couple arrived. Of course, it is a big place (the city of Calakmul covered 27 square miles) and we may have missed seeing some other visitors.

We did see a crew of workmen excavating out the insides of the biggest temple.

Our guidebook says this UNESCO World Heritage Site was spotted from an airplane by a Maya-speaking botanist and explorer in 1931, while he was surveying for chicle. It went unexplored for 50 years and did not benefit from archeological excavation until 1985. It is believed to be the largest city-state in Maya history, home to as many as 60,000 people. 6000 structures have been identified. It has the tallest of all Maya structures in Mexico (taller ones in Guatamala, I believe), and structure #2 here is 174' tall. Structure #1 is similar in height. It has many other impressive structures as well and we climbed to the tops of at least 5 or 6 of them. This is exhausting and scary too

because they are so steep! The steps typically rise 12 to 15” and are often only 6 inches deep. These things rise like gods from the forest floor and lift one well above the tree tops!

Temple #2 is built on top of a pair of older temples, and in so doing there were tunnels created inside the new structure. The workmen we saw were hauling out loose debris (by the 5 gallon bucketful). They were also welding together I-beams to shore up the tunnels. At some point, they said, tourists will be allowed inside.

There are resident monkeys -- spider and howler -- which we saw and heard, but didn't do a very good job of photographing. All the monkeys of Mexico are apparently endangered because they are captured and sold as pets. I haven't mentioned this, but all along the way we saw many of the big bright blue butterflies -- blue morphs -- along the road and in the archeological sites, but have not been quick enough to photograph any of them either.

(My nephew Daniel who was in these jungles a couple of years ago has a great story about taking a nap in the Jaguar preserve in Belize and waking up to find his body blanketed with these blue morphs. Unfortunately, he says, his pack with his camera was slightly out of reach. Had I heard this story before I went, I might have tried to replicate part of it. A good excuse for resting our feet if nothing else.)

We were not the first ones to arrive this morning at Calakmul, but we were definitely the last to leave. We got out of the deep jungle and onto the main road just as the last light of dusk was fading. Ate dinner at Rio Bec Dreams and slept well, again.

Becan

Thursday, December 6

We got up early and showered at Rio Bec, then paid and drove away before breakfast. We have a long drive ahead of us today.

As I stated, near Xpujil (Shpoo-hill!) are several other ruins. Between our jungle resort and Xpujil is Becan. If I remember correctly, Becan is unique in that it is surrounded by a moat, and it also has a unique style of architecture that includes rounded corners on the temples. (If I remember incorrectly, then that is true someplace else.) Not a terribly large site, there are no restrictions on climbing and exploring.

Becan was “discovered” by Carnegie Institute Researchers in 1934, but initial excavation was done by a team from Tulane University in 1969 -1971. Since the late 1970's, research here has continued through Mexico's National School of Archeology and History.

Near the end of this stop we explored a tunnel made of false arches. The Maya apparently never developed a keystone type arch (as the Romans did, and the Goths modified to make those pointy medieval churches), but used this false arch extensively to create rooms with stone roofed ceilings. Frankly, I can't tell what holds them up exactly, but we walked the length of the tunnel anyway. On the other end we

discovered huge additional plazas and temples! This stuff just goes on and on! And in spite of that, each site we visited is quite unique and enjoyable.

Xpujil (again)

In Xpujil we stopped for groceries. Seen during the light of day, Xpujil isn't so bad, but IS one of the very few (only place?) the police stopped and questioned us. They have a significant presence in this town which is so remote from the populated parts of the peninsula.

There are speed bumps here too of course. We found various versions of these everywhere. Always in towns or even hamlets, but anywhere it seemed proper for cars to slow down. In Tulum on the side roads they used rope – salvaged cheap from ships I suppose. They were always marked with road signs and were very effective; if a stop sign doesn't work for everyone, these do. I think we need them in the states with the same kind of frequency.

The grocery store was, as usual, fascinating to me. A rather large place compared to most we had seen, they had a wide range of products both local and imported. They sold lots of stuff in bulk which was nice to see. The instant coffee selection was huge however. More shelf space devoted to it than any other single product, except candy and disposable diapers. We bought good local cheese, and bad cheese too -- good thing we bought 2 – and bread, avocados, bananas, pecans, peanut butter etc. This provided us with breakfast and mid-day snack for Thursday, with leftovers for emergency food, which we always seemed in need of. Climbing pyramids uses a lot of energy.

The other two nearby sites we decided to skip. We need more time to do it all.

Bypassing our turn off, we went east on Hwy 186 as far as the Pemex station to fill up. The solution to getting ripped off at the gas station seemed to be in buying a set dollar (peso) amount. So we bought 200 pesos worth, twice. Each time however, the station attendants distracted Joe and Josh, and then turned off the pump, clearing the sale record before anyone could look at it. They stated of course that they had put in 200 pesos worth, but we had no evidence other than the gas gauge on the dashboard. We seemed to get an adequate reading by the time we had put in this \$40.00 worth. (Each 200 peso bill is worth a little less than \$20. By the way, to make things a little more confusing, Mexico uses the dollar sign to indicate pesos. \$200 = \$20 USD.)

Zoh-Laguna

Retuning to Xpujil and turning north, we stopped in again at the town of Zoh-Laguna. In the daylight this place is very nice indeed. Almost all the houses are built of planks – lumber! – and look like the little bungalows built in the US in the 1920's and 30's. Some have garages or carports attached. I guess it looked nice because it looked "familiar," but it also looked prosperous with schools, health clinics, etc. Later we read that it was built as a lumber-company town in the 1940's.

We continued on our long drive north (90 km) along a fairly straight lonely road that went due north, more or less along the Campeche/Q. Roo state line. (That is, this is

true according to one map. The maps don't all agree and that might be because the state of Qunitana Roo has had a rather unsettled history, including the Caste Wars and the state lines have been redrawn even within the past few decades.)

This road was also under construction for a short distance. The ½ inch of blacktop was being scraped up and replaced.

After traveling without sight of hardly more than a single house in 90 km, or seeing a half dozen other cars, the road ends at a T and many towns are dotted along this new road. We did not go east because that dead-ends after a few towns. We went west (left) and then northwest up toward the city of Mérida and an area of intensive ancient development known as the Puuc Route.

These towns seemed to be full of adults and children walking and bicycling. The tricycles of a particular style (and all are painted orange!) are especially prevalent. They have a single rear wheel and instead of having handlebars, the frame hinges to a two-wheeled cart for carrying cargo of all kinds, including the family. This looks so civilized! I want one! It is also much more appealing than the less common street scene of a young father on a motorcycle with his child perched in front of him and his wife holding on behind him with her other arm slug around the baby. We later found a store selling these cargo tricycles for about \$200 USD new.

Schools and students in uniforms are seen in every town, no matter how small. We have read that while Mexico has had mandatory primary education for almost a century, only in very recent years has this been enforced in the Yucatan.

From the T intersection we had another 90 km (still on an unnumbered road) to drive to get to Hopelchen. Hopelchen is an important place to us today because it has a bank with an ATM. Our Visa card has been mostly useless for days.

Hochob

Before Hopelchen however we diverted 13 km to take a side road to Hochob, a site just north of Dzibalchen. (That other place was Dzibanche; there seem to be a number of place names that start with Dzi...probably the Mayan word for Lake or somesuch.)

Hochob is a very small site with only a few excavated structures. They are not even big, but are very nicely decorated.

I liked it because I found 4 or 5 man-holes (person-holes). They were uncovered, but crudely roped off. These are entrances to rain-collecting cisterns created either by the Maya, or perhaps in some cases natural caverns that the Maya sealed to hold water. These entrance holes are perfectly round, barely more than a foot in diameter and have been smoothly bored through stone slabs, some about 25 inches thick. My guess is that these thick slabs were lain on the tops of the cistern chambers. It was not clear to me if there were several different chambers, or if these several holes (the sign indicated there were 7 of them), all collected to the same large chamber. The sign also indicated they had lids designed to filter the rain water to keep impurities out of the cistern.

Dzibalchen

After returning to the main (still unnumbered) road, we went back a few blocks into Dzibalchen to find ice cream. I had an hour earlier spotted a man selling ice cream. On his cargo- tricycle he had a big box with tubs of ice cream inside and long skinny boxes holding paper cups and ice cream cones! Imagine that.

We did not find him, but instead we found a take-out chicken place. This was a covered alleyway/open-air dining room next to an enclosed room with a half-dozen computer stations – an internet café. The chickens were grilling on an oil drum as we entered, so we figured this would be “fast food” Mexican style. It was. I was brave and, mostly using sign language, ordered food for all of us. The wife brought us delicious rice, salad, tortillas, bottled drinks, various sauces, and hot chicken freshly cleavered, (the same way Vietnamese chop chicken: without regard to joints.) Delicious.

Moving right along (our goal, after getting money, was to get to Uxmal before 5 pm.), we continued north to Hopelchen.

Hopelchen

As expected, the bank was in the town square, and even though this is a large town -- the biggest we have been in yet -- it was still easy to find the square. A big old very plain Catholic church also faced the square and we stepped inside. It had ribbons of yellow flags strung from the top, resembling a used car lot. Apparently these are up for the feast of “our Lady of Guadalupe” on December 12th. This was December 6th.

We had been driving through farm country, mostly fields I would guess are much less than 50 acres in size. Mostly maize; no surprise. Further south we’d seen smallish fields of sugarcane and bananas. I saw a sorghum field somewhere too. In the town square we saw several farmers. How could I tell? They were wearing farmer’s overalls (just like mine and Joe’s) and straw hats, and some were even with their farm wives!

We have seen a number of women in their traditional dresses – snowy white shift with a vibrantly-colored embroidered yoke, and about 6 inches of lacy petticoat hanging down below the shift’s hemline. Of course, like muumuus in Hawaii, these have only been “traditional” since the Europeans invaded in 1492.

After this brief stop in Hopelchen we realized we would not be able to get to Uxmal (Ooshmal) during the day. Mary came up with an alternate plan: go to the evening sound and light show at Uxmal tonight and then get to Chichen Itza tomorrow – our last full day. So sad.

Kabah

We decided to try for a motel in Santa Elena, 88 km from Hopelchen, where the road splits – west to Uxmal and east to Chichen Itza and Cancun. Shortly before our arrival in Santa Elena we (one of us) read about Kabah, in the waning light. It was 4:30, but since our route went right through the site we decided to stop and enjoy its last half hour of openness.

The guidebook describes Kabah as ludicrously, “insanely” covered with faces of the rain god, Chaak. It says Chaak has a long hooked nose. It actually curls up, and I would describe it more as an elephant nose. Rain has probably always been pretty important in the Yucatan Peninsula. No mountains to catch the clouds or store winter snows.

There are a few really big (though not tall) buildings here with many intact rooms created by the use of false arches to form long tunnels. The widest tunnel we measured was about 9 feet. These rooms came in all lengths of course. The setting sun created beautiful golden light on the stones and shone through the less-than-common open windows across the top of the main building’s façade.

Santa Elena

Drove into Santa Elena in the near dark (that is now 6 out of 6) and rented Kristine’s last two rooms at her B & B, the Flycatcher Inn. This is the nicest place we’ve stayed yet. The price was 500 pesos for our smaller room, and 600 for Mary and Josh’s suite. These spacious rooms each had beds for 3 people, hot water, and were clean, new, and very nicely decorated. <http://www.flycatcherinn.com/>

We dashed out to a quick dinner a block away where Josh and I ordered Mayan specialties, including eggs cooked with ground squash seeds, and hibiscus water. This is made by steeping dried hibiscus flowers (these little red ones grow everywhere in the jungle). It had been chilled and sweetened with sugar so it looked and tasted much like Kool-aid, but still I learned something new about hibiscus – a common tart red flavoring ingredient. We all are comfortable sharing our food, so the plates always get passed and we all get to taste everything that looks good. Not once have we gone hungry for lack of good-looking food. We have shared expenses by roughly alternating days for each family to pay for everything, or alternatively, by whoever has the right kind and amount of money at a given time.

Uxmal

Then we raced 10 km, in the dark, to Uxmal to see the sound and light show that started at 7 PM. This type of show is offered at Chichen Itza too, and at least one or two other sites. I do not recommend it, but it was a way to see something of Uxmal. It is a sit down and watch sort of thing – not the fine after-dark tour we had at Mont St Michele in France 10 years ago. 30 pesos each for entry and 25 pesos each for a radio-receiver, very direction-sensitive English language headset. At least the price was right.

An attempt was made to give some Maya history through telling a romantic love story, playing dramatic music, and shifting the lights around. When various lights were on we were able to see a few (3 or 4) of the buildings lit up. It is not safe to wander these sites in the dark...people fall down the steps and die in the daytime! And there are plenty of places where there are no steps, just walls without any hint of guard rail. Generally, the grounds and buildings are not lighted. Under the jungle canopy there is not even star light.

The Magician’s Temple is the big structure here and the guidebooks indicated that there is some suspicion that the reason it is of such an unusual shape and size is that the reconstructionists played a little fast and loose. It is a huge fat pyramid with a rounded

bell shape, and an oval base (unusual) and is the biggest by far of anything in this northern part of the peninsula. But not as big as what we saw in Calakmul; in fact, significantly shorter. Still, in the dark especially, it was very impressive.

Santa Elena (again)

Friday, December 7

At breakfast, the owner, a tall slender blonde in her mid-years, told us she was raised in Eastern Oregon and has lived in Santa Elena (married to a Mayan man) for 18 years. She says she has seen many changes, many for the good. And also the introduction of plastics – plastic bottles everywhere. She says she has been waiting 18 years for phone service, and drives the 10 km to Ticul everyday to check her email. Last night we had seen the notes she'd left in the rooms about the trails and what to look for in their 20 acres of natural jungle here on the edge of town. We did not have time to enjoy them, but did like what we saw of her garden. We will return, and not just to pick up Joe's favorite bed pillow which we inadvertently left there.

Mary and Josh dashed off after breakfast to buy gas while Joe and I finished (or thought we finished) packing. Gas, per Kristine's instructions, was at the other end of town (2 long blocks down the main street), and could be identified by the little hand-written Pemex on the white concrete wall. Again, this was a 5 gallon bucket siphoned into the car.

Loltun Caves

Then we hit the road running to travel the 40 km to Loltun cave in time for the 9:30 AM tour. We were warned that they are corrupt, and I believe it. They refused to give me entrance tickets (our receipts) and the price, though as posted, was twice the price listed in the guidebook, and twice what the other INAH archeological sites were charging. Our guide, whose name I can't remember and who used to live in Estacada, Oregon, in 1981, said the only pay he received was what we gave him, and suggested 600 pesos for his one hour custom tour.

He answered all of our questions and told us about water sources in the cave that seep all year long, plus the rainy season torrents that flow through the cave. It had ripple marks on the clay and sand floor. He told us that stone age people lived in the caves 12,000 years ago, but the Maya didn't. The Maya used them for religious rituals and to hide from hurricanes and later, Spaniards. He himself was born into a Maya-speaking family, learned Spanish in school, and English while living in the US. He showed us a nest of bats and waited while we took futile photos.

A large tour bus had pulled in ahead of us, but they all spoke Spanish maybe and their tour was separate from ours. We were very fortunate indeed to have our own personal guide, and I was very happy to pay 500 pesos for his services. Just wish I'd gotten that entry receipt.

Arcancéh

We stopped here for lunch and were surprised to see that this town has its own Maya ruin right downtown, across from the public square. No time to explore; we want to see Chichen Izta and we're running out of time. As I read the guidebook later, I see that we missed a fine opportunity. Definitely have to come back here for the ruins scattered all

over this community and the fine cenotes here too. We certainly enjoyed Acancéh's friendly natives who prepared our lunch!

Kristina had given us a map with 2 NEW roads drawn in. One represented a bypass around several small towns (which I was sorry to miss), which sped us up on our dash to Chichen Izta. Still it was a narrow 2-lane road with potholes and no view of much except occasional crops and lots of scrubby jungle. Finally we connected with the freeway just outside the town of Acancéh a ways east of Mérida. Mérida is a large city, the capital of the state of Yucatan, and we did not go there. Loltun Cave to Acancéh was about 80 km.

There are two routes, both presumably superhighways that run east/west across the state of Yucatan for a distance of some 400 km. One is a freeway, the other is a tollroad, referred to as the cuota route (as in the English word "quota," I presume). The price is not particularly cheap, but the more important feature is its lack of exits. There is only one mid-point exit shown, but there must be actually two or three or four. After about 150 km on this tollroad, we got off at Chichen Izta about 3 pm. Only two hours to see the whole of this very famous site.

Chichen Izta

As at Uxmal, we were greeted by a humongous sign – a concrete wall with something like 6-foot tall lettering to let us know we were at THE destination. We paid a 90 peso entry fee (more than double of anywhere else than the cave) and got a purple plasticized paper wristband that probably would have given us entry to their evening light show had we time or inclination.

Once past the entry gate we had a very long walk into the site. This is common at virtually all these sites -- maybe to minimize air pollution from cars? Of course here it was also to afford us shopping opportunities at the hundreds of cheap art vendors. This walk at Tulum was at least a km. Here could easily have been as far, but at least there were things to look at. Eventually, on our way out, via a different route, Joe did buy a music device of split bamboo: a two toned drum that says....CHICHEN ITZA ! on it. Mary bought a black and white onyx chess set; very tiny by comparison to the options available; less than 12 inches on a side.

Chichen Itza is a very busy place, though hardly "crowded" because it has spacious lawns, all mowed and probably quite free of ants: hills or leaf-cutter highways. There is a ball court, a single pyramid temple, and a palace. We were very tired and leaving when we discovered another area (we thought it was an exit) and found a marketplace, a steam bath, a "church", and a couple more structures, including a round observatory.

This round observatory was built up on a large platform, but the building itself was not large. It did however have a "false arch vault" that created a spiral staircase inside the building. We of course could not go inside, but were able to view from the perimeter and enjoyed it all in spite of our general exhaustion. The carvings, bas relief, etc, here are certainly far more extensive than we saw at the southern sites, but were similar to what we viewed these past few days at the "lesser" and smaller sites of Kabah and Hochob which had wonderful friezes, though largely un-restored.

Still, we found plenty to enjoy and were among the last to leave.

Our guidebook says Maya written language was translated in the 1980's mostly, though much assisted by an alphabet created and recorded by a Spanish priest in the 1570's. This is the same priest infamous for destroying so many ancient Mayan texts in 1562, shocking even the Spanish rulers who called him back and put him on trial for this and other abuses.

The Mayas apparently lost their ability to read and write their own language a long time ago....before the Spaniards arrived maybe. It is easy to imagine how this loss could occur in just a generation or two (especially without mass produced books), but hard to contemplate what kind of situation could persuade an advanced culture to throw itself off this cliff, especially since it seems to have happened before the Spanish conquest.

Valladolid

We drove on the free road to Valladolid, another 40 km from Chichen Itza, while we read about our upcoming adventures of finding a hotel for the night. Kristine had recommended a place and we used our cell phone (!!!) to call for reservations. But they were full, so we decided to try her second recommendation which was also in our guide book, the Hotel Zaci.

In this past week we have seen a number of small accidents, or at least police vehicle with their flashing lights. Tonight we saw a farm truck that lost its entire load of fruits and vegetables, in and out of their crates, all over the grassy roadside. This was a rather busy highway by comparison to what we have seen, with even a couple teams of bicyclists with their flags of the Virgin, bicycling to particular destinations in honor of these various religious holy days.

Suddenly we were in the city. This is the largest place we had visited yet and there were many bikes and cargo-trikes on the roadway, the sidewalks too narrow to hold the pedestrian traffic, horse-drawn vehicles, many motorcycles and cargo-tricycles where the back end has been replaced with a motorcycle. There is no lane striping, and no helmets of course on cyclists.

Fortunately the streets in Valladolid are numbered in a recognizable pattern (unlike Playa del Carmen) and on a simple grid. So, with no fatalities, we worked our way to the hotel and found a parking place right in front! (Fatalities would have been inside the car; 4 drivers is too many some times!)

The lobby of this hotel is gorgeous with a strip of grassy lawn and a classic fountain leading to the pool. The rooms are beautiful and they have hot water. This costs 360 pesos per room, though we could have paid 400 if we'd wanted them to power up the air conditioning units. Unlike the Xpujil area, it is warm here at night, but not uncomfortably so. The town square is a block away, and the hotel provides off street parking in back, between the hotel and the Valladolid bus terminal. This parking lot is also where they dry the hotel's laundry. This hotel is a mostly 3 story concrete

structure. It even had some maps of Mexico and the Yucatan on a wall near the pool.
<http://www.hotelzaci.com>

The hotel recommended an adequate restaurant on the square for dinner and afterwards we strolled a bit around the square where one man sold ice cream (he had a scoop and big tubs of ice cream on his cargo-tricycle), and another sold balloons! It was a picture from a children's story book of the 1930's or maybe 1890's. Many people. Lovers on benches, people of all ages away from their televisions and enjoying the cool evening air. We did see a shop where a man was repairing a television.

We tried the pool at the hotel, but it was a little cool and we were too tired. We fell asleep by 9:30.

Saturday, December 8

I woke up to roosters crowing and showered, enjoying a trickle of hot water in the cool morning air. (I could have turned the water on stronger, but didn't want to.)

By a rather late 6:45 AM we were greeting Mary and Josh and on our way to find desayuno at a desayuno buffet for 50 pesos (a sign spotted last night from the square). As it happened, the room was full of young people in school uniforms and the waiter offered us table service for the same price. I ordered us a pitcher of watermelon juice and tamales for myself. Mary had pancakes again.

Cenote Zaci

We then walked a few blocks to the Zaci Cenote, but didn't swim in it. The entry fee is 15 pesos, which you need to pay if you want to see anything. The attending woman, who was also doing a bit of laundry, requested two pesos (less than 20 cents) to use the restrooms in the adjacent public park.

Dzinup – Cenote X-Keken

Zaci Cenote is mostly covered with a cave and a little dusty looking, but the guidebook assures us it is a good enough place to swim. Highly improved with a walkway down to the water, it was not as nice as Grand Cenote. It was still early and other people started to arrive as we left. One, a young Aussie, said he had not even heard of cenotes until this morning.

We said goodbye to our beautiful hotel and drove back westward to Dzinup to check out the two cenotes there. Mary wanted to see the one entirely in the cave, X-Keken. We paid our small entrance fee and went down deep into a darkish cave. It has a single small hole in the roof (I wonder what this looks like from up on top. From the bottom of this large cavern it looked about 6 feet across.) that lets in "plenty of light" unless you are actually trying to take photos. Not enough for any kind of plants to grow in the cave or under the water though, so the snorkeling was less than delightful. Fish, tiny white ones and 3-4 inch long black ones, were pretty much all there was to see under the water. Except we could also see steep slopes down into very deep water.

Kind of a scary place, even without the massive lump limestone stalactiting its way down from the cavern ceiling. More people arrived and Joe, Josh, and I went swimming.

Mary put her toes in, but the temperatures were not tempting us to swim. A few others, including the young couple from Germany, also swam. In fact we loaned them our snorkels briefly so they could see that there wasn't much to see. We have been encouraging all we meet to go to Grand Cenote.

Then we changed out of our wet bathing suits and got onto the freeway (after a couple of false starts) and headed for Cancun on the toll road. Today's section, Valladolid to Cancun, cost about \$20 USD, all paid at a single toll booth. We only saw one toll booth yesterday also, similar fee.

Cancun

Cancun is a very big city. We drove a long time to get to the zona hotelera sandbar which happens to be in the shape of a "7" off the coast of the city proper. On the mainland, at the foot of this large 7 is the airport. This is our destination for 11:30 AM today and, by going up into Cancun and across and down the hotel zone, we took the long way to get there.

Mary and Josh drove this way a week earlier and observed that there was no apparent public access to the beaches out there. We decided to use the excuse of finding a hotel for Mary and Josh for tonight as the reason to park in a hotel lot and take a peek at the Caribbean Sea (something Joe and I hadn't seen yet on this trip). Once at this sumptuous hotel that charged \$125 per night for a room there seemed little point in having Mary and Josh drive us to the airport when there were taxis aplenty. Had we not felt so rushed for time, Joe and I could have driven the car and returned it, letting Mary and Josh be car-free for their last day. The taxi cost us \$25 US. They strongly recommend getting to the airport 3 hours before flight time and we arrived 2:30 early only to find that our departing flight was delayed by 1:30 due to a snowstorm in Salt Lake City. (Same scenario we had experienced coming in.) We observed that the recommended 3 hours must be so they can fleece visitors one last time as they are funneled past the millions of airport "duty free" gift shops. Once past security, we were "back in the States" for prices, and also food -- types and quantities.

We called William and Jane to discover we'd missed a major storm a week ago, causing disaster areas through western Washington and Oregon. Our house is OK.

We'll be spending the night in Salt Lake because we're missing our connecting flight. Joe is reading an excellent brief history of the Yucatan in the back of the Moon handbook, Yucatan Peninsula, copyright 2007.

Home

Sunday, December 9

Easy flight home from Salt Lake. Took the light rail from the airport to our condo near Beaverton Central Station where we had left our car. (Boy, it is cold here! Must be less than 50° Fahrenheit!)

Then we left a few things in the condo and went out to get the car, but discovered that neither of us had picked up the car key. When Joe returned to the condo, leaving me in my tropical clothes with luggage next to the car, he was still not able to locate the car

key. Bewildered how we could have managed to get the car there without a key, we noticed that there was a business card with a note on it from the condo's security company. One of the guards had noticed the key sticking out of the trunk's keyhole and taken it to the security office! This was the worst inconvenience that happened to us on this vacation. And even it was a good thing!