

# **From *Yucatán & Mayan Mexico***

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## **Cancún**

People are very nasty about the city of Cancún. Hotel proprietors along the rest of the 'Riviera Maya' tell you with great self-esteem, 'of course, we're not Cancún'. The implication is that Cancún is big, brassy, 'oh, so tacky', Miami-South, a cross between a beach and a freeway. Well, Cancún is big and unsophisticated, and horrifies some people. But, to say something on behalf of the old place, consider these two points:

A few years ago Friends of the Earth put out the suggestion that people who were really concerned about the environment should take their holidays in established commercial tourist towns rather than forever demand new remote and 'unspoilt' places into which to extend airports and air conditioning. By these standards Cancún is the most eco-place in the whole Riviera. It is a purpose-built, industrial estate of fun, a specialized facility, to be made use of or not as you wish. It does not pretend to be anything else, or extend itself in disguise into the countryside.

Secondly, people often complain that Cancún is 'not the real Mexico', which presumably exists in some ideal adobe-state of immobile third-worlddom. In fact Cancún is the most Mexican city in the whole Yucatán, in that, in contrast to the very distinct, traditional Yucatecan culture of Mérida or Valladolid, people from all over Mexico live here. From being a necessary dormitory for chambermaids and gardeners, Ciudad Cancún has become a real city, population 600,000 and counting, gathering its own momentum as well as tourism. It has the *barrios*, bustle, street life, sense of chaos and some of the tensions of a modern Mexican city. OK, you say, this is not actually the Mexico we came to see. But you can't say it's not authentic. Mexicans take holidays too, and at some times of year foreigners share the beaches

with crowds of locals and big family groups.

Having accentuated the positive, this is not to deny that Cancún can be an acquired taste. The Hotel Zone along Cancún island is forever being compared to Miami, but it has a lot of similarities with Las Vegas, being so new and pleasure-centred, and with so much architecture that's downright silly, such as banana-shaped restaurant signs in luminous pink. Charm is not the strip's most obvious characteristic, and the traffic density, there and in the city centre, can be atrocious. Cancún is a bit like any modern city, in fact, although crime and similar signs of urban decay are still relatively small-scale.

Because Cancún is preeminently the main entry point to the Yucatán, most people find themselves spending at least a night here on arrival or departure. Even though it has over 29,000 hotel beds, it fills up. The busiest times are Christmas, winter and Easter. Part of the folklore nowadays is Spring Break, a great American institution, which traditionally sees US college students have a wild time before serious exam business starts. Think Club 18–30, and multiply the numbers by several thousand.

Things to do in Cancún? Go with the flow. The city's reason for being, its beach, is one of the world's finest, a spectacular strand of white sand and surf running for miles. For a quick immersion in the Cancún experience, book a couple of nights here, see that view, and sample that other great Cancún institution, a pool with a swim-up bar. Have three margaritas and then roll mellowly backwards into the water, with your ears half-in and half-out. With luck they'll be playing some bouncy Mexpop that you can hear vibrating through the pool as you float around and look straight up at the perfect azure sky. It can be a transcendental experience. If then you must have culture, Cancún has a theatre, a soccer team, and two Maya sites, at El Rey, on Cancún island, and El Meco, at Punta Sam.

## **Mr Stephens and Mr Catherwood**

John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood are inseparable from any account of the

Maya lands and Maya cities. Stephens' books, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (1843), superbly illustrated with Catherwood's engravings, revolutionized knowledge of ancient American ruins and first made them known to a wide public.

They were an odd pair. Stephens was born in 1805, the son of a wealthy New York businessman. After qualifying as a lawyer at Columbia he became something of a man about town, and dabbled in politics. Campaigning in support of Andrew Jackson in 1834 he caught a throat infection, and it was suggested he travel for his health. Like most men of the Romantic era he was eager to visit Rome and Greece, but unlike others he kept on going to Egypt, Syria and Palestine, becoming the first American ever to visit Petra, before returning via Turkey and Russia. He had not intended to be a writer, but unknown to him some of his letters to a friend had been shown to a publisher, who at once declared them worthy of a wider public. At a time when few Americans could travel so far, Stephens' first book, *Incidents of Travel in Arabia Petraea*, already with his easygoing style, made him an immediate celebrity.

In London on his way home two more things happened that would change his life forever. First, he met Frederick Catherwood. Reserved, intense and fanatically precise, he had none of Stephens' social connections nor his social graces. Born in Hoxton in east London in 1799, he showed great drawing ability from childhood and was apprenticed as an architectural draftsman. After working around Britain he spent ten years travelling in Greece and the Middle East, drawing cities and ancient sites. Back home without money, he exhibited his drawings at 'Burford's Rotunda' in Leicester Square, a display of pictures of exotic places which in those pre-photographic days was a big attraction, and it was at one such show that he met Stephens. Secondly, Catherwood showed Stephens Waldeck's edition of Del Río's report on Palenque, bringing to his attention the existence of

unexplored pyramids and temples in Mexico. These two dissimilar personalities shared a passion for ruins and an awareness of the thousand questions left unanswered in Del Río's report, and a new double act was born.

On their first trip, from 1839 to 1840, they travelled through British Honduras, Honduras and Guatemala, up through Chiapas to Palenque and then by ship to Mérida and Uxmal. Stephens had with him credentials as US Ambassador to the Confederation of Central America – a job of exploration in itself, since no one was sure such a government still existed, or where it could be found – and conscientiously made side-trips to Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Their first book was an extraordinary success, selling as much as best-selling novels of the time in America and Europe. On the strength of it they thoroughly explored the Yucatán peninsula in 1841–2, this time with no diplomatic responsibilities, for their still more successful second book. After that it was suggested they try Peru, but Stephens had to attend to family business and went back to politics, before getting wrapped up in a scheme to build a railway across Panama and dying there of one bout of malaria too many in 1852. Catherwood published a beautiful separate edition of his engravings in London in 1844, and worked as a surveyor on a railway in British Guyana and with Stephens in Panama before he also died, when his ship sank crossing the Atlantic in 1854.

One of the great attractions of the books is Stephens himself: endlessly good-natured, endlessly curious, perceptive, enthusiastic, full of a rather preppy charm and always willing to be distracted by a fiesta or 'charming young ladies'. In the background there is the obsessive figure of Catherwood, making his infinitely detailed drawings in atrocious conditions and through recurrent attacks of 'fever'. A great many passages begin 'Leaving Mr Catherwood at the ruins...', where he stayed alone for days and weeks with his hammock and camera obscura while Stephens explored the surrounding villages and their village characters. On several occasions he nearly died, but would not give up, and their

first journey only ended when Stephens found Catherwood collapsed by his drawing-board at Uxmal. The result was images of an extraordinary precision that stand up well against modern photographs.

Stephens' greatest achievement stemmed from his generosity of spirit, aided – as he characteristically acknowledged – by the research of Yucatecan scholars such as Juan Pío Pérez: leaving aside the prevailing racism, he and Catherwood were able to see what was in front of their noses, that the builders of the ancient cities had been the region's native people. They effectively 'discovered' the Maya for the outside world: when they set out in 1839, they had only vague references to ruins in Copán, Palenque and Uxmal. They provided the first detailed descriptions of these cities and Chichén Itzá, and brought the first news of scores of other unknown sites. Not the least compliment paid to them is that, of all the gringo books on Mexico, Stephens' rate consistently among those best regarded by Mexicans themselves.

## **Maya Art and Architecture**

Maya large-scale architecture is intensely theatrical. The role of major buildings as symbolic, sacred spaces, continually reproducing cosmic structures and 'mimicking' natural features, meant that they were often more than anything giant stages for the performance of public ritual. As hot weather architecture, too, the spaces they enclosed – plazas, patios – could be as important as the buildings themselves. Behind the awe-inspiring façades, rooms and interiors could be surprisingly plain.

The veneration of the *ahau* or lord also made large parts of Maya cities giant monuments to their rulers. One consequence of this was the practice of building on top of existing buildings. *Ahauob* felt it necessary to continue the work of their forefathers and demonstrate their own sacred powers by commissioning their own monuments. Temples

were built next to other temples, and pyramids built over existing ones, sometimes only completed a few decades earlier.

Maya building techniques were a mixture of the simple and the sophisticated. Most structures were built up by amassing together crude rubble work with a simple form of concrete, which was then clad in smooth or elaborately carved facings in stone or stucco. A characteristic feature was the 'Maya arch', a flat-sided upturned V topped by a flat coping stone. The Maya never discovered the true arch, and the rooms that could be built with the Maya arch, if sometimes long, were narrow. The builders of Chichén Itzá created larger spaces by placing Maya arches on top of pillars, but these roofs were unstable, and have all collapsed. Also, the Maya arch could only support a certain amount of weight, which is why the Maya were never able to build true buildings of more than one storey. The apparently multi-storey buildings they did produce were created by building up solid masses at the back to support the upper floors, slightly pyramid-style. Maya-arch roofs could support a 'roof comb', monumental stone screens that rose out of the top of buildings, clad in carved and decorated stucco. One prime feature that has been lost is that buildings were brightly coloured: walls were mostly painted red, and carvings were picked out in brilliant blues and yellows.

Temples and pyramids are the most famous Maya buildings, but élite residential complexes have been identified. The **Palacio** at **Palenque** is the most famous and complete Maya palace, but there are many others, especially at **Sayil**, **Kohunlich** and **Comalcalco**. Most follow a similar pattern, with small rooms around connecting patios. Much of court life went on in the open air in these patios, some – where traces of food preparation have been found – the domain of servants. Again, a major feature that can no longer be appreciated is their colour: the irreplaceable Bonampak murals are the only substantial surviving wall paintings (except, maybe, for murals recently found at Palenque), and leave you breathless as you think what might have been.

What most homes of humbler people were like can be deduced without any archaeological knowledge. Look in any Yucatán village and you can see examples of the *na*, the stick and palm-leaf hut that has housed ordinary Maya people throughout history, surrounded by a *jacal*, a family enclosure for cooking, keeping animals and other daily tasks. Cities or not, Maya centres were not orderly urbanizations: instead, they were mixtures of clusters of *nas*, stone buildings, fruit gardens, open spaces and *milpas* straggling into the forest. Nor were they all uniform, for there were some with a concentrated core within a perimeter wall, like **Becán**, and others spread over a wide area, like **Cobá** or **Dzibanché**. Some – notably **Kohunlich** and **Dzibanché** – have a high number of small stone buildings, suggesting, surprisingly, that even non-aristocrats may have lived in them. Maya builders deployed their techniques with great ingenuity and variety, and could build in brick (**Comalcalco**) or out of a mountainside (**Toniná**). Some of the most distinctive styles (which overlapped) are outlined on p.42.

As well as buildings, another feature of most cities was the *stela* or standing-stone. Elaborately carved with reliefs and inscriptions, they formed the historical and ceremonial record of a city. *Stelae* are common in most southern cities, but much less so in the north. If much Maya architecture has a geometrical simplicity, Maya carving often abhors a vacuum, covering surfaces with entangled shapes.

Maya public art and architecture stresses the awesome, but another element in Maya art is that 'genres' are not separated, and it's possible to find details of ordinary life shown alongside imposing cosmic rituals (very noticeable at Bonampak). Images of daily life are most often seen on smaller objects, especially ceramics. Vases were painted with scenes of Maya eating, smoking, writing and receiving guests, as well as mythology and ceremony. Separate mention is owed to the **Jaina figurines**, clay figures that were placed in graves on **Isla Jaina** off the coast of Campeche. Superbly vivid and naturalistic, they depict every part of Maya society, and include a wider range of images of women than any other type of Maya art.

## The Aluxes and the Dwarf of Uxmal

An *alux* (pronounced al-oosh) is a Maya leprechaun, a little spirit with the body of a baby and the face of an old man, born out of an egg. Always mischievous, they can be benign or malevolent. To this day, many Maya farmers leave offerings in their fields as they plant their corn, to win the cooperation of the *aluxob*. According to one story, some *aluxes* are spirits of the old gods, driven from their temple-homes by the Spaniards, and have been taking revenge on *dzulob* (non-Maya, in Yucatec) ever since.

The most famous *alux* of all is the *Enano de Uxmal*, the Dwarf of Uxmal. His story, which crops up in different versions throughout the Yucatán, was told by local Maya to Stephens. When the story begins Uxmal was a humble place, with nothing like the grandeur it later attained. It was ruled over by an old king, who lived in fear of a prophecy that he would be dethroned by a new lord, who was to announce his arrival by beating on a drum. Meanwhile, an old woman who lived alone in the woods, and cast spells, decided she wanted a child before she died. She spoke to some crows who gave her an egg. From it there duly emerged a baby with an old man's face, who already spoke and was 'as bright as a squirrel'; obviously he was an *alux*, the Dwarf. One day, he found a drum in his mother's *na*, and began to play it. Hearing it, the old king was thrown into a panic, and sent all his men out to find the source of the noise.

The Dwarf was brought before the king, sitting beneath a sacred *ceiba* tree, and told him that he would be the new king of Uxmal. The king demanded that he prove it in tests of wit and strength, to which the Dwarf replied that he would, on the condition that the king matched every test himself.

The king was first confounded in a string of riddles, and left looking stupid. Then, the Dwarf said he would build a path to Uxmal from his house, suitable for a king and his



mother; the *sacbé* or road from Nohpat and Sayil duly appeared. When the king challenged the Dwarf to build a house higher than any other in Uxmal, in one night he created the Pyramid of the Magician, worthy for a king. Finally, a crucial test saw both of them hit over the head with giant hammers. The Dwarf's mother placed a special tortilla over her son's head, and he survived; the king, of course, did not. The Dwarf ruled over Uxmal for centuries, transforming it into a great and wealthy city.

## **Villahermosa**

*To know how hot the world can be I had to wait for Villahermosa.*

Graham Greene, *The Lawless Roads*

Tabasco's state capital is not one of Mexico's colonial cities, nor is it today the sweltering, languid tropical river town that Greene would recognize. As you approach the city you pass what appear to be endless miles of suburbs and *colonias*, and big highways that carry a near-incomprehensible quantity of traffic. Further in, many areas are taken over by a disorderly mixture of cars, offices, parking lots, billboards and brash shop fronts. Parts of Villahermosa look a bit like downtown Los Angeles (after all, everybody there speaks Spanish too); some show the scars of flood damage. All this bustle and scrambled modernity (and the heat, which hasn't changed) has led some people who only come to Mexico looking for the traditional and picturesque to dismiss the place outright, and avoid it. But, like the state as a whole, Villahermosa has its positives.

First of all, there are the unique Olmec relics of Parque La Venta, alongside which is one of the best wildlife collections in the region. Villahermosa's Anthropology Museum – sadly, awaiting post-flood restoration – is one of Mexico's best. On a wider level, it's a lively city, with an urban edge in place of the tranquility of Yucatán cities; you need to have your guard up more than you would in Mérida or Chetumal, but there's plenty of Tabascan friendliness

too. One feature of Villahermosa is the continual presence of water, in creeks, rivers and entire lakes that turn up throughout the city, or the slow-moving River Grijalva itself. And the city has a living heart: in the centre, the streets of the 19th-century town Greene knew, renovated as the **Zona Luz**, are full of movement, street life and talk, with cafés in which to sit out as the heat of the day fades a little, and watch everybody go by.

Villahermosa began life in another place and under another name. In 1519 Cortés founded a settlement at the mouth of the Grijalva, near present-day Frontera, called Santa María de la Victoria. After the pirates of Tris appeared off the coast in the 1550s, however, life for its inhabitants became increasingly impossible, and in 1596 it was decided to move the whole town upriver and take over a Chontal fishing village as the site of a new 'city', to be called Villahermosa de San Juan Bautista, the 'Beautiful City of Saint John the Baptist', normally known simply as San Juan Bautista. Over the next two centuries the city became the hub of the Tabasco dyewood trade, surpassing in importance older towns such as Tacotalpa. San Juan Bautista covered itself in glory in 1846 during the Mexican-American war, when American ships sailed up the river in an attempt to take the town, and the gringos were actually forced to withdraw in defeat. Since the Revolution the city's name has been reduced to Villahermosa.

## **San Cristóbal de Las Casas**

Arrive in San Cristóbal from the sticky north on a morning in April or May and you immediately notice two things: the air and the light. Both are dazzlingly, crystalline clear and fresh. This is only one aspect of the weather in the valley of Jovel. On another day you can wake up amid a cold, damp fog, which turns to soupy humidity for a brief hour as the sun rises and burns off the mist, giving way to superb mountain sunshine through the middle of the day, only to be followed by what looks like a wet English afternoon as the sky clouds over before the day ends with icy, spitting rain. It's almost as if San Cristóbal were a volatile world

in miniature. Another thing you may notice as you arrive are explosions. This is not because the Zapatistas have reappeared, but because in the Highlands it is traditional for celebrations to be marked with fireworks. There is always something being celebrated in this city.

Nestling in its valley between high peaks, with its arcaded porticoes, time-polished cobbles, Baroque churches, and centuries-old houses with orange-ochre walls and solid gateways, San Cristóbal is a city of deep shadows, patios and glimpses. It is perhaps the most atmospheric of all Mexico's colonial cities. While parts of Mérida can seem transplanted from Andalucía, San Cristóbal more readily recalls a Castilian hill town like Ávila or Toledo, hunkered down against the cold. It has a very Castilian stateliness. Simultaneously this is the capital of the Chiapas Highlands, where the Highland Maya – as well as forming an ever-growing proportion of the population of the city itself – come to buy, sell and interact with the outside world. Most still wear the traditional dress of each community. In some of the city's Spanish churches they worship in their own way, kneeling on the floor surrounded by candles and pine needles. Although San Cristóbal was founded as a colonial island in an Indian sea, the Maya are present in every part of the modern city.

All this one might expect, but what is more surprising is that San Cristóbal is the only city in the Mexican south that could be called chic. Artists, writers and intellectuals from Mexico City have treated it as a favoured retreat since the 1960s, and they have been joined by international bohemians on the Gringo Trail, and later by so-called *Zapatourists* seeking the aura of the Zapatistas. San Cristóbal has trendy coffee shops, and small stores where designers market their own jewellery and clothes. It has as many good bookshops as the rest of southern Mexico put together. This all adds to the mix. It confirms, perhaps, that this is a power point in the Maya sense, a place where Maya shamans, the Spanish Golden Age, backpackers, radicals from across the globe, *mariachis*, experimental info-technology and Mexican poets can encounter each other, in a rare mountain valley.