

An Adventure in Mexico

A Recollection

(1972)



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With Sandy Lavine, Tom Spruill,
Paul Spruill, Doyle Tudor, Donald
Robinson and Bonnie in mind.

They knew me when

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Why Now

It has been almost 50 years since my girlfriend and I made this adventurous trip from Atlanta, through Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Mexico, and back. During this trip, we experienced meeting over a hundred people, seeing historical sites, and changing landscapes from semi-arid plains to snow-capped mountains to a tropical jungle. We lived a lifestyle along the way that would be impossible today. Nineteen seventy-two was not different from any year around that date, but the context of those years was light-years different from the ten years before and the ten years after.

We made this trip in my VW van with a 40 HP engine and a small buildout for the convenience of driving and living in it. Great effort was made to be comfortable with very little and we enjoyed doing so. Traveling in my van gave us opportunities that would never come if we did this trip any other way. We enjoyed New Year's Eve in New Orleans, remote areas of Texas, interesting cities, and quiet nights on beaches. We entered Mexico in the remotest area along the border, drove for miles through small villages on a dirt road, visited Mexico City, and beyond. One of the unexpected highlights of the trip was experiencing the different cultures while traveling through Mexico.

My excitement, brought on by the memories when writing and again when reading my own story, accompanied the satisfaction of knowing what enjoying youth is all about. In 1972, these experiences were not so unusual, as they would be today. In addition, they may seem too adventurous and extraordinary, but every event, along with many more unmentioned, actually occurred. The pictures are from the rolls of film I took along the way with the exception of one I took at a much later date for comparison and three others. This experience created an indelible memory I can always reflect on; I think, as you read you will understand why.

Mark Twain arranged to have his two-volume autobiography published a hundred years after his death. I am guessing fifty years after the trip is long enough for me not to offend or embarrass anyone—if by happenstance they come across this writing.

The Planning

It was as if yesterday. During a storm-driven rain on a Sunday afternoon, I was at my girlfriend's apartment on Peachtree Place, a little north of downtown between Peachtree and West Peachtree; I lived in Buckhead. Bonnie and I were passing time the best way we could without going outside. She was talking about uninteresting recipes and art by Van Gogh, Dürer, Gauguin, and other artists. She also was talking about different languages, she knew German. I was busy rolling a joint and listening; however, at the same time I was curious, what is a people mover 200 feet below ground that talks to you at the airport—the Sunday newspaper just published an article describing the rebuild of Hartsfield.

Bonnie, moving on with her thoughts, mentioned how great it would be if we could take a trip to Europe. We could enjoy the culture, art, and architecture while she would introduce me to their beauty. I was excited, not as much for the art and beauty but for the adventure. We both had some money saved but reality hit as hard as the thunder was loud. There wasn't enough for Europe. We would hitchhike around, stay in low cost hostels, visit museums, and experience European life, but still, there was not enough money—Europe was out.

Canada came up, but neither of us could get excited, then Mexico. Mexico was doable: we could drive, the exchange rate was advantageous, and in a warm climate—it was almost winter. Bonnie immediately told me about the Mayan ruins, and I thought they must have cheap pot also. It was a go.

We would live in the van between hotel stays, travel and see what we could, and when the money runs out, just come home. However, for this trip to be feasible, we needed a small buildout in my van for the times we would be camping.

This buildout would consist of a deck twelve inches above the floor with hinged double doors accessing a lower space: providing a flat surface on top for sleeping and storage for food, water, and supplies below. Finishing it off with carpet on the floor and double doors would give it a living room quality.



Sandy took this picture of my VW van with friends just before leaving. See the sub-floor.

After completing the subfloor buildout and carpet installation, I designed and built a detachable canvas roof for those starry nights (the original canvas cover was damaged). This model VW van had a large opening similar to a sunroof but covered with canvas, which slid back and forth on tracks. I replaced the original 36 HP engine with a newer 40 HP not too long ago, so, mechanically, the van was ready. Now, the openness from all of the windows was our only concern; however, my mother took care of that later.

The anticipated lighthearted travel was going to be enjoyable. There were no time schedules or commitments, we would just see what tomorrow brings. The only locations we identified to visit were Mexico City and some Mayan ruins in the Yucatan. Other stops along the way would be the cities represented by the bigger dots on the map; however, while maneuvering among them, we discovered some cities represented by little dots and villages with no dots became interesting and entertaining layovers. There was a world of experiences we would enjoy between the dots.

The only problem left was what to do with my motorcycle. I always enjoyed bikes and previously had two Hondas and a Harley Electra Glide. The two Hondas separated peacefully but the Electra Glide resisted and made for a violent separation—I crashed it.

One slow Sunday afternoon I decided to take a short ride on my big and comfortable Electra Glide to get the mail from my PO Box. Sandy asked to go along, so I invited him to jump on. As we approached McDonald's in Buckhead on Peachtree heading north, a young driver with hamburger and fries on his mind carelessly turned left across our path. My bike hit the passenger side hard sending Sandy and me flying over the top of the car as if out of a double-shotted circus cannon. I remember



This is similar to my Electra Glide that we flew over the handlebars.

seeing the top of the car as I flew and then landing on the street on the other side of the car—we were fortunate not to just splatter on the car. In a bundle on the street, I was in terrible pain thinking I'm not dead so I need to open my eyes and assess the damage. Sandy was OK outside of a few cuts and scrapes; I provided him a soft landing. I seemed to be intact except for a strange observation. My left thigh was a normal twenty-two inches in length, but comparing the right thigh next to it, it was much shorter, about fifteen inches in length—this was bad. After an eternity, I was off to Piedmont Hospital to have my femur rejoined. My recovery was almost enjoyable because of the special attention from all of the young nurses and frequent

visits from my friends. One nurse took me home when I was discharged and I introduced some others to my friends—the following experiences could go on for twenty pages, but it ends here.

After the accident, I only had my beloved 1968 Harley Sportster 900cc XLH—the one with the gear shift on the right—it was Harley’s racer. Another unique feature on this bike was a “dead-man throttle,” so called because the throttle grip did not have a return spring. My Sportster was a fast and exciting bike for in-city rides, but the four-gallon gas tank was too small and the drive geared too fast for an appropriate road bike. I took care of the gear problem by using two different sprockets for the chain drive: the original for the city and a larger one for the road. This gave me the immediate speed Sportsters were known for in town and a lower RPM on the highways. I lived with the small gas tank problem by stopping every fifty or so miles for gas, this also gave me an opportunity to unshake. Those old Harleys were vibrators.



My 900cc Sportster; Little Mike on the left, I am on the right

I still wanted to ride while recovering from my broken femur but the pain in my right leg prevented me from applying the pressure needed to balance the two-wheeled bike when stopped. My friend Little Mike solved this problem by loaning me his vintage, three-wheeler Harley 45. This was the perfect solution because there was no balancing required and I could put my crutches on the back. For those without experience in cranking an old Harley, the procedure is to prime the motor by throttling a couple of times, leave the throttle open one-third, close the choke, set the timing, and jump down on the pedal crank. Once started, you had to return the throttle, adjust the timing, open the choke a little, and completely after the motor warmed up. Cranking it with my left foot and making the necessary adjustments timely, without falling down, was a challenge; however, I quickly developed a technique and was back to cruising the streets of Atlanta again. I just enjoyed riding!

After my leg healed enough to ride my Sportster, but before I went back to work, I went on a long trip. My brother was in the Air Force stationed at Kincheloe SAC Base in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, and while living there with his family he invited me for a visit. I had two choices: I could take a boring car trip or an exciting bike trip—the choice was immediate. Although I took many rides through the North Georgia Mountains, and parts of Tennessee, South Carolina, and North Carolina, I never went on a long cruise (1,050 miles to my brother’s). I Planned the trip, packed my bag, tied it on to my sissy bar and took off.

Along the way, on I-75 in Lower Michigan or Ohio, a potential catastrophe occurred. While relaxed and cruising I lost all power, but the engine was still running at high RPMs. I slowed as I coasted to the side of the road, and when I was well off the Interstate, I noticed the problem immediately. My chain was dangling and dragging, the master link broke. I didn't dwell on what could have happened on the road, but instead, found myself satisfied with just being stranded on a Sunday afternoon without a chain. Within thirty minutes, two bikers riding Hondas pulled over offering help. I said all I need is a master link and shared the thought of every shop closed on a Sunday. One rider said he never rides without one, but it is for his Honda. He located the link and offered it to me to try. It was a perfect fit. He was upset at that point thinking the shop sold him a Harley link for a Honda, but I think they were simply compatible. He declined any money for the link, and like most riders, he was happy to help another rider out. I installed the link, put the chain back on its sprocket and was on the road again.

Another time, Bonnie wanted to go for a trip on the bike to the Democratic National Convention in Miami. The first stop was her mother and her husband's house around Hawthorne, FL. We stayed longer than expected because Bonnie volunteered me to build a screened porch on an existing slab. I framed it and put a vinyl roof on leaving the screen and screen door installation for them. I was anxious to get away from that unexpected labor when we left for Disney World, our next stop.

Disney World was still in the opening phase and was all about the adventure that was to come in the future. Our adventure for the present was trying to find entertainment among the few exhibits and uncompleted rides before that future arrived. Unbelievable today, but that day in the park we had a hard time filling 5 hours.

Continuing our trip south, we had lunch and a couple of beers in the Desert Inn at Yeehaw Junction, and then we left for Miami. I was silently thrilled when we got there because the convention had ended—so, why not, the next stop will be Key West. Actually, it was Key Largo, where we were going to sleep on the beach. While drinking a couple of cold beers on the water's edge and watching the water lap up on the beach, we settled in to the time when mosquitoes ate supper. They were much better than any advertising for motels: thousands of them forced us to pack up around 8 p.m. and check in the first motel we came to. The next morning we took off for an easy ride through the Keys, which is still the best motorcycle ride in Florida. Every time I go down there now, I see the old 7-mile bridge and remember us crossing on it. I also remember how those narrow lanes felt tight, even on a bike. We made it to Key West, enjoyed a few days, and as everyone else, we turned around and left on the same road we came in on. This trip was after our travels in Mexico.

These two trips have me riding my Sportster from the Canadian border in Michigan to the southernmost point in the USA, Key West. In addition, there were many other trips to Daytona Bike Week in 1971, Birmingham and Mobile to visit relatives, and as mentioned, mountain trips in North Georgia.

For now, my Sportster needed a temporary home. Either Paul or Tom mentioned his dad may store it for me in his backyard shed in Tucker—their dad agreed.



Bonnie and I are sitting in the van at my parents' house in Birmingham. We are passing time waiting for my mother to finish sewing the curtains.

Before we left Atlanta, Bonnie wanted to personalize the van with her Georgia State sticker—I had my “Legalize Marijuana” sticker. We bought some provisions and stored them below the built up floor, said goodbye to our friends, and we were on our way.

Our first stop was my parents' house in Birmingham. It was on the way and for one night only. I wanted to eat supper, spend the night, and explain our trip. We stayed there longer than expected because my mother insisted on getting some material and sewing curtains for the van's windows. I measured the windows and gave her the dimensions, and then designed the hanging method: installing two attachments at the top and bottom of each window for a spring to go between, giving us the flexibility to slide them open and shut. This, satisfying my last concern, was worth delaying the trip a few days.

My mother always enjoyed sewing, but with my siblings and me gone, she had little reason to crank up her sewing machine. Seeing a need for curtains in the van gave her that reason, and smiling with a purpose, she dusted off her old friend. After getting the material, she immediately started work with a dedication from who knows where. They worked better than expected and were an elegant addition. Goodbyes again, next stop New Orleans.

Beginning the Trip

We did not plan it but some things just happen, we were in New Orleans for New Year's Eve. What a party, just like Mardi Gras. Anxious to get to Mexico, we left the next day with that typical New Year's Day feeling.

After leaving New Orleans, we had our first night in the van. It was on an ugly, mosquito-infested beach somewhere in Louisiana or Texas where we were hoping this would be our only disappointment. It was here we decided to fill in some blanks, so under the dome lights we started looking for the dots on our map. Bonnie mentioned The San Antonio River Walk. The River Walk was trendy but the Alamo was rock-solid history, we did both.



The Alamo



Bonnie on stage across from the seating area at one section of The River Walk

The next day we were eager to leave that unsuitable beach to get on the road and put some miles behind us. After spending some time in the van, we made it to Houston where we stopped at a large park for a break. Being Sunday the park was crowded with people, reminding me of Piedmont Park in Atlanta but lacking the depth in personality. We walked around for an hour, looking and loosening our muscles, and then we were back on the road to San Antonio.

In the middle of nowhere Bonnie said, "I have to pee." There was nothing in sight, no stores or gas stations, not even some woods to disappear in. Bonnie reminded me every minute so I would not forget. Within a short distance, I saw a vacant area off the side of the road with one little bush. I pulled over and Bonnie intuitively ran toward the bush, she went behind it and I sensed a smile. When she was coming back to the van, another car pulled off the road and a woman ran toward the same bush. Her husband and I had a casual laugh about the busy bush. I

asked him if he thought a Johnny Appleseed type person planted these bushes every ten miles in Texas.

We chose Brownsville to cross the border into Matamoros, but before we did, we gave in to the temptations from Padre Island. I forgot where that steep bridge to the island was, but realized the limitations of the overloaded van and its 40 HP engine climbing it. Creeping up to the top at 35 MPH maximum was stressful; however, once at the top and over, we were smiling again. We stayed at the beach in the van, but unlike the first beach, this time we enjoyed snow-white sand and the clear Gulf water. Padre Island, similar in sand type and dunes to Florida's Panhandle, has some pretty beaches stretching for miles.

The next day we went to Brownsville to spend our last day in the USA. Since we were expecting a full day in Mexico the following day, we decided to stay in a motel to be comfortable for the night and fresh the next morning. Well, the full day came but not in Mexico.

There could not have been a more beautiful day to start our excursion. We were up early, ate breakfast, and headed to the border crossing. Mexico here we come—or so we thought. At this time, my beard and hair were considerably long, too long for Mexico. The border guards denied us entry. In broken English, they said they were not allowing anyone in with a beard—hippie agitators. Our disappointment soon changed to acceptance with hilarious laughter knowing Mexicans denied us entry into Mexico because of a beard. We needed a Plan B. Since it was still early, we went to a small restaurant to discuss alternatives over coffee, and it was there we thought the obvious: why not ride along the border to the next crossing and cross there. We agreed. After locating the highway that went along the Mexican border on the map, we drove to it and headed out, deeper into Texas and the unknown.

Life in 1972 was much simpler than today, especially ours. With little concern what each mile brought and not caring enough to anticipate what came next, we looked at every hour as a cool adventure. That was a good thing because our border crossing turned out to be 670 miles away in the small town of Presidio, Texas. There, the Mexican side didn't even have a paved road.

Not thinking of the destination but what was between here and there we had some good times. During the drive, we came across what we thought was a ghost town, but while walking around imagining its history, things just did not look right. It turned out to be a



Town built for filming Westerns. Bonnie is leaning on the support post, center of picture, at the entrance

“scene”—a western town built for western movies. A little farther on we were in Langtry where the museum of Judge Roy Bean, “Law West of the Pecos,” offered an informative break from being in the middle of nowhere.

When I was building my parents retirement house on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay (1974–1975), and afterwards, my favorite watering hole was “Judge Roy Bean.” This was a very popular bar in Daphne, Alabama, where there were saddles instead of bar stools, a large outdoor area used for cookouts, volleyball, horseshoes, and other games—and Billie, the resident goat to roam. Jimmy Buffett must have enjoyed it also because he played impromptu concerts from time to time (his parents lived just up the road). I often wondered, with Langtry on my mind and a beer in my hand, if anyone, besides the owner and me, knew the significance of the name.

While continuing our search for a border where we could cross, we discovered the large and unique Big Bend National Park, which was unknown to us before we were there. It was in this park where we befriended two guys at one stop along the river, each traveling alone in his own van. We talked about traveling in Mexico but they had little to say and were not much interested. Then, one said he would go to Mexico and let us know what he found. He stood up, dove into the Rio Grande River and swam across. We watched him get out, walk around for a few minutes, and swim back. He said he found nothing.

The four of us agreed to find a suitable place, circle our wagons, and camp for the night. The campsite that would be home for one night was a picturesque, flat, scrub-grass area with mountains of rock nearby. The time was getting well into the afternoon when we started a small fire for a focal point and one of the guys asked if we had any pot. I said, expecting to cross into Mexico, we were dry. He said, “OK, I have some,” and rolled a joint. After smoking and passing, he brought out four hits of acid (LSD), which he generously passed around. He never said why he had this stuff and no one asked, but being so generous to strangers, I thought he was running some and had plenty.

Bonnie and I decided to walk over to the rock mountain and climb it to find that perfect spot: a perch that would accommodate our frame of mind and one to watch the picturesque landscape with the sun going down. Overstaying the sunset, it turned dark quickly. Fortunately, our friends did the old explorer’s trick: they enlarge the fire so we could find our way back. Concerned, one decided to find us and we found each other while we were returning.

We separated the next day, but Bonnie and I didn’t leave the park. We wanted to explore more before going to Mexico—by road. We found an unfamiliar beauty in the mountains of rock we climbed, the cacti we avoided, and the ever-present families of peccaries crossing the road—always going somewhere with their funny wobble.

There was a concern in the back of my mind about what we would do if we had an accident from our climbing, snakebite, or anything else since we only saw 10 people in this 1,025 square mile park. And if one were to consider yesterday, of all the people in Big Bend National Park, thirty-three percent of the park's visitors were "high"—this "high" ratio had to be a national park record (if kept). Before leaving, we concluded this had to be the least visited national park in the entire park system.

Presidio, Texas, was seventy miles west of the park and one of the smallest dots on the map. I didn't even expect a crossing, but there it was—a lone guard in a small shack, a pathetic crossarm, and on the other side a dirt road. A remote country railroad crossarm had more prestige and use than this International border partition. I am sure this was the smallest and least impressive crossing along the entire 2,000-mile border. However, we would go no farther in search of a border crossing, Presidio, Texas, would work—in a way.

Several unsuccessful attempts at crossings along the 670 miles gave me the confidence for a casual approach to the border guard. We greeted and I asked permission to cross. The word must have spread the entire 2,000 miles about me and my beard because he said you cannot cross with a beard. In addition, there was a new problem. He slowly walked around the van, and when I expected a compliment on the buildout, he pointed to the "Legalize Marijuana" sticker and said, "No can have in *Mé-He-Co.*" A second problem, this guy must be working toward a transfer to an AC/heated station with an automatic cross arm and paved road. We turned around and got a motel room for the night. My frustration with not being able to cross with my beard was at its limit, also at its limit was continuing with this method of looking for a border crossing; we may very well end up in Tijuana before crossing, so I gave up.

In the morning, I shaved my beard. Bonnie was startled when she came into the bathroom, she never saw me without a beard. I told her to shower and get ready to cross because not only have I shaved, I'm going to peel the sticker off too. It worked, the same guard, pleased that we did what he asked, let us pass after we filled out a simple form. He gave us an entry authorization with car certificate.

When we entered the state of Chihuahua, we found it as remote as Pancho Villa did when his activities centered in this same area during the early 1900s. We understood we could easily disappear in this remoteness just as Pancho did.

We exchanged some dollars for *pesos* in Brownsville and have been waiting to use them ever since. Now, with a full tank of gas, air in the tires, map, English/Spanish dictionary, food and water stocked, we were ready for an adventure—*Bienvenido a Mexico.*

The Mexican Experience

We had two hundred miles of dirt road in front of us. Of course, we didn't know that from the map, it was just a line, a small line, but since it connected to a bigger line, I was ready; Bonnie was concerned, but ready. After a few dusty miles, we slowed down for the chickens and dogs in the road in this no-dot village. There were several tiny villages along the road, all the same, mile after mile. Villages without names, not much going on, a couple of old pickups that may or may not have worked, the lucky few had a burro, and the main occupation seemed to be surviving.

The burros fascinated me. A simple beast of burden was a valuable asset here. They idly hung around until needed, and then they became a pack animal, transportation or whatever else within these creatures' unique capabilities. The scenes could have been from the 1800s if the occasional pickup were removed. I've been in a couple of third-world countries so the scenes were not shocking, just there again. For Bonnie, it was like being on a different planet—she was a long way from the Dürer's and Gauguin's. We were well out of place. For two hundred miles, we saw the strangest expressions on people's faces when we casually waved. I am sure they talked about that lost American couple in the van going somewhere for a long time.



A father and son with their two hard-to-see burros carrying firewood in a small village.

We covered about fifty miles, passing only three vehicles with their following dust clouds, when we came to this large no-dot village. There was a small handmade four-foot high sign with the name of the village on it—I think. It was time for a break. I saw what appeared to be a suitable place to stop and I did, in the road, it didn't make any difference. There was an old metal cooler standing on four legs with beer and soft drinks inside. The twenty ice cubes spread out on top of them, all under a burlap bag, gave the appearance of being chilled. I didn't recognize any brand name, but I did recognize a *cerveza* (one of the first words I learned) and grabbed it. This not-hot beer tasted good and I felt relaxed. I wanted to communicate, but I found my mispronounced words with a southern accent always produced an expression of a question mark on the person's face I was talking to. From that time on, Bonnie would be the main communicator.

I was a little concerned about gasoline, so we asked the drink vendor and he replied that in most villages some entrepreneur bought gasoline to use and sell to others. He directed us to a *casa* about 300 feet away where it was stored in small containers, never over the equivalent of 5 gallons. After going there and getting the point across, *el hombre* came out with 16 liters, poured it in for us and we were on our way. Paying in *pesos* brought on this mental conversion to dollars process, and I got faster at it as the spending increased.

We ended our first day in Mexico in this scenic desert wasteland. Earlier than normal and without any village in site, we decided to set up camp a little off the road. Only scrub grass and these very unusual Century Plant cactuses (*Agave Americana*) kept us company. They live ten to thirty years and then one day decide to send up this twenty-five-foot-high stalk, growing close to a foot a day, produce a flower and seed, and die. No one had to tell us to watch out for rattlesnakes, we knew.

As we settled in for the evening, I was still getting used to the feel of wind on my beardless face and Bonnie's prolonged stares while thinking about the extraordinary times in Texas we would have missed if I shaved in Brownsville.

Our first night in Mexico was peaceful and quiet as we fell asleep watching millions of stars through the opened roof. Morning came quickly and I was thirsty for coffee and hungry for breakfast. We could fix both here but I wanted to experience a Mexican morning in a village, and there was one waiting for us a few miles down the road. Sitting outside, on a homemade bench at a homemade table, the coffee was good and the breakfast was simple—no meat, fresh eggs from the chickens running around, spicy beans with chilies, and some type of bread. After enjoying this casual breakfast, it was time to continue our trip. So far, our purchases of beer, gas, and breakfast indicated how inexpensive our trip was going to be.

Driving on, we found nothing different for the next hundred or so miles. I stayed busy looking at the scenery and calculating kilometers per hour to miles per hour. Suddenly we saw through our dust-coated windshield, as if a tall tree on a prairie, an official road sign. This sign displayed its designated information and to us much more—we were near asphalt. Later we learned what all road signs meant, even some very strange ones in Mexico City.



Century Plant (*Agave Americana*)

When we saw the actual junction where dirt met asphalt, we sensibly turned left knowing that was the way to Mexico City. Once again on a smooth road, I welcomed the thought of never seeing that area again. We were still in desolate country, but there were signs of civilization—somewhere. The thought of not buying gasoline from a man's donkey barn occurred to me again as we approached a *PEMEX* station. Gas was very cheap, either because of the government's own monopoly or no taxes.

While getting used to life in Mexico, as the miles raced behind us, we were no longer giving second looks at things we would never see back home. We were in the traveling routine now, expecting more than a potholed road, dodging chickens, and finding beer colder than 70°. Enjoying the simplicity of pulling over and camping when a desirable site appeared became more practical than we ever imagined. The provisions we carried in the storage area made our lives not only comfortable but gave us worry-free days of independence in remote areas.

One morning I woke up early and got behind the wheel quietly so Bonnie could continue sleeping. I drove a few soft miles before stopping at a small restaurant where I got some coffee and visited the restroom. Quietly getting back in the van with my coffee, I drove on. After fifteen minutes of driving, I wondered why Bonnie was sleeping late, so I pulled over—she wasn't there. Wow! She had to have gotten out of the van and went to the women's restroom at that last stop, and I, unaware, drove off. Going back, expecting to see a mystified girlfriend, I found her casually waiting. We had a good laugh, but I always wondered what went through her head. Since we never had a contingency for being lost from each other, we became more careful in the future.

Continuing on our trip—together—we came across some elaborate shrines when we stopped and walked around one wondering about its purpose. There were hundreds of them. Mexico's Constitution of 1917 restricted the Catholic Church and public displays of religion, but this shrine and many others obviously showed how well those laws, repealed in 1992, were ignored.

I thought the shrines were to accommodate those going by in giving them a chance to stop and give thought with prayer, but changed my mind after reading an LSU, 2002 PHD candidate's dissertation *No Place to Die: The Poetics of Roadside Public Places in Mexico*. This paper explained the many *nichos* placed throughout Mexico as memorials, mostly off the side of roads but some were in meaningful remote areas. A *nicho* is similar to a shrine except it usually involves an early, unexpected death, has walls and a private



space. We saw none when we were traveling, meaning the popularity came later. In America, we simply place a marker on the road with flowers to memorialize a death. In Mexico, they do it with a Mexican flair. Since we were there, the Mexican people are building fewer shrines similar to the one in the picture and many are disappearing or not being maintained. According to the dissertation, the official sanctioning of these shrines, *nichos*, and other memorials is they have to be maintained.

Our next stop was in a fair-sized city where we parked and spent hours walking around looking at shops and visiting an outdoor market. These markets were in every city where their size and merchandise offered varied according to the size of the city hosting it: the small markets offered a few basic food items and the larger markets, such as in Oaxaca, offered produce, meats, tools, clothing, hardware, and much more. They were a Mexican version of our shopping centers, only condensed and without a permanent roof or walls. While walking around the city, away from the market, we were amazed at how many local *panaderias* (bakeries), *restaurantes* and *pastelerias* (pastry shops) served the people. It was as if no one ate at home. Unlike ours, their delicious pastries had little sugar. After completing our shopping and exploring, we returned to the van—and our first exposure to crime.

Since there was no way to secure the canvas, someone crawled in through the top and stole the most valuable thing they could find, Bonnie's hiking boots. I agree there wasn't much else a respectable thief would want, especially since they didn't discover the storage area below the floor. We thought something like this may occur, but we didn't expect it so soon. As it turned out, we never experienced a crime again. We reported the theft to the police, even though our concern was not the crime—Bonnie wanted her boots back. Efficient is beyond description. Before we left town we checked in with the police and were told they arrested the perpetrator. Bonnie asked where her boots were and they said they did not know, which was strange because the boots would be the evidence of the person committing the crime. They told us we would have to be in court the next day around two o'clock. This was an unwanted inconvenience we felt obligated to attend that proved futile: we didn't recover the boots.

The next afternoon we were in the courthouse where no one spoke English, it was very confusing. We managed to find the equivalent of a prosecutor, and after failing to communicate effectively, he said we could go. Not understanding or caring about the case, we were happy enough to leave, but first we brought the boots up, and again, the official seemed to think they weren't relevant and had no information. It was as if the boots had nothing to do with anything. Relieved of this distraction we left without the boots, got in the van and continued our trip; leaving the defendant to his fate while probably wearing the boots.

We developed a routine when coming into a large village or city: We would ride around getting an understanding for the layout of the city, then park and walk back to the interesting

places. At the next stop we found the typical outdoor market with a *Vendedor de queso* (cheese vendor). I purchased a large chunk of *queso blanco* (white cheese). It was delicious, so I ate the entire piece. This rich and creamy cheese satisfied my craving for dairy products, which have been absent for several weeks. Finding this cheese again and getting Bonnie a pair of hiking boots was now on our, just created, to do list.

While driving south toward Mexico City, we noticed the changing landscape. We were still on the plains, but viewing mountains, much higher than in Colorado, with their majestic, snow-covered peaks off in the distance. This picture shows the contrast between a snow-capped mountain and the semi-arid, lowland plains.



Mexico City is a 7,300-foot-high, mountainous-valley city and the largest city we visited after leaving Atlanta. Since we originally designated it as a city to visit, we started anticipating a well-deserved layover. Our conversation evolved to tourism and suspending this roughing-it for three days and four nights, and that meant a hotel with a bed and shower—it was time.

Mexico City was unbelievable. We found civilization, heavy traffic, people, stores and businesses everywhere; but first things first. We anxiously rode around for an hour looking for a hotel since we had no information other than a road map. When we came across an impressive, old building that was one and since it qualified for location and cost, we checked in. With the key in hand, a quick glance at the decorations and a polite look at each other, as if on the starting line, there was a race to the shower—I lost. It wasn't long before we were showered, had clean clothes on, and ready to hit the streets.

We decided to give the van a rest and get around in a metropolitan way, so most of our discoveries would take place on foot and with local transportation. The transportation was smart. The subway system was only three years old and a pleasure to ride, and above, on the street level, there were busses, and taxis with different systems. One system utilized VW Beetles with no front passenger seat for easy entry and exit to and from the rear seat. The drivers would go in one direction on the main streets stopping for anyone who hailed them, charge a flat fee, and take the passengers to their stop or the drivers' turnaround. At his turnaround, he would do the same thing in the opposite direction on the same street and then turn around again at the end of his course—this was his route all day. The purported Beetle was from the recently made deal with the VW Corporation to produce the VW Beetle in Mexico.

Adjusting to the timing of when businesses were open was a little irritating. Mexicans still enjoyed their *siesta* every day from noon to two or three, which meant most places were

closed during those hours. This resulted in four traffic rush hours each day: going to work, going to *siesta*, going to work, and going home. Because of the extra traffic causing unnecessary air pollution, which was a big problem in this valley city, some people were trying to discontinue the *siesta*. However, after *siesta*, business and social activities went on as normal until 9 p.m. Some institutions, like the museums, stayed open during this traditionally honored idle time.

On our first full day, we decided to visit the *Museo Nacional de Antropología*. Here they presented a range of historically and culturally important artifacts from Mexico's pre-Hispanic past: everything from the *Toltecs* and *Zapotecs* to the *Maya* and *Aztecs*. This was an excellent preview of what was to come when we visit the ruins. We spent almost a full day at the museum, but that was okay; we still had up to 9 p.m. to enjoy the activities of a fully opened city.

The next day we visited the "Floating Gardens of Xochimilco." Beautiful, boats everywhere. It was a floating market with vendors in boats selling flowers, vegetables and everything else. We hired a *palista* with his *chalupa* (similar to a Venetian gondolier and gondola but with vibrant colors) to show us around the canals. This again was a full day excursion, but we had up to 9 p.m. for other activities.

On the last day, Bonnie wanted to go to the university to see the campus and talk to some students about their politics concerning Vietnam. In the USA, we had this anti-Vietnam war revolution going on and the Mexican government was cautious of this liberalism spreading. Remember my beard problem? While walking around the campus, we met some courteous and friendly students, most spoke English, who showed us around and invited us into their student union building. I enjoyed listening to their ambitions for Mexico until it was time to leave; I was anxious to enjoy our last night in the city.

After discarding a couple of empty books of traveler's checks, it was time to leave Mexico City. I made myself aware of the highway we wanted to use to exit the city so there was little confusion in leaving. However, once on this road I was alarmingly surprised with the fifty miles downhill drive surrounded by lush jungle. Concerned about burning out my brakes, I stopped every ten minutes so the brakes could cool off; the engineers at Volkswagen never designed a braking system to accommodate this overloaded VW van. It worked, we never had any brake problems.

Our next stop was the middle-size-dot city of Puebla. Puebla was a well laid-out old city that was just comfortable to be in. It was a city you could spend a couple of days in doing nothing and feel the time was well spent (Merida was the same). No one could argue that *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios* was not the focal point in Puebla. This basilica was built between May 1574, and August 1575, and consecrated on March 25, 1629. The base on

which the church is built is one of the largest pyramids of the ancient world, being 177 ft high and covering 54 acres. And yes, we climbed those steps all the way to the top; how could we live the rest of our lives explaining why we did not?

While walking around exploring, as we did in every city, a peasant (peon) approached me. It seemed as if “peasant” was a locally accepted term describing, well, a peasant. He was with his son. Seeing my camera strapped over my shoulder, he indicated for me to take a picture of him and his son. He had a very proud look on his face and I didn’t consider disappointing him. Standing them together, framing them with an appropriate backdrop, I backed up and clicked. I did my best to tell him when I get the film developed I would have a large print made and mailed to his home. I handed him a pencil and piece of paper, and asked for his address (*donde casa*). He wrote something illegible to me, but thinking a postal clerk would later understand this address, no problem, *de nada*, and *adiós*.

We learned, in a foreign environment, taking something for granted has consequences. In another city, when I finished the roll of film, I dropped it off for developing and have the large print printed. I was satisfied with the print of the father and son and thought how happy he would be to get it. I immediately went to the post office to fulfill my promise. When I gave the postal clerk the hand written address from the father, the clerk did not recognize it. I did my best to tell him it was an address in Puebla, but the clerk responded that not only was this not an address but it made no sense. Then I realized the peasant was illiterate, he would never get his picture. This was a profound disappointment for me.



We enjoyed Puebla very much and knew we would miss it. People this side of Mexico City were very different in their attitude and friendliness; it was just so much easier and more comfortable being around them.

Once we left Puebla, we were looking forward to Veracruz, our next destination. In the historical city of Veracruz, there were the old Spanish gold shipping port, beautiful beaches, and the clear Gulf waters. Exploring it was exciting so we stayed a few days, not in Veracruz, but a little south on the beach, and from there we would drive back to the city.

The first day in Veracruz was almost over, so we drove south to see what we could find. In those days, the locations we went to on the beach were void of people, privacy was not an issue, and it was easy enough not having to deal with people while camping. That isolation was

something no one will ever see again. We woke up the next morning seeing nothing but nature, so we became part of it by running naked toward the water for a swim and afterwards a walk down the beach. About a half-mile down the beach, we saw another American couple doing the same thing—in the same way. We met, sat down, and talked for an hour. Suddenly a young Mexican, ready to fish the surf, appeared, looking at us, he asked naively, “Do all Americans go naked on the beach?” How could we answer without offending him by saying, no, only in Mexico. Somebody said something and he casually shrugged it off and went fishing. We later went to town for more exploring and supplies, and then returned to our camping.

Rain was pouring down late the next morning when we left for town, and somewhere along the way, I had a small fender bender; one that was so minor it rated as a fender dimple. Bonnie insisted that I report it to the police, to be within the law. What could I do, I agreed. I bought an insurance policy specific to Mexico in Brownsville to relieve me of this type of liability and any related problems, but we never used it. While riding around Veracruz we found a small building with *estacion de policia* on it, and inside there was one officer behind a counter. We tried to tell him what happened but he would have no part of it; he stood, rubbing his stomach saying, “*Ahora no, es hora de comer,*” (not now, it is time to eat) while walking toward the door.

I asked when he would return and the answer was, “*uno, dos, maybe, tres horas.*” We waited, hoping for *uno*; it turned out to be *dos and a half*. He came back twirling a toothpick in his mouth and rubbing his belly, again. With a big smile on his face he asked, “How can I help?” We told him about the accident and emphasized the other person was uninjured and probably did not report it. We struggled, even with his help, trying to fill out the required form and then he said we could leave. We did, and I’m sure he filed our form in the appropriate trash container.

Our next destination, sort of backtracking, was Oaxaca. Everybody was talking about this attractive area and its famous outdoor markets, so we decided to go there before the ruins. The drive was enjoyable; we preferred the flat roads with lush greenery to the northern semi-arid landscapes and anxiety the mountains gave us in our overloaded van. Oaxaca’s markets were huge; it was a city that served the surrounding areas and beyond. However, I failed to find that delicious cheese that I enjoyed in that middle-size-dot city north of Mexico City. Not only here though, nowhere in Mexico City, Puebla, Veracruz or any locations in between—and I tasted the *queso blanco* in each. Bonnie told me to give it up, saying it came from a local family, in one city with a never shared family recipe.





Realization comes hard sometimes but she was right. She did not have the same determination in finding boots.

The rest of our time south of Mexico City would be in a lush, green environment. In many places, this thicket met the asphalt road with no room or shoulder to pull off on; so thick, it was impossible to walk through. Everywhere south of Veracruz was different in many ways.

The people and their culture were as if we were in a different country. This became more prominent deeper in the Yucatan peninsula, especially Quintana Roo Territory (Quintana Roo was still a Territory, it became a state in 1974) where the inhabitants didn't look Mexican but resembled the Mayans carved on the walls of the ruins. It seemed the deeper we traveled into the jungle the friendlier everyone became.

One humorous time we were checking into a motel and the clerk asked, "*con o sin?*" After a few minutes, we understood the question to mean do you want a room with or without hooks. In this area, many people travel with their own hammock, and instead getting a room with a bed, they would get a room with hooks and hang their own bed. We became so enthralled with the idea we had to get a hammock, and the perfect place was the next outdoor market. They came in two sizes—single and matrimonial. We bought the double (matrimonial).

We realized we were low on water while going through one village, so we looked for a place to refill our almost empty containers. This stop was an interesting little place where no one spoke English; however, by this time we were able to get our meaning understood. "*Donde esta el agua, por favor?*" addressed to a *señora* walking in the road with



Bonnie gave the well a try. We found the water fresh, clean and free.

a bucket produced a point in the direction toward an area with stacked stones. Curious, we walked over and found a well that was the water supply for the entire village.

We were becoming hard-core by this time and little surprised us. We tried to blend in as much as possible by doing as the locals, and found this technique allowed us to be accepted and sometimes entertaining by our naiveté.

Visiting the Ruins

Las Ruinas were in ruins. Mexico discovered what had been there for hundreds of years is now a huge tourist attraction. We always saw people at the ruins we visited, sometimes five, twenty, or over a hundred at the more popular Chichen Itza. At the same time though, Mexico was struggling with its limited archaeological budget resulting in unmanaged and unguarded ruins. Restoration began on some ruins, yet others were untouched since the Mayans left. The major sites, such as Palenque, Uxmal, Chichen Itza, and Tulum, were cleared and accessible. Others, so far ignored, looked like a mound of dirt with stones and sometimes with trees growing out of them. Then, there were many undiscovered.

La Venta, home of the Olmec people between 1,200–400 BCE, was our first site to visit. There wasn't much information because the historical sites were unexcavated. This stop, having only a couple of stone statues on display, was about 30 minutes long. Our only disappointment was being there years before excavations began.

Our next stop was in Villahermosa where we found a well laid out, medium-size village that was uniquely different and appealing. There were kids running around, dogs wandering, and small houses everywhere; many were too close to the highway—six feet off the asphalt. The houses were without windows, having only openings with shutters that rarely closed.

Most cities and villages had a plaza, the larger ones had several, and it was in these plazas that we enjoyed hanging out, relaxing, people watching, and studying our map. Each city's plaza was a signature of that individual city representing its history, people of importance, and other locally important things. Restaurants and shops surrounded Villahermosa's plaza, so we ordered lunch and *cerveza fria*. When it was served, we learned that limes come with most food not for flavor but to keep the flies away. Since we ate mostly outside, we enjoyed many limes and took our chances with the flies.

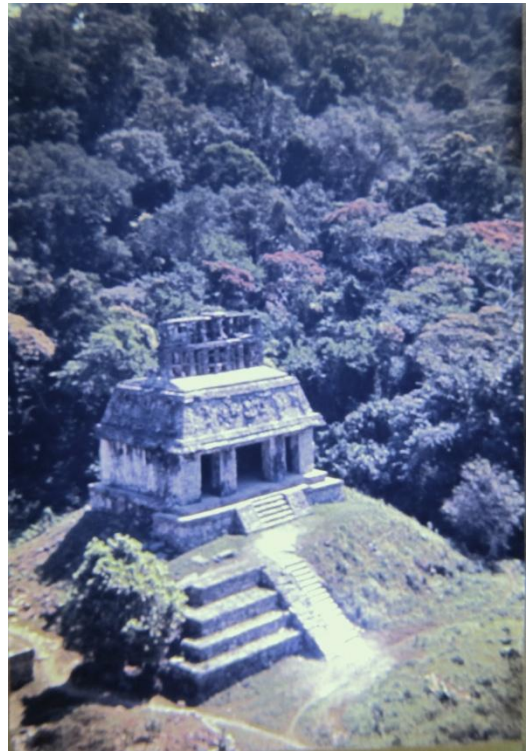
Palenque, our next stop and the first large ruin we visited, was a major city during the years 226 BCE–799 CE. The only problem was we couldn't find it. There were no signs, directions, or anything indicating the ruin was even here. We wondered if we were in the right place; however, we easily put this small matter off for the time being because our interest was sleeping in a hotel. While daylight was fading fast, we found a suitable place, and our thoughts were now on showering and sleeping well; *mañana*, we will find the Palenque ruin.

It was dark by the time we walked into our small but accommodating room. Once in the room we noticed a strange fourteen-inch-high window by the ceiling going across the length of

the twelve-foot room. We couldn't see through this window because it was dark outside, so not giving it much thought we showered and prepared for an early night for an early morning.

A rooster crowing at the break of dawn and chickens pecking on the glass window awakened me. After getting out of bed, I looked out that long, narrow window and realized we were in a subterranean room with the ground level being the bottom of that window. On the other side of the glass was a barnyard with chickens running around. There was no elevator, but if there were, our room-level button would be labeled BCL (below chicken level).

Thankful for not having to pay extra for the view we went to breakfast. With breakfast came the directions to the ruin: There is a path off the highway that leads into the woods, follow it about 300 feet and then cross the stream, continue up the hill, and when you get over it you should see the Palenque ruins—look out for snakes. We did. Nobody mention the stream was sizable with a picturesque waterfall just upstream. Bonnie was concerned and anxious when she realized the method for crossing was to jump from boulder to boulder. We successfully crossed and enjoyed the reward of being dry the entire time spent at the site. The ancient name for this ruin meant Big Water.



Recently, an archaeological team discovered a hidden chamber where someone was



entombed; however, our excitement to explore that ancient burial site, deep in the heart of the ruin, ended when we found a newly installed locked iron gate. This was the only chamber leading into a ruin we saw and heard of among all the ruins.

The Palenque site was big and already occupied with exploring visitors before we got there. We joined them and spent several hours walking among the buildings where

imaginations were running wild. Each explaining what the buildings were for and how the ceremonies played out: human sacrifices, heart takings, and those sorts of things. Of course, no one really knew. Sometimes validity (convincing here) lies in the mere competence of the act, which was surely missing. I was curious as how they got the body out. They had to carry the 2,000-year-old corpse up the tunnel-like corridor, down the path, through the woods, across the stream, and then transport it to a museum in Mexico City.

While looking at the meticulously restored buildings, I noticed the unique mansard-like roof design that we never saw again. However, more common and similar to other ruins were the challenging steps with their six-inch tread and twelve-inch rise. While the Mexican government spent considerable time and money restoring and making Palenque visitor friendly, for some reason they neglected the access, leaving it just as the Mayans used it.

The ruins here and elsewhere were impressive enough, but to understand all the Mayan gods in this polytheistic culture was beyond our interest. However, one god, *Kukulcan*, who was in charge of governing, agriculture, the sky, and earthquakes, seemed to be the most popular. Many representations of him—an imaginative feathered serpent—were carved out of stone, embellished with two heads, and having long, curved tongues. The symbols for *Kukulcan* were numerous and the easiest to recognize at most sites.



Road going through Uxmal. My van is shown parked.



Uxmal with paths among the ruins. The center background shows unexcavated ruins.

The next *ruina* we visited was Uxmal, about fifty miles south of Merida. With the road dissecting Uxmal, it was easily accessible. The picture shows a contrasting example of restoration and unexcavated ruins at the same site.

Archaeologists agree that the current paths connecting the buildings were the same use in ancient times; moreover, there were larger paths or roads connecting the different sites in this area to facilitate trade. Trade and social interaction sometimes lead to disagreements that can escalate to warfare; however, avoidance of warfare was important because defeated

enemies were honored by being sacrificed to the gods. These sacrifices also ensured a good crop and plenty of rainfall. Later, when the offerings, or lack of them, cease to work, all of these ancient cities rapidly depopulated as if the job market disappeared; families hit the road. Archaeologists believe serious droughts caused few food crops to grow, resulting in not enough food or water to support large concentrated populations. One possible cause of abandonment worth mentioning is overindulging priests, unable to stir up a good battle and short on captured enemy, honored their own citizens. With each ritual, your odds of being the fortunate one to be honored by having your heart ripped out while still beating were getting too close for long-term planning, and many declining that honor quietly slipped out the back.

Merida was a short distance from Uxmal, so we easily made it in time to get a hotel and enjoy the evening. I loved Merida and thought how nice it would be to live there. It was a laid-back, big city with plazas, shops, restaurants, museums, and a history with buildings dating to the 1500s. The plazas were always entertaining with friendly and helpful people who were using them as communal backyards. Enjoying the luxury of a big-dot city, we stayed a few days doing and seeing as much as we could.

On the second day, we heard about Progreso, a nearby fishing village on the Gulf. Always looking to expand our adventure, we decided to ride up for lunch and visit this quaint fishing village with a lot of activity. Among our discoveries was this patient boat builder building a shrimp boat. I forgot how long he said it took him to build a boat but remember the speed didn't concerned him. The fresh seafood was delicious.



We were back in Merida to enjoy the evening with other people, and there were people everywhere, all the time. They were living their lifestyle outside because most houses and buildings were not air-conditioned. No one seemed to shy away from their life being in public view. Houses with openings for windows, similar to Villahermosa, met the sidewalk, and when walking by, we were three feet from someone sitting in their living room. We could easily say hello and carry on a conversation without raising the volume of our voice.

In Merida, there were two distinct groups of people: one looked similar to the indigenous Mayan and the other looked more Mexican. Both were *mestizos* (Spanish and indigenous decent), but here and especially deeper in the Yucatan the people were more representative of a dominant Mayan gene and culture. I'm sure these distinctive markers continued down to British Honduras (now Belize) and farther.

Sadly leaving Merida, knowing there is more ahead, we drove to Chichen Itza. Physically, Merida was in the rearview mirror, but mentally the pleasurable experience would never leave—we will be back.



Chichen Itza was an active city from 600 CE until 1,400 CE. It was, by far, the most well-known ruin; we heard people talking about it from Mexico City to Tulum. When we first saw it, we understood why. There were massive buildings spread out over a large area and each had a purpose, including the ballpark. The ballpark served two purposes: the game, sort of a vertical ring of basketball, and the honor to die in a ceremony for one of the gods if you lost. They believed with this death you would go straight to paradise without having to ascend slowly in increments like everybody else. I guess elsewhere getting your heart ripped out while still alive and beating was the equivalent—here it was simply losing you head.



This was the first picture I took in 1972



Uncannily, 20 years later standing in the same position I took this picture of my sister, foreground, and wife, background.

When I was going through my old pictures, I was surprised to realize one picture was similar to a picture I took around twenty years later. It was of my sister and wife, when they, my brother-in-law, and I went to Cancun, rented a car, and made a day trip to Chichen Itza.



The Temple of *Kukulcan* is a step-pyramid that dominates the center of Chichen Itza. The pyramid consists of a series of square terraces with stairways up each of the four sides to the temple on top. Plumed serpents were sculptured to run down the side of the northern balustrade

for a unique purpose. Around the spring and autumn equinoxes, the late afternoon sun strikes off the northwest corner of the pyramid and casts a series of triangular shadows against the northwest balustrade, creating the illusion of an animated feathered serpent crawling down the pyramid. Building this temple for that effect over a thousand years ago is impressive.



The Mayans built the observatory to keep track of dates and occasions from celestial events. Inside were stairs to the top where windows were set in positions that allowed light to strike a certain point at a certain time.

In the Mayan society were excellent stonemasons and engineers who created astonishing works, albeit most had religious significance. Their skill is obvious when looking at the intricate fit of each stone as they were used in angles, slants, curves, and other dimensional ways at the Observatory. And again, in the representations of the popular feathered-serpent deity, *Kukulkan*, on the corner of this building with his exaggerated stone-carved tongues.



Common throughout the Peninsula, including Chichen Itza as seen here, were *cenotes*. These limestone-ceiling collapses, also known as sinkholes, created large and small ponds. A significant amount of historical information about the Mayans came from archaeologists exploring these ancient dumpsites when they recovered different items tossed in hundreds of years ago.

Chichen Itza always had many visitors who were constantly looking, talking, discovering, and happy to explain their interpretation of, well, everything. Nods and smiles greeted

everyone as people from all over the world meandered around. We had the pleasure of befriended two of them.

Everybody remembers a situation that caused him or her to go on an unchangeable course, and if that decision were not made, but another, as if taking a different road, life thereafter would be different again. One couple we met at Chichen Itza did that to us in a way you could not imagine. Not in a metaphysical way, we didn't share thoughts with *Kukulkan*, *Chaac*, *Ah Mun*, *Ek Chuah*, or any of the other illustrious deities, but in a mechanical way.

The Contessa

I forgot her name, but at the time she caused me to think of her as "The Contessa." She was an Italian from Milan—a very attractive mid-twenties woman who spoke Italian, Spanish, English, and maybe other languages. Her father was the curator for a large museum in Milan. She was courageous, uniquely different, and had the means to carry out her ambitions. Her current ambition was to travel by herself, through the USA (completed), Mexico (almost completed), Central and South America, and then fly home. During this trip, she would share rides, hitchhike, take river trips on small boats, travel by donkey, horseback, and whatever other transportation third-world countries provided. She was confident in explaining this to me while I was surprised and asked how she could anticipate everything she so casually mentioned. Her answer was calmly, "I did it before." I was impressed.

Abierto a la duda (open to doubt)

Let's appropriately call him "Duda." I forgot his name but remember his personality quite well. He was one of those people who could look at you, straight in the eye, and tell you something in a way that you would never believe him. Duda was a fortunate person: he hooked up with The Contessa while traveling. She was passing time with him during her travels until they would separate, somewhere south before British Honduras. There, she would continue on, and he, well, doing what he said he was doing—or not doing it. Duda said he came to Mexico to get his brother out of jail from a drug deal "gone bad." While he was waiting for the next legal event, he met The Contessa and they both agreed to travel together until the necessary separation. I was not impressed.

Bonnie and I met The Contessa and Duda at Chichen Itza. We were compatible enough to enjoy the time we spent together walking and talking. When we told them we were going farther down the Peninsular, they asked for a ride and we agreed without giving it much thought. I am not sure what they thought when they saw our van, there was no meaningful expression on their faces other than relief to have a ride. The Contessa and Duda hopped in with their packs, and the four of us were off on a journey, a unique journey only this trip could produce.

Not giving it any thought, but I should have, the van was now extremely overloaded. Fortunately, all of the roads were flat, so we took off as normal and stopping wasn't a problem either. Bonnie and I were going to the next ruin, Tulum, and they agreed to accompany us.

We headed east toward Cancun and took the cutoff, bypassing the city of Cancun; this road took us to the coastal road where we turned south. This highway continued south to Tulum and farther into British Honduras; it was desolate and tight—the jungle met the road. Mile after mile, along this seemingly highway to nowhere, we talked and studied the occasional homestead carved out of the jungle. A few were interestingly creative but others made us wonder how anyone could live there. It was peaceful and quiet riding along; soon to be too quiet.

The engine died, gave up without a struggle, not even a cough. We were stranded without power in our lane and unable to pull off the road because of the jungle. What happened was everybody's question but mine—I knew. The extra weight was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Not bringing this up, I visited the rear and opened the engine cover to see if the problem was obvious—it wasn't. I yelled to Bonnie, "Try starting now!" In a second, I recognized the sound of the dead. Now everybody was looking at the captain, what do we do. Bonnie was up for anything, The Contessa was unfazed and Duda was irritated at the inconvenience.

The decision is easy when there are no options. I remembered an established homestead a couple of miles back, where conceivably, if we push the van there I can work on the engine. The owner has a small front yard where I can park the van a few feet off the road. Duda and I pushed, the women took turns pushing and steering—all the way back to the Mayan's homestead.

Stalled in Quintana Roo Territory

Vincent was his name. He looked nothing like a Mexican, but as if he just stepped out of a frieze or sculptured wall from one of those Mayan ruins. He spoke not fluent Spanish but with a dialect that made it hard to understand, we called it the Mayan dialect. The Contessa translated everything but struggled with his particular pronunciation. He didn't seem the least bit surprised seeing three people pushing a van, and one steering, down the highway to his house; when he saw us he helped. Vincent was excited we came to visit and welcomed us with an invitation to stay as long as we wanted.

Pushing the van was not only tiring but also worrisome. With the jungle touching the road, I was concerned about the danger of other cars or trucks passing because we had no place to go; however, a little luck found us and we saw no other cars or trucks the entire time. Later we discovered it wasn't luck, there simply wasn't any traffic on this flat, asphalted road. We pushed the van more than two miles before finding its berth. This well deserved resting spot for the van would be home for a couple of weeks and the foundation for many adventures.

Vincent built his homestead for a future wife and family, and now he was taking the next step by living with his silent and maybe wife to be. Maybe, he explained, because in this region the culture was to go into a village, there weren't many, find a suitable woman, get permission from her family to take her to your homestead, and try a married lifestyle together. If it works out, you can get married; if it does not, you dutifully take her back home. They were in their trial period where either could quit any time. Our inclusion during this period must have broken up some monotony because their nearest neighbor was about five miles down the road. Duda was becoming silent too, wondering how to get out of here.

The Contessa, Bonnie, and I settled in very fast. We set up camp while Vincent watched and was impressed with our abilities. When the late afternoon turned into early evening, he invited us join him at his nightly fire that he used for socializing and cooking. That location became the central meeting point and used for entertaining cultural swaps. Vincent's hospitality and our stay became one of the most remembered parts of our trip.

The nightly fireside socializing became routine, and sometimes, Vincent's friends and brother joined us making it a small party. They mostly enjoyed watching modern Americans (and one Italian) out of their norm and living in a primitive lifestyle, in their norm.

At our first fireside gathering, we communicated the best we could and heated something for dinner; however, this evening didn't last long because we had a full day and were ready for sleep. Without electricity and artificial light, we became accustomed to using as much

daylight as possible. We went to bed early and got up when the sun started climbing the horizon. Sleeping space was limited in the van, but later, three snuggled proved to work. Bonnie and I went for the luxury the van provided, The Contessa and Duda shared The Contessa's tent.

The problem with the engine never escaped my mind—it didn't even get to the back of it. Along with the beginning of the next day, Bonnie was fixing coffee and I was assembling my tools. I traveled with tools ever since my first car, not many, only the essential ones filled that small traveling toolbox. The well-engineered VW did not require many tools, but it did require a change to metric. I also carried tools, fewer by far, on my motorcycle trips—the chain problem was resolved effortlessly once I had a master link.

After working for Southern bell as an Installer/Repairman, I added something to the traveling toolbox, a butt set. This is a rubber telephone with a rotary dial. It has alligator clips to tap on to any phone line anywhere to make a call using that number's line. Another clip is attached to hang it from your tool belt that always made it banged against your butt. Southern Bell issued me the two in the picture in 1970 and I still have them. With a butt set, you could make a call from anywhere there was a telephone line—it was the closest thing to a cell phone of its day.



After spending thirty minutes examining the engine and several attempts by Bonnie to crank the motor, I knew it was hopeless. The pistons effortlessly cycled up and down; there was spark and fuel, but no compression. Understanding this motor lacked the qualities of Lazarus, I knew what had to be done. I will remove the engine from the van, take it to the Merida dealership 200 miles away, and have them rebuild it, then I'll bring it back and reinstall it. I rebuilt the 36 HP engine myself when it was in need, they were uncomplicated engines; however, at Vincent's I didn't have the needed tools or parts to rebuild this 40 HP engine.

I shared this information with everyone, suggesting Bonnie and The Contessa stay behind while Duda and I head to Merida. I couldn't lift the engine by myself, so Duda was needed. He was not the type of person to volunteer, but anticipating a hotel room in Merida he readily agreed. Vincent was becoming more amazed at our capabilities when The Contessa explained to him what was going on.

Removing the motor was simple enough and maybe the easiest part of the trip. We packed our packs, moved the motor to the side of the road, and prepared to stick our thumbs out when a vehicle approached. The typical thumbing was a bit formal here where a hand

gesture worked the same. This was an American travel method, we never saw Mexicans hitchhiking. A daily bus starting from Tulum, farther south, going somewhere north and returning was a possibility if no one picked us up; however, this bus had no time schedule.

It was an hour and half later when we saw the first vehicle, a car. Jokingly we told Bonnie and The Contessa to take their clothes off and stand in the road so the car would stop, but there was no need because the local people were always ready to help. After the contessa explained everything to the driver, he got out and opened the trunk. We put the motor in, said goodbye, and were off on the first leg of our trip.

We didn't go far, the driver was going to the city of Cancun, but he agreed to drop us off on the main highway from Cancun to Merida. He stopped; we got out and walked around to the trunk, removed the motor, placed it on the side of the road, offered *muchas gracias*, and started hitchhiking. This road had more traffic but the drivers were less generous with their seats. It wasn't long when a car stopped and we did our best to communicate our situation. Again, the driver got out, opened the trunk, we put the motor in, and rode on. He took us about fifty miles down the road and left us in the middle of nowhere. Even though the location the driver chose was jungled, he must have thought it best because it was populated. We would have the company of two other people that seemed to be semi-camped on the side of the road with their two dogs—*muchas gracias*, again.

The two *hombres* with dogs had been hunting and shot a small deer. They got hungry while waiting for a bus, so they started a fire and were cooking the deer. Now, our trip is unfolding into a bazaar scene that at the time didn't seem much out of place. In a remote area along the highway, there are four people and two dogs; two are cooking a deer over an open fire, the dogs are scratching at the flies, and the other two are standing around a motor they are transporting. Expecting no one to stop to interpret what was going on if we were to hitchhike, we decided it best to take the bus into Merida.

There were two types of busses, *primera* and *segunda* (1st and 2nd class). The *primera* was a new comfortable bus with ac/heat. It had regular stops at stations and rarely picked up anyone along the highway—they didn't want to pay the premium fare anyway. The *primera* bus had a time schedule and got you from point A to point B comfortably. The *segunda* bus was a *primera* bus without ac/heat and 20 years old. It would stop anywhere the driver saw someone waving, didn't have a time schedule and most of the time got you from point A to point B. We understood from the hunters we were waiting for a *segunda* bus.

An hour passed when the bus appeared. There was excitement. The hunters quickly put the fire out, grabbed the dogs, and unnecessarily waved at the bus driver—as if he wouldn't notice us. Duda and I decided to follow their lead. The bus pulled over, and without the driver

getting out, the hunters went to the baggage compartment, opened it, and put the dogs and gun inside—they kept the semi-cooked deer with them. We followed, opened another section and put the motor in. The hunters stepped in, paid a fare and placed the deer meat on the overhead luggage rack. We stepped in, paid our fare, and sat next to our new *amigos*. The driver, as if everything was perfectly normal, drove on.

In route, while bouncing down the highway to Merida, our *amigos* were pulling cooked pieces off the deer through the luggage rack and eating them. As customs go, it is impolite to eat in front of someone without offering them some, here too, they did. Duda declined, I was too curious, so, why not.

We got in Merida late, after normal business hours and after the VW dealership had closed. Not wanting to sleep with my motor in a hotel room, I looked for a taxi to resolve the issue that evening. We put this well traveled motor, without a single cylinder firing, in the trunk and went to the dealership. I directed the driver to pull up to the service gate so we could unload the motor and leave a note saying I would contact them in the morning—hoping for the best.

Now, off to find a hotel, *cerveza fria*, and dinner. We were back in civilization. Duda and I found a nice hotel in a lively location where we shared one room with two beds. Throughout the evening and trip, Duda and I had no profound conversations, only shallow talk in passing, which was fine with me.

The next morning came early enough. I contacted the VW dealership and they found someone who spoke English. We talked about the rebuild and he gave me a price, I agreed and asked how long. He said a week. I told Duda I wanted an easy day, so we should take a bus back to the Cancun cutoff and then catch a ride. He didn't surprise me in saying he was not going back to Vincent's; he would stay in Merida, wait here for my return to get the motor and then go back. As much as I enjoyed Merida, I would be going back to the van and return again.

An uneventful bus ride back to the cutoff and thumbing a ride to the van ended with one happy face. The Contessa was very disappointed and kept asking me why Duda didn't come back. The answer, he wanted to wait in Merida, was given and repeated. It was almost time for sleep when I learned The Contessa had been sleeping in the van with Bonnie and was comfortable there, so why change the routine—I joined them, tight, but who's complaining.

Time slowed down since we were watching the calendar; we were passing time the best way we could until my trip back to Merida. The Contessa seemed lost, I expected her to pack up and continue her trip leaving me the pleasure of telling Duda goodbye for her. For me, it was strange looking at my immobile van with an empty engine compartment every day, like a young chick's gaping mouth—feed me.

Vincent's brother came by one evening after a day of fishing. He caught what The Contessa interpreted to be barracuda (I wasn't sure) and gave a portion of his catch to Vincent for supper. Vincent then slyly gave a portion to us and I detected an ulterior motive in his face: he wanted to see how we would cook it—he delayed cooking his. This seemed to be another humorous observation about cultural differences about to take place. Bonnie immediately retrieved a piece of aluminum foil from the van, wrapped the fish, made a little bed of coals at the side of the fire, and placed the fish on them. Vincent started laughing; he indicated the foil was similar to paper and would burn leaving the fish in the fire. He was unaware of aluminum foil. Showing him another piece and its potential, he was awed, and the joke was on him—we laughed hard and long.

This picture shows Vincent's, impressive for the area, homestead and how this was no small endeavor. What the picture doesn't show is this land was once "jungle meets road." He first cleared the jungle and then built these huts. He may have raised the level of land with the fill from the small pond that was left of these buildings. We used that pond for bathing. The hut where Vincent and his maybe-wife lived was essentially furnished with two chairs and their swinging matrimonial hammock. There was a dead-end trail across the street going fifty feet into the jungle used for life's necessities when privacy was desired.



Vincent's homestead with my van under a shade palm.

Vincent had a few chickens running around, like everybody else, and a pig in its pen. In this picture, I was befriending the oinker; entertainment was hard to come by.



Across the highway was more jungle that eventually ended at the Caribbean, we left the Gulf of Mexico when we started going south at Cancun. I reasoned the distance to the Sea to be about one-half mile and kept imagining walking there to enjoy the beach and water, but the jungle was impenetrable.

During one visit to the nightly fire, Vincent's brother mentioned with excitement how he was going to buy property on the Caribbean, and when the many tourists come, he would make a lot of money. There must have been information going around about the future Cancun resort area that we missed—we certainly didn't see any activity that would indicate something was

going on. After looking at the jungle everywhere and him, we wondered if he had digested peyote or psilocybin mushrooms, we wished him luck.

During the previously mentioned trip with my wife, sister, and her husband to the Cancun resort area, we rented a car to visit Chichen Itza. I had to return this car midmorning the next day, but before I did, I couldn't resist the thought of taking one last trip in it by myself. I woke up early, dressed, got the keys, and headed out to find the old homestead. I was disappointed in all the growth, not jungle but civilization. Nothing was recognizable. While slowly driving, I was remembering a different world and looking hard for any resemblance of Vincent's homestead until I knew I had gone too far. Turning around going back even slower, I came across the only logical place for Vincent's homestead and our two-week encampment. It was a carved-out area off the road without any buildings—or van. I stopped, got out, and walked around; even though nothing was there, I saw everything in my mind as it once was. Something had been there before and I know what.

The week was up and it was time to return to Merida. I started out as before, standing on the side of the road staring into the vast void of traffic. Finally, a car approached and stopped. I was off on another excursion. This time I was going to catch a bus, *primera* or *segunda*, at my first opportunity. Late in the day, I made it to Merida where I would meet and stay with Duda in the hotel for the night. The VW motor business would come tomorrow; for now, there would be a shower, *cerveza fria*, dinner and bed. Duda was quiet on his week in Merida and I couldn't have cared less.

In the morning, I had high expectations about getting my motor, going back to Vincent's and continuing our trip. But once at the dealership things changed. I found their attitude and *modus operandi* cold, similar to back home, American style. This was unexpected and out of place for where we were. While talking to a clerk he asked me a confusing question, "Where is the van?" This question came as a bluff, as if they lost it and wanted to blame me. I guess he didn't get the word about a dropped off engine at the service gate. I explained and he said they needed to install it. My answer was, "That is impossible." He then explained without the dealership installing the motor they would not warranty it. I asked if he understood this motor came in without the van and nothing was said about that until now. He mechanically repeated the no warranty statement. The only reason I went to the VW dealership for this rebuild was the thought of VW guaranteeing this motor and having this guarantee valid at all VW dealerships. The cost of the rebuild was a large portion of the money we had left, and without a warranty, I was concerned. After a few seconds of thought, I said, "Keep the motor."

Duda was in his own world waiting outside. I came out, not angry, but accepting the new twist in our trip. I shared the information with Duda, and then, not inviting him or asking for his opinion, said I am going to catch a *primera* back to Cancun. Duda understood he could

join me if he wanted, he did. This was a sad moment because I knew our Mexican trip we planned on that stormy Sunday was coming to an end.

Going Home

The trip back was quiet and comfortable. I asked the driver to drop us off at the cutoff before Cancun where we could catch a ride to Vincent's and he agreed. I can't remember why we didn't visit and explore the middle-size-dot city of Cancun that was a short distance down the road. It would have been an easy day-trip during the waiting period.

We got back when the sun was low on the horizon. It was only natural for us to pair up since we each had our own story to tell. Duda had a story but couldn't get it out because he was catching hell from this Italian-tempered Contessa for not coming back with me earlier; I explained to Bonnie that we no longer have a van to travel in. Bonnie had a hundred questions—I had a hundred answers, practical answers explaining how we would continue our trip, just in a different way. It was time to return home and enjoy that portion in a way that will be easier: we will travel by bus or car and sleep in hotels every night—a twist for sure.

Knowing we would soon be abandoning our home, the next morning was hard. The Contessa and Duda decided to continue their earlier planned trip to Tulum after breakfast and coffee. We thanked them for their company and help, said goodbye, and then they awaited that infrequent ride south on the road. Once they left there was an eerie stillness, a sad quietness—we had found companions along the way and shared so much. I never understood why The Contessa stayed with us. Maybe she was expressing appreciation for us picking them up and possibly feeling partly the blame for the mishap, or she simply enjoyed sharing this experience as part of her overall trip—we will never know. Duda would have no such dedication or interest. If it had not been for The Contessa, he would have disappeared immediately after the van stopped. We never saw them again.

We were grateful that The Contessa explained the situation to Vincent before she left. Once he became aware of our predicament he offered his help in any way he could, this made our last few days easier. My first plan was to separate what we could take in our packs, give to Vincent, and have Vincent sell for us. Vincent understood and agreed to try to find a buyer for the sellable items. Then I did a magical thing, I told Vincent I was giving him the van. Magical because of the way he responded, proud and happy, rubbing it the way you would a favorite dog. He then went on to explain how he will get an engine and have his own *El Carro*.

There wasn't much to sell, but some things did have value. One was a large tarpaulin I brought along thinking somewhere it would come in handy, and it did once. It was cold and windy on that ugly, mosquito infested beach in Louisiana or Texas, typically not mosquito weather, but those large suckers stood their ground and found their target. We were hoping

the dense smoke from a couple of joints would deter or misdirect them but I believe they enjoyed it as much as us—it just made them hungrier. I wrapped the entire van with this tarpaulin thinking we would be warmer and hoping it would keep the mosquitoes out. That beach was deserted, but if someone did discover our van, I could imagine the description—a large canvas wrapped package on the beach with voices inside.

After sorting our things and having Vincent occupied with marketing among his friends, we went to Tulum. This turned out to be the last ruin we visited, which was agreeable with both of us. By now, our quest for exploring ruins was satisfied.

Tulum, small and on the water, was different from the other ruins. The belief was the Mayans at this site used the Caribbean to fish and access other trading ports. I never did learn who or where their trading partners were.

So used to development along our coast and the constant problems of erosion, I was amazed that no erosion took place here in centuries. We walked down the same paths the Mayans used hundreds of years ago. They walked from their homes to the temple, the Caribbean, and their small beach. The beach is not shown, but the access is the sandy area in the left of the bottom picture.

Unconcerned about the time, almost forgetting we don't have a van to conveniently drive and sleep in, we overstayed our visit. After making our way to the village of Tulum, we heard there were no buses leaving until the next day, and taking a chance on hitchhiking this late in the day, with very little traffic even during the day, wasn't smart. Unable to find a return trip to Vincent's, we entered the nightly cycle.

Disappointment was the normal evening event in Tulum for everyone without transportation. It was so common that most people in Tulum, when asked about what to do about leaving, directed everyone to a shed where they could spend the night and wait for *mañana*. There were no hotels. We went to the shed where we found eight other stranded travelers waiting for *mañana*. This was going to be a long night since we had nothing but the clothes we had on.

Not preparing to spend the night, we sat down—I was thinking. I told Bonnie, let's walk around the village of Tulum and find someone willing to take us the fifty miles north to



Picture from the rocks, at the bottom of the temple, overlooking the Caribbean in the Tulum ruin.



Tulum ruins on the Caribbean Sea, outside the village of Tulum.

Vincent's, we will pay them. We spoke to several people without any luck and went back to the shed. However, word got around. Thirty minutes later two men showed up at the shed looking for us, we talked about the fifty miles and had a *peso* agreement, *adiós* Tulum.

It was very dark when the four of us got into his pickup and rode off. I don't know why the second guy went, he wasn't needed and crowded the cab. Bonnie sat next to the man, she could make small talk, I was tired.

Thirty miles out of Tulum, Bonnie said they wanted to show us something, although not quite understanding we agreed. They turned off on a small dirt road into the jungle in the direction of the Caribbean. I was concerned for our safety for the first time in Mexico. I became untired fast and on alert for anything out of the ordinary—other than being in a crowded pickup with two Mexican strangers on an isolated dirt road, in the jungle, and at night.

Their actions and demeanor were not threatening but the typical friendliness we became accustomed to. The driver stopped and invited us to get out. I was still apprehensive and prepared for almost anything. We exited the truck and walked a short distance when they proudly pointed out a large *cenote*. I am sure it was beautiful in the daylight but this was no time for sightseeing. After thanking them for their thoughtfulness, we got back in the truck and ended up at Vincent's without any further heart accelerating moments.

We spent the next day relaxing at the camp hoping to hear good news about sales, but so far, there wasn't any. Vincent mentioned a popular beach at Playa del Carmen we may want to visit; it was a little south and halfway to Tulum. We went the next day and found this small village with an idyllic Caribbean beach. We enjoyed the beach, went swimming, and had lunch with a couple of *cervezas*. Our interest piqued when we learned there was a ferry from here to Cozumel and back each day.

The village and ruins of Tulum would be as far into Mexico that we would travel. Only 150 miles from British Honduras, we would go no farther. However, before we change directions and head back, there was one last side trip needed—Cozumel.

We were excited about this nautical experience when we arrived at Playa del Carmen in time for the ferry the next morning. On this dream-like day, the Caribbean had that typical clear-blue look for the entire forty-five minute ride to Cozumel. I was still impressed with the visibility of the water when we arrived at the community dock; in its depth, you could see in detail the bottom and everything residing there.

We disembarked for a day trip and found a small city with an outdoor market, shops, lodging, and a couple of bars. While making the rounds in the immediate area we heard about a popular bar at the northern end of the island, so we made the interesting trip through part of

the island and finally came across this bar surrounded by jungle. It was big for the location, but still a hut with open sides and a thatched roof. We easily found something to eat and drink from the limited menu.

The entertainment was the owner's pet monkey—he seem somewhat wild to me though. This monkey leisurely hung around until you sat down, then he would casually make it over to your table. He was not friendly, he had this grumpy old man at a bar syndrome; leave me alone, but I will take something to eat if offered—we discovered you didn't have to offer it. The monkey had the attitude he had been here ever since the first day the bar opened; I am a regular, and you, are the tourist.



After an entertaining day, we thought about staying overnight but decided against it since we would do the same thing over again the next day. We connected with the ferry for the return trip to Playa del Carmen while realizing this was our last excursions in the area.

When we made it back to Vincent's, we knew leaving was the next inescapable event. Hanging around for a couple of days, delaying leaving by making excuses someone would buy more stuff, didn't make sense. Realistically a few more *pesos* didn't make any difference.

I showed Vincent how to start the motor if he did get one. There was the typical keyed ignition switch in place, but it didn't work. I left it there for appearance and a distraction if someone wanted to steal the van. Even though the switch was defective I never got around to replacing it, instead, I installed and wired a hidden toggle switch under the steering column to connect the battery and an obvious push button switch on the side of the steering column to start the motor. This actually made stealing the van easier if you knew the technique. We gave everything left in the van to Vincent and got another laugh over the aluminum foil. We had everything we could carry in our packs and were ready to begin our return trip home.

That sad morning came and what Vincent originally interpreted as our visit ended. After two weeks of Vincent's hospitality we said goodbye, wished him luck with the van, the maybe-wife, and any future business endeavor with his brother in developing the jungle. We grabbed our packs, made it to that familiar place on the side of the road, and waited for our last ride away.

The bad thing about this highway was there was little traffic; the good thing about this highway was the people that traveled it were generous and would stop to help you. American tourists were different, they never stopped. We were gone.

This time our ride wasn't going to Cancun, he took us well past the cutoff. When we got out we decided to hitchhike again, but if a bus were to come we would ride it. We were going to Merida for a few days and knew this would be a good distraction.

In Merida, our favorite city in Mexico, we were comfortable in our hotel and enjoyed walking around seeing what we missed during the first stay. Merida had a lot to offer and even those few additional days were not enough. We finally had to put Yucatan and Quintana Roo Territory behind us and begin our return trip.

We left Merida by bus, and after traveling most of day we stopped in a small city where we checked in a hotel for the night—confidently stating, “*con.*” Using our matrimonial hammock for the first time fulfilled our subtle anticipation. It was different but comfortable and we understood why so many people chose the hammock for their permanent bed. Moreover, it was the most practical bed in this hot and humid climate. The next morning was casual, getting up and going out for breakfast and coffee was becoming routine now. We left either hitchhiking or by bus, depending on who wanted us the most.

We did this again with several cities and the trip was becoming less interesting without that capability the van offered: turn here let's find out what's down this road, here is a good place to eat, stop at this market, or I want to camp here. I didn't expect my appetite for adventure would be so sapped without the van.

We found the farther we traveled north the less interest we had in exploring. Our thoughts were becoming more of going home. So much so, we discontinued hitchhiking and even the *autobus de segunda clase* was out of the question. Getting out walking around seeing what a city has to offer now lacked its appeal, we found ourselves more involved with bus schedules and connections. Missing the adventure and exploration of each city, and that unique situation in that unique city, made their names fade from memory. Without the van, we had to replace that carefree travel mode with having to plan for the night and next day—our faces said the fun was gone. We were still a long way from Atlanta though.

The *Primera* buses were truly first class transportation in Mexico. They had a quiet ride with big, comfortable seats, better than any bus in the USA. The drivers were professionals, well paid, well trained, and privileged to have this desirable job. They knew it and worked accordingly.

After ending the day in one city we explored, we booked a bus with an overnight ride. We would sleep and put a few miles behind us. During this ride, around 3am, a boisterous commotion awakened everybody. We didn't fully grasp what happened until the next morning. At one stop in a remote area, someone was trying to get on the bus without money or a ticket; he was arguing with the driver, but the driver wouldn't let him on. The door shut and the bus continued its route. In the morning, the explanation going around was drug dealers and growers were chasing this man, and he, without a ticket or money, was desperate to get out of the area. We now were over a hundred miles away.

We made it to Matamoros, our last city in Mexico and the one we were originally going to cross into from Brownsville, Texas. Matamoros was a typical border town without any unique personality that interested us, so there was no reason to spend any time there. However, there was one concern that got bigger and bigger the closer we got to the border.

When we crossed into Mexico, the border guard issued an "*entrada con coche*" certificate (entry with car) that we were supposed to turn in when we left the country. It was illegal for an American to transport and sell a car in Mexico, and since we did not have a car, we had a dilemma. A certificate to travel was necessary because of our anticipated lengthy stay, the people who crossed and went back the same day didn't need anything, not even an ID.

I told Bonnie I would walk across the border as if a day-tripper and she should stay one hundred feet behind me, if something happened she would be free to deal with it. My concern was our packs made us stand out because most day-trippers didn't have packs. If I crossed, then she should cross. I didn't expect anything to develop but this was a good precaution. Also, as good precaution, I hid the certificate in Matamoros so we could retrieve it if needed. Somebody had to find that certificate eventually, but we would be in the USA. I crossed, Bonnie crossed—we were back on American soil.

At that time, it was as if all of the episodes in Mexico were sealed away in a vault in my mind and "Part II" just opened—it was getting back to Atlanta. Too late in the day to get on the road, we decided to stay overnight and head out early the next morning. Brownsville was not an interesting city to hang out in so we passed time the best we could. One thing we conveniently did was convert our remaining *pesos* to dollars before we got too far from the border.

Interestingly, we met two Mexicans who lived and worked in Brownsville. They spoke English and were interested in our travels, they were from Mexico but never went to the places we did. As time passed, we said we were going to find a motel for the night and leave the next morning. They invited us to spend the night at their house, so we accepted.

The next morning we were talking about our return trip to Atlanta over a cup of coffee after eating breakfast, and realized how strange it was that we were in the same coffee house discussing where to cross the border after being refused entry not too long ago. The memories we created during that time span will be with us for the rest of our lives.

We made it to the highway out of town and started hitchhiking. Traffic was heavy and we quickly got a ride, goodbye Matamoros, hello somewhere. In 1972, it was not unusual to hitchhike, and most people hitchhiking were similar to us: the man would have long hair and a beard of some sort (my beard was making a comeback), the girl would wear tight jeans, have long hair and usually a hat that complemented her personality. Traveling with a blonde-haired girlfriend wearing a buckskin jacket, like Bonnie, helped ensure a ride. Almost all rides that picked us up were “straight.” Straight in 1972 meant pro-war, anti-communist, anti-marijuana and anti-everything else they thought the hippie movement was about. Another condemned tenet of the hippie movement was “free love,” they preferring the costlier type that has been around for millennia I suppose.

The drivers’ interest in picking us up was exposure to our lifestyle, telling us why we were wrong in all of our beliefs, and if we didn’t win in Vietnam the whole world would be communist. In addition, they believed marijuana was the devil’s weed, created by Satan, as the surest path to Hell. It was always Marijuana, not its more familiar names of pot, weed or a joint. Always the same story and our response was always the same—bless his heart.

On the way home, we tried to get rides that were in for a long haul, never short ones. In the evenings, we would stay in motels, preferably by a restaurant and somewhere to get a beer to “wipe the dust off.” Starting all over the next morning was becoming routine.

One such ride was when we “. . . thumbed a diesel down . . .,” (Janis Joplin). This driver had a story, and we noticed immediately—he was wired. The driver got in to his story before we were situated in our seat. His friend told him he could make a lot of money as a long-haul truck driver. He was unsure but thought about trying it. Renting a rig and getting a few routes was how his career started. He never explained about the insurance part, but wrecked the rented rig, totaling it. Confronted with the bills he reasoned the only way out was to take out a loan, buy a new rig and drive long hours every day. I asked how he could drive so much and his reply was, “I have no-sleep pills that I take; they are not drugs they just keep you awake, he is against using drugs.” Bless his heart.

This guy talked, and talked. He told us how to drive, how to shift gears, showed us all ten positions of his seat—several times. He pointed out everything in the cab from the horn to floor mats. He talked, we fell asleep while he was talking and he never stopped. We woke up

and he was still talking, he talked us to sleep again. Good ride, a few hundred miles. We thanked him and remained silent for an hour, we had to give our ears a rest.

We took a bus for the final leg to Atlanta, but before we got on, I had to decide what to do once we arrived. My first call was to my good friend (Doyle) Tudor. I told him we finished our trip and were coming in by bus. He immediately offered his extra bedroom and was anxious to see us.

I met Tudor in Atlanta when we both worked for the “phone company.” He was from the mountains not too far outside of Chattanooga, but he didn’t have to tell you he was from the mountains, you knew once he started talking. After a few beers, his mountain twang became harder to understand, so much so that you would miss a few words if you were not his hometown neighbor. He was a good person.

Tudor grew up in a small shack without money or much food and hand-me-down clothes were his wardrobe. He had eight siblings and said most were born on the kitchen table. He walked to school and was obligated to do his share of chores around the cabin when he got home. He told me one day he came home from school and found all five of his neighbor’s kids in the house; his mother took them in because their parents abandoned them. I had a hard time holding back a laugh when he said, “That’s when things got hard.” Tudor died November 3, 2002.



Doyle Tudor at the Peachtree Hills Pub, around 1972

It was good to be home again in Buckhead. Bonnie got a job right away, but I had something else on my mind—getting my Sportster. I did, and took a few rides to get the cobwebs out. Things eventually got back to normal; Bonnie and I were both working and we moved out from Tudor’s apartment. We later returned the favor by letting him move in with us at a house we rented in Peachtree Hills and again in the huge apartment we had on Peachtree at the Brookwood Station area, close to downtown. This, like the story of the nurses, could go on not for twenty pages but hundreds—it ends here though.

Our trip encompassed three months on the road and travelling 7,300 miles—4,800 miles in the van and an additional 2,500 without it. The story was told so no additional summaries are needed.

It was as if yesterday.