

## Ditching the Ache

My *Fodor's Mexico, 1980* said:

*Of Spain's Sevilla it is stated that, "Quien no ha visto Sevilla, no ha visto maravilla." In the fast, thumb-like peninsula in Mexico's southeast which much of the English-speaking world, with ungrammatical simplicity, calls "the Yucatan," the marvels are the stately cities of the Maya.*

The ache. At any moment it threatened to drive me shut-down insane. It went with me everywhere. It wouldn't stop. I was horrified when it dawned on me that no matter how I struggled—no matter what I thought—the ache would continue for a long time. I did not know until then that the ache could be so awful.

In the beginning of 1982, the road that passed by Xel-Ha on the Yucatan Peninsula was two lanes only. My hair was still wet, and I was trying to make up my mind. Everyone knew exactly what they were doing. Cancun was the group's next destination, and I was bone-weary of tourists.

Some of the buses were better than average out here. Coming out of Mexico City we saw plenty of the ADO buses, reassuring in their appearance. Not like *Flecha Amarilla*, and *Flecha Roja*. Literally translated, "Yellow Arrow" and "Red Arrow" respectively. I suppose these companies named them after arrows to convey a spirit of swiftness, and efficiency, but to us American students, *Flecha* anything quickly became the standard of a five-times purchased-over school bus/wreck that should have been demolished twenty years previously. The ADO buses, on the other hand, did not seem to break down so often, and were designed for the populace at large instead of school children.

We pulled out of the vast, filthy, mile-high urban megalopolis called Mexico City on a cool breezy evening. How would I be able to sleep on a bus? I felt tired but not sleepy. My body did not want to sleep,

which would have been the perfect thing to do in that bus as it labored on interminable roads through the darkness. Everyone else was reclined in adequate comfort, and out for the night.

The darkness. My body was trapped. In response, my mind wandered. Kind of like the way the other senses try to make up for the lack of the sense of sight when it is pitch black. The mind visits distant conclusions and tries to oblige you to believe in monsters.

My new ache was the worst monster of all. I thought of my Uncle Jim and his hokey 8-track Patsy Cline tapes in his car. Now I was thinking of those same songs and their relentless problems of the heart. What in the world was happening to me? Patsy Cline?

I took a peek at Gustavo, a Mexico City (*Chilango*) kid who decided to come along with us. He shared a seat with me, and his head gently swayed with the bus's bumps and swerves. The engine hummed with steady resonance somewhere.

After a night struggling to keep my imagination under control, gentle pastel skies opened over flat dark horizons, giving my eyes something to latch onto and a steady mooring for my head.

Then I felt the scent of caramel, coming from... my mouth? I heard giggling and straightened up. I had actually fallen asleep. I was chewing. My companions had balanced a candy on my lips while I slept with my head tilted back. I was glad I didn't choke. I played with the irony that I had spent an entire night with nothing to do and yet did nothing to them, and yet they exercised no such restraint the following morning.

Actually, the caramel introduced a welcome sweetness and distraction to my waking. The ache was there, still. What was its source? Then I remembered. Christa was just two rows up with the other girls. Only a few weeks had passed.

The ache was born on December 14<sup>th</sup>, Friday, a little after three in the afternoon. The clouds in the sky were a tie-die gray. The air did not have a trace of breeze. I was wondering if we might walk around Polanco looking at the windows, gazing at the *pan dulce*, perhaps buying a cross between a Danish and a

cheesecake. Maybe we would go to la Condesa. We would eat at the *Neveria Roxy*. I would say “hola” to Raymundo as he served us Popocatepetls, and pretend, for a moment, that I could be like a Mexican. We did not do either of those things. Instead, she told me she wanted to be just friends. Some moments of my life cling to me like moles.

I managed to go home for Christmas. I took a bus all the way there from Mexico City. I walked to my house from the bus station at seven in the morning. My mom was at the kitchen table having her coffee. She gave me a hug and we talked while waiting for everyone else to wake up. She asked me lots of questions and I was too tired to offer much resistance. I had a back pack full of Mexican trinkets that I would use as gifts. After a week, I took a bus all the way back down to Mexico City where I met up with everyone else.

And so began the tour with Gustavo and the crazy American students who wanted to see the Yucatan Peninsula. Everyone knew about Christa and me, and being just friends came with its own set of problems. The ghost of a dead relationship haunted our group. It manipulated what the group said and where it went at every moment, even as it was invisible to all travelers around us. I gravitated to Gustavo most of the time. What was I doing here? Then I remembered. I was still excited about Mayan ruins. Ruins. How weird.

It was refreshing to finally outrun the urban wilderness of Mexico City, visible in all its horrid splendor through the dirty bus windows. In place of the city, I saw vast green sultry meadows, punctuated with scrubby trees and an occasional timid hillside. The green was not a bright or vivid. It was dull. A vigorous green would be impossible with the sun beating down so oppressively. No flowers—just pure heavy green. It was not a rain forest, as I had thought it would be. The trees were far too small and isolated. Little shade, and not dry like my home in California. I saw no people and no houses for miles—not even shacks or barns worn away to sticks. We were far from any city.

The Yucatan Peninsula had plenty of ruins. You could easily spend a life time studying them. We had been hearing about these ruins in our anthropology class, and we were actually going to see them. (Would we get any extra credit for doing this?).

## **Uxmal**

My *Fodor's Mexico, 1980* said:

*Uxmal exemplifies the essential simplicity and uncluttered facades of the Puuc style. Yet basic to both and indeed to all Mayan architecture is the way every important building is raised on some sort of substructure, varying from inches to more than 100 feet in height, with the taller ones soaring in zigurat stages to the temple at the top.*

I thought the driver had made a mistake when we stepped out of the dark air conditioned bus onto a quiet road in the bright heavy exterior. The sky had clouds, but they only served to increase the glare, at a moment in our lives when none of us had yet discovered sunglasses. A major Mayan ruin was supposed to be in this vicinity? We noticed a white dirt driveway leading away from the main road, so we used it to walk into the bush. An old ticket booth coincided with the broadening of the road to an empty parking area. A dark, fat man in a T-shirt man sat on a stool in the booth. We took a chance that the booth and the man were both supposed to be there, and paid him 20 pesos each.

Once on the grounds, a steep, white pyramid, sticking out of the savanna like an alien spacecraft, pulled at us as we entered the main square of the ruins. It hurt the eyes to look at it. The precipitous stairs seemed dangerous, but it was not as bad as it looked. Gustavo grabbed a hanging chain and pulled his way up. The rest of us crawled on our hands, knees, and feet. You don't see a white pyramid in the middle of such flatlands without wanting to get to the top. I took a lot of photos and I learned the name of a Mayan god—"Chac."

Before, Christa and I would have walked everywhere together. At Uxmal, she could not stay close enough to Jolene and Liz.

Night fell and we stayed at the campground. We went to the light and sound show where they said the word “Chac,” so the English speakers could understand at least one word. After a whole semester in Mexico City, I understood a lot of the show, but the American tourists seemed turned off by the dialog. I was never sure how the lights enhanced the message, but they looked kind of cool—for about two minutes.

I would have thought that one sleepless night on a bus would mean getting more sleep the following night. One difference between this night and the previous one was the mosquitos, making me even more trapped than ever. I do not like spending the night in a sleeping bag in the midst of intense heat, but I had no other way. I also had to cover my ears because the mosquitos loved to buzz in that very spot. How did they know where my ears were?

Second day. Bryan, Miles, Gustavo and I went and visited other ruins that were heaps or rubble, and it was easier to appreciate the brutality of the centuries. Nobody, not even a ticket seller was around. I noticed a rocky mound, just by chance. The area’s desolation had slowed my pace, so I could see things that normally would not be very interesting to me. Gazing with patient deliberation, I could see a stone pile that had been carefully arranged once, a long time ago. Thin-leaved magueys and other brush clung to the sides. Crowning the top, a white skeleton of a tree sat, dead as the civilization that piled up these rocks. The thinner branches had long since broken off, but it still had recognizable traces of the life it once had, compared to the rocks upon which it sat.

Bryan and Miles climbed to the top of some of the temples. It was like rock climbing. I touched one of the temple walls, and gritty sand came off in my hand. A few rocks fell to my feet and I decided not to go up myself. I took photos instead. These ruins were different from the castles that my sister took when she was travelling in Scotland. Those places were pristine when compared with what we had.

We had to thumb for rides, but I don’t think “thumbing” was the right way to do it in Mexico. Gustavo just held out his hand. How could I even think of hitchhiking through a poor country in spite of all the

warnings I had about doing so growing up in a wealthy country? What had happened to me? I became a different person—someone who did not sleep, did not eat, and had little regard for personal safety. Beds of pickups were the best rides, but we settled for anything. I felt uncomfortable that Bryan always had to holler “*pendejo!*” when someone didn’t pick us up.

The girls did not want to go, so we left them back at Uxmal. When we returned we found them reading cheap novels at the campsite. Vendors sold us some food. That evening we took a bus to Merida.

## **Merida**

My *Fodor’s Mexico, 1980* said:

*There are not many night clubs in Merida, and some of the better ones are in the hotels themselves. Some feature entertainment imported from Mexico City, but usually rely on local talent.*

Whenever I went into a town in Mexico, buses always took me to “El Centro.” Merida’s “Centro” had an old cathedral, which seemed to have all the disadvantages of drab modern architecture, and yet was still saddled with constraints of neoclassical conventions of the sixteenth century (but that would be impossible. They did not even know about drab modernism back then). The layers of bricks on the walls had several shades of brown and gray, as if they were sourced from different times and geographies. The flat walls on the front and the sides went straight up with no ornamentation. Very different from the Art Traditions class I took in my freshman year.

I had visited lots of churches in Mexico. The one in Taxco was overwrought and magnificent. Some of the American students visited Taxco only and travelled no further. So many churches, and yet I, a Catholic, never went to Mass once.

We looked for our hotel, chosen by the girls. I asked a slender old man, who looked like he would know the area, for some directions. Bryan said “Garrett!” with a bracing dose of remonstrance. I looked at him

up ahead. He held up the guide book in his hands, as if that was the settling point for everything, and as if doing anything other than what the guide book said was somehow unacceptable, dangerous, or worse.

We had dinner together at a place where the walls were covered with polyester curtains. A stack of empty soda bottles in crates sat in the corner. The tables were too small to accommodate the plates and drinks we ordered. A small child came in and sang a song while whacking two pieces of wood together. Gustavo and I gave him some money.

After dinner we waited with a crowd at a busy intersection. A woman got pushed headlong onto the street before the light changed. I heard her hand smack the pavement as her bag fell from her shoulders.

Oranges rolled across the pavement. A small red pickup was heading straight for her and a collective gasp gripped the onlookers. She could not get up in time. The driver of the truck slammed on his brakes. The screech of the tires resonated across the two-story buildings that hemmed in the sidewalks. The truck stopped a few feet short of her. I was horrified. Bryan said “She was just praying his brakes would work.” When we arrived at the hotel, I split off from the group to walk through the dark streets.

Beggars and cripples. I would not know Mexico without them, and Merida was no exception. I saw one fellow who had no legs at all. He moved around on an old wooden dolly, inches from the ground. His shirt was the color of the street, and so were his face, hair, and the hands he held out to everyone who passed. I gave him a *pan dulce* I had just bought. He put it in a shirt pocket as he rolled away.

When I returned to the hotel everyone was sprawled over two beds. Gustavo sat on the desk. The guys were drinking large bottles of Carta Blanca. The girls were looking at a book and a bottle of something clear. Jolene stood up as I came in.

“Okay, Garrett. You have to try this,” she said, holding the bottle to me.

“I do?”

“Yes.”

“What’s in the bottle?” I asked, holding it up.

“Tequila.”

I opened up the screw top and took a whiff. It stung like horseradish.

“Okay,” said Liz, referencing a book. “You take a hit of the bottle. Then you bite into the lime.”

Jolene had some limes on the bed. She had a half lime in her hands and a small bowl of white stuff.

“What’s in the bowl?” I asked.

“Salt,” said Jolene.”

I looked around at the guys with their beers. Gustavo took a swig of his bottle. I don’t think he was more than 17.

“Shouldn’t I do this with a shot glass?”

“We don’t have a shot glass.”

I took another look at the bottle in my hands. “%100 de Agave” it said. I did not see anything listing its alcoholic content.

“I’m ready,” said Jolene, standing next to me, lime in one hand, bowl of salt in the other.

I sighed and reopened the bottle. I stretched out my right hand with the bottle in it. No cheering—just people looking at me. I looked at Christa and she looked down.

“Well, here goes.”

“Don’t breathe until you have bitten into the lime,” said Liz, looking at her book.

I attached my lips to the bottle’s opening, tipped my head back and allowed more of its contents into my mouth than I intended. The sting threatened my nose and the back of my throat. I put the bottle on the desk. Jolene was ready with the lime. It had about a table spoon’s worth of salt mounded on the top. That

seemed like a lot of salt to me but I didn't have any time to think about it. I grabbed the lime out of Jolene's hand and bit down on it, spilling salt everywhere. I had not tasted so much salt since my first time getting rolled by a wave in the Pacific.

I swallowed the salt and put the lime down. Teeth marks encircled the green skin. "I don't think that's the way you're supposed to do it," I said.

"Well—that's what it says here," said Liz.

"Get someone else next time."

Christa and I had gone on trips together, and we got our own hotel room. No longer. That night I leaned against the wall, read my tour book with my clunky flashlight, and waited for sleep to come (it didn't—again). I listened to the relaxed sound of others sleeping.

I got to know the Yucatan very well that evening...

*My Fodor's Mexico, 1980:*

*Distinctive in appearance, dress, speech and manner, the Yucateco is often chunk-cheeked and round-eyed, similar in profile to the faces carved on the temples in the Mayan cities, shorter and sturdier than his paisanos to the west.*

I got up at first light, slipped out of the room and walked around "El Centro." It was delicious freedom. I saw retail stores, restaurants and bakeries that would be alive with people in a couple of hours. The street vendors would be selling tacos and tortas for the brave diner who would, with luck, not be travelling the following day. Stands with large, five-gallon vats of drink would be available. And Christa would not be with me.

When I got back to the room Bryan accused me of leaving a log in the toilet. I denied it.

"Well—who the hell did it, then?"

“I don’t know.”

Playing the tourist, most of us went to museums. Bryan and Miles stayed at the hotel. We saw many presentations about the Mayans. They mentioned the “arco falso” (false arch), and I remembered a lot of false arches in the ruins we saw the previous days. Did our anthropology class tell us about this?

### **Chichen Itza**

My *Fodor’s Mexico, 1980* said:

*The best known, most extensively restored, and in some respects the most extraordinary of the ancient ruins, Chichen Itza is a jewel amongst the Mayan ruins.*

We took a three-hour bus to Chichen Itza. It was supposed to be two hours, but it turned into three hours with distressing ease. Not even Bryan complained, which I took as a sign that Mexico was wearing him down. We all received life-long lessons on patience that year.

I had not seen so many people at ruins since Teotihuacan, where the *chilangos* from Mexico City dominated. Americans and Europeans were everywhere. Busloads of day trippers from Cancun clung to confident-looking tour guides. We, on the other hand, went where we wanted. We spoke Spanish. We knew the country while they knew only beach, snorkeling and breezy hotel rooms.

We also met Russ, a man with dangling pale gray whiskers and a softness in his middle. He wore low-hanging khaki slacks, barely held up by a belt cinched at the buckle, with the loose end swinging freely in front of him. We almost always saw him reclining in a folding lawn chair. He had a camper mounted on top of a sky blue Chevy pickup. The camper’s roof was covered with a dusty gray tarp held down with duct tape. He was either in his chair or gone, perhaps looking for the mushrooms that he offered to sell to us. He told us about nights with the stray dogs that would fight when one of the females was in heat, and the floor of his camper would bang.

We tried some of Russ' mushrooms that evening, but the girls would not do it. Christa was keeping her distance and Liz and Jolene were afraid (What? You don't trust illegal substances from a smelly stranger in the middle of a foreign country?).

I lost my legs and arms and I could not get up. Miles and Bryan did, however. I did not know where they went. The rest of us talked with Russ. Gustavo had already gone to sleep. I had been in a no-sleep mode, so why not have some mushrooms?

The stars were soaring through thick black skies. I was transfixed with the constellation, Canis Major, which Russ had just shown me. It took the shape of a galloping horse. Then it was a horse with a boy on top. The boy was lost and he did not know where his parents were and he was looking for them, but the horse was not going where the boy wanted, but there was nothing he could do because he had never been on a horse before and the horse was his only friend. Then the stars were a pair of lovers separated by something big, powerful, and evil. Their desperation showed in how their contorted limbs stretched. I think I was crying. Then I saw a warrior. He was supposed to commit suicide for his family and his honor but he was not sure he had the will to do it. He remained forever in the sky, vacillating.

When I woke it was first light. I was always awake at first light. My mouth was dry, but I had just had my first good sleep in days. I was the only one up. Then I noticed the mosquito bites on the places where I did not have repellent. I tried to move and felt the aches of a body that had been asleep, on rocks, for hours. But I had been asleep! I had thought I would never sleep again. Then I remembered the ache. My ache.

I got up and walked around the grounds. The Chichen-Itza ruins were quiet in the early part of day. I saw only one other guy who was probably a park employee. He didn't seem to want me to bother him, and all I said was "hi."

When I got back the others were waking up. I found out that Miles and Bryan had snuck over to the older part of Chichen Itza, and climbed the temple of the moon in the middle of the night. I dismissed my

indignation that they did not invite me. I tried to imagine being on top of the Temple of the Moon in the middle of the night, high on mushrooms. They said it was great, but they got pulled down from their reverie fast when they noticed a couple of men heading towards them in the moonlight, drifting like ghosts.

They relived their stupor-stricken misadventure.

“Miles.”

“What?”

“There’s two guys coming this way.”

“Oh shit!”

The men continued to advance across the campus.

“Miles.”

“What?”

“I think they’re guards.”

“Oh shit!”

The guards were getting closer.

“Miles.”

“What?”

“I think they have guns.”

“Oh shit!”

Miles and Bryan did not know what to do.

“Miles.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna run for it.”

“Oh shit!”

Bryan slid down the side of the temple away from the advancing men, and then ran straight into the brush, with Miles right at his heels. We were all laughing and horrified as they narrated their story.

That day we went up a tunnel into the Pyramid of the Warriors. A string of naked incandescent lights lit the way up the tunnel. We had a look at the end—a couple altars with bars in front of them so no one could get close.

Everyone, including Christa, went to see the older ruins. Miles and Bryan did not come. I saw the pyramid of the Moon. It looked old and round.

At the end of the day we took the bus for Valladolid. European tourists filled the buses in this part of Mexico. A French woman was in the middle of ours, hollering something to her friends who wanted her to get off, but she did not want to go. Eventually she did, after delaying everyone else.

We saw more towns, churches, and ruins in Valladolid, Coba, and Tulum. On one bus, an old man with a tasseled cowboy hat came in before it started. He walked through the bus and laid a pen and a note on every lap on his way towards the rear. I did not read the note, but tilted my head back and closed my eyes. When he left he took back the pens.

I saw the lovely Caribbean Sea (The California Pacific was never this blue) for the first time which made our next stop an easy decision—Xel Ha. It was a place where we could go snorkeling, something I had never done before. If I had known about half of the things down in those waters I would have been much more excited than I already was. We checked our things and rented snorkeling gear. They didn’t even ask if we could swim, although I do seem to remember signing some waiver. That was Mexico.

I had on trunks, mask, snorkel and fins. But I didn't need the snorkel. Xel-Ha was like my swimming pool back at home, only bigger and more interesting. I did not know that the fish would be so colorful and tame. I sunk to the bottom of the water as low as I could until my ears felt pressure. I saw creatures up close. I could have touched them. I saw coral, sea fans and little plants that closed up when anything passed too close. And I saw Miles and Bryan, swimming together at the surface, apparently unable to get down to where the action was.

Liz and Jolene went in but Christa did not. She waited at the cabanas, reading a book. I was the last to get out of the water and join the others. "I'm going to Guatemala," I said. Looks ranging from indifference to horror surrounded me.

We left the park and waited by the road. The girls were excited. I saw a lone car coming southbound down the road. This would be my chance. I crossed the road and held up my hand. The car passed me and I heard laughter. I stayed where I was and set my back pack down.

Gustavo crossed the street and approached me. He spoke English "Garrett. You should not go Guatemala. It has war. It has danger. You should not go." He looked into my face. Then he went back to the others. Christa did not look at me.

A pickup appeared. I stood up and let my back pack fall where it was. I held up my hand as it approached and watched as it slowed down. It was one of those moments when I was feeling separated from my body. I could see myself looking at the pickup as it stopped in front of me. I threw up my back pack into the bed of the truck before getting in myself. I pulled forward and leaned my head against the cab, looking backwards. I waved. The others looked at me, not waving. The truck revved, pulled back onto the road and accelerated. My companions were getting smaller. The truck was going faster and faster down a straight highway and it was dusk, but I could still see them. Then they were gone. I was alone, taking a ride with someone I did not know, going to strange places. I was thrilled and terrified. I was free like never before, and perhaps never again.

Dusk eased into night as the truck sped on, and I was thinking about the border. I would have to move when I arrived. The next day, I would be in a new country.

The ache was still awful and ugly. But I was outside of myself and the ache was inside me, in a cage.

I stuck my tongue out at it.

*My Fodor's Mexico, 1980:*

*The border is impressive for its remoteness and the irritations of getting across. It is best to have a passport, multiple-entry Mexican tourist card, Guatemalan tourist card, smallpox vaccination certificate, and all the other paraphernalia required for international travel.*