



Central America 2015

Bruce Grant, December 2015

November 2015, I've had this idea in my little head about visiting my PLAN sponsored child in Honduras. Also, an old friend in Guatemala offers an open invitation and Guatemala is, after all, just down the street from Honduras. I have found a very reasonable direct flight from Ottawa to Cancún, so there's just no excuse for hanging back.

A 6am departure from Ottawa puts my feet on the ground in Cancún by 10:30. A bus gets me before sundown to Chetumal, a place that no one really wants to visit.

Chetumal, the Capital of the State of Quintana Roo, is a low-lying city on that hurricane-prone Caribbean shore. It got blown away in 1955 and was rebuilt in a mid 20th century style. What you get is a sprawling modern suburb that lacks a city; a Scarborough that lacks a Toronto.

The sun is getting very close to the horizon, time to move on quickly. Outside the terminal a taxista offers me the ride to Corozal in Belize. We agree on a M\$200 fare (C\$16) for the ride. He opens the trunk and I fling my bag in (mistake #1).

At the border, I present my passport with the Forma de Migración tucked inside (mistake #2). La Gordita (little fatty), is not her real name, but it's a fair description of the officer on duty. She takes from me 25 US dollars. That's OK because if I pay cash this time, I can save my "Forma de Migración" which cost me US\$25 for the return trip. She stamps and returns my passport and I soon find the Forma is gone. I go back to correct this, but she's having none of it. The cash has obviously gone to her own pocket and La Gordita is defending her territory very aggressively. If I continue to push my point, this isn't going to end well.

The taxi brings me to the Belize border post where I find out that this is the end of my ride. He can't drive me across the line. Corozal is still eight miles away. My bag is in the trunk. I pay up.

As I turn away from the taxi, a mosca (fly) approaches to help me with the formalities. I don't need this help; I have already met my quota of thieving opportunists for today, but I can't get rid of him. He's in my face constantly, telling me how to fill in the forms and how to get from here to there. He's on his phone setting up a taxi to take me to Corozal. Leaving the building, I'm offered a ride for a lesser price with a Belizean family returning home from México; I jump in. As we leave, the fly's taxista friend is running after us, waving and shouting because I have called a taxi and then skipped out. But I didn't call the taxi. One small win for me after two losses. There are five more border crossings in my planned route through Central America; I will have to do better.

My Hotel in Corozal is called Mirador, (Lookout) and it's well named because at four storeys high it's the tallest building in town. I check in, then head out to find some nourishment and get over my unpleasant border experience. There's music, and food stands are set up in the central park; I sample some pupusas and tacos, then go in search of a beer. The tropical warmth, the sea breezes and laid-back vibe of this place are starting to work on me.

The bar has a pool table and the young man in the photo is introduced as the snooker champion of Belize. He circles the table with the controlled energy of a caged animal, pausing only long enough to whack another ball into another pocket. The bicycles of the spectators are piled up at the door. He's making his music and his audience is enjoying.





Morning in Corozal, water from last night's rain still lies on the streets and in the ditches. There is no place for it to go. All of these sea-level places, Chetumal, Corozal, Belize City and others are doomed to be destroyed from time to time by the hurricanes whose storm surges can reach up to fifteen feet high. Belize City got wrecked in 1971 and the capital was moved inland to Belmopan. Nobody wants to live in Belmopan. Apart from government, all the action is still in Belize City.



Belize City is another place where visitors are in town only long enough to pass through. Between buses I take a walk along Canal Street and find a chicken dinner in this little stand. They have one chair which they offer to me as my dining room. This spot is far from the sea, but the canal at sea level goes up and down with the tides.

Another bus change in Dangriga and I get to Punta Gorda in the south of the country, arriving in the dark. This has been a long bus day.



Morning in Punta Gorda, the coffee shop is across the street from the place where a boat will depart to take me to Puerto Barrios in Guatemala. This is not Starbucks. On the table you can see a thermos of hot water, a jar of Nescafé, a jar of White Death and a jar of sugar.



A lot of Spanish is spoken in Belize, and English and a version of English that sounds much like a Jamaican dialect. This little church is DA WATA FOUNTIN. I have also seen a barbecue joint called FAYA HAAT and a dress shop called SISTAH'S CHOICE. The only officially recognized language is English and English units of measure are used exclusively.

The culture is largely Afro-Caribbean or Latina, many businesses are Chinese and the Government is English. It would appear that everyone gets along OK.



This is the ship that makes the thirty mile daily crossing from Punta Gorda in Belize to Puerto Barrios in Guatemala. The sky to the east is looking very dark. We are loaded in and issued big sheets of black plastic to cover ourselves if it rains. The sea is not very rough, but we will travel toward those black clouds.



The crossing takes an hour and a half and our four hundred Yamaha horses drive us at a good speed, so that the boat bounces on the tops of the waves and the rain is horizontal. Do I want to hunker down under a black sheet, missing the spectacle and the pictures, all in a vain attempt to stay dry? No, I don't. When we arrive in Guatemala I observe that the other passengers are just as wet as I am.

It's a short walk up the street to the immigration office. Guatemala doesn't charge any entry or exit fee, but the border officials frequently charge their own fees. For a Guatemalan border it is well to have a few US dollars set aside in a separate pocket. This time there is no charge.



It's a short bus ride to the border of Honduras. A long, slow line makes this a most tedious crossing. There is a three dollar charge and you get a receipt that's supposed to get you out of the country without paying again, same as Mexico. A big sign on the wall explains the procedure, which should make it harder for the officers to cheat you. Remembering my Mexican experience, I am trying to get it right this time; I have done my homework.

Arriving at last at the window I see a smiley-faced little man whom I pay with a five dollar bill. He stamps me in and explains with his Spanish-speaking smiley face that he cannot give me change because he has no US funds. No problem, I reply in Spanish, just give me fifteen Quetzales or forty Lempiras. The smile fades and he gives me the two dollars in US funds. Victory is sweet, even if it's only two bucks.



By bus, I continue on to Omoa, a small beach town in Honduras. The town, such as it is, stretches along the highway, a mess of gas stations, restaurants and shops. The beach is two km away and offers a strip of palapa restaurants and cheapie hotels. I stick my head into a place opposite the beach and ask for a room. They tell me they are full up.

“No es posible.” The place is obviously empty; they just don’t want to be bothered renting in the low season. They show me a room across the muddy yard, 150 Lempiras, C\$9, OK, I’ll take it. The big palapa restaurant in front, at the beach, is also empty, but the family is there, so they have on offer beers and a supper. A swim, some beers, a good filete pescado fresh from the sea, it doesn’t get much better than this. Call it rough travel if you will, but it has its moments of pure bliss.

Morning, I catch a bus to San Pedro Sula. The second city of Honduras and murder capital of the world, it serves as a transport hub for this region. Waiting in the station, I bump into this man who introduces himself as Julio Cesar Aguilar Vásquez. He’s a preacher now, but he tells me proudly of his involvement with a small group of friends in the founding of PLAN Honduras which was called at that time Foster Parents International. This was in 1977. I’m inclined to find this story credible because he told it to me before I mentioned my own involvement with PLAN. I have since tracked him down on the internet and verified the story.



He's clearly proud of that accomplishment. A PLAN project doesn't merely hand out charity; it works on a sustained long-term program to change lives for the better. I'm not at all susceptible to beliefs in religion or karma or portents, but I have this strange feeling that my journey here has just received a blessing.

The bus from San Pedro Sula to Comayagua is slightly worrying because of the dreadful noises coming from the differential just below my seat. Clearly the crown and pinion gears are both worn down to the nubs and they are in an epic battle to see which one will outlast the other. Silence when the bus is coasting, a conversation-stopping racket when we accelerate. We make it to Comayagua where I get off and leave the gears to sort out their differences somewhere else down the road.

My hotel tonight is a big old casona that really could be quite reasonable if they would just pick up a paint brush and attend to some small repairs. For now, it's a shabby but adequate place, well located near the centre. My room has a narrow balcony that offers a good view high above the street.



By email, I have arranged to meet the PLAN people at Ricardo's Café next to the cathedral, a place that I have identified through a photo in Google Earth. They had offered to pick me up from my hotel, but I had no idea where I would be staying. Ricardo gets me a breakfast and a good cup of coffee. A good cuppa is not so easy to find in the coffee-growing places; it's seen as an export crop and not part of their culture. One is likely to be served a cup of hot water with a jar of Nescafé and a plastic spoon.

The PLAN people, up from Tegucigalpa, arrive on time and we have our first meeting at my table.

Carmen is a cheerful and strong, get-it-done, no nonsense type. Carlos, just four months with PLAN is making his first visit with a sponsor. Very young, yet he speaks Spanish, English and French.

We discuss the day ahead in a mix of English and Spanish until it appears that Spanish will be the one language we can all work with. The crowd at the project site will all be Spanish speakers. A car and driver are waiting beside the plaza.



On the way, we stop at a supermarket in La Paz. I don't really know what to bring as a gift for the family, but we all agree that everyone likes to eat. So, we do a grocery run. Carmen is a great shopper; she charges through the aisles, tossing things into the cart which is pushed along by Carlos. The cart is quickly filled.

The PLAN vests have reflective stripes on them that light up in the flash from my camera.



We attend the PLAN office in La Paz where they introduce me to the whole staff and describe the range of programs that they offer here. Three levels of mentoring programs are directed to primary school children, young teens and young adults. Girls are empowered to resist sexual predation. Education and development of skills are reinforced at all levels. A girls-only soccer league is supported to overcome the traditional passive-submissive ways of being a girl. The young people's expectations are being raised and lives are being changed.



Now we move on to the home of the sponsored child, Heidy, 13 years old, who lives with her grandmother near La Paz. Her mother is away, working. The father is not mentioned in our discussions and so I don't ask. The house shares a patio with grandma's brother who lives next door. It appears that Heidy is in a good and safe situation.

Heidy is holding on to two books that I have brought, entitled "Inglés Hecho Fácil", (English Made Easy). In my experience, learning another language is a very interesting and rewarding project. For one in Heidy's situation, it could be an essential skill. There aren't many good jobs here that don't require some knowledge of English. You can't even study for the good jobs or professions without reading English language texts. I'm hoping she will put the books to work at her school, or perhaps set up an English club for groups of students who want to take on this project. The books are still damp from my rainy ocean crossing.



We jump into the car for a tour of the village with Heidi. First stop is the school which is closed from December through January for the annual vacation.

In the picture, we are visiting the arc welding shop and meeting the teacher. There is also a gas welding and metal working shop and a sewing/cooking shop. The school and teachers are provided by the state; the equipment has been provided by PLAN.





The village has a very handsome central park and church



Our Leader



It's difficult to photograph Heidi. When she sees the camera, she offers a shy camera face. This picture, a sneaked shot, presents her very well, as a confident young woman.

We are visiting the large rice fields near the village that provide seasonal employment for unskilled workers.

"I don't want to see you ever working in the rice fields."

A big eye-roll and a smile: "¡Oh no, no es para mí!"

I like her clear self-confidence. This kid will do all right.



We return to the home, where a lunch is being prepared. Cristina is baking tortillas on the wood-fired stove. The kitchen and dining table are outside on the patio, shaded by a tin roof. Cristina is a local worker for PLAN.



A good lunch and conversation, then it's time to head out. My PLAN hosts will drop me back in Comayagua and return to their office in Tegucigalpa. It was a great visit.

Wherever I travel, there are hands out begging in the street for a coin. So, I'm a rich gringo and they are desperately poor and they can guilt me into making a small donation. This may help them through their day, but it won't change their poor lives. For the most part, I've quit doing it. I have three sponsored children with PLAN and I have seen very well how that program works to really change lives for the better. Success requires a certain critical mass of involvement in the community, a partnering with the existing resources and continuous support over some long period of time to change the culture of the people, to instil pride and to raise the expectations of the youngsters. I am impressed with what I have seen.



Back in Comayagua, I have some time for sightseeing. The town has a fine cathedral overlooking the plaza with a facade that looks like fine white porcelain.



In the bell tower they have what is claimed to be the oldest clock in the Americas. Called El Reloj Arabe, it was built for the Alhambra in Grenada in the twelfth century when Spain was still a colony of North Africa. It was given by the King of Spain for this newly-built tower in 1587. Comayagua was then the capital of Honduras. The clock still keeps time and automatically chimes out all the quarter hours.





A bus in the morning to San Pedro Sula and a transfer onward to Copán. The on-board entertainment this time is a preacher who gives a long and passionate reading from the Bible. At the end of it, he doesn't ask for any money. He's not selling religion, he is apparently a committed believer who wants to spread the word to the people on the buses. A little old lady across the aisle from me has been listening attentively and she gives him a gentle pat on the arm and a sweet smile.





It's a long ride to Copán, made longer by a bus breakdown and a wait for the rescue bus. We arrive in a hill town with a lot of ups and downs and cobbled streets. In the centre there is a lively young backpackers scene. Hotel Buena Vista is a slightly posh place with a pool way up on a hill, thus the name (Good View). It's only twenty dollars and it's in a quiet zone. The walk up the hill is arduous, but the tuk-tuk ride only costs half a dollar. Full moon tonight!



Dinner tonight is in an upstairs restaurant overlooking the plaza, a quiet place with good food and a mature group of diners, a place with the improbable name of *TWISTED*. Go figure.





Today is a Mayan ruins day. In the photo I'm standing on a pyramid, above treetop level except for the tree that is growing out of the pyramid. The tree roots have been very destructive of these ancient structures. The forest for miles around is full of little hillocks, each one representing a collapsed stone house.





Local Resident

What happened to the Mayans? It wasn't the Spanish conquest that destroyed their civilization, they were already diminished to the status of forest dwellers. The theory, according to local residents is that environmental destruction caused their downfall, a lesson for us all in the twenty-first century.

The ruins represent only the grand institutional buildings and the homes of the elite minority. The largest part of the population would have lived in simple palapas made entirely of wood and palm leaves, all gone without a trace. Cooking fuel would also have been wood.

So, cut down all the trees and your cities become unsustainable. With forest cover all gone, the land is susceptible to flash floods in the rainy season and drought in the dry season. Agriculture fails. The only way out of this is to return to the forest and abandon the cities.

A long bus ride to Antigua in Guatemala, no issues at the border. Only three passengers are on this ride. Gert, a fortyish Swede who has been everywhere and spent the last year living in Antigua, though he hasn't learned a word of Spanish. He's going to continue on to San Pedro Atitlán, a tiny village on the side of the world's most beautiful lake where he hopes to settle in and live with the Pentecostals and Catholics and yogis and healers who all contend for the psychic space.

The other, is a young woman called Mona, a writer of books about spiritualism and energy healing. She's in a big rush to Mexico City to celebrate her birthday with friends and family in two days. Why didn't she dash to the airport? No money. OK, she can just make it if she rides for two days, stopping only to change buses, but she will be a wreck when she gets there. What is it about Guatemala that draws in these people whose feet don't quite touch the ground?

I arrive at night and find the town in a festive mode, a big sound stage in the central square, a jam of people and cars. I get turned away from several hotels which have no rooms but they do have dorm beds. I keep looking; there will be at least a bed, but I'm hoping for a room. At last I score a private room in International Mochilero Guesthouse for C\$20, a room with three beds and shared facilities in a quiet inner patio.



Crack of dawn, I am awakened by the clanging, atonal bells from Iglesia y Convento La Merced. Some bells chime and some clang. These are clangers. No tienen merced.

El Volcán de Agua has the usual white cloud hooked to its top, and Volcán de Fuego is blowing smoke. I hear the volcano has been erupting off and on in recent times, so anything can happen. Reports say there is also lava from time to time, and explosions that fling rocks into the sky.



At Lago Atitlán, Panajachel, also known as Gringotenango, sits on the near shore. It's 6.5 km across the water to the shore in front of Volcán Tolimán.



To the east, the smoke of Volcán de Fuego is still visible,
a north wind blowing it away from Antigua.

This is my old friend Murray, a degree in Psychology, Certified Shiatsu Therapist, stone mason, house painter, farmer, rebel, up for any adventure, "Why not? Let's go!" Murray found this place years ago when land was still cheap, and built his house bit by bit; now he has subdivided and is building another house. He has become, quite unexpectedly, a prosperous old gringo living in a tropical paradise.

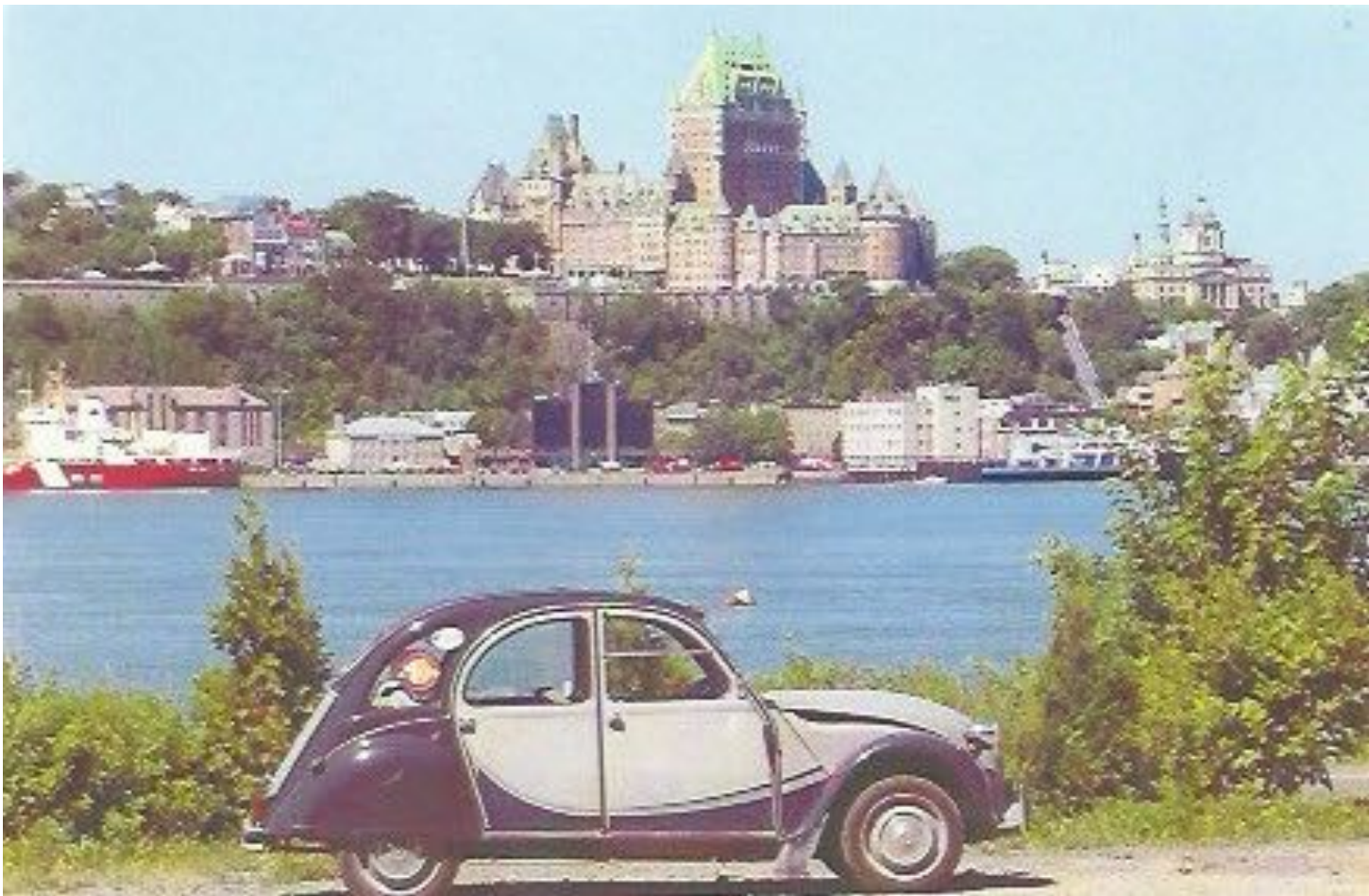


At 5100 feet of altitude, Lago Atitlán has an ideal climate. Look everywhere in Pana and you will not see any heater or any air conditioner. The steep, dry hills and the wind-tossed water are not at all suitable for breeding mosquitoes. Heaven is clearly visible, if not attainable in the starry night sky; Hell pops out of the mountain tops now and then to remind us – "I can nail you any time I want!" J.R.R Tolkien could not invent a better environment for creating awe and for stimulating wild imaginings and spiritual cravings.

We're sitting around and talking about old friends, and particularly about Ross and Patti Kembar both now passed on, much regretted. He tells me that Ross's old car is still sitting in the barn where he left it. What? How can this be? The son Peter was very keen to have this car; how can it still be sitting there?

Well, the answer would be that Peter is living in Vancouver now, with a young family and much to do, and anyway, how do you get an old non-roadworthy Citroën Deux Chevaux from Peterborough to Vancouver?

We both say it at the same time: "Hey, we could do that!" And so, the next adventure is now in the planning. Not exactly the next adventure; as soon as I leave, Murray will be off to Colombia, Ecuador and Peru and I will be continuing my Central American travels. Vancouver or bust in a 2CV will be for next July. We emailed Peter and he's quite keen, says he will join us for some part of the trip.



This is an archive photo of the same car when I drove it from Peterborough to Halifax. The story is in my book about "La Mauricie". If I complete the trip to Vancouver, it will be my coast-to-coast 2CV touring car.



A few restful days at Murray's place and an adventure planned for next July, now I'm ready to get back on the buses and Murray is off to South America.

A shuttle to Antigua and then another to Cobán a half-way point on the long road back to Belize. Arriving after dark in Cobán, I land at Hotel La Paz, a sprawling place built around an interior patio that serves as an overnight parking lot. It's been raining off and on for hours. Apparently that's normal for the jungle of the Northern Department of Petén. They claim that the annual rainy season lasts here for thirteen months.



I pass a day here, walking around, getting wet, finding some good eats and I reserve my shuttle on to Flores for tomorrow morning.





Flores is on an island, connected to Santa Elena by a causeway. We get less rain here, but no sunshine.



We are near the end of the rainy season here and the lake level is high. My room has a balcony overlooking the lake. Froggy noises from the flooded malecón will go on all night.



I have checked into Hotel Mirador del Lago, a basic backpacker hostel. At the back, a terrace overlooks the lake, with a bar in one corner and a tin roof that is deflecting a gentle but persistent rain. I find my room, dump my backpack on the bed and return to the terrace.

There are a dozen other travellers here, in small groups or singles, all with their noses into their cell phones, their thumbs busily working. One conversation only, a young woman with a wire hanging out of her ear is talking loudly to a friend in Los Angeles, oblivious to the other inmates in the place. The other inmates appear to be equally unaware of her. Nothing else to do, I sit alone at a table looking out through the rain to the darkened lake and sip on a Gallo beer.

Whatever happened to conversation? I used to stay in the youth hostels when I was a youth. The travellers met each other and compared experiences, told unlikely but mostly true stories and exchanged tips on places to go and places to avoid. The hostels were not comfortable or convenient, but they were cheap and, best of all, they were meeting places, places of learning.

I remember the stories of the young Afrikaner who had hitched from Jo'burg to Europe on a South African passport, his youthful energy and imagined invincibility being his only resources. There were occasionally those 60's flower children travelling to or from Katmandu, passing through Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan on their way. You can't do that any more. The young man from Tunisia had no destination in mind, only he knew that he could not return home as long as Habib Bourguiba remained in power. An African man had learned his English from Catholic missionaries and spoke with a most delightful Irish brogue. Stories were told of encounters with Communist border officials, some sinister, others rather more like comic opera.

It's over. The people don't talk any more. Looking on the bright side, I can see the potential of this cheap and ubiquitous technology to lift half the world out of poverty, ignorance and dictatorship. It's no less significant than the invention of printed books. But for me, something important has been lost.

Old people have a licence, I suppose, to regret the way things have changed; old people have always done that. And yes, I must admit these memories of mine are from another century. So, I finish my beer, fold up my regret and slip it into my pocket, shuffle back to my room, write my notes and go to bed. It has been a long day, it's raining out and there's no one here to talk to.





On to Belize again, no problems at the border. The hand-cranked swing bridge is claimed to be the only one in America and so it's a major tourist must-see site, though it only swings once a day. The boat will be my ride to San Pedro, on Ambergris Caye. Off we go.



Ruby's Hotel is an old friend in San Pedro, right on the beach, terraces on three levels, only slightly ramshackle, all this for only about about C\$35. I've been here before.



I'm sitting on the lower verandah, a guy walks in, narrow-brim hat, crooked nose, whiskered face, shorts and sandals, beer belly, walks with a limp, arms decorated with prison tattoos. He goes out to the beach office to get a beer. Coming back in, he's looking around, so I kick out a chair for him and he sits down.



“Jim. My friends called me Jimbo.” I see a small Canadian flag pin on his vest. We get on just fine and he’s telling me his stories. He’s an old biker, a one-percenter; now in his mature years he has become a gentle citizen. I’m an old biker too; though I never ran with the gangs and I don’t have prison tattoos, I did have some Harleys. I can talk the talk. Jim opens up to me. “Had a stroke about a year ago. My memory’s fucked. I can’t even dial a phone number without writing it down one number at a time.”

Jim has two wives; well, one is an ex-wife who just couldn’t handle the craziness any more. But she’s still a friend. The current wife and the ex are friends too, and they both have helped to sponsor this trip. Jim’s kiddies (yes he has kiddies) were all opposed to this adventure, afraid that he was going to die out there. I agree with him that at our age this is not the major consideration. We’re all going to die. The more important thing is to keep on living until finally we do that other thing.



Jim tells me with pride that he is the founder of A B A T E in Canada. That's a biker organization, one-percenters who have gone over to the other side, maybe to build up some good karma before they croak, or maybe they're just tired of all the conflict, danger and violence that goes with the gang life. He tells me proudly about the charitable projects that they take on. His driver's licence has a medical suspension. Still, at home he rides his ATV into town and the cops just smile and look the other way, so pleased that Jimbo is no longer a real problem. Those guys still throw some crazy field parties.

"Have you seen Arnie? Arnie's a guy from Norway; I met him in Corozal. He said he would meet me here. He's late. He's kind of an oddball, into spiritualism and building stuff in different ways."

I haven't seen any Arnie. Jim is impatient to get moving. He's a biker; he's happier when he's moving, so he's going out to rent a golf cart. There aren't many cars or trucks in San Pedro; it's golf carts. He wants to get around, see the town, and walking hurts him. He takes off and I go for a swim in the sea.

I've had my swim and changed back into dry clothes, back to the verandah and someone new is sitting at our table. I get a beer from the beach place and the new guy nods a hello. I sit down.

"Hi, my name's Arnie." He is quite as described by Jim, explains his ideas about new construction technologies. I still like to think that I possess the keen analytical mind of the Engineer, but I don't get what he's saying. So, I tell him about Jim who is looking for him. "No, I don't remember him, but I s'pose if I see him I will remember him."





When Jim returns, he's got a new adventure to report. Seems like he got onto this golf cart and went back and forth in this little town. Yes, you can walk the whole place in ten minutes, so, with a golf cart you can very quickly run out of things to see.

He came to a big paved road and so he cranked it up to the max (which isn't much on a golf cart) and he was enjoying one of those wind-in-your-hair biker moments when the trucks with the flashing lights surrounded him. He had somehow found his way onto the runway at San Pedro's airport. They ushered him to a gate and sent him on his way. He tells this little story with a big grin, still savouring this latter day bad biker adventure.

“So, here’s Arnie. You were looking for Arnie.”

“Arnie?” He has no recollection of Arnie or of our discussion about Arnie. He’s clearly confused and apprehensive, so he takes the prudent course and clams up. Arnie, I think, is now looking at me with some suspicion. Jim goes to get a beer and I explain to Arnie the story about Jim’s stroke and his memory problem.

The final vignette in this little story: a guy comes by, offering a bottle of whisky, half full. He’s flying tonight and can’t take it with him. Just wants to find it a good home. Jim, Arnie and I, we all turn it down. After, Jim explains to me, “When I drink whisky, I get real angry, I do bad things.” He looks right into my face with his bad whisky face. It’s scary. I’m glad he turned it down.



The shadows are getting long. There are a lot of upmarket places in San Pedro and some good restaurants. So, I’m going to finish this excellent day with an excellent dinner. I have a ticket for the speedboat to Chetumal tomorrow morning.

The early morning “Water Jet” leaves from the other side of the island, a five minute walk from Ruby’s place. Most of this passage is inside Chetumal Bay, so there isn’t much of an ocean swell. Three 200 horsepower Yamaha motors move us along fast; the 80 km ride takes less than two hours.



No tricks at the Mexican border, though I do have to pay US\$25 for a new Forma de Migración. A shuttle bus is waiting outside, looking for a load of passengers to haul to Playa del Carmen or to Cancún. I join them. We’ll be in Playa around noon.



Playa del Carmen is an old friend that I first visited in '01 and I have returned several times. The beach frontage is becoming quite built up, as the picture shows. It's gratifying to see that my old Cabañas Sofía is still there, small simple cabañas with shared facilities in a back yard right next to the beach. And Club Nautico Tarraya is still on the beach slinging beer and food and offering a place to hang out all day long if you want to.



Thursday 10 December, I'm moving on to Puerto Morelos, quite close to the airport. I fly on Saturday. Posada Amor has a room for me in the interior patio at C\$32. The Amor in this place is not about sex, it's Amor de Días.





The corner nearest Posada Amor has the authentic coffee shop that the much bigger Playa lacks. Frothy cups with steamed milk and cinnamon, carrot cake, pastries. Welcome home. Next door, the new and used book emporium is run by a young lady from Calgary.



A lot of restaurants in PoMo. It's a suburban hangout for prosperous Mexicans from Cancún. This one, Pelícanos, is a huge palapa, a cathedral of food and drink right on the beach





A snorkel visit to the coral reef which is just off the beach. Sting rays, barracudas and the biggest lobster I've ever seen. The "langosta guardiana" is keeping watch at the entrance of a cave where uncounted smaller lobsters can be seen massed inside. Who knew, not me, that these primitive creatures have a family defence system?



For all that it's a beach town right next to two international airports and the Cancun hotel strip, Puerto Morelos is still a little Mexican town and there will be religious parades. I fly tomorrow.



Cancun Airport: The departure area is a huge circular cavern with no sense of flowing from check-in to departure, just a huge crowd hanging around waiting for something. Across the room, I see him; it's Jim. He's using a wheelchair as a walker, his bag in the seat.

My first impulse is to go and meet him again, but I check it. What if he doesn't remember me? What if it just gets him mixed up? He had told me he would be flying out today, to Toronto. it seems like he's doing OK. Old Biker, survivor, philanthropist, traveller



