

The Khalsa's 2005-2006 Yucatán trip.

For the first time we decided to spend the Christmas holidays someplace warm. In April 2005 we bought our tickets on Priceline and found a hotel that sounded good. In December we had an early Christmas celebration at home and then headed south on the 22nd. We returned the day after New Years. Below are some images with accompanying text giving the highlights of the trip. Click on any image to view a larger version.



This was our first trip to the Yucatán and we had no desire to go to Cancún or Cozumel. Jitka found a great hotel in Playa del Carmen, Casa Tucan, run by a German couple. We had a 2 bedroom suite with kitchen for about \$50 USD per night. It was 2 blocks from the beach, had a small pool and an excellent restaurant.



“Playa” used to be a sleepy fishing village, but is rapidly becoming another overpriced Mexican Caribbean tourist destination. It even has a WalMart. But it also has nice restaurants. Here we are eating at “100% Natural,” a Mexican chain health food restaurant.



Only one day did we spend at a beach in Playa. All the other days we were either exploring the interior or riding a “colectivo” (shared van) to nearby prettier, less populated beaches. The Colectivos are a great way to travel to anywhere between Playa and Tulum, 45 min. to the south.



On day 2 of our trip we (unknowingly) endured a 3 hr timeshare presentation in exchange for a car rental. We made good use of the car though, taking it on 2 long day trips into the interior. On the first day we visited the Mayan city-state of Cobá, which had a population of 40,000 at one point. Cobá is only about 10% excavated, with the various sites spread over 50 km². We rented bikes to visit all the sites, most of which were connected by nice gravel roads, like this one, but some by much rougher, primitive trails.



The first place we stopped was a ball court. The Mayans took ball playing very seriously, the losing team often becoming human sacrifices. This was a small court, with the sloping walls below the hoop distinguishing it from the larger courts with vertical walls and a higher hoop.



The next stop was “El Castillo,” the second highest pyramid in the Yucatán (higher even than the famous El Castillo at Chichén Itzá). The climb is not for the faint hearted.



Unlike Chichén Itzá, there weren't hundreds of other people trying to climb El Castillo at the same time, and the view from the top was mostly of undisturbed jungle. You can see two other, unexcavated pyramids at the far right near the horizon.



Cobá is unusual in being situated by several lakes (most fresh water in the Yucatán flows below the surface). This is a picture of the parking lot for Cobá, still underwater after flooding caused by hurricane Wilma. We had to park in a makeshift lot and hike an additional kilometer on a freshly cut trail through the jungle to get to the entry.



This is the Pyramid of Kukulcán, or El Castillo, in Chichén Itzá. Chichén Itzá is the most famous and best restored of the Yucatán Peninsula's Mayan sites. As Lonely Planet says, it “will awe even the most jaded visitor.”



A climb to the top of El Castillo is a must. One starts out confident enough on the steep stairs, but as you gain altitude, it is best not to look down.



We encountered people frozen with fear, gripping the rope, about half way up.



The view from the top is magnificent. This shot is looking at the Temple of the Warriors, containing the classic reclining Chac-Mool figure. It is surrounded by thousands of columns which at one time supported a roof.



Jitka and Siri Jodha in the Great Ball Court, only one of the city's eight courts. Along the walls of the ball court are stone reliefs, including scenes of decapitations of players.



This is a relief on the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars, depicting these animals clutching human hearts in their claws.



This is a Mayan observatory, one of the most fascinating of all the buildings at Chichén Itzá. It has an interior spiral staircase and windows that helped priests determine important celestial events.



After the visit to Chichén Itzá we needed to cool off. What better way than a swim in a deep “cenote.” A cenote is a limestone cavern whose roof has collapsed. The Yucatán is a vast porous limestone shelf, uplifted from the ocean only 2 million years ago. Pictured is Barbora and Siri Jodha swimming in the Ik Kil cenote.



We had dinner in [Valladolid](#), at Hotel Maria de la Luz. Jitka and Barbora are shown in the interior courtyard. Valladolid is a charming colonial town, not much visited by tourists. The drive back to Playa del Carmen in the night, through the jungle, on a road that wasn't even on one of the detailed maps we had, was an adventure.



On another day we visited Gran Cenote, just outside Tulum. Here we went snorkeling in the startlingly clear water. All rivers in the Yucatán are subterranean and many cenotes are connected through underground networks, which Siri Jodha got to explore on a scuba dive (see below).



The main reason we went to the Yucatán was to hang out at the beach. One of our favorites was at Villas del Caribe about 20 min. south of Playa del Carmen.



The Café del Mar at Villas del Caribe. We may stay here next time we visit the Yucatán.



We'd usually hang out until night and eat at the Café del Mar, which had excellent food.



There's nothing so relaxing as a sunset walk on the beach.



We were also very fond of the beaches even further south, near Tulum. We spent a day at Cabañas Ana y José, a rather upscale place along a gorgeous stretch of beach.



The beach front hotel strip near Tulum has places catering to all tastes. The Shambala Petit Hotel was for the yoga and meditation crowd.



The beach front resort Diamante - K near Tulum was another favorite hangout for us.



Barbora in the beautiful turquoise blue waters at Diamante - K.



One morning we visited the Tulum ruins, the only Mayan city on the coast and the most visited. The workmanship and ornamentation are inferior to the other ruins we saw, and it is overrun with tourists. I was appalled to see an American (U.S.A.) throwing a paving stone at a coconut tree trying to dislodge a coconut for his son.



The town of Tulum pueblo is very unassuming, having just one main paved street, but it has many good places to eat. We often dined there after spending the day at a nearby beach. Here is Jitka and Siri Jodha sitting in Taqueria el Mariachi.



Usually in the evenings, after returning to the hotel, we'd sit outside our room drinking tea, eating cookies and reading.



Jitka and Siri Jodha trying on hats.



Siri Jodha took a 2-tank dive at "[Hidden Worlds](#)," the place the underwater scenes of the IMAX film "[Amazing Caves](#)" was filmed. He went there by himself, and didn't take a camera along. The link will take you to a page with more information about this dive, supplemented with images borrowed from other websites.