

Postcards

from Yucatan



Holbox, Yucatan Peninsular, South East Mexico.

August '04

Rain gods

Chichen Itza Temple

Let's start with the biggest thing in this part of Mexico: Chichen Itza. It's 93 leg-stretching steps big, and in the afternoon heat feels even bigger. How the Mayans built it without anything more than human power is the biggest marvel of all. It took generations, and together with its sister temples and chambers, formed the regional capital here from about 600 BC onwards. The view from the top of the main pyramid is unbroken jungle to the horizon is on all sides, and it really is unbroken; unbroken by guide rails, cages or barriers of any description – just you and 93 giant stone steps to the ground. Petrified tourists are clinging to the walls in a bid to quell their vertigo as they shuffle around the top tier of the temple. It's all clearly taking its tour on the tour groups.

Mathematically perfect and modelled on the lunar calendar, the pyramid is the focus of a vast temple complex dedicated to the Mayan rain gods. Our guide is explaining how in the later Mayan period the priests sacrificed just about anything in the prayers for rain.

In a region devoid of rivers, and with only the thinnest layer of topsoil sitting on the porous limestone bedrock, rain deserves a pretty big temple. The sacrifices may have started with fruit, but when the excavations began in 1963 they dredged up more human hearts than anyone would want to think about.

While he's busy explaining the brainwashing that they think happened to the people who were sacrificed (yes, they were alive when it happened), the clouds have been darkening. We're learning how the secret to good rain seemed to involve teams of seven priests, a rubber ball and a hoop twenty feet up on a wall, and the strangest version of basketball you can imagine, when the first rain drops arrive. There are only a couple, but they are grenade-like in proportions making craters in the dry dirt as they explode near our feet.

Something to cool the air is always welcome in the sweltering heat of the interior, but the rain gods are just warming up, and as if answering the calls of all of the tour guides in unison, lightening bolts explode earthward a few miles away followed almost immediately by the deafening cracks of thunder. Then again, more cracks, and again. The flashes are blindingly bright as the rain really begins. The roar of a tropical



Chichen Itza Temple: By day and by night

deluge is getting louder and following those few, giant drops, a wall of water edging its way across the courtyard. We watch it in awe, a curtain being draped over the ruins. A curtain that is getting closer. And then wrapping itself around us, water crashing down like a dozen giant power showers pointed straight at everyone's faces. In moments it's raining so hard that I'm finding it tough to even breathe without inhaling water. Thousands of tourists are fleeing in all directions; this was *not* on the itinerary. In less than a minute, the dry earth is transformed into a shallow lake and soon I can barely see the temple. The water's intense; billions of droplets battering the ground and no sign of a break.

Undeterred, indeed almost oblivious, our guide continues talking (albeit with a notably raised voice) while all but the hardy few join the rest running for cover. I know how wet he is, because the rain's already soaked everything I'm wearing and his office shirt and slacks look a lot thinner than my canvass travel shorts. On the bus later there will be rows of despairing tourists drying out passports and wallets, looking for anything dry in their bags and trying to resuscitate their mobile phones.

Eventually the gods take pity on us and when the rains do clear, the cool dank air is a refreshing change from the blistering inland heat that has made the temples so tough the days before. There were scare stories on the travellers grapevine that led many to only consider early morning or late night Mayan adventures, but after the rains it's as pleasant as a summer's day back in the lake district at home. We get some time to explore and sitting at the very top of the pyramid, legs dangling over the giant stone steps, I get an impromptu Japanese lesson from a young journalist also travelling alone. She needs the all important photo taken and after we've exchanged cameras we chat in broken English watching a tour group of distressingly over-weight North Americans clumsily descend. Fearful that at any moment one at the top will slip and take out the entire coach-load we walk around to the quieter side.

"Mom, where's the elevator", I catch one of the kids whine in the line to descend.

"Honey, I know it's old, but they really should put one in you know" Mom says to Pop.

I'm conscious that the rain knocked out the one set of lights there are inside the pyramid with the first few drops. Electricity and rural temples are not natural bedfellows and the sunken cables for the spot lights regularly short out. When I overhear someone asking their guide when they can climb down the lightless internal passageway, the response is beautifully Mexican. "Not possible now. Electricity broken. Maybe they fix tomorrow. Men not here." [It turned out later that men were 'on lunch' until the end of the day, which was quite normal for 2pm].

Plastic temples and a thousand sombreros

Back in the small arcade of tourist shops that are growing like a virus around the complex entrance, the two Californian guys I'm travelling with are getting a real buzz out of the acres of tourist tat that sprawls out onto the pavement from what is bravely build 'local cultural market'. If you ever need a plastic temple, an oversized sombrero, or any number of little figurines, then this is the place for you. Oddly in spite of the 'ask for tour group discount' signs, and the battalion of salesman who are trying to persuade you that a miniature plastic guy under a plastic palm tree with an 'I love Mexico' sticker on his chest is just what you're craving,

almost no-one's buying anything. We'd already stopped at two vast shops on the way here, selling an equally vast array of exactly the same stuff on the way and I can't help thinking that if they could only put something nice out here, then they really could be onto a winner.

But it's a futile thought and I leave it behind, along with the guy and the palm tree, and head off to a Cenote to cool down. The Cenotes are the entrances to water-filled underground caverns where the roof has collapsed to form a cool oasis in the humid jungle. They underlie much of Yucatan and I'm hoping to dive one in a week or two. Leaping off the rock face the water hits you a second or two later; hard, cold, clear. And after so much time in the sea I forget how readily we sink in fresh water and fight to tread water hard enough. There's a mixed group of day-trippers in our party us and a mother from Wiltshire with pearl earrings and sculpted hair is psyching herself up for the jump while her daughter watches in shock: "I've never done anything like this", she squeals and we hurl ourselves off the platform past the eyes of a shocked family, their jaws somewhere by the towels on the floor.



Deep Cenote near Chichen

Colonial dining

Valladolid

I ditch the tour bus at a roadside shack about 10ks from Chichen. The guide (our fifth in as many hours), says he grew up there and I can get a connecting bus no problem. I don't buy the story about him growing up there, but do buy a cool bottle of Fresca as soon as the air-conditioned Mercedes pulls away. And that makes everything seem just fine, in spite of the fact I'm now on an empty road, somewhere near Chichen, surrounded by no one who speaks English. Clocking a sign that may have once said 'Hotel' (plan B now firmly established) I head to what may be a bus station (a shop with an unusual number of benches outside) and ask in what could be Spanish (with much imagination) about buses.



Valladolid is a sleepy colonial town in the centre of the Yucatan peninsular that I picked out of a guidebook for its promise to offer a glimpse of the real Mexico. Actually the bus, bus station and the

roadside shack from the afternoon was quite enough of the 'real' Mexico, but as the bus pulls into the terminal and switches off its lights for the night I'm passed the point of no return.

Valladolid really is perfect for the evening. It's modest and simple, seemingly ignorant of the nearby coastal tourism and carrying a good sense of history. There's a tree-filled square at the heart of the place, which everyone comes to stroll in once the mosquitoes have calmed down for the night. In the centre a huge fountain lights up the pairs of seats that litter the park, the spray of the water drowns the whistles of the traffic police who seem to have replaced the lights at each corner, and my gearless bicycle weaves and wobbles around the packed cars until I find something to lock it to.

Opposite the vast white church with its sparse interior lies an equally vast hotel, with its double height ceilings, courtyard fountains and palatial sleeping chambers pretty much unchanged since the Europeans left. The 'typico' local dishes are a jumble of everything on the menu and taste great. There's a handful of tourists enjoying early evening beers and we soon start swapping travel tips.



Bugs in the garden

Enrique stops me walking into the garden. He stands between me and the door in quite a confrontational way; odd. He's calm, but insistent too. Back moments later with a plastic broom he gently sweeps the spider that's barely a foot from my foot back into the jungle that spills into the garden. Now I don't know much about spiders, but this guy is black, about eight inches across and looks like something you don't want to mess with. My preference would have been to hurl my thickest guidebook at it while leaping onto the nearest table (though I'm not convinced that even the whole Lonely Planet Central America guide would have done much more than sustain it some mild bruising). Even though it could clearly kill a horse, I know Enrique is doing the right thing. Back around my bed it's a different story; I lift everything as far off the floor for the night as possible and close up every zip I can see, every posted that can be velcroed and every box that can be sealed. The thought of an extra passenger hitching with me to Tulum is not something I want to even dream about.

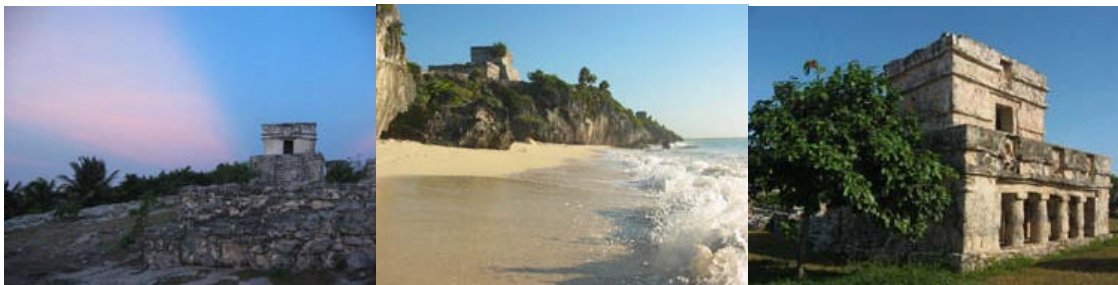
Bus timetables

It's the next morning in Valladolid, 9:45 at the bus terminal and coaches are lining up to get in. The morning rush is underway and I've missed the 9:20 to the coast. Mexican time intervenes; it's still here, and with broken Spanish I find it third time round (which is not as good as it sounds in a bus terminal of six buses).

We cruise along an almost deserted highway, flanked by deep jungle and the occasional wheel-less truck that can't be persuaded to go further.

Cenotes

Tulum



Temple of the Wind God, and right the temple of Frescos on the cliff just behind.

The Mayan property developers clearly understood the importance of Location. The temple complex goes from the beach sands back about two hundred meters and along the coast for about a further five hundred. The temples have sat here for a couple of thousand years, but the priests are long gone and these days they're just home to giant Iguanas, and giant snakes from tourist buses.

Flying

The water in the Grande Cenote cavern is completely clear. Little catfish suspend themselves like odd balloons, invisibly tethered to the stalagmites that form the cave floor. The four of us, led by Robbie – a German cavern diver who loved the place so much he stayed an extra 10 years – glide through the chamber and drift into one of the deeper caverns. Stalagmites the size of old oak tree trunks heave themselves up from the floor to lift the huge cavern roof. Roll over and the roof is a pin cushion of stalactites, each perfectly intact. My bubbles bounce onto them, hiding everything in that shimmering mercury texture of air under water. Then they pierce through as the air finds some crack to escape into. This cave system is 12ks and underlies the slither of land between here and the coast. We're going less than a kilometre around it, but in the tranquil perfectly clear waters you lose all sense of the danger of getting lost. Like kids in a candy store we're wide eyed and irrational.

There's coral in the roof

Yucatan has the world's best cave diving and the underground geology of the region is spectacular. More than 500ks of flooded limestone caves where stalactites and stalagmites form the type of world

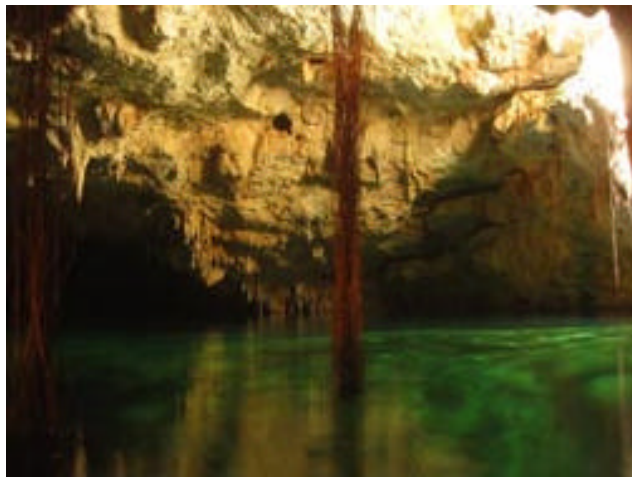


that only Dali could have dreamed up. You reach them through holes in the bedrock deep in the jungle, and the reality is that many have never been dived before, and most are yet to be discovered.

Back at the entrance to the cavern where a few snorkellers are cooling from the afternoon sun, the roof of the cavern breaks the surface. The rock is breathtakingly thin around the central area that has collapsed to form the Cenote that we climbed down through. Looking through the strata a mishmash of layers hides fragments of coral, much of it fossilized. The Yucatan peninsula was once coral reef and either the melt waters of an ice age, or the heave of tectonic plates pushed the area up so high that the reef plateau became the peninsular and the soft limestone bedrock began getting cut away by water. The cuts formed channels that would eventually carve out caves and one of the largest underground river systems in the world. Fastforward through geological time again and sea levels rose, flooding most of the limestone caves with freshwater, freshwater that is cool and cleansing to sink into on this hot humid afternoon.

Archaeology

That was to be the first of many, many dives and soon I get into a rhythm of heading out to the middle of the jungle with Robbie and dropping down through some hole you'd never know was there. The holes become progressively less accessible until one day we find ourselves driving around Tulum looking for anyone with long enough aluminum ladder they can loan us to get down into the water at some new untouched places. With ladders lashed loosely to the roof, the jeep packed with dive gear and the doors roped shut by various harnesses, we bounce off into the jungle on an under-used 4x4 track. When the track runs out we walk on a narrow path through the trees and eventually leap twelve feet through a tiny hole into the sparkling blue water.



Tree roots break through the roof of a Cenote to find water

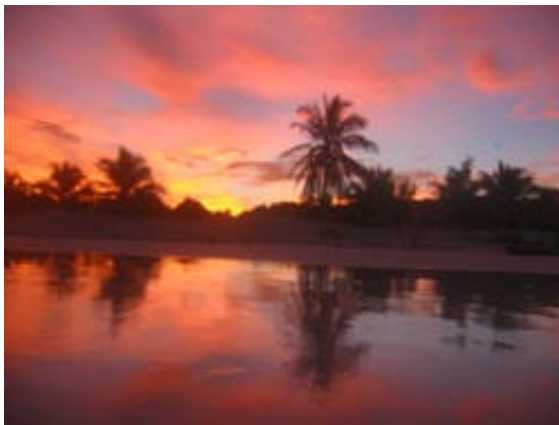
Tobi and I have chanced upon an archaeology dig and exploration in a new part of the Cenotes cave system. He's a pilot with Lufthansa and also an experienced diver. By accident more than design we've stumbled across an archeology crew researching fossils in a petrified coral reef among other things. The best find was two days ago; the jawbone, back teeth and tusk of a mammoth that one of the guys reckons must be about 20,000 years old. My hunch is that it fell through the hole and couldn't get out, then got buried in sediment. It's out of alignment with everything else and the soft sand around it makes excavation easy. Fresh water, free from plankton, fish and current is doing a good job of preserving everything down here.

Terrapins

Breaking through the roof above me there's a tree root that sprays out into a million fibres. Un-phased by the four divers and their torches, an adult terrapin blinks its eyes open, looks out from its shell, and settles back to sleep.



The Beach Cabanas that run for 15ks along the coast, Tulum, Quintana Roo



Tulum

- Bearded hippies from Texas who stayed too long but make great breakfasts
 - Sleeping in luxury Cabanas on the beach with a breeze rolling off the sand and rippling the mosquitoes nets
 - Snorkelling with sea anemones in the shallows just off the shore
 - Watching the sun set with a cool cerveza
 - Drifting through a Mayan canal in the nature reserve
- Double length fuel trucks trundling down the hummingbird highway to Belize city
 - Needing to dive into the water to escape the blisteringly hot temperature after lunch
 - Taking four-by-fours through the jungle to find an un-dived Cenotes
 - Buses so brimming with passengers, several have to get off
 - Trekking through jungle and learning about trees that bite, make chewing or cure you
 - Climbing twenty five metres to the rickety top of a high hide
 - And staying another day, because that's what you do

Diving: Mexican style

Sharks and rays

It was a short trek north to the diving off the coasts of Cosumul. The reefs here are rated in the top ten world dive sites and the first few dives today certainly lived up to expectations. We dropped down onto the edge of a 300m underwater cliff and hung about watching some pretty big fish race by in the current that acts like an expressway down here.



From the drop off it was a hard kick or two to scale some ridges into the calmer coral gardens for a drift dive across a vast array of corral pillars and swim-throughs, punctuated by sandbanks.

I say calm, the waters are massive here and a 5k/hr current sweeps you over the reef as if you are flying. Just below there are lazy nurse sharks lounging around in pockets of slack water and alongside us a pair of giant spotted Eagle rays sweeping in to land on the patches of sand. As they come in they start feeding, scooping up buckets of sand and filtering them for what I suspect are worms or small crustacea. I twist onto my side and fin hard to hold position with them as they arc around us.

Diving really does not get better than this; I'm heading straight back out tomorrow.

A Mexican dive adventure

You already know the guy I am diving with. If you ever saw Luc Besson's 'The Big Blue', then today I found that guy, Enzo; the main guy, the Italian guy, the diving guy. A wall of machismo about 6ft 2, with that kind of focus of someone has when they live for one thing and that thing is their life. Now I'm no first-timer in the water, but the badges on his shirt are intimidating: instructor trainer, wreck team, explorer, and a whole bunch of others I can't even fathom. I look at my hired jacket and mouthpiece and feel like I'm back in school doing an early class.

"Roberto. ¡Hola!" A man of few words.

In his wake is the luggage. What he lacks in conversation, he makes up for in kit. Now everyone has dive stuff, but this is all the stuff anyone *can* have: cameras, lights, belts, buoys, torches... and at least two of everything. And buried underneath it his dive buddy, also mid-forties coastal Italian. He wasn't quite so chatty so I never did get his name.

So we book in, just the three of us. And without knowing we really have booked in for the authentic Mexican dive experience. It begins with ripple of confusion and the frantic search by our divemaster for a taxi that would get us from the dive shop to the pier at the other end of the island. Frantic only because these guys are all searching for the few cabs that will do the special locals' rate rather than the standard fare the cruise passengers pay when they pour onto the island twice a day.

After a lot of shouting one turns up. After a bit more one accepts the deal. So we make the pier with no problem. Late, but no problem. It seems most things in Mexico are like this; you get there in the end, just not on the timescale you were planning. As a northern European, providing you leave your watch on the plane it's all fine. Eventually we even track down the boat.

Ah, 'boat'. There's a word. It conjures up images of romance, the slick lines of a racing craft slicing through the water, the tight sails of a yacht tacking, a gin-palace moored off the beach, at the very least something that might actually be sea-worthy. Facing us was a vessel that makes a Cuban raft seem sturdy. It is floating, I'll give it that. And after my water bottle had been converted into an impromptu petrol funnel, it even has fuel. But it had seen better days. The waves of confusion are starting to swell – diving today will not be simple.

Thing is, the crew inspire even less confidence. And there's an unusual tension between the guys who are working the dive trip, too much fast talk, phone calls, driving about the dock. I pick up snatches of conversation 'El capitan... cerveza... mañana'. Nope, it's not looking good. After almost an hour Martez, the head honcho shows up to deliver the final blow: we are not diving.

Our captain's boat had already sailed for the night; to the bar on the pier where they all go after work. Martez could go and drag him out, but the dive sites are hard to find and the currents are lethal, no-one wants a captain after even one beer. And I'm guessing that no captain has just one beer.

"I'm sorry", says Martez, "Mañana we dive".

"No, we wait," Roberto's voice cuts through like an engine from deep inside this equipment box. He surfaces: "You find another captain. It's okay, we wait. No you find one. Many pesos, someone will come. You use radio. We wait. It's no problem".

Martez does what he's told and unlocks the radio. I'm just thrilled the radio works. So far it's the only thing on the boat that hasn't needed serious coaxing before it's persuaded to do whatever it does. If only it was that easy with the captains.

After twenty minutes Martez is broadcasting more of a distress call than a job offer, and I'm conscious that the interviewing process could be quite swift. Right now if a kid with a compass shows up he's going to have the job. Meanwhile Sergio our divemaster is just staring at Roberto's equipment. And the tanks. Just the four. Each. They are diving air, a helium mix and nitrox, an enriched oxygen mixture that means they can stay down longer. Sergio is rapidly realising he is the least qualified on the boat and is starting to take his gear apart in the hope that no captain shows. We're two hours behind and the date with his new girl is heading for the rocks.

Roberto seems to be one of these guys who when they tell people to do things, they do them. He talks at Martez again, whose confidence has withered to the point of just nodding energetically. Then he is back on the radio, and probably for a larger fee, and much to Sergio's distress, we soon have a captain. There's a brief calm in the storm of confusion. And Roberto has just about finished rebuilding his equipment, which with the aid of a small underwater scooter, now resembles a submarine (though I venture it can stay down a lot longer).

The motor turns over and we chug out to Palanca reef in the strong currents to the south of the island. The irony that the boat is worth less than Roberto's dive gear is not lost on Sergio, who is openly wishing he still had the job with the big dive school that owns the lucrative rights to some of the cruise ship passengers. He doesn't even have a dive computer and looks like he'd be much more comfortable taking first timers down a few meters for one of those 'come and try' experiences.

I never found out why he didn't have that job any more, but half an hour later we roll backwards over the side and fall into the fresh clear Caribbean waters, dump the air out of our buoyancy jackets and start falling like leaves to the ocean floor. Our captain dropped us right on top of a wall that vanishes out of sight; an undersea cliff sinking another 500 feet or more. The Italians slide down it, into the darkness and then out of sight themselves. We drift along the ridge, about 100ft down looking out into the blue for the big fish that brush up against this part of the island.

Sergio spots an adult grouper first, at just under a meter it's a good lunch for the predators that patrol the drop off. A few minutes later I drift into some barracuda swimming against the current. Sleek bodies just twisting almost imperceptibly to hold their place. I turn round far less graciously, tuck in my hoses and arms and start to fin hard to match them. Three, then a fourth joins us, striped bodies, eyes alert, enjoying their place at the top of the food chain. We swim together for ten minutes, me just slightly to one side so my air doesn't hit them when I breathe out and make them angry. With teeth accounting for a fifth of its body you really do not want to make a barracuda angry.

And then over the ridge and onto the sandbanks to look for turtles. Like everything here, it all seems to turn out just fine in the end.

Night diving

So I survived my first encounter with Roberto and had a truly great dive... although an odd thing did happen later, and it made for an interesting dive. I can say odd now, looking back on it from the margarita haze of an evening beach bar. Our divemaster, the hapless (and increasingly hopeless) Sergio managed to lose two things, both the boat and all track of time; two commodities of not inconsiderable importance when you are diving.

The adventures of the afternoon meant that our second dive only begun at about 6:30. That's roughly three hours later than it should have. Which wouldn't really matter, unless it was getting dark: it was getting dark. Very dark in fact. The sun sets here about 7:30 which means that underwater the light doesn't stand much hope of penetrating the surface after about, well, 6:30 as it happens.

Now normally with night dives you take some extra equipment. Torches can be pretty useful, and a long inflatable balloon that act as marker buoys to show the boat where you are, and a compass, just in case you really do get lost and have to head for the shore. Actually, the torches may seem pretty obvious but they let you see stuff you'd never have known was there. The bright light creates an explosion of colour everywhere you look. Even at dusk the buoy's essential for the boat to find you on the surface; at twilight it's pretty tough telling a diver from a wave when you are more than 100m away and in this current that was a given.

So, without any of this, and with a Captain who was meant to be elsewhere, and a Sergio now two hours late for his date, it made for an interesting dive indeed.

"The bus to Chiquila has gone".

The bus to Chiquila really had gone. That much is pretty evident from the ticket seller's hand gestures. Which is not what you want to hear when you had to get up before both 6am and the sun to get on a bus that just got you to where the bus you wanted to get had just left from. Back in Playa de Carmen, the sweet faced girl who sold you the tickets was adamant you would make the 8:30 connection. Thing is, there was no 8:30 connection. Maybe there was once, but not now. The Chiquila express (and take that with a pinch of salt) left an hour earlier.

Buses and roads; backbone of the Mexican travel industry. In fact, pretty much the only bone of the Mexican travel industry given and the notable lack of railways or rivers in the south. There use to be air, but the recent crashes on internal flights had wiped out the few routes the government hadn't already grounded in their war on drugs. Roads are the key: there are trucks for freight and busses for us. And occasionally, like

those small local buses in the southern part of Quintana Roo, a hybrid that combines both. Often with a supporting cast of chickens, pots, bags of produce, the occasional large mammal and always the grouchy security guard who insists on taking a double seat regardless of how many people are standing.

But buses and bus timetables seem to have more of a casual relationship with each other than they do at home. And it sucks when you miss one, especially when there's only one a day. I'm cursing myself more than Mexico, after all I should have expected it, double-checked against it, thought it through, done whatever you are meant to (though what *is* that exactly?), and done it again when you are relying on a once a day connection to make a once a day boat, to a once a trip island. The first bus may have arrived on time as she promised, but it's the connection that matters most. When it comes to bus timetables, if their unity is that of marriage in Europe - for better for worse, in sickness and in health - then in Mexico think of it more as an early date. They may have met before (though probably by chance) and now they're checking each other out, deciding on their next move, there's anticipation, gossip, excitement and even adrenalin, but as yet no actual meeting. And today one has decided to be fashionably late for the other. So that's why I'm here, in the bus terminal on the edge of Cancun in the cool morning air at 8am with a 23hr wait ahead of me.

It's a calm time. The ticket hall is almost empty and the ticket kiosks have no lines. They still manage to keep referring me to someone else each time I ask the cashiers for Chiquila, but it's nice that they have no lines. It makes the place feel less oppressive. When you are as linguistically challenged as I am, vast lines, confusing signs and only a few minutes before departure can make bus stations pretty daunting places.

But the bus to Chiquila really has gone. Though I only find this out once I've bought the ticket from the man who rather than being in the kiosk is wandering around the ticket hall selling scraps of paper from a book that looks like he made it at home on one of those printing presses you can buy kids for a dollar in the market. (And he probably did).

"Hablo Ingles?"

"¡No!"; this is going to be tricky.

So that's how I end up negotiating routing options with a ticket seller in his late fifties who has no English and even less of an inclination to help yet another lost tourist who can't read a bus timetable. He's civil for sure, but I can tell his heart's not in it. Actually mine isn't either. My heart's in the air-conditioned restaurant over the road ordering Mayan scrambled eggs; a spicy collision of cultures that substitutes baked beans on toast with refried beans and tortilla with a sprinkling of coconut, and laces spinach into the lightly scrambled eggs themselves. I really am longing for breakfast. Hallucinations; that's what travel here can do to you.

Back in the terminal we've found a map and it's time for a little geography. From both the road network and his hand signals it's unclear how the Chiquila bus gets there, and I reckon that trying to meet it en route is pretty futile, but there's a little scratch with 'Kantunilkin' marked next to it that must be less than 50ks from Chiquila. 50ks is a short hop compared to where I am now; it's a breakthrough. It looks like a potential

routing so I mumble something about 'autobus par.. por favour'. He gently moves his head in a way that suggested a nod. Not an actual fully-fledged nod, but enough to placate me.

"Collectivo? Taxi?", I wail desperately, pointing at the gap between the two dots.

My new friend just shrugs. But I think he gets the basic idea as he looks at his watch, thinks, and then whisks me off to the busses with a newfound sense of urgency. Along the way he's fiddling in his pocket: pen and change appear. He's scribbling over my ticket and giving me a few pesos back. I'm just bemused but you have to go with these things, right?

The bus routing may yet turn out to be possible, but we'll find that out later as it turns out that the Kanata-something-or-other one is leaving; now. It really is *leaving*. When I ask when, I catch something like 'El punto... hora' while he trots ahead of me uncannily fast. He's gone from catatonic to neurotic in a matter of seconds and dragged me with. And in less than a minute of boarding, the Mayab coach is weaving its way through the piles of rubble that for some reason lie indiscriminately around the main exit of the terminal, giving a hint of war-torn frontier territory. Then we're onto the increasingly busy streets of the city and stopping at every street corner for a few more passengers. Oddly there's no mention of Kantunilkin on the bus itself, but this feels like progress and sometimes that's all you need. I want to thank the ticket guy and give him back the change he just gave me as a tip for being so helpful even if it didn't seem like that. But he's long gone, and no doubt settled back into his tranquil life next to the kiosks.

My new companions are a young couple with a toddler whose braided hair drapes over the arm rest as she sleeps in spite of the ceaseless jolting, and two women wrapped in headscarves old enough to be her ancestors. I help one of them pay the driver. She's speaking Mayan which means we won't be chatting much either, and clutching her handbag with a heap of other bags around her feet. We're picking up speed again and the driver's making vast waves with his whole upper body as we pass another coach, where quick inspection reveals their driver is doing exactly the same. They both beam broadly as the buses pass, though I can't help but think who they expect to see driving the bus other than another Mayab bus driver.

So what of my new destination, Kantunilkin? It's large enough to be on the map, but small enough to avoid any mentions in any guidebooks. Truth is I'm not holding out for much more than a roadside shelter and a tacos stall; Mexico's equivalent of a one horse town. Though thinking about it, the horse could prove quite handy.



And with the comforting vision of me and Tonto moseying along the dirt track to the coast, the Mayab bus sneaks out of the city limits onto a deserted highway, rattling through potholes and heading vaguely west. Soon the houses have thinned out and there's jungle on either side, and only the occasional passing truck or



car crammed full of everything to break up the empty road. Oh, and we just stopped in the middle of nowhere to pick up a shirtless guy with a withered face and an equally withered large truck wheel. Looking at the road, maybe that's all that's left of whatever he was driving?

If truth be told, the only bone of the transport industry is not in great health, it seems to have a dauntingly large ditch

running alongside it, and the patchwork of those pot-holes stretches from here to Belize. Trying to ignore the creeping feeling in the back of my mind that we'll end up in the same ditch as this guy's truck, I start plotting how exactly I'm going to get through the next stage of the journey to the fishing island of Holbox.

Tonto

Tonto arrives in the form of Ramone. If there were horses then they must have fled before the buses arrived. Kantunilkin turns out to be a one-taxi town, and Romone is the guy. His car is filled with dangly things and I have a hunch Ramone shops at the same store that sells those little plastic Mexican characters with the 'I Love Mexico' stickers. There's a dangling Koala wearing a romper-suit that is so faded I'm thinking it came with the car (probably early seventies), a dangling Santa Clause and a few more toys of the non-descript animal variety. There are stickers for Cancun, stickers for Mexico, stickers for radio stations, stickers for pop stars and stickers just for the sake of stickers. Add in a trim of dangling beads, loud Mexican pop music cranking out from all the speakers, dark sunglasses and a beaming driver and you get the picture.

Ramone's in his early thirties and from here in Quintana Roo. I'm still struggling with Spanish, but he distinctly says he's been driving for two years. I'm presuming he means taxi-driving, although judging by the way we're sliding around in the dirt on the unsealed road to the coast, it could actually just be 'driving'. Outside the town (which takes well under a minute) he opens up the engine and soon we're sitting on 120, sharing the pop music with raw jungle on either side. There's not much traffic on the road, but as we approach the dust thrown up by a truck in front, Ramone edges up the speed as if going faster will help us squeeze through what is looking like an increasingly un-squeeze-through-able gap. Shrubs are hitting one side of the car on one side and the wing mirror's about an inch from some very menacing wheels on the other, but we slide through unscathed and continue in the same manor for another half hour.

Along the way we race through the town of San Angel and I catch the sign that says population 1850 – though quite where they are in the twenty or so buildings we can see is beyond me. Then there's a girl

waving a butterfly net in a break in the trees and I'm conscious how many butterflies there really are here – though as we touch 130 more are probably now wedged in our grill than she could ever hope to catch in the net. Ten minutes later, my eyes are wide as the distinctive insignia of a Mayab bus appears through clouds of dust hiding the road ahead . As we shoot past this one I look back to read the sign; it really is the 7:50 to Chiquila I missed this morning. With its speed capped at 90 we pull into the port about ten minutes ahead of it and I have time for drink on the tiny ferry before the dozen or so bus passengers hop on. Things really do have a tendency to turn out just fine

Conch shells

Conch shells and Holbox

The runway on Holbox is marked out with conch shells . They're painted white: thousands of them. Two neat rows on either side of a wide dirt track that's been cleared of larger rocks . Unless you are standing right on it, the only sign there's an airstrip is the windsock flying confusingly over the sports field next door. It's as small as small can get and even though the moon was bright this week, I wouldn't want to try a night landing for sure.

The conch shells are not the only odd thing about the airfield. There's a distinct absence of planes, which was something I'd been counting on. Asking Maria, who seems to be the only person in any of the terminal buildings (read 'small house') at the airfield, it becomes clear that my plans to hitch on a supply plane, a medical plane, or a trainee looking to boost their hours, or indeed anyone with some wings , are looking pretty futile. Not a single one of the 1600 or so islanders has a plane or a pilot's licence. Which is also odd, because judging by the size of the 'bossman's' house business can't be too bad. Maria explains that my only option is chartering a Cessna Caravan from the guys I met in the control tower back at Cozumel. Saab Air do private charters across the Yucatan peninsula, but at US\$500, it's a little steep unless I can find a few

other people who fancy a trip to Isla Mujeres.



Holbox (pronounced *Hol-bosh*) is an endearing island fishing community about 10ks due north of Chiquila, a crown some 30ks long and in parts only a few hundred meters wide that balances on the top of the Yucatan Peninsular. Sitting in the Gulf of Mexico, the waters here are shallow and warm, though not as clear as the

Caribbean. As I wander a few miles along the deserted coast the beach turns to shells and wading into the sea to cool down it's hard to find water more than knee deep. But easy to trip over conch shells that litter the sands. Conch are big here; soups, salads, and as Martin the diver from Cozumel who tells me at lunch "part of tradition, good for the man, makes us horny". He also says it's "important for Mayan people, much vitamin", then laughs, but I can't seem to help noticing how content the women all seem.



The island's a nature reserve, and one that the mainstream tourist scene seems to have overlooked for the time being. There are no roads, just sand tracks; no cars, just bicycles and customised golf carts (including several painted in yellow and black insignia of New York taxis); no banks, or ATMs (though rumour has it that there's a guy in the park some days who may change dollars), and as you know, a once a day bus that no one is that sure of the time for. When it gets dark it gets dark, when it gets light people get up. When it rains the mosquitoes come and the tourists leave, and when it stops raining people do well again. The kids can play anywhere and no harm will come to them, there is no crime, no deadlines, no stress, and as everyone keeps saying "no problem". I can't help but think I've stumbled across some parallel universe to the world I know.

On the main road that crosses the nine blocks from the south to the north shore is the Tortilla shop that cranks out the islands snacks, the room is about 3m by 5 and in full factory mode as we sneak a look in through the wide open wall that acts as serving hatch, loading dock and extraction fan. It's a day later when I find out just how good the tortilla taste, but this fresh, with heaps of guacamole and salsa, really is something special.

If the tortilla factory is the key to island snacks then the fishing boats on both shores provide the main event, leaving the car ferry (actually just a barge that's pushed by a tiny tug) to bring the rest. Round the square there's one ice-cream shop, an old man making ornaments out of shells on the corner, a couple of general stores and a few clothes shops that have grown up in the front room of people's homes, and a few groups of ambling visitors heading for the beach. The church is here, though it looks a squeeze to get more than a hundred inside. To make a phone call you head to the telegraph office on the south west corner of the square; a small concrete room dwarfed by the satellite dishes in its back yard (but be there before three when it closes). There are enough bars and restaurants to cater for the few tourists that make it here, and as of a couple of years ago an internet café offering a lightening bolt of technology into a community that still sleeps on hammocks, speaks Mayan and doesn't care much for TV.

And that is Holbox, at least as far as our footprint has marked it. A thousand people living on a narrow sandbank surrounded by, and as in sync with, the sea as you can get these days.



My cabana is on the northern shore and like almost all the houses has a roof made from a dozen or more layers of woven dried palm leaves held down with fishing nets. Beneath are a couple of beds , a hammock and a painted concrete floor. The on-shore breezes keep everything refreshingly cool and lying here in a shaded hammock outside on the beach, all you can hear is the rhythmic whispering of the palm leaves as the wind breaths over them in soft gusts. It's beyond idyllic and I find myself planning my next trip back here. Holbox was the reason I came to Mexico, and ironically, due to pretty poor itinerary planning, a loused up bus connection and some poor Spanish, almost the one place I missed.



And what really surprises you most is just how few tourists there are. Devoid of infrastructure, it will remain a no-go zone for the package tours and industrial scale tourism that has swamped Chichen Itza and Cancun, but even among the independent travellers it seems to have escaped notice. I flick through some other guides and they too have followed Lonely Planet's almost dismissive treatment of what must be one of the island jewels of Central America.

Mosquito coast

A mile, maybe two, along the coast from the village is the last of no more than ten hotels and Cabanas. Everything here is small scale and I've counted no more than 8 rooms anywhere. Inside there's an icebox with cold juice and an hotelier who is winding down for the

end of the season. Come the first of September he's back to the mainland:

"Here we are long way from village, when mosquitoes come it not nice". I ask more about the mosquitoes and it seems this is no casual statement; the island's famed for them, and probably one of the best defences to mass tourism.

Gone Fishing

Holbox is the place to come if you want to have a chance at world-class tarpon fishing. That was the claim on one of the websites and I can only assume that it's true.



"Been fishing all day, every day", confirms Nick, the retired American Airlines pilot covered in cotton from neck to fingers. "Me and my buddy come every year". The closest flats are about 15 minutes from the jetty, but the travel an hour or two for large tarpon. The season runs from May till now and for those who don't want deep fishing there are small tarpon and snook in the flats around the mangroves

Italians and Mama's cooking

I've been speaking Italian for four hours now and it hurts. Thing is I don't speak Italian. I mean I took a class once, for a few months, but it was 30 minutes a week and I didn't turn up to most. Italian was light relief from my A and S levels, and longer ago than I care to admit. But Mr Rees would have been impressed with me tonight.

Another odd thing about Holbox is that everyone here seems to be Italian: Leon and Carmen who own the cabanas, all of their guests, the guys in the bar and the tourists I met in the general store. Blonde Italian kids play with the Mexican toddlers and most of the titles in the book exchange are Italian novels.

"We come here fifteen years ago", explains Carmen, toddler in one hand and a pair of US\$300 sunglasses in the other, just out of reach. "We Italians, we love the sea, we want to live by it. But back in my re-ion, region [Carmen stumbles over the words] apartments by the sea are one million dollars, here, even in Playa three bedrooms are only 18,000." Now her only complaint about Mexico, ironically, are the number of Italians on the Yucatan coast.

I throw in my lot with the two young Italians in the cabana next door and we head to the nearby beach bar for a cold cerveza or three. Joe and Eric are from a small village about 20ks outside Milan. They are twenty-one and off to see the world, jacking in their jobs in construction in favour of a plane ticket to Cancun. They've been on the island a day which makes them veterans in a village you can walk around in a few minutes and I'm out for being a sponge, soaking up as much as I can.

The beers progress into food and we have dinner on the north beach just after sunset, with the backdrop of the jetty and the tiny bobbing boats that form about half the fishing fleet. One of them provided the huge pescado [fish] we're tucking into, lightly grilled and with delicate pile of vegetables on the side.



Joe's English is about the same as my Italian, which places the burden of linguistic link on Eric, who, incidentally, can't figure out why the place is over-run with Italians either. They're heading to Isla Meyers in a few days as well, and then wherever things take them. Nervous and under-prepared for life away from home they are both shocked to discover how much British travellers seem to clock up. It all reminds me of a time when I was sixteen and backpacking through the villages of Northern Italy with friends from school. In a tiny hillside hamlet somewhere in the mountains near Luca, the teenagers were shocked when we turned up. Even the oldest, at almost twenty, had to ask Mama's permission to go down the mountain and here we were, a thousand miles from London, scruffy as anything, lost and not a parent in sight.

Eric and Joe remind me of those guys. This sudden freedom seems to have daunted them both, but when I ask about the family it's clear that they miss home already. Both live with their families, like pretty much everyone before they get married from my Chianti-clouded memories. They've only been away a week but already it's a wild adventure. Food can be a great comfort in times of need and as soon as our excellent dishes have been wiped clean, Eric bounds off to the bar to order a pizza.

"It's good. Not like my mother's, but good," he's beaming on return.

Ten minutes later their faces light up as a quarto-fromagio with anchovies lands on our table and is duly devoured amidst nothing less than whoops of joy.

Sails

Seventh mode of travel

Sailing boat is the seventh mode of travel I have used since stepping off the air-conditioned bubble that touched down in Cancun a few weeks ago, eighth if you include the pony, but that didn't last long.

My father would have been proud of me today. I sailed about 10ks along the coast. Thing is, I don't sail. Mind you I don't speak Italian and that didn't stop my botched attempts last night, so maybe with a just a hint of over-confidence I rigged the Laser, threw in some cold water and strongsun block and leapt in.

Leoni had taken me around the block a few times yesterday, the block being the two fishing boats moored about 200m off the shore and the next pier. It's an unusual 'block', but seemed to do the trick. He was enthusiastically explaining in Italian about winds, knots, rudders, tacks and balance. He's a good teacher, and if I spoke Italian I would have learned loads, as it was I sort of grabbed things when he pointed at them, tried stuff out when stuff could be tried and measured my performance by the anxiety on his face. We tacked around the piers a few times and I consistently failed dismally to turn around the buoy I had been aiming for. But we stayed upright and I vaguely felt some childhood memories being rekindled.

My father enjoyed sailing. I was never really sure if he was any good at it, but he talked the talk, walked the walk and sailed the boat. To listen to him in the club house after we'd moored up, you'd have taken him for an old sea dog for sure. I wasn't a dismal failure, but the way I was never allowed to skipper (or at least skipper anything either expensive or unsupervised) spoke volumes.

And today there's just me, the Gulf of Mexico, and Carmen's farewell words of
"Careful, we no want you in Cuba Daniel"

I tack ceaselessly up along the Northern shore to where the flamingos wade in the shallows, going into the wind and cutting into the currents which are my safety tickets home if disaster strikes. Even when a slightly unplanned tack hurls my baseball cap onto the water I manage to execute a perfect salvage operation following what could only be described as a three point turn. Progress is good and on one of the beaches Mariabela and Ricardo want to come for a ride. I stop by for a bit but politely decline and head back out along the shore - not quite ready to take passengers just yet.

Coastal waders

Drifting past the brown, deep billed pelicans that perch on the wooden stumps that mark what was probably a jetty before the 1988 hurricane ripped through. Pelicans are the most ungraceful of birds when they take

off, it's never clear to me how their comedy falls and flaps turn into flight but I could watch them do it for hours. Given how slow my progress into the current is, on the third tack next to the same stump of pier it feels like I am watching them for hours.

In the shallow flats that stretch half a mile out from the beach, hundreds of Flamingos are burying their beaks in the sands to feed. Bundles of pink feathers balanced in those tiny legs.

Flying fish

I'm sailing quite far out now and the waves have picked up. The wind is tugging in gusts on the mainsail and the rudder (literally held together with string and sticking plaster), is regularly slipping out of place. Did I mention that Leoni's Laser was one of the worst dingy boats I have ever seen? Even if he had been a great sailing teacher back in Italy, he clearly didn't bring any kit with him when he and Carmen moved here about six years ago.

The cracks in the hull that let in the water, the roughly patched fibreglass from the cracks I can see inside, the substitute sail and mast, and the missing cleats are not exactly giving me a secure feeling. As another wave breaks over the bow, adding to the inch of water around my feet I find myself curiously idolising Sergio's dive boat back in Cozumel.

Then the fish arrive. I must have sailed straight into a school of sardines who dance around on the surface sending the water white at the bows. Dozens leap over each other, a clear three or four inches out of the water. A minute later they're all gone and I tack back to the shore.

Then it's the turn of a ray. I can't even guess what type but it leaps vertically about a foot above the waves before splashing back down.

Then a flying fish. I'm guessing it was a flying fish because it flew and, well, that seems like a good name for a fish that can do that. It flew about six foot off to the port side going about ten times the speed of my boat and I'm sure I saw wings kick out from the side. A minute later and there's another, gently changing direction mid-flight in a way guaranteed to fool anything that might have been chasing it down below.

Whale sharks

The Whale sharks here are big. In fact to say a fish that tops 40ft is big is still an understatement. They're vast, huge, gigantic. They are the pyramids of Chichen Itza in the water. And they are fast; real fast, exhausting even a strong swimmer after a few minutes. Here they congregate in large numbers as the

currents stir up plankton, bringing it to the surface. We're all scanning the waves when the first one appears off the port bow, about a hundred meters from us; two fins gliding through the water, one firm dorsal fin and the weaving tip of a massive tail that will knock you out without even trying.

I slide in the water and kick like mad along the surface to what looks like its path. The first thing you can see is its mouth. About a meter wide and almost square in proportion. Rows of leopard like spots across its head and when you get real close a tiny eye pointing outwards from either side. I get real dose, close enough to see the eye, close enough to see inside the mouth, close enough to see the spots. When you weigh several tonnes and have an engine stronger than a boat on your stern, a feeble swimmer is not something you bother altering course for. He comes straight at me.



He's moving quickly, I'm guessing just under 10ks/hr, and I'm fining as fast as I can just to keep up, and keep ahead of his lateral fins that are about a foot beneath my chest. Eye to eye we're swimming away from the boats, him chasing plankton, me chasing him, and his tail chasing both of us. His large tail. His large powerful beast of a tail, that is slicing sideways through eight foot arcs not too far from my own foot fins.

I only manage to keep pace for a couple of minutes and then admit I'm beat, breaking left with a few almighty kicks to get away from the engine end that's coming up fast. And off he goes, vanishing into the murk. Minutes later I'm just catching my breath when another appears and the chase is on again. Then rest and some calm surface finning towards where the others are. On some there are symbiotes sticking to their underbellies, others are escorted by smaller sharks, from a very different species with black and white lines



running down their body. Then it all starts again; nervous juveniles and oblivious adults – we swim till our legs hurt and have to be helped back on board. Exhausted I slump down onto the bows and peel off my wetsuit to warm up in the noon sun.

Off the starboard bow a ray breaks the surface, a square black silhouette against the bright blue sea. It flips backwards, landing clumsily with a splash designed to shake off any barnacles that may have decided to set up home. On

the way back we see more rays breaking the surface, falling back into the water to clean their backs. Then there are more pods of dolphins gently ambling through the straights towards the Gulf. More schools of sardines fleeing the predators and turning the water white as they jump about on the surface.

Night drives

Eric and Joe are tucking into another pizza in the island's one pizzeria and wave as we head away from the square. I've been stumbling through pigeon Italian now for a couple of days and it's not just hurting me, it's also decimating any Spanish I may have accidentally picked up in the past few weeks.

Ricardo has a golf cart for another few hours and is determined to make the most of it. Loading up with insect repellent, cold beers and some iced water – which even in the middle of the night comes as a welcome relief - we head out along the shore with Mariela and Yotu to enjoy the island by moonlight. It's a day before the full moon and the light is so bright on the beach you could read. We're not alone. The quiet daytime beach has a distinctly wild side, with a potent mix of golf carts and tequila in the area around the village. For an island with no golf course there really are a lot of golf carts. Since they arrived ten years ago they've overtaken bikes, and bicycles as the standard mode of travel; bouncing wildly through the deep dips of the sand tracks that pass for streets all over the island. When we get out to the smooth firm sands of the beach the driving is much easier.

After an hour or so the beer has run out and the driving descended to an all-time low. Ricardo has given up any attempt to stay on the tracks and we're bouncing wildly over patches of grass and shrubs. Yotu has a plane to Munich in the morning and is openly doubting whether she'll ever make it: after a year away from her job as a features writer on a regional daily, this will be a tough week. "I'm already thinking of leaving in a couple of weeks and heading to South-East Asia", she confides.

Party time

Tucked away on the windward side of the village, hidden at the end of a gated alleyway that leads from the beach, is the place the young people go when the internet café closes. Playstations and websites are replaced by the island's one Karaoke machine and in an upstairs air-conditioned bar, the guys are out to impress their girls tonight.

It's a distinctly Mexican affair and I feel quite privileged to be there, though I get more than a few stares when I follow Mariela in. When I get to the bar Ricardo waves a greeting to the guy serving that I guess from the way he replies means 'don't worry, he's with me', and I order some of the cheapest and coldest beers I've had in days.

The singing is rough, the videos so kitsch they'd be worthy of the souvenir stalls in Chichen Itza, the tunes entirely unfamiliar, but the atmosphere great. No doubt they will all be pushing on till sunrise, but a few tequilas later I have to make my excuses. Tempting though it would be to try and follow in phonetic Spanish as the ball bounces over the words on the big screen at the end of the bar, there's some packing for me to do tonight as well and it's easily past three already.

Banos and buses

The giggling girls at the Cola stand seem to have lost the key to their Banos. Either that or they're just enjoying watching panic creep across the face of yet another tourist. Time's tight and the boat should be leaving. The harbour master on Holbox kindly let's me use the toilet in his house. A near disaster on the ferry has been avoided and as I jog back they're untethering the moorings. Just in time I hop on and we pull away, and I vaguely wonder what would have happened to my rucksack had I been a minute later.

When we dock a storm's approaching and lightening bolts are hitting the ground a few miles further along the coast in a scene close to the experience at Chichen Itza. I seal up my passport in waterproof envelopes in my money belt as I clamber off the little ferry boat. There's no bus in sight and I'm starting to regret declining what I think was an offer of a lift from a middle age Mexican mother who barely came up to my chest. Well I think it was a lift, but who knows. She definitely said something about Cancun and driving, but maybe she was just touting for Ramone.

The Mayab coaches turn out to be hiding around the corner, ensuring we all run the gauntlet of taxi drivers and mini-vans first. I can't see Ramone but am sure he's around somewhere as this is the rush hour time of day and a fare to Cancun can be a week's wages in a single ride.

In now familiar fashion there's a rush to buy tickets and then nothing happens. When the bus driver eventually decides it's time to go he opens the wide door to the luggage store under the bus (which breaks immediately, dropping its main supporting pole into the dirt), and then he ambles up the steps. At the second stop a dozen chattering schoolgirls get on, one of them carrying a small box with narantha [oranges] printed on the side. By the delicate way she is handling it and the ceaseless tweeting that surrounds it, I'm guessing that the pet canary is on the move.

The plan is to head for Islas Mujeres for the last night before making my farewell to Cancun airport in the morning. Although the weather's not on my side there's ample time and the journey is simple. An hour later and there's about fifty passengers standing, almost all women, and most with children. This is the only bus to the city and with every village we stop at it seem like everyone is heading along the Cancun road. But the passengers change constantly and few stay for more than half an hour.

When a family leave, two schoolgirls grab the seat next to me, sitting on top of each other, looking at the oddly dressed tourist and then giggling lots. An hour later there's a young mother and a very young baby – I'm guessing only a few weeks old. I can't figure out of the guy she is with (looking barely old enough to be in his teens) – is he a brother or husband? But before I get the chance to say 'hola', they pile into a family seat behind.

"¡Frescas, frescas!", two smartly dressed boys of maybe eight or nine at most, lead a gang of kids onto the bus carrying a cool box with what I suspect are some pretty warm soft drinks. They stay with us for a village or two and then hop off. The older boys have shoes, but the younger kids that follow in the pack are barefoot

and look pretty rough. I want to buy some drinks, I want them to keep the change, I want them to go to school, I want things to be better.

Islas Mejeres

So a taxi, a tacos stall and a boat later, and I find myself back in Islas Mejeres, the island I first came to a few weeks ago. Nothing's changed for sure, but everything seems just a little different and I realise I'm more comfortable with Mexico now. The couple of touts that are hanging around the main strip ignore me and I ignore them. The flags are waving outside of the dive shops and the barmen are laying out the tables street tables for dinner.

There are familiar faces, both locals and travellers, and in the café and the pizzeria, and I'm soon checking back into the same place I stayed for the first few nights.

"¡Hola, que tal!", I get a welcome back from the girls on reception and a couple of the travellers. After a swim there's a barbeque and European music, with margaritas blended in the garden under the palms and ice-cold beers being



unboxed. After dark settles around us and the coloured lights paint pictures on the walls, Vanessa starts fire dancing again. This time she is with a few of the people she's been teaching and it's impressive stuff as huge arc of flame fly around us – though their intense looks of concentration on faces of the supporting cast makes all of us in the front row edge back just a little. Then there's a birthday and cake, signing and more margaritas, and everyone chats under the rustling trees until the small hours.

Time's up

I always hate the end of trips. They're so final. Everything you've had you want to take with, yet nothing can come. The community you've been part of feels like home and you're not ready to leave. There are people you never got the chance to say goodbye to, and things you never bought – though they can keep that plastic man and the palm tree in Chichin Itza as long as they like.

But the rains have come, the sharks have gone and it's time to leave. Catching up with some friends back in Islas Mejeres last night was great, but for many the season finishes next week and in the jungle the mosquitoes will prosper in the storms. So with a handful of photos and some well thumbed guidebooks I climb into a taxi late one morning at Puerto Jaurez "¡Aeropuerto, por favour!"