

Mexico a Go Go

On the short flight from Havana to Cancun, I laid out such a simple plan. I had about five weeks left on this latest "voyage" and had yet to really relax. I had been carrying a few paperbacks thru different time zones, always planning to get all this reading done while I lounged by the pool. A simple plan.

Departing Cancun on the 26, the first stop was a lovely little place called Vallidolid, about two hours down the road. This would be my first rest stop. Nothing much to see/do except for these limestone sinkholes called "cenotes" where you can swim in relative isolation. But of course I hit town, and the casa mama had all these ideas for what to see and before I know it, I'm committed to seeing the ruins at Ek Belam out in the jungle. Then there was this amazing folk art gallery. I did ride a bicycle out to a few local cenotes and did get to swim, but it was like a public pool back home, swarming with kids who didn't obey the "no splashing" edict in either English or Spanish. I also wasted a half day going to see Chitzen Itza...it disappointed...too many people for too few sites. After this global ruin hunt, frankly I was expecting more from such a well-known place. Never cracked those books.

Ek belam Fotos

From Vallidolid, it was another 2hrs on a bus to Merida. I had planned this route to skirt the Caribbean side of the Yucitan, but the prices for even a bottle of water are just so much more expensive than on the Gulf side. Merida was the capital of the Yucitan and priced accordingly. I would spend New Years here but only long enough to catch more ruins at Uxmal

From Merida, the overnight bus brigade began. First stop was Palenque, set among the Chiapas jungle. These were some great ruins...and with a waterfall. Even the gringo accommodation was in a jungle setting..Fun for two nights and I finally cracked a book..it was a big stop

Palenque photos

From the Jungles of Palenque, another overnight bus dropped me in San Cristobal de las Casas (SCDLC, as it's known). This was my first real splash of color in southern Mexico. It was a great place just to roam the streets and chow down. Four nights here didn't seem enough.

Night bus number three brought me to the coast and the surfing heaven of Puerto Escondido. Since I didn't surf, a bit of this lifestyle was lost on me...and it was hot, like Egypt-in-Summer hot... I couldn't be outside after ten in the morning. I thought it was just me but a fair amount of the hostellers also hid out by the bar. I opted to cut my visit short and push on to one of my favorites; Oaxaca.

Another night bus, but then 6 nights in an amazing place. The colors, the food, the streets, this was a great place to explore. I hit the Sunday market about 20 kilometers out of town and saw some amazing crafters and took an all-day tour out to these "petrified waterfalls

Oaxaca photos

And then it was the last overnight bus to Mexico City. At 25-million people, this was the largest city I've ever been to...I mastered the public transportation system and spent 3 days taking in a lot of sites.

After three days, I was off to Zitacuaro, in the next state of Michoacan to catch the butterfly migration. I had foreseen a lack of hotel rooms during "peak season" here and booked a handful of nights months ago. As the time drew closer, I began to seriously question the wisdom of five nights in a hotel. Thankfully the owner didn't seem to mind as I cut my stay down to four nights.

The route to the butterflies is not exactly straight forward. I believe this is due to the temporary nature of things. The "season" for these fluttering things is only 4 months long. So while I was expecting tour companies to be sitting at the bus station awaiting my arrival, this was not the case. The hotel owner explained how I could get there by cab and eventually I did get out there, but it involved a few hops.

The Rosario Sanctuary is perched up a mountain. So from the parking lot everything was a steady march up. Taking public transportation from "Zita" ran me all of \$3; the park entrance was \$2.50 and a generous guy can tip another \$5 and feel like a king, so overall your experience can cost as little as \$14. I mention what it "could" cost as a theoretical, since your experience may vary, as did mine.

The advice was to go during the week for smaller crowds, which was true. Unfortunately, fewer people also meant fewer "collectivos" heading to the park from the next town of Ocampo...So I got in on the cheap, but when no colectivos showed up, I faced the prospect of a 12km walk back to town. Thankfully I carried a fist full of pesos and hailed a passing cab. For the outrageous sum of \$7 he got me to my bus connection in Ocampo..

Turns out that monarch butterflies, or perhaps butterflies in general, are a skidding creature, prone to flutter off at the slightest provocation, say a shutter click. Or probably more precisely, hundreds of shutter clicks. They said this year had the greatest number of monarchs in the last decade and I can't dispel that...there were millions...too many to photograph, but I did my best. It was really an amazing site. One you're in amongst them, they ask for quiet, so everyone is just silent, almost floating along with the monarchs... and eventually the trail turns downhill and you return to town.

So that was Day #1 photos

One bit of odd luck happened before I left on this last trip. My travel buddy, the Canon 5D Mark III, began acting up when I left Cancun, and during my attempt to figure out what went wrong, I reset the camera to its factory defaults..what could it hurt. It was just after the reset that I lost all control of my menus...and I'm a guy who loves his menu choices...unfortunately the factory default is for smaller picture sizes. And without menu control, I couldn't change it back. It was as if my big camera was reduced to a camera-phone...I was not happy, but eventually resigned myself to this being life.

Anywho, the night before I was leaving for Monarch heaven, I was downloading some images, and suddenly I had menu controls back. I didn't waste any time, and immediately reset the image size to "massive" and sure enough, 2 minutes later I lost control again. But at least I would be taking bigger pictures heading into the last tour.

So back to the story. There are actually three sanctuaries in the area, and while I had notions on seeing all three, I would be good with just two. The second sanctuary, called Cerro Pelon was up another mountain, but in the opposite direction from Rosario. This time an expensive cab brought me to the park, where I faced the prospect of a 2hr vertical hike or a 35-minute horseback ride. I went with the horse since the guides were essentially horse grooms. The first five minutes had me thinking I could have gone for the hike, but then the trail went up very steeply. I was glad to be on a horse. I was also glad to not BE a horse...my guy struggled near the top and quit several times. But in the end, we all made it.

While the horse was recovering, I was left alone to go see butterflies. There were nowhere near the numbers as in Rosario, but the environment was different. Up at the top of a mountain pass..I walked along the trail with my big 400mm lens and got some pretty decent shots, but was feeling a little dejected...the horseback ride was more like an hour. I had broken this poor horses back, and for what? A handful of pictures of butterflies on flowers.

Down the hill we went, and I was just going to chalk this up to bad luck, when the guide took a sudden left-hand turn near the bottom. I knew we were on a different path than the way we came, but suddenly there were like 10 horses, and five guides milling about. I dismounted and followed the guide around a corner and there were monarchs..or more specifically MONARCHS! Millions of them. A blizzard of red and black wings pouring towards me. Turns out we had probably summited too early in the day and the butterflies had yet to warm up with the sun. During our trip down the mountain, they had woken up and were coming down with us..

There were other tourists just standing amongst this huge swarm, taking it all in. They had yet to summit the mountain, and who knows what the top looked like after this point, but this area was amazing. Since the others had a mountain to climb, they soon departed, leaving me all alone.

I went a bit further and found this area that was just like frenzied blur. Looking down, for whatever reason, there were about 50,000 butterflies on the ground warming in the sunlight. I got the big lens working overtime to capture this huge canvas of wings and motion. Again, it was totally amazing to be amongst so many, knowing this was THE spot in all the world to see this.

After the final dismount, my taxi took me to the bus station and I returned to Rosario for a late afternoon shoot, which was OK, but nothing near what the morning shoot was like.

I pulled into "Zita" later that night exhausted, but content at having caught what I came to see.

Monarchs

Three more nights in Mexico City followed as I took in museums, a castle and even an antique market.

The bags are packed and I'm flying home in the morning. I have been wearing shorts for nine straight months and if the weather reports are true, I will be experiencing almost a 100 degree temperature shift come the morning.

I will be sending along a more formal report about all of this travel, but for now, I'll just summarize where we've all been on this trip:

April 28, Fly to Barcelona via Reykjavik

Barcelona to Tangier, Morocco via 26hr ferry

A month in Morocco, camels, Sahara, souks and medinas

Two weeks in Tunisia with Star Wars sets

Two weeks in Egypt, bottom up, Abu Simbel to Cairo. Touched Pyramids

Ten days in Jordan, Petra and Wadi Rum, Amman and the Dead Sea

Two weeks in Romania in a car; Dracula's Castle, Painted Monasteries and that Salty Turd place

A week in Hungary with Deputy Dave, the smartest guy I know and a hell of a friend. (great family too!)

A few days in Slovakia where the blue-berry dumplings were sublime

Almost a month in Prague and Cesky Krumlow (the camera really heated up here)

A week in Krakow Poland where I almost went into a gastronomic coma

A fortnight in Turkey, Istanbul and Cappadocia

Three weeks in Sri Lanka where I liked the green parts better than the shore

Three weeks in England and Scotland. It dented the wallet, but who cares, it was awesome

Five weeks in Ecuador; slow tour from top to bottom with a walking two weeks in the Galapagos

Two weeks in Cuba, there's more here than cigars and rum

And Five weeks going from Cancun to Mexico City; cenotes to monarch butterflies

I thank you all for coming along with the journey. My next adventure will be trying to adjust to life back in America while convincing my cat (the Dude) that I used to live in his house.

Feel free to drop me a line and let me know how you're doing. I will be spending the next few months working on the photos from all this travel, so I'll have some down time.

Looking back, most of the photos I took were of man-made objects; Pyramids to Petra, Churches to Castles...but then there was the Galapagos, that eagle and those butterflies.

Take care and I'll keep you posted on what's next...

The Bon Voyager

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