

'The real Mexican experience'



Thessalon correspondent **Pauline Clark** and her husband, Gerry, recently ventured to Mexico to see first-hand what their photographer daughter, Courtenie, raves about — they weren't disappointed

"Head from Courtenie lately?" Gerry asked. "Not yet," I responded. "I'll be glad when I hear she's safely back in Mexico."

You might think that a bit strange. Safely back in Mexico? You bet. Having been there ourselves, we're pretty comfortable with Courtenie's environment.

Courtenie, our daughter, is a photographer. She's supposed to be returning from a trip to Guatemala where she has been travelling alone for the past 12 days. She's actually been living and working in Mexico for more than two years, first in Puerto Vallarta, then Guanajuato. Mexico City and now Playa del Carmen.

In fact, we recently travelled to visit her in Playa to get what our daughter calls "the real Mexican experience."

Not wanting to do the luxury resort vacations, my husband and I both agreed we much preferred this impromptu travel, where we would wander to nearby towns, see a few tourist attractions, experience Mexican neighbourhoods and find a few places to stay along the way.

"Aren't you scared?" people asked us before we left.

Not at all. Courtenie has been in Mexico for a while. Not only does she know her way around, she's also able to speak Spanish. We would even have our own guide and our own interpreter.

Our first little test to our confidence came about the instant we arrived at the airport in Cancun. We quickly cleared customs after disembarking from our late night flight but our cause for concern came when we stepped outside. Where was Courtenie? She was supposed to be there to meet us. Actually, we didn't feel really concerned until a taxi driver told us the last bus to Playa del Carmen left at 8 pm. It was now 10 pm.

"Don't waste money on the shuttle," Courtenie had said. "There's a bus that only costs \$3." The shuttle I found in an online search would have been much more expensive so we decided to go along with our frugal-minded daughter's plan.

In true Mexico fashion, there were plenty of people outside the airport more than eager to assist us with taxi service. The trouble was we didn't know where we were going.

While my husband chatted with a young taxi driver, I bit the bullet and turned my cellphone on. I knew it could be expensive but I sent a short text message using the Live Profile app and our daughter immediately answered that she'd be right there.

A minute later she appeared followed by a female taxi driver, who immediately got into an indecipherable debate with the fellow to whom my husband had been talking.

"What's going on?" I asked. "They're just discussing who is going to drive you. He thinks he got you first," our daughter explained. "Now they want me to choose."

She pointed to the female and the young male shrugged, shook his head,



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and then proceeded to assist with taking our luggage to the taxi.

"The men here would never just let the girl load the luggage even if they're mad at her," Courtenie explained.

She had told me on another occasion that she liked how the men let women go first and would always give up their seats on a bus. I had to agree it's something we see less and less of at home.

Less than an hour later, Gerry and I looked at each other as the taxi bounced and bumped through an extremely rough street to our daughter's apartment, our home base for the



Photos by **PAULINE CLARK AND COURTENIE CLARK** Special to The Star

Top photo, Courtenie Clark is seen at Lago de Atitlan in Guatemala; top right, the family was entertained by mariachi bands on 5th Avenue right below the hotel room balcony; bottom right, a harpist stops to play a song on the beach in Playa del Carmen; above, Courtenie, Pauline and Gerry pose at the Tulum Ruins.

next week.

We were eager to venture from that base the next day so we walked down Avenue Juarez, then over to the street where we caught the colectivo to travel to the small town of Tulum. These shuttle vans are quite reasonable, costing \$30 pesos per person, the equivalent of less than Cdn\$2.50. Not bad for a 45-minute ride. There are literally hundreds of these vans traveling in all directions. Ours stopped to pick up passengers, mostly people heading to and from work in the many resorts along Highway 307.

Though Tulum is not nearly as touristy as Playa, there are many tourists. Many of the residents are expatriates from Canada and other countries. Some are what our daughter calls "hippies," who were selling their wares in the town plaza during the evening.

Tulum is one of our new favourite places. It had a great atmosphere, was not at all "Americanized" and we found some small hotels that were not only reasonable and very clean, but were unique.

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