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■ **MEXICO:** Continued



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

Above, Courtenie and Pauline Clark snorkelling at Gran Cenote; top right, Gerry on the beach at Playa del Carmen; bottom right, Playa del Carmen's 5th Avenue is seen at night; above, a woman with sells wares as the sun sets in Isla Mujeres.

Spectacular Mayan ruins

FROM C1

Of course, before we found these ones we had checked out a couple of rather rough looking hotels before finally moving our search to an Internet café.

While Courtenie and I searched the computers, Gerry wandered around talking to strangers. It's something he does so much that our daughters back in Canada ask where the photos of him talking to strangers are. The thing I have to admit is, he garners a lot of good information this way.

That's how we found Don Diego de la Selva. An Australian couple directed us to the edge of town within walking distance where, set a short ways down a dirt road, we found what we've come to fondly call "the jungle hotel." To reach our room, we had to walk through a palapa where we'd have a simple French breakfast in the morning. Don Diego's was like a hidden paradise offering a quiet serenity at least until the rooster started crowing at 4 a.m. We decided, however, that in Mexico, a rooster crowing at 4 a.m. is a good sound.

After settling into our room, we strolled back downtown and discovered the town plaza. Most towns in Mexico have a plaza where everyone gathers. We watched a clown perform for the children, other children were painting at tiny easels and we followed a parade of people as they sang and made their way to the nearby church.

We stopped at the Paletaria y Neveria (ice-cream parlour) for the Mexican version of ice-cream. Though we passed on flavours such as coffee and lime, we tried coconut and guanabana. No one seemed to notice or care that we were the only tourists there.

The next morning, we left our jungle paradise to continue our travels. As we walked through the town, we were slightly unnerved at the hundreds of police officers lining both sides of the street. Finally, someone told us that a dignitary was going to be coming through.

Our taxi driver told us the Mexican government believes a strong police presence makes tourists feel safer, but he noted that tourists feel more alarmed with so many police everywhere. Perhaps if they weren't all carrying such big guns, they wouldn't be so unnerving, I thought.

Our taxi took us a few miles out of town to the famous Tulum Ruins. These are the only Mayan ruins that actually overlook the Caribbean. We spent the few extra pesos it costs to hire a guide and it was money well spent. Ernie (Hernan in Spanish) our guide, was a native Mayan and told us a bit about the Mayan culture. He also explained how some of the hieroglyphics depicted tales of human sacrifice that once took place in this ancient culture. It was also interesting to learn that the wind tower on

the site was built in such a way that a shrill whistling noise would and, still can, be heard for miles as a warning when hurricane-force winds arise.

"Without a guide, this place would be just a pile of rocks to you," Hernan said. We had to agree that we had much respect for this ancient culture after our tour.

Interestingly, Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum is currently running an exhibition on the Secrets of the Mayans.

And finally after two days in Mexico, we put our feet into the Caribbean Sea, first on the beautiful beaches of Tulum and the next afternoon back in Playa del Carmen.

Though we bow away from the heavy commercial aspects of travel, we highly recommend Playa's Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue). This is where you'll find a street crowded with tourists along with blocks and blocks of hotels and hostels, restaurants, shops and night-clubs and street vendors and performers to suit every taste.

The streets of Playa are fairly easy to navigate, being set up on a grid system. Avenues run parallel to the beach starting with 5th and going up in increments of five. Streets or calles run perpendicular to the coast and increase by twos.

5th Avenue has some amazing hotel deals. We found a room with a balcony directly above the street for just \$40 and that was for three of us. The hotel had a strange and unique lobby and pool area which we knew our free-spirited daughter would appreciate. "I want an apartment here," she told us later.

Courtenie took advantage of the ocean being only a block away and rose before dawn to photograph the sunrise. Later, as she crawled back into bed for another hour's sleep, we slipped out the door to find an "Americano coffee" on the beach.

Since Courtenie had to work during part of our visit, I agreed with Gerry's plan to "make some money" going on a hotel time share visit. He's been fascinated with how that system works — not the actual time share but the whole gimmick of getting people to go. At every corner there are people trying to get tourists to go on these time shares. Usually there's an offer for a free breakfast or free T-shirts, but if you talk to the same people long enough, you just might get a better deal. Ask Gerry. We did have a good breakfast and walked away with a good sum of cash, but it took four hours out of our day.

One day we decided we would go to the island of Cozumel. As we waited for the ferry boat and talked to employees at the local tour companies, we learned that the island would be busy with three cruise ships docking that day. As we stood in the pouring rain debating our next move — yes, it rains a bit in paradise — we decided against Cozumel and began to think about visit-



“As we travelled home, we reflected that we'd never felt as safe on a vacation as we do in Mexico. The Mexico we hear of on the news is not the one we've seen; but in a country of 113 million, we've definitely not seen everything.

ing Gran Cenote, near Tulum.

The problem was how to get there, but after a little investigating, we opted to hire a taxi to drive us. The cost was only US\$60, much cheaper than the \$90 to rent a car. The taxi driver was happy to sit in the shade by his van waiting for us both at the cenote, and later while we lunched in the beach community of Akumal. It was a much better day for him than hustling for fares of 50 pesos per trip around Playa. One driver told us they sometimes only make three or four trips a day or less in low season.

Courtenie had described snorkeling as feeling like you're in the middle of Little Mermaid and I might have to agree. We'll have to do more of it another time. Cenotes are fresh- or salt-water pools that formed over centuries when rainfall was

absorbed into the limestone and collapsed the caves, creating the pools of water open to the sky. These pools are considered sacred by the Mayans.

The final leg of our trip started off with a late-night arrival in Cancun where we felt actual trepidation for the first time. Lodging in the highly commercialized hotel zone cost much more than we wanted to pay, but we finally found a more reasonable hotel. It was a five-minute walk to the restaurants so, being already well into the evening, we decided to take it.

Between the duct-taped shower head, the gaping hole where a shower drain should have been, the gritty feel of the fine Cancun sand on the floor and the rusted antique air conditioner, we weren't entirely sure this was a good place.

In fact, there was an instant in that hotel when I felt like I was in a horror movie. That was as Courtenie ran downstairs to catch the taxi where she thought she'd left her cell-phone, changed her mind and ran back up to where I stood in the hallway wondering where we were. The wind from the ocean howled around us. Sand was covering everything and we'd wondered just where Gerry had gotten to since he hadn't returned from registering.

But for all that, it was the most spectacular view we'd had in a room that week.

In the morning, I asked Gerry if we were on an episode of Candid Camera as we walked along the beautiful ocean and looked up at the front of our building. Some rooms were boarded up with plywood. Others had no glass or windows. Ceiling fans could be seen drooping in bad disrepair from the salty, sandy sea air. One room even had the cement frame of the window smashed and broken.

That was also the one time we didn't have our camera in our hands.

When we departed the hotel we were craving a strong coffee and went to Starbucks before figuring out how to get to the small ferry that would take us to Isla Mujeres. We were directed to the dock where an old boat transported workers and a few adventurous (translate: cheap) tourists to the small island. Gerry said the boat reminded him of the old boats that once transported people to Mackinac Island some 40 years ago.

Courtenie kept her eyes closed during the boat ride, saying she didn't like the motion. My husband had moved two seats ahead and also sat with eyes shut the whole journey. A young girl next to us looked a little green and an older couple, tourists also, rolled their eyes with a grin as the boat flew across the water. I wondered just where we were going and if we were truly crazy.

But about eight miles across the Caribbean waters, we arrived at Isla Mujeres. We knew the minute we walked off that boat that this was possibly the highlight of our week.

You could walk around the whole island if you wanted, but you could also take a taxi or rent golf carts or mopeds. The island is only five miles long and a half mile wide.

We chose to walk around the north end where we had docked and where the downtown was compacted into a few blocks. We were amazed at the many shops, cafes, bookstores and buildings. We even checked out a couple of small hotels and decided next trip we'd have to stay for a night or two.

We took pictures around the remains of buildings destroyed in a hurricane 20 years ago.

The water pounded loudly against the rocks and the wind whipped through our hair, and yet Isla Mujeres was quaint and peaceful. We stopped in tiny beachside bars for drinks, bartered for a Mayan calendar and some bottles of vanilla.

We also tried regional specialties like marquesitas, which are nutella, caramel, cheese and sliced bananas spread onto crepes and rolled up before they harden.

As we waited on the dock for the commercial ferry to take us back to Cancun, we watched the most magnificent sunset. Happy and relaxed from our day on Isla, we boarded the large commercial ferry for less than we'd paid to come over.

Back in Playa, we headed back down to 5th Avenue. Courtenie and I smiled as Gerry stopped to talk to the various vendors and time share sales staff we'd come to recognize. "Mr. Toronto," they called him as they recognized his Toronto Maple Leaf T-shirt. We stopped for dinner in an upper-level restaurant where mariachis entertained us at our table.

We watched and wondered about the tourists walking on the street below. We talked about the rough ferry ride to Isla and the guy whose photo we sneaked while he smashed open a coconut and poured the milk into a cup on the beach. We laughed at Courtenie's story about the middle-aged American sisters she'd met in a local bar one night and we watched them, seated at a table directly below us, flirting with their lone gentleman companion. We knew we would remember and laugh about these little incidents in the future.

Back at Courtenie's, we finished closing up our luggage and fell into bed, talking into the night. A few hours later, our taxi driver, the same one we'd hired a few days earlier, blew his horn ready to return us to the Cancun airport.

As we travelled home, we reflected that we'd never felt as safe on a vacation as we do in Mexico.

The Mexico we hear of on the news is not the one we've seen; but in a country of 113 million, we've definitely not seen everything. Mexico City alone has a population of 22 million — that's almost four cities the size of Toronto.

According to the Mexican Tourism Board, approximately 1.6 million Canadians visited Mexico in 2010 — almost twice as many as five years earlier. The number of Americans visiting each year is in excess of 17 million.

As I finished typing this, I pulled up Courtenie's Facebook page one more time.

"Thirty-three hours of traveling and waiting for buses are over ... Back in Playa," her status read. I breathed a sigh of relief. She was back in Mexico. Safe. Again.