



Reader's Trip

The Yucatan's solstice

BY KAREN KRAMER

Every year thousands of tourists flock to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to enjoy the beaches of Cozumel and Cancun. But for the solo traveler who wants a bit more adventure (with a smattering of history and anthropology thrown in), I recommend going toward the end of September or March for a different reason.

Last March I headed for the Yucatan to experience the spring solstice at the pyramids of Chichén Itzá. Twice a year—on the Spring equinox of March 21st and the vernal equinox of September 21st—the sun casts a series of shadows on the great pyramid of Kukulcan, that makes it appear as if a diamond-pattern rattlesnake is descending. The phenomenon is well known throughout Mexico, but few tourists from outside the county have discovered it.

Merida, and the surrounding region

I arrived a week ahead of time so that I could explore the region and talk with people familiar with Mayan culture. Merida,

the capital city of the Yucatan, was my base for the first week. From there, I could make side trips to the seashore, small towns, and ruins. The city itself is wonderful—well laid out, with parks and plazas, museums, inexpensive restaurants and cafes. It is a sane, logical city with north/south streets having an even number, and east/west streets, an odd number.

Merida has plenty of three star hotels in the \$20 to \$40 range, single. I stayed at the Hotel Caribe near the center of town, which at \$31 a night, single, was a delight. A former convent, the Caribe is filled with beautiful Mexican tiles, sculptures, and lots of lush plants. Similar to many hotels, it offers a good restaurant, but I preferred to frequent restaurants where I saw local people eating. The "L'Ouvre," on the corner of 62nd and 61st street, had a midday meal of soup, enchiladas, beans, dessert, and coffee for \$4.50. "El Popular Chino" next door served typical Yucatan dishes. I ended each day with its wonderful salbutes—fried, hand-made tortillas covered with shredded turkey, pickled onions, and avocado slices. For \$1, it's the Yucatan equivalent of a pizza slice!

As Merida is hot and dusty, I made side trips to the various beaches and ruins. Although it is relatively inexpensive to rent a car, I prefer to take buses (second class) whenever I'm traveling in Mexico. The buses go everywhere, and are inexpensive and reliable. I enjoy traveling along and getting off someplace—anyplace—and walking around for a few hours. I stopped one day in a little town called Kanastin, about 40 miles outside Merida. In an hour I had walked around the entire town, up and down small dirt roads, past thatched houses with tidy gardens, through the Indian market, and back again to the bus stop.

There are several beaches within an hour's bus trip from Merida, but the best one is Celestun, a fishing village about two hours away. The bus, which departs from Merida's 55th street station every two hours, costs about \$4. Celestun is a tranquil spot to spend a couple of days. There's no noise—and no crowds—much the way Acapulco was 60 years ago. Even the water is quiet, bathtub warm and waveless. The Hotel Gutierrez, built on the sand, costs \$16 a night. I chose not to

stay overnight, but spent the day walking the town's quiet streets and having a midday meal at the Restaurant Celestun, also built right on the sand. A large, informal place, the friendly staff will let you use the rest rooms to change in, and its showers to wash off the sand and salt, even if you don't eat there.

The spring equinox

The highlight of my trip was the spring equinox. Several days before the event, I spoke with Jose Diaz Bolio, an 88-year-old native of Merida who has devoted his life to the study of the Mayans and their connection to the sun and the snake. Señor Bolio explained to me how the sun strikes the side of the pyramid in such a way that triangular patterns of light and shadow appear, forming the shape of a rattlesnake. The sun can only make this pattern at the time of the equinox when the hours of day and night are equal. The Mayans used this as a calendar—a sign that spring had arrived.

Although most Mexicans think of the equinox as being exactly on the 21st, the time varies a bit each year, and it is possible to see the patterns for a day on either side of the exact equinox. Jose Diaz Bolio advised me to go on the 20th and 21st in case of rain or crowds. It was good advice.

On the 20th, I went to the main bus station on 71st street and bought a ticket for both days. (The buses, which leave every hour and cost \$4, can sell out, so it's best to buy a ticket ahead of time.) The bus took two hours to get to Chichén Itzá—by the time we arrived at noon the sun was hot. It's wise to bring along food and bottled water, which you can buy from vendors along the way.

It's also a good idea to arrive an hour or so before the shadow begins, to give you some time to walk around and see the other ruins. About 2 p.m. guards began to rope off an area of about 200 feet at the base of the pyramid. (This prevents climbers from scrambling around and spoiling a perfect panorama of what is to come.) The shadow begins to appear, very slightly. Then, slowly, for the next three hours, triangles of light and dark spread from the top of the pyramid to the base, culminating at the carved shape of a serpent's head at the bottom. If the sun and your imagination are active, there is no denying that a large serpent has made its way down the length of the pyramid.

I was so moved by the event that I went back again the following day. As most people come on the exact day of the equinox, it was a little too overwhelming. The large crowd, estimated at 20,000 persons, overpowered the spirituality. Many "New Age" followers brought crystals and musical instruments. Mexican families came with huge picnics. I was glad I had attended each day, to experience the flavor of both.

In general, I found the Yucatan a great place to travel alone. The Yucatecos (who prefer to not be called Mexicans) are gracious, courteous, and friendly. Their hospitality makes visiting the Yucatan easy. At any time of year you can enjoy the ruins, the beaches, and an attractive capital city. But if you go in March or September, you'll also have the experience of watching a rattlesnake formed of light and shadow descend a pyramid, just the way the Mayans viewed it hundreds of years ago.

Karen Kramer is a New York film maker.

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