

# States of the Union

## THIS IS MEXICO?

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

**D**IANE AND I arrived on this battered Caribbean island yesterday, 470 springs after Hernán Cortés dropped by on his way to the Mayan mainland. A tourist without a travel guide, Cortés was hunting for gold, slaves and mainly fame in Spain, and he would find all three well inland, where Montezuma and the Aztecs held sway.

Cortés in any case was unimpressed with the coastal Mayans, whose civilization, say our archeologists, had already soured. Among other things, they had forsaken their kinder, gentler ways in favor of human sacrifice, sometimes of children, on whose hearts the executioners ceremoniously feasted. Cortés' system of ethics permitted butchery but drew the line at sacrifice.

What we are mainly hunting for here on Cozumel is peace and quiet. Diane has commandeered an umbrella and two beach chairs (plastic contraptions shaped to the contours of no known species). We douse each other with a thick cream guaranteed to discourage melanomas. With towels beneath our heads we recline, sighing in the sun, expelling the chilly northland winds we brought with us, digging our fingers into the warm sands. Dozing.

COZUMEL

Ugh! Electronic noise shatters our dreams. We sit up. Three attractive college-age Mexicans, two boys and a girl, have made camp beneath a nearby umbrella. One of the boys is fiddling with an enormous squawk box. "So this is Mexico," I mutter.

It is an unwritten rule in our family that when punk rock breaks out, Diane springs into action. "Please," she says to the kids, "turn off the tape." The Mexicans look attentive but puzzled. There seems to be a language gap here. One of the boys makes the music louder and looks at us questioningly.

"No, no," says Diane. She goes to the box and turns it off. Then she points to the surf, which is making a soft, persistent washing sound: Oshunoshunoshun. "There," she says. "There is the beautiful music." Now the girl understands. She gazes at the ocean and smiles at Diane. Diane smiles back. With only a grain or two of self-consciousness, the five of us stand there listening to the surf.

Tuesday. Some of the gold that Cortés pilfered is returning to the Mayans in the form of American tourist dollars. Our two hotel breakfasts this morning — orange juice, coffee and a stale muffin — cost 37,000 pesos, which is not as much as it sounds but no bargain at \$8 apiece. (The Mexican government

these days has inflation relatively under control. The annual rate is 23 per cent, compared with the 1986 spiral of 276 per cent.)

Cozumel prices are only slightly less outrageous than those charged in Cancun, the Honolulu-like tourist trap about 10 miles to the northwest, on the coast of Quintana Roo, that has made all the profiteering possible. Cancun was no accident. Once a sleepy Mayan village, it could not even be found on Mexican road maps as late as 1970. Then FONATUR, the agency charged with improving Mexico's tourist business, chose Cancun as its first multimillion-dollar experiment in resort development. Now it is a gaudy metropolis of 190,000 with hundreds of hotels, restaurants and car rental agencies strung along its two slender sand spits.

Last November a devastating Caribbean hurricane, *el cyclone*, hit both Cozumel and the Quintana Roo coast, uprooting trees, flattening thousands of thatched dwellings and even knocking down some of the new, sturdy-looking hotels. On Cozumel the rubble is all around us and many hotels along San Juan Beach remain closed, their sandy shores washed away, their skeletal frames bereft of windowpanes.

"They are the ones who had no insurance," a taxi driver explains to us. "They are searching for Miami money to rebuild." Unfairly perhaps, to an American ear "Miami money" sounds remarkably like Miami vice.

Wednesday. We lunch at El Acuario, an elegant seafood restaurant featuring an eye-catching tankful of tropical fish. Hoping to eat as the Cozumelians do, Diane orders the conch salad. She gives me a "taste," if that word can apply. It seems a form of oceanic tofu. Halfway through the pile on her plate Diane stops eating. She sighs. "I can't decide," she says, "whether to ask for a doggie bag or just forget the whole thing."

My answer endangers nearly 35 years of relative marital harmony: "Let your conch be your guide."

After lunch we drive in our rented topless Jeep five miles down the coast to Chancanab National Park, a gorgeous beach with a snorkeling playground

offshore and a botanical garden at our backs. The mangrove jungle-garden is much the worse for wear, courtesy of *el cyclone*, but there is a deep lagoon intact, so pure that we can gaze down and watch the tropical fish winking at us.

*Schnorchel* is Middle High German for snore or snort, neither of which is feasible with one's nose stuffed inside an airtight snorkeler's mask. I feel more comfortable looking up words than looking up fish, but at Chancanab what choice does a bookworm have? Reluctantly I rent a mask, attach it to my face and ease myself into the shiny sea. (Diane is already out there somewhere praising the fish for their silent music.) It turns out to be quite a show. All manner of translucent creatures glide past my goggled eyes—pink, gold, orange, purple, and colors with no earthly names. We humans, huge as we loom, do not seem to disturb the fish, possibly because we are so colorless.

I stay underwater until bested by an illusion of drowning. Emerging, I hear a fellow snorkeler remark to her friend that some of the fish "are sort of smiling." *Those are the Mona Tunas*, I consider telling her, but don't.

Back at the hotel we deliver our Jeep to Ramon, the careworn hotel travel agent who brokers all rentals. "How was it?" he asks.

"This Jeep is in terrible shape," I tell him, hoping for a refund. "The horn doesn't work. The lights don't go on. The odometer is dead, and so is the gas gauge. How can you give a customer a heap like this?"

Ramon shrugs. He has heard it all before. "We used to make Jeeps in Mexico," he explains. "Now Chrysler makes them in your country, and the import tax is not good for the price. They are very expensive here. So we don't buy any new Jeeps. We do the best we can with the ones we have."

"Whatever happened to free trade?" I snort. (You can do that when you're not snorkeling.) But Ramon is busy filling out my credit card receipt. He is a practical man. He does not respond to stupid questions.

Friday. We are running out of cash, so in the morning I take a taxi down-

town to the Plaza, where there are rumored to be two banks. The first bank is very crowded. I stand in line for an hour, only to be told by a teller that I have missed "the morning exchange hours."

The second bank has a sign in the window announcing its hours: From 10 to noon and from three to seven. It is 11:45, but the bank is closed. Being an American, I believe in printed messages. I linger in front of the window, trying to reconcile the discrepancy between the sign and the locked door.

Soon I am joined by two compatriots, a mother and a daughter wearing bright-hued slacks and straw sombreros. They are probably fresh off the cruise ship *Adventure*, a graceful, all-white extravaganza that I saw anchored in the harbor through my taxi window. "Nine ports in seven days," said the driver. The older woman tries to open the door. "It's locked," she says unbelievably. She keeps on rattling the lock. "How can that be?"

The daughter seems bored. "It just is, that's all," she says. "Come on." She starts to move off but her mother stays put. "I don't understand," she says. "Why do they say one thing and do another?" Now the daughter taps her foot and looks my way for sympathy; she rolls her eyes heavenward.

At this point I intervene. "Madam," I say to the mother, "this is Mexico." My explanation seems to satisfy her. "Oh," she says, "I see."

I HAVE BEEN reading Carlos Fuentes' *The Old Gringo*, and now, as I watch mother and daughter disappear around a corner, something a minor character says in that novel springs to mind: "Mexico is not a bad country. It's just a different country." America is not a bad country either. It's just a literal-minded one.

The sun is shining but it has started to rain, the gift of a single small cloud directly overhead. With others I take shelter beneath the thatched roof of the Plaza gazebo, where dark-skinned women are trying to sell secondhand books spread out on tables. From my protected perch I survey the Plaza, a

pleasant square surrounded by cafes and shops. The hurricane uprooted many of the small, beech-like trees, but it did not disfigure two obligatory busts of Benito Pablo Juárez (1806-72), the revolutionary who became Mexico's George Washington; nor did it damage the modest white campanile that stands in one corner—unless it was the winds that snuffed out the tower's clocks, both of which are stuck at 9:38.

It has stopped raining. As I leave the gazebo, I glance at the man who has been standing next to me all this time. From a short string in his right hand dangles a very large pink fish, quite dead. I note that it is not smiling.

Monday. A small commercial plane this morning carried us across the waters to the village of Playa de Carmen, whence we drove to Tulum in a rented VW Beetle, the kind no longer sold in the U.S. Tulum is the site of an ancient coastal city the Mayans called Zama, or "dawn." It faces the east. It is mid-afternoon; most of the tour groups have departed and we have the place pretty much to ourselves. We wander from one stone ruin to the next—forts, temples, palaces—trying to imagine the lives that once filled this silent ghost town.

The city was built on a hill. At the crest rise the remnants of a stone castle, once a sacred site where ritual sacrifices were made. We climb the stone steps to the top and are rewarded with a sweeping view of the Caribbean, its white waves crashing against the rocks below, and of a meandering wall that circles the city. A handsome American family has arrived in our wake. The bearded father carries a little girl. The boy, about eight, stays with his mother, who reads to him from a guidebook.

"This is the shrine where the priests sacrificed little children," she tells him. "They liked to eat the children's hearts."

The boy shows only curiosity. "Would they eat mine?" he asks.

"Oh, yes. Yours might be very tasty."

They drift out of earshot. "That kid is going to have nightmares tonight," I tell Diane.

"You never know," she says. "This is Mexico."