

Part 3: Mexico (east & south)

****Introducing Mexico****

Mexico is about 6 times the size of Malaysia, with a population of 118 millions, It is of upper middle-income, according to UN classification. Per capital GDP around US\$ 15,800, the 15th largest economy in the World. Electronics is the key export, around 30%. A big country by any standard.

The people

60% Mestizo (mixed ancestry), 19% Whites, 15% indigenous. The indigenous people belong to many groups: Maya, Mixtec, Xapotec, Tzeltal, Otomi, etc . Religion wise, 83% Catholics and 9% Protestants.

What to see:

We started at the eastern end, came to the southern states with more indigenous people, and ended our tour at Mexico City in the central highlands, just a small part of the big country.

The countryside

Many of the rural roads have a wide paved surface outside the demarcated lanes. Something like having the width of 3 effective lanes for a 2-lane road. That makes over-taking easy and safe. Efficient. And like Guatemala, drivers automatically slow down in village areas because of road humps. Sign shown. Why, only cars feel the humps, no effect on buses and trucks eh? Shown also solar-powered street lights.



The Day of the Death

As in Guatemala the Day of the Death is celebrated around October 31st to November the 2nd. Our second period of visit in Mexico started on November the 3rd. There were still decorations in many places. In Mexico skull masks and papier mache painted with skeletons are the most common public decorations. Shown some interesting items. The 1st and 2nd photos show the papier mache skeleton family and paper-cut lace at our hotel in San Cristobal de las Casas. The 3rd a pairs of "girls" found at the Zapotec ruins at Mitla.



A coffin was on display at the Centro de San Angel, a street decoration, both in Mexico City. The last is a very popular skull called "La Calavera Catrina" based on the etched image by the famous engraver Jose Guadalupe Posada in 1910-13.



****The East and South****

Merida

Merida is the capital of the state of Yucatan, with a population near to a million. 60% of the people are Mayans, making it the city with the highest % of indigenous people in Mexico. The landmark is the Plaza Grande with some historical buildings, such as the Casa de Montejo built in the 1540s as the palace of the first governors. The original portico shows 2 conquistadors standing triumphantly on the heads of Mayan Indians. Need to have that such bad taste meh? Where are the human rights people?



Other notable buildings fronting the square are the City Hall (night scene) and the Palacio de Gobierno famous for its giant murals painted by Fernando Castro Pacheco in the 1970s. The one shown is about the Caste War between the Mayans and the whites.



Merida is also famous for its churches. The Cathedral de San Ildefonso is the oldest church built in the Americas, built around 1560-1587. The Templo de la Tercera Orden was built in the 1600s.



Chichen Itza

Chichen Itza is a huge archaeological site about 125 km east of Merida. The city is estimated to have a population of some 35,000. It is a relatively new city, active from around 600 to 1200 AD. The northern side is older than the southern side.

The main attraction is the pyramid called El Castillo, 24 m high and dedicated to Kukulcan, the Mayan version of God Quetzalcoatl. Its height

and striking geometric dominate the site. The acoustic is amazing. A clap of the hands in front of the staircase of the pyramid is followed by an echo that resembles the chirp of a bird, the quetzal, a large colourful bird found in the highlands of Mesoamerica



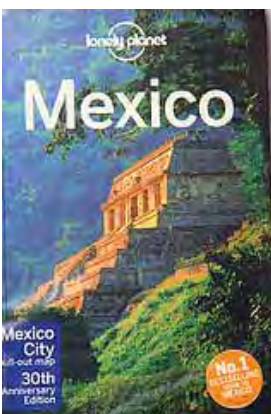
Chichen Itza also has the biggest ball court in Mesoamerica, 165 m long. The ball court is a stadium lah. Still in place are 2 engraved rings that the ball has to pass through to win a point. The rubber ball was as big as a man's head. The ball game played by the Mayans also had ritual significance. The losing team members could be executed, as shown by carvings on the walls of the court. Our LCW should feel lucky, still alive after having lost in 2 Olympic finals.



Chechen Itza, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the 2nd most visited archaeological site in Mexico. In a 2007 worldwide internet poll, the El Castillo was voted as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. To me it is **hugely over-rated**. It has received favourable voting because it sounds like "chicken pizza". Many people love pizza.

Palenque

Palenque is another famous Mayan ruin, located in south Mexico, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is smaller than Chichen Itza but much older, around 200 BC to 800 AD. It was conquered by jungle after that. The main structures which have been recovered from the jungle include the palace and several temples. The most impressive is the Temple of the Inscriptions, constructed during the reign of King Pacal (615-683 AD) His tomb was also there. The pyramid measures about 60 m by 42 m at the base and is 27 m high. At the top the temple itself is another 11.4 m in height. The temple is featured on the cover of the Lonely Planet book on Mexico. Wow! On the cover of the best-selling travel guide. Do I need to say more about the grandeur of the temple?



The palace is a group of structures and courtyards at the center of the city, with a 4-storey Observation Tower.

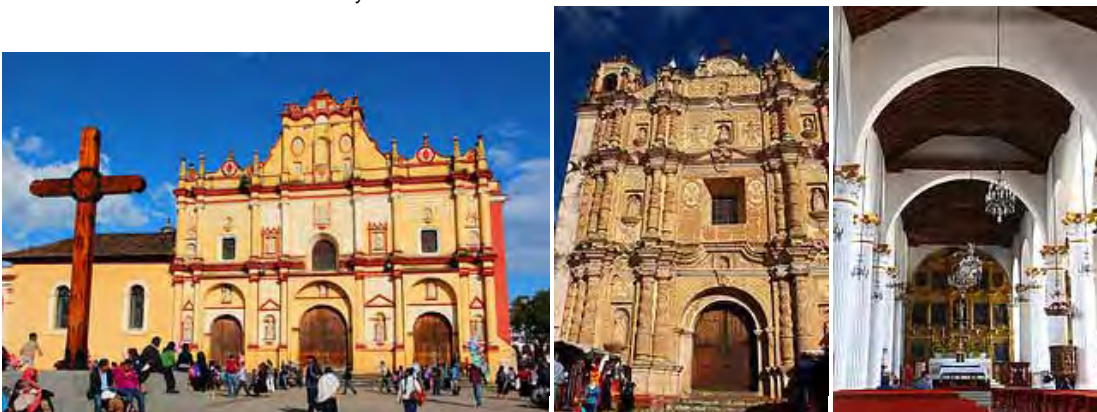


Shown a carved image of King Pacal on the palace wall, the Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Foliated Cross, with a 3-year-old tourist from Beijing, China. We asked this little cutie any difficulty in climbing the steps, she replied, "mei wen ti 没问题" or "no problem".



San Cristobal de las Casas

San Cristobal is a small town of around 140,000 people in the central highlands of the state of Chiapas in south Mexico. There are many churches here. Shown the Cathedral and the Santo Domingo Church. The Cathedral's architecture has European Baroque, Moorish and indigenous elements. The main façade was completed in 1721. The Santo Domingo Church is extremely ornate in decoration. The columns and external walls are heavily decorated with stucco.





Canon del Sumidero

The canyon is about 45 km north-west of San Cristobal de las Casas. We had a 2-hour boat ride on the Grijalva River to look at the canyon. It is about 14 km long and nearly 1 km deep. It supports a variety of wildlife like crocodiles, iguanas, monkeys and several kinds of birds.



The river is heavily populated. The most obvious pollution is garbage, particularly plastic containers. We went there early morning and our boat was the first to start. At a particular spot on the river, over maybe a 25 m section, the river was choked with garbage. Like the garbage pieces all cuddled together for warmth in the cold morning. On our way back there was no more such gathering, as the many boats had dispersed them. Only the early birds see such spectacle!



Oaxaca

It is city of some 265,000 people, the capital of the state of the same name in southern Mexico. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its archaeological ruins and the native Zapotec and Mixtec cultures. Shown the famous Church of Santo Domingo, built around 1555 to 1666. .



And some exhibits on contemporary arts in the Santo Domingo Cultural Center.



Monte Alban

Monte Alban is the ruin of the greatest Zapotec city. The top of the mountain was leveled for the creation of the city center. The civilization covered a lengthy period from around 500 BC to 750 AD. The restored areas are the Grand Plaza and the surrounding buildings. Shown the huge Grand Plaza, 200 m by 300 m as viewed from the North Platform, and the central temples.



Monte Albán is special in having a large number of carved stone "Danzantes" (dancers), which represent naked men in contorted and twisted poses, some of them genitally mutilated. Shown a dancer carving, the Ball Court, and a fellow visitor. People with artificial legs also climbs up and down the ruins, while some able-body visitors just sit at the café to avoid the blazing sun.



Mitla

Mitla is a Zapotec ruin some 44 km north of Oaxaca, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While Monte Alban was a political center to the Zapotecs, Mitla was the religious center. The unique feature here is the intricate mosaic fretwork made of small stone tiles. Thousands of pieces of cut and polished stones are fitted without the use of mortar. Shown details of such fretwork. Next to the ruins is a modern church with red domes.



Around Oaxaca

We also visited Santa Maria del Tule to admire the "Tule" tree said to be the World's largest cypress tree. It is said to be at least 2,000 years old, as chronicled by the Aztecs. It was considered sacred by the indigenous people. For example the Mixe people believed it was the walking stick of a God. The diameter is about 12 meters. The tree is still growing. We also visited the former convent at Cuilapan de Guerrero. Shown the uncompleted chapel with interesting shadows.



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**** End of Part 3: Mexico (east and south) ****