

# Cozumel May 15-22, 2004

I had been looking forward to this trip for a while - I had a great time in the Cayman Islands last year and wanted to get back to the warm clear water. Geoff and Lana were in Cozumel last year and their pictures were fantastic - I had to see for myself!

May 15

I actually departed late the night before on a red-eye flight - the other option (which most of the others did) was to take a 6:15 am flight, which meant getting up at 4:15!! Early wake-ups weren't for me... I would try my best to sleep overnight on the plane. It was a pretty uneventful flight - but the whole time, it was hard to imagine actually being in Cozumel just a few hours later - and actually going diving! I have a hard time sleeping on planes anyway, but with the anticipation of the trip, it would be even harder.

The last part of the flight was the most beautiful - as we skirted past the Florida Keys and Cuba. Miles of clear blue water all around us were interrupted by just a few patchy clouds. Over Cuba and over the mainland of Mexico, you could tell where the land started by looking at the edges of the tall stacks of clouds hovering over the land. They were just fair weather cumulus formed by convection - no major weather was in the area. The graceful white sand beaches of the islands with the crystal emerald-green, turquoise, blue and indigo water dotted the ocean.

We arrived at Cozumel finally - I just had to get my luggage and clear customs and hop on the taxi to the resort. The green "PASE" light came on at customs - so clear sailing. I found a taxi minivan and we started heading to the resorts. I wasn't quite sure where Scuba Club was, but had to trust them to take me there. Besides, the taxi was already paid for ahead of time in the airport, so there would be no point for them to drive me around aimlessly to rack up the fare.

I made it to the Scuba Club at around 12:30 - actually just ahead of Simon and Cindy. We all got our keys and checked in, and actually caught the tail end of lunch - chicken enchiladas from the resort. It was so nice to finally be there in Cozumel - it was picture perfect weather. Not too hot or humid, a few scattered clouds, and the ocean was as blue as you see in the Corona commercials.

I had to take a short nap to help get over some of the jetlag and lack of sleep from the flight. I was still waiting for the others to show up - in the meantime though a couple more people showed up and I started getting my dive gear ready. I picked up my weights from the shop - all 8 lbs of it, and got my BC ready.

Before diving, though, I wanted to test out my new underwater case I had gotten for my digital camera. Gretchen also wanted to get in the water to fiddle with her dive gear, check weights, and stuff. I snorkeled a bit while she was on scuba - we went off the pier down to about 15-20 ft. Everything was working pretty well - the new camera case performed quite well. I still needed to do a little calibration with the flash and remembering to set all the menus right before entering the water (there was no way to use the "up" and "down" arrows underwater, making the menu navigation quite difficult or impossible in some cases). But that was a small price to pay for the quality of the underwater shots. Plus if the fish moved while you took the picture, you could just shoot it again! The instant gratification was key!

We had our little orientation shortly afterward - getting the logistics figured out for the trip. We were going to be doing 2 dives a day - the boat left at 9 in the morning. The afternoons were pretty free, except for one day when we planned on diving a shipwreck.

The checkout dive was nice - to get used to being in the water again and dealing with the currents. It was easy to get separated quickly in current if you weren't paying attention. Plus the first dive the next day would probably be a serious dive - deep and with current. The checkout dive in itself was quite nice - the pillars of our little pier from the resort abounded in marine life - schooling grunts, yellowtails hanging out in the current. Blue tangs - just like from Finding Nemo - paid us a visit. Beady sea anemones whose tentacles looked like big eyeballs, yellow rays cruising on the bottom, even some spotted moray eels were hanging out in their little holes.

Dinner at the Fat Grouper was a treat - the resort had a restaurant with a great view - overlooking the ocean and the gorgeous sunsets each evening (the one thing we missed in Cayman, since the sunset was always behind us). It felt so good to get a good night sleep that night - we had a great week of diving ahead of us.

May 16

Today was our first real day of diving - we were all up fairly early, eagerly anticipating the adventures underwater. We seemed "reverse jetlagged" - getting up 2 hours earlier in the morning instead of 2 hours later as you'd expect! We were up by 7, had coffee before breakfast, then enjoyed buffet breakfast with eggs and sausage and fresh fruit, before grabbing our dive gear from our lockers.

We headed out to our boat - the Dive Cat, which had just pulled into our dock. They were already loading the scuba tanks on the boat - apparently for them, the easiest way was to toss them in the air over the rail of the boat. They were quite well experienced at catching the heavy tanks without dropping a single one!

The diving in Cozumel was for the most part drift diving - we all had to enter the water at about the same time and head down together. Otherwise we would quickly drift apart in the current - and we didn't feel like having to kick so much to stay together. This meant we had to be ready and when the dive master said "go", we had to go quickly! Our first dive site was the "Dalila" wall - full of colorful coral formations including brain, star and flower corals. Tube sponges, elephant ear sponges, and vase sponges covered the reef while schools of grunts, yellowtails, barracuda, and even a school of trunkfish appeared to hang stationary in the current. It was not too often you'd see a single trunkfish, much less a whole school of them!

Ernesto was our dive master for the first day - his jolly and portly little frame never lacked a smile. He really enjoyed working with us - it would be a fun job working as a dive master - diving for your job! In fact all the dive masters and the boat captain always had a smile - they loved to be out in the water. They were amazingly competent - able to show us where to go underwater and what to see.

At times, drift diving seemed like the most relaxing kind of diving - just drifting along with the current, while watching the scenery go by, but as soon as you would see something that caught your eye, you'd have to let it go in a short time to avoid tiring yourself out in the current and also getting separated from the group - it was key for the group to stay together, since there's a lot of boat traffic on the surface and the boat captain wouldn't want to run around picking up people everywhere when we finished the dive! It took a bit of getting used to - sometimes I felt I had to focus more on where I

was going with the current than watching the fish, but this was my first real experience with current. I would get more comfortable with current as the week went on.

Our second dive was at the Paradise reef - a bit shallower than Dalila - it was full of schooling fish again. There was a little more current in the shallows, and with the current came even more fish - large schools hanging out on the lee side of the coral mounds. One of my favorite sounds underwater was the tank banger - indicating the dive master had spotted something again - they had very watchful eyes seasoned with years of experience underwater, and I felt I would have missed so many things if it wasn't for them. A couple tank bangs revealed a king crab as big as I had seen before, hiding in a crack in the rock. A filefish appeared shortly afterward, as well as several lobsters in a small cave. Near the end of the dive, we saw a large concrete box and I discovered a group of banded shrimp - it was fun to start training my eye to try to anticipate where creatures may be hiding.

We enjoyed some "scuby" snacks on our way back to the resort - that's one of Margo's traditions with her diving trips. We all took turns bringing some kind of goodies for the boat rides and surface intervals. We'd lie in the sun, enjoying snacks, checking the "fish books" and trying to think of everything we had seen on the dive.

We had lunch at the resort - again included in our package. We just had to sit down and they'd take our orders. Many times we just took the specials for lunch - giving us some variety, plus we were sometimes too lazy to think about what we wanted when we were hungry!

Since it was a Sunday night, most of the tourists would be gone, since cruise ships don't normally come in on Sundays. That made it a good time to visit town - you could get stuff cheaper at the shops (less demand - lower price) and you didn't have to fight the crowds. Many of the shops had the usual tourist trinkets, T-shirts, Mayan pyramids and calendars, and mugs, but one of the shops we visited had some of the strangest things - a "piccolo" shaped in a very phallic shape - don't ask me to explain!

The small town of San Miguel was evidently the tourist capital of Cozumel - especially since it was where most of the cruise ships and ferries come in. McDonalds, Hard Rock, and Pizza Hut with delivery - complete with mopeds for doing the pizza deliveries.

Dinner again at the Fat Grouper - we'd have dinner there each night, watching the sun set with the reds and golds bouncing through the layers of clouds and watching the lights coming up on the mainland. The mainland was just about 20 miles away.

May 17

The usual early coffee and breakfast in the morning before heading over to the Dive Cat. Our boat was just pulling in right on time and the dive masters were starting to load the gear. Our first dive was at Palancar Reef, near the southern part of Cozumel island. In fact, most of our dives were near the southern part of the island - they tend to get fairer weather as the land blocks most of the prevailing weather from the north and east. We headed southwards again, going out against the current, as our resort once again faded in the distance as we passed the nearby tall lighthouse and the international pier. At the pier this time, we passed a couple of the biggest cruise ships I had seen - they must have been bigger than the Titanic! Carnival cruise lines was in port - 2 ships that had at least 10 decks of windows I could count - not including the decks underneath!

The motor finally slowed and halted and we had reached our next dive spot at Palancar Reef. Palancar

is one of the most famous reefs at Cozumel - stretching over 3 miles. We'd just get a glimpse of it during about a 50 minute dive. We had rearranged the groups a little and Ariel was our leader now. All the leaders were great fun to hang out with and talk to, but I really liked diving with Ariel. We dropped down to about 90 feet on the seemingly unlimited wall - the wall disappeared into a deep indigo abyss far below us.

We visited a couple swim thrus - pretty common on all the reef walls, as we headed to the edge of the drop. It was like jumping off a cliff like from the top of Half Dome, but you just hang there in midair. The wall was covered with sponges - the usual large barrel sponges, vase sponges, elephant ears, and the like. We slowly made our way up the wall while slowly outgassing our extra nitrogen and enjoying the scenery. We came up to another set of swim-thrus, where we passed through one of the tunnels to a sand flat and some shallower reefs. I could hear a couple more tank bangs and sure enough, under one of the rocks was hiding a really strange looking black fish - I wasn't quite sure what it was - later I found out it was a toadfish. We also spotted some flamingo tongues on one of the gorgonians - like small slugs with interesting beige and brown spots. We were down to about 1000 pounds and it was time to start heading up - the whole group slowly made its way up to our safety stop at 15 feet. This was often the most relaxing part of the dive - we just hung out not needing to move a muscle for a few minutes once our buoyancy was balanced.

Some scuby snacks and spirited stories of the first dive entertained us on our boat ride to our next destination - Yucab Reef. It was a little shallower for our second dive. Again with the shallower depths, the current was a bit more swift, but the faster current brought an amazing variety of sea life - schools of barracuda, grunts and yellowtail. Carrying a camera still proved a bit difficult with the current - it was hard to get many pictures. Sometimes I found it's just as rewarding to forget about the camera and spend more time just looking at stuff, but it felt like a tough sacrifice sometimes.

We got in some nice hammock time in the afternoon after lunch - I didn't even feel like reading my book - it was so nice just to lie there and relax by the ocean and let the breeze put you to sleep!

A bunch of us started getting ready for a night dive at the Scuba Club pier - we'd get in the water at late twilight and it'd get dark while we were underwater. During this time, many of the sea creatures that hide during daylight hours start coming out. We dropped down off the end of the pier and immediately spotted some small rays by the base of the pier pilings. A few brittle stars had emerged from the sand and were out and about. We saw lots of small silverfish, small crabs, sea cucumbers, and scallops, that I don't remember seeing during the last 2 days. Then all of the sudden, we saw the largest pufferfish I had seen before hiding inside one of the metal cones making the artificial reef. It was so big I didn't even recognize it as a pufferfish - the huge black and white spotted fish looked like it had grown so big inside the cone and would no longer be able to get out! Our air was going to last for quite a while at 20 ft, but we were getting ready to get out after about 40 min, plus we were getting hungry - we were saving dinner until after the dive. As we neared the end of the dive, some crabs and sea urchins showed their mobility. We got a late dinner - just before the restaurant was closing - whew! - and hit the sack.

May 18

We started the day on the Santa Rosa wall - again seemingly dropping off to infinity. Numerous caves and swim thrus penetrated the wall - we started the dive by dropping onto the sand at about 60 ft, then penetrating a cave and coming out at about 80-90 ft with the deep abyss below us. Exploring a little deeper revealed some lobsters hiding in caves, large angelfish, sea anemones, and barracuda in the

distance in the shallower waters. It was a beautiful dive - what a location! Unfortunately I had gotten a bit too excited after seeing so much beautiful stuff and I was burning through my air - I was at about 500 pounds less than most of the other people. Time for me and my buddy to go up and part from the rest of the group. Thanks to our safety sausage on the surface our boat found us easily, since we had drifted away a bit in the current, and we could avoid getting run over by the multitude of boats in the area!

Our second dive was at the Villa Blanca wall - our dive master said this is often a good spot to look for seahorses - we dropped down onto the reef and started exploring some grassy areas and almost immediately we spotted 2 seahorses! Actually thanks to the trained eye of our divemasters, even after they pointed out the seahorses, we still had a hard time seeing them since they are so well camouflaged! The dive also brought some green moray eels, filefish, large angelfish, and the usual schooling fish. The only bummer was we spent so long fighting current while taking turns with our cameras, that we were using so much air, and it's hard to be always so careful with the fins when group is crowded. But it was worth it, since seahorses are so rare and beautiful!

We decided to dive the Felipe Xicotencatl that afternoon. The base of the wreck is in about 80 ft of water - we descended the anchor line to the base, under the stern by the propellers, where we saw a nice Christmas tree worm in its entirety on the outside - most of the time you just see the "heads" of the worms. We got to penetrate most of the wreck - we seemed to be inside the wreck forever, navigating back and forth and weaving through the small openings. It was like a full 3-D maze - following the bright yellow fins of the divemaster fortunately kept us from getting lost - and they have a lot more experience in the wreck than any of us!

We took a brief stop in the "head" - 3 of us sat down to "do our business" and Simon grabbed a picture. The tile floors were still intact and the light switches still even worked. We ended the dive near the top of the control tower - in just about 30 ft of water, where a large black grouper was hanging out. The anchor line waved in the current about 100 ft away and it was a mad dash fighting the current to get to the line to avoid getting blown downstream - I was afraid of getting tired and not being able to fight the current too long, but fortunately made it just fine.

Back at our resort, Simon the explorer was eager about trying to visit some of the Mayan ruins in the area, and we were willing to spend one day off from diving to visit some ruins. However, we quickly discovered there was a set of ruins nearby on Cozumel itself - much closer than Tulum or Chitzen Itza. I was curious about seeing the ruins too, and was Simon. The San Gervasio ruins are just about a 20 minute cab ride from our hotel, and we decided to make a visit. Built to worship Ixchel, the fertility goddess, the city was built around 2000 years ago. The San Gervasio ruins are the only fully excavated Mayan ruins on the entire island of Cozumel.

Simon and I hopped on a cab - they are plentiful around our resort - and we headed over through the jungle on a lonely road, watching out for potholes and "topes" - speed bumps. Next thing we knew, we were there. A small entrance fee, and we were in to explore on our own.

The ruins were actually quite extensive - we were surprised how many ancient buildings must have stood there. Once inhabited by the mighty Mayans, today they are mostly populated just by the many tourists and some large multicolored iguanas - some up to 3 feet long! The Mayans must have been quite religious - many of the buildings were ancient temples and altars and places of worship. We visited most of the sites, walking along some of the "sacbe" - the ancient roads. Though not as grand as the pyramids at the more famous Maya cities, the Alamo and Casa Alta was still quite impressive.

Several large iguanas were soaking up the rays on the steps of the Casa Alta.

On our way along one of the roads we spotted a small trail off to the side and my curiosity got the best of me as I went to check it out. Just a little way into the jungle was a fairly extensive cavern. Overgrown jungle had mostly covered the entrance, but inside were several wide chambers - fortunately I had brought a light (actually just to look though the ruins - I didn't expect to find a cavern like this!) Probing a little deeper in the dark cavern revealed more chambers going deeper, probably going back about 50 feet or so, and in the back, the ceiling was covered with bats! It was much like the bat caves in the limestone bluff at Cayman Brac. In fact many of the Caribbean islands have limestone from ancient coral reefs, which dissolves into caverns. Colonies of fruit bats hung from the ceiling waiting for dusk when they would go out to forage for food. Not wanting to disturb the bats too much, I just looked briefly and made my way out.

We took our cab back to the hotel - turns out the driver was still hanging out at San Gervasio! It was nice to not have to call another cab and wait, since we were starting to get hungry. Dinner at the Fat Grouper again while watching the sunset - a great way to end the day. I had enjoyed seeing the ruins and we were talking about visiting at least Tulum sometime in the rest of the week. They were quite helpful at the hotel desk - they have quite a few options at the desk - they arrange tours to Tulum, Coba, Chitzen Itza, and even diving trips at some of the cenotes on the mainland. They even provided a power cable so Simon could plug in his computer and I could download my pictures.

May 19

Early morning coffee and chatter around the table as usual before breakfast - we were looking forward to today - there had been talk about going down to Punta Sur, where some famous caves and swim throughs were located. Turns out the rumors were true, and after breakfast, we headed out to Punta Sur for our first dive - our goal was hitting some of the deep caves going out on the wall - the wall contained the infamous "Devil's throat" cave dropping to about 120-130 ft.

We didn't all do the deepest cave - the divers with a bit less experience (< 100 dives, me included) ended up doing a slightly shallower and shorter cave, emptying out at about 100 feet. We could still get the full experience of the caverns, but without using as much air and not building as much nitrogen, so the shallower cave was fine with me.

The cave was quite an experience - blue shafts of light coming down from many directions as the passage wound its way through the coral heads. Most of the bottom was sandy white and the walls were covered with sponges. An occasional closer look revealed critters hiding in the dark cracks, but we had to keep moving - following the bright yellow fins to avoid getting lost and to not use so much air at our depth. After quite some time in the dark tunnels, we popped out on the wall at about 100 ft where we saw a turtle far below us - probably another 30 feet deeper than us (well deeper than our depth limit) - he was just hanging out. we slowly ascended along the wall and popped through a different cave to the sand flat at about 50-60 ft where we saw a carpet of garden eels. We slowly made our way up to 25, 20, and 15 feet for a bit longer than normal safety stop, where we were entertained by several long barracudas, a few sting rays on the sand, and a large black grouper.

Our second dive was over at Tormentos reef - a bit shallower at around 50 ft, since we had gone deep on our first dive. A few lobsters hung out in some cracks at the bottom of the reef. Many of the purple vase sponges had hidden secrets - some had brittle stars hidden inside - like in the Caymans, but some also hid arrow crabs. A short swim through a tunnel revealed tons of schooling fish hiding in the lee

sides of the coral heads. A large blue midnight parrotfish passed in front of us as we tuned our eyes to see the baby pufferfish and green moray and coronet fish. The usual angelfish kept us company and "eyeball" anemones kept watch along the bottom.

It was nice to just spend the afternoon relaxing a bit, just hanging out in our room and in the hammocks. Simon was busy with a computer textbook - prepping for a big interview with Intel when he got back. It kind of reminded me of when I was learning my music for an audition with Schola the day I got back from Caymans last year.

I still hadn't been to the tall lighthouse just down the beach from our resort - it was beckoning for at least a brief visit. A couple locals were fishing for sea urchins ("espinos") along the shore and a bunch of local families and kids were playing about near the lighthouse - they seemed so carefree. Dinner at the Fat Grouper once again and we were off to bed. A few people decided to do a night dive, but with my inexperience with the current especially at night (the dive was going to be a site with heavy current), it was best to sit out this time. The octopi would be there next time - some people saw 3-4 of the 8-legged critters on the dive!

May 20

Our first destination was the Palancar caves - we had visited Palancar reef earlier in the week, but the 3 mile long reef would take many dives to visit completely. This part of the reef was filled with caves, narrow canyons, making an interesting three-dimensional structure. The usual deep water tube, barrel, vase sponges covered the reef, and arrow crabs, turtles, angelfish. Ariel made a great silhouette in one of the cave entrances - a nice photograph. We came up on a beautiful sand flat - the white sand appearing like snow in an alpine mountain range. Up to the tops of the coral heads - bright small fish flitted back and forth among the arms of the coral.

Onwards to Paso del Cedral - shallower and again a lot more current. Too much current (unfortunately) for me to be real comfortable with the camera - plus it was nice to just enjoy the scenery instead of feeling like I had to kick against the current everywhere to get just the right photo. In general I burned about another 500 pounds of air when I brought the camera!

Nice sets of barracudas and groupers. Schooling yellowtail snappers, grunts. Moray eel hiding in top of coral head. Our dive master pointed out a great lobster under one of the coral heads - I was quite satisfied with the find, and just as I was going back up, he grabbed my arm and pointed out 2 more lobsters and a sleeping nurse shark under the same coral head! What a picture - but I didn't have my camera - I have to save the memory! Back in the current, we glided along the reef up to a nice set of swim throughs and tunnels, which provided a little relief from the current where we could sit in one place and hang out a bit.

That afternoon, we decided to re-visit the Scuba Club pier - there is so much great marine life right off the end of the pier. The usual schooling fish, some starfish in the sand, even a spotted moray eel in a small hole. Flounder and yellow ray gliding along the sand. We even got to see a juvenile drum - with its graceful black and white stripes. A few sea urchins and crabs near the shore.

A relaxed afternoon with some more hammock time to nap and swap diving stories. I had planned to visit Tulum and Coba with Mika and Bob tomorrow, but they changed their mind and decided to visit Chitzen Itza. I knew Chitzen Itza was one of the most significant Mayan sites with spectacular ruins, and the staff at the desk said there was still one spot available for the tour! I was able to book it - and

was quite excited about going. It was a bit more expensive than Tulum and Coba, but I was told it would be worth it.

I made a brief visit to town to hit an ATM and log onto the internet. Internet cafes were quite plentiful in San Miguel and it was nice to check into the email every once in a while, sending "e-postcards" via email and checking for important email. It was good to knock down the inbox every once in a while so it wasn't quite so overwhelming when I got back. After being logged in for about an hour, they said it would be \$3.00 - I thought I remember the sign saying it was \$1/hour (but that was on Sunday when the cruise ships weren't in port and the rates were lower). Now, it was \$1/half hour and I was logged in just over an hour, ratcheting the fare up for 1.5 hours. Even though it was quite petty, I was a bit embarrassed, since I only had about \$1.50 on me at the time - I was quite broke (I thought I would have had enough for one hour at \$1). And to my dismay I discovered my ATM card didn't work in the machine (it just spit my card back after giving some error message in Spanish). And most places in Mexico are cash-only (no credit cards or checks accepted). Fortunately they didn't really care and just let me go. I guess that made up for when I was shopping earlier in the week, they "messed up" my change (most likely on purpose), leaving me short a few pesos, since they guessed foreigners who didn't recognize the "strange" coins wouldn't count the change on the spot. I realized it too late (for that time, but I caught them at their game on a later purchase).

Once a week they have a pinata fiesta at the Scuba Club resort - we had dinner outside, at the BBQ where they had prepared some tasty tamales, fajitas, and other Mexican food. We sat outside enjoying the music and good food, and shortly afterward, they were setting up a large pinata! A bunch of us took turns with the bat after being blindfolded and spun around. Many of the swings came up empty, sometimes knocking the person down instead of the pinata! But in the end we all laughed, ate way too much candy while wearing "party hats" made from the points of the pinata!

May 21

Today was our big day to visit Chitzen Itza - I was visiting along with Mika and Bob. Turns out Simon the intrepid explorer was also going, but he arranged the tour entirely on his own instead of just getting the package at the front desk. I wasn't quite as brave, plus it would be more fun for me to go with others in the group. Simon was already gone before I woke up (he had to leave around 6 to take the ferry to the mainland and a bus to Cancun, then to Chitzen Itza). The rest of us were taking a flight over. It didn't leave until around 10:00, so we had a much more relaxed morning, enjoying breakfast and sticking around for a group picture. A few people were doing the dive today, but a bunch were renting scooters and some were just going to hang out. Right around when the boat arrived for the divers, we parted ways and we headed to the airport.

We caught a small plane at the airport and buzzed over to Chitzen Itza. It was pretty low key, no frills flying. No "airport security" at the special terminal, no baggage check, and no bathroom on the small 12 seater plane. It was just about a 30 minute flight though. We taxied straight down the runway, turned around, and took off. It was interesting to watch the cockpit and listen to the flight instructions (they were in English, and the dials were all in US units (feet, nautical miles, etc) instead of metric, like the rest of Mexico and the world). We climbed up to about 5000 feet above the puffy clouds and looked down at the brilliant blue water below. The cruise ships were still in port as we flew over. We crossed to the mainland, over Playa del Carmen and its brilliant white sand beaches. Then it was endless featureless jungle for miles. The only indicator of how far was left was via the GPS map in the cockpit, until we were nearly over Chitzen Itza, where the grey limestone pyramids jugged above the flat jungle and a few tourists were hanging out in the expansive courtyard. The pilot flew us past



the runway and dropped lower so we could all get a great aerial view before we touched down.

We checked in and started our tour - we had a guide to show us some of the sites and give us some of the explanations. It was kind of nice to know what you are looking at. We got to visit the main pyramid complete with its 365 steps (91 steps on each of 4 sides plus one at top = 365). Apparently the Mayans were very much into numerology and astrology, having several calendars with different numbers of months and days. When the days and months passed on their spiritual and harvest calendars, they were like large gears ticking with one gear having 260 teeth and one having 365 teeth, so every 52 years they would come back into alignment and there would celebrate special blessings.

The city featured a rather large ball court where players would have to hit the ball with their shoulders and bodies (but w/o using hands), and knock it through a series of small hoops high up on the side walls. It was like a very tough game of basketball, but the losing team would often face much more severe consequences, maybe even death!

We didn't have a lot of time for our visit - we all had to meet at 2:00 to be picked up at the visitor center, which was a bit unfortunate since there was so much to see - the temple of the warriors with its 1000 columns, the sacred cenotes, nunnery, and observatory. I had to scramble a bit to try to see everything - take a bunch of pictures, then look at the pictures when I got home and figure out what it was all about. It was quite interesting though to see the city from the top of the pyramid and to discover some caves not on the map by one of the cenotes (which also had some bats in it!). I'd have to go back when I had more time. This is probably what prompted Simon to go on his own so he didn't have to rush out after a few hours.

We were back in Cozumel around 3:00 that afternoon - which gave us some time to hang out in town and relax before dinner. The taxi dropped us off in town and we had the afternoon to hang out a bit. Mika and Bob had a few errands to do in town, and I wanted to shop a little more and withdraw some much needed cash. I spotted a nice pyramid sculpture at one place - it was selling for \$25 - they were willing to go for \$20... I looked and realized I only had about \$8 cash left on me (that was everything, including coins)! They weren't able to go that low - so I left and looked around some more. Another shop down the street had the same sculpture for \$15 - they dropped to \$10, and I showed them my \$8, and they took it.

But now I was completely broke and I still couldn't find a working ATM. I started just walking around, meandering back to our resort, and stumbled on the Museo del Cozumel - a good place to hang out for a couple hours in the afternoon. Interesting history of Cozumel filled the museum - natural history, Mayan civilization history, Western settlers, and finally an exhibit about the sea life (which was good but no match for seeing it for real!)

It was just a few minutes walk back to the Scuba Club - some hammock and pool time was in order. A few people were back from their afternoon activities, but not many yet. It was nice to relax a bit until dinner while watching our final sunset dipping below the clouds. Tonight being our last night in Cozumel, and with it being Margo's birthday and close to Gretchen's birthday too, we had to have a little celebration dinner. Margo really enjoyed her gift from all of us - a "figure-enhancing" t-shirt!

It was getting late and I was in bed around 11:00 - I had just nodded off to sleep when Simon stumbled back in - probably around midnight. He had just gotten back from Chitzen Itza - after a long bus ride, missed bus connection, detour through Cancun, and barely making the last ferry back from Playa del Carmen. He got his adventure after all!

May 22

Alas it was our last day and time to start packing up for home. Most of us had flights around 12:30. I was finally able to find a working ATM in the morning, where I could settle debts with people I had borrowed money from, and pay all the tips (to cover the boat crew, restaurant staff, dive masters, etc). And since most things in Cozumel operated cash-only, I was quite relieved to find the ATM!

All the gear was cleaned and suitcases were packed, bar tabs were paid (a different drink each night added up to a bit of a tab), and keys were returned. We caught our taxi van back to the airport and bought some last minute souvenirs in the airport to finish off our pesos before catching our flight.

My flight back was a bit less than direct - I was unable to get a good flight back to SFO, requiring connections in Charlotte and Chicago. Heavy thunderstorms around Chicago and the midwest (which I found out later contained several damaging tornadoes), kept us on the ground for a bit in Charlotte. I had almost missed my connection in Chicago (that flight wasn't delayed too bad since the storms had passed, making the connection rather tight). The light show from the window was fantastic as the sun was setting over the anvil-headed clouds and the stars were coming out. It turned out my luggage spent the night in Chicago, making it on the next flight (at least I didn't have to spend the night), but the airport staff was amazingly courteous to deliver it - we met on a street corner in Palo Alto close to church after service.

An eventful and memorable trip - thanks Margo for putting it together, and I look forward to the next one.

-- THE END --