

Rijumati's Travels – Part IX: Mexico and America

Dear Friends,



What unexpected adventures assail the lone world traveler! Since I last wrote to you I have done a two week solitary retreat on Wladek Swiatecki's fabulous little houseboat in Oakland Harbour, been engaged in a very long distance love affair with my wonderful new lady S--- (fortunately we intend to meet in Cuba soon!), taken an amazing road trip through the stunning deserts and canyons of the US Southwest and made my way to Mexico City where I am currently installed as visiting minor-celebrity with an increasingly full diary. There is so much I would like to write to you that it is hard to know where to begin. I have many fragments of travel letters that are yet to be polished up and threaded together to make a necklace of tales. Below is piece about my departure from the USA and arrival in Mexico called "A Tale of Two Buses" which contrasts these two utterly different cultures.

I will give you just a brief summary of the rest for now. The retreat on Wladek's houseboat was a gift from heaven. After so many months of continuously moving on, to spend two weeks in one place was deeply refreshing. The boat is only 15 minutes walk from Oakland city centre, but in an altogether other world, gazing out over the vast expanse of the estuary populated by strange and wonderful creatures such as pelicans, cormorants, coots, canoes, sailboats, huge barges, and powerful launches. For most of the time I didn't leave the boat, and on the day I left it took several hours before the solid Oakland sidewalks ceased to rock to and fro in a very disturbing manner!



What can I say about falling in love again? I have indeed met some lovely women on this journey, fallen in love often and occasionally this was requited. But the lifestyle of the world traveler isn't very attractive to most lovers – no stability, no country, no assets, no security... Fortunately S--- is different and has even delighted in my eremitical existence. We met in India last April, liked each other a lot, kept in touch by phone and email and then fell in love. I wish I had the art of the poets so that I could wax lyrical about love: the joy, sorrow, torture, madness, childishness, wonder and falling apart. Fortunately or unfortunately (your choice) my skill in words falls too far short of the mark so you are spared or deprived of my deranged romantic out-pourings. A few poems, letters and erotic pieces are all that I can muster.



The Four Corners – that is the region where Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico meet – is one of the most amazing places I have ever been to. The geological, archeological and anthropological jewels to be found there must be amongst the most sparkling on our wondrous Earth. I started in the classic Western town of Flagstaff where I hired a car, the only way to get about in this part of the USA, and headed first for the Grand Canyon.

How can one ever describe that first sight of the Grand Canyon? The vastness and majesty of this geological

masterpiece defies the imagination's ability to grasp it, let alone the power of words to capture it. None of the pictures, words or statistics really prepare you for the sense of immensity, timelessness and sublimity. I spent two days seeing the Canyon from different places, descending into it, reading about its unique geology, enough for the rocks to start to soak into the imagination. Strangely at times a somber depressed state would descend upon me in the presence of the Canyon, as if my little life was called into question by its vastness of vision.



In a land of supreme geological wonders the Grand Canyon is the King, but there are yet many queens, princes and princesses. The Canyon de Chelly, a sacred site in the huge Navajo Indian reservation, is on a far more human scale and home to the astounding habitations of the Ancestral Puebloans – called Anasazi by the Navajo – who built their gravity defying villages in the cliffs and thrived for nearly 1000 years until they mysteriously departed in the early 14th century, probably driven away by drought and the encroachment of other tribes.

The Navajo, Hopi and Hovenweek Indians all have reservations in north-eastern Arizona, visiting those vast desert plains is rather like entering another country. In fact the Navajo have their own president and time zone, which is rather churlishly 15 minutes different from the rest of the state. I felt that I had inadvertently entered the mythical realm of cowboys and indians especially when I visited another of the regions most celebrated geological wonders, Monument Valley. These iconic red mesas amidst the desert of vast Arizona-Utah plateau are also breath-taking in their own way and a little further north is the equally awesome Valley of the Gods, where one just heads out into the realm of giants on a dirt track. Then in Colorado I visited another Ancestral Puebloan site at Mesa Verde, the Cliff Palace there being the most famous of the Puebloan constructions.

Add to these many other wonders such as minor canyons, Indian cliff top villages, rock formations, the road-trip realm of cheap motels, soulless desert pitstops, vanishingly straight highways, vast open vistas and one has enough experience for a full-length movie. Thankfully I wasn't compelled by circumstances to drive off a cliff as Thelma and Louise did in their movie, though I did end up in Texas, famed for its redneck culture, which is rather unsettling for a pacifist, vegetarian, budget traveling Buddhist!

So this short summary has got out of hand, here are a few photos and below is the story of the buses. I feel like I'm on my way back home, wherever that now is, I should be in the UK by mid-February, lots of love Rijumati

A Tale of Two Buses

With a sense of restrained excitement I rose early to prepare to leave the USA, the country which had fed and sheltered me for two months. I was about to head out into the confusion and complexity of an alien culture whose language I barely grasp, whose customs I don't know, whose people are a mystery. I was heading for Mexico.

I checked out of my cheap and soulless motel soon after the dawn. The Red Roof Lodge, which did indeed have a red roof, is El Paso's cheapest motel chain. The staff were friendly but couldn't offer any help with my travellers questions, I just gave up after a series of "don't knows" and "can't help you's." I made my way to Avis to return my sleek little Pontiac. Through an amazing piece of synchronicity the Red Roof lodge, which I chose by sheer chance, turned out to be on the same street as the Avis office. In a huge sprawling metropolis like El Paso, where the accommodation district is many miles from the downtown, it seemed nothing short of a miracle to have landed so close to the final destination for my little car.

I felt sad to be giving up the delight and freedom of the car, we'd spent many happy hours together, plying our way through the lost desert roads of the American Southwest. We'd driven over

mountains, through canyons, across unmade dusty red tracks, through forests and even made it up into the snows. And lastly there was the long haul on Interstate 25 where together we crossed the whole of New Mexico in a day. I love driving the vast open spaces of the USA, the road disappearing into a mythical vanishing point, a pencil thin utterly straight line leading to the Beyond. The openness and freedom of these moments are indelibly marked on my soul. I have even contemplated what it would be like to become a long distance truck driver, though of course the romantic image that I have and the reality are worlds apart. I imagine that the trucker's life with its mind-numbing hours at the wheel, endless progression of local music stations and their adverts, huge greasy meals and truck stops would be an effective means of spiritual suicide.

With classic American efficiency the hire car return was totally straightforward and easy. A friendly Avis assistant, who was open by 8am, checked the details and printed me an invoice, it was all over in a few minutes. I asked him for help with the question of where I should go for the US immigration control, having completely failed to discover this from the Tourist Information or my hotel, and he obliged by phoning the Customs office who assured me that it was straightforward to do on "the Bridge" the border control at the Rio Grande. I thanked him for his help, though he couldn't tell me anything about buses back into town apart from the fact that there was a bus stop on the nearby main street.

It was a busy workday morning in El Paso, Interstate 10 had long tailbacks into the city and the Accommodation district on Exit 11 was buzzing with cars. Yet on this beautifully clear winter's day there was not a person on the streets as I walked in search of a bus stop. The only humans I saw not in a vehicle were some road workers putting out warning signs on the central reservation of the 6 lane main street. Nobody in El Paso, it seems, would ever think of walking somewhere! Once again I felt adrift in the world of the lowlife budget traveller, suddenly severed from my wheels, the essential prosthetic extension of the American way of life. I felt the sense of how a completely simple wish - to go from this district to downtown with my luggage - was now a major logistical challenge. Of course the sensible traveller would have just booked a taxi, borrowing someone else's prosthetic extension for the job, but somehow I relished the challenge of trying to work out how to get a bus to where I needed to go - and saving myself \$20 to boot.

It has to be said that in El Paso the bus stops are not a major feature of street life. It is a city whose abundance of road signs eclipses the abundance of plant life, as if the road signs have their own form of genetic crossings and propagations. Every stretch of highway and street has multiple messages for the passing vehicles, some great, some small, some bright, some dull. And yes, the bus stop signs are small, dull, white placards on the top of a short single pole. At first I thought my friendly Avis man had misled me, since there was nothing remotely resembling my image of a bus stop to be seen under the huge construction that overhung the highway advertising Goodyear Tyres. But as I wandered around, clambering over the woodchips that line the sidewalk I noticed this unassuming little placard with a single bus graphic. There was no schedule, no route number, no information of any kind, just a black graphic about 25cm high stuck on a pole. As the huge pickups and SUVs growled past I felt rather like a lost alien in a new world. Was I being a total schmuck standing in this asphalt and concrete desert waiting hopefully?

Miraculously within 10 minutes I spied in the far distance something that looked like a bus coming towards me. It must have seemed rather strange to the driver to see this backpacking foreigner waving vigorously with the enthusiasm of a man escaping from the wilderness. And when his orange indicator signified that he had seen me and was actually going to stop I could hardly contain my joy. He was faultlessly polite "Well sir, to get to downtown you need to be on the *other* side of the street at that bus stop" he was pointing vaguely to a direction in which I couldn't make out anything that might be a bus stop "you want the 15 or 18 bus, there will be one coming in 5 or 10 minutes." The relief I felt at getting some seemingly reliable information was immense, "do you mean by that bench over there" I said pointing at the only distinguishable object in this urban jungle "That's right sir" and promptly the door closed and off he went.

With a little skip in my heel I headed for the pedestrian crossing. It seemed like an age as I waited for a green crosswalk sign, a lone homo sapiens trying to traverse 6 lanes of mean looking automobiles grossus. "Oh there's my bus!" At last the pedestrian was accommodated by the grinding traffic light logic boards and I dashed across the highway, dragging my wheelie backpack at an illegally dangerous speed. But too late, though the bus stop was only 30m away the no. 15 was

passing it and I hadn't been seen. He stopped at the lights directly in front of me. I motioned vigorously that I wanted to embark, but the driver, though stationary, just shook his head with a complete resolve that told me my plight was hopeless. He made that utterly useless gesture that bus drivers in the USA always make when you know they're not going to help you - he pointed another mile up the street as if to say "you get to that stop before me and I'll let you on!" Somewhat forlorn, for all I knew there might be only a single bus in the whole morning in El Paso, I plodded the 30m down the street to the putative official stop and parked myself there. "Well I guess \$20 for a taxi is better than standing here all morning" I consoled myself as a Plan B.

However I need not have worried. Within 10 minutes a no. 18 bus had rolled up. But though the driver let me on as I tried ask how much to pay and where to alight for the Rio Grande immigration point he was talking on a wireless device of some sort the whole time and only gave me the most cursory of answers. And as I tried to stuff my coins into the ticket machine they jammed and he had to use some force to push them through, still of course talking on his wireless... perhaps some things in the USA don't work as well as one might think.

Eventually I made my way to the "chasm" of the Rio Grande at the end of El Paso street. Of course the river itself is nothing like a chasm, at this time of year the concrete water channel that directs this most symbolic of boundaries is mostly dried up. The chasm is between the two worlds that collide along the boundary between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. The Rio Grande bridge symbolises this collision perfectly, spanning merely 150m, its broad bulk is permanently choked with vehicles queuing in one direction - leaving Mexico to enter the USA. On either side of the carriageway are two walkways, cloistered with metal roofs and barriers. To the West is a free flowing channel of pedestrians leaving the USA, to the East an slow moving queue of Hispanics attempting to enter the USA. This sociological tide never ebbs, it always flows in the same direction. One can't help feeling that the implication of this is that one day Mexico will be completely empty of people and the USA will be very crowded, but as yet US immigration have somewhat stemmed the tide of this trend.

Now one would think that leaving the USA is a relatively easy thing to do, that they are keen to see you out. Not so at the Rio Grande immigration point. I could have walked out of the country with absolutely no immigration control, but a little common sense told me that unless my green visa waiver was processed I would most likely face an impenetrable wall of red tape when I next tried to visit the USA, it would seem as if I had never left the country. So when I got into the no man's land on the bridge itself I asked a woman US immigration officer how to get my exit properly processed. "Oh, you have to pay your 35c" - the toll for pedestrians on the bridge - "and exit through that metal gate, go over to the other side and get processed there. That gentleman will open the gate for you" she said pointing to a well-armed Texan immigration officer who seemed to embody the frontier swagger of the Big State. "And watch out for the cars when you cross the carriageway," she added in a sort of uselessly helpful way since the stationery lines of bored drivers seemed in no danger of out running a snail, let alone mowing down a lone pedestrian.

So I duly paid and ended up joining the interminable queue of friendly Hispanics trying to get into the USA. I was greatly moved that an elderly gentleman, seeing my plight, let me join the queue in front of him rather than walk back another few hundred metres to the end. I asked two more US immigration officers how I should proceed to get my visa waiver processed, in an utterly bored voice one of them said "queue here and then go to gate no. 6." To their credit, in efficient American fashion the long queue did actually move quite fast. But when I got to the gates, the door to no. 6 was the only one which was well and truly shut with a sign marking it out as applications for "Permits" and a large group of Mexicans sitting around rather forlornly. It was already 10am and I asked if anyone knew when it would open, one man answered "we don't know, they say it open 8 o'clock." It was one of those moments of bureaucratic frustration that reminded me of Russia as I said under my breath "but I'm just trying to leave the bloody country!" However on an intuitive whim I tried the door handle anyway and lo and behold it opened to reveal a small office in which a standing elderly Mexican gentleman was conversing in rapid Spanish with a seated woman US immigration officer. The whole air of the situation was one of deference on his part and professional distance on her part. I stood in the doorway looking for an opening in their dialogue in which to intercede, but none was forthcoming. So I just dawdled there in the doorway, effectively circumventing the large group queue of Mexicans seeking permits until at last I caught her gaze and explained that I wanted to quit the USA in a legal fashion. With a momentary glance at my passport she extracted the green visa waiver

which she deposited in a rather less than reassuring way on her desk saying "we'll process it later" and I was on my way back into no man's land.

Well, if US departing immigration was casual, then Mexican incoming immigration was non-existent. At the other side of the bridge was a smartly uniformed Mexican official who was talking vigorously to someone, and two soldiers sporting automatic weapons. I tried to ask how to get my arrival into Mexico authenticated but the officer just pointed me to a metal button in the barrier saying nothing else. I was bemused, what did it mean, he carried on talking so I pushed this metal button and wondered what to do, nothing happened. The pedestrian corridor is very narrow at this point and with my wheelie rucksack I was causing a considerable blockage, suddenly one of the soldiers motioned to me to move on with a degree of intensity that left me certain I shouldn't argue with him. So I passed through the barrier and into Mexico, confused, uncertain, no one had even looked at my passport. "What do I do about this?" I wondered. I had in fact crossed the bridge the previous day to collect a Mexican immigration form which had been stamped with a date, so given the lack of any discernable customs and immigration control I just had to assume that the stamped form would be sufficient. The laissez-faire attitude of Mexican controls didn't leave me very re-assured. Was I going to fall foul of some minor official somewhere and have to pay my way out of bureaucratic hell?

Ciudad Juarez is but 150m from El Paso, but what a huge gap separates the two. Suddenly I was back in a "real" city whose streets were crowded with people, whose somewhat ramshackle houses and shops were packed tightly together and everywhere someone was trying to make a buck. I immediately loved the sense of energetic interplay of the peopled streets, as opposed to the large Texan boulevards whose main occupants were SUVs and pickup trucks. At the same time I felt a little uneasy, Juarez is well-known as a violent drug city with regular drug-related killings between rival gangs or the police, and as in all such places the heavy crime atmosphere trickles down into the petty crime sphere so that muggings and thefts are more likely in Juarez than elsewhere. Here I was a lone English tourist who had just walked into the middle of the stage, without a clue of whether I was in the right place or not. I suppose a little reflection would tell one that the district right next to the border would be heavily patrolled enough that it would not be a natural place for gangland violence to take place.

I made for the smart looking office "Transportes Chihauhenses" at which I had inquired the previous day and discovered that their tickets to Mexico City were 30% cheaper than those bought in the USA. Here I made my first Mexican "friend." Francisco spoke pretty good English and translated for me as I tried to buy the bus ticket to *Mexico* as the city is ubiquitously and confusingly called. Problem no. 1: the ticket office do not accept credit cards, and I had no Mexican cash having just entered the country. Problem no. 2: the bus leaves in 30 minutes - wonderful - but it doesn't leave from here, you have to take a bus or taxi to get across town to the Centrale Camionera. They were happy to accept US\$ but I thought it best to keep a stash of US\$ for emergencies. So Francisco and I - it was never clear exactly what his relationship with the ticket office was - went on a walking tour of Juarez to find an ATM, whilst he explained that ATMs were very hard to find. I was in that classic position of foreigner confusion not knowing if this was some sort of elaborate scam or if Francisco really was just trying to help me out. I was less than reassured by our first encounter, when we took a short cut through the car park of a very official looking building and were stopped by a uniformed woman with a gun in holster and Francisco proceeded to explain to her in rapid Spanish - I managed to get the gist of it - that I was a tourist needing to find an ATM to get cash to buy a ticket. "Now why are we in this car park explaining my circumstances to a woman officer with a gun?" I wondered, and at the same time all the Hollywood movies of Mexican police corruption erupted into my mind. After a while she seemed satisfied enough and Francisco tried to explain to me that because of the drug-gang problems in Juarez the police were very suspicious, I wondered if I looked like an American cocaine courier, but quickly rejected this ridiculous hypothesis, for the alternative hypothesis that I was just a rather eccentric budget traveller who has a habit of taking the unusual route. Most sensible travellers would have bought a bus ticket by credit card in the USA and let the bus company deal with all the hassles of crossing the border!

The entrance to the large official building, which turned out to house several banks and financial offices, was complete chaos. A high tech security system was sprawled across the foyer with wires hanging everywhere, soldiers sporting yet more automatic weapons and people squeezing through the gaps in the security gates in all directions. The atmosphere was rather more like a fiesta celebration than a financial hub. Lo and behold hidden in one corner was an ATM of my own bank HSBC - what

joy I hadn't seen one since I'd left Kazakhstan 6 months previously. I had to literally squeeze through a gap between the wall and a table, brushing the machine gun of one of the soldiers with my backpack, he gave me a warm smile and waved me on, as Francisco once again explained my plight. The hope and the disappointment. I tried three times to withdraw cash but on each occasion at the very end a plaintive message came up in Spanish saying the poor machine was unable to dispense any cash on this occasion. On the third try I asked Francisco to confirm that I had understood the message correctly, though in a moment of travelwise caution I turned my body to block his gaze as I typed in my pin - I still wasn't sure if this was some elaborate scam or not.

Francisco looked rather downcast at our failure, "there are not so many ATM in Juarez" he said with a degree of finality. Instead of the sense of dismay and doom this might have previously caused in me I felt a strange sense of excitement. "Well, how is this going to work out then - I'm stuck in Juarez and can't buy a bus ticket!" I guess some of the disasters of my year long travel made this problem seem rather minor in comparison. Then Francisco's eyes lit up as he dialogued with an elegant woman in a half constructed booth. "There is another ATM" he said, as if one were referring to a rare species in danger of going extinct.

So we headed off back to the main street and just a few metres away from the bus ticket office was a small convenience store - the sort you might find anywhere the USA - selling all the usual mix of groceries, booze, snacks and snug in the corner was a shining HSBC ATM. I did the business in a couple of minutes. "Better you get 2000 pesos" said Francisco helpfully as I decided to withdraw 3000, enough to cover the bus ticket and several days in Mexico City. I couldn't help feeling that the supposed dearth of ATMs in Juarez was much more an aspect of Francisco's awareness than of the reality.

Back at the ticket office it was too late for the 10 o'clock bus, so I took the next option for 12 o'clock. But problem no. 2 remained. Francisco and the two salesmen debated vigorously about how I should get to the Centrale Camionera which is 40 minutes by bus or 20 minutes by taxi - I was very surprised by this statistic, Juarez was a much bigger city than I had imagined. "Taxi is \$10, bus is 4 pesos (about 30 cents)" they informed me. "Well I've got two hours to get there, I may as well try the bus" I said, Francisco looked very concerned "Is okay for you?" he asked, I was touched by his genuine tone of concern. "Well if I don't make it I will come back here and get a taxi," at which he seemed to concur. So they duly drew me a map of downtown Juarez, pointed out from where I should get the bus and shaking hands we parted. I waited a moment to see if Francisco was expecting a tip or payment from me, but he just turned away as if going on to his next job. I thanked him politely "muchas gracias," with my sense of the basic honesty of most people that you meet confirmed once more.

A slight sense of foreboding bubbled in my mind as I wandered of down Juarez street. Catching a bus in a new country where one doesn't speak the language is always an adventure - recollections of the infinitely confusing choice of micro buses in Buryatia came to mind - but at the same time learning the bus basics of any culture is a very satisfying achievement. No two cultures do their buses the same way.

After a few misdirections I eventually found the right spot at which to wait. Though there was no structure at all to indicate that this was a bus stop the long lines of people waiting and the continuous stream of vehicles arriving and departing made it completely obvious where I needed to wait. Problem no. 3: I had no idea what bus to take. So I just got on the first one that came and asked in my best Spanish "por favor Senor, Camionera Centrale?" The driver shook his head gravely and directed me to talk to a man on the street who was carrying a clip board and had a hands free earpiece stuck to his head. I tried out my Spanish again on him, and he laughed "I speak English, you need a bus with this name" he handed me a paper with some writing on it, "and wait on that corner" he pointed vaguely to somewhere on the next two blocks. "Is there a bus number?" I asked rather dubiously as I tried to decipher the long title in Spanish that began with a "P," "No" he said curtly and that was that.

So I wandered off down to the next block, or was it two blocks and stood hopefully on the pavement as bus after bus with large inscribed numbers painted onto the chassis rolled by. Mexican buses are a rather different species from their nearby American cousins, in fact they might even pass for a different genus at times. In place of the smooth panelled machine tooled surfaces, glass expanses

and LED displays, are rough hand beaten panels, variously fitting glasses and hand painted signage. In fact through a miraculous pseudo-Darwinian process they have evolved to be very like South Asian buses, I believe that genetically they are almost identical to Indian buses.

After about 15 minutes I was getting a little restless, the unceasing tide of buses had produced none whose name began with a "P." Since my ticket to Mexico was for a fixed time I couldn't risk being late, so I began to wander past the throngs of people waiting looking for some help as to whether I was on the right track. My eyes picked out Jesse, a short fellow standing by a stall selling trinkets, something about him was bright and friendly. I tried out my Spanish again, handing him my paper, and was relieved that he spoke perfect English. "Oh that's the bus I'm taking, just wait here" and no sooner had he said it than our bus arrived.

Jesse made sure with the driver that he was going to my stop and then walked me down to the far end of the lengthy chassis where we sat on long open benches and started talking. His story was rather tragic, though he had no air of despair about him. He had worked in San Francisco as a builder for nearly 15 years and was married to an American and had 2 daughters. However he was an illegal immigrant and the US officers eventually caught up with him and expelled him from the USA. He had been trying to get back to be with his family for 5 years, which was how he came to be in Juarez, though he confessed to disliking the city greatly. Somehow his demeanour didn't quite carry the intense sadness that a story like this entailed, and though I was confident of his honesty I wondered if there was more to the story than he was telling me. Anyway, we agreed how heartless the US immigration bureaucracy was.

Jesse wanted to know all about me and where I had been, what I thought of Mexico, what I thought of El Paso and Juarez. He just seemed to be interested in people, we got on famously and for the first time since I had left South Asia I felt myself in a world where meeting with strangers was just a natural way of life. I knew that I was going to love being in Mexico.

When Jesse got off the bus he took me up to the very front seat and once again made sure that the driver would drop me at the Camionera Centrale. I was greatly touched by this small yet essential kindness that he did for me as we parted. Travelling like this is a continuous lesson in receiving human kindness.

Another human feature of the Mexican bus that marks it as radically different from the American cousin is that it stops anywhere at anytime for anyone. A little old lady puts out her stick from the shattered remains of a dusty concrete sidewalk and we literally shriek to a halt, the brakes screaming metal on metal. And it is best not to look too closely at the tread on the tyres either!

I was duly deposited at the Central Bus Station by the bus driver with little more than a grunt and a wave from his niece who seemed to be glued to the gear box, but this was quite sufficient; I cheerily exited with a "muchas gracias."

What an incongruously smart building is the Camionera Centrale of Juarez. Leaving the dusty broken roads and sidewalks one enters a smart world of polished marble floors, long airport style counters and lots of bored looking staff. One could be anywhere in the world of international travel in such a space, apart from one small but exceedingly important detail. The huge clock that dominated the fascia inside the terminal was giving the wrong time by 20 minutes. At first I became alarmed that my watch was 20 minutes out, a recipe for travel disaster, but then it became clear that it was the bus station's grand clock that was wrong, and just wrong enough so that the unsuspecting passenger would think it was right! How many places in the world would you find a clock like that?

I wandered about taking the measure of place, rather reassured by the façade of smartness that I wasn't going to get mugged at knife point here. I cursed as I tried to squeeze myself and my baggage through the 2m high paying metal turnstiles that protected the toilets. And I rejoiced that there was a Customs point - with yet more machine-gunned soldiers - perhaps someone here could help me with proper passport control. I hoped in vain, my passport was given a cursory glance and I was waved on. Two soldiers jabbered at me in Spanish until it became clear that they wanted to inspect the contents of my pack. The inspection was even more cursory than the passport inspection, but perhaps my air of indifference told them that hunting through my pack wasn't likely to produce a haul of drugs or weapons.

And so I took my place on the Transportes Chihauhenses coach, the most elegant and sleek coach of my entire world travel to date. With its two dedicated gender toilets, three video screens and seats that almost reclined to horizontal it left all the American and Canadian long distance buses standing. My only criticism was that in the 25 hours it took us to arrive in Mexico City, we were subjected to no less than 10 hours of Hollywood movies. Most were eminently missable, but the loud speakers blared out the volume and when I eventually asked the driver to make the sound quieter "muy tranquilo por favor" he seemed to turn the sound up! Well, this is Mexico, and I love it!

Dear Friends,

My time in Mexico is coming to an end, and my globe-trotting too is coming to an end. Though the journey no doubt will continue as I try to discover what it means to "return" after such a long and rich odyssey.

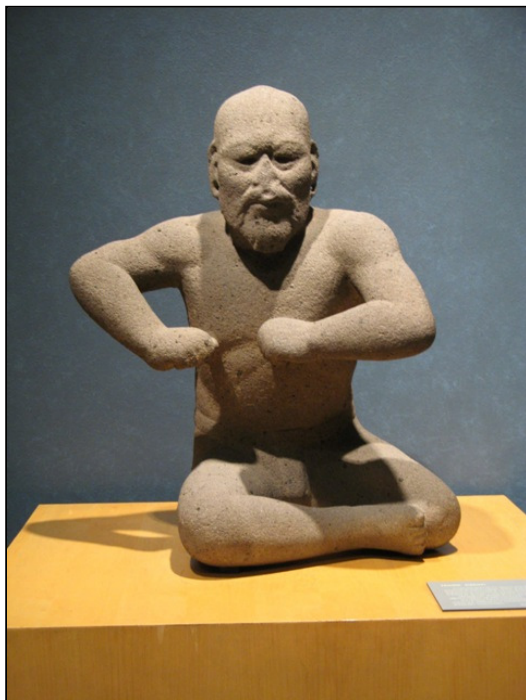
Tomorrow I am taking a short flight from Cancun, on the Mexican Caribbean coast, to Havana, Cuba and there I will meet S----. It feels like another chapter of my life is opening, and I feel very excited and positive about this particular chapter!

I have loved Mexico, and many cameos are partially threaded into stories about my time here. Particularly I have some stories from the interminable hours I have spent on Mexican buses, unfortunately being subjected to endless B-movies along the way. However the writers space has only opened up briefly during these adventures, so those stories must await another, perhaps rainier, day.

For now I will just leave you with some pictures of the amazing places I have been to and a piece about the intense cultural impact that Mexico has had on me.
with love Rijumati

The Clash of Cultures ***Museo Anthropologica***

For a European visiting Mexico city's Museo Anthropologica must rank as one of the most exciting and unsettling of all museum visits. Having been educated with a eurocentric view of history, which only grudgingly acknowledges the heights of Asian culture, and barely even mentions pre-Colombian



America, discovering the Meso-American cultures comes as a big shock. The breadth, depth, diversity and antiquity of these cultures is mind blowing. The ascendancy of high culture in Meso-America stretches back over 4000 years. Whilst the northern Europeans were living a barbaric tribal life around 2000 BCE, the Olmecs were laying the foundations of their culture that produces colossal statuary, even Greece and Rome had not arisen. At the height of the Roman empire, around the start of the common era, the formidable city of Teotihuacán was already established. When Europe was just beginning to grow out of the dark ages the people of Teotihuacán, whose name we don't even know, were already gone and forgotten, though the huge pyramids of the Sun and Moon and their 200,000 strong city with its elaborate temples and dwellings still remains. For the Aztecs, whose civilization was all but eradicated by the Conquistadors, Teotihuacán (an Aztec name meaning "the place where men became gods") was an ancient, sacred and mysterious place, akin to the great pyramids of Egypt for the Europeans. They stayed in Teotihuacán on their 200 year tribal journey before founding Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City, in the

middle of Lake Texcoco, and clearly learnt much about architecture, religion and culture. Thus the ancient lines of influence stretch far back into the past.

The diversity is also mind-boggling. Between the Mayan civilisation that thrived in Mexico's Yucatan, where it is said that every hill you see on the plane is a Mayan temple waiting to be excavated, and the cliff cities of the Ancestral Pueblans of Mesa Verde in Colorado, is as great a difference as between Turks and Scots. Suddenly it dawns upon one that in pre-Colombian America there are whole chapters or even books of the human story of which the Europeans are most culpably ignorant.

I wandered around the Anthropologica for several hours in a sort of stunned daze, drifting from room to room, from one ancient and awesome cultural apex to another over the last 4000 years. Teotihuacán impacts one with something like the power of the Egyptian pyramids; Tenochtitlan, the Aztec city in the lake could easily rival Venice; Monte Alban, the Zapotec cliff top city, must rival the Acropolis of Greece; Mayan Palenque and Uxmal lost in the jungles are at least as impressive as the Hindu and Buddhist masterpieces of ancient India. And so the story continues.



The feeling of being overwhelmed was not a pleasant one, but it seemed like there was no other way to really let the images and histories into my European soul. I kept stopping to breathe more deeply as I saw yet another stunning image or read another awesome historical reconstruction. I found myself fascinated by the figure of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, the fusion of the snake and eagle, both of whom are powerful archetypes in my personal mythology. Despite the repugnance to the Aztec and Toltec martial and sacrificial practices, I could not deny that their deity, Quetzalcoatl had a tremendously powerful attraction for me. Dr. Conze, the renowned

Buddhist scholar, famously said that Buddhism has always thrived in lands where there is a cult of the dragon or snake, and here in Mexico it seems that such a cult was alive and thriving before the introduction of Catholicism. I wonder if this is partly why Buddhism is so successful in Mexico City.

Much of the Meso-American art is highly stylised, indicating a strongly conventional tradition, but there are some striking exceptions. The boxing man from the Mayan hall has all the dynamics of a Praxiteles sculpture, and the Aztec god of Love, Flowers and Music, Xochipilli, holds much grace and pathos, his face carrying a tragic expression, even as his body shows the marks of celebration.



So I emerged from the Anthropologica rather shell-shocked in a positive way, much more open and raw to the story of our species than I had been before. The impact continues to sink into me as I contemplate my tour of the great temple sites of southern Mexico.

The Virgin of Guadalupe

The Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe is the most visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the world after the shrine at Lourdes. This fact alone tells one just how powerfully Guadalupe features in the soul of Mexico. It is said that Mexicans don't trust the government or the police or even their football team

(and who can blame them!), they only trust two things the Land and the Virgin of Guadalupe. So I knew that on my visit to Mexico I must meet her, and I wasn't disappointed.

José Luis and I picked our way slowly through the avenue of stalls leading up to the Basilica. Here every possible religious artefact was available, from utterly gory crucifixes, with blood pouring from the open wounds on Jesus Christ's pathetic body, to large T-shirts sporting Guadalupe's powerfully syncretic form.

The big square in front of the two Basilicas, old and new, was thronging with people, processions, bands, costumes, a huge fiesta atmosphere. We stopped for a while to enjoy the processions, the simple delight of people taking the trouble to express their beliefs in a colourful and exciting way.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is a very powerful symbol, a dark skinned woman, clothed in a shawl of stars, standing on a black moon. I felt the universality of her form, even though she appears in a Catholic context. She speaks to me of the infinite, the shadow world, the hidden depths and of acceptance and kindness. A possible source for her is Revelation Chap 12, which describes the woman clothed in the Sun, standing on the moon, with a crown of stars being persecuted by the dragon. The same passage also mentions the snake and the eagle so there are deep resonances for Mexico. Strangely one of my favourite William Blake paintings "The Woman clothed in the Sun" is inspired by this same passage.



As José Luis and I sat watching the thronging masses I took in the atmosphere of the new Basilica, a modern circular building from the 1970s. It was heavy and respectful, I didn't really like it much, especially the centrality of the huge and gory crucifix. We took the moving walkway to go past the apron of San Diego, on which the original image of the vision is painted, along with hundreds of the faithful, all trying to get the ideal photo.

The old Basilica, which is sinking heavily into the mud of the now non-existent Lake Texcoco, was almost entirely taken up with internal scaffolding, noisy dusty, yet still the devotions of the faithful took place.

The site of Guadalupe abounds with all manner of chapels, churches and gardens apart from the main Basilicas. My favourite was the Capuchin chapel, which was a much brighter and joyous place. The crucifix was very small, as if it were obliged to be displayed but that such gore was not really wanted here. The main feature was a large joyful mural of the Sagrada Familia and the ceiling frescos of a smiling San Diego.

José Luis and I climbed the hill through the beautifully laid out gardens in which water cascaded gently. I was greatly impressed by the large stone Aztec snake heads from whose mouths water poured to flow around the Virgin's statue, what an amazingly syncretic invention - the Catholic Fathers have always been good at incorporating pagan power into their traditions!

When we arrived at the exact spot in which San Diego is supposed to have had his vision of Guadalupe there was a striking mandala of indigenous and colonial figures all engaged in adoration of the Virgin, a very strong image. At the hill's summit we saw another chapel with sickly sweet paintings of submissive natives converting to Catholicism; it left me feeling rather appalled.

What was striking was the atmosphere of adulation, faith and devotion from the 1000s of people visiting on this most ordinary of days. And most notable of all was the high prevalence of pregnant women and young mothers. Around the time of Guadalupe's festival, I believe it coincides with the full moon of December, it is said that 1,000,000s visit the shrines and that it is impossible to move around the precincts. I can well believe it! The cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe is powerfully alive in Mexico, and I can honestly say that I believe this is a good thing for the people of this deeply religious

country. For She is comes from them, an eruption into Catholicism of something deeply archetypal in the Mexican soul.

Museo Carillo Gil

At the suggestion of a friend I went to see the paintings in the Carillo Gil. On the first floor is Señor Gil's amazing collection of works by the three greats of Mexican 20th century painting Rivera, Orozco and Sequieros. The Rivera collection is rather small, his works being dotted around various museums all over the city, though there was a lovely nude of his wife, Frida Kahlo. Rather it was the paintings of Orozco and Sequieros which were to touch me deeply.

Almost the first painting that one meets is Orozco's "Christ cuts down his Cross." I was utterly arrested by this image, its ramifications resounding into my heart and mind, and leaving me reflecting on how powerful and shocking this must have been when it was first seen in the 1940s. Even today it is a wonderfully shocking and liberating image: the martyr rejecting the oppression that seemed to have destroyed him.



The middle aged curator was watching me closely as I stopped, dumbstruck by Orozco's painting. Since there

was no one else in the museum I guess he had little else to interest him. I asked if I could take a photo and he explained in Spanish that I was supposed to buy an additional ticket for that, but then in true Mexican style he added generously that one or two photos would be okay. He seemed to want to express something to me and as I listened intently somehow my understanding of his Spanish rose to the occasion and he was always happy to repeat his words more slowly if I showed signs of incomprehension. For the next 30 minutes I was given an impromptu tour of the great works in the collection by a man who obviously loved them and had studied them for many years.

Interestingly our first painting, the "Christ cuts down his Cross" was the context for a dispute between us. He explained that Orozco was a communist and that this was a purely political painting, pointing out the symbols of burning books and fallen columns that represented aspects of the Mexican organs of government. I had to agree that there was a strong political intention, but disagreed with him that it was a purely political painting. The image of Christ, axe in his stigmatised hands, was affecting me in a profoundly "religious" and even transcendent way. He was insistent that there was no religious meaning, I knew in my heart that there was. His expert knowledge was unable to alter my direct experience.

But no matter, we moved onto the next paintings and he kindly explained the meanings and images as he understood them. Orozco painted a series of 4 paintings of the Spanish Conquest. Though only 3 are in the Gil collection, the tragedy and brutality of the images is also stunning. Orozco's courage, sadness and even anger leaps out of these paintings. He captures the ambivalence or even resentment in the Mexican psyche to the Conquest. It is significant that nowhere in Mexico will you find statues or streets in honour Hernan Cortez, he is seen as a brutal and bloody man.



There was one more painting that was to arrest me strongly, this time by Sequieros, a painting of Zapata on his horse. In this case the feelings that arose were of beauty and aliveness. The yellows of the canvas and the abstract almost Franz Machian form of the horse attracted me very strongly. Though there was little to indicate that it was Zapata other a hint of his sombrero, the title was altogether apt. Zapata is one of the great heroes of Mexican history, an honest and lifelong revolutionary who didn't use the power he obtained for selfish ends, unlike so many Mexican strong men have done and still do. His motto "tierra y libertad" still holds power today and was used by the fighters in the Chiapas rebellion of the 1990s. And like a truly iconic figure he died for his cause. So add Sequieros' beautiful forms to the story of Zapata and one has an inspiring and emotive painting, another masterpiece.

I left the Carillo Gil with a deep respect for the modern Mexican artistic tradition and a little more understanding of the sadness and inspiration that have shaped the Mexican character.

Rijumati, December 2008