

## ***Smoke, Kidnapping, and Rock 'n Roll – A Cancun Vacation***

### **Saturday, 2 April**

0230 (Boston/Eastern time): Check-in at Boston's Logan Airport for flight to Cancun, Mexico. TNT TRAVEL agent offers upgrade from Coach to First Class for just an additional \$198.00 for both my Lady and me. We buy it.

0350: Airborne aboard a PRIMARIS AIRLINE B-757, enroute to Cancun. My first trip to Mexico since visiting border town long ago while in Navy flight training.

0505: Movie starts. Unfortunately, airline has forgotten to electronically connect first class seats, so headphones do not work. Watch silent movie for several minutes while saying unkind things about TNT. Take out book.

0520: First class breakfast: muffin and Fruit Loops. They must be getting dog food in Coach.

0530: Coach is getting bagels and cream cheese. We ask for same.

0945 (Mexican/Central time): After clearing customs, shuttle arrives at GRAN COSTA REAL HOTEL, an alleged "5 Star" hotel. We bought the "all inclusive" package – meals, drinks, tips all paid for up front. We descend into Rap Hell. We were assured by TNT that "spring break is over." It isn't. The place is elbow-to-backside with drunken college students, many having assumed the horizontal, gravity-challenged position. Vulgar rap music blares from speakers making conversation almost impossible. Our room won't be ready (disinfected?) until 1500, so my Lady and I spend five hours trying not to trip over drunks and cringing at the "music." It's raining, so we huddle in the lounge in a far corner. Smokers are everywhere (mostly college age women; what do they think is attractive about smoking?) and foul cigarette smoke blankets the room and grounds.

2130: Having checked-in and had dinner, go to bed when loud, pounding rock music wakes us up. Every night at 2100 the hotel has a "show" at poolside, outside of everyone's room, with pounding-loud music. Lie awake until past 2200, cursing TNT Vacations. Bedroom and bath are comfortable, at least.

### **Sunday, 3 April**

0820: Breakfast at one of hotel's four restaurants. Order eggs over steak. Get raw eggs over thin steak, all covered with a disgusting green sauce. Inedible. Have to be more careful ordering food here.

0930 – 1600: Hit the beach and the beach hits back. Small beach is crowded and Volkswagen-sized speakers are bellowing-our rap "music." My lady asks for the volume to be lowered. Ten minutes later it is increased to its previous painful level. Food is served on beach – not bad – lots of beer and margaritas help dull the music. Water cold, lots of seaweed. Sand dirty with cigarette butts and other debris. Staff keeps coming with drinks, however, to dull the pain. Lots of boating in bay, dive boats coming and going, parachute pulls behind boats.

1940: Drinks at pool-side open bar. Approached by staffer who offers us a visit to a sister hotel – GRAN CARIBE REAL – for next day free breakfast and tour. Offers \$50 gift certificate, which my Lady parlays into a \$100 gift certificate and Mexican Gift Basket. Tour is promised to last under 90 minutes.

2103: In room when 100 Decibel Theater starts for the night outside – curse TNT yet again and leave room for another Manhattan.

### **Monday, 4 April**

0815: Catch a cab for Gran Caribe Real Hotel for breakfast and tour. After breakfast we find ourselves locked in a room with a salesman who is intent upon selling us 100 weeks of vacation at the hotel chain for \$ 38,800. We are polite and reply that we did not come there to buy anything and do not want to purchase any weeks. Guy is relentless but we remain politely uninterested – so – his boss comes over and launches a new attack. 200 weeks for \$ 38,800 – 50 weeks for \$ 19,000 – he won't quit and I announce we are way over the 90 minute window and we want to leave. Instead, he brings HIS boss over and cranks-up the pressure. No more pretense of politeness, just bald sales. We stand to leave and he says, "Sit down. I'm not finished. Show me some respect!" That's it. I put on my Navy hat, stand up, tell him to STFU, and order him to take us back to the lobby. Instead, he gets up and dismisses us to find our way back to the lobby by ourselves. Once back at the lobby they are reluctant to give us our gift certificate and basket until my Lady chews them a new collective anus. We leave with the gifts and a bad taste in our mouths.

1110: Back at our hotel and just in time for the Really, Really, Loud Music to recommence for the day. We ask to have the volume dropped and in response are told they "cannot lower the volume for just one guest." I flee to the room but noise follows. My Lady toughs it out on the beach, a dedicated sun worshipper.

1810: Have dinner followed by cocktails at the beach bar. Music is off for a while. Listen to drunken British Dianna Ross female impersonator sing Motown songs before falling off the bar, over the bar's side rail, and down onto the beach. He issues one surprised, "Aawwkk!" as he disappears from view to a chorus of appreciative clapping and cat-calls. Several minutes later he reappears, a little shaky but unbowed. Resumes show tune cavalcade.

2100: 100 Decibel Theater reopens for the night. Have another manhattan. Think-up new names to call both TNT VACATIONS and DIPLOMAT TRAVEL.

### **Tuesday, 5 April**

0710: In lobby, my Lady reiterates her great displeasure about the constant booming music. Staffer listens attentively. I mention I am going to write a web report upon our experience and that seems to get his undivided attention. Have good buffet breakfast, cooked to order. High marks for the food and staff here, at any rate. But a 5 Star hotel this ain't. Two?

0800-1130: Beach quiet for a change. Someone is raking beach after my Lady's earlier

complaint about it. Peaceful, sunny.

1130: Rap Monster returns.

1230: New development: The Battle of the Hotels shatters the beach. Hotel across the bay cranks-up punishingly-loud music that hammers our beach. As if in response, our beach cranks-up their music. Entire bay is now awash in screeching, discordant, conflicting music. To add insult to injury, our hotel's Sports Coordinator takes this opportunity to get on her Mr. Microphone. It's become clear that there is just one window of quite during a day here, from about 2200 to 0700. Must warn others!! The music and booming is so loud that normal conversation on our beach is difficult. On the other beach the sound must be life-threatening.

1830: Stumble, dazed, to dinner. Restaurant has unmarked stone terraces along the floor. My Lady falls off one as she crosses the floor. Pretty banged-up, can't walk without help. Back to room, lots of ice on bumps. I bring-back dinner in a bag. We drink sambucca and listen to 100 db theater. Another unpleasant holiday surprise at the Real.

### **Wednesday, 6 April**

0815: I help my Lady hobble down to breakfast. Just lettuce for salad. Mexicans don't seem to have gotten aboard the veggie wagon. Tips are part of all-inclusive, but staff very appreciative of an extra dollar here and there. Last of the college bums seem to have departed.

0850-1200: Beach has been groomed again. Water has warmed and has been cleaned of most seaweed. Tranquil for several hours – then – Battle of the Hotel Bands starts again. We are serenaded by a tender song in which a woman with a Spanish accent warns her boyfriend, “No fornicating with no other women!” or else. We know sound volume propagates logarithmically, so if we can't clearly hear each other talk on our beach, they must be dropping dead from the music on the other beach. Our hotel – never the shrinking violet – returns the salvo with salsa music, but at a slightly lower volume. Cancun is the noisiest place I've ever been, including the BOQ at NAS North Island, CA, which was 300 yards from the approach end of the long runway – the one used by A-3s and A-5s 24/7 for quals. A new “instrument” has joined the din – power paint-chippers wielded by workmen on the pier 100 yards away. Lovely musical counterpoint.

1930-2100: Drinks at beach bar. We meet another couple who paid 1/3 (one-third) what we paid to TNT for the same vacation and they came from farther away (Canada). Bummer.

### **Thursday, 7 April**

0815: Bus picks me up for much anticipated trip to the Mayan ruins at CHICHEN ITZA. My Lady still cannot walk without pain and so stays behind to get some sun. Studied site in college. Mayan Empire lasted over a thousand years, then collapsed between AD 1430 and 1450 for reasons speculated but unknown. Bus is full of Americans and Canadians. Staff friendly and helpful. We have been told by TNT Travel to expect a two-hour drive each way. The toilet is under an alcove, cylindrical, and perhaps 40 inches wide. You sort of stand over the toilet and move a clamshell-shaped door around you into place, leaving your knees up at your chin when you try to sit. We are instructed that toilet on board is “for emergency use only.” That's a Roger.

When I ask to confirm the travel time, the staffer laughs and turns away. As the last hotel pickup, my seat is next to the toilet. Joy. About 2 ½ hours into the trip, we stop at a Mayan village where the people chose to live just as they did in the 15th century. Thatch huts with stone floors, sleeping hammocks slung during the day, a shallow community well, no electricity or gas. Mexican government subsidizes them and delivers pallets of dried corn, which they make into tortillas. Kids seem happy enough. They speak Mayan, with Spanish as a second language. We are told there are 42 languages spoken in Mexico. A look at California in 20 years? Staff serves soft drinks and fruit. Drive continues and “emergency” toilet gets a work-out on the way. Lucky me.

1205: The “two hour drive” ends as we arrive at Chichen Itza. We have three hours on site. We get a nearly two-hour tour from a very knowledgeable staffer who’s an historian. Great stuff! Studied it long ago as an anthro major in college but this is the real thing! Very hot; about 100 degrees in the sun and the ground is a baked, dusty dirt. Several in group drop out. An ambulance collects a victim from another group. Trails are packed with vendors selling souvenirs and geegaws. Very aggressive. Reminds me of the salesmen at Gran Caribe Real. Take about 40 pictures of site. Guide says we can climb main pyramid at our own risk. “If you fall off the pyramid (91 stone steps from the top), you get to lie there until you get up. There will be no lawyers filing any suits here. This is Mexico.” I crane my neck, looking up to the top and see many people, obviously exhausted and overweight, sagging against the top wall and looking despairingly back down the steps and wondering how the hell they are ever going to make it back to the ground. I decide not to make the climb.

1420: Tour’s over. I’m fried and meander back to main building where I find some shade and buy a snow cone (\$2.50). These people know a marketing opportunity when they see one. Building is full of dazed, over-heated Americans and Europeans stumbling around in the heat, hair disheveled, clothing askew and untucked, sunburned to a crispy red. At least I wore sun block and a hat. Feels good just to eat my snow cone in the shade.

1515: Bus departs site, loaded with fried, tired tourists. “Emergency toilet” is in constant use and overflows. Every time someone pries-open the clamshell door and emerges, a belch of hot, putrid diarrhea-and urine smell issues forth. I flash back to rough flights in Navy P-3s where the “toilet” is a bucket. Bus suspension is not the best, nor is the Mexican “highway.”

1530: Bus stops for lunch. It’s 90 degrees in the restaurant, so most pass on the offering of hot soup and tamales. I have lettuce and watermelon as the sweat pours down my face and back. I take off my cap to wipe my head with napkins. A group of locals does a dance with bottles on their heads.

1630: Bus departs restaurant.

1640: I realize I’ve left my favorite Stargate SG-1 hat at the restaurant. Rough ride continues. Toilet gets more fouled. Beer and soft drinks served. The bus’ air conditioning is good. Sweat starts to cool.

1925: Arrive back at Gran Costa Real. Last stop. I stumble off bus. My Lady is waiting for me at the bus stop. Shower time. Ahhh!

2110: Collapse into bed after visiting gift shop. Mission Chichen Itza complete.

### **Friday, 8 April**

0750-1030: Hit the beach again after breakfast. It has again been groomed and packed down and it's quiet.

1030: Loud music resumes, but it's salsa instead of rock or that vile rap. Good weather continues. Since Sunday it's been high 80s and clear and very breezy. Ultralight airplanes constantly circle the bay, towing banners. These light aircraft come across the beach with 30 and 40 degree crab angles into the wind to track straight along their intended routes. Looks like great fun.

1215: Club sandwiches on the beach.

1250-1330: More beach, then yesterday catches up with me and its time for a nap in the cool room.

1530: Lady bustles in. She won at bingo (naturally) and her prize is a t-shirt that proclaims, "I found the G-Spot!" (we're told it's a local night club). Won't be wearing that one in front of the grandkids.

1540: The Big Giant Sports Voice from Hell starts up at poolside.

1600: Time to start packing for trip home.

1840: Dinner at Maria's (best restaurant at hotel). Staff makes crepe rose for my Lady, then serenades her with guitar and song. We get personalized special cheesecake slices. A too brief excellent interlude to this fiasco.

2100: Drinks with new Canadian acquaintances. When she learns I'm retired US Navy she stops talking to me.

### **Saturday, 9 April**

0655: Arrive at Cancun Airport for 0845 flight home. Get hosed for \$9.00 for breakfast sandwich. Boarding is late again (Primaris Airline again). First class passengers are told to go to the back of the line for boarding. The legend continues. Finally board at 0940. And wait. And wait. We are told that flight is being delayed for "paperwork." More waiting. More waiting. Captain makes numerous trips off and back onto aircraft. Looks chagrined. Announcement: aircraft must be pushed to another gate while we wait. More waiting.

1105: Start engines. Weak cheer from passengers, along with several Navy words not suitable for a family magazine. As we taxi, crewmember tells me what happened. Mexicans demanded bribe to release aircraft (in an era of terrorism threats). Crew refused. Mexicans then charged flight attendants with stealing from duty free shop and demanded to board aircraft for arrests.

Attendants had not been off aircraft since it arrived. Captain told them to make love to themselves. Time passed. Mexicans then announced that they were not sure crew was properly qualified or that they were US citizens; demanded copies of all crew passports and crewmembers' flying licenses. This is unlawful and crew refused. More time passed. Finally, Mexicans reached an agreement with airline's Las Vegas office (paid a bribe) and aircraft is released. This comes upon the week's news that Cancun police have been arresting American tourists who have driven to Cancun and have forced them to drive to ATMs, withdraw money, and give it to them (the cops). We have such good friends south of the border.

1130: Movie time. Surprise. These first class seats don't work, either, so we cannot plug-in our earphones again.

1210: First class lunch. Same one as breakfast on trip down. My Lady and I dine on chicken wings scavenged from hotel snack bar night before.

1545 (Boston Time): Land at Logan Airport. First Class is held on board while rest of passengers deplane (at least airline is consistent). Clear customs and immigration, get baggage, head for car, then home. Even Boston feels like coming home after our Mexican Adventure.

**Epilogue.** I contact American Express and tell them not to pay TNT Vacations because of the awful trip they delivered. After eight weeks of back and forth, TNT proclaims that the problems we had on vacation were not their responsibility, but rather, the responsibility of the Hotel, the airline, the Country of Mexico, and G-d. TNT issues me a \$99 credit for their failure to deliver the vacation promised and I have to pay for the most disappointing vacation rip-off of my life. TNT Vacations screwed my lady and me big time, kept the money, and told me to get lost. I will never use them again. Mexico proved itself to be a well-oiled kleptocracy – a country I will never visit again.

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