

Before you go

Issue 5 | November 2008

The New Japan

Starting a Business as a Foreigner
in the land of the Rising Sun

Plus

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Going Overseas For Medical, Dental, or Nursing Home Care

Retiring on \$500 a Month

How to afford a better life in the sun

Falling in love with Niagara Falls

One of the Northern hemisphere's greatest natural wonders

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The New Japan

By Arin Vahanian

Starting a Business as a Foreigner in the land of the Rising Sun

Up until a few years ago, the thought of starting a business in Japan as a foreigner conjured up images of businesspeople hampered by extraordinary start-up costs and capitalization requirements, a never-ending stuffy bureaucracy, mountains of documents full of incomprehensible jargon, inflexible regulations, and an overall feeling of dread akin to that of getting a root canal done. While some of those concerns were exaggerated, some of them were very valid, and the Japanese government, realizing it had to make changes in order for Japanese businesses to remain competitive in today's global economy, wisely took the bold steps of reforming the system. And those reforms have now made it easier for a foreigner to start a business in Japan. In addition to those reforms, a number of changes in the business atmosphere, as well as some changing demographics, have all contributed to making things easier for a foreigner wanting to set up a business. So while the bureaucracy still exists, the language barrier is very real even for foreigners who do speak Japanese, and it is not as easy to start a business in Japan as say, Australia or Singapore, the fact is that it is much easier for a foreigner to do business in Japan nowadays, for a few key reasons.

Firstly, the Koizumi administration introduced a number of economic stimulus packages and other policies, which in turn helped support smaller businesses and increased foreign investment into Japan. One of the policies that has made it easier to start a business in Japan is the introduction of legislation which eliminated the capital-



Japanese people today are more open to accepting foreigners into their business community.

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ization requirements when starting a company. In the past, starting a corporation in Japan required one to come up with three million to 10 million yen in cash and transfer it into a Japanese bank account, but those requirements were eliminated during the Koizumi administration. Furthermore, there was a reduction in spending on wasteful public programs, as well as the cleaning up of bad loans from the banking sector, and these moves also helped Japan become a more business-friendly country.



A changing business environment has also contributed to improving the situation for foreigners. Japanese people today are more open to accepting foreigners into their business community. One only has to look at the examples of foreigners leading some of Japan's largest corporations (Howard Stringer of Sony and Carlos Ghosn of Nissan come to mind) to see that things are indeed changing. In addition, more Japanese people have experience working abroad, and have had contact with foreigners and foreign culture, and thus feel more comfortable with accepting foreigners than they did before.

challenging problem – as well as a hopeful solution. As there will be more pensioners but less people paying into the system to support those pensioners, Japan will have to become even more open and flexible toward foreigners wanting to set up shop, as it will require more tax revenues to support the benefits being paid out to senior citizens. Since foreigners who are living and working in Japan must also pay tax to the Japanese authorities, just like any Japanese person would, having more foreign workers means more tax revenues, which means more funds available to support public programs. Furthermore, the rapidly aging population means that there will be much more demand for businesses that cater to senior citizens. This is a demographic that is widely catered to by businesses in countries like the US and UK, but this has yet to really take off in Japan. Now, whether or not this will actually happen remains to be seen, but the fact of the matter is that during the last decade or so, the government, as well as the people, has become more open to accepting foreign ideas and foreign business practices. In my mind, Japan has no choice – with countries like China and India growing and becoming more influential in the world economy, Japan will have to do all it can to stay competitive. And one of the ways it can stay competitive is by bringing in foreign experts and business people, who could offer a different point of view and a different way of doing business, which in turn would help strengthen Japan's economy. But the question now becomes, how does one actually start a business in Japan? It is best to look at the situation from two angles: 1.) as a foreigner already living in Japan, and 2.) a foreigner living outside of Japan but who wishes to set up a business there.

Finally, the changing demographics of Japan require that changes be made to the system. Japanese society is aging rapidly, and with people having fewer children, this creates a

Foreigners Living in Japan

If you are already living in Japan on a working visa, you may be able to use your existing visa to operate a small

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a Specialist in Humanities working visa, whose scope is quite broad and which allows one to do many different kinds of work in addition to the regular job he/she holds. Many foreigners already operate businesses such as language schools and web design firms, using this visa. So whether you are working as a language teacher or in the engineering department of a Japanese company, you may be able to use your current working visa to start a business, without having to switch your visa over or actually incorporate and go through all the paperwork. To take advantage of this, you will need to apply for either a document called a *shuroshikaku shomeisho*, or Certificate of Authorized Employment, or a *shikakugai katsudo kyokasho*, or Application for Permission to Undertake Activities Other Than Those Specified on an Applicant's Visa, at the immigration office. You will also be required to pay tax on the earnings from your business and file a tax return, or *kakutei shinkoku*, at the local tax office. Finally, you will need to report your new business name to the local ward office, or *kuyakusho*.

If you have a Specialist in Humanities or other such working visa, you may also quit your existing job, start your own company, and sponsor your working visa by yourself, when it comes time to renew your visa. The reason one is able to do this is that in Japan, unlike many other countries, your working visa belongs to you and not your company. So for example, if you receive a three-year working visa and then quit your job one year later, you will still have two years remaining on your visa. When the remaining two years are up, instead of having your employer sponsor your visa again, you can sponsor it by yourself. The procedure for a self-sponsorship visa is very similar to the procedure for running a side business in addition to your job. All that is required is filing the aforementioned Certificate of Authorized Employment at the immigration office, and a trip to your local ward office so the authorities can update your alien registration card with your new business name. In addition, you will need to report your sources of income and file a tax return at the tax office, as well as give a copy of your tax return to the immigration office when it is time to renew your self-sponsored working visa.



If, however, you would like your business to have limited liability, as well as take advantage of tax breaks, it would behoove you to incorporate formally by starting an independent company. And, be aware that if you are on a working visa such as the Specialist in Humanities visa, and you attempt to start a business and do work that is different from what is specified in your visa, your application may get rejected. For example, a language teacher probably won't be able to use his/her working visa to legally start a movie production studio, work as a bar host/hostess, or something radically different from what he/she is currently doing.

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Therefore, you may ultimately decide to formally start an independent company in Japan, and in this case, you have two choices: a *godo kaisha*, or limited liability corporation (LLC), or a *kabushiki kaisha* (KK), or joint-stock corporation. A KK requires more time and money to set up (the actual requirements for setting up a KK are discussed later in the article), but allows investors to acquire stocks in the company. In the past, companies that had an LLC formation in Japan might have been looked down upon, but nowadays, the business climate is much more flexible and thus, this is no longer the case.

In addition, relationship-building is even more important in Japan than many countries in the West.

One example of a foreigner who has incorporated a KK successfully is Matthew Murray of Objective Trading Ltd., a financial services firm in Tokyo. Murray's firm offers

financial services to both expatriates and Japanese, and he has attributed his success to getting started in the right way. The right way, says Murray, is to hire an accountant immediately. "Have an accountant on hand from the inception of your business. After completing the business registration process you may only have a short time to make some important declarations to the tax authorities. A good accountant can help you get started off on the right foot."

Another foreigner who has successfully started a KK in Japan is Richard Sproston, President of The Forge Ltd., a consultancy firm specializing in helping individuals, teams, and businesses close the gap between current and potential performance. One piece of advice Sproston gives to people who are looking to operate a business in Japan is to find a coach or a mentor who can help them through the beginning stages. "This is something I personally needed but didn't have during the business start-up and development phases," says Sproston. "A good coach/mentor will help you clarify your thinking and action plans and support you as you turn them into reality." In addition, relationship-building is even more important in Japan than many countries in the West, adds Sproston. "A lot of business comes from word of mouth here, so you should spend time networking and building relationships with your target market as well as their associates. This way you'll find you're presented with more business opportunities."

For Those Living Overseas

If you are based overseas and are considering doing business in Japan, there is no need to have legal working status in the country, or acquire any kind of working or residence visa. Any foreigner can be a shareholder or establish his/her own company in Japan, even if he/she is in the country temporarily (for example, on a tourist visa). There are four ways to start a company in Japan. The first is through opening a **Representative Office**. This is the simplest way for a foreign company to get involved in the Japanese market. This business structure does not require any prior registration in Japan, and allows companies to do market research and implement advertising campaigns, but not engage in any kind of commercial transactions. Representative offices also may not open bank accounts or hold real estate. This business structure is best for someone wanting to do some research on the Japanese market before jumping in completely.

A **Branch Office** will allow you to transact business in Japan providing that you have already secured a physical office, appointed an office representative, and registered all the required documents at the Legal Affairs Bureau. A branch office can open bank accounts and hold real estate under its own name, but has no individual legal cor-



porate status, since it is offering services on behalf of the parent company located overseas.

A **Subsidiary Company** has individual legal corporate status and allows you to engage in full business activities in Japan. If you decide to start a subsidiary company, you will have to do so under either an LLC or KK formation.

An **Independent Company** is a company started in Japan, which maintains its headquarters in the country and is not a subsidiary of another company. Of course, if you decide to start such a company, you will, again, have to do so under either an LLC or KK formation.

If you decide to start a KK, here are the typical requirements, according to journalist Haru Maki:

- Appoint a representative who is a Japanese resident
- Secure a physical office (this can be on a temporary basis)
- Obtain the required visa(s) and complete your alien registration at the local ward office
- Prepare three company seals and register them with the local government office in the area where the company representative resides. These three seals are: a representative seal, or *daihyoin*; an every day use seal, or *shiyoin*; and a company name seal, or *shaban*. Another seal, called a *jitsuin*, which is required for people who hold important positions in the company, may also need to be registered
- Acquire a seal registration certificate, or *inkan toroku shomeisho*, from the local ward office
- Register the KK at either the head office or branch of the Legal Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Justice in the municipality where your company will be located. The following details must normally be included with the Articles of Incorporation: the name and address of the company incorporator, who must be a Japanese resident; a partnership agreement if there is more than one incorporator; a company profile; and the purpose(s) for starting the company
- File a notification of the incorporation of your company and the opening of a payroll office, and file an application for the approval of a blue tax return, or *ao-iro shinkoku*, with the district tax office
- Notify the local tax office of the commencement of the business
- File applications for health insurance and the public pension with the Social Insurance Office
- File an application for employment insurance and employee accident compensation with the Public Employment Security Office

From the elimination of capitalization requirements needed to start a business, to the various free support services available in the country to budding entrepreneurs, Japan may be moving toward reform slowly, but it is indeed moving.

process, most people hire a lawyer, or, what is called a judicial or administrative scrivener, who can handle all of these procedures and navigate through the bureaucracy. Fees for a scrivener can run anywhere from 50,000 yen to 200,000 yen, depending on the size of company you are starting and the type of business, and fees for a lawyer average out to 150,000 yen or more (if you require everything to be explained to you in English). Hiring such a professional is crucial, because all of the documents must be written and filled out in Japanese. Even if you speak, read, and write fluent Japanese, it is unlikely that you will be able to get all of this done as quickly and efficiently as a scrivener or lawyer, so it makes sense to hire one. However, please note that neither a scrivener nor a lawyer is an expert in tax issues, and that if you require such services, it is best to hire an accountant as well. Some accountants can also take care of setting up a company.

According to Masahito Nakai of Nakai Immigration Services, an immigration law firm based in Tokyo, it currently costs around 60,000 yen to register an LLC and around 240,000 yen for a KK. On top of that will be the fees you pay to a professional to handle the paperwork for you. Since setting up a business can be a somewhat complicated

One important consideration is that if you start a business in Japan and intend to use the company to acquire an investor/business manager visa and live in Japan, you will have to follow the previous requirements if you are setting up a KK (there are different require-

ments if you are setting up an LLC, which should be discussed with a legal professional), as well as meet capitalization requirements of around five million yen, rent a physical office, and possibly employ two full-time Japanese workers (though this requirement is usually waived if one comes up with the full capitalization of 5 million yen). Although this may seem daunting and/or unfair, it does make sense. Now that the capitalization requirements for starting a business have been eliminated, nearly anyone can come up with a few hundred thousand yen and set up a company in Japan, so the government naturally wants to make sure that people who are immigrating to Japan for the purpose of starting a business are serious about it and not just filing the paperwork in order to get an easy visa. If you are considering going this route and securing an investor/business manager visa to live in Japan, there's no need to fret – the five million yen of capital does not need to stay in the company bank account forever (since it is assumed that you will be using the money to run the business). In any case, if one is interested in immigrating to another country, it is best to contact an immigration lawyer.

If, however, you would like your business to have limited liability, as well as take advantage of tax breaks, it would behoove you to incorporate formally by starting an independent company.

How to Get Help

One way to get help is through JETRO, or the Japanese External Trade Organization, which is dedicated not only to promoting Japanese exports abroad, but also to promoting foreign investment into Japan. This means that JETRO can provide you with lots of valuable help, such as office space for up to 50 business days, information on market conditions for your industry, help with finding a business partner, and other kinds of support, all at no-cost to you. For more information, visit JETRO's website at: www.jetro.org. Also, local government offices such as Business Entry Point, at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government offices, can give you free information about starting a business in Japan, as well as information about licensing regulations, education, housing, and day-to-day necessities. For more information, visit their website at: www.tokyo-business.jp/eng/index.html.

Conclusion

Throughout much of its history, Japan has had to face many disasters, both natural and man-made. From earthquakes to typhoons to economic crises, the country has experienced its fair share of hardship. But each time, it has weathered the storm and emerged victorious. Despite the aging of its population, the turmoil in the global financial markets, and the emergence of economies such as India and China, Japan, as the world's second largest economy, remains well-poised to stay competitive. This is due not only to the excellent work ethic of the Japanese people, or changing attitudes toward business and toward foreigners, but also the various economic policies that have been enacted to help businesses stay competitive, thus making it easier for foreigners to do business in Japan. From the elimination of capitalization requirements needed to start a business, to the various free support services available in the country to budding entrepreneurs, Japan may be moving toward reform slowly, but it is indeed moving. And although Japan may not be the easiest or cheapest place in the world to set up a business, it has recently become easier, especially for foreigners. It is this author's hope, as well as the hope of many millions of people in this fiercely unique and prosperous island country, that Japan can regain its past economic glory, and once again be an economic and cultural role-model for the rest of the world.

Arin Vahanian – is the author of *An Expats Guide to Budget Japan* – an eBook from EscapeArtist.com.

Medical Tourism

By Brent Wilson

Going Overseas For Medical, Dental, or Nursing Home Care

If you live in a country where health care is expensive--like the US--you may have heard about the growing popularity of going overseas for medical or dental procedures, or in some cases for nursing home care.

Even with good insurance, the cost of care in the US is, for lack of a better term, unbelievable. You may survive the operation, but will you survive the bill? Not only that, but care in the US is often not the best, depending on your circumstances. The World Health Organization ranks the US health-care system number 37 in the world, behind almost every European country, Saudi Arabia, Columbia, Costa Rica, and Chile.

If you don't live in the US, you may still have some interest in medical tourism--perhaps your domestic health care system doesn't cover a procedure you want, or maybe the wait for the procedure is too long.

People shouldn't have to export themselves to get decent, affordable medical care, but this is the world we live in.

Types of Medical Tourism

Probably the most straightforward type of medical tourism is going overseas for dental work.

The most highly developed center catering to overseas dental patients is Mexico. The primary business of some entire towns



Hospitals have opened up in India and Thailand, among other places, which cater solely to overseas patients.

Medical Tourism

along the Mexican/US border is dental work.

Costa Rica is another popular place for dental procedures. The dental infrastructure and sheer number of dentists is much smaller, but it's still a good destination for many procedures.

It's possible to get quality dental work in many countries, but in Latin America these two countries probably have the most overseas dental patients.

Dealing with a hospital that has been inspected and accredited by Joint Commission International does take some of the guesswork out of getting care overseas.

Plastic surgery overseas has been popular for quite some time. Many of the plastic surgeons performing procedures overseas have training comparable to those in the US or Europe and many have even gone to medical schools in the US or Europe.

A fairly new form of medical tourism consists of going overseas for procedures which are just too expensive in one's home country. In some cases, it may be possible to pay cash for a procedure overseas--say gall bladder surgery, or chemotherapy or even imaging like MRI or cat scans--and even with travel expenses included end up paying less than your deductible and co-pays would have been in the US, even for those with insurance.

For those without insurance, and with limited access to the health care system, it could be a life-or-death matter--for a few people, going overseas for a medical procedure could literally save your life. Some insurance companies are beginning to pay for medical procedures performed in other countries, since the savings are so great. Hospitals have opened up in India and Thailand, among other places, which cater solely to overseas patients.

Alternative therapies not available in one's home country have been popular for a long time. For someone with prostate or other types of cancer in the US, there are treatments available in Germany and other places which aren't available in the US. Overseas nursing home care is a small but growing business. This is something worth considering for those who will need nursing home care, particularly from the US.

US rules require that you be basically broke (have under \$2500 in assets) before the government pays for your nursing home care. If you don't have long-term care insurance, the charges of \$3,000-5,000 per month for nursing home care will quickly eat up whatever savings you might have. Speaking from personal experience of my own mother's 15 years in US nursing homes, it may be worth checking into care in Mexico, to compare with offerings in the US. For those who can speak some Spanish, have at least some mobility, are flexible, and don't have children to look after them, it might be a good option.

Quality of Overseas Care

A very interesting web site, which anyone contemplating overseas health care should study closely, is <http://www.planethospital.com/>. Their web site provides a great deal of information on procedures in various countries. This company can also assist you in choosing a provider, and for a relatively small fee can help you in arranging all the details of your overseas care. I'm not endorsing this company one way or the other, but their approach seems to me to be impartial and helpful.

It would be worth asking whether a foreign hospital you plan to use has been accredited by the Joint Commission International, particularly if you are considering a complicated and/or invasive procedure.

To the best of my knowledge, no such accreditation exists for overseas dental care and nursing home care.

Cost alone is usually a very poor standard to go by, and should never be the primary factor in your decision as to which health care providers to use.

Regardless of which facilities or providers you may decide to use, it would probably be wise for you to do a walk-through of the facility or offices before any procedures are performed. It's easy to produce glossy brochures and web sites, and to make all sorts of promises and assurances. At any rate a walk-through would give you an idea of the general standards of their facility.

Another option would be to ask for references of people from your own country who have been treated at a facility or by a provider. While it is possible that some people could be paid to lie about their treatment (or lack of treatment) it's still worth a shot. If you are knowledgeable about the procedure that you plan to have, you can ask some pointed questions that only a person who has had the procedure (or a medical professional) would know the answers to.



Overseas Dental Care

As mentioned above, the best-developed center for foreign patients seeking dental care is Mexico.

Some border towns along the US/Mexico border seem to exist primarily to serve US dental patients. Most border towns will have a relatively large number of dental offices, so it isn't always necessary to go to a town like Nuevo Progreso (just south of McAllen, Texas) which has perhaps several hundred dentists. In terms of quality, it can vary quite a bit. It would be wise to know exactly what you need before you go to Mexico, so that you won't be sold any

unnecessary procedures. Of course it would be wise to also know what a procedure would cost in the US.

The internet has a number of advertisements for dentists in Mexican border towns. Dentists in the interior don't tend to advertise much. Prices tend to be higher along the border, but it can also be more convenient since it isn't necessary to travel further south, and with a concentration of dentists the lab work can be faster and better quality (but not always).

If you plan to have some dental work done on the border, it would be wise to get an estimate of cost and the time required before making a trip, and then allow at least an extra day or so, in case anything comes up or the lab has to re-do some of their work.

Many people confuse good insurance with good medical care. The difference is that insurance only guarantees payment, not the quality of the care.

If you know someone who has had dental work done along the border, ask them for input on their experience.

If you travel to a town on the border before deciding on a particular dentist, walk around and take a look at some of the offices. You might want to speak with several dentists and look at their equipment to get a feel for their competence. A dirty office is never a good sign, nor is equipment that seems to date from before the revolution.

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From my own personal experience, I've seen mostly very modern equipment in Mexican dental offices. The x-ray machines tend to be the newer type where you don't need the lead apron. Mexico graduates a lot of dentists, and they seem to buy new equipment when they set up their offices.

If you go to a small dental office, the dentist may not have a receptionist or even an assistant. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, as the dentist may still offer good quality care. Some dentists have an office in the front of their house. Again, this isn't necessarily a bad thing, and does not necessarily detract from the quality of their care.

You may survive the operation, but will you survive the bill?

I've known people who have saved thousands, and in some cases tens of thousands, by getting dental care in Mexico.

If you do visit a border town for dental care, you can normally get cheaper lodging on the Mexican side, but standards are sometimes better on the US side. It's also not a bad idea to park your car on the US side, and take taxis on the Mexican side.

Many (not all but most) dentists in border towns will speak some English. In the interior, it isn't so common. Standards at the border seem to be more consistent, in the interior it seems to vary more.

If you are interested in dental care in a different country, a lot of my advice still holds. It's mostly a matter of evaluating the cost, the dentist's references, the cost and ease of your travel to their office, how long the procedures will take, and how comfortable you feel with their expertise.



Plastic and General Surgery

One provider of overseas medical care can be found at: <http://overseasmedical.net/index.htm>. This company is affiliated with Wockhardt International, a hospital group in India. The Wockhardt hospitals have been inspected and accredited by Joint Commission International. Their web site has a good breakdown of procedures and costs.

Dealing with a hospital that has been inspected and accredited by Joint Commission International does take some of the guesswork out of getting care overseas. As usual there are few guarantees, but you know that procedures, equipment, staff, and training are probably going to be adequate for your needs. When you locate a health provider from a web site and only

have their glowing (self provided) references to go on, you may be taking a much bigger chance, since you have no idea of the adequacy of their care.

There are any number of web sites which offer plastic and general surgery in various countries, so do some checking. But don't in any case make any sort of decision on any procedure based on what you saw on some web site. These sites are best used as a basis for further research, to check references and prices, and to get an idea of how the whole thing would work for you. For a given procedure, learn what the cost would be in the US--don't get just one estimate in the US, get several. Some web sites will high-ball the US cost to make it look like their "discounted" prices are lower.

Another thing to consider, particularly for an elective procedure for which you have either no insurance or insufficient insurance to pay for the whole thing, is that you may be able to negotiate a discount on a procedure in the US, without even going overseas. Some surgeons and hospitals will give a break on some procedures, but of course few will advertise this. If you have a certain amount of money for a procedure, ask around--let them know you will pay the bill upon completion of the procedure. It's certainly worth checking this option before going overseas.

For the downside of plastic surgery overseas, check this web site: <http://www.ebreastaug.com/breast-implant-news/overseas-plastic-surgery.htm>.

Concerning elective surgery overseas, my advice is buyer beware. Look for a hospital that is certified (see Joint Commission International, above). I wouldn't necessarily believe all the horror stories (you mean no plastic surgery patients in the US ever had any problems and all overseas patients have problems?)

nor would I believe the glowing reports the overseas providers give (you mean EVERY patient you ever had was perfectly satisfied?). Going under the knife is serious business, and don't even think about it unless you have done extensive research on the surgery provider.

Going under the knife is serious business, and don't even think about it unless you have done extensive research on the surgery provider.

In response to US providers who posit that all care in other countries is dangerous, I would ask them why the World Health Organization rates the US system as #37, after Costa Rica, Columbia, Chile, and almost every European country? It's possible to get excellent care overseas, provided you do your homework.

If you can find a provider who was trained in the US or Europe, so much the better. Don't spend a dime until you see the facility and talk with the surgeons who will be performing any procedures. Where did they receive their training? What if you have problems after the surgery, how will they deal with that? What sort of insurance do they have if you have to sue them? Can you even sue them at all in another country? What sort of after-surgery follow-up procedures do they have?

Arrive a couple days early for a procedure, and tour the facility where you plan to have surgery. Talk to the surgeon. Do you feel comfortable with the facility and the surgeon? If not, think twice about going through with any procedure.

Before going overseas, ask for and check out any references you can get. Talk to anybody you might know who has had a similar procedure done, whether in the US or overseas. Don't consider paying cash for a procedure, always pay by credit card. If your credit card limit isn't high enough, try to work it out with the issuing company.

In my opinion, any reputable surgery provider should have lots of good references, should be willing and eager to answer any of your concerns to your satisfaction, should be willing to accept payment by credit card after the procedure is done and you are satisfied with the results, and their hospital or facility should be inspected and accredited by an independent accreditation body, like Joint Commission International.

It's also worth Googling any overseas doctor, hospital, or clinic to see if anybody else has written anything about them, whether good, bad, or indifferent. Keep in mind that some positive references may have been written by those who have been paid to do so.

For those seeking medical care in Mexico, an excellent reference is the book, *Mexico Health and Safety Travel Guide*, by Robert

Medical Tourism

H. Page, M.D. and Curtis R. Page, M.D. Phone 866-MedToGo, <http://www.medtogo.com>.



Going Overseas For Imaging and Diagnostic Care

One of my cousins recently had an MRI. The cost? Five thousand dollars. He had good insurance (with a large employer) but he was still out a thousand dollars out of pocket. Five thousand dollars for a twenty minute procedure. At the rate of two MRI procedures an hour, this one machine would generate roughly twenty million dollars a year in revenue (eight hour day). Good work if you can get it.

In some cases it can make sense to go overseas for imaging and diagnosis of some conditions, especially under the following circumstances: 1) you lack funds or insurance to pay for imaging (particularly in the US) but have a condition where imaging would be very useful, and you do have enough money for overseas imaging 2) you have diagnosis and treatment options in your home country, but think you might have better alternatives in a country with different treatment regimes (for example going to Europe for prostate cancer treatment). Some treatments may be available overseas that aren't available in your home country 3) you've had treatment of a condition and have had poor outcomes and would like a second opinion 4) you feel the quality of care you've received in your home country is poor or you have too much of a wait to receive it.

You might be surprised to know that even now, some x-rays for some US hospitals are read by Radiologists in India. Of course, many health care providers in the US are foreign born, and received all or much of their training overseas.



Overseas Nursing Care

For older readers, nursing care is something to consider in their waning years. If you're fortunate enough to live in a country with a good elder-care system, you may never need to consider leaving your country to find a decent place to grow old in once your health begins to limit your ability to provide your own care.

However, some readers will find it necessary to make some tough decisions. In the US, for example, before the government will pay for nursing home care, you have to spend all your money above \$2500 before they begin to pay. This almost guarantees that nursing home residents can't go back to live independently--they don't have any money left, since they had to spend it all on their nursing home care.

Many people prefer assisted living care while they are still more ambulatory, but Medicare doesn't pay for it.

I've been in quite a few nursing homes in the US, and I can say that I've only seen a couple that I liked at all. Only one that I would have considered living in myself.

Keep in mind that some of the complaints about nursing homes in Mexico also can apply to nursing homes in the states. Speaking

You might be surprised to know that even now, some x-rays for some US hospitals are read by Radiologists in India.

from personal experience, my mother suffered from various forms of abuse, some of which was at the hands of nursing home employees, theft by nursing home workers of her possessions, and poor medical care. And this was while I kept a hawk's eye on her care, all in a nursing home that was regularly inspected only a few miles from my home! I should also mention that one of the state nursing home inspectors locally was convicted of taking bribes from nursing home owners, and that the bookkeeper in my mother's home was convicted of embezzling from patient's accounts. You really can't get much worse than that. Why not consider Mexico for a fraction of the cost?

One of the biggest complaints of nursing home residents in the US is that they are lonely, so that should come as no surprise that it would also be a complaint in Mexico. However, the attitude toward old people seems to be different in Mexico.

Many people would hesitate to move to Mexico because their family members are living nearby, and they assume they would come to visit them regularly, but would not do so if they moved to Mexico. On the other hand, many relatives basically stop visiting you once you move to a nursing home, particularly if you live more than an hour from them. Family visits can become rare once you live in a nursing home--with some people, their relatives would visit no more seldom if they lived in Mexico than if they lived in the US. It's sad but true, and I've seen in many times.

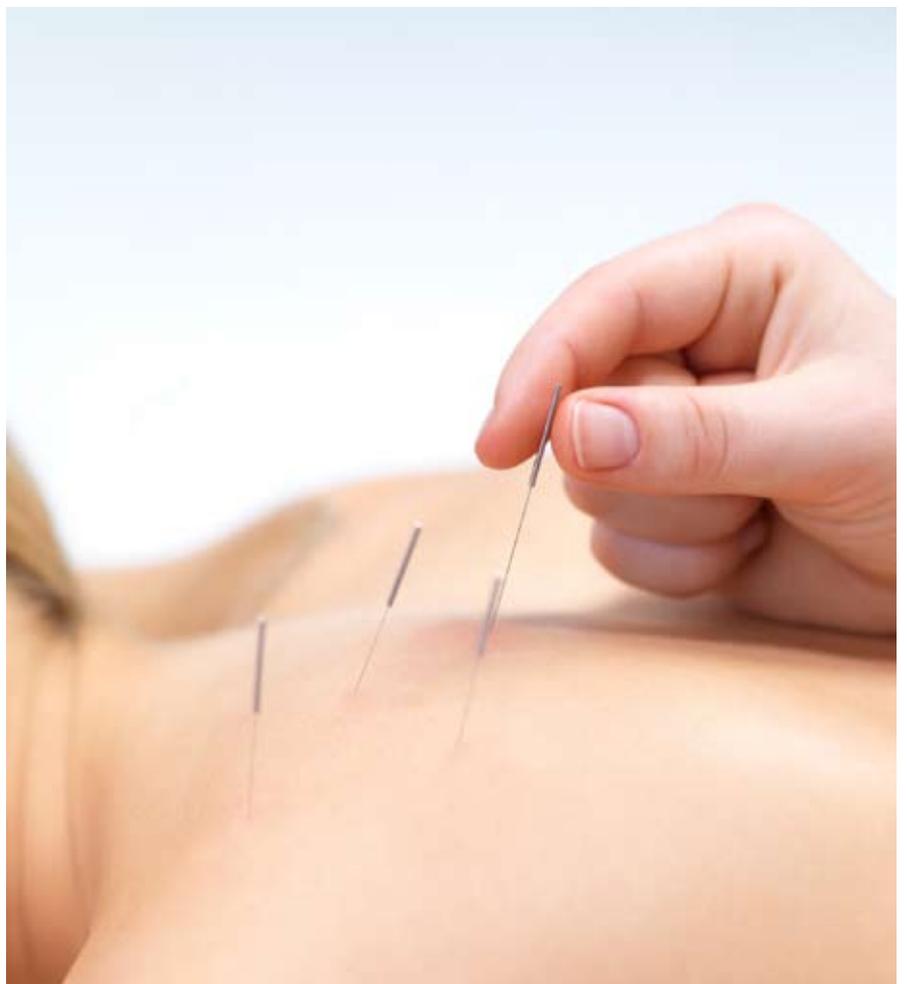
Another option for living in Mexico is to live independently in a house or apartment, and hire a live-in caretaker. Wages will vary, but should be no more than \$3-5 per hour. In many areas, \$15 or \$20 a day would be considered a very good wage for a caretaker.

When considering a nursing home in another country, it would be wise to choose one located not too far from your home country. Many people, when they get older, don't tolerate cold weather, so choosing a warm climate can be a smart move as well.

I would suggest that anyone considering an overseas nursing home arrange to stay in a home for several weeks on a trial basis, before making the final move. Food, medical care, staff, cleanliness, freedom from stress, activities, and weather are some of factors that will influence your happiness in a nursing home. It's likely that you won't be as happy in any nursing home as you were in your own home, but if you can't live independently any more, you have to live someplace where you can get assistance.

Alternative Care Overseas

Mexico has been known for a long time as a center for alternative cancer treatments. An introductory discussion can be found



Medical Tourism

at: http://www.alternative-cancer.net/mexican_hospitals.htm.

The Cancer Cure Foundation web site at http://www.cancure.org/directory_clinics_outside%20US.htm contains information on cancer clinics using a wide variety of treatments in many different countries. The same web site also has their own listing of Mexican alternative care clinics.

It's difficult to evaluate the odds that a particular cancer treatment will be effective for curing your cancer. This is true whether you are in the US or overseas. Conventional treatment may be very effective in many cases, but it's also true that many people die from conventional treatment. Unfortunately we don't know how many. It's difficult to say whether alternative treatment may be more effective in your own particular case, but it certainly is worth investigating.

What If You Already Have Great Insurance?

Many people confuse good insurance with good medical care. The difference is that insurance only guarantees payment, not the quality of the care. Even if you (or your insurance company) pays a fortune, the quality of your care is not guaranteed.

Some border towns along the US/Mexico border seem to exist primarily to serve US dental patients.

A lot of people also seem to have an inordinate, and often unearned, faith in their health care providers, and don't realize that consumer protection and standards of service in some ways are inadequate in the medical business.

In some cases it may be possible to get better care overseas for less than the cost of your co-pays and deductibles in your home country, particularly if you are from the US. Most overseas providers aren't in such a big hurry to process everybody. House calls and office visits that are extremely thorough and unhurried and can take an hour or longer (as much time as is necessary) are a thing of the past in the US, home of the five minute office visit. So don't let your "good" insurance get in the way of your care.

Purchasing Pharmaceuticals Overseas

Many people, particularly in the US, pay very high prices for pharmaceuticals.

As an aside, almost every European country has price controls on pharmaceuticals. The US does not. Many companies sell identical drugs in Europe for a fraction of what they cost in the US. In poorer countries, the prices are often even far lower than that.

Some pharmaceutical companies have campaigns to scare people into thinking that all drugs purchased overseas are dangerous, subject to counterfeiting and so on. Counterfeit drugs are to be found, but it's probably not nearly so common as you might be led to believe. Many drug companies insinuated that drugs purchased in Canada were dangerous. To the best of my knowledge,



oversight of pharmaceuticals in Canada is at least as good as it is in the US.

Counterfeiting might be a concern when purchasing drugs on the street in some African country, or perhaps in India, but otherwise it probably isn't that common. India, by the way, has a huge generic drug industry, and large, reputable companies like Ranbaxy, Dr Reddy, etc, which export many pharmaceuticals to the US. Brazil and Thailand also have many large generic drug companies. In some places, purchasing pills in individual blister packs might be safer than purchasing pills which come in bulk, if you do have a concern.

There are a few unscrupulous providers in other countries, but plenty of wonderful ones as well.

For those living in the US, the most convenient place to purchase pharmaceuticals is Mexico. Many border towns have large pharmacies which cater extensively to US citizens crossing the border to save on their prescriptions.

In Mexico it often isn't necessary to have a prescription for most drugs, or if you do need one in some cases there will be a doctor in the pharmacy who will write a prescription for you on the spot.

If you happen to be traveling to another country and regularly take prescription drugs which are expensive, it's worth visiting a local pharmacy to check the price of drugs locally. You might be able to stock up, and save hundreds of dollars.

If you are in Mexico, one of the best places to get pharmaceuticals is Farmacia Similares. They sell primarily generic drugs, and have better prices than I've seen elsewhere. Some of the large pharmacies in border towns are also competitive, but check around. Prices can vary drastically from one store to another, but Farmacia Similares seems to be a great bet.

If you do purchase a quantity of pharmaceuticals overseas (like in Mexico) and return to the US, you will sometimes be asked by the border personnel if you have purchased pharmaceuticals in Mexico, particularly if you walk across the border. Your response is a judgement call--good to be honest, but you did come to save some money, and if the US had price controls on pharmaceuticals the whole exercise wouldn't have been necessary.

If you do plan to purchase some pharmaceuticals overseas, you should know the generic names of the drugs you plan to purchase, since they often go by different names in other countries, particularly if you've been purchasing the name-brand versions. You should also know the dosages appropriate for you, since different dosages are often available in other countries.

Keep in mind that some positive references may have been written by those who have been paid to do so.

I've noticed that over-the-counter medicines are often more expensive in Mexico than in the US. The real savings are in prescription drugs.

Do Your Research

This article is meant to encourage you to do further research for your own particular needs. There are a few unscrupulous providers in other countries, but plenty of wonderful ones as well.

Supposedly we have great consumer protection in the US, but we've also had estrogen (prescribed for over 30 years, in some

Medical Tourism

cases may create more problems than it solves), Phen-fen, Vioxx (greatly elevated heart attack risk), Celebrex (ditto), and many other products which were approved by regulatory authorities and prescribed by thousands of physicians.

It should be painfully clear by now that no country has a monopoly on consumer protection. Don't trust any particular health care provider just because they are wearing a white coat and have "MD" after their name. Their treatment protocols may prove to be perfect for your situation, but that is to be determined by your own research, not by blind faith.

In many areas, \$15 or \$20 a day would be considered a very good wage for a caretaker.

Best of luck in your search for good care, wherever you may find it.

Retiring on \$500 a Month

By Ken Bayliss

How to afford a better life in the sun.

South East Asia

Some people regard Third World and Developing World countries with fear or even derision. Granted they don't have the same lifestyle, things happen more slowly in some countries, often not at all. Problems that locals shrug off, like power outages, or water shortages could drive you nuts. Yet if you are prepared to adapt you'll find there's a uniqueness of culture, warm weather and warm people.

Places where \$500 a month can afford you a nice retirement are becoming harder to find. South East Asia allows you to tick the retirement-with-ease boxes. Granted it is an adventure and you'll certainly never live like a king. But then, do you really live like one now!

In Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines there is great potential. Where, for instance, can you find a dramatic isolated island and stay there for around \$9 a day, including food? And where is it possible live near a beach that rarely sees foreigners these days? Or, where can you find a resort for \$6 a day? All these places actually exist. Granted they are far from high-end places, and they certainly don't have glossy brochure advertising. Yet you can go to these places and you can avoid the cold and damp of the fall and that long hard winter.

These three places are tropical countries. Consequently they get quite hot in the summer. However, there are a couple of places mentioned that have cool winters.



Problems that locals shrug off, like power outages, or water shortages could drive you nuts.

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Not snow and hail and that bone-numbing feeling. These go down to just about 10 Celsius, around 15 Fahrenheit.

Living in underdeveloped countries things can surprise you. It could be the lack of facilities for disabled people, or the slums, the traffic chaos and a myriad other things that will color your first encounter. However, before you go, do your research well.

Some will say you can't live anywhere on that money, but they have a higher incomes and higher expectations.

Leave nothing to chance.

Being seriously disabled in these countries is not an option on \$500 a month. You will also need some insurance if you are a senior

and you are prone to certain issues. Yet you could stretch to getting a person to help you out in some countries. Also if you are going to get a spouse, two can live as cheaply as one in Asia, as long as one partner is not Western. Whole families live on less than \$500, but it means cutting back on things you insist on having; air-conditioning, mostly western foods, supermarket shopping, living in fancy ends of town, big houses and a car.

Some will say you can't live anywhere on that money, but they have a higher incomes and higher expectations. Go in with none, be happy with what you get and work from there. With the right attitude on spending, it is possible to find a place and still live a good life, even near a tropical beach. You just have to leave the mental and material trappings of the West behind. By doing that, perhaps for the first time in history, the average Joe can live almost anywhere he/she chooses. So count your blessings because you have the power to move to some very interesting places, even with just \$500 a month coming in.

Contacts

Before you go it would be good to get a few local contacts. Here are two sites which have those potentials.

Global Freeloaders lets you stay free in many places around the world for a day or two whilst organizing your thoughts. Free to join and free to participate. Members give you a free bed or room and in return you can agree to, or totally ignore, requests from other members for accommodation in your place.

<http://www.globalfreeloaders.com>
They have 6 members in Cambodia, 165 in Thailand and 285 in the Philippines.

The Hospitality Club is another place where you could stay free for a night. There are many round the world that will give advice and may even put you up for a night or two.



It's free to join and no other hidden fees.

<http://www.hospitalityclub.org> They have 17 members in Cambodia 750 in Thailand and 743 in the Philippines.

<http://www.aca.ch/joomla/index.php>

Americans abroad, and other nationalities, will like this site. Good advice and news, great links.

Ex-pat sites should be checked out too. These know what's going on and will give you invaluable information.

The Daddy of all ex-pat links

http://www.expertexpert.com/links_expatriate_sites

Thailand

Many people's idea of Thailand is a rural life, water buffaloes in rice paddies, temple-dancing maidens and smiling people. Others notice a quickly developing world where technology and financial aspects are enthusiastically embraced. In reality both are correct. Thailand is a balancing act. It holds on to traditions in a world economy and an all-embracing blanket of overpowering Western culture. They take pride in festivals and try and create an atmosphere of Thai-ness. They also borrow ideas, but adapt everything to their way and liking.

Everyone or thing eventually gravitates to the main city of Bangkok. It offers a cornucopia of choice not possible elsewhere else in the country. It goes some way to explain why a large proportion of people living in Bangkok originate from the countryside, mainly from the area known as Isan, in the north east.

For our purposes, though, the capital it is too expensive. We need to go into country towns and cities to survive on \$500 a month. In these country districts there are smaller cities where you can get similar things that Bangkok offers. These are quieter places where the word skyscraper is unknown and where your money goes a lot further and people get to know you.

Being poor is a way of life here. They have cell phones but struggle on 6 dollars a day. You couldn't live that low because in Asian countries they have extended families and beg and borrow off each other, or make do and mend all the time. People live mainly on rice and are adept at scrimping and saving where you will struggle. It's still very cheap, however, even for you. Cheap food



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is available from stalls and markets, supermarket food halls and small restaurants. A small meal for one plus a Pepsi at a small place would set you back about 50 Baht – just about \$1.50.



Accommodation

Living in areas outside of the capital is pretty good for retirees of all classes, for rich and for some poorer ones. Here prices of accommodation begin to tumble down to a respectable level. Unfortunately, most seaside living in Thailand is now expensive; the same in many countries. There are a couple of places listed here that are worth considering. If you don't like them then head for the hills.

Apartments

This web site has some very good cheap apartments for rent outside Bangkok and other areas. <http://en.9apartment.com>

Go to the left hand corner and click on the UK flag then go to the Category Search. Now go down the list till you see 'Residence search in upcountry' and click on that. This will give you a good list of places outside of Bangkok. These apartments are mostly limited to Chaing Mai, Chon Buri, Khon Kaen, and Rayong.

The good thing about apartments is that you can stay for a night or two, usually about \$10. Then you can check out the area and also the apartment building itself. The cost of a house or apartment in country districts should be around 2,000 - 4,000 Baht (\$60 - \$120) a month. Electricity is extra and of course so is water. It doesn't amount to much, roughly 1,500 Baht (\$45) a month. Fans are more common than air conditioning in the country so don't expect luxuries. It also means that your electric bill would double, maybe even treble with air con. If you are hot buy another fan, they cost around \$22 and save you a fortune in bills. Also make sure your apartment is not facing the sun all day.

If you rent a small house in the country these rarely come furnished, so try and make a deal with the owner to put in some things. Failing that they will know someone who has items for sale.

Chonburi

South east of the capital is Chon Buri is a small seaside town on its way to its near neighboring town, and the sex capital of Thailand, Pattaya. Chonburi also has nightlife, not as loud as its neighbor, but enough to satisfy most people. It is just 44 miles, a short bus ride, from the capital. You can go by train, at 6.55 a.m. but any other times you'll have to get off at nearby Aranyaphet station and finish the short journey by taxi. <http://www.traveller2000.com/train/TimeTable/Eastern.htm>

Public transport is often in the form of motorcycle taxis and songtew's. These are high-sided covered pick-up trucks with 2

benches in the back and are often crowded Both are cheap and no need to tip. Find out the cost from the bike taxi before getting on. It's usually as low as 10 Baht or at most 15 Baht (44 cents), so check. With the songtew pay when you get off. Again it's not more than 10 Baht (30 cents) or so. As always with people like motorcycle taxi drivers, never use big bills when paying. They will never have change and presume that as a rich foreigner you'll let them keep the change. Chon Buri is a combination of old and new, wonderful and awful, restful and lively, a true enigma that may appeal to many, whilst others will hate it.

Some cheap short stay accommodation

Canterbury Tales Cafe & Guesthouse, Soi Chaiyapoon, Nongprue, Banglamung \$17

Uwe und Wantana's Gastehaus und Restaurant 245 Moo 9, Sukhumvit Road Najomtien Soi 9 \$10

Reading

Most books can be found in Pattaya.

SE ED Bookshops containing English language material.

G Fl., Com Building, Pattaya

2nd Fl., Lotus Pattaya.

G Fl., Book Variety Carrefour

Pastimes

The annual Water Buffalo races. Golf at the Pattana Golf Club and a Sauna, Massage, Jacuzzi or eat in their nice restaurant. Fees are relatively cheap. Deep sea fishing organized by an ex-pat club. www.pattayasports.org

[e-mail golf@pattayasports.org](mailto:golf@pattayasports.org) Walking, both beach and nearby hills, bird watching, biking, fishing, sailing and snorkeling. There's a beach and a harbor to watch the traditional fishing boats heading out to the Gulf of Thailand. Tiring of that there's a big Robinson's shopping mall as a change.

Chiang Mai, is cradled by forested mountains and has seven hundred years of history.

Hospitals in and around Chonburi

Chollavej Hospital Sukhumvit Rd. KM. 143

Chonburi Hospital Sukhumvit Rd. Muang

EK-Chon Hospital Prayasatja Rd

Pattaya Memoriam Hospital 328/1 moo9 Pattaya-Klang rd., Nhongprue, Banglamung.

Phayathai-Sriracha Hospital Srirachanakorn 3 Rd

Samitivej-Sriracha Hospital Jermjompol Rd

Somdet Pranangchao Sirikit Hospital. A.Sattaheep

Rayong

A four hour drive, or an hour and a half by plane from Bangkok, is Rayong. The town has 200,000 people and is not far from the Cambodian border. The area has a 100 km of beachfront where you can see most of the 10 islands groups in the Gulf. Elsewhere are waterfalls, mountains, fruit plantations and forest. The usual amenities for a moderately sized Thai town exist;

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supermarkets, franchised outlets such as KFC, 7/11 and movie theaters, though the films will be in Thai.

The first big beach in Rayong is about 10 km after the city, called Hat Mae Ramphung. It's popular at the weekend, but is 12 km long so it's easy to find a deserted bit. The top of the beach is fringed with sea oaks which gives you some good shade. There are beach chairs that cost 20 Baht a day and these double as an ad hoc restaurant where someone will come with a menu. It's in Thai so ask for Kow Pat Gai fried rice with chicken – about 30 Baht (88 cents). The place is quiet, a few mini-marts and a few other stores.

If you want peace and an easy life there is also Ban Kon Ao, a small fishing village at the other end of the beach. Not that many foreigners get here. Mostly Thai families go there for their holidays. If you make a base in Rayong, or the Reggae Guest House, take your time and check things out.

Cheap short stay accommodation

A place to stay on the beach, with a Caribbean touch, is the Reggae Guest House. It is very welcoming and you can pick up some good local information here. A rear balcony room goes from 200 Baht a night (under \$6) for a 2 night or more stay. An ocean view room shoots up to 350 Baht (just over \$10) a night for a 2 night or more stay. Considering its location next to the beach, the place is a real bargain. You can get a discount of 40% if you book for 30 days!

<http://www.reggaeguesthouse.com>

The local area has many Scandinavians renting houses or those who have bought houses there. If you don't stay at the Reggae Guesthouse buy a meal from their vast menu and talk to the obliging staff about local rentals.

Pastimes

There are few things to do in Rayong, bar the usual fishing, walking, swimming, beach activities and some sailing. There are one or two golf courses such as the Rayong Green Valley Country Club. It's not cheap but it has other facilities in the club. As always with golf clubs go there during the week, since weekends get packed out.

Hospitals

Mongkuit Rayong Hospital Mabya Rd

Rayong Hospital Sukhumvit Rd

Thonburi Sriklang Hospital Sukhumvit Rd. A.Klang

Quite a few clinics and pharmacies in town, some on Sukhumvit Rd

Khon Kaen

Just 278 miles north of Bangkok is Khon Kaen. Situated in the middle of Isan the town is a vibrant place with a university. It is a town of 150,000 people and is the administration center for the northeast of Thailand. You can get there by plane in 1 hour, or bus in 5 hours.



It is not a tourist town, so don't expect the same facilities as those places. The night life is OK and the people are friendly, though not many locals speak English. Try the Khon Kaen Forum – this thread is not just for accommodation there are lots of other threads and is used by ex-pats in the area.

http://www.khonkaen.com/english/forum/forum_topics.asp?FID=39

For public transport there are songtews. There are different lines through the city. You can decide between the different lines by the color of the car. Wave the vehicle down and ask for your destination. It costs around 10 Baht. There are often Tuk Tuk's which will take you everywhere in town for similar prices.

Members give you a free bed or room and in return you can agree to, or totally ignore, requests from other members for accommodation in your place.

Most ex-pat activity is centered in the ex-pat bars. Some worth a visit, especially for getting contacts are: Eric's Bar between Hotel Sofitel Raja Orchid and Kosa Hotel, centrally located in downtown Khon Kaen. Leo's Bar Located in the heart of Khon

Kaen City opposite the Hotel Sofitel and only a few minutes walk from the Kosa Hotel and Charoen Thani Princess. Number 1 Bar Located on Namuang Road, a few minutes walk from both Khon Kaen Hotel and Kaen Inn. Seven's Corner Located on Soi Yimsiri, cross Srichan Road near Bangkok Bank and follow the Soi to the end.

Cheap short stay accommodation

Europe Guest House Air con rooms 460 Baht \$13.70, fan only 150 Baht \$4.50 <http://www.europe-khonkaen.com>

Reading

SE-ED Book Centers

1st Fl. Fairy Plaza, Khon Kaen Branch. 69/9 Klang-muang Road, T. Ni-muang, A.Muang

Ground Fl., Kosa Com Building, Khon Kaen Branch 250/1 Sichan Road, T.Ni-muang, A.Muang

Pastimes

Horse racing is held in a good stadium every Saturday and Sunday except on holidays. Racing starts at 12:00 (noon) and goes through to 6:00pm for a ten races. Swimming in a local pool, at Chol 2, or in the Kosan d Sofitel hotels costing about 100 Baht. There's golf and possibly cricket some time soon, in the university they play rugby.

Hospitals

Pracha Wet Hospital near Khonkaen University.

Srinakharint Hospital (government)

Khonkaen Hospital (government)

Chiang Mai

A popular place to retire in Thailand is Chiang Mai. Look on a map and it is the most north westerly big city. It's a bit more expensive these days, but it has a thriving foreign community. It has a train service from Bangkok and you can fly there cheaply enough, for around 2,000 Baht (\$60). Chiang Mai is regarded as Thailand's second city, with a population of 1 million. Its importance is mostly derived from tourism these days.

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Chiang Mai, is cradled by forested mountains and has seven hundred years of history. It has its own culture, festivals, and traditions as well as arts and a mix of local Hill Tribe communities. Many rate it as one of the best towns to live in Asia with its mix of cosmopolitan and traditional appeal. As it is situated in the north of Thailand it gets cool in the winter. Something a lot of people love.

Public transport is the usual songteaw and Tuk Tuk variety, as well as the motorcycle taxi. These are cheap and cheerful at around 10 Baht for short journeys.



Some cheap short stay accommodation

- Parami Guest House 210 - 212 Charoenrat Rd - \$6
- Same Same Guest House 104 Ratchaphakinai Rd - \$6
- Julie Guest House 7/1 Soi 5, Prapokklao Rd., Muang \$6
- Thapae Gate Lodge 38/7 Moonmuang Soi 2 \$7
- Tha Phae Garden Guest House 60 Thaphe Road Soi 3 \$7

Reading

- Book Zone 318 Thapae Road.
- Bookazine Basement of Chiang Inn Plaza Chang Khlan Road.
- CE-ED Lotus Supercenter Flr 2, 132 Moo 1, Chiang Mai-Hang Dong Road.
- Dokya Book 177 Chang Phuak Road. Duangkamol Chiang Mai Co., Ltd. 79/1 Kotchasan Road.
- Sangseaw Book Co., Ltd. 15/75-76 Huai Kaew Road.
- Suriwong Book Centre 54, 54/1 Sridonchai Road.
- Tokyodo Books Kad Suan Kaew Flr 4, 99/4 Moo 2, Huai Kaew Road.
- The Bangkok Post and Nation newspapers come in around 9.00 a.m.

Pastimes

Jogging since it's cooler up north, especially in the 'winter'. Fishing, bird watching, walking and swimming in hotel pools. Tennis, some court rentals are \$1.6 to \$3.5 per hour. Fitness centers and gyms in most big hotels. Ask for daily rate or membership. There are a number of golf clubs; The Royal Chiangmai Golf Resort is one.

Ballooning; info@orientalballoonflights.com not very cheap. Flying can be done at Chiangmai Flying Club and even offers pilot training, cmfc@cmflyingclub.com or <http://www.cmflyingclub.com> Microlights 15 minutes for \$55 www.skyadventures.info. You can even learn to fly one, but it's over \$2,300 for 20 hours tuition. Horse riding in a number of riding clubs average \$12 an hour.

Government Hospitals and Medical Centers

- Maharaj Hospital
- Chiang Mai Ram Hospital
- Suan Prong Hospital
- Chiang Dao Hospital
- Chai Prakarn Hospital
- Chiang Mai Neurological Hospital

Dararatsami Hospital
Doi Saket Hospital
Doi Tao Hospital
Fang Hospital

There are many more as well as numerous clinics and pharmacies throughout the town.



These towns and cities could be jumping off places, If none appeal there's a vast amount of small townships and villages to look into. You will need to seek out apartment-type buildings and call in. Word of mouth is a good way of finding things. Ask around in restaurants and even go to a bar or two in town and ask if anyone knows of permanent accommodation. Most people know someone who can speak a smattering of English. Please be aware that life in a village in Asia is not the same as one in your country. Few if any people speak English and their customs aren't yours. Of course, it could be the very reason why you want to live there

Approximate expenses for apartment living on the cheap in Thailand.

Rent: 4,000 B

Electric: 1,500 B

Water: 250 B

Cable: 500 B

Groceries: 4,000 B

Transport: 1,500 B

Miscellaneous - Visa Insurance etc. 2,500 B

Total monthly expenses 14,250 B - \$401.00

Banks

Domestic and foreign banks http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_banks_in_Thailand

USEFUL LINKS

Real Estate

<http://classifieds.thaivisa.com/real-estate/houses-to-rent/classified-chiang-rai.html>

<http://www.thailandpropertyolutions.com/index.php>

Information on low cost travel in the region

<http://www.travelfish.org/>

Lowdown, reports and info from Thailand

<http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Asia/Thailand/TravelGuide-Thailand.html>

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Cheap flights inland and some Asian countries

<http://www.airasia.com/index.htm>

Bus enquiries and information for travel round Thailand

http://www.tourismthailand.org/about_thailand.php?module=transportation&file=transportation01

A good site for all train information, though confirm at the station first

<http://www.seat61.com/Thailand.htm>

Work out your costs with this money exchange rate site

<http://www.xe.com/ucc/>

Legal advisors

<http://www.sunbeltasiagroup.com>

<http://www.siamlegal.com>

Visa Matters

e-mail info@siam-visa.com

e-mail idlthailand@yahoo.com

e-mail sunttee@asiaaccess.net.th

Chon Buri is a combination of old and new, wonderful and awful, restful and lively, a true enigma that may appeal to many, whilst others will hate it.

Next Month – How to retire to Cambodia and the Philippines on \$500 a month.

Falling in love with Niagara Falls

By Anne Coombes

One of the Northern hemisphere's
greatest natural wonders

Each year, 12 million people jet off to Niagara Falls. Some go to get wed, some to relive their honeymoons (it's not for nothing that it's dubbed 'Viagra Falls' or a spot for 'newly weds and nearly dead') and some simply because it has to be done. It's one of the Northern hemisphere's greatest natural wonders – to be ticked off alongside the Grand Canyon, the Rockies and a cruise around Alaska's glaciers. The Falls themselves are bewitching in a quite unexplainable fashion. Yes, we're all ready to be impressed by their size and their beauty but their allure extends far beyond the photogenic. Their raw power is so hypnotic that it's no surprise to learn that around 20 people each year choose this location to jump to their deaths. If you happen to be feeling undecided, it's probably not the place to test your will. You stand before them and your entire being dwindles to little more than a wisp of puff. Perhaps this is what makes them the ideal wedding backdrop – only love is a match for their elemental force. Ignore jokes that the Falls are 'the bride's second disappointment' - only the soulless fail to be moved.

Well I never.....!

They are 12,000 yrs old and the second largest in the world - after South Africa's Victoria Falls. The Angel Falls in Venezuela are the highest but Niagara's huge volume of water is what makes it impressive. In fact, Niagara Falls encompasses three separate cascades: the American Falls (850 feet wide), the Bridal Veil Falls (just 50 feet and also on the American side) and the well-



You look up in awe and become acutely aware that these are moments you'll remember for the rest of your life.

Falling in love with Niagara Falls

known Canadian Horseshoe Falls (2200 feet wide). Around 600,000 gallons go over each second, from which comes Niagara's name: 'Thunder of Waters' in the original Indian language.



The Maid of the Mist – the most fun you can have while wearing a plastic bag

Don your complimentary blue plastic raincoat and climb aboard a Maid of the Mist cruise. Since 1846, these jolly little boats have been plying their trade with eager tourists – initially as the only route across the river. Famous passengers have included the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII), President Roosevelt, Russian President Gorbachev, British Princes Harry and William, and a host of other royals and premiers. These days, they are the ultimate way to view the Falls. From their base, the force of water is so great that it's rather like standing in a gale; the mist soaks you from head to foot (hence the fetching outfits). You look up in awe and become

acutely aware that these are moments you'll remember for the rest of your life. The best strategy is to stand at the prow of the boat and take the experience head on. It's a total rush - worth standing in line for - but pre-booking tickets avoids the wait. Prices and opening times at www.maidofthemist.com

Up, up and away

Another truly memorable – and dramatic - way to sample the panorama is from the air. Jump into a 6 man helicopter and be whisked off to view the mighty Falls from your own eagle-eyed perspective. You can take a Rainbow Air helicopter from the American side (www.rainbowairinc.com) or a National Helicopter from Niagara-on-the-Lake (905-641-2222). Niagara Helicopter Rides offers a cheaper alternative, with a thrilling 8 minutes in the air (Victoria Ave, Niagara Falls - 905 357 5672). A more sedate choice is the Flight of Angels tethered balloon, on the American side. The helium filled fantasy rises to 400 feet, overlooking the Gorge and the Falls (716/278-0824).

Other unusual ways to view the Falls.....

Take an external glass fronted elevator up the 775 foot high Skylon Tower – the tallest in the area and the Falls' most famous man-made landmark. Be ready to leave your stomach at the bottom and your head in the clouds: you can't fail to be impressed by the sight that awaits you from this amazing

vantage point. Take your time on the observation platform at the top – you can walk around to survey a 360 degree panorama. The Skylon has a buffet restaurant and a smarter eatery at its summit – you can hardly find a better location to stop for lunch. During the summer, it's open until midnight – giving magnificent views of the illuminated Falls and twinkling promenade below. It's been a top spot for visitors since it opened in 1965 (www.skylon.com)

To encourage the nocturnal birds and animals to strut their stuff, the site has a specially darkened 'ancient jungle ruin' room.

Another novel way to enjoy the scenery is from the Niagara SkyWheel. Ascend over 175 feet in a gentle arc aboard one of its 42 enclosed gondolas - each can take up to 6 people. The ride lasts just ten minutes but will leave you feeling delightfully tranquil. You float off the other end, basking in the afterglow of having taken yet more fabulous Falls shots for the album.

Your other opportunity to pop on a rain poncho comes at the Journey Behind the Falls – located under Table Rock House at the very brink of the Horseshoe Falls. An elevator drops you down 151 feet; tunnels then take you through solid rock to viewing arches directly behind the Falls' curtain. The noise created by the rush of water is staggering. You can also stand on a deck, just a few feet away from the lower edges of the cascade. It's not the most comfortable location – being windy, very wet and quite deafening – but it's strangely compelling. Tearing yourself away simply to grab another ice-cream up above or peruse the souvenir shop seems like madness; drink in every moment.



You can even enjoy the Falls while sitting in a darkened room – courtesy of the IMAX Theater – not far from the Skylon Tower (www.imaxniagara.com). Watch the raging waters on a six story high screen. It's not cheap for a 45 minute film – but is certainly unique (is said to be the 2nd most watched IMAX film ever).

A Narrow Escape

In 1918, a sand barge broke loose from its towing tug with two men aboard and drifted towards the edge of the Falls. The brave souls managed not to panic however; they opened the vessel's lower dumping doors, allowing it to ground itself on a rocky ledge. After an excruciating 29 hours, they were rescued by a line cast out to them from the nearby Hydro-Power Station. The scow has remained there ever since, almost within spitting distance of the crest of the Horseshoe Falls. Each year, it rusts a little more and people place bets as to when it'll finally go over.



After dark

The Falls are even more breathtaking once dusk has fallen. Twenty two xenon gas spotlights (250 million candlepower each) illuminate the cascades in shades of violet, green, rose, magenta and topaz – it's completely over the top yet it works beautifully, ensuring the promenade is just as bustling throughout the evening. In winter, the lights begin around 5pm (8:30pm in spring and fall and 9pm in summer). From mid May to early September, there is also a free firework display every Friday and Sunday night at 10pm. (plus Wednesdays in July and August and Fridays alone until October 5). Extra displays are put on for Victoria Day -May 21, Memorial Day -May 28, Canada Day -July 1,

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U.S. Independence Day -July 4 and the Canadian Civic Holiday -August 6.

Is it a good idea to visit the Falls in winter?

If you don't mind wrapping up warm, then Niagara is still a great place to go in the colder months. In fact, finding a good room over the Christmas and New Year period is almost impossible unless you book well ahead and are ready to pay a princely sum. The huge volume of mist from the Falls crystallizes in a picturesque fashion on trees along the shoreline, creating a pretty winter wonderland. Frost has never stopped the Falls altogether but an ice bridge does tend to form at the base from late December to late February (caused by ice from Lake Erie traveling over and building up at the bottom – up to 80 feet thick). Tourists would regularly go for a jaunt on the ice – until three people were swept away on a floe in 1912; walking out is now taboo.



The American Falls, being much narrower, are more likely to freeze. The Horseshoe Falls have only once been significantly affected; in 1848, an ice jam at the mouth of the River caused flow to be severely restricted and they were reduced to a trickle for just over a day. Locals were disturbed by the sudden silence that descended on the town – having been used to living with the constant roar; some even believed that the end of the world might be approaching. This didn't stop them making their way onto the riverbed though; they picked up artefacts that had lain hidden for centuries - bayonets, tomahawks and other 1812 weaponry. On a practical note, Maid of the Mist staff nipped out to blast away rocks which had been impeding their cruises.

Where can you meet a walrus, killer whales, dolphins and sea lions – not to mention Canadian elk, bears and deer?

Sadly, the Maid stops running towards the end of October and doesn't open again until late April at best. However, the town has wisely invested in night time illuminations for the whole 5km promenade. These

beautify the town all year round but are especially fabulous during the Festival of Lights; 3 million bulbs pull in crowds from November to January. Don't miss the world's largest illuminated Canadian-American Flag!

Taking the plunge

Why do people knowingly send themselves over the Falls – in a barrel, kayak or otherwise? Are they brave or simply foolhardy? Some, no doubt, are banking on their 15 minutes of fame. Most strike us as one sandwich short of a picnic. A lack of fear isn't always quite what it's cracked up to be of course. Of the 16 stuntmen and women who have gone over, only 11 have survived. These odds clearly sound favorable to some; two adventurers have barreled over twice – and lived to tell the tale.

The daredevil's guide to going over the falls

Not to be attempted by anyone still in possession of their sanity, since launching oneself over is:

- a) very dangerous and
- b) against the law

Tip one: What are you thinking of? Book a psychiatric appointment immediately. No one in their right mind would want to find themselves plunging over the Falls. Can't you get your kicks by cutting out supermarket coupons and buying the occasional lotto ticket like the rest of us?

For those intent on using up several if not all of their nine lives.....

Tip two: Since you'll be freefalling with the force of 600,000 gallons of water per second landing on your head, it's advisable to build a strong vessel for your jaunt – inside padding often works well. Of course, it won't be the fall that kills you so much as your landing; once over the 170-foot Horseshoe Falls, you face another 180 feet of water in the churning pool below. You'll be flung around like a cat in a washing machine.

Tip three: Pack an oxygen tank or two. Assuming your lungs are still in working order, be prepared for a stint under water.

Tip four: Take a two-way radio; you'll be able to chat to your pals in what could be your final moments.

Tip five: Try not to throw up. You'll be traveling at 75mph in a confined space; need I say more.

Tip six: Pray you don't drift over to the American Falls. You'll be heading for a huge pile of rocks at the bottom. No one has ever survived.

Tip seven: Don't be tempted to go over without a 'vehicle' of some kind. Most of those who gaily jump over with the intention of meeting their maker are successful. The few exceptions to this rule have included a 7 year old boy in 1960 (who fell out of a boat) and one Mr. Jones in 2003. He and his friend got boozed up and decided it would be a great jape. Sadly, the friend was too sozzled to work the video camera – so their stunt went unrecorded.

Tip eight: Have a wad of cash ready to pay your fine – up to \$25,000 (this pays for the emergency services to rescue you).

Most people only come to Niagara for the weekend but there are enough activities to keep you going for far longer.

Nutters' Hall of Fame

The **Great Blondin** (Jean Francois Gravelot) was the best known of Niagara's tight-rope walkers. In 1859, he stretched a 1,100

foot long rope across the water and tottered across in 20 minutes. Not content with this, he introduced bizarre novelties such as pushing a wheelbarrow before him, climbing on a chair halfway, shackling himself in chains for the trip and, even, cooking a meal on a portable stove, which he then lowered to a boat waiting below. He returned the following summer to entertain thousands of tourists with similar high jinx – including scampering over with the Prince of Wales' assistant on his back. He continued to defy death until the grand age of 68 and died peacefully in his bed at 73.

Let's hear a round of applause for **Annie Edson Taylor**, the first person to think of going over in a barrel. In 1901, the retired schoolteacher hired a manager to publicize her dive and took her cat along for company. She came out the other side with noth-

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ing more than a small bump on her head, despite the Falls having four times the volume of water that they do today. It seemed like an interesting way to spend her 63rd birthday.

In 1911, **Bobby Leach**, from Cornwall in England, was less fortunate. He broke both his kneecaps and his jaw. Once out of hospital, he toured the world with his trusty barrel but came unstuck in New Zealand. Slipping on orange peel, he fractured his leg. He then developed gangrene, had his leg amputated and died of complications.

Another Englishman – **Charles Stephens** – had a go in 1920. He strapped himself in and placed an anvil at his feet as ballast. Unfortunately, this broke through the bottom of the barrel, dragging him to a watery grave. His right arm, still strapped to his harness, was the only part of him to ever be recovered.

Frenchman **Jean Lussier** spent his life savings building a 6 foot rubber ball for his jaunt over the Falls in 1928. He recouped his costs by selling pieces of the ball (which later came to resemble chunks of car tires) ever after.

Greek waiter **George Statakis**, from New York, took his pet turtle with him in 1930. Rather unluckily, his barrel was trapped behind the curtain of water for 18 hours and he ran out of air. His turtle was found alive and well but refrained from selling its story to the press.

Local man **William Hill Jr** made his craft – ‘The Thing’ - in 1951. Sadly, it broke apart and his battered body was recovered the next day, leading to public stunting being declared illegal.

Nathan Boya, from the Bronx, was the first African American to go over, in 1961. He used a ball similar to Lussier’s – named the ‘Plunge-O-Sphere’ and went over relatively unscathed.

The first Canadian to succumb to the lure of the Falls was **Karel Soucek**. In 1984, his adventure resulted in no more than a few cuts to his face from his wristwatch (and a fine). Some people just don’t know when to quit; he died the following year while re-enacting the stunt at the Houston Astrodome.

David Munday had such a fabulous time going over in 1985 that he made a second attempt in 1990. Rather embarrassingly, he became stuck on the brink and had to be removed by a crane. Undeterred, he tried again in 1993 and made it out the other side alive. He was the first to survive the double whammy.

Try not to throw up. You’ll be traveling at 75mph in a confined space; need I say more.

Steve Trotter – a part time bartender – built his barrel from two Greek pickle barrels and padded the inside with material usually reserved for cushioning nuclear warheads on the move. He went over in 1985 and 1995, taking his equally fearless girlfriend, **Lori Martin**, over with him the second time.

In 1995, **Robert Overcracker** opted for a dramatic alternative: a jetski and a parachute. He shot over the edge as planned but his parachute refused to co-operate. His body was never recovered.

To learn more, pop into Niagara’s Daredevil Museum; you can even view some of the barrels used.

What happens to the fish?

Unsurprisingly, fish are better built for a trip over the Falls than us humans. Foremost, they can breathe underwater – certainly an advantage. Secondly, their bendy little bodies can fly through the cascades without too much damage. The downside for them is that, as they hit the water below, their fishy brains are temporarily stunned and they forget to swim down deep, away from the seagulls awaiting their dinner. Most do survive though. Less fortunate are the ducks who inadvertently go over - apparently a recurring problem on foggy days.

The Falls are on the move

The Horseshoe Falls used to erode at about 3.8 feet each year – gradually moving back towards Lake Erie. Luckily, diverting a large quantity of water to hydro-electric power plants reduced this to 2.3 feet and today's anti-erosion steps (shoring up rock with iron rods) has halted the loss to around 1 foot annually. It may take several centuries but, eventually, the Falls are likely to reach back to the lake.

Say Cheese!

People have been posing for a shot of themselves against the Falls since photography first began in the mid 19th Century. A trip to Niagara wouldn't be complete without your own selection of pictures – so don't forget your camera. You can snap the Falls from so many angles and the view changes greatly depending on the time of day and the weather.

The American side versus the Canadian – how do you choose?

Most people choose the Canadian side, since it offers a better view of the Horseshoe Falls and has 1000% more kitsch to keep you amused; imagine the glitz of Coney Island or the UK's Blackpool. Those who prefer a more refined experience often choose to locate themselves at quaint Niagara-on-the-Lake; its 19th-century architecture is second to none. From there, you can drive to the Falls in around 20 minutes.

If you are in any doubt about your other half's intentions, it may be a destination to avoid of course.

The American side has its charms, too, attracting 5-6 million visitors (compared to the Canadians' 12m). You still have the option of taking the Maid of the Mist boat ride, or walking down to the 'Cave of

Winds' – a walkway around the base of the American Falls and behind the Bridal Veil Falls. You can also stroll across to Goat Island (surrounded by such fierce rapids that it was considered for an Alcatraz-style prison). Its beautiful park reserve is the oldest in the States – designed by Frederick Law Olmsted. You can also pay a visit to the Aerospace Museum, see the Aquarium or tour the Old Fort (peopled by historical re-enactors in 18th century period costume). Additionally, the town has over 150 fashion outlets with big designer names (a free shuttle bus operates) – don't forget your credit card!

Another advantage is that it's much cheaper to fly from the US into Buffalo rather than Toronto. Of course, you can always take a shuttle or cab from Buffalo to your hotel on the Canadian side of the Falls (or walk across the Rainbow Bridge from NY state Niagara to the Canadian side each day).

Family Fun

Where can you meet a walrus, killer whales, dolphins and sea lions – not to mention Canadian elk, bears and deer? At

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MarineLand! With its 4.5 million gallon breeding and observation tank. If this wasn't enough to keep your little ones amused, it also has a splendid theme-park. Get your kicks on the Dragon Mountain roller coaster, through 1000 feet of spooky tunnels (perhaps best attempted before too many hot dogs, ice-creams and colas have been consumed). Then, climb aboard their rather fancy Ferris wheel for a more sedate ride. Take a picnic or dine at one of the park's three cafes. Open from late May to early October, admission is C\$37 for adults and children over 10 with concessions for seniors and 5-9s; under 4s go free. (www.marinelandcanada.com)



More excitement awaits you on the Whirlpool Jet boat. It departs from Niagara on the Lake and from Lewiston on the US side. Throughout the summer, you can be shaken, stirred and licensed to enjoy the thrill, darting with abandon across the class five rapids of Devil's Hole. The jet boats travel at speeds of up to 60mph, wheeling daringly close to the edges of the gorge. Expect to stagger off with jelly legs and dripping hair. Despite the fetching water proof poncho and aqua booties, you're likely to clamber back onto land rather on the soggy side. Don't fancy getting wet? Take the covered 'Jet Dome' option. It costs C\$56 for adults and C\$47 for those 13 and under. 6 year olds (at least 44 inches tall) can take the wet boat ride while 4-5 year olds (at least 40 inches) can try the covered boat. (www.whirlpooljet.com)

If jet boating sounds far too 'Formula One' for your liking, try the White Water Walk. Take a tiny elevator 230 feet down to the base of the gorge, enabling you to stroll along a boardwalk close to seething class 6 rapids.

Non-vertigo sufferers might enjoy the Whirlpool Aero Car - a Spanish cable car which crosses from one side of the Niagara Whirlpool to the other. The mysterious waters swirl and twist upon themselves some 250 feet below. It's a mesmerizing sight. View the rapids, the Whirlpool, the Gorge, and the hydro-electric plants during the ten minute trip. It's located 3 miles down river from the Horseshoe Falls and the car holds a maximum of 35 people.



A short drive from the Falls is North America's largest glass Butterfly Conservatory. 11,000 square feet of tropical rainforest plays host to exotic flora and these exquisite winged creatures. They are free to flutter in the humid enclosure, giving you the chance to study them up close. You may even find one or two alight on your shoulder – especially if you are wearing a brightly colored outfit. This is said to be very lucky;

each landing is worth at least one trip to a Niagara casino! The man made waterfall and winding pathways add to the charming atmosphere inside the building. You can easily spend an hour here – more if you are a keen photographer; the butterflies' iridescent wings cry out to be captured on film.

The Falls themselves are bewitching in a quite unexplainable fashion.

The Niagara Falls' Bird Kingdom is the world's largest indoor, free flying Aviary, within a few minutes walk of the Falls. Almost 500 birds and 80 species (many of them endangered in the wild) make their home here. You can walk through as the birds swoop around your head. The main atrium has a multi-level rainforest environment - with 35 foot tall palm trees, a 40 foot waterfall and several ponds and streams; it's unique. To encourage the nocturnal birds and animals to strut their stuff, the site has a specially darkened 'ancient jungle ruin' room. Bats, owls and other creatures of the moon spend their nights under artificial lighting (to encourage them to sleep) – turning them into chirpy critters in the fake night of daytime viewing. What's a little internal clock reversal in the name of public entertainment?

Watch the Egyptian Fruit Bats feeding every day at 10:30am and 2:30pm, have your photo taken with a jolly parrot on your head, let a parakeet nibble seed from your hand or get intimate with palm sized lizards – the fun is never-ending.

An unexpected treat at the Aviary is the 125 year old nobleman's house from the Island of Java. Made of teak and intricately carved, it makes a truly gorgeous backdrop for the feathered friends who like to drop in. Sample a cup of exotic imported coffee or tea while you admire the handiwork. (www.niagarafallsaviary.com)

If taking a gentle promenade through lush flower filled gardens is more your style, then you'll be in seventh heaven at the Botanical Gardens. You could spend several days soaking up the atmosphere; there's 99 acres to explore – with a huge rose garden, ornamental trees and shrubs, herbs and vegetables, a formal parterre and sumptuous rhododendrons and azaleas. It opened in 1936 and has been a visual feast ever since. Linger amongst the dazzling displays, savor the tranquility of the ponds or take a horse & carriage tour. The Gardens are partly maintained by students from the resident School of Horticulture.

Meanwhile, Queen Victoria Park runs adjacent to the Horseshoe Falls, with plenty of benches along the way to allow you to rest awhile and admire the views. Its colorful blooms and lush lawns are certainly inviting. Lots of people simply set themselves up under the shade of a tree and have a leisurely picnic.

A little glass of something

Wine lovers will be delighted to discover that the Niagara Region is rather famous for its wineries – from charming Château des Charmes and rustic Inniskillin to contemporary Jackson-Triggs and the Pillitteri and Peller Estates. You can tour the cellars, indulge in a spot of tasting and load up your car with bottles – a souvenir only surpassed by Niagara snowstorm paperweights. More than 40 wineries in the area welcome visitors through their doors year round. Situated between two lakes, they benefit from cool springs and long autumns – creating perfect conditions for grape growing. The Mike Von Heckler Warm Lake Estate Vineyard & Winery – which exclusively produces Pinot Noir – is among those most attuned to the needs of wine buffs. Their 'Barrel Samples' session lets you taste from ten different 2006 varieties – with the guide, you can learn how to appreciate the nuances of different batches: a snip at \$10. Other seasonal events – such as the 'Hallowine' Murder Mystery – are organized

Each year, it rusts a little more and people place bets as to when it'll finally go over.

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throughout the year. Keep tabs on the latest by viewing www.warmlakeestate.com

Always time for golf

Those who go to sleep dreaming of that perfect hole in one will feel their toes twitching at the thought of Niagara's superb golf courses – the highest concentration in North America no less. You can play almost all year round, so, smuggle your clubs into the trunk and set aside some quality time for 18 holes. Among the top courses are the following:

The **Loch Ness Links Course**: with an authentic Scottish feel, ravines, ponds and hills. It overlooks the Welland Canal – offering views of passing sea-faring ships. Don some tartan shorts and keep eyes peeled for Nessie.

The **River Course at Grand Niagara Resort**: 320 acres of picturesque tree lined fairways and sparkling ponds. It offers plenty of challenge for the experienced.

The **Legends on the Niagara Battlefield Course**: lives up to its name with a selection of bunkers and water hazards to lure you into trouble. An 1812 battle was fought just adjacent to the course.

The **Usher's Creek Course**: following a natural stream through the woods. Expect to beat your way out of the rough a few times.

The **Thundering Waters** club: boasting the 7th longest hole in Canada (661 yards), it combines heathland, parkland and woodland to great effect.

Above the Niagara River whirlpool and gorge is the aptly named **Whirlpool Public Golf Course**: super views and fairways designed by the Toronto Terror (Stanley Thompson).

Worshipping at the altar of Lady Luck

There are several casinos on the Canadian side, lending it the nickname of 'the Las Vegas of the East'. The new Fallsview Casino Resort – complete with a huge shopping mall of boutiques and a host of chic cafes and eateries – is the most impressive; it has the largest gaming floor in Canada. It's worth a walk around inside to revel in the dazzling beauty of the interior - a marvel of glass, marble, gilt and glamour. If you fancy your hand in the gaming rooms, there are 150 tables and 3000 slots to choose from,

The provincial clientele, cheesy video screens and 'trying too hard' laser show may leave New York clubbers sniggering but most people there are having a whale of a time.

covering 180,000 square feet. The hand painted ceilings and unusual ornaments aim to conjure up the ambience of olde-Europe. Any genuine European would be sure to scoff at this but might concede that the Fallsview Casino has its own grandeur. No expense was spared to make this

a memorable venue. For shows, check out the 1500 seat Avalon Ballroom (featuring the likes of Aretha Franklin, Tom Jones, Lionel Richie, LeAnn Rimes and Bonnie Tyler). Meanwhile, its 365 club has free concerts in its cocktail bar every night of the year – predominantly jazz and blues. Its nearest rival is Casino Niagara near Clifton Hill. It's rather more down market – but meets the expected quota of bell-ringing, coin dropping thrills. On the American side is the Seneca Niagara Casino. \$80 million was spent on revamping the old Convention and Civic Centre – it's no match for the Fallsview Casino but has its own share of buzz and excitement.

Calling all party animals

Niagara's most popular nightclub is Rumours. Forget your inhibitions on the happy-go-lucky dance floor. The provincial clientele, cheesy video screens and 'trying too hard' laser show may leave New York clubbers sniggering but most people there are having a whale of a time. The Hard Rock Club has a slightly different vibe. Its 60s plush velvet is complimented by the world's largest disco ball. One of the newer additions is the Dragonfly Nightclub, inside the Fallsview Casino Resort. It has an ample 12,000 square foot dance floor and employs guest DJs from around the world; needless to say, it has the latest in sound and lighting.

If you fancy a bit of live entertainment before donning your dancing shoes, there's Yuk Yuk's and the House of Comedy to choose from. Alternatively, head to the Sports Zone for bowling, video games, billiards or a spot of sports watching on its 6 huge bar mounted TV screens.

Clifton Hill: more glitz than can be good for you

Forget all notions of taste or restraint. Let the flashing neon lift you to a higher plane: one in which ghouls, dinosaurs and a wax image of the Pope vie for your attention.

Having just one wax museum clearly wasn't deemed sufficient: you can choose from the Movieland version - with characters from Indiana Jones, the Wizard of Oz, Harry Potter and Austin Powers, each set in a suitable scene from their film - or the Louis Tussaud museum. The latter boasts more than a hundred figures. Visitors are welcome to pose for photos with their favourites and the Movieland site offers an usual souvenir idea – having a wax replica made of your own hand.

Fairground lovers will want to sample the Cosmic Coaster Ride, which offers a fusion of 'the Grand Canyon and Outer Space'; the moving car seats up to 38 people and takes you on an 8 minute simulation (littlies can have a non-moving seat). Continue the fun with the Ghostbusters Ride through a haunted house, shooting the spooks and spectres with your own laser gun.

If you like that sort of thing, the Guinness Book of Records Museum is a rather good example of its kind, sporting life-sized models of the planet's most extra ordinary humans. See a replica of Robert Wadlow – the world's tallest man, at 8 feet 11.1 inches – and another of the most tattooed woman. More fascinating facts than you can shake a

stick at. In the same vein is Ripley's Believe it or Not! Mr. Ripley spent a lifetime collecting unusual items and managed to visit 198 countries. The museum houses over 500 artefacts – including some used by Niagara's own daredevils, alongside film footage of their exploits. Ripley's 4D Moving Theatre boast a 6 channel surround sound system and a huge screen, with seats that move in 8 directions. Beware stuffing yourself with the ever present chips, ice-cream or burgers before climbing aboard.



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Of course, no such avenue would be complete without a spot of mini-golf. Dads can flex their competitive muscles against the cheating ardour of their children at Dinosaur Mini Putting. Its 18 holes are surrounded by lush vegetation and include a few sand and water hazards along the way. With a par of 40, it takes around 30-40 minutes to play. Having fibre-glass replicas of Tyrannosaurus Rex beam down at you only enhances the pleasure, naturally. If the weather is looking dodgy, you might want to opt for an indoor version at Galaxy Golf Indoor Mini Putt. It promises a 'glow in the dark space adventure'.

Shopping

At least a hundred shops jostle for your dollars at Niagara, most selling items that will seem highly questionable within 24 hours of your return. It's hard to resist buying the odd ghastly souvenir however – they exert a magnetic influence, particularly potent on anyone under the age of 11 or over the age of 65. Among the more remarkable venues is the Hershey Store: the only one of its kind. If you like their chocolate, the 4 story building's 7,000 square feet of confectionary will have you spinning in your tracks. A giant Hershey's Kiss perches on the corner of the building, just in case you've missed the sign. Free samples of fudge are on offer, alongside strawberries dipped in chocolate and 'signature Hershey milkshakes'. For the truly greedy, there's a 5 lb. Hershey Bar for sale. Life-size Hershey Kiss characters wander about the retro style interior, which sports vintage photographs and nostalgic collectibles.

Another sweet temptation is the Fudge Factory. Their freshly made fudge comes in every flavor imaginable and really is amazingly delicious. You can watch it being made (alongside Candy Apples and – strangely - Beernuts).

Movie buffs will be drawn to the MGM Retail Store, which sells a wide selection of its archive on DVD, with CDs of film soundtracks to boot. Movie memorabilia abounds.

On a different note, there's the world's only World Wrestling Entertainment Store. Buy some wrestling outfits so you can re-enact the battles of your favorite characters at home. The store is set out like a WWE arena, with posters of the superstars and Royal Rumble video games on giant screens. You can watch the latest 'Pay Per View' events or try the PileDriver Drop Ride (shoot up 200 feet in the air and then plummet back to earth screaming).

Niagaran phrases

Got the sniffles? Sounds like a Niagara Nose to us

Redecorating? Why not go for Niagara Green (light blue/green). Ideal for shower tiling

Need an impressive hairdo for the office Christmas party? Try Niagara Curls (a cascade of ringlets made popular in 1865)

Is your favourite beach spot getting busier each summer? It's a case of Niagarization (a term conned in the 1850s when trains began bringing 60,000 visitors a year to Niagara)

Putting up with an over-emotional work colleague? No doubt, she cries Niagaras at the smallest thing

Tying the knot?

50,000 people a year travel here to say 'I do'. It all began when a certain Theodosia Burr (daughter of a future US Vice President) chose the Falls for her honeymoon. It soon became all the rage. Just three years later, Napoleon Bonaparte's brother, Jerome, took his beloved there for a spot of Niagara loving.

If you are in any doubt about your other half's intentions, it may be a destination to avoid of course. Hitchcock's 'Niagara' showed Marilyn Monroe's femme fatale plotting to push her new husband into the raging torrent. Alongside anywhere with a cliff, the Falls are the perfect site for 'accidental' death. On the flip side, their raw power is a sure-fire aphrodisiac; it's no wonder that people often choose the Falls for a second honeymoon.

The 23rd floor of the Marriot Fallsview and the Skylon Tower both make fabulous spots to hold a reception. For help organizing your event, view www.weddingcompanyniagara.com. For an outdoor ceremony, consider a pretty gazebo at Niagara-on-the-Lake or say your vows in the beautiful Botanic Gardens; www.occasionsniagara.com can advise.

Apply for a C\$100 marriage license from the City Hall: 4310 Queen Street - 905-356-7521. It's open 8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Monday to Friday. You'll need your birth certificates and another piece of ID and, if it's not your first run around the block, bring your certificate of divorce (or your first partner's death certificate). Once you have your license (valid for 90 days) you can trot off to get wed (immediately on the Canadian side - those on the American side have to wait 24 hours). More info at www.niagarafalls.ca/city_hall/departments/clerks/marriage_licences

Fly 1,900 feet above Niagara Falls and pledge your troth with a truly unforgettable panorama spread below. National Helicopters, which run from Niagara-on-the-Lake (905-641-2222), offer a range of airborne packages – including weddings over the Falls. On the American side, the Falls Wedding Chapel offers its own amazing Sky Chapel helicopter wedding. You can bring three guests (or two plus a photographer / camera man provided by the Chapel). An additional candlelit ceremony, with music, at The Falls Wedding Chapel - with up to 45 guests – can be arranged afterwards at no extra charge (www.fallswedding.com).

Pulling in the punters

Hotels began vying for business as far back as the 1820s. In those days, there were just three hotels. Their owners contrived Niagara's first ever stunt – one which may put animal lovers into a swoon. Two bears, two raccoons, a buffalo, a dog and a goose were placed in an old schooner and sent tumbling over the Falls in 1827. Ten thousand people turned out to watch the poor beasties tumble to their fate. The bears were running loose on the deck, so managed to swim to safety but, of the others, only the goose survived the plunge. These days, Niagara's hostelrys prefer to lure us in with jacuzzis, waterbeds and all you can eat buffet breakfasts. Jump online to check out who's offering the best deal for your chosen dates.

Where to stay

Top choice for families:

Kiddies will love staying in a Wolf Den Suite at the Great Wolf Lodge. The hotel has its own huge indoor water park (13 slides, a wave pool, hot tubs and a 4 storey tree house) and eateries designed with littlies in mind: the Camp Critter Bar & Grille, the Antler Shanty Grub, the Bear Claw Café, the Canoe Coffee Shop, Grizzly Rob's Bar, the Spirit Island Snack Shop and, if all else fails, a Pizza Hut. If your other half is obliging, you might even have time to sneak off to the Lodge's swanky spa. www.greatwolfodge.com

Top choice for canoodling couples

Splash out on a Junior Presidential Suite at the 5 Star luxury Niagara Falls Marriott - just 100 yards from the main attraction. Get smoochy in a whirlpool bath for two, snuggle up on the sofa in front of your very own panoramic view or pop down for a couples' massage in the spa. Continue gazing at the Falls as you dine or breakfast in the elegant Terrapin Grille. www.niagara-fallsmarriott.com

Falling in love with Niagara Falls

Super views on a budget

Just down the road from the Niagara Falls Hotel is the Ramada – located on floors 27 to 30 of the space-age looking Minolta Tower. It's half the price but offers equally fab views. Savour the sights from your small but perfectly formed bedroom and prolong the pleasure by dining in the Pinnacle restaurant on the 26th floor – 525 feet up. www.niagaratower.com

On the American side

For charm and character, try the Tudor-style Red Coach Inn overlooking the Upper Rapids (www.redcoach.com) or Hanover House's Victorian ambience (www.hanoverhousebb.com)

Feeling peckish?

You'll be spoilt for choice but Tim Hortons – right by the Falls – is a super choice for cheap lunchtime sandwiches and snacks. In the warmer months, it's nice to sit outside and enjoy the sunshine of course. Take a seat at the Falls and Firkin (just outside the Niagara Fallsview Casino Resort). It serves traditional 'English Pub Grub': steak and Guinness pie, fish and chips and other hearty treats. Of course, there are plenty of familiar names to choose from: the Hard Rock Café, Wendy's, TGI Fridays and Planet Hollywood to name a few. The Skylon and Minolta Tower restaurants offer the best views but, for a culinary treat, head to Casa Mia (3518 Portage Rd). If your hotel gives them a ring, they'll send a taxi for you free of charge. This authentic Italian is elegant yet cosy, the food is amazing and they have live jazz on Friday and Saturdays.

Getting there

This year, Americans have needed to show a valid US passport to fly into Canada and return (this will extend to those crossing overland in late 2007/early 2008). www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/travel

There's plenty of choice when it comes to flying. Several airlines operate and there are regular services throughout the day (but do remember, it's cheaper to fly into Buffalo and then take a shuttle to the Canadian side, than it is to fly directly into Toronto from the US).

The perfect weekend break

Most people only come to Niagara for the weekend but there are enough activities to keep you going for far longer. You may simply want to drink in the beauty of those waterfalls and indulge in some spa treatments and fine dining with your loved one but, if you have more time, do visit the vineyards or play a round of golf or two. Nature lovers shouldn't miss the Aviary or Butterfly Centre while others will have the time of their lives reveling in the bizarre fun of Clifton Hill, raving it up in the clubs and gambling themselves silly. There's certainly sufficient to keep anyone amused (whatever their budget or interests) and the Falls are no more than a short hop from most cities along the Eastern side of North America.

A Ramble in Mexico

By Ron Hannah / Photos by Ruth Forbes

Away from tourist resorts and large cities

Having wandered the world these past four years and become acquainted to some extent with truly exotic cultures like those of Laos, Cambodia and China, I now find myself in the relatively familiar embrace of Latin America. Unlike those other lands, this one uses an alphabet and even many words that I am used to, the people look somewhat the same as me, though darker (I still stand out), and the homogenizing influence of America brings this place, this Mexico, even closer to that with which I grew up. I do not think this is a good thing, but it is there and must be acknowledged. My plan, our plan, Ruth and I, is to go from here ever southward in the safest and cheapest ways we can find, and ever farther from the Frozen North land of my birth, perhaps even to the Frozen South - Antarctica. I expect the direct American influence may diminish as we go, especially as we like to stay away from tourist resorts and large cities, but that the diminishing familiarity will be counteracted by a growing knowledge of Spanish until some sort of uneasy equilibrium is attained. In China, when my Mandarin started to become useable, things got much easier though all was still exotic and much was still hidden from us. I only hope I do not start mixing Chinese words into my Espagnol as I did French into my Mandarin!

So, after an incredibly bored immigration officer had resentfully stamped our passports (we were interrupting his TV viewing, or siesta, or something) and entering entirely fictitious residence addresses on our forms since we did not really know where



He is a gregarious sort and seemed to know everybody, but it slowly became apparent that he is something of a pest

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we were going, we arrived in Chihuahua from the north in an air-conditioned bus and on good roads. This is American influence, an infrastructural manifestation that is surely bound to decrease, at least in some countries, on our super- to sub-equatorial travels. Chihuahua is growing fast as the housing developments attest; the cactus being pushed aside by row upon identical row, hillside upon hillside, of neat adobe houses. These subdivisions are government built hives for the workers, small and basic, but an effort at least to take some of the poor and help them toward middle-class status, or at least to stave off a revolution. Like the middle-class and those who aspire thereto everywhere, the Mexican workers are more concerned with working hard for their futures than they are with present esthetics. But the soul of Mexico is not to be stilled even within these American Dream seekers - colours abound.

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Crossing from the grey apartment blocks of China into pastel Vietnam was a revelation still fond in my memory, but the Mexicans must be near the top in the chromatic sweepstakes. Pastels there are in those carefully (too carefully) laid out neighbour-

hoods, but punctuating them often were leaping reds, yellows that bordered on rudeness, greens you could taste; entire walls of solid, in-your-face brilliance. Even from the highway they were brash, and we loved them.

Imagine standing before one of them with the sun at your back. In a very short time your rods or cones (which ones perceive colour?) would be beaten into pulpy submission and you might crave once again the grey of a Chinese apartment block! (Ruth disagrees.)

Our bus stopped and we hefted our ever-lighter packs. When you travel for lengthy periods, you learn what is important to carry and you do not cease to wonder at how little you really need. A smiling taxi driver approached. We indicated the railway station and he declared it was a long way and would cost 100 pesos, US\$10. As usual in a new place, we were unsure how far it really was or what it should really cost. This is always the most stressful moment in travelling. Ruth tried to bargain, writing 50 beside his 100. He understood, but maintained his price. "That sounds high", Ruth indicated a high level with her hand. "We don't know where the train station is or how much a taxi should cost." He had been looking uncomprehending at this barrage of English, but at the word taxi he brightened and indicated himself. His face was boyish, his voice ingratiating and we were tired and flush (this being the start of our trip), and so we finally agreed. In fact it was some considerable distance so we did not feel cheated in the end. We have even commented on him since, recalling his gentle energy.





The train station was deserted but for a man in an obscure corner. He came out and pointed to a board giving the fares for the ride through the Copper Canyon. It was our plan to go to the west coast then take a ferry across to Baja California Sur and Los Cabos - The Capes. This is the local name for Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo, touristy and expensive, the sort of places we would normally assiduously avoid. We were going there for my daughter's wedding however.

A first-class ticket was roughly double that of second class. On the internet Ruth had found a story posted by someone who had purchased both and done the journey each way. His final conclusion: Why pay double for an expensive dining car and a slightly

faster ride? So we didn't, and we thank him for that. At 6 o'clock the next morning, Ruth walked across the street from the Casa Chihuahua, our comfortable backpackers' lodge, and came back with two tickets to El Fuerte, you see our host had been extolling the virtues of that place over those of big, noisy Los Mochis, the true end of the rail journey, and we are suckers for local colour.

Chihuahua also has local colour though, and not just in those housing developments. The previous evening, our hostess had drawn a map to a restaurant she thought would please us. That it did not was not her fault, people usually assume we are standard tourists wanting a foreign-country experience as close as possible to what we know. Not so. We left the gringo-ridden place with its American prices and wrong music, and had a cob of corn with chili powder in the local plaza. Every town has a cool and shady square with fountains, gazebos and smiling people. That and the visible colours make Mexico most attractive. I mustn't fail to mention more about the food, for tortilla soup (sopa Azteca) has become my new favourite, and that we found in a small locally run cafe where a young couple sitting at a nearby table with their beautiful dark-haired infant welcomed us most warmly to their homeland. The evening walk back to our lodge took us past ornate, if dusty, monuments and churches, ubiquitous in Mexico alongside Pancho Villa wanted posters and vehicles of all sorts rushing by. Just as we had become accustomed to in Asia, crossing the street was a calculated risk. On the wall of our lodge when we got home was a large-screen projection of 'The Da Vinci Code' and its exposé (hardly new) of the Catholic Church's ongoing war against women. This film, in such a deeply Catholic country, makes one realize how subtle the human mind in dealing with contradictions is.

Our host next morning pointed out breakfast items and told us, as I mentioned, of El Fuerte. He also spoke of having living previously in Switzerland where he found everything over-regulated and of how different Mexico was, i.e. no regulations. He wants to find something in-between and I wish him luck. It is my observation that countries progress quite quickly from a mañana attitude to red-tape frustration and immobility when Business moves in. Still, Mexico is not quite as anarchic as its reputation would suggest. The railways do not operate on Mexican Time, and our train left precisely at 7AM.

This is a common phenomenon 3rd-World-wide: rules are put into place then ignored, and the conductor understood this fully.

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It snaked through the countryside, climbing into the Sierra Madre Mountains, past endless dry outcrops of rock, cacti tall and stark against the sky and dusty farms bordered by stone fences built to a straight and geometric precision that belied the portrayal of Mexicans as being lazy. The ride was smooth though not so smooth that writing in my notebook was easy, the conductors were courteous and the armed guards with automatic weapons slung over their backs were unexpected to an innocent Canuck. Is such a presence really needed? The conductor pointed to our bag of food and asked that we go to the bar car if we wished to eat it, then later returned to collect the garbage of all those (including ourselves after we saw what others were doing) who had eaten at their seats. This is a common phenomenon 3rd-World-wide: rules are put into place then ignored, and the conductor understood this fully. It's fun when you get the hang of it, but always observe the locals first to see which rules they are flouting, and keep your crackers hidden when the conductor walks by.



At the summit, Divisidero, the train stopped for a mere twenty minutes, time to rush down the 50-odd steps, past food and handicraft vendors and take a few photos of one of the world's wonders. The fence at the rim stops you from dropping off into a space deeper and wider than the Grand Canyon, with green side canyons receding into the mists of a clear day. I say this because even clear air contains enough fine particles that distant things start to fade. The far walls of the Grand Canyon look unreal because of this, and I have even had the same sensation looking across the cavern of the Albert Hall. It is possible to stay overnight in a hotel here, or in nearby Creel, and even to hike down into the gulf, but I wouldn't attempt it without a guide.

On a couple of flatcars nearby were several Winnebagos, homes on wheels, fuel-greedy luxury travel chained into place for the voyage across the mountains. I suppose there are no roads here that can accommodate such behemoths, and the idea of traveling in one of them seems self-defeating to me. How dare you bring your double bed, microwave oven, satellite TV and internet into Mexico, living in it sealed off from Mexico, and then claim to have visited Mexico? Your life is shackled into place just as surely as your vehicle on its platform.

If the stay was short it did not lack in excitement and colour. The food hawkers displayed red tacos, yellow corn and green chili sauce; the crafts were brilliantly painted and the Tarahumara ladies wore bright serapes over their shoulders, setting off the rich, highly photogenic brown of their faces. Don't take their pictures without permission however - they still think a photo steals their soul, but some will sell a spiritual morsel for a few pesos. These are people as exotic as any of those of Asia, people whose remoteness spared them the worst

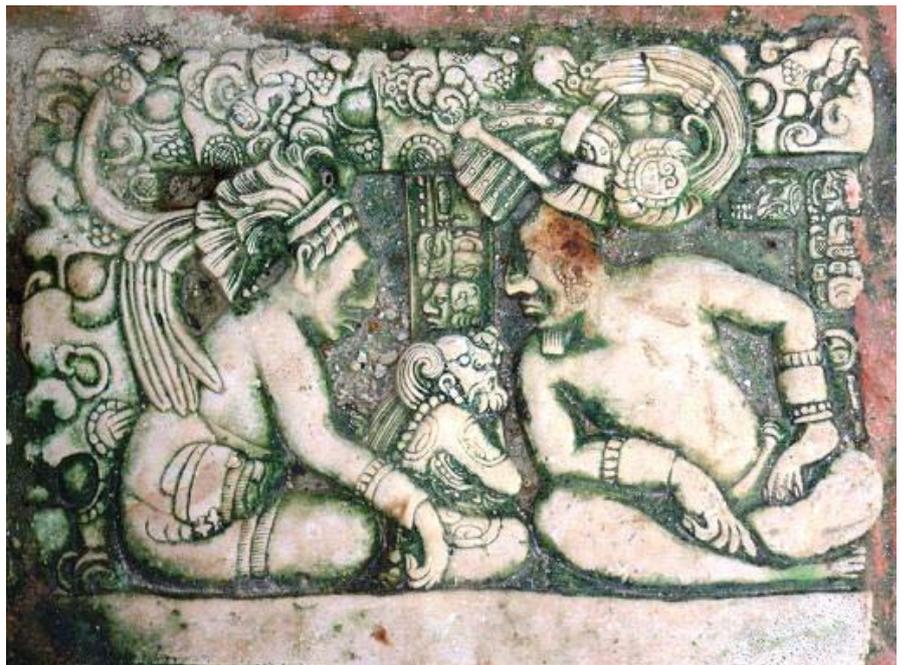
We stood transfixed for two unbroken hours, and then walked to our hotel in the dusk, stopping once again to try to explain to a tout who had ingratiated himself slightly to us why we would not endure a distressing harangue for any price.

savagery of the Spaniards and to whom Spanish remains a second language. We looked at each other in mutual curiosity then re-boarded - the deeply beckoning scenery for the next hour making up for the brevity of our stay. Ruth stood in the windy space between the cars for much of the trip, taking photos. Here again, a sign forbade people from standing there, but it was almost always crowded with sightseers and Ruth had to stay to keep her place, her hips becoming bruised by constant jarring against the gate.

Because of the bus schedule we had to stay in a hotel one night, one which was well above our normal budget, but we did not want to wander too far in search of economy.

It was dark when we reached El Fuerte and we had not booked ahead, we never do. In four years of wandering, only once have we had difficulty finding a room. A wanderer must have a certain trust in life and I find this trust growing over time and the Universe unveils to us her protection and bounty. Standing beside the descent ramp was a man with a sign bearing the name of the very hotel we had been told about. In addition, the proprietress was there and she spoke English. Almost never has our arrival in a town been easier. "Mi casa es su casa," she said, "My house is your house".

We had descended considerably from the canyon and the days were hot once more. The pines had given way to palms. Our daily walk took us to a lookout over the fast-moving Fuerte River from a modern-day fortress on the site where the original Spanish fort is thought to have been built as a defense against the Indian tribes defending their lands. It contains art works and historical photos and artifacts of the area. One is struck both by the fierce pride in the faded faces in those pictures and by a sense of futility upon beholding the elaborate hearse that carried them one by one to their graves. The chest of coins and papers bills that they had to leave behind added to that feeling. We are approaching the Day of the Dead now as I write, and skeletal images are everywhere. Perhaps that is why thought like this come to me. Nahuatl petroglyphs nearby, from a much more distant time, also enhance such musings though the day was too hot for us to search them out.



We had walked down to that river in the heat of the afternoon in search of a restaurant which did not seem to be there, and by the time we found our way back up to street level, Ruth had decided she wanted to lie in our room under the fan. Alone, I found a busy market street despite this being a Sunday, and bought a 'gelatino', thinking it was ice cream. I smiled on my way, spooning up my cup of jello, and met Bobby.

Bobby's English was only slightly less fractured than my Spanish, and I wasn't sure I could trust him, but I stopped and talked anyway. He is a gregarious sort and seemed to know everybody, but it slowly became apparent that he is something of a pest. He suggested a beer after pointing out the local brothel, to which I had responded that I was here with my wife. He seemed to think that should not matter but I remained adamant. I think he was disappointed, but he kept telling me he liked me. No, he

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was not drunk, his bad breath was purely the result of poor dental hygiene. He ordered me a beer which duly arrived, the top of the bottle discreetly covered by a torn-off piece of tissue paper. He drank nothing but kept talking. It was an open, well-lit, tourist-frequented bar in a historic building, but I still wondered about Bobby and whether my beer was spiked. I have heard of this. The place had too many patrons for that however, and it was the wrong time of day. Still, I wondered. From time to time he brought the conversation back to women, Chinese women (he knew I had been there), Spanish women, and I knew that to be accepted I would have to confess some indiscretion. Not that I cared if he finally accepted me but I felt the pressure nonetheless. I finally divulged my deep appreciation of Mexican girls and my having been painfully distracted many times in China when I was there on my own. This was enough. He filled in the blanks, and with a sly smile I let him believe what he so earnestly wanted to believe. Macho was satisfied and shook his new muchacho's hand very warmly.

Menchú's biography, which won her the Nobel Peace Prize, is harrowing reading which you should approach only if you feel strong.

Los Mochis is the end of the Copper Canyon rail line, but we took a bus for the final leg of that journey. After some time walking the hot streets in search of a ticket office that had moved, we finally obtained ferry tickets to La Paz on the Baja Peninsula.

This gave us several free hours since we did not have to be at the terminal at Topolobampo until 11PM. Los Mochis is the big impersonal city we had been told it is, and it offered little to the non-shopping backpacker, but we did locate in internet cafe (our life is simple but not primitive) and later the place to catch the Topolobampo shuttle. Not far off was a small market and a man selling cantaloupes from the back of a truck. We walked around the block, fruit in hand, looking into shops and finding an elderly seamstress who mended a hole in my trousers and would not accept payment. I have been continually impressed, in the entire world, with the generosity of the poor. How they shame the complaisant rich! We ate most of our cantaloupe and gave the rest to a ragged man who had come to sit near us, Ruth getting up and taking it over to a street side cardboard box to scrape out the seeds for him. He was obviously hungry and he disappeared quickly to eat it. Some schoolboys around us threw gibes and little nuts from the surrounding trees at each other. I kept my hand on my backpack beside me, not being sure one of them might try to run off with it and feeling sad that such thoughts must me kept in mind when travelling.

As darkness approached we finally hopped aboard one of the busses we had been watching come and go, then we sat inside the ferry terminal building. It was overly air-conditioned and cold, so we stepped into the outside waiting area, much more comfortable and without the television set mounted high up, with the volume set to match, that was playing Mexican soap operas to several rapt patrons. To one trying to locate the freedom that comes with inner peace and acceptance, watching actors portray persons whose emotions are entirely out of control is painful in any language. In Moslem countries they are less sexually based and more moralistic than in Mexico or America, but the unthinking emotionalism is the same, and just as distasteful. The television set was located just above the public telephones too, by the way, to the discomfiture of anyone trying to make a call.

The overnight ferry ride was uneventful for the most part. Poor and middle-class Mexicans mingled with the gringos and slept across several seats, as I did, or on the floor, as Ruth did, since



the ship was not full. It was here that we encountered Mexican time, or rubber time as they say in other parts of the world. It left on time all right, and the trip took eight hours, however a brochure had said it would take five and the salesgirl promised us six.

At the terminal in La Paz it was like entering another country. A guard asked to see our passports and tourist cards. I had forgotten that another bored border guard had had us put our information on a card that he had stapled into our passports, cards that must be handed back upon exiting Mexico. This is very important to such people and meaningless to me except insofar as those who issue such cards are profoundly shackled in their thinking. We showed him our cards and got into a lineup of fellow foot passengers. After a time it became clear that a soldier was going to inspect our luggage. A row of tables was set up for the purpose and when my turn came I said to the handsome young man across from me, "No hablo Español". He examined everything and found nothing of interest except some brown herbal pills that resemble rabbit droppings. I indicated my thumping heart and he nodded and left me to repack. I wish I could have told him how much I hate that, but I doubt he would have cared.



Ruth was waiting by the time I nodded to the last smiling, machine-gun toting soldier, and we boarded yet another bus bound for the southern tip of the Baja, the fabled Baja of dry rolling hills, gullies with cactus and wildflowers, occasional glimpses of the Pacific Ocean on the right and the Sea of Cortes on the left. I have dreamed of this place, but I knew I was going to be disappointed: it has been overrun by Yanks and Snowbirds and there is little trace of Mexico any more.

The compassionate and sensual beauties in the faces of the many Virgins and in the knowing face of that fascinating Mayan woman in the market place whose eyes haunt me still.

The bounteous lifestyle to the north seems to come with a price tag of forgetfulness. Affluent Americans and Canadians have, in a great many citified cases, forgotten their origins and no longer look deeply at what they do. They have withdrawn even into

gated communities and have been tricked by a torrent of advertising that surface beauty and momentary prestige equal quality. A pretty centerfold model, for example, with a vacuous smile, is taken as the very paradigm of feminine beauty, a goal to be attained at all costs, even that of an empty partnership. Don't get me wrong - I wouldn't deny her bed space, but neither would I mistake her allure for something substantive. I think. I grew up in this mentality too, and only slowly am re-learning that an organic tomato with a blemish tastes far better than an exquisite specimen from the supermarket. I recall Pu Yi, the last emperor of China, confessing in his autobiography to being so sheltered behind the walls of the Forbidden City that he did not know that rice grew in the ground. How many modern children have no real idea where milk comes from, I wonder? A rich tourist is not so much of a prisoner as Henry Pu Yi was, at least not yet, that he cannot behold wholesome produce as he strolls

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through a Mexican market, but would he buy his groceries there or at the Cabo san Lucas Wal-Mart? More likely he would eat at a tourist oriented, overpriced restaurant, abusing his body with fat, sugar and alcohol and thinking himself fortunate.



That is what the fancy hotels that line the beaches in San Jose del Cabo (where we stopped) offer, a reinforcement of a wasteful lifestyle - and the fabled beach here is not even that pleasant, arid, treeless, lacking in shade, and with chiggers in the sand that can dig painfully into the skin of your feet and must be extracted with tweezers. All beaches in Mexico are public. The hotels do not like this but must grudgingly obey the law of the land. Between them (unless you look like a gringo and choose to walk through the lobby) are rough and broken spaces, dry and dirty, for the local people who venture there, in stark contrast to the well-watered and manicured beauty out front that greets the guest who has money. Ruth and I lack that sort of money but we look right, so we could walk right in, unlike the average Mexican who would quickly be escorted out of these places that generate unimaginable revenue

that his people never see. We entered one of them to use the sanitary facilities, were greeted with friendly waves and smiles from the waiters at the spacious lobby restaurant, then left to have lunch. Lunch was bread, tomatoes, sweet onions and lush avocados (with blemishes), purchased in the local market and consumed with pleasure in the shade of a balcony with an unfriendly “Guests only” sign on the wall. Still, we looked right so no one said anything to us as we ate. I wonder why it is called the ‘hospitality’ industry?

We had arrived before the wedding party, so as usual we wandered. After a couple of days the touts offering hotel time-share promotions stopped bothering us. I think they were genuinely puzzled that we would not accept gifts of cash and alcohol (quite generous gifts - there are professional tourists who pay for their holidays by attending these things) in return for a free breakfast and a very hard sell, but we had been around this particular block before and found it just as distasteful as the tourist who wrote of her experience in a local paper. The highlight of these days however was a flamenco performance in the town square, free and spectacular. Spoiled only by a sound technician’s ego in the form of stupendously loud amplification, it featured live musicians, singers and dancers who brought life, nay élan, to their art form. Flute, violin, guitar and drum played blazing and unfailingly accurate rhythmic and exotic melodies, while the dancers, six female and one male, arrogantly flashed their eyes and feet in ways that utterly transcended the powerful forces to which they were subjecting their skeletal and muscular systems, to leave the audience quite stunned. We stood transfixed for two unbroken hours, and then walked to our hotel in the dusk, stopping once again to try to explain to a tout who had ingratiated himself slightly to us why we would not endure a distressing harangue for any price.

My daughter and her fiancé, I am pleased to say, have a social conscience. They, and most of the wedding guests, stayed at a hotel away from the beach and cheaper. It cost only five months of a Cambodian doctor’s pay per night instead of two-years’ worth. Ah, doesn’t travel give one perspective? Ruth and I found local accommodation that was still cheaper and hopefully benefited a Mexican family, and on the appointed day we all gathered for the most beautiful wedding I have ever seen.

That they are the most delightful couple in the world goes without saying. Brides and grooms always are, and this is not just

a father's pride speaking. She glowed, they both did, and as I escorted her slowly down the walk to the beach, trying to think of funny things to say to lessen her nervousness, my heart was singing with joy and hope for them both. The sun was setting gracefully, the day cooling nicely, the surf rolling in without being intrusive, and when their voices broke during the exchange of vows, I cried - I, who have until recent years prided myself on being in complete control of my emotions! It did not help that standing before me was my younger daughter, maid of honour, also crying. She has always had a face that expressed depth of feeling more profoundly than any I know. Their mother, my former wife, sat beside me and for a moment we shared again what we once had. It cannot imagine a more sublime moment, and I cannot write any more about it here but for one thing: I finally was able to wear the Chinese and Tibetan shirts (I changed clothes for the reception) and the Balinese sarong that I had been carrying with me for so long. My pack and my life are now somewhat lighter.

As a tropical depression approached from the Pacific, the skies grew cloudier and the seas a little rougher. Nonetheless the family went by boat the next day to a sheltered bay for a fine lunch and some diving and snorkeling. Ruth is a poor sailor so she laid down while I recalled the nauseating quantity of sea water I had swallowed on my only other snorkeling experience. Even the deep silence and beauty that I had seen to be under the ocean could not induce me to try it again, and the bride herself because slightly bloodied from having been pushed against a rock by a wave. I mused instead on how close alien realms are to us and how a small shift in location, or in thinking, can bring whole new worlds into view.

Our shift in location the next day was a larger one – we flew to Mexico City. I had hoped to see the gathering hurricane from the air but it was not to be, instead I caught glimpses of mountains and rich farmland. We avoid polluted and noisy cities like this one normally, but especially now that many parts of Mexico were in their accustomed social turmoil and tourist warnings were being posted on the internet. Despite televised scenes of tear gas and water cannons, we say nothing of the sort nor even had we detected unnamed tension in the air. Soldiers and police with respect-inducing weapons on their backs we had seen in many countries so they were nothing new (though their wearing of bulletproof vests was new to us, and disconcerting), nevertheless we planned not to stay in the city, and also to avoid beautiful Oaxaca further south where most of the trouble is centered.

We had been advised to cross the city to Tapo in order to take the bus to our next destination. A helpful couple at the airport however, suggested our best plan would be to take a cab to the North Terminal. This we did through midday traffic that flowed surprisingly well in this hive of 19 million souls, as we commented on the Asian, and now Mexican, habit of giving information out of politeness rather than for its accuracy. We have encountered this often: rather than say you don't know, you point and say, "That way". So was it the North Terminal or Tapo? As it happens, both are possible but this seems to be an exceptional case.



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We were witnessing the same inequities that have been exported to everywhere we have been. Magnificent towers puff themselves up beside mismatched wood, cardboard and corrugated tin barrios, fine restaurants pull the wealthier trade from the vendors' wagons just outside their doors, and Mercedes tourist buses jostle with cars and trucks of all descriptions – pristine and new to tattered and smoke-belching. Because of the bus schedule we had to stay in a hotel one night, one which was well above our normal budget, but we did not want to wander too far in search of economy. Through the window of our room we could look down on a huddle of rude shacks without water or electricity. Isn't it time these amenities were at last regarded as basic human rights?

We stayed not long in Mexico City. The North Terminal is vast, surely a kilometre of ticket stalls intermingled with coffee and souvenir shops. Beggars steal in too, and before being chased away one laughing boy cajoled a few pesos out of us. I liked him instantly and, with my bag closely in view, wondered if I would be so humourous if I were dressed in his shoeless rags and living in his squalour.

Our luxury bus (still cheap enough that middle-class Mexicans can sometimes ride in them) took us through green farmland to the terminal at Guanajuato to the north-west. We boarded a local bus, avoiding taxi hassles, and before it came to a stop in the market place I was in love with this town! Multi-tiered and multi-dimensional is Guanajuato. Modern traffic rushes through ancient stone tunnels over cobbled streets; high-speed internet cafes rest near domineering Renaissance and Baroque churches that overawe with their carved and painted splendour; local Indians and mariachi bands vie for tourist dollars while university students sit reading in the many plazas and incongruous images of Don Quixote are everywhere. There is a classical music festival here named for Miguel de Cervantes which somehow Guanajuato has co-opted, a large international one, and we had missed it by one day, however that meant we had no trouble finding accommodation. We had actually caught a portion of that festival without fully realizing it: those amazing flamenco dancers in Cabo were part of it. We met a young man working in a hostel who had come for the festival and now was staying on for a year. I think I could do that too.

Beauty brings visitors and enough visitors alter the local economy and degrade the local ambiance. If the beauty is so great that the numbers of tourists finally inspire the city fathers to create an international festival, one should expect the local flavour to succumb completely, yet this has not happened here. Perhaps those civic leaders took a lesson from Edinburgh, the mother of such festivals, and they carefully monitor the quality of both performances and of souvenir shop offerings, the tastefulness of the advertising and the movement of traffic. In those antique streets, you realize this cannot be an easy task as a bus brushes past your shoulder. Brilliantly coloured houses are here too, and because the city is on a hillside they are more visible than elsewhere, not hidden behind one another – a subtle enhancement.

This is a musical city in a musical land. The mariachi bands would gather round tables of diners and drown out conversation with spirited, if not always in-tune or well balanced melodies. What did it matter? Who cared if three violins are no match



for two trumpets? It was inspired and infectious, some of the players truly skilled and all handsomely attired in matching outfits, and we loved it. Up on the gazebo jazz students developed their chops, lovers huddled on park benches under the carefully sculpted trees, and people simply sat watching people from the steps of the magnificent Teatro Juarez. We left much too soon.

Mexico City, that redoubtable hub, sailed smoothly past once more and we changed buses there for Veracruz, on the Caribbean coast. This is the first city to be established on the North American continent. It has 16th century fortifications with cannons still in place – defense against pirates – a fine aquarium, and little else but for very friendly people and spectacular seafood. I suppose that is enough. A typical serving will contain a full pound of shrimps, clams, octopus and fish, and sell for a very modest price. We sampled some at a restaurant recommended by a cab driver, and the owner was delighted to have a pair of foreigners in his place. Mexican tourists are everywhere but not many gringos. He sat us ostentatiously at a curbside table so that passing cars could see us.

In the Plaza de la Constitucion one evening there were live musicians on the bandstand, a pair of older, elegant dancers up there with them, and a square filled with dancing couples. I had stepped away from overly loud speakers as the Master of Ceremonies talked for far too long, and when the music began again I found myself standing solitary in a field of dancers. This was old-fashioned dancing, sambas, tangos, in which partners actually touch one another and sometimes attain most graceful coordination, like that couple in white up on the platform, doing the simplest of steps with verve and enjoyment that flashed in their eyes and was reflected in proud hand flourishes. I didn't know this kind of culture existed still, and it delighted me. We saw that same couple later, dancing on the sidewalk to a marimba band playing at a restaurant. At other restaurants around the square, mariachis played and customers sang and step-danced, one with a glass of tequila on her head that surely must fall. It did not. Walking home later we glanced in a narrow doorway where a gentle old man was sanding the neck of a guitar. He greeted us warmly and showed of his shop full of instruments in various states of repair. It was clear that here was a craftsman of the old school. He spoke volumes of Spanish to us but his message was simple: "Welcome to my country, my city, my workshop, where I do what I love and am satisfied".

In Veracruz, along Independencia Street, there are tiles inlaid into the sidewalk. They are in imitation of native art. They depict birds and animals, people carrying bundles on their heads as they traverse mountain paths, and others going about their daily business. Then strangers arrive, Cortez and his band. Soon the tiles show severed heads, hands and feet, slaves being beaten and the like. We read somewhere that the phrase "Mi casa es su casa" has only ever been taken literally by these newcomers, and their ferocity was unequalled even in the despicable history of white Christian expansion worldwide. There is a deep and long canyon to the south into which the Indians would leap in order to avoid Spanish slavery. The name 'Veracruz' means 'True Cross', by the way.

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We ventured south too, toward that canyon, but never quite got there. First there is a small volcanic range harbouring a town called Santiago Tuxtla which we had read preserves much of its old character, so we stopped. The preponderance of colonial architecture probably results from the fact that the town is on a hillside and there is not much room left for modern office towers. A multi-arched façade separates a crowded market from a central square, and in the square is an Olmec head, one of those squat boulders carved into the flat features of an Indian face. Several of these have been found, the subjects apparently wearing helmets, and it is thought that they may be famous ball players or kings dressed for the games. Nothing much has changed from pre-Columbian times it seems, we still worship testosterone and reward it lavishly and with wild excess.

The town is small and offers little to the casual visitor, and we walked up a street into the nearby hills. The road climbed and

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gave way to a dirt path that forked regularly. There were butterflies in the area that caught Ruth's photographic eye and a family below who watched with curiosity these odd strangers, one standing waiting while the other crouched and huddled in an effort to get that perfect shot. Eventually the path opened upon a slightly wider one, very roughly cobbled, steeply climbing, and much harder to walk on than the dirt had been. It led up and up to we knew not where, but we did know that the highway from the north lay ahead and we vaguely thought to find it and walk home with refreshingly even footsteps. We passed farms and pastures and workers with cruel looking machetes lounging by the wayside. They were friendly but I felt vulnerable. A proud man on horseback permitted us access along the public path, but when we turned through a gate and probably onto his land he rode down the hill by another route to keep us in view. Our plan to find the roadway via this method was finally foiled by a stream that was quite fordable had we been more sure of our goal. Instead we turned back and again encounter those workers who now used their machetes to peel oranges for us. In response to our questions about a scarlet fruit we had seen, one of them mimed eating one and falling dead. This is how we learned the word, 'toxico'.



More hours of bus travel the next morning delivered us to Palenque, site of some impressive Mayan ruins. The town is one of those that is overrun by tourists, and that caters too much to their tastes. Ruth disagrees, feeling that it does retain much of its authentic character, but I came away with the memory of expensive-looking hotels and accents far too close to my own. I always enter them with mixed feelings. Here are all the things I grew up with and once valued: the latest movies, fast food, familiar sights and sounds, English spoken, but why would I want those now? I am here seeking the new and unfamiliar, am I not? At the same time as I feel relief, I feel repulsed. The following day (if I may be permitted to jump ahead slightly), waiting for the bus, we filled in a half-hour in the local cemetery. It was Day of the Dead, very traditional and much more in line with what we sought. We did our bit to minimize spoiling that tradition with a foreign

presence by sidling along the edge of the crowd that was celebrating mass and singing, and beheld newly-swept graves and family mausoleums with chairs within and photos of the departed. Out of politeness perhaps, no one said anything to us, but we were never quite sure how welcome we were or whether to take pictures. This is the dilemma of the tourist – you want to see but, just as in quantum physics, the very act of your observing alters the subject. We left for our bus, sharing it with Italian and Polish fellow travelers.

Returning to my narrative, the ruins of Palenque are a few kilometers outside of the town. A passing young man with a jarring Yankee accent told us to take a 'collectivo', or shuttle van, to an inexpensive hostel near the park entrance. This proved to be a collection of guesthouses, cabins and restaurants carved out of the dense greenery and devoted entirely to the oddball backpackers' trade. It retained some Mexican quality however, in that nobody seemed to be around to show us a room, though the tent offices offering tours were all well-staffed, English-speaking, and aggressively friendly. We rarely take tours, preferring to get there on our own, and we shook them off as best we could. At last a young lady with fetching tattoos on her face introduced us to a caretaker and we took a jungle cabin with bed upstairs, largely open but for welcome mosquito netting over the broad windows. A handwritten admonition by the staircase warning guests of scorpions falling from the ceiling gave me pause. Still, and despite the clatter of seed pods falling from the trees overhead onto the corrugated tin roof, we slept well. The air and the sounds of the rainforest are always soothing.

Among the trees not far off, are pyramids. They are not hugely tall, many of the trees are higher, and it is easy to see how the structures became overrun and forgotten. Yet their majesty remains intact. The stonework is broken, the staircases rendered uneven over time, many sections are collapsed and most of the friezes are unrecognizable, yet their majesty indeed remains. Yucatan and Guatemala are the latest hotbeds of archaeological activity these days and the investigators' newfound ability to

read Mayan script is bringing to life an empire much more far-flung than was once thought. Kings' names such as "Shield" and "Snake-Jaguar", and records of growth, decline and warfare also show that nothing much was different here than elsewhere when it comes to human behaviour, nor had the Mayans learned peace from the experience of the Olmecs before them, nor have we learned from our forebears.

"Forgotten", the word I used in the paragraph above, is not strictly correct. Ruth and I are here visiting among people whose direct ancestors built these proud cities, many more cities in fact than was previously thought. They knew about them all along and their trails still go through them. The peoples' pride in their heritage may have been driven out of them by Spanish conquerors and priests, but "forgotten is merely a white man's conceit, and I would not be surprised if there were many other cities carefully and deliberately hidden from the conquerors' eyes. "Forgotten": I sneer the term in the face of gringo academics and point to Angkor Wat, the darling of Cambodia's gawking tourist trade, many of whose "forgotten" ruins always were, and remain, practicing temples, hardly forgotten at all.

The first antechamber we entered was dank, dripping, humid and sticky. I had come in hopefully, expecting relief from the heat without, but found little. The nose is assailed by acrid odours, by molds and spores, and the three empty grey rooms into which we were allowed to peer offered not much. There was more to this place, much more, but it is also clear that the building is in poor repair and probably not safe for the average visitor. It was an inauspicious start.



The next structure along, via the neat lawns and gravel paths was the tallest, was called the Temple of the Inscriptions, housed splendid paintings and carvings and even a king's tomb, and was closed to the public.

The Palenque site is powerfully resonant even so, and we contented ourselves with sunlight on broken columns, picking our way along uneven, often roofless halls, and passing through arches and doorways whose columns and porticos sometimes showed remnants of carved bird-god-kings with spectacular plumage.

We saw complete images of those personages (copies of the ones in the tomb) on the vendors' blankets spread out in many places along the walk. They were beautiful, multi-coloured images, done on fine leather, of the Mayan calendar and of various legends. Carved replicas of the pyramids there were too, and as usual in these places everywhere we have been, trade was slow, and there were simply too many people trying to make a poor living like this. They keep up a friendly front, tell you the stories depicted on their wares, offer you gorgeous objects that you don't want and create in you the usual Traveller's Dilemma: how can I truly help these people without filling my backpack with unwanted items, however lovely? If I purchase a trinket it will help a family for a day. If I give these struggling ones all the money in my pocket and walk away in tears it will help them for a week or a month, but what can I truly DO?

There is an answer, and it begins within yourself and at home. Do your homework, find out which corporations promote fair trade and encourage just dealings throughout the world, and buy from them only. Much more importantly, tell those from

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whom you do not buy why you are not buying. They are very sensitive to public opinion. It will mean a radical change in your lifestyle, a change that will become deeper as you learn more, but hey, the consumerism of the West is unsustainable anyway and will collapse sooner or later. Why not prepare for it? I saw one vendor sit before a magnificent palace with his face in his hands after we, travelling very light, bought nothing. I think he was just resting but I sensed inconsolable grief.

These people know grief, and the savage injustices meted out to them over the past five centuries continue today. We wandered among the tattered remnants of Palenque, their one-time pride, and have learned since that there is a small but growing sense of identity among contemporary Mayan people, fostered by such writers as Rigoberta Menchú. We applaud it. Menchú's biography, which won her the Nobel Peace Prize, is harrowing reading which you should approach only if you feel strong. After reading only a little, your thoughts at the fruit counter will never be the same. Murder and dispossession in exchange for bananas, cotton and coffee – fair trade, anyone?

Rigoberta is actually from next door in Guatemala but her people transcend foolish modern boundaries. As in Africa and everywhere, arrogant conquerors set up boundaries that ignored local cultural and historical frontiers, dividing families and nations without a thought. But Palenque is undeniably there, testament to these people, silently putting the lie to the white man's desperate belief in their inferiority to justify his maltreatment of them. We spent the day among these slumberous stones and heard them whispering, then walked the two kilometers home, stopping for supper at an open restaurant with a swept-earth floor, that played amplified pop music for us. I must seek out a local musician and hear some "forgotten" Mayan music.

Our last Mexican town was San Cristobal de las Casas. We spent a couple of days wandering; using the Insurgency Hotel on Insurgency Street as our home base (the Mexicans are in love with their turbulent past). Here the local people have learned to cater to tourists and there are coffee houses with wireless internet and prices sufficiently high to lull the visitor into thinking this is just like home. But there are also markets and churches that feel untouched, at least to me, ancient buildings showing carved dates and weathered statuary of great antiquity, and a sense of living history. Insurgency Street is paved with concrete slabs instead of being cobbled, so that the tires of passing vehicles, those whose engines are not too loud, slap at the interstices between them so as to imitate the clip-clop sound of horses hooves. If you close your eyes you can imagine a buggy on the street as in days of old. It is to be regretted that you cannot also close your nose.

From the churches and markets you take away multiple images and sensations: great stacks of fine, colourful embroidery, for hopeful inspection; glowing altars and a thin, imploring Christ, for filial devotion; piles of sweets, custard, coconut, all in bright, imaginative guises, for greedy delectation; somber, deeply carved flora, floor to ceiling, in the church of San Francisco, for tranquil meditation; the savoury smell of food wafting by, for rabid salivation; the yellow walls of the 'Indian church' of St. Thomas, built by an early bishop in the centre of town instead of safely far away, for happy celebration; the compassionate and sensual beauties in the faces of the many Virgins and in the knowing face of that fascinating Mayan woman in the market place whose eyes haunt me still.

Guatemala called, and we had no guidebook. For the first time we were going into a country cold. I felt no great trepidation however; after having visited a dozen-odd countries in the past four years, how hard could it be? We hadn't planned this, it just happened that we couldn't find a book in Mexico. So be it.

We went bravely ahead to La Mesilla, giving the usual invented addresses to border guards as bored in the south of Mexico as in the north, and after paying a taxi driver 20 pesos to drive us to the frontier, a distance we could easily have walked, had we known. I missed that lovely, honest driver in Chihuahua.

The Cu Chi Tunnels

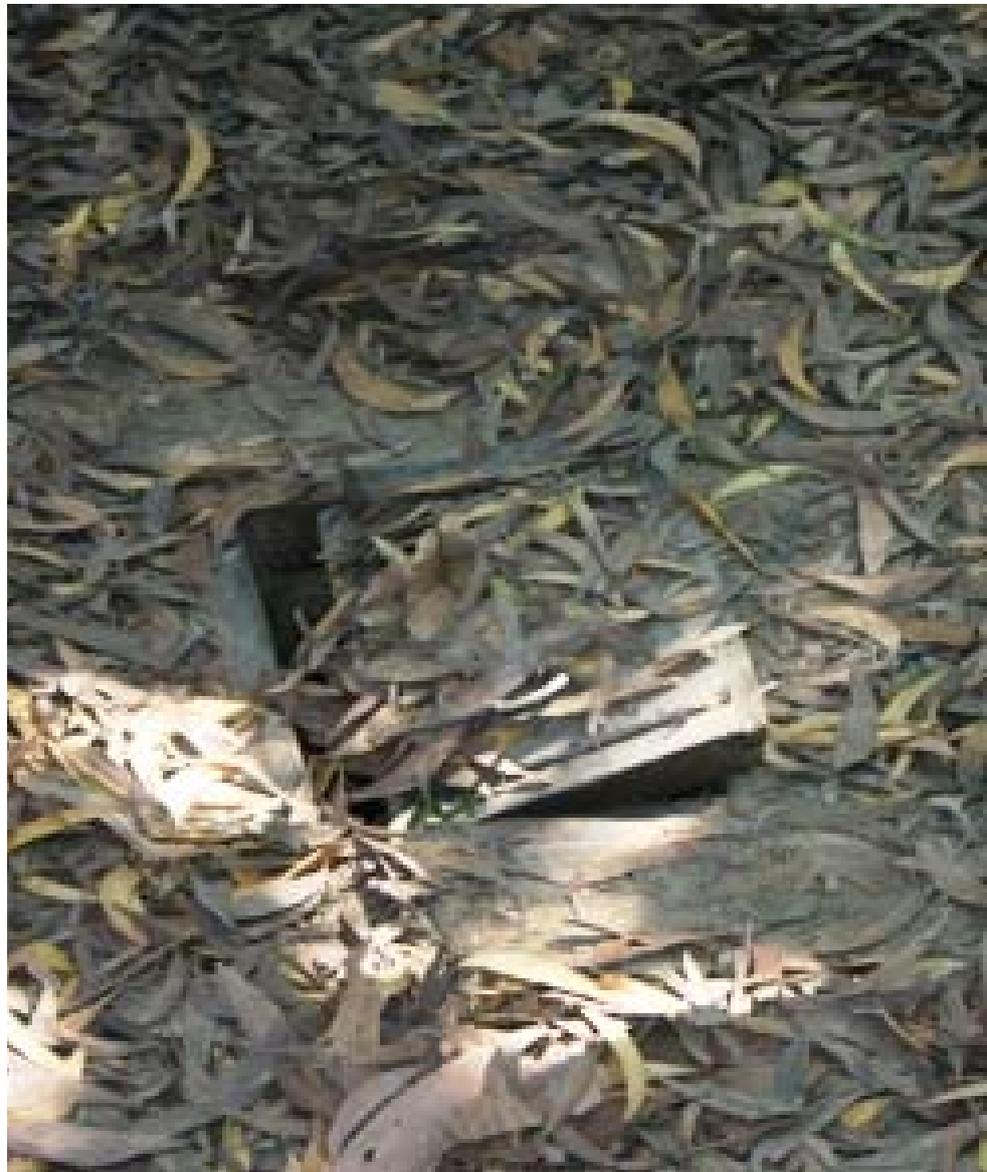
By Antonio Graceffo

Where the history of two countries meets

Today, the paths that lead along the top of the Cu Chi Tunnels are well marked and quite wide. They have been worn down by busloads of camera-wielding tourists from around the world. Hearing the constant stream of loud chatter in Japanese, Korean, German, and New Zealandish, it was hard to picture that this area had once been covered by an impassable jungle. During the war, the land was infested with booby traps, designed to wound, not kill, American soldiers. The American response to the bamboo spikes and tiger pits built by the communists was saturation bombing. A plan, which resulted in the civilian population hating us.

The Cu Chi Tunnel complex is located just 70 km outside of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), in an area dubbed by the Americans, The Iron Triangle. The complex contains more than 75 miles of tunnels, dug deep enough in the earth to resist American bombing. The many layers of passageways are dug at varying depths and built with many switchbacks and turns, to prevent an invader who happened to find an entrance, from getting a clear shot at more than a few Vietnamese soldiers. One of the methods used by the Americans for counteracting the tunnels was to pour flammable liquids such as petrol or napalm into them. Once again, the many turns would prevent the flames from traveling far. The tunnels were equipped with numerous escape hatches, so that the Vietnamese could surface if they needed to.

According to information put out by the



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Vietnamese government, there was never actually an order given to build the tunnels. They were constructed over a period of decades by revolutionaries. Construction of the tunnels began in 1948, when the Viet Minh were waging a war of independence against the French. Various villages built their own set of tunnels to escape random bombing raids, hide weapons, or to use as a base to launch hit and run attacks against their enemies. Over time, the tunnels of the various villages were connected, forming an intricate system of underground highways. By 1965, the connected tunnels spanned more than 200 km. The tunnels included hospitals, kitchens and living quarters.



One of the most significant battles in the American War was the 1968 Tet Offensive. Launched on Tet (Vietnamese New Year), the attack took the American and South Vietnamese forces completely by surprise. Much of the Tet Offensive was launched from the tunnels at Cu Chi.

Twenty-three year-old Binh, my guide, looked like a Vietnamese soldier. Still uncertain of what was a taboo topic, I was afraid to ask him if his olive drab attire and woven pith helmet were the uniform of the Vietnamese army or if he was actually only a tour guide at the Cu Chi tunnels. Either way, the uniform added a certain martial ambiance to one of the most ingenious tactical innovations of the Vietnamese during the American war.

“Both my mother and my father fought here”. Binh tells me proudly. Today, the soldiers of Cu Chi are held up as national heroes, models of the unwavering resilience and endurance of the Vietnamese people which eventually lead to the American troops being pulled out.

Having just passed my fortieth birthday, I remember watching the Vietnam War on TV. I also remember bus and railways stations crammed full of young men in uniform. The young men missing a leg or hand stand out in my mind to this day. I could never quite make the connection between the clean dress uniforms I saw on the streets, and the dirty, violent war I saw on the news, and the smelly hippies with long hair who carried signs, sang songs,

I could never quite make the connection between the clean dress uniforms I saw on the streets, and the dirty, violent war I saw on the news, and the smelly hippies with long hair who carried signs, sang songs, and hated President Nixon.

and hated President Nixon.

The seventies was something I experienced from a child's perspective. In school, they told us to love the president, but then I heard the adults saying he might be going to jail. Then he wasn't the president any-

more. There was no more fighting on TV. The soldiers had all come home. The hippies cut their hair and began bathing. John Travolta rose to super-stardom with "Saturday Night Fever" and suddenly, it was cool to be Italian and wear a white suit.

As an adult I learned more about the war, how complex the situation was. This wasn't World War Two. There was no Adolf Hitler who was all evil and easy to hate. At the end of the war, England was more than a thousand years old, the US only two hundred. We were a child nation, and the war was our national coming-of-age, when heroes and villains were no longer simply wrong and right. The adult world is full of difficult decisions, where often none of the options seem to be 100% right.

It is not my place to decide if a divided Vietnam is better or who was wrong or right. My experience in Vietnam was the first time I was faced with a US foreign policy which was unpopular and which resulted in the deaths of millions. I didn't know what to say to people I met. They knew I was American. Should I apologize? Should I defend our actions? Should I just pretend I didn't know?

In 1991 the Doi Moi policy privatized businesses and farms, and set Vietnam on a course of unprecedented economic growth. Today, Vietnam is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. It benefits from a young, well-educated populace who have been told since birth that they must work hard, get rich, and help to elevate the country to the economic powerhouse of Southeast Asia. So far, the plan is working. Vietnam's economy is experiencing double-digit growth. Most investors believe that they will reach their goal in the next five years, leaving Thailand and Malaysia far behind.

Hearing the constant stream of loud chatter in Japanese, Korean, German, and New Zealandish, it was hard to picture that this area had once been covered by an impassable jungle.

It was a new Vietnam I was visiting. The Cu Chi Tunnels were part of an old Vietnam that I needed to see, but which I didn't want to dwell on.

My other guide, Mr. Hoi, in civilian clothes, told me that he had worked as a translator for the South Vietnamese Army. After the war, he was sent to a collective farm camp, till 1991. Now, even he was cashing in on Vietnam's new economic prosperity. He has a fairly well-paid job, carting tourists around the country.

"Most foreigners think these tunnels were built by the North Vietnamese," said Mr. Hoi.

He was right. The average person has trouble distinguishing between North Vietnamese Regular Army and the Vietcong. Vietnam, like Korea, was divided into two separate and sovereign states, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The NVA were the uniformed forces of the state of North Vietnam. The Vietcong were communist guerillas who could have been from either north or south.

According to Mr. Hoi, the Tunnels were built by Vietcong, living in South Vietnam, to support invasions from the north.

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“Cu Chi was declared a Free Fire zone by the Americans,” said Mr. Hoi. “Operation Crimp began on January 7, 1966. B-52 bombers dropped 30-tons of high explosive.”

Some of the bomb craters had been preserved. They were absolutely massive, penetrating several meters into the earth. The implication was that these tremendous bombs probably decimated civilian villages on the surface, but failed to reach their intended targets, the tunnels below.

The implication was that these tremendous bombs probably decimated civilian villages on the surface, but failed to reach their intended targets, the tunnels below.

“Many women and children died in the bombings,” said Mr. Hoi.

Years and years of bombs fell on Cu Chi, effectively turning the once lush jungle into a pockmarked moonscape.

Before you went to look at the tunnels, you had to sit through a Vietnamese government propaganda film about the Cu Chi Tunnels. The film gave a predictably unbalanced version of the war crimes committed by the Americans and “their puppets”. The way history seems to have been taught here is that the US invaded the sovereign state of Vietnam and waged a war against women and children. The film never actually referred to the South Vietnamese government or the South Vietnamese forces.

“This is also an area where Agent Orange was used,” explained Mr. Hoi.

Agent Orange was a chemical defoliant which was dropped from American aircraft to remove the hiding places of the opposing forces. Countless US veterans are now suffering from illness which is attributed to exposure to the toxic chemical. In Vietnam, the widespread use of the chemical resulted in a generation of horribly deformed babies. Along the way to the tunnels, we stopped off at a craft shop where victims of Agent Orange were being taught to create beautiful works of art.

“The Vietnamese government is now suing the US government for damages done to children and second and third generation babies born with birth defects.” Mr. Hoi told us.

Showing us the incredible camouflage job that the Vietnamese were capable of, Binh, the young guide in fatigues, lifted up a bit of foliage, revealing a small tunnel entrance. He removed the wooden plate, and disappeared beneath the earth. Next, it was our turn.

In a recent government publication, I read that the average, urban male in Vietnam was 160 cm tall. I am small by American standards, but compared to the average Vietnamese 176 cm is pretty tall. And of course my weight, close to 90 Kgs is nearly double the average Vietnamese man.

“How big is that tunnel?” I asked, doubtfully.

“Because of the tourists, it has been widened to forty inches,” said Binh.

“I would love to try this tunnel on, but do you have the same style in a forty-one extra-portly?”

“No, we are out of stock!”



During the war, small US soldiers were often volunteered to be tunnel rats, the soldiers who would crawl down in the holes and search for enemy soldiers or intelligence. It is not hard to imagine that this was one of the most dangerous and least desirable jobs in the war.

It was a squeeze, but I did manage to get my body into the tunnel. It would have been impossible for me to turn around, however, so I imagine that tunnel rats must have had to go in head first. I wasn't about to try that. In theory, the soldiers went into the tunnels to feel safe but I kept thinking of primitive fish traps which work on the same principle - once the fish swims in, he can't turn around to get back out. I just felt trapped.

In theory, the soldiers went into the tunnels to feel safe but I kept thinking of primitive fish traps which work on the same principle - once the fish swims in, he can't turn around to get back out. I just felt trapped.

These tunnels were nothing like the ones on Hogan's Heroes. They didn't pop up under the guardhouse so the prisoners could play pranks on fat Sergeant Shultz. A single day in one of these tunnels would have driven Newkirk insane, and he would never have gone on to host "Family Feud."

The next tunnel had been widened to nearly double its original width and paved with cement. Here we had the opportunity, like in a Jules Verne novel, to journey under the surface of the earth and come up at a different tunnel, thirty meters away. Crawling along this narrow wormhole, felt hot and claustrophobic. When I finally emerged, just minutes later, I was dripping wet with sweat. If there had been any doubt before, there was none now. I never wanted to be a tunnel rat.

After the tunnels we were shown through a museum of booby-traps. There were swinging traps, spike traps, door traps, conical traps, and seated traps all bearing metal spikes or sharpened bamboo stakes.

The tour ended at a shooting range where you could pay to fire American M-16s or the Russian made AK-47, favored by the communists. Capitalism was clearly taking off in Vietnam, as the fee was 400,000 Dong for 20 bullets (about \$1.25 per round). This is a particularly good business, especially if you consider that they got the bullets for free; the Americans were just throwing them around.

On the way back to Ho Chi Minh City, Mr. Hoi told us of his own war experience, fighting along side the Americans.

"Sometimes, if the fighting slowed down, we would go in the bunker for four or five minutes or just three minutes. We would laugh, drink, joke, and play cards. Every time we went back to the fighting, we would think maybe next time we won't all be here."

Today, it is better to say it was right," he laughed, suggesting that it probably still wasn't a good idea to discuss political matters in Vietnam.

"It was so terrible. We suffered so much already."

The war and the ensuing hardships he endured during the reunification of Vietnam had given Mr. Hoi a fresh perspective on life.

"We need to enjoy everything in our lives, and use everything God gives us. I have seen a lot. I talk to the young people I don't

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want them to be sorry at the end. I warn them now to enjoy their lives. Fifty years goes by so fast. And then maybe you regret that you did not enjoy your life.”

“Many people say the war was wrong. Many say it was right. Today, it is better to say it was right,” he laughed, suggesting that it probably still wasn’t a good idea to discuss political matters in Vietnam. “But I think maybe the young people will have a different opinion and talk about that. Since Vietnam entered ASEAN and WTO things have gotten better and better. Now we have growth of ten percent and more. The country is going up and up. And we are a unified nation, opening to the world.”



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