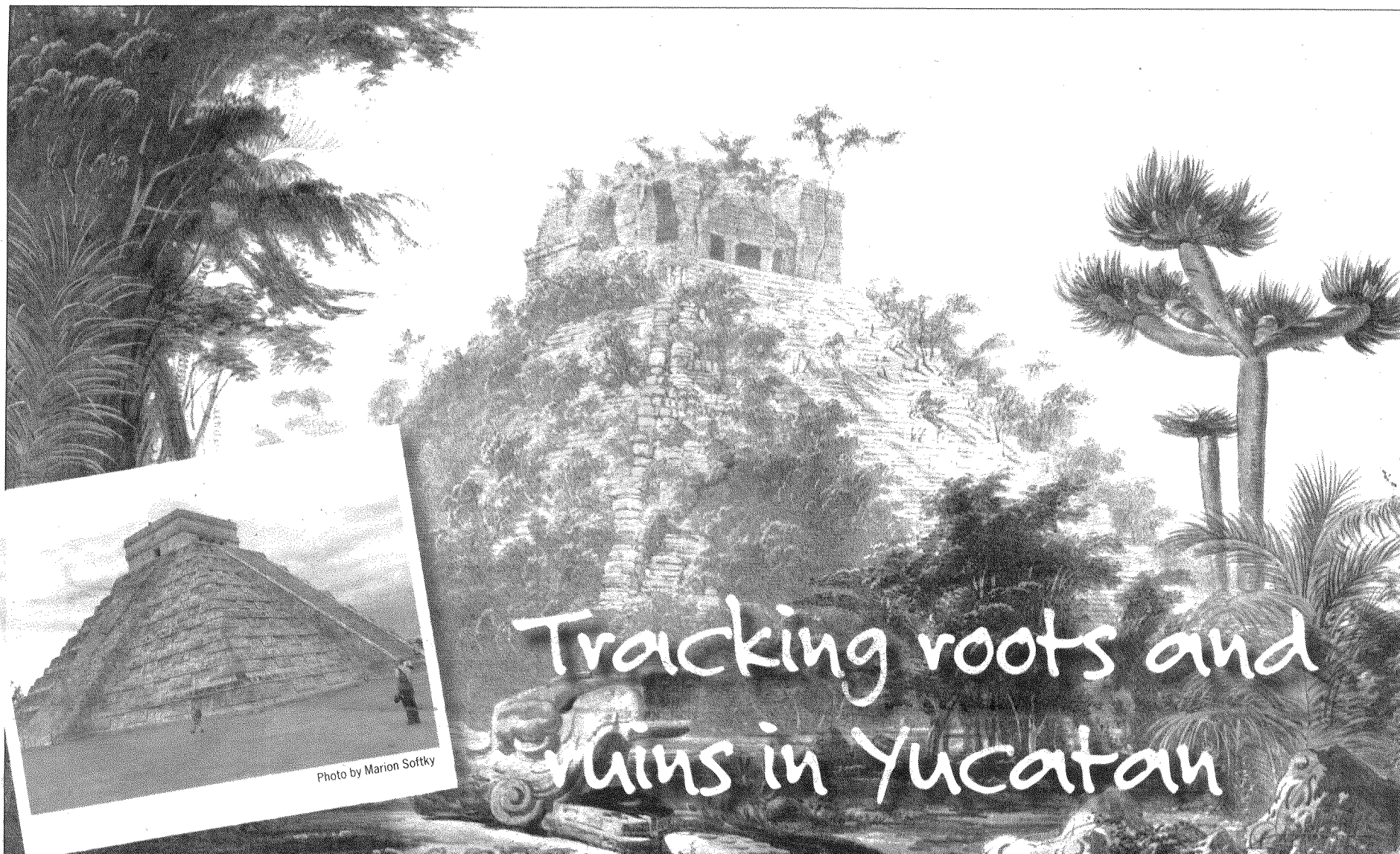


2 Destinations

A special section on travel and adventure by local people. ■ May 30, 2007

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Drawing by Frederick Catherwood

When Edward Harvey, the father of the author of this story, visited the Mayan site of Chichen Itza almost 100 years ago, it was surrounded by jungle and looked like this drawing by Frederick Catherwood about 1844. The photo inset shows what the Pyramid of Kukulcan at the site looks like today.

Relics of ancient Mayan peoples in Yucatan stir family memories from 100 years ago

By Marion Softky
Almanac Staff Writer

One's early memories can be magical. Certainly many of mine were. I particularly loved to hear my mother talk about how she met my father close to 100 years ago in a logging camp in Yucatan.

My grandfather, a dashing red-headed Civil War veteran from the South, ran the camp where they cut mahogany and chicle trees in the jungle. My mother was his bright, pretty teenage daughter; all the men fell in love with her. And my father, almost 20 years older, represented a company that bought the lumber. They used to ride together, but it was years before they married.

What really drew me to Yucatan almost 100 years later was her tale that my father had visited the ruins of an ancient civilization rising from the jungle. Unfortunately, he died in 1951, and I never quizzed

him about what he observed. I never asked him how he felt seeing the massive pyramid of Kukulcan at Chichen Itza, shrouded in vines and shrubs and palm trees, rising out of the jungle.

My mother told me he was tremendously excited. I still try to imagine what it would feel like to ride for days, and then come upon such a sight.

Today the view is vastly different, but still powerful.

The outlines of the pyramid — now called the Castillo — are clean and sharp; it sits in the middle of a manicured lawn surrounded by miles of partially restored temples, columns, palaces, a huge ball court, and a sacred well that was used for human sacrifice. There is even an ancient astronomical observatory. And it's all accessible to thousands of tourists every day. On one day I counted 38 large buses at the two entrances to Chichen Itza.

This contrast stayed with me as my son, Ed, and I toured southern

Mexico and Yucatan last winter. For three weeks we soaked up the ancient and the modern — both so different from what my parents experienced in the early years of the 20th century.

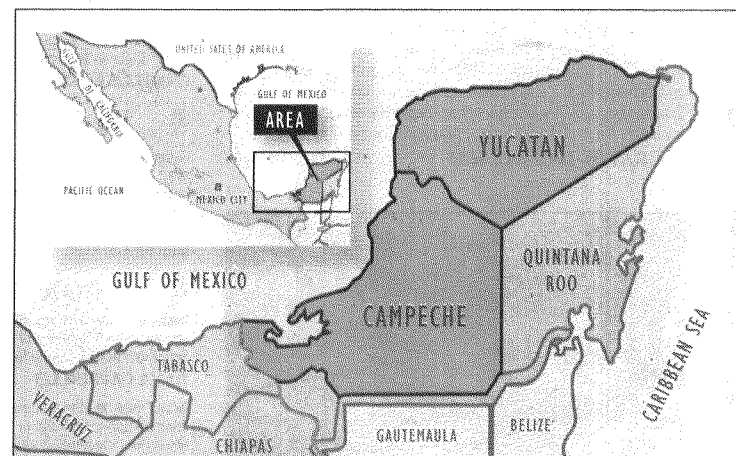
So much more is known now. Literally thousands of ruins have been excavated; even more remain as overgrown lumps on the land. The quantity is staggering.

Yet these ruins and the civilizations that peopled them remain ultimately mysterious. It is hard for anyone modern to fully absorb a culture so alien and so ritually bloody.

First, a tour

I started my pilgrimage with a tour, led by the Archaeological Conservancy, of early sites in the area of Veracruz. I wanted to get accustomed to Mexico, and to learn about its early peoples before heading on our own to Yucatan and the Mayan homeland.

I had recruited my son, Ed,



The area of southern Mexico and Yucatan that staff writer Marion Softky and her son Ed toured last winter.

a graduate of Menlo-Atherton High School and now a techie in Connecticut, to go along for companionship and logistical support. He's fun, speaks serviceable Spanish, and deals enthusiastically with the mechanics of travel — too much luggage, buses, lodging, tips, and so forth.

Twenty-eight of us assembled at a plush hotel in Veracruz, where we met our leaders, Jim Walker of the Archaeological Conservancy, and Dr. John Henderson, a Mayan scholar and professor of Anthropology at Cornell.

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'The archaeology was overwhelming'

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For the next nine days, we visited archaeological sites, from Olmec sites dating to 1200 BC to Spanish forts, and several superb museums. We enjoyed excellent hotels in five towns, and those of us who weren't worn out — like Ed — enjoyed the wonderful Mexican night life on the streets and plazas, as well as restaurants, and sometimes bars or night clubs.

I remember sunset and dawn on the playa at Poza Rica, and Ed's search for a karaoke bar. We finally tracked one down on advice from the hotel staff. No karaoke, but a super collection of baseball caps and T-shirts. Except for the Detroit Lions.

The archeology was overwhelming. Just thinking about the commitment and energy and skill to build the cities, plazas, pyramids, temples and houses — they ranged over 2,500 years — stretched the mind. It felt like trying to take in European history, from the Greeks to the Renaissance, in a couple of weeks.

Our most strenuous day and high point — literally — was Cantona, a late classic city of some 30,000, located 7,500 feet high in the coastal mountains. We panted past some of its 24 ball courts and 3,000 residential terraces, many still unexcavated. Some of us climbed a pyramid or so, but we could still see more pyramids and plazas stretching off into the distance.

Our visit to the early Olmec site of San Lorenzo, famous for its colossal stone heads, brought a local Portola Valley connection. Sheldon Breiner, a geophysicist and specialist with magnetometers, carried out a magnetic survey of the site more than 30 years ago. He personally discovered some of the most famous heads and other mega-carvings, buried deep in the soil.

The Olmecs, who flourished starting close to 1200 B.C., served as the mother culture for most of the later civilizations up to the Aztecs. Not only did they transport the rocks for their multi-ton carvings over 70 kilometers to San Lorenzo — without wheels — they initiated the hieroglyphic writing and intricate calendars further perfected by the Maya. They even discovered zero.

Dr. Breiner believes the Olmecs may also have invented the compass. They had the magnetic materials, and some of their plazas are oriented toward the magnetic north at the time, he suggests.

Anne Cyphers, the chief archaeologist at San Lorenzo, gave us an inspiring tour. Finally, she told me to give Dr. Breiner a big hug. "Say hi, and keep up the good work."

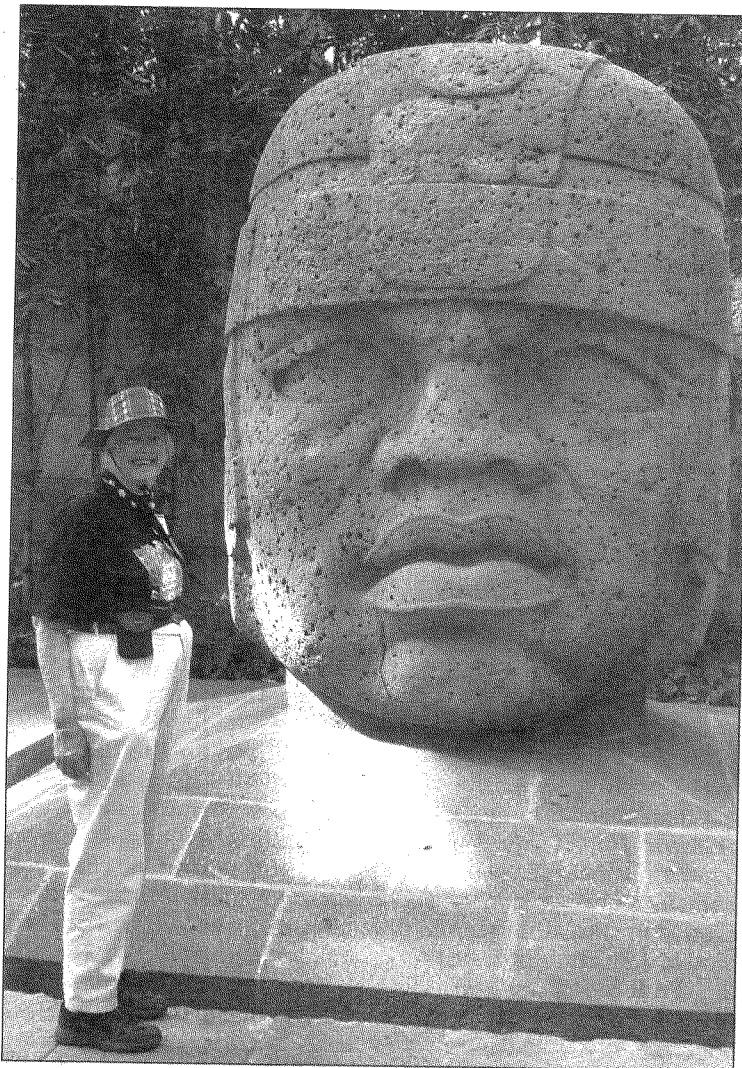


Photo by Ed Softky

Traveler and Almanac staff writer Marion Softky poses beside one of the colossal Olmec heads in the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, Mexico.

On to Yucatan

Merida, a lovely colonial city, introduced Ed and me to the warmth and color of modern Yucatan, and some of its problems.

We split our last week between serious sight-seeing at two northern archaeological sites of Chichen Itza and Uxmal; and soaking up the appealing cities of Merida and Campeche, the seaport town my mother referred to most often.

Between destinations, we rode Mexico's comfortable buses over long flat expanses of barren scrub forest with almost no villages, agriculture, haciendas or development. I kept wondering why and how the land that produced corn and squash and beans for hundreds of thousands of Mayans for a millennium could be so barren now.

In Merida and Campeche, we stayed at comfortable, homey hotels close to the city center with its old cathedral and plaza. Every evening and through the day we were taken with the friendliness and activity in these public places. There seemed to be entertainment every evening and crowds to enjoy it. Even during the day, we often came upon a band playing and people of all ages dancing joyfully.

Most fun was a Sunday night in Merida, with hundreds of people relaxing in the plaza in front of

the colonial cathedral. Half a dozen young men with drums started jamming on some steps. Pretty soon, a crowd gathered, and a couple of other young men started break dancing. One man aged to bounce in circles on one hand — not graceful perhaps, but spectacular. And fun.

At Chichen Itza we plunged back into the Mayan world — and its ritual blood-letting. Surrounded by stunning monuments of stone, we couldn't escape the visible signs of a civilization dominated by religion, power, and war. There were buildings for sacrifices; and the sacred well where virgins were purified before taking their dive to the next world.

The bas reliefs of skulls were easy; it was harder to decipher the carvings that showed other kinds of violence from animals tearing out organs, to bloodletting of kings, giving the gods their quota of human blood.

We've had one minor debate. Who got sacrificed after the ritual ball games that were crucial in all Meso-American cultures? The winners or the losers? My 12-year-old grand-daughter and our Mayan guide insist it was the winners; sacrifice was an honor, they said. Prof. Henderson

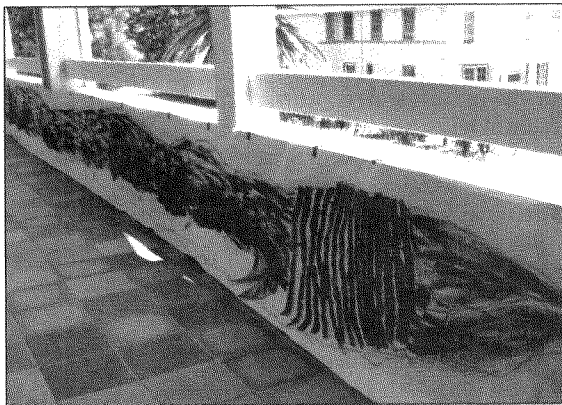
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Preschoolers draw whale to scale

Preschoolers at Trinity School's Early Childhood Program at 330 Ravenswood Ave. in Menlo Park have made a life-sized drawing of Delta, the mother humpback whale that, with her calf, Dawn, was still stalled in the Sacramento River when this page went to press.

Pam Harris, program coordinator at the school, said her intent was to "cement" their understanding of the event by allowing the kids to recreate it in various media. They measured out 50 feet of butcher block paper and got to work.

The kids also made a model of the delta out of blocks, miniature bridges, blue vinyl sheeting and two plastic whales. "I'm delighted the kids took this ball and ran with it," Ms. Harris said.



Preschoolers draw 50-foot whale on butcher-block paper.

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believes it was the losers.

The sheer scale of Chichen Itza is awe-inspiring, especially when the monuments are lit through dramatic clouds. We had one frustration, however. There are so many tourists that you are not allowed to climb the pyramid or most of the monuments. And visitors can no longer climb up inside the Castillo to see the pyramid underneath, and its temple with a red-jaguar throne. These now appear only on post cards.

Leaving Chichen Itza, we stopped at Ik Kil nearby, where Ed swam happily for an hour in a beautiful "cenote," the kind of limestone sink hole that provided water to the Mayans on the limestone Yucatan plain. Unlike the cenote at Chichen Itza, which was green, Ik Kil was

deep, clean, blue, and popular—and had never to our knowledge been used to sacrifice virgins.

Uxmal, in the Puuc hills to the east, was another large and beautiful site. It has a stunning pyramid with rounded ends, and many other buildings, plus a lively stock of iguanas. Our charming guide, Jorge, called them whimsical names, like Helmut Kohl and Monica Lewinsky.

Around Uxmal there was finally enough forest to support birds. We saw a few wild parrots near the Club-Med hotel where we stayed. And some wonderful birds called mot-mots. They were iridescent blue and green and had long tails with feather "pendulums" hanging down.

At Kabah, a major site near Uxmal, we saw a magnificent building that spoke to the insecurity of people who lived and farmed the

dry limestone plain of Yucatan. The palace there is adorned with 260 masks of Chaac, the Mayan rain god, with his long hooked nose. That says something.

Our last few days in Yucatan were shadowed by the imminent arrival of President Bush on Monday night to Merida, and Tuesday to Uxmal.

Everyone was excited—generally negative but excited. At Uxmal, workers were mowing the lawns and whitewashing the curbs to be ready for his visit. Contrary to local hopes, the potholes to the Club Med were not filled.

As we prepared to board our plane Tuesday morning at the Merida Airport about 6 a.m., we felt excitement in the waiting room. People were clustering at the windows and taking pictures.

Just outside loomed the giant shape of Air Force One on the tarmac. ■

MENLO PARK FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING CONSIDERATION OF PROPOSED BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2007/2008

NOTICE IS GIVEN pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §13893 as follows:

1. The District Board of Menlo Park Fire Protection District Preliminary Budget for Fiscal year 2007/08. Copies of the Proposed Budget are available for examination by interested persons during regular business hours at the District's Offices, 300 Middlefield Road Menlo Park, California

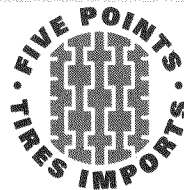
2. The District Board will conduct a public hearing at 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday June 19, 2007 in the classroom at Station One, 300 Middlefield Road, Menlo Park, California to consider adoption of the final budget. The purpose of the Public Hearing will be to hear any person regarding any item in the budget or regarding the adoption of other items.

3. The public hearing conducted on Tuesday June 19, 2007 may be continued from time to time at the discretion of the District Board.

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